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Buddhist-Christian Studies, Vol. 1. (1981), pp. 63-71.

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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

in body. Only through denial of one's feminine body in this lifetime is there spiritual attainment in the next. While men too were to deny their sexual and bodily needs in order to gain rebirth in the Pure Land, there was never a specific *vow* for them to despise their own body. Sexual transformation from female to male is taken literally—that is, a woman dies and is reborn as a man.

The majority of Mahāyāna *sūtras* fall into another category, however. Women's capabilities as Bodhisattvas are ignored in these texts but they are qualified. *If* a woman's virtue and merit is extraordinary, she may become a Bodhisattva while remaining in a female body. She does not have to *defer* her religious goals until another lifetime as a male. The literary motif of sexual transformation is accomplished in this lifetime—by eradicating her sexual identity. The female body is seen as male—that is as perfect and pure.

The external features of sexual identity are biologically based but also moral in nature. Past karma dictated rebirth as a female, hence as a morally inferior being. Sexual identity then can be changed with an improvement of one's moral behavior. According to an early Buddhist account in the *Attasālinī*, "The features of men and women are perceived both by the eye and the mind."³ Hence, one's sexuality is not only in the eye of the beholder. It is not simply a question of "what you see is what you get." Psychological factors are also brought to bear on one's sexual identity. If the mental and moral powers no longer fit the old karmic patterns of behavior, the limitations of the female body are negated. The female body brought about by past karma no longer follows that past conditioning process. The implication is that through meditation and discipline, the female sexuality of the body has been destroyed along with past karma.

The woman as Bodhisattva has a masculine mind—that is, religious mind—in a female body that no longer is subject to sexual desire. By definition, such a body is *really* no longer female, although it still *looks* female. Let me give the exact words on this view according to *The Sūtra on Changing the Female Sex (Fo shuo chuan nü shen ching)*:

If women can accomplish one thing (Dharma), they will be freed of the female body and become sons. What is that one thing? The profound state of mind which seeks enlightenment. Why? If women awaken to the thought of enlightenment, then they will have the great and good person's state of mind, a man's state of mind, a sage's state of mind. . . . If women awaken to the thought of enlightenment, then they will not be bound to the limitation of a woman's state of mind. Because they will not be limited, they will forever separate from the female sex and become sons.⁴

These texts differ from those such as the *Pure Land Sūtra* mentioned before. Women's bodies alone no longer define their sexual—and religious—identity. Allowances are made for a psychological component to sexuality in women which could temper the sexual needs of their female bodies. Through this psy-

chological transformation into a male—via meditation and discipline—a woman could free herself from her sexual nature without postponing her becoming a Bodhisattva until rebirth as a man. She was no longer biologically determined by her body nor a victim of her bodily needs. Unlike the *Pure Land Sūtra*, her way out of a nonreligious state was not through vowing that she would no longer be reborn as a woman. She emerges from her sexual identity as a female by mentally becoming a man in this lifetime. One no longer looks at only physiological sexual traits as defining one's sexual identity but also at the moral and psychological characteristics of individual women.

Let me cite perhaps the most famous example—the Nāga Princess episode from the *Lotus Sūtra*:

At that moment, the venerable Śāriputra spoke to the daughter of Sāgara, the Nāga King: “Good daughter, you have certainly not wavered in awakening to the thought of enlightenment and have immeasurable wisdom. However, the state of Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment is difficult to realize. Good daughter, even a woman who does not falter in diligence for many hundreds of eras and performs meritorious acts for many thousands of eras, completely fulfilling the six perfections still does not realize Buddhahood. Why? Because a woman still does not realize five types of status. What are the five types? (1) The status of Brahmā, (2) the status of Śakra (Indra), (3) the status of a great king, (4) the status of an emperor, and (5) the status of an irreversible Bodhisattva.”

At that time the daughter of the Nāga king Sāgara owned one jewel which outvalued the entire three thousand million world systems. She gave this jewel to the lord who compassionately received it. Then King Sāgara's daughter spoke to the Bodhisattva Prajñākūṣa and the Elder Śāriputra: “This jewel which I gave to the lord was quickly received, wasn't it?” The Elder spoke: “Yes, you quickly gave it to the lord and he quickly received it.”

The girl spoke: “If it were possible for me to have magical power, reverend Śāriputra, I would have realized Supreme, Perfect Enlightenment even more quickly [than the Buddha's receiving the jewel], and there would have been no receiver of this jewel.”

Then, at that instant in time, before the Elder Śāriputra and the entire world, King Sāgara's daughter's female organs vanished, and the male organ became visible. She appeared as a Bodhisattva. At that instant in time, he walked toward the south; sitting at the foot of the Bodhi tree made of seven jewels in the world system Vimalā (Immaculate), he appeared as an enlightened one.⁵

Giving up her jewel is relinquishing her sexual identity as a female. The sexual change is viewed as a radical transformation, requiring emergence from everything constitutive of femaleness in a woman's attitude.

But these texts which deal with women's sexual—that is, ultimately religious—transformation are also contradictory in content, leaving a residue of the devaluation of the feminine in relationship to the masculine. The *sūtras* of this type are ambiguous in the following senses:

1. They acknowledge that women can develop a “masculine” state of mind, namely, a religious state of mind. They symbolize this extraordinary accomplishment by means of a *magical* act in the literature—bodily change from female to male. Put simply, women have to work much harder than men in order to attain enlightenment because they are women.
2. Male is evaluated as superior to female in imagery and in society which has developed this symbolism to reflect its values. Hence, innate psychological characteristics of maleness and femaleness are denied *philosophically* since females can change into males psychologically. *Yet* the male symbol is still ranked higher than the female, and women have to exert more effort to overcome their physical needs.
3. The uncomfortable “resolution” of the *problem* of women's equality is to attain the spiritual path by not *really* being a woman. the definition of womanhood still is in opposition to religion and excludes the attainment of Bodhisattvahood and Buddhahood.

BODHISATTVAS WITHOUT SEXUAL TRANSFORMATION

Now I would like to analyze the more liberal portraits of women as religious beings, what I refer to as “Bodhisattvas without Sexual Transformation” in Chapter Six of my book. Texts which I have interpreted in this category are an extremely small percentage of *sūtras*, although they are representative of some of the most popular and influential Mahāyāna scripture. Here the sexual ambiguity and contradictions inherent in the notion of “sexual transformation” are attacked. The argument runs something like this:

1. If all phenomena are in perpetual flux, there are no innate and unchanging attributes or essences to things.
2. All notions of innate attributes or qualities are mental categories, that is, terms defined in relation to each other.
3. These attributes or qualities are imputed onto things by the mind—are figments of the imagination.
4. Maleness and femaleness are a pair of concepts that are defined in terms of each other and are not innate attributes or essences.

In a nice Nāgārjuna twist, in line with the main thrust of Mahāyāna, any term which derives its meaning only in relation to its opposite, signifies nothing in itself. Hence, maleness and femaleness have meaning only in relation to each other. Characteristics of “femaleness” are only defined in terms of what is

characterized as “maleness.” If male is defined as the transcendence of bodily needs, this posits something which *cannot* transcend bodily needs—namely, the female. Any belief that bodily needs *cannot* be transcended is counter to the Mahāyānist claim that everything can be changed. Hence, by the opponent’s own definition of maleness and femaleness, the notion of the *unchanging* is admitted. Namely, the female is unchangeable, yet at the same time capable of changing into a male—a contradiction of the opponent’s own definitions. The conclusion that results is: Notions of femaleness and maleness as unchanging qualities are contradictory concepts and based upon discrimination. All such discriminations must be excised according to Mahāyāna doctrine.

How is this argument spelled out in the literature? Let’s look at the most famous example—from the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra* which criticizes the motif of “sexual transformation” in a humorous and lighthearted way:

At that time, a goddess was residing in Vimalakīrti’s house. After hearing the Dharma which the Bodhisattva (Vimalakīrti) had explained, she presented herself to him. She scattered celestial flowers over the Bodhisattvas and the disciples. The flowers which landed on the Bodhisattvas fell off while those on the disciples did not. Even with all their magical powers, the disciples couldn’t make the flowers fall off.

The goddess asked Śāriputra: “Why do these flowers fall off them (the Bodhisattvas)?”

Śāriputra: “Because flowers are not for the religious so they fall off.”

Goddess: “Why shouldn’t flowers be for the religious? These flowers are not objects of discrimination. Only you venerable monks conceive of such discrimination. Even though you renounce your homes for the sake of the Buddha’s Dharma, if you make discriminations, you are not religious. Look at these Bodhisattvas whose flowers do not remain on them because they have eliminated all discrimination. You are like frightened men who are seized by evil spirits. Disciples who are frightened by life and death are seized by sights and sounds, scents, tastes, and touch. Those who no longer are afraid have no sensual desires. . . .

Śāriputra: “Why don’t you change your female sex?”

Goddess: “I have been here twelve years and have looked for the innate characteristics of the female sex and haven’t been able to find them. How can I change them? Just as a magician creates an illusion of a woman, if someone asks why don’t you change your female sex, what is he asking?”

Śāriputra: “But an illusion is without any determinate innate characteristics so how could it be changed?”

Goddess: “All things are also without any determinate innate characteristics, so how can you ask, ‘why don’t you change your female sex?’ ”

Then the goddess, by supernatural power, changed Śāriputra into a likeness of herself and changed herself into a likeness of Śāriputra and asked: “Why don’t you change your female sex?”

Śāriputra, in the form of a goddess, answered: "I do not know how I changed nor how I changed into a female form."

Goddess: "Śāriputra, if you can change into a female form, then all women (in their mental state) can also change. Just as you are not really a woman but appear to be female in form, all women also only appear to be female in form but are not really women. Therefore, the Buddha said all are not really men or women."

Then the goddess, by her supernatural power, changed Śāriputra back into his own form. The goddess questioned Śāriputra: "Where are the female form and innate characteristics now?"

Śāriputra: "The female form and innate characteristics neither exist nor do not exist."⁶

CONCLUSIONS

There is an implied misogyny in the literary motif of "sexual transformation," despite the citation of these examples as allegedly supporting the religious ideal of universal enlightenment. Though discrimination was viewed as the imagination's tendency to posit innate qualities onto things, and such discrimination was ultimately false, latent discrimination based upon sex and gender was continued. The theme of "sexual transformation" stereotyped the female as biologically limited and psychologically limited in ways the male was *not*. There were a few cases of men being *demoted* to being women in some early literature but these were always cases of gross infringement of monastic discipline, that is, *moving away* from the religious state through *loving* the body and bodily functions. Hence, love of the body is associated with being female.

Women were bound to their bodies because of their ingrained sexual desires. The belief that woman was innately sexual admitted the only innate attribute in a philosophical system which otherwise denied all innate attributes and essences. The literary motif of "sexual transformation" symbolized a religious transformation for women who wanted to attain higher states of religious practice. Removal of sexuality—or, becoming religious—was to be no longer female but to become male.

As I have tried to argue, even though there is a way to enlightenment for women—women must acknowledge that their being female is ranked lower than being male as a *requirement* for religious advancement. Even though it may be argued that "maleness" is a *symbol* of perfection, and it is not to be taken *literally* that men are perfect, that symbol reflects a latent prejudice of "attachment" (in Buddhist terms) to the value of being male in society. The "solution," then, of not *really* being female but only appearing to be female is not really a solution to the issue of women's access to the goals of Buddhism.

It is only when "maleness" is not really "maleness" *either* that notions of sexuality are excised because they are discriminatory. The assertion that sexual identity is a mental category comes out strongly in the example I gave from the

Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra. This interpretation of the egalitarian view of Bodhisattvahood is devoid of innate sexual traits, but such a view was never actually practiced in society at large in either India or China.

The ideal of the Bodhisattva in female form as a savior figure was expressed in art, however. In terms of devotional Buddhism, the theology and iconography of trans-sexual Bodhisattvas had universal appeal to the lay practitioner who could worship either a male or female form of a celestial Bodhisattva, depending upon what symbolic dimension of deity he or she wished to honor. For example, warrior-like heroic traits of Bodhisattvas were often represented in male images, although not exclusively so. Maternal or aesthetic traits of Bodhisattvas were usually represented as female images, but sometimes as androgynous. The feminine and masculine were both represented as symbols of the sacred.

Images of the feminine as divine, sacred, and powerful necessarily have to account for: (1) attitudes toward sexuality and maternity, (2) attitudes toward spirit and matter, and (3) attitudes toward culture and nature. Usually these attitudes are seen as polarizations, as involving conflicting concepts, in continual tension, and mutually exclusive. For example, the "good" woman is a maternal, though asexual, type of symbol.

Feminists today are beginning to investigate the depth and pervasiveness of sexual stereotypes, role identification according to gender, and images of what defines femininity in our society. They are questioning assumptions made about women and how these assumptions affect women. In radical feminist theology today women are looking for other alternatives to the heavily male-dominant images of Judaism and Christianity. The vast majority of feminist theologians acknowledge that traditional religious stories and images which are absorbed by all members of our culture are potent forces which can be devastating to the self-concept of women. Cross-cultural analyses of images of the feminine may provide alternative models for creating new symbols and images as well as revising old ones. The feminine has tended to be associated with the secular, powerless, physical, and natural in the major world religions. Two cosmological structures emerge in dualistic opposition: sacred vs. profane, symbolically represented as masculine vs. feminine. In early Buddhism this dualism is represented by imputing sensuality, and ignorance to the feminine as opposed to meditation and wisdom to the masculine. Association with the world of the feminine was spiritually polluting.

Sexuality could be controlled by removal from the social sphere, symbolized as feminine. Later, more liberal forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism attempted to reject the earlier tradition, *philosophically* by refuting dualistic views between mind and body, *religiously* by practicing without social discriminations, and *symbolically* by integrating masculine and feminine images in depicting the sacred.

There are various feminine images of celestial Bodhisattvas, particularly images of the most popular figures in Mahāyāna Buddhism, Avalokiteśvara (Chi-

nese: Kuan-yin) and Tārā. In China the figure Kuan-yin had special significance for women, in the development of women's cults and in representing the feminine as divine.

In the androgynous or epicene forms of Bodhisattva images, the male Bodhisattva principle of the divine is never viewed as subordinating the female principle. Both are integrated and contingent upon each other. Feminists who are challenging the core symbolism of Judaic and Christian images of the divine as masculine are essentially criticizing dualistic metaphysical systems and suggesting revisions of masculine and feminine imagery symbolic of a reunion of the physical with the spiritual dimensions of human existence. They differ on whether or not notions of the sacred should be androgynous in symbolism or if there should be equal representation of both sets of images. Feminists agree in criticizing the *exclusion* of female divinity figures as devaluating the feminine and robbing women of an image with which they can identify. In fact, what feminists are demanding is a radical change in the stories, images, and symbols of woman and the feminine. This is a compelling challenge to all religious institutions in which the hard, encrusted, and tenacious patterns of thinking about women and their feminine natures have been deeply embedded and ingrained.

For many feminist theologians and feminists in general, the women's movement cannot be effective without challenging some of the basic symbols and images of religion. To a large extent, those opposed to the women's movement have rallied forces from religious organizations which have deeply ingrained prejudices embodied in their use of religious images. The challenge women face today, in confronting religious values and belief systems which powerfully deprive women of their autonomy and their desired goals, can be given momentum by looking at images of women and the feminine in other traditions. I have shown some alternative images of the feminine as sacred in order to illustrate that the feminine *and* the divine or holy are not contradictions.

NOTES

1. See Diana Paul, *Women in Buddhism: Portraits of the Feminine in Mahāyāna Tradition* (Berkeley, California: Asian Humanities Press, 1980).

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 169-170.

3. Herbert V. Guenther, *Philosophy and Psychology in the Abhidharma* (Berkeley: Shambala, 1974), p. 165.

4. *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 14.918c. 6-9, 12-13, as translated in *Women in Buddhism*, pp. 175-176.

5. From Chapter 11 of the *Lotus Sūtra* as translated in *Women in Buddhism*, pp. 189-190.

6. From the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra* as translated in *Women in Buddhism*, pp. 226-228, 230.