

# Buddhist Attitudes: A Woman's Perspective

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## **Introduction**

Buddhism, which coexists with Confucianism and Shintoism in Japan, does not deal specifically with the questions under discussion. Neither classical Buddhist sutras nor present Buddhist scholars touch on the subject. Both Confucianism, which came from China in the 6th century, and Shintoism, an ancient religion native to Japan, have more to say on matters which affect the daily lives of the people. Therefore, we will have to look at both of these religions before we attempt to explain Buddhist attitudes towards female sexuality.

According to the Shinto myth of creation, Izanagi (the male god) and Izanami (the female goddess) created the Japanese archipelago together. In this mythology the sun goddess Amaterasu played a primary role, while Tsukiyomi, god of the moon, was relegated to a secondary one. The oldest chronicles of Japan, *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki*, also indicate that ancient Japanese society was a matrilineal one in which women exercised considerable authority. Before the advent of Buddhism and Confucianism in the 6th/7th century it was customary for the bridegroom to move to the house of the bride, and women had the right to initiate divorce proceedings and to remarry any number of times. Pre-8th century Japanese poetry reflects the liberal spirit on matters of sexuality: a separate but sacred house was maintained for women in childbirth, which was an occasion for celebration; no taboos surrounded the subject of menstruation.

Early Japanese history contains numerous examples of women rulers, but with the gradual change to a patriarchal society and the Tenno (emperor) system, women's influence waned and male domination became the norm.

Confucianism brought with it a patriarchal and male-centred system of ethics in which strict observance of the established hierarchy, loyalty to one's superiors and filial duty were of utmost importance. A son had filial obligations towards his mother, but at the same time a mother was expected to obey her son, especially the eldest son.

Absolute subordination was required of a wife, who could be divorced if she failed to bear a son. The menstruating woman and the woman in childbirth were considered impure. In short, woman's sexuality was largely seen as a negative quality. These attitudes gradually filtered down from the aristocratic class to become the norm for all of Japanese society.

Ritual practices concerning childbirth, purification after childbirth, wedding services and various fertility cults were characteristic of Shintoism. Buddhism, on the other hand, was primarily concerned with the salvation of souls, although having come to Japan via China, it was already influenced by Confucian ethics. It became a state religion, but then underwent a reformation which gave rise to various sects such as Zen, Jodo and other Mahayana schools, which emphasized salvation for the masses. Mahayana Buddhism greatly influences life in Japan today. It is on this school that I will base my subsequent observations.

### **Early Buddhism**

Buddhism began in India in 5 B.C. when Sakya attained enlightenment and Buddhahood. Sakya was a son of the ruler of the Sakya tribe, born into wealth and free from material worries. He married a cousin, Yasodhara, and they had a child named Rahula. He lived in three different palaces, one to protect them from each season — hot, cold and rainy. Although Sakya had no apparent problem in his life, he gave up his family and went into the priesthood.

No explanation is given for his entering the priesthood, but Sakya believed that the negation of sexuality was essential to the priestly vocation. It is said that he tried to make up for the loss of his mother who died during his childhood by finding sexual fulfillment and that he entered the priesthood because sexual life was unsatisfactory. Another possible explanation is that he chose this response because he could not find whatever it was he was seeking in life as a married man.

After attaining enlightenment, Sakya taught that by freeing oneself from self-centredness, both men and women could experience the enlightenment of Nirvana, as he himself had done. Buddha taught that all people can be equally enlightened through "Gyo" (disciplinary training), through which one can come to understand the pain felt in life.

**Problems related to the institutionalization of Buddhism (Sangha)**

The development of the principles of Buddha's teachings and the institutionalization of the religion facilitated the development of Buddhism, but it also contributed to the secularization of the religion. Buddha's step-mother, Mahaprajapati, wished to become a priestess, and although she made tremendous efforts to do so, she was not accepted by Buddha. Finally, on the advice of Ananda, a disciple of Buddha, she was allowed to enter the priesthood. Some people see this as an indication of Buddha's discrimination against women; but I believe that Buddha allowed women to enter the priesthood because he rejected patriarchal principles.

However, for a woman to enter the priesthood, eight conditions had to be met. One of the primary ones was the principle of "Bhikṣuṇī". This meant that women who entered the priesthood could not chastise or give advice to men who broke priestly rules. On the other hand, male priests were to discipline women who did not follow all priestly rules. Thus even a woman who had been a priest for many years still had to accept chastisement from a novice male priest. This clearly indicates the different attitudes towards men and women in the priesthood.

Furthermore, men were commanded to follow 250 different Buddhist precepts (*sīla*), while women were required to follow 350 *sīlas*. These differences seem to indicate discrimination against women, but there is another way to interpret the differences. Even though women, as priestesses, had more difficult Buddhist precepts to follow than men, they were able to follow the commands more easily than men and thus had fewer hindrances to attaining enlightenment. Buddha demanded from priests the complete negation of sexual desire, and he knew from his own experience that this was very difficult for men to achieve. The negation of sexuality became natural for Buddha, but for priests who later entered the priesthood for reasons other than those of Buddha, a way had to be found to strengthen the resolve to remain celibate: the idea that women were unclean thus came to be emphasized.

An example from the *Sutta Nipāta* (835), the sacred book of Buddha, indicates how this was done :

Once when I went to hear about the higher perception of life, I saw the three witches of jealousy, hatred, and greediness. I had no desire to have sexual relations with them, for they were filled with unclean human wastes. I did not want to touch them even with the tip of my toe.

Using the most obscene words, women were also described as unworthy of men, as temptresses. *Sutta Nipāta* 703 says: that "Woman is

a temptress for the holy person. Let not woman be a temptress for man." But no instances are found which describe man as a tempter. They are considered blameless when they accept an invitation from the temptress. This unfair attitude to women is based on the belief that it is difficult for male priests to completely negate their sexuality.

### **The world of the Theri-gatha**

Although Buddha imposed strict rules regarding women candidates for the priesthood, an unexpectedly large number of women entered the priesthood and attained enlightenment. They lived strictly in the way of Buddha. A frank expression of their experiences was compiled in the "Theri-gatha". "Theri" means monks who understood "dharma" and "gatha" means poems. There were many women who became priestesses after leaving their beloved children and husbands. The following story appears in the "Theri-gatha":

I suffered and became confused because of my child's death. My thoughts were confused and disrupted. I wandered here and there without clothes and with uncombed hair. Then I went to a Buddhist service and began to regain my mind. I was taught "dharma" through the mercy of Buddha. Listening to his words, I left my family and entered the monastery. I came into the peace of Buddha by following his words. In this way my anxiety came to an end. I overcame the root of my anxiety (Theri-gatha 133-138).

The same benefits accrued to women who lost their husbands and turned to Buddha. There are stories of prostitutes who, after much suffering, became monks. They determinedly rejected all sexual relations and followed Buddha's teachings wholeheartedly.

There are cases which indicate that male priests occasionally tempted women. Stories in the Theri-gatha describe the experience of women rejecting the advances of men. One woman, whose eyes were an object of a man's desire, plucked out her eyes and gave them to the man. In this way she followed Buddha's teachings.

Whatever the reason for entering the monastery, the women were strong and continued to be followers of Buddha's footsteps. They may have seemed a threat to patriarchal society, although we have no way of knowing how these women who left their families, rejected their sex roles and family roles, were accepted by society. We do know that sex differences were not a factor in the attempt to reach enlightenment. When one reached the stage of supreme understanding, no discrimination remained. The experiences of women shared in the Theri-gatha prove that women are capable of attaining enlightenment.

**Mahayana Buddhism**

Mahayana Buddhism is a systematized and theorized form of the original Buddhism. It was formed about 1 B.C. "Maha" means great and "Yana" means carriage. "Mahayana" was in other words a carriage by which to reach to the world of enlightenment from this world. The meaning of "Maha" was characterized by the teachings by "Bodhisattva" (bosatu). Originally "Bodhisattva" meant a type of perception that comes with Buddha's enlightenment, or seeking enlightenment not only for oneself but also to save all living beings.

Another understanding was added later to the concept of "Bodhisattva": that attaining Buddhahood is associated with the salvation of all living beings. This "Tathagatagarbha" concept was based on the belief that all living things could become a Buddha.

The original Sanskrit for "Garbha" in "tathagatagarbha", essentially has two meanings: one meaning is womb, and the other is embryo. Thus it can be translated into "the womb which holds Buddha's embryo" or "Buddha's embryo which holds the womb". These interpretations seem to reveal the true meaning of Buddhism, especially as words describing women's bodily functions were used for the expression.

It could be argued that the attainment of Buddhahood is essentially to be feminine. The central concept of Mahayana Buddhism is "Sunya", or emptiness. Sunya does not mean nothingness, but rather the absence of substance. What is this substance? It may be defined as "words". Words create the idea of dualism, dividing selfhood from others. This dualism is the beginning of separation (*vikalpa*). Emptiness, "Sunya", negates the idea of separation, negates words and the division (dualism) they create. This process is called non-separation and leads to Nirvijnam, the wisdom of non-separation. Communicated by words, the teaching comes when the words are negated and transformed, transmitting life to living beings. It uses words which communicate to human beings; they may be understood by other animals in different forms.

By negating substance, the idea of carnal desire is equal to Buddha. There is a contradictory concept that human beings with carnal desire can be saved in Buddha. If carnal desire and Buddha each has its own substance, then both can never be equal. However, when both concepts negate substance and remain in emptiness, carnal desire and Buddhahood can become one. The same way of thinking can be applied to the birth and death concept, which is equal to Nirvana. The world of toil and enlightenment is empty essentially so that they can become one. When men and women can be empty themselves, can be without substance, there is no

separation between them. This concept does not negate the difference in gender, but removes all discrimination against both genders.

### **The condition of women in Buddhism**

#### *Five reasons for barring women from the priesthood*

Buddhism was affected and changed not only by changes made in the original principles but also by the social system.

India had a strong matriarchal tradition. Until the Aryan invasion of the country, women were involved in religious activities. In the period of the Vedas women were not despised, but with the development of patriarchy, women's status declined. The patriarchal system introduced five theories to bar women from achieving Buddhahood: Women were not able to be (1) Brahma, the creator, the highest god, (2) Sakra Deranam Indra, the main god protecting Buddhism, (3) Mara the devil who damages lives and people's goodwill, (4) the king of the four states — East, West, South and North — and king of gold, silver, copper and iron, and (5) Buddha.

Of these points, the most important is that women cannot be Buddha, in other words, cannot be saved. This theory was really not compatible with the basic teaching of Buddha. Buddha taught that all living beings were able to reach Buddhahood. According to it, animals could be saved, but not women. Buddhist thinking thus conformed to the mainstream social order which was organized under a patriarchal system.

In the *Manusmurti*, Law of Manu, the status of women declined even further. The teachings delineated three layers of submission: before marriage women were to be submissive to their fathers, after marriage wives were to submit to their husbands, then mothers were to submit to their sons. The role of women was that of being a mother. Unless a woman had a son she was divorced; women were only for bearing children. Woman as described in the *Manusmurti* was evil, unclean and to be used as a tool. As male power was strengthened, so too was the patriarchal system. The status of women was abject, and they were not treated as human beings.

#### *The concept of rebirth as men*

In the process of the development of Mahayana Buddhism, it was understood that any person could reach Buddhahood. The five theories which barred the salvation of women was an issue taken up and decided by male Buddhists. Mahayana Buddhists seemed to have difficulty in interpreting the five theories for women. However, no woman was

consulted in relation to the rule that women could not reach Buddhahood. Moreover, women could not find a way to solve the problem under the clever control of the patriarchal society. The theory that governed women's ability to reach Buddhahood was not a keen concern for men, who in any case did not believe that women were human beings. Male Buddhists who were concerned with Buddhahood for women held the theory that a woman had to be reborn as a man before reaching Buddhahood. This concept became famous as the Lotus Sutra (*Saddharma-pundarikasutra*), explained in the following story from the sacred book:

The King Sagara-*raja* had an intelligent daughter who had fine senses. With her wisdom she was a perfect person in many ways. She had wealth equal to the value of the universe and dedicated all her possessions to Buddha. When Buddha accepted the gift from her in front of all the elders, her female organ disappeared and a male organ grew on her. She was changed to a male before reaching the stage of enlightenment. Then she went to the South, the world of Uimala, and sat under the bodhi tree for "gyo" — disciplinary training, necessary to reach Buddhahood.

This specific and concrete example of a woman being changed into a man in order to obtain salvation represents a passive solution to the problem. As a Buddhist woman, this kind of solution makes me both angry and sad.

The idea of transmigration (*samsara*) existed in India during the development of Mahayana Buddhism. According to this concept, human existence does not end in death but is continued in a rebirth. With a worldview based on transmigration, birth is directly related to death, which is transformed to birth again, making it possible to be born again in a human body or in the body of an animal. There was no resistance to the idea of being born again as a male, but as far as I know there is not a single source indicating that a male might desire to be born again as a female. In a patriarchal society where males held superior status, no one had any desire to be reborn as a female.

The idea underlying the concept of Lotus Sutra was that women could be freed from physical suffering and social pressures in the long run by being reborn as men and thus achieving salvation. What, then, is the significance of the suffering of women? Generally speaking, the suffering is the pain of childbirth. This may involve real pain. However, from ancient times women have experienced great joy in the power of bringing new life into the world. The act of childbirth was seen as sacred, not



simply a cause for suffering as it came to be defined by men who were physically incapable of bearing children. It is impossible to go back to the original form of Buddhism unless salvation for women solves the pain which causes the suffering.

#### *Faith in Amida Buddha*

In Mahayana Buddhism, the concept that unlimited numbers of Buddhas could exist emerged. This is similar to the "Bosatsu" concept.

The most beautiful region of Buddhahood was said to be a region in which people could live near the Buddha who would teach them, and thus lead them quickly to enlightenment. This was Amida Buddha. Amida Buddha has become the major current of Buddhist history, offering the attractive concept of altruistic vows and the "pureland" concept.

Amida Buddha was originated by Dharmakarabodhisatta (Hozo Bosatsu) who trained himself to reach Buddhahood and came up with the concept of the ideal state for the Buddhist country, "the Pureland". He established 48 vows for this purpose. Long ages have passed since Amida Buddha's time, but his vows are to lead all human beings to the true fulfilled land, the Pureland, located 100 million miles to the west. It symbolizes the ideal state. All who were born in the Pureland are equal, and experience no pain. Hozo Bosatsu pursued and accomplished all of his vows and became Amida Buddha.

The Amida faith is based on Amida Buddha's vows. By chanting the name, "Namu amida butsu", one can achieve birth in the Pureland. Anyone can embrace the belief, and easily chant the name. Through this teaching, people who are marginalized or frowned upon in society can also achieve salvation. This faith permeated to the lowest levels of Indian society. It also spread through another category of people — women — who could thus receive salvation. Faith in Amida Buddha had important implications for the salvation of women, who were suffering both physically and socially.

The 35th of Amida Buddha's 48 vows is directly concerned with women's realization of enlightenment. Buddha samyak sambodhi says:

Sakymuni, when I reach the Bosatsu stage, all women who believed in the pure heart of Bosatsu who are in the mysterious and incomparable Pureland would dislike me as a woman. If all women left life in this world and received a woman's body again, I would not realize perfect enlightenment.

Once again, the message is that women who are determined to reach enlightenment and enter the Pureland of Amida Buddha must first change



their sex. (In the Jodo sect of Buddhism, however, salvation was offered through the simple act of chanting the name — Myogo — and thus many women anticipated the realization of enlightenment.) But faith in Amida Buddha has been supported by women who dreamed of rebirth in the beautiful Pureland where there was no pain or suffering.

### **Japanese Buddhism**

*Zen* (Suzuki Daisetz and Beatrice Lane)

The main strand of Buddhism in Japan is represented by Zen Buddhism and the Jodo Kyo. The founders of Zen, Dogen and Eisai, are not discussed in detail here because they expounded a doctrine of salvation by Gyo, works, and were not laypersons but priests. The layperson with a spouse and children has difficulty relating directly to their teachings.

Dogen was a very fastidious person who could not accept the desires of the flesh, and was drawn to wealth and honour. Yet in his youth, before he moved to the Eihei-ji Temple, he had a view of women quite different from the common understanding: "What kind of fault do women have? What kind of morals do men have? There are bad people even among men. There are good people even among women. The desire of people to hear the teachings of Buddha and to enter Buddhahood is not limited to men only but is also among women. When one does not cut off all doubts, men and women are in the same stage of perplexity. When one cuts off perplexity and realizes the truth (dharma), there is no difference between men and women" (from Raihai Tokuzu in "Shobo Genzo").

Thus Dogen's view was that women can achieve Buddhahood as well as men. When Dogen was young he believed in the equality of men and women and criticized the foolishness of the Mount Hiei and Mount Koya temples which barred women from entering. However, in later years, by the time Dogen built the Eihei-ji Temple he no longer believed in the equality of men and women and prohibited their entry. This change of heart has repercussions on present-day society.

Zen is based on Dogen's teaching. It is based on meditation in the temple and detachment from the world and therefore has little significance for people today who must participate in society. A Zen Buddhist who can offer Zen's meaning to present social conditions is Suzuki Daisetz. He enriched Zen for the benefit of people in present-day society and also introduced Zen to other countries. His experience was not limited to the priesthood, as he lived truly and freely in the world of Zen. Because he experienced Zen in modern society, based on the original

form of Buddhism, Daisetz may be as a Zen Buddhist superior to Dogen or Eizai, or at least equal to them.

Suzuki Daisetz was born in Kanazawa City in 1870. His father was a city doctor who studied Chinese and Dutch medicine, possessed many books, and interested himself in his son's education. However, his father died when Daisetz was 5 years old, leaving his family in financial difficulties. An elder brother died immediately after his father's death, his elder sister departed to marry, and two other brothers lived independently. Daisetz lived with his mother, a believer in Shin Buddhism. In the 1800's Jodo Buddhism was widespread in the Hokuriku area. It evangelized very simple but earnest believers, all of whom maintained a family altar at home. Every day they chanted the sutras before the altar, giving daily life a religious ambience. In later years, Daisetz said in his memoirs that his religious sensitivity was nurtured by his mother. His mother offered Daisetz's school record and other awards at the family altar and closely observed rituals for family ancestors.

When he was 21 years old, Daisetz entered Waseda University and visited Enkaku Temple in Kamkura for the first time to participate in Zen meditation. He questioned why his life did not flower like a tree which could grow and bear fruit unconsciously. This was the first step to entering the religious life. Meeting with Master Imakita Kosen in Enkakuji was the catalyst for Daisetz's decision to follow Zen Buddhism. After Master Kosen's death Daisetz learned from Master Soen Shaku. When Daisetz was 25 years old, he experienced internal unity of the subjective self with the object, Kensho. While meditating, he realized there is no difference between a large pine tree in the moonlight and the consciousness of self. He had reached the stage of true personhood.

In 1987 Daisetz went to the United States where he published various articles and translations. When he returned to Japan he taught English. Later, as a professor at Otani University in Kyoto, the main focus of his work was research and writing on Zen.

When he was 41 years old he married Beatrice Lane, an American. Born in 1878, in Boston, Beatrice graduated from Radcliffe College and continued studies in sociology at Columbia University. Not satisfied with traditional Christian faith, she became interested in oriental philosophy. When Daisetz was in the United States she learned much from him. Two years after Daisetz returned to Japan she followed him and they were married soon after.

Daisetz and Beatrice felt that it was their life's purpose to communicate oriental philosophy and religious ideas to the West and they placed

importance on the exchange of opinions and ideas in writing. This was very rare in Japan. It was not common for a wife to be involved in the same work as her husband and this was possible not only because Beatrice was an American but because as a free-thinking Buddhist, Daisetz was not overly concerned about what others thought of him.

Most of Daisetz's writings relating to Zen are in English, and many people who come from abroad to Japan to study Zen become familiar with Daisetz's work. However, not many people know about Beatrice and their mutual influence.

Beatrice studied Buddhism throughout her life and was, of course, influenced by her longtime partnership with Daisetz. Most impressed with the thought on Bosatsu (Bodhisattva), she found great meaning for existence in the concept of "great mercy", or compassion, which made the existence of Bosatsu possible. Beatrice did not separate herself from other human beings. When she talked about ordinary living beings she included grass, trees, mountains and rivers as well as animals and human beings. In practice, she was an extraordinary protector for all animals, bringing home cats and sheltering dogs which came to her door. Beatrice thought the concept of Bosatsu particularly attractive for women, and she encouraged other women to practise the belief.

Beatrice said: "Our 'capacity for progress' depends not upon the masculine principle, but upon the feminine principle, if one wishes to call it so, of compassion and sympathy to all forms of life..."

"This 'Ewig Weibliche' — what can it mean but love, compassion, and sympathy, the eternal feminine spirit such as is manifested in the ideal of the Bodhisattva? It is the glory of Mahayana Buddhism that it has set itself unreservedly to this ideal and it holds it out to the world as the only antidote to all trouble, turmoil, and suffering induced by man and other beings" (*Impressions of Mahayana Buddhism*, p. 27, Kyoto, the Eastern Buddhist Society 1940).

The "Concept of Compassion" or mercy was the core of Beatrice's faith. She believed that one should not divide oneself from the other. The concept of compassion is not included in the male principles, because the male principles are the competitive ones. Compassion is a feminine trait. It is valuable to evaluate Buddhism from the feminist perspective which Beatrice found in Buddhism, although Buddhism was developed in a male-oriented social system.

The writings by Suzuki Daisetz, who was her master and husband, included this feminist perspective, for he truly lived as the liberated person who understood the core of Buddhism. He transcended the

dualism of the world by avoiding any division of himself from the others. Daisetz and Beatrice practised the belief that men and women could not be divided throughout their lives. They attempted to help others to understand that they too could be free of dualistic thinking and thus experience the heart of Bosatsu.

Daisetz wrote after Beatrice's death that conversations with her never really came to an end. It is said that real communication can occur when the selfhood is liberated and when one recognizes the other's position. Daisetz wrote : "Beatrice's concern was not to be able to compile her 10-year study and to have to leave her partner alone. She often said we were united. But only half of the one remains now. Throughout my life my work was not completed without her help. But some day we may be united in Kairos. The mercy of Bosatsu is endless." Daisetz was able to transform the sadness of losing Beatrice into a joyful remembrance of the relationship that had existed between them.

#### *Jodo Kyo (Shinran and Eshinni)*

The major form of Buddhism in Japan is faith in Amida Buddha. The religion reached its climax in the person of Shinran, who lived in the 13th century and raised the Amida Buddha belief to the status of a popular religion. Applying Shinran's teachings to the present is the essence of the belief of the Amida Buddha. It may be asked why Shinran, who lived in the 13th century, should be important in the latter half of the 20th century. His faith experience was of a universal nature, but the concepts of the 13th century are not valid for solving problems that present themselves today.

Shinran was born in Kyoto in 1173. When he was nine years old he entered the Mount Hiei Temple for training in the doctrine of salvation. At that age the decision to enter the temple could not have been taken on his sole initiative. Scholars have different opinions as to why he entered the temple at such an early age, citing as reasons the many wars during that period, as well as chronic famine. Shinran's father's social status was such that Shinran had a very difficult and miserable life in his early years. In the Kamakura period (1192-1334) some influences of the matriarchal society still remained. When Shinran's mother died there was no one to care for him, and he was sent to the temple. In any case, to live in the environment of the temple, Shinran had to give up his ordinary secular life.

When he was 29 years old, Shinran left the Mount Hiei Temple and went to the Jodo Kyo, founded by the Priest Honen. The reason for this

change is unclear, although he said in 1202 that he abandoned the difficult practices to take "the primal vow" in the Collection of Passages on Teaching, Practice, Faith and Realization of the Pure Land Way.

Letters written by the wife of Shinran, found in 1291, also explain why Shinran changed to the Jodo Kyo. They say that Shinran went down from Mount Hiei and stayed at Rokakudo, which was located in central Kyoto, 12-13 kilometres from Mount Hiei. He stayed there for 100 days and meditated on the direction of his life. On the morning of the 95th day he had a dream and went down the mountain in order to live with people practising the teachings of Jodo Kyo. The dream which Shinran received from the oracle Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva was the following: When the devotee finds himself bound by his past karma to come in contact with the female sex, I will incarnate myself as a beautiful woman and become the object of his love. Throughout his life I will be his helpmate for the sake of embellishing this world, and on his death I will become his guide to the Land of Bliss.

Why did Shinran not go into the sphere of enlightenment by overcoming life and death? One reason he was hindered from doing this was the problem of sexuality. This problem did not allow him to continue his self-training, which meant freeing himself from his ego. He had the internal desire to have a relationship with a woman, but was bound to follow the celibacy rule of the priesthood. Shinran thought seriously about the negation of sex for the priesthood. For him, having sexual relations with a woman violated the priesthood order and was therefore a sin. The dream oracle indicated that his sexual relation with a woman could be interpreted as finding Buddha contained in a female body. Therefore, his feelings against the celibate priesthood became strong. Out of a sinful situation and a growing sense of guilt, Shinran saw Buddha's salvation, which could lead him to Pure Land. With this confidence in the salvation of Buddha, Shinran decided to live in Jodo Kyo as a lay person with his wife and to establish a family. Shinran accepted what Buddha once rejected for his enlightenment and found his salvation in a different way from Buddha's.

The Buddhist life-style involves negating sexuality. Yet lay Buddhists and those who live in social relationships struggle with problems which are contrary to this precept and strengthen the ego — the opposite process of coming closer to Buddha's enlightenment. Shinran understood that the problem related to sexuality applied not only to him but was universal. The guilt involved in violating the vow of priesthood increased, while at the same time the joy of salvation was realized. It is similar to the belief

which holds that the awareness of the fallen in hell is the realization of salvation. Shinran taught that "all sins of the past, present and the future are changed to good. To be changed does not mean the sin is erased."

According to Shinran, all beings are sinful, but receive "Other Power", which is more than the denial of self-power. *Tannisho*, a book written by Shinran's disciple Yuien fifty years after Shinran's death, says in this regard that "when a person overturns his heart of self-power and entrusts himself to the other power, he will realize birth in the true fulfilled land."

There are still few resources available to help us understand Eshinni, Shinran's wife. It is said that he might have had a few wives, but the number is not the issue here. What is important is that he married Eshinni as a Buddhist priest. Her life itself means a great deal for women today. She was born in 1182. There is no record of her birthplace or her personal history. The only information available to us today about their married life is contained in Eshinni's letters from Echigo (far away from Kyoto) to her daughter in Kyoto, written in Eshinni's later years. These suggest that she married Shinran in the expectation that theirs would be an ordinary marriage relationship. It was only later, in a dream whose meaning was confirmed by Shinran, that she learned that her marriage partner was not an ordinary person. She came to believe in him as Buddha. It is said that Eshinni actually saved Shinran and helped him to find Buddha through their physical relationship. At the same time, Eshinni was also redeemed and found her salvation. The awareness of Buddhahood grew between them, for the mutual relationship of man and woman can only be established when the man and woman have mutual faith.

Eshinni strengthened her faith by living with her family and relating to others. This is a faith model for people in present-day society. Eshinni's way of preaching the faith is specially understandable for women. She showed that man does not have a superior status when entering the faith and that woman is not inferior in any religious sense. Instead, Eshinni proved that women too can enter the faith and live within it.

### **Buddhism today**

Although Buddhism started in India and came to Japan through China, Buddhism has been declining in those countries. In Japan Buddhism was adopted as the national religion in the 6th century and protected by the rulers of the time. It spread among upper-class elites. The number of adherents grew steadily. Policies for the protection of the religion emphasized the training of priests and involved the building of temples all over the country. The number of priests increased and the teachings of

Buddha spread among the people. The elite class protected Buddhism in order to secure their status in society. Ancestor worship was exploited to confirm their ruling power.

In the Kamakura period (1192-1334), evangelization depended greatly on the efforts of such masters as Dogen, Nichiran, Hogen and Shinran. Their teachings were easily understood by ordinary people who wanted to attain salvation. Through the offer of salvation to all, Buddhism attracted people caught in the difficult situations of war, famine and sickness.

Another reason for the success of Buddhism was the obligation for each family to belong to a temple (Edo era, 17-18 century). Faith was not a matter of individual devotion, and ancestor worship was enforced. Buddhist temples were supported by families through many generations and the control of the temple was passed down from one generation to the next in the priest's family. The religious organization stabilized in a pyramid formation. Each sect had a temple headquarters and a network of temples firmly organized under this family-based system, called the "Danka system". This remains the basis of Buddhist religious organization today, but the content of Buddhism has been distorted.

The primary purpose of Buddhism thus became ancestor worship, and the main emphasis was given to the observation of religious ceremonies. The numbers of followers of the major religions in Japan in 1982 were: Shintoism 50%, Buddhism 42%, Christianity 1%, others 7%. Buddhism is divided into 5 major sects: Tendai, Shingon, Jodo, Zen and Nichiren. The relative size of each is given in the following table:

	<i>Temples</i>	<i>Members</i>
Tendai	4,000	3,305,643
Shingon	11,894	12,445,829
Jodo	29,851	20,283,420
Zen	20,513	8,610,094
Nichiren	6,548	32,626,405
Others	236	4,362,093
<i>Total</i>	<i>73,042</i>	<i>81,623,484</i>

Because 80 million of a total of 130 million Japanese call themselves Buddhists, Japan is called a Buddhist country. Generally speaking, Japanese go to Shinto shrines to pray for the safe delivery of babies. When the baby is one month old the parents take the baby to a shrine to ensure its healthy development. Young people go to a Shinto shrine for



protection and to pray for success in entrance examinations for colleges and universities. Although some prefer Christian wedding services, the majority of marriages today are in the Shinto tradition.

Major ceremonies in the year begin with New Year in a Shinto shrine. In March, during the week of the Spring Equinox, people go to Buddhist services and their ancestors' graves. In August and in the fall again they go to their ancestors' graves and some go to a Shinto shrine for celebrations. Even families that are not Buddhist perform Buddhist funeral rites for a deceased family member. There is a Buddhist service every day for 49 days after the funeral, with a final, main, service on the 49th day. This service is repeated, however, on the 100th day, then one year, 3 years, 7 years, 13 years, 25 years, and 50 years after the funeral. Every month on the day of the funeral the temple priest visits the family at home for services. In this way, people's lives are closely bound to Buddhism.

The local temple priest is supported by the family's adherence to the religion. The temple priest performs ceremonies for the dead. Most priests at present are married and have families. Before the Meiji Government lifted the law which prohibited the marriage of priests, the only exception was Jodo Shinshu, founded by Shinran. Until the Meiji period, Buddhist priests did not marry publicly. The negation of the sex desire stressed by Buddha is no longer practised.

In the Jodo sect, temples are operated by a master of the temple (jushoku) and his wife (bomori). The temple priest attends a ceremony called a "Tokudo" at the headquarters of his sect and receives special training to be qualified as a priest. There is no need for a woman to undergo training to become a bomori. She automatically becomes one upon marrying a temple priest.

The Jodo sect itself consists of ten sects. The biggest is called the Honganji sect, which consists of 10,460 temples, with 19,774 male and 5,285 female qualified priests. Women recognized by the Honganji sect for the priesthood are limited to those whose husbands have died or whose sons are still too young to be temple priests.

The Otani sect does not recognize women priests at all, and there are no examples of a wife assuming this position. Within the Otani sect a bomori is the same as an ordinary housewife, but she has to carry more responsibilities at home and at the temple. For example, she must welcome all members of the temple. She has to clean the building and the garden, and change the flowers on the altar. The bomori is expected to prepare for the numerous religious ceremonies which fall throughout

the year and to take care of the monthly women's meeting held at the temple.

It is questionable whether busy priests and bomori who have to carry out so many ceremonies have time to study their faith. It is very rare to find temple priests and their wives who deepen their faith within the present context. In the management of the temple, they are too occupied with various ceremonies necessary for ancestor worship to be able to intelligently renew their faith. The present system of the temples shows various signs of crisis, for temples are not meeting the needs of people.

Why, then, do books on Buddhism sell so well? Why does the religion become the main subject at a cultural centre operated by secular groups? Why are women's meetings on Buddhism organized by the city so well attended? Keeping up various ceremonies for ancestor worship alone does not make one a Buddhist. The main problem for Buddhism in Japan is that the religion is supported by the family as its basic unit. The pyramidal organization formed and supported by the strong family system was established in modern times, largely based on the hereditary right of the priest's family. All temples follow this custom. The organization has the merit of transmitting Buddhist teachings, but at the same time, to sustain its organization, it has secularized the religion. As the secularization process continues, it will be more difficult to spread the true teachings of Buddhism.

### **Future tasks**

Present-day Buddhism is not true to its original form. As feudalism forced women to be submissive, Buddhism oppressed women. Buddhism saw women as sinful beings, and the patriarchal system forced women to take on a role at the bottom of society. As a result, women were powerless. At present, a trend to renew Buddhism is developing among women. Since women have been severely disadvantaged by Buddhism in the past, one might ask why they would be interested in such a process of renewal. The principal reason is that the concept of equality between man and woman can be found in Buddhism. Also, religion is about life rather than about death, and human beings have a desire to seek the truth related to life. If the role of Buddhism is to seek the truth, then it should respond to the needs of all people.

In the renewal process it will be necessary both to evaluate the principles of Buddhism which discriminate against women and to achieve a new stage of religious understanding about men and women. Buddhism has the potential to develop a new form of feminism. The new under-

standing of Buddhism is that Buddha is neither male nor female, but has achieved the perfect state of both sexes. This allows all people to work towards the perfect state of being by achieving Buddhahood. The opportunity for such development is open to both sexes.

The Buddhist concept of "emptiness" means that the differences between the sexes are of little importance. The concept of emptiness, which is completely absent from Western thought, negates all horizontal relationships. It is a positive principle. This concept could open up a new way of thinking and help us to find a solution which responds to the needs of all people, and points the way for all to achieve perfect Buddhahood.