

Gender Equality of Buddhist Thought in the Age of Buddha

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Introduction

IN different historical eras and geographic regions, the teachings of Buddhism, including those regarding women, have taken various forms. In recent decades, the development of feminist theory has encouraged a revisiting of the world's religious traditions, including Buddhism, from a women's perspective. Buddhism has been criticized as having functioned as an instrument of oppression, often lending support to discrimination against women.

In the twenty-first century, as the value of gender equity gains wider acceptance, there is an increasing need for such criticism to be coupled with efforts to reconsider the relation between Buddhism and women and the potential for the deep egalitarian currents of Buddhist thought to be deployed in a manner that is emancipatory for women.

This paper looks at the portrayals of women in the early sutras, said to describe the Buddha's lifetime, as a means of clarifying Buddhism's view of women. These early scriptural sources contain many references to women. This presentation will look at the question of women in the early Buddhist community and the Buddha's own views of women.

1. Women as a Source of Temptation

According to tradition, the Buddha, having attained enlightenment under a Bodhi (pipal) tree, began his teaching career by preaching to ascetic practitioners in Sarnath. This is referred to as the First Turning of the Wheel of Dharma and the resulting converts became the Buddha's first disciples, forming the initial Sangha, or community of practitioners. The Sangha continued to grow as more and more people were drawn to the Buddha and sought to engage in Buddhist practice.

For monk practitioners, women were seen as the greatest single impediment to their practice. Among the precepts to be upheld by monks, those against sexual misconduct were especially strict. These

monks were expected to engage in the purification practices known as Brahmacharya in order to control the sexual impulses that were regarded as especially powerful among all human desires. Monks who violated this precept and had sexual relations with women were banished from the Sangha for having committed the grave crime of transgressing the rules of conduct known as Pārājika.

The Buddha, for his part, is recorded as having been very harsh in his condemnations of the deleterious effects of contact with women and of carnal desire. Denunciations of sexual desire can be found throughout the Buddhist scriptures. For example: “Full of lust for the sight of a woman, for the voice and the smells of a woman, for a woman’s touch, you experience many kinds of suffering.”²¹ And: “People followed by thirst crawl around like a captured hare. Therefore you should remove thirst and wish for being free of passions. / Beset by craving, people run about like an entrapped hare. Therefore one who yearns to be passion-free should destroy his own craving.”²²

Monk practitioners were admonished that they must be careful of all such temptations, and that by avoiding the lures of women and resisting sexual desire, the world of enlightenment would be open to them. The Buddha urges abnegation of a variety of desires but none more than sexual desire. There is reason to believe that there were specific conditions within the community of believers that impelled the Buddha to denounce carnal desire so emphatically. There are recorded reports, for example, of a monk who had been seduced by his wife from whom he had separated in order to take up Buddhist practice.

The original community of believers was composed solely of men, thus reducing the exposure to the temptations of women and sexuality. The members of this community lived in forests and caves, under trees, in cemeteries and exposed areas. They practiced a simple way of life satisfying only the bare minimum of needs. Living away from population centers, they could avoid contact with the temptations presented by women and were thus relatively less likely to violate the precept against sexual misconduct.

After a time, however, women appeared who expressed their wish to join and be part of this community. These would become female monks, and the Buddha’s initial response is worth noting.

2. The Ordination of Women

As noted, for some time, the Sangha was composed only of men. But eventually women, whose presence had been abjured as a hindrance to

practice, were admitted into the community of practitioners. It is easy to imagine the various problems that arose from this. There are number of different narratives depicting the process by which women came to be ordained into the community of believers.

The first group of nuns to be ordained is said to have been 20 women led by the Buddha's stepmother, Mahapajapati Gotami. Mahapajapati nursed and raised the Buddha after his mother, Māyā, died just one week after giving birth to him. Her son Nanda also entered the religious life and when her husband King Suddhodana died, she went to the Buddha who was then residing in the outskirts of Kapilavastu, the capital of Shakya Kingdom, and expressed her desire to join him. The Buddha rejected her request three times, saying that this was something she must not do or even consider.

Having had her request refused by the Buddha, Mahapajapati followed him, making the arduous journey to Vaishali, some 200 kilometers distant. She again requested permission to join the Sangha as an ordained nun and was again refused. This time it was Ananda, one of the Buddha's ten major disciples said to be first in hearing the Dharma, who took pity on her and asked, "Lord Buddha! Are not men and women the same and their ability to reach the state of Arhat (enlightenment)?" The Buddha responded by acknowledging that they were. Ananda followed up by suggesting that there should then be no reason to deny women admittance into the Sangha. At this point, the Buddha had no reason not to grant the women's request.

There were, however, eight conditions (the eight Garudhammas or heavy rules) attached to the ordination of women. Most of these monks. Further, whereas there were 250 precepts for monks, the lives of nuns were to be guided by 348 precepts.³

Here however, I think it is important to reaffirm the core thread of human equality and nondiscrimination that runs through Buddhism and Buddhist teaching, which asserts a fundamental equality, unaffected by such factors as birth, class, sex or class. This can be gleaned from the following words of Sutta Nipata:

"Not by birth is one an outcast; not by birth is one a brahman. By deed one becomes an outcast, by deed one becomes a brahman."⁴

This is a truly dramatic assertion in a society that at the time was structured around a caste system in which Brahmin occupied the preeminent place. This egalitarian philosophy, transcending all distinctions of class and caste, exerted a strong appeal among the non-elite majority of the populace. The Buddhist Sangha was likewise governed by an egalitarian ethos, in which the most important factor determining

respect was the number of years that had passed since a person's full ordination. Whatever their respective social backgrounds, a junior in faith was expected to rise and bow in reverent greeting to a senior.

The equality of men's and women's capacity to realize religious enlightenment can be confirmed in the discussion cited above regarding the ordination of women. It is also apparent in these words of the Buddha. "If any woman or man goes in this direction, he or she approaches nirvana in this vehicle."⁵

In the India of the time, women were subjected to the control of their families and husbands; their existence as individuals was accorded only scant recognition. Against this background, the opportunity afforded by Buddhism to leave their families and seek personal salvation was truly revolutionary. This is not to say that all forms of actual discrimination were eliminated, but we can see the aspiration toward equality within early Buddhism, despite the constraints of the era.

3. The Enlightenment of Buddhist Nuns seen in the Therigatha

Despite the strict conditions placed on ordination and the many precepts they were required to follow, many women became nuns. The Therigatha (Verses of the Elder Nuns) is an early collection of poems by 71 elder nuns: 23 of royal background, 13 from the commercial class, 18 Brahmins and 4 courtesans. This suggests the large number of women who had been ordained in the Buddhist order.

These women's motivations for becoming nuns were varied. Their stories are marked by individual drama: the deaths of children, escape from a violent husband, being left without support following the death of a spouse, fleeing from incest, etc. They tell the noteworthy stories of women who had struggled to survive in a society that afforded them no respect, but were able to practice Buddhism and gain enlightenment on an equal footing with men. Although the precepts they had to follow were strict, they were able to experience their own existence, not having to submit to anyone else. As one scholar has put it, Buddhism offered them a refuge from the violent abuse of their families and the discrimination of society.⁶

This collection of verses is imbued with the powerful confidence these nuns embraced regarding their enlightenment. The verses of the nun Soma, the daughter of a Brahmin family, merit our attention as a critique of gender-based discrimination. The following is her response to a demon claiming that the teachings are difficult to grasp except by

those with withdrawn as hermits, and impossible for woman to understand.

“What does womanhood matter at all / When the mind is concentrated well, / When knowledge flows on steadily / As one sees correctly into Dharma.”⁷

After having lost her husband, child and family members, the nun Kisa-gotami encountered the Buddha and attained enlightenment. To quote her verse:

Going along, about to give birth, I saw my husband dead. Giving birth in the road, I hadn't reached my own home. Two children deceased, my husband dead in the road—miserable me! My mother, father, & brother were burning on a single pyre. . . . With family killed, despised by all, my husband dead, I reached the Deathless. I've developed this path, noble, eightfold, going to the Deathless. Having realized Unbinding, I've gazed in the mirror of Dharma. I've cut out the arrow, put down the burden, done the task.⁸

Likewise, the Buddha welcomed former courtesans into the Sangha. The nun Vimala was among them:

Intoxicated with my complexion, figure, beauty, & fame; haughty with youth, I despised other women. Adorning this body embellished to delude foolish men, I stood at the door to the brothel: . . . Today, wrapped in a double cloak, my head shaven, having wandered for alms, I sit at the foot of a tree and attain the state of no-thought. All ties—human & divine—have been cut.⁹

The experience of enlightenment described by these nuns is in no way inferior to that described by male monks in the Theragatha, another, parallel collection of verses. The nuns' verses are filled with the joyful confidence that those who follow the Buddhist teachings and engage in practice can reach enlightenment. The existence of these writings is in itself evidence of the presumption of gender equality in terms of enlightenment. This is all the more remarkable when considered against the lack of social of women at the time.

4. The Buddha's View of Women

Here I have looked briefly at the Buddha's view of women. Admonitions to avoid women are premised on recognition of the power of their

sexuality. The Buddha does not assert that women's capacity to attain enlightenment is inferior to that of men's. Even the more vigorous rejections of femininity are best understood as warnings to men to avoid such distractions in their own pursuit of enlightenment.

Carnal desire, one of the fonts of life itself, is shunned. It is easy to imagine the difficulty this view had gaining acceptance in India with its rich tradition of thinking about sexual love. Some scholars have suggested that Buddhism's strict teachings on this front was one factor hindering its widespread acceptance within Indian society.¹⁰

But religious practices requiring sexual abstinence are possible only to those living in communities of the ordained. This would be difficult if not impossible for lay women believers in the midst of family life and its complex emotional realities. Early Buddhism was a religion focused on clerics. While the nuns of the Therigatha collection express their religious confidence and joy, most women lived lives dominated by men amidst the sexual and emotional entanglements of secular life. The Buddhist teaching of equality of enlightenment pertained only to life within the community of the ordained. It did not change the prevalent perceptions a society as a whole.

Following the Buddha's passing, there were changes in attitudes toward Buddhist nuns. The Buddha is recorded as saying to his disciple Ananda that if women had not been ordained, his teachings would have gained acceptance in society for thousand years, but because women were ordained these teachings would only spread for 500 years. A home with many women is more vulnerable to the predations of Burglars or robbers; in the same way, in a Sangha with nuns the difficult practices will not long be upheld.

But there is reason to doubt the veracity of this record. It is possible that male monks who did not welcome the presence of nuns presented their own views as the Buddhist words. Seeing a community of women believers only as an impediment, they sought to present the ordination of women as something other than the Buddha's true intent.

During the Buddha's lifetime an ideal of gender equality was taught, and within the confines of an ordained community women were able to attain enlightenment. But men were the protagonists of the community, and it was they who compiled the sutras, at times incorporating into them their own views, in the wake of the Buddha's passing. Over time, the Buddha's original spirit was diluted and the ideas of these male monks were recorded as sutras, generating a philosophy of discriminatory and degrading views of women that runs counter to this original spirit.

Conclusion

Despite the gender equality of the Buddha's own views, in later eras, the Buddhist view of women changed under the influence of societal norms and systems prejudicial to women's interests. This resulted in such teachings as that women could not become Buddhas, that they were burdened by 5 obstacles to enlightenment, that they must first be reborn as men to attain enlightenment and that they must be excluded from holy sites. From within the darkness of history, against assertions of the deep karma and unsalvageable nature of women, we can hear their anguished cries in quest of enlightenment.

The founder of the IOP, SGI President Ikeda, as written the following on this point:

To cause that Law to spread and take root in society, however, the Buddha had to consider how to explain it in terms people would accept. Under certain circumstances, Shakyamuni, while fundamentally determined to teach the Law "according with the Buddha's own mind," had to employ wisdom and adapt his teaching to the capacities of his listeners simply to get a hearing; he had to draw others gradually toward his own enlightened state of life...When explanations are tailored to the biases of society in this fashion, however, there is a danger that even people of sincere faith will become attached to those biases, leading to a distorted interpretation of the teaching. The effect often is that when a distorted teaching gets handed down it does nothing but exacerbate and harden the discriminatory attitudes of society. If we were to trace the historical view of women in Buddhism, we would probably find many such instances.¹¹

The question of philosophic accommodation to social norms is important one, an unavoidable problem when considering the transformation of an original system of thought.

At the same time, such Mahayana teachings as the Lotus Sutra, which describes the enlightenment of the dragon King's daughter, or the vow to save suffering people by Lady Srimala in the sutra of the same name, as well as Nichiren's own teachings on the enlightenment of women, all these offer a clear lineage of emancipatory ideas within the Buddhist tradition. This is a lineage to which the SGI lays claim.

To dedicate oneself to Buddhism means more than simply studying the words of the sacred texts. It means to interpret and reinterpret Buddhism as a philosophy against the context of the present era in

which we live, in order to revive its original spirit and give it new and relevant meaning. This is the work that SGI President Ikeda has been engaged in and called for. This holds an important key for thinking about women and Buddhism in the present.

Notes

¹ Theragāthā Verses of the Senior Monks. Chapter of the Twenties. “16.2 Pārāpariya.” <http://suttacentral.net/en/thag16.2>

² Buddhārakkhita Acharya, trans. “Craving.” In *The Dhammapada: The Buddha’s Path of Wisdom*, 104. Buddhist Publication Society, 1998.

³ For a detailed discussion of the precepts to be observed by Buddhist nuns, see Iwamoto Yutaka *Bukkyo to Josei* (Buddhism and Women), Sato Mitsuo *Genshi Bukkyo Kyudan no Kenkyu* (Research in the Early Buddhist Sangha) Sankibo Busshorin, 1963.

⁴ “Vasala Sutta: Discourse on Outcasts” (Sutta Nipata 1.7), translated from the Pali by Piyadassi Thera. *Access to Insight* (Legacy Edition).

⁵ Samyutta-Nikaya 1.5.6

⁶ Tagami Taishu, *Bukkyo to Sei Sabetsu: Indo Genten ga kataru* (Buddhism and Sexual Discrimination: As Recounted in the Original Indian Texts), Tokyoshoseki, 1992, pp. 8–16.

⁷ “Soma Sutta: Soma” (Samyutta Nikaya 5.2), translated from the Pali by Bhikkhu Bodhi. *Access to Insight* (Legacy Edition)

⁸ “Kisagotami Theri” (Therigatha 10), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. *Access to Insight* (Legacy Edition)

⁹ “Vimala: The Former Courtesan” (Therigatha 5.2), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. *Access to Insight* (Legacy Edition)

¹⁰ Minamoto Junko “Nihon Bukkyo no Sei Sabetsu” (Sexual Discrimination in Japanese Buddhism) in Ogoshi Aiko, et al. *Sei Sabetsu suru Bukkyo* (Sexual Discrimination in Buddhism), Hozokan, 1990, p. 92.

¹¹ Ikeda Daisaku, et al. *The Wisdom of the Lotus Sutra: A Discussion*. Vol. 3. World Tribune Press, 2000, pp. 104–105.

Author Biography

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The Language of Lotus Sutra's Parable of Medicinal Herbs

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Abstract

The Lotus Sutra as a text has been translated into different languages. In the English language several versions of the Lotus Sutra exist today. As a Buddhist text, its English translations have a wider outreach reaching the Occidental beyond its Oriental origin. Based on Kumarajiva's translation of the Lotus Sutra, the English translations are reputed to have kept to its appeal and richness of its language. This paper looks at the discourse of the Parable of the Medicinal Herbs from the 2009 translation by Burton Watson. The corpus consists of the 216 lines of the verse format of the parable. A discourse analysis of the text revealed the extensive use of literary devices and binomials to deliver its teachings and the message of impartiality. It is through these language features that makes it linguistically appealing to its readers. I wish to caveat that this attempt to examine this rich and classical text is with the humble understanding that it will not lend itself to any single interpretation.

Introduction

The Lotus Sutra is one of the most important and influential of all the sutras or sacred scriptures of Mahayana Buddhism, revered by almost all branches of the Mahayana teachings, and over many centuries the object of intense veneration among Buddhist believers throughout China, Korea, Japan, and other regions of eastern Asia.

Burton Watson (1993, p. ix)

THE Kumarajiva translation of the Lotus Sutra is highly reputed and remains the version sorted out in both China and Japan. Based on this translation, the Lotus Sutra was translated many times over into the English language and each attempt is a work to produce the finest interpretation of its message and meaning. Two versions of Watson's translation were published in 1993 and 2009. This paper has chosen the

2009 publication as it is the latest. Watson's translation is also the working version selected by The Institute of Oriental Philosophy (IOP) of Japan and the Soka Gakkai Malaysia (SGM). The selected chapter, The Parable of the Medicinal Herbs, is one of the seven parables in the collection of the Lotus Sutra.

The Lotus Sutra consists of 28 chapters and it is unique that each chapter is presented in two formats—prose and verse. Each chapter begins with a prose that introduces the main thrust of the chapter and the content is then presented in a verse form. This unique dual format of presentation places the Lotus Sutra in a genre of its own.

Methodology

The source of this exploratory paper is the translation by Burton Watson (2009) entitled *The Lotus Sutra and Its Opening and Closing Sutras*. The focus of analysis will be the verses from Chapter Five (pp. 137 to 143). The stanzas have in total 216 lines. Each of the verses are numbered for ease of reference.

Analysis of the language features will look at the use of language features, namely, literary devices and binomials. The findings will be presented as the language used in:

A. The Didactic Overtones of the Parable of Medicinal Herbs

B. The Language of Impartiality in the Parable of Medicinal Herbs

Examples will be taken from the corpus to facilitate the illustration and discussion of the language features found.

Language Features—A Brief Introduction

This section provides an introduction to the main features found in this text. To begin with, the Parable is didactic in nature as it can be categorised as texts that offer instructional information with guidance in moral, religious, and ethical matters. The language features in the Parable can be divided into two groups: Literary devices and binomials.

A. Literary Devices

Imagery refers to the use of literary devices such as anaphora, epithets, hyperboles, similes, metaphors and descriptive words to give a dramatic effect so that readers can visualize through the mental picture created in their minds.