

## Introduction

Scholars investigating sexual stereotypes in our society are becoming increasingly aware of assumptions made about women and the effect of these assumptions on women. Traditional religious stories, images, and ideals absorbed by members of a culture are frequently vehicles of misogynist views. This presentation of literature from the more recent Buddhist tradition known as Mahāyāna attempts to provide examples of the variety of images of the feminine which may have been potent forces in formulating the self-concept of women in Buddhist societies.

Are Buddhist portraits of women the same as those in Western society? Do the images of the sacred and the divine, as constructed by male Buddhists, include the feminine? Are notions of sexuality viewed as compatible with notions of the sacred? The following readings are designed to furnish answers to these questions.

Many sympathetic to the teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism believe it to be an egalitarian religion, more supportive of women than either the earlier form of Buddhism or other religions. Indeed, there are positive images of the feminine in the Mahāyāna tradition, and laywomen and nuns play an active role in Buddhist religious practices. However, texts preserved in the Buddhist canon reveal a wide spectrum of views, most of which reflect male attitudes, the educated religious elite, whose views do not often reflect sexual egalitarianism.

Like Judaism and Christianity, Buddhism is an overwhelmingly male-created 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 Bud-

dhists, like male religious leaders 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 while the profane or imperfect is represented as feminine, we have a polarization that suggests both internal psychological conflicts and external social barriers between the sexes.

These Buddhist texts, many of which are translated for the first time, should be of considerable interest to students of religion as well as to feminists. At a time when Buddhism is rapidly increasing in importance both as a subject of academic investigation and as a popular religion in the West, Western women are undergoing a fundamental change in their understanding of their roles in society. As this tradition of religious thought moves into a Western society that is self-consciously reexamining sexual roles, it is important to explore the Mahāyāna Buddhist images of the feminine, which offer an opportunity for Western readers to examine the sexual typification in an important religious tradition.

The texts, a small sampling of the vast corpus of Mahāyāna literature, offer a fascinating perspective on sexual role formation. From a feminist perspective, one perceives a destructive, complex set of images preventing women from fulfillment within the Buddhist religion. From a male perspective, one can sense fascination and alienation. These texts reveal as much about men's self-concept in relation to women as they do about the effects of these texts on women's self-image. The imagery of a mysterious and elusive woman shows men's feelings of wonder and curiosity. At times, women must have felt

isolated and removed from full participation in Buddhist society because of their diminished status in Buddhist orthodoxy. Some men must have felt curiosity about the marginal feminine world that perhaps, because they could not share, they devalued.

The translated texts in this volume represent an attempt to document a range of problems concerning the depiction of woman and her feminine nature in Mahāyāna Buddhist literature. Affirmative and negative portraits of the feminine are included. Some texts represent a dualistic system of beliefs and values, in which women are excluded from fulfillment of their religious convictions. Other texts reflect a nondualistic system in which women are included 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.

A major precedent for this study was set in 1930 by the publication of I. B. Horner's *Women Under Primitive Buddhism*. In her volume on women's roles in Theravādin Buddhism, Horner investigates the earliest known Buddhist textual sources from the Pāli Theravādin canon, written approximately during the first century A.D. but dating back several centuries before that time. The roles of Buddhist laywomen and Buddhist nuns or "almswomen" are discussed. The focus of the present work is on traditional attitudes toward women, their soteriological 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. My 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. I have 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 book.

The interpretation of textual materials in this volume 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. Sutras 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 Mahāyāna Buddhist anthology known as *The Collection of Jewels*. The materials include poignant folktales, rhetorical diatribes, myths, devotional 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 Mahāyāna 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. Representing the orthodox view of a religious establishment, Buddhist texts were the approved doctrinal statements of the monastic elite in much the same way that Vatican pronouncements and council papers represent an orthodox view that is not necessarily carried out by practicing Roman Catholics. 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. Simultaneously, the mystery of the female body and its powers are associated with disruptive cosmological powers. Exceptions to this view, however, are found in some Buddhist literature as well as in other religious literature, particularly with regard to the prostitute. A pros-

titude's sexuality, although feared, is also desired. She is powerful because she is not subjugated by any single male authority figure. She is appreciated because she gives of herself indiscriminately.

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. Mahāyāna Buddhists usually preferred the notion of transcendence of all sexuality in religious women, rather than in the controlled sexuality of the mother.

Women may derive their power either through their sexuality as evil, threatening, and mysterious or in accordance with their religiosity defined as an asexual spiritual potency and creativity. When women's sexuality is regarded as an anomalous, potentially destructive force, it limits their power in society. However, regarded as creative spiritual persons, women may be given a complementary religious status, equivalent (or nearly equivalent) to men. Women's relationships with other women, as a legitimate source of spiritual inspiration, are omitted from scripture, with the exception of a few verses allegedly composed by nuns. Women as religious figures are almost always counterparts to men and are portrayed in some relationship to them.

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 a unified spirit, in the manner of compassion and wisdom. This is the more prevalent Mahāyāna Buddhist view.

The reiteration of these themes and the resolution of the contradictions between opposing views of the feminine are not told in the same ways from culture to culture or even within a single culture's various subgroups. In Buddhism, a panorama of texts evidencing the two themes creates an intricate web of threads woven into a fabric of male stereotypes of the amorphous female. The manner in which these elements describe the female is provocative and complex.

In organizing this variety of primary sources progressively from the most inferior image of the feminine to its most egalitarian presentation, I have followed the typology based on the early Buddhist myth of the origin of society, the *Agarñña-suttanta*, a text in the Pāli canon. In this text, the two central themes of femininity, in particular, and sexuality, in general, are delineated in a generalized way. We see the absence of sexuality and of all opposing elements in the beginning of personal relations in a Golden Age.

According to this myth, there was a Golden Age in which asexual, self-luminated, and noncorporeal beings dwelled blissfully in the heavens, existing without need for food. One day one of them tasted the earth with one finger, and the others followed. As a result, these beings lost their luminous natures, and the sun, moon, and stars appeared. The beings continued to eat and gradually became corporeal and heavier in form. Those who ate little were beautiful whereas those who were gluttonous were ugly. Pride in one's beauty caused the devolution of the cosmos; the physical appearance of the beings became even grosser in form, and divergence in beauty became greater. The sexes then emerged and, with them, passion and sexual intercourse. Sexuality became immoral and

violent, a degeneration from the previous state of perfection. Gradually, sexual intercourse became sanctioned under prescribed situations. With continual devolution, property resulted, and crimes were committed until the best one of the human race, a male, was elected king.

This Buddhist myth assumes the potential of a state of perfection which is asexual, noncorporeal, and beyond notions of good and evil. Physical devolution is concomitant with moral degeneration. There were neither sexual nor social distinctions in the perfected state nor any tendency for passions (for food, property, or sexual intercourse). As soon as the celestial beings of the Golden Age lost their divine state (by falling from heaven), their nature was associated with desire and craving. The earth, the object of their craving (or "taste"), was characteristically a feminine symbol in pan-Indian religion.

The relationship between devolution and feminine earth may or may not be causal. Although no cause for the degeneracy of the age is offered, pride and sexuality emerge immediately after the increase in eating, the gross degeneracy of the human form, and the appearance of male and female characteristics. Sexual intercourse, the first act which violates a member of the opposite sex, is an object of revulsion. This account helps clarify our understanding of sexuality in early Buddhism and prefigures a trend found in Mahāyāna texts as well. The Buddhist accounting for the origins of sexuality is thus associated with the fall of humanity. Sexuality as a fallen state is associated with eating and the acquisition of property.

In this myth both men and women are equally responsible for their fallen state. However, in some Buddhist texts women are represented as more responsible for bringing about the fallen state, although the reasoning is not always clear. Devolution is the way of the world and of ordinary human behavior. Evolution, on the other hand, is the way of Buddhist practice. Buddhism works

against the grain of devolution by reversing the process of sexuality, acquisition of property, and all other forms of sensuality and desire. The religious objective is to reverse the entire process of attachment to the world of desire in which sexuality is one important factor. The question to be raised is whether women have the capacity to “reverse” or at least control their sexuality and worldly desires.

The selection of Buddhist texts translated here documents major varieties of female stereotypes in the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition, reflecting both the propounded ideals of Mahāyāna 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 “Sadāprarudita 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.