

# 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.

