

Women and Sexism in Japanese Buddhism

A Reexamination of Shinran's View of Women

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THE THEME OF WOMEN and sexism in religion is one that is attracting a great deal of attention in Christian circles these days. This upsurge of interest is attributable to the climate of growing awareness among Western intellectuals that women have long been isolated from the mainstream of intellectual history as represented by Christianity. In contrast, the world of Japanese Buddhism shows little active awareness of this theme as a problem demanding consideration. This does not mean that there has been no oppression of women in Buddhism. Women, in fact, have been discriminated against as the concept of the five obstacles and three obediences (*goshō sanju* 五障三従) exemplifies.

The concept of the five obstacles as articulated by male Buddhist priests around the first century B.C.E. states that women are not to be thought of as: 1) Brāhma, the Creator and hence most superior deity; 2) Śakra Deranam Indra, the chief guardian deity of Buddhism; 3) Māra, the devil who injures lives and people's good will; 4) the kings of the four states—East, West, South and North, or the kings of gold, silver, copper and iron; nor 5) Buddha. This concept has been interpreted as the five-fold theory hindering women's salvation in Buddhism.

The three obediences originated in the Brahmanic thought of ancient India where women were taught to obey three groups of men. As a child, a woman was to obey her father. When she married, she had to obey her husband. If widowed, she must obey

her son. From this standpoint, women could never be independent or exercise independence. This teaching was later assimilated into Mahayana Buddhism. The *goshō sanju* was introduced into Japan along with other important Buddhist thought and used to discriminate against women in many ways.

Many Buddhist priests and scholars have ignored these issues and contended that there is no gender discrimination in Buddhism because from the standpoint of emptiness (*śūnyatā* 空) there is no distinction between men and women. These same religious figures have also preached that, from the standpoint of affirming the manifold characteristics of human beings just as they are, enlightenment makes allowances for every man and woman.

The preaching of male religious figures notwithstanding, there has been a long history of discrimination against women in the Japanese Buddhist world. For example, women were strictly barred from entering the sacred precincts of Buddhist temples. Moreover, the sexist teaching of many famous and respected Buddhist figures led religious women to accept obedience to men and a male-dominated society. Among these figures, I view Shinran's responsibility as the greatest. Shinran is one of the most popular figures in Japanese Buddhism and the founder of Shin Buddhism (Jōdo Shinshū). His teachings have had enormous influence not only on religious people but also secular people in Japan. In this paper,

I hope to elucidate his view of women and its sexist structure.

THE VIEW OF WOMEN IN PURE LAND BUDDHISM

In order to understand Shinran's view clearly, I think it is necessary to consider the view of women held by the Pure Land sect of Buddhism which Shinran followed and later developed in his own way. According to the teachings of Pure Land Buddhism, Amida Buddha, the main Buddha of the sect, was the enlightened manifestation of Dharmakara who had set himself the twin tasks of reaching buddhahood and building the ideal Buddhist state, the Pure Land. He established forty-eight vows for this purpose. These vows are to lead all human beings to the true, fulfilled land. Dharmakara Bodhisattva pursued and accomplished all these vows and thus became Amida Buddha. Long ages have passed since that time, but all beings are to be taught about the Pure Land in which all people are equal and experience no pain.

Amida faith spread most quickly among people living on the lowest rungs of society. It also spread among women who were, until then, excluded from salvation by the other streams of Buddhism.

The thirty-fifth of Amida Buddha's vows is directly concerned with women's realization of enlightenment. The vow reads:

When I have attained enlightenment, all the females of the unfathomable and wonderful Buddha countries of the ten quarters, on hearing my name, shall awake in joy, obtain faith, and rejoice, thereby aspiring to enlightenment and despising the female form. If they beget again the female form in their after-life, may I never obtain the Highest Perfect Knowledge!¹

In light of this vow, any woman determined to reach enlightenment must first receive a male body and only then be able to enter the Pure Land of Amida Buddha. This is a typ-

ical indication of changing one's sex for salvation (*henjō nanshi* 變成男子). It has long been held that women's salvation became possible thanks to Amida's merciful vow, and that Pure Land Buddhism best supports women's religious belief and practice.

From a feminist viewpoint, such thinking is another form of sexism. The teaching that women can reach enlightenment only by despising their female bodies and aspiring to male bodies implies that a woman's body is impure and sinful. In other words, being a woman is the worst and unhappiest state in this world.

In the period that Pure Land Buddhism spread among the Japanese masses, women were severely discriminated against in the patriarchal society of the day and had no other option but to accept an androcentric religion. Women supported the Amida faith and dreamed of rebirth in the Pure Land where there was no suffering and pain. In this fashion, some of the most anti-female teachings were supported by women who were willingly deceived into slavery by the power of this new belief.

THE SITUATION OF WOMEN IN JAPANESE BUDDHISM

Buddhism came to Japan in the sixth century. One chief characteristic of Buddhism adopted by the Japanese government was its devotion to national security and ancestor worship. Buddhism was accepted as the de facto state religion after its introduction to the country. Its main task was to conduct rituals and offer prayers for an easy childbirth, purification after birth, good health, wedding services and fertility. Thus, what began as a teaching of how to achieve enlightenment in India soon found itself relegated to the salvation of the souls of the dead and funeral rites.

In the thirteenth century, a Buddhist reformation came about through the appearance and teaching of a number of important

figures. Among them were the Pure Land master, Hōnen (1132–1212) and his disciple, Shinran (1173–1262). They endeavored to make Buddhist practice easier so that the masses could reach salvation. According to their teaching, one could achieve birth in the Pure Land merely by chanting the name, “Namu Amida Butsu.” This simple formula of faith has been cherished and handed down by the poor from generation to generation.

Shinran’s contribution to Pure Land teaching is distinct from Hōnen’s in that he emphasizes faith rather than works to attain birth in the Pure Land. According to Shinran, people on the fringe of society—the poor, social outcasts and those branded as public sinners by virtue of their occupation—could be saved and led to the Pure Land by their faith in the unfathomable compassion of Amida, even if they had violated Buddhist precepts and ignored Buddhist works.

Since Shinran singled out the discriminated people of his day to preach to, he has been deeply esteemed as the great Buddhist figure who associated with the poor and identified with them. It is true that he was a great Buddhist in this regard, but as far as women are concerned, he was not free from the androcentric and phallogocentric thinking of his time.

Shinran was born in Kyoto in 1173. When he was nine years old, he embarked on the path of religion and climbed Mount Hiei where he underwent the rigorous religious training required of a Buddhist monk at the flourishing Tendai monastery. At the age of twenty-nine, circumstances led him to descend the holy mountain and return to the common people among whom he preached.

According to letters written by his wife, Eshinni, Shinran went down from Mount Hiei and shut himself up at Rokkakudo in Kyoto. He remained enclosed there for one hundred days and meditated on the direction

of his life. At dawn on the ninety-fifth day, he had a dream and decided to remain down from the mountain in order to live with the common people and practice the teachings of Pure Land Buddhism (*Jōdo-kyō*). The dream oracle which Shinran received from Kannon, the Bodhisattva of Mercy (Avalokiteśvara), was as follows:

When the devotee finds himself bound by his past karma to come into 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.²

This dream oracle is well-known as that of *Nyobon*; *nyo* meaning “woman” and *bon* meaning “to violate.” The dream thus refers to having sexual relations with a woman which in the Buddhist tradition of the day was a breaking of the precepts. Originally, there were five precepts in Buddhism: no killing, no stealing, no adultery, no lying and no drinking of alcoholic beverages. Buddhist followers, especially the *bhikṣu* (monk) and *bhikṣuṇī* (nun), were required to follow these precepts. However, it was very difficult for Japanese monks to observe these precepts.

When Buddhism was introduced into Japan, it was established with strict monastic discipline. Monks were required to live a celibate life with all sexual relations prohibited. Over time, however, many monks married in secret and had children. It is not clear why these monks violated the precept of celibacy, but several reasons have been suggested. Buddhism’s necessary coexistence with Shinto is one of the reasons offered.

Indigenous to Japan, Shinto is an ancient religion. According to Shinto myth, the Japanese islands were created by the female deity, Izanami, and the male deity, Izanagi. In ancient Japan, women were recognized as

being invested with divine power, as reflected in the myth of Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess. Both the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon-shoki*, the first historical chronicles of Japan, indicate that ancient Japan was a matrilineal society and during the early historical periods, there were a number of reigns of empresses.

Poetry written prior to the eighth century (the *Manyōshū*, for example), reflects a liberal attitude of women with regard to sexual matters. It was not a rare occurrence for women to take the initiative in love. Under such circumstances, it may have been difficult for Buddhist monks to observe celibacy. Over the course of time, women came to be regarded as defiled beings and censured as temptresses by Buddhist leaders.

In the Heian era (794–1185), esoteric Buddhism was introduced to Japan and sutras which contained the sexist concept of the five obstacles and three obediences became popular. The sin of women was emphasized and women's sexual power, regarded as divine in the past, began to be reviled. It was during this period that women were prohibited from entering those precincts set aside for religious practices necessary for the attainment of Buddhahood.

Many Buddhist monks, however, did not stop their sexual relations with women. They continued to practice nyobon. With the loss of divine status attributed to sexual power, women became merely the objects of male sexual desire and excluded from salvation because they were born women.

In the Kamakura era (1185–1382), new religious leaders appeared who preached that salvation for women was possible. Among these are Hōnen and Shinran. Hōnen presented several views on the possibility of salvation for women, but his views of women in general were little different from those prevailing at the time. He held that women were inherently endowed with serious sins such as the five obstacles.

Although Shinran's view was not fundamentally different from that of Hōnen, he was far more deeply affected by conflict over the issue. He confronted his own growing awareness of sexual desire, but he did not wish to violate a woman and sin secretly against Buddhism as many priests of his day did. The famous dream oracle he received reflects this struggle with his own sexuality.

SHINRAN'S VIEW OF WOMEN: THE IMAGE OF KANNON BOSATSU

According to Shinran, Kannon Bosatsu (Avalokiteśvara) appeared to him in a dream and told him that if he were to break the precept of celibacy, the woman he so violated would in truth be a manifestation of Kannon. In Shinran's view, the oracle indicated that his sexual relations with a woman could be interpreted as finding Buddha in a female body. Against the background of a violation of the precepts and an increasingly guilty conscience, Shinran saw Buddha's salvation leading him to the Pure Land. With this confidence in the salvation of Buddha, he decided to marry openly.

On the surface, this seems to be a very moving religious story. As a result of Shinran's teaching, women were upgraded from being the objects of sexual desire to the status of Kannon Bosatsu who would save men in accepting their sexual desire. Because of this, it has been said that the idea of equal partnership and equal possibility for salvation were introduced into Japan by a most revered religious figure. However, is this really the case?

Just as some Christian feminists hold that Eve and Mary are female models created by men, I would hold that whether as a temptress or as Kannon the image of woman is that which men want it to be. Implicit in Shinran's teaching is the idea that if women did not want to be considered as a temptress and excluded from salvation,

they had to become like Kannon in being willing to accept male sexual desire. This would save them. Looked at from this perspective, Shinran's dream insight is a rather androcentric idea.

Shinran's view of Kannon Bosatsu was not an orthodox one within the Buddhist tradition. Avalokiteśvara was a male bodhisattva in India, but in China the bodhisattva underwent a sexual transformation and emerged as a beautiful, white-robed female figure, Kuan-yin. Although viewed as a woman, Kuan-yin was worshiped as the possessor of a magical power that could grant the wishes of her worshipers. Chinese women saw Kuan-yin as the symbol of liberation from the patriarchal system of their society because she could liberate women from many kinds of suffering.

However, during her assimilation into Japanese culture, Kuan-yin underwent another kind of transformation. She became the Japanese deity Kannon Bosatsu who symbolized the compassion of motherhood. In this guise, Kannon was very popular among all kinds of people, regardless of sex or class. Kannon was thought to manifest herself in whatever form was effective to save all beings in distress.

While the image of Kannon was presented as feminine and maternal, it had never been presented as sexual. In Shinran's dream, however, while the maternal image of Kannon is reflected in her willingness to sacrifice herself for him, it is also sexual in that she is willing to become the object of his desire. In Shinran's dream, Kannon has undergone a fourth transformation. She manifests herself as a beautiful, sexually desirable woman who will save men from their sexual desires.

This transformation of Kannon from the sacred goddess to the sexual woman reflects Shinran's actual view of women. He desired maternal women who would embrace men as a child and at the same time, he wanted desirable women to satisfy

men's sexual need. In Shinran's time, women were willing to accept this image of themselves because it granted them the possibility of salvation. Women who sacrificed themselves could be considered as the incarnation of Kannon Bosatsu even though they were sinful and impure.

This paradoxical teaching that the most sinful and defiled beings could be saved through the compassion of Amida Buddha was unique to Shinran. 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."³ In other words, women's sins were changed to good because of Other Power (*tariki*), but their sins were never erased. Aware of their own sins, women should sacrifice themselves for men and then, they could find salvation.

Shinran, one of the greatest Japanese Buddhist figures, idealized the relationship between men who require both maternal and sexual love and women who sacrifice themselves to this need. Because of the influence of Shinran's teaching, many men and women internalized his ideas.

From the psychological point of view, this kind of male-female relationship resembles the mother-son relationship, so it was never criticized as sexist. It has often been said that women are superior to men in Japanese Buddhism because men cannot live without women. This is very deceptive. Women are still required to observe the three obediences: obedience to father when young, to husband when married, and to son when widowed. Since women were required to obey, support and take care of men, men became psychologically dependent on women.

The original teaching of Śākyamuni led to a very ascetical religion which required its disciples to train themselves and observe strict precepts in order to attain Buddhahood. After assimilation into Japanese society, it was transformed so radically that it produced a unique Buddhist

culture that makes much of an interdependent relationship based on maternal sacrifice.

It is generally held that the concept of the dominance of men over women (*danson jōhi* 男尊女卑) came from Confucianism. I think, however, that the Buddhist teaching of the five obstacles and three obediences has had a far greater influence on Japanese men and women. Confucianism may have been preeminent in public life, but it was Buddhism that controlled and influenced the collective consciousness of the Japanese people.

MOTHERHOOD

The image of motherhood in Japanese Buddhism is very different from that found in Christianity. Just as Christian feminist theologians discuss the oppressive aspects of motherhood in Christianity, Buddhist feminists must discuss the problematic aspects of motherhood in Buddhism. A comparative study of the Virgin Mary and Kannon Bosatsu would highlight the understanding of motherhood found in East and West.

The sexuality of the sacred mother is an important topic that needs to be addressed. In Christianity, the sexuality of the sacred mother was hidden and ignored, and Mary was worshiped as the symbol of virginity. As a result, women in Christian societies were deprived of their own sexuality and forced to maintain their virginity, not for themselves, but for the men who would eventually possess them.

In the Buddhist world, on the other hand, women were basically regarded as sexual beings. Nonetheless, encouraged by their Buddhist beliefs, women could not help hoping for a transformation of gender after death in order to achieve salvation. As long as women lived as women, they were forced to submit to fate.

In Japanese Buddhism, motherhood is combined with sexuality as symbolized by

Kannon Bosatsu. Women were taught that they were in themselves sinful and impure, but they could be saved by becoming sacred mothers who dedicated their sexuality to men.

In the Japanese Buddhist tradition, courtesans who offered sexual pleasure to men were often regarded as the incarnation of Kannon Bosatsu. Stories of the transformation of courtesans into Kannon were often transmitted in folklore or dramatized in Noh plays and became popular among the people. Against this background, it was very difficult for women to refuse male sexual requests. In this world view, women who did not accept the sexual desires of men could not become the sacred mother, Kannon Bosatsu.

In the Christian tradition, there has been a distinction between woman the sexual object, symbolized by Eve, and woman the mother, symbolized by Mary. Consequently, the sacred mother could be divorced from the sexual object. In Buddhism, on the other hand, the two functions were combined in the teaching that sexual women could fulfill the desire of men and thereby save them.

I cannot say which is a better stance. Both Mary and Kannon are products of a male fantasy conceived within patriarchal religion. We women must reclaim the image of motherhood and women's sexuality in our own way. Japanese feminists, especially, must strive to improve women's image and status so that women are seen as beings equal to men.

FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Japanese patriarchy has forced women to assume the role of the oppressed at the bottom of society. Under this system, women had led powerless lives. Buddhism has supported this system by preaching that women were sinful and should obey men. One of the greatest Buddhist teachers,

Shinran himself, taught an idealized relationship between men and women in which women must always be motherly and at the same time, objects of male desire.

Even Buddhist nuns in Japan were not exempt from being objects of sexual desire. There are quite a few pornographic stories revolving around the theme of nuns' sexuality which is severely taboo in other Buddhist countries. Can we really say that there has been no oppression of women in Japanese Buddhism?

In addition to the issue I have treated in this paper, there are many other problems of sexism that women face in Buddhism. The most important among these is the *danka* system (壇家制度) which began in the Edo era (1615--1868) and has continued until the present. This family system is the structural support of Buddhist temples. Under this system, the family is recognized as the basic unit of Buddhism and each family is obliged to support a temple. Faith is not a matter for individual choice and ancestor worship is enforced.

Almost all temples in Japan have been handed down within a priest's family from one generation to the next, at least since the Meiji era. Anyone born into a temple priest's family continues in the priesthood, and in this way temples became family possessions. The religious organization of the

temple system stabilized in a pyramid-like pattern with males dominant at the top of the pyramid.

The position of Buddhist women, whether nuns or lay, is a very subordinate one. They are expected to clean, cook and sew for the priests. With these duties, women never found enough time for meditation or other religious practices. Furthermore, under the *danka* system women are not allowed to assume positions of power or responsibility.

I cannot treat these problems on institutional sexism in this paper. At present, many Buddhist women are asking the Buddhist organization to undertake institutional reform. They have even found a few male priests and scholars to support them. These women and men have recognized the sins committed by Buddhism and are seeking to renew Buddhism. I hope that Japanese Buddhist leaders listen to these critics and initiate drastic reforms.

NOTES

¹ *Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi* (無量壽經, 第三十五願) *Muryōju-kyō*, Thirty-fifth Vow.

² Daisetsu Suzuki, trans., *Collected Writings on Shin Buddhism*, 1973, p. 170.

³ *Tannishō* (Notes Lamenting Differences), Ryūkoku Translation Series, vol. 2, 1642, pp. 15-16.