

A Mirror for Women? Reflections of the Feminine in Japanese Buddhism

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Introduction

Buddhism teaches a way of life that leads to universal Enlightenment without regard for sex or even species. The idea that women might not be able to gain Enlightenment has been entertained, but by a minority; likewise, despite the fact that rebirth in the human realm is considered to be the most propitious, it has not been considered impossible that spiritual practice could be pursued while in non-human form. Indeed, many Jataka tales describe the spiritual practice undertaken by the Buddha and some of his senior disciples when reborn in the animal realm. However, within the human realm, not all have been considered to be born equal and different schools of Buddhism, to varying degrees, have made broad claims about the spiritual capacities of men as group and women as a group, women being understood to be at a disadvantage in relation to men. Japanese Buddhism, in particular, has been characterised by a persistent anti-feminism, with women being portrayed as not simply disadvantaged but positively dangerous.

This article will briefly look at several key Japanese Buddhist texts and representations formulated by men about women and question whether there is anything characteristically 'Buddhist' about them at all. I shall argue that rather than offering privileged insight into the special difficulties faced by women practitioners, these texts are in fact about men and their troubled relationship with women.

As Bernard Faure points out, in Buddhist texts generally:

Woman is conspicuously absent, or she appears in as much as she is an element of the Buddhist discourse on sexuality: not for herself, as individual, but as one pole of attraction or repulsion in a gendered male discourse about sex. Denied the role of a subject in this discourse, she is primarily the emblem of larger generative, karmic or social processes, with positive or negative soteriological value (1998:14).

My reading of Buddhist texts 'about women' is influenced by feminist theorists such as Laura Mulvey who, like Faure above, argues that in all man-made representations, women are a 'silent image' which she describes as 'bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning' (1975:7). As I will show below, the meanings that have been projected on to women in Japanese Buddhism have been largely negative.

A Mirror for Women?

The title of this article is taken from a popular medieval religious tract written in 1300 by Muju Ichien, a Rinzai Zen monk. The title is derived from a passage in the text where Muju encourages his female readers to 'make these precepts her constant companion [as she would a mirror]' and thereby establish herself as 'a person of sensibility, a follower of the Way'. Despite the fact that the readership of the text is envisaged as female, the advice offered by Muju is remarkably non sex-specific; indeed it is standard Buddhist ethical teaching, liberally sprinkled with citations and examples from Canonical scriptures.

It is not until near the end of the text that Muju directly addresses women when he states that 'Many serious instances of the sins of women, among the unregenerate who are all deluded, are cited in the sacred scriptures and commentaries.' Referring to a list drawn up by the seventh-century Chinese monk Dosen, he outlines the 'Seven grave vices of women'. These are: (1) they arouse desire in men; (2) they are jealous; (3) they lack empathy; (4) they are only concerned with their appearance; (5) they are deceitful; and (6) they are without shame. The first six in the list are hardly surprising and, indeed, could have been listed in the same order in a Christian tract of the same era. What is most interesting about this list is the seventh 'sin' of women:

Seventhly, their bodies are forever unclean, with frequent menstrual discharges. Seeing that both pregnancy and childbirth are both foul and the afterbirth unclean, the evil demons vie for possession while the good deities depart (cited in Morrell 1980:68).

While the first six sins of women are character traits that some women might be expected to embody more than others, just as some men might, the last sin is a physiological condition which affects all women equally. It is only the seventh sin that can be characterised as specifically female.

The notion of women's inherently defiled and defiling nature derives from Muju's literalistic understanding of karma. Earlier in the text he explains that stingy and greedy people are born into poverty, that the haughty are born into low castes, and that those who violate the precepts are reborn with defective sense organs. Although Muju does not make the connection in the text, he believed that beings were not born as women by chance but that rebirth in such a defiled body was the result of some negative past-life action. Muju accepted the belief, prevalent in popular Buddhism of the time that women were by nature unclean. This understanding has significant implications for women's spiritual practice because of the great emphasis placed upon ritual purity in Japanese religion, both Buddhist and Shinto. Since women were at all times unclean, it was not possible for them to enter the holiest parts of monastery or temple compounds, or in extreme cases, to even set foot on the mountains where these retreats were built¹. More importantly, according the Menstruation Sutra (Ketsubon kyo), which was widely read in Japan from the time of Muju until the end of the nineteenth century², every time a woman bled, she polluted the ground and the waters

that were used to make offerings to the Buddhas and severely offended them. As a result she was constantly accruing negative karma, the result of which was rebirth in the 'Bloodpond Hell'.

This is a startling claim and is clearly in conflict with fundamental Mahayana principles such as emptiness and non-duality. How can a woman's body be 'inherently' defiling? This paradox was addressed by certain male exegetes of this sutra such as the author of the early nineteenth-century work, 'Random Stories about the Buddhist Ceremonies – The Origin and Transmission of the Ketsubon kyo' , who reasoned that:

Because they were born as women, their aspirations to Buddhahood are weak, and their jealousy and evil character are strong. These sins compounded become menstrual blood, which flows in two streams each month, polluting not only the earth god but all the other deities as well (cited in Takemi 1983:235).

In this analysis of women's 'sins', their lack of spiritual aspiration, jealousy and evil nature are the volitional characteristics that result in negative karmic effects or sa.mskāras. Women's menstrual blood is here not seen so much as a symbol of these negative volitions but a physical effect of them just as obesity might be the result of greed. Despite the fact that this position can be undermined using basic Mahāyāna principles, it does not seem to have been criticised by Buddhist teachers in any systematic way. Indeed, the 'defilement' of women became the paradigmatic Japanese Buddhist view.

Women in Japanese Buddhism were defined by their bodies in a way not paralleled by representations of men. Indeed, women as a class became identified with the flesh and with carnality in a manner strikingly similar to Christianity which suggests that this representation of women is not characteristically 'Buddhist' but rather 'male'³. Faure points out how the Buddhist male establishment was 'unable or unwilling to distinguish between biological constraints and the arbitrary constraints imposed by society' (2003: 105). In Buddhist thought, there really is only one gender - femaleness - since maleness is not considered problematic and not subject to interrogation. While we have a multitude of examples of male clerics discoursing on the disadvantages of female rebirth, there is no balancing voice that comes from women themselves where maleness is held up to scrutiny or regarded as problematic or 'other'. Men are viewed within Buddhism as somehow less gendered than women, already, by virtue of their male anatomy, closer to an ideal of androgyny.

A further way in which women tended to be reduced to the purely physical occurs in a variety of Japanese Buddhist images of female cadavers. These images, designed for contemplative meditation, occur throughout poetry, narrative literature, woodblock prints and paintings from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries and are not paralleled by similar depictions of male cadavers (Chin 1998: 277). This is not a characteristically Japanese practice but, as the work of Liz Wilson (1995, 1996) has shown, is paralleled by the treatment of the female corpse in Pali and Sanskrit literature. As Wilson argues, the use of the female

(never the male) corpse as an image for contemplation means that, paradoxically, women become the teachers of men, but it is not what is going on in women's minds which is important, it is the physical process of decay taking place in their bodies. She comments that through horrific transformation, the woman's body is 'made into a display board for the Dharma' (1995:95). Women, as symbols of 'the material,' are once more understood to be tied up with the physical body in a way not paralleled by representations of men.

Women's 'Five Obstructions'

Closely connected with the Japanese Buddhist idea that women were somehow defiled is the doctrine of the Five Obstructions (or 'Hindrances'). According to this teaching, women are excluded from five forms of rebirth, namely rebirth as a Brahma god, the god Sakra, the tempter Māra, a Wheel-turning king or a Buddha. The idea behind this doctrine is that there is something inherent in the state of 'woman' that means she cannot, while in female guise, attain the very highest or most powerful forms of existence as symbolised by the list of the five great beings. Similar to the defilement arising from menstruation, the 'five obstructions' are understood to be internal to the state of 'woman,' something that women have brought upon themselves through previous negative actions.

Faure sees the origin of this list as a 'technical or juridical restriction' arising from the rules subordinating women to men within the sangha, but points out how within Japanese Buddhism they came to be interpreted as a 'moral and ontological inferiority' deriving from women's impurity - since rebirth as a woman was not a morally neutral state but resulted from bad karma (2003:63). These two teachings regarding women occur throughout Japanese Buddhist texts of all periods and can be said to characterise the Japanese Buddhist view of women, at least until recent times.

How did Buddhist women position themselves in relation to this male-centred view which scripted them as objects in a discourse which characterised them as defiled, defiling and by their very nature incapable of attaining the highest and most powerful forms of rebirth solely on the basis of their female body? It is difficult to answer this question because it is hard to find examples from the Japanese tradition where women speak about themselves in their own voice.

However, there is an interesting incident in Murasaki Shikibu's⁴ eleventh-century novel *The Tale of Genji* that suggests that women may not have always taken these teachings too seriously. Murasaki was a woman of high birth serving as a lady-in-waiting to the Empress who, more than any other figure in Japanese literary history helped define Japanese prose literature. Denied her own teacher, Murasaki was a child prodigy who had learned the Chinese classics by listening outside the door to the lessons provided for her less able brother. Her father is reported to have said that he wished she had been born a boy for then she

would have been able to rise to a position in the world that best suited her remarkable abilities. Murasaki, as a capable, highly intelligent, well-educated woman might be expected to have shown a certain disdain towards male-dominated narratives positioning women as inherently defiled and inferior, and in one passage in her novel in particular, this would seem to be the case.

The passage occurs late in the novel, after the death of the hero Prince Genji and concerns the speculations of Genji's son, Prince Kaouru, about the nature of women. Kaouru's thoughts, upon overhearing his mother's religious practice, are narrated thus:

His mother was at her devotions, morning and night, but he thought it unlikely that the efforts of a weak and vacillating woman could transform the dew upon the lotus into the bright jewel of the law. A woman labours under the five hindrances, after all. He wanted somehow to help her towards a new start in another life.

Above is the translation offered by Edward Seidensticker and it would seem to rehearse the usual definitions of women as weak, lacking consistency and in need of help and advice from men (even their sons!) in order for them to make any spiritual progress. Most invidious of all is the notion that a woman's primary efforts should be directed towards rebirth as a man (as is suggested by the phrase 'a new start in another life').

However, as Edward Kamens (1993: 389) points out, the phrase translated 'the five hindrances' is not the usual *itsutsu no sawari*, but the circumlocution *itsutsu no nanigashi* which might more properly be rendered as 'the five something-or-others' or 'the five whatsits'. Murasaki's audience would have had no trouble identifying the 'five something-or-others' as the 'five obstructions' and would certainly have been able to list them, so why did Murasaki choose this circumlocution? One possible interpretation would be that she was indicating a certain disdain for this particular 'teaching,' or expressing an ironic attitude towards the idea that women are 'hindered' by what she lightly refers to as 'the five whatsits'. As Kamens points out 'dismissal, condescension, and exclusion – of women, by men – are what the *itsutsu no sawari* topos is all about' (1993:393). Could Murasaki, a brilliant and unusually well-educated woman, here be expressing disdain for the tradition which regarded her as inherently defiled and handicapped by her female birth? After all, Kaouru is Murasaki's creation, the condescending attitude he expresses towards his mother is scripted by Murasaki herself. Anyone who reads the entire novel could not miss the irony of this passage in which Kaouru, at best a confused and melancholy adolescent, thinks how he might best 'help' his mother on her spiritual path. In this passage, is Murasaki not subtly undermining the condescending attitudes held towards women by many of the male nobles at Court who were far less able than herself?

Japanese feminist critiques of Buddhism

Japanese feminists have criticised the various negative Buddhist representations of the female form in much the same way as western feminists have attacked Christianity. Hitomi Tonomura asks 'What does it mean to illuminate the Buddha's truth [of impermanence] consistently through the female body? Does it not configure the female as an object of observation, an entity disassociated from her own humanity?' (cited in Chin 1998:278). And it is worth raising the question, although it is impossible to answer in the context of the present article, what was the effect upon women believers who, less self-confident than Murasaki, were expected to see themselves 'mirrored' in these representations?

Japanese feminist criticism of Buddhism has been harsh and thoroughgoing and certain Buddhist teachings have been interpreted as underlying mainstream views of women that assign them to a lesser place in Japanese society even today. Minamoto Junko, for instance, has written a number of books in Japanese criticising the patronising tone of many popular Buddhist tracts written by male monastics for their female lay followers. These texts were often gathered together in compilations such as the sixteenth-century *Collection of Teachings for Women* (Nyonin kyoke shu). Many of the passages in this collection, which was used for purposes of proselytization by the Pure Land School, rehearse the negative views about women that had by this time become widespread. These include the notion that women have been abandoned by the Buddhas because of their sinful nature, and that they cannot generate the bodhicitta or become a Buddha while in a woman's body. The reasons given are again connected to women's essential nature:

This is because women are possessed of a feckless and grasping nature, and their actions are day and night motivated by thoughts of attachment and a jealous heart. Caring only for themselves, they heap envious calumny upon the heads of others and generate the karma of evil and impropriety (cited in Minamoto 1993:97).

These attitudes were very pervasive and were still characteristic of Japanese Buddhism in the nineteenth century as the abbot of the Honganji order, Honnyo (1778–1826) illustrates in a letter to female disciples:

Women are said to be afflicted with the Five Obstacles and the Three Subjugations (i.e. they must obey their fathers in childhood, their husbands in marriage, and their sons in widowhood). Because they are terribly sinful, they are abandoned by the buddhas of the ten directions and fall into the hells with no hope of salvation' (cited in Minamoto 1993:92).

The above text shows a fusion of Buddhist and Confucian (the Three Subjugations) beliefs which, from our modern understanding of Buddhism, expresses an extreme wrong view: that women as women are unable to make spiritual progress (i.e. are 'beyond hope of salvation').

Unfortunately, Minamoto reads the negativity expressed towards women in Japanese Buddhist texts as a fundamental characteristic of Buddhist teaching that goes back to the Buddha himself (she notes the Buddha's seeming reluctance to admit women to the sangha) and she fails to draw attention towards those few teachers within the Japanese Buddhist tradition (of whom Dogen⁵ is the most remarkable) who showed great impatience with male disciples' attitudes towards women. Nor does she discuss Mahāyāna texts and bodhisattvas that stress women's spiritual potential, as if in response to the popular view of them as inferior and defiled. These other Buddhist voices, stressing that 'femaleness' has no bearing on an individual's ultimate spiritual capacities, and identifying obsession with gender difference as a spiritual hindrance in itself, should not be underestimated when giving an account of the Buddhist attitude towards women.

However, given the great volume of calumny directed towards women by men recorded in the Japanese Buddhist tradition, it is no surprise that, within the Japanese context, Minamoto concludes, 'Buddhism has operated as a philosophy that blocks modernization' (1993:113). She regards Buddhism as a hindrance to the development of women's rights in Japan, identifying Buddhism as 'a reactionary philosophy' chained to outmoded and discredited views of 'women' (1993:113). It is perhaps no surprise that it has not been the traditional Buddhist sects that have attracted large numbers of women practitioners in recent times, but the syncretistic 'new religions' that have become identified with women spiritual leaders in Japan.

Conclusion: A Mirror for Men?

The above texts and representations of women taken from the Japanese Buddhist tradition say nothing about the actual nature of women; indeed, in a Mahāyāna context, it would be doctrinally impossible to elucidate just what this 'real' nature might consist of. Instead, these texts express the ambivalent and, at times, hostile attitudes held towards women as a group by men as a group. Throughout the representations discussed above, 'femaleness' seems to function as a repressed dark side and 'woman' as a repository into which men empty themselves of negative traits which could be said to characterise men as much as they do women. In so doing, the male figure becomes the norm, the archetypal 'human' figure, the ideal Buddhist practitioner, and the proto-Buddha-to-be. Women, to the extent that they are acknowledged at all, are men's shadows, lesser beings who are presented more as spiritual hindrances to men than as spiritual practitioners in their own right.

In a seminal essay, feminist anthropologist Sherry Ortner asks the question 'Is female to male as nature is to culture?', an apt question in relation to a recent book attempting to explain the Buddhist view of women⁶. In the course of her research, Ortner was struck by how 'in every known culture, women are considered in some degree inferior to men' (1974:69). Rejecting an explanation based on biological determinism (that women somehow 'lack' a potential inherent in the male body), Ortner instead suggests that women have repeatedly been identified with the world of 'nature' whereas men have been associated with the world of

'culture'. As she argues, women are 'seen as representing a lower order of being, as being less transcendental of nature than men are' (1974:73). This is certainly true of the Japanese Buddhist tradition where women's menstruation became a particular site of morbid fascination for male monastics, leading to the development of an entire 'sutra' dedicated to the topic.

That such a belief could come to dominate the Japanese Buddhist tradition is curious in the light of the strong Mahayana influence in Japan and the antinomian tendencies displayed by characteristically Japanese schools such as Zen, Nichiren and Pure Land. Why were key Mahāyana teachings such as the emptiness of all phenomena and the non-duality of nirvana and samsara not used to question the curious insistence that women were 'by nature' both defiled and defiling? There is nothing 'Buddhist' about the negative view of women expressed in much of the Japanese Buddhist tradition; in fact, these views show startling similarities to those elucidated at great length by another elite group of male monastics in the Christian tradition. In Christianity, too, 'women' became the bearer of the 'nature' archetype, associated with sensuality, carnality and death⁷.

Given the radical nature of the Mahāyāna dialectic which insists upon a fierce interrogation of the dualistic structures which determine our conceptualisation of the world, it is odd that such obviously mistaken views about the nature of women came to be widely held throughout Japanese Buddhism. The texts described above are, therefore, a mirror for men in that they show how dangerous it can be when a single group within society controls not only who can speak, but also what is said. As Sherry Ortner has argued: 'Ultimately, both men and women can and must be equally involved in projects of creativity and transcendence. Only then will women be seen as aligned with culture, in culture's ongoing dialectic with nature' (174:87).

Throughout most of Japan's history, women were denied access to the social institutions that would have enabled them to participate along with men in the project of cultural production. When some outstanding women such as Murasaki, quite by accident, managed to access the education reserved for men, they showed themselves to be more than capable of equalling and even surpassing the achievements of men. Murasaki Shikibu stands out in the Japanese tradition as a clear example that the 'Five Whatsits,' despite male monastics' claims to the contrary, may not have been such a hindrance to women after all.

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Notes

1. Japan's more established Buddhist sects, such as Tendai and Shingon, reinforced the idea that women were polluting by banning them from their sites of worship altogether (this was known as the 'prohibition of women' or *nyonin kinsei*). Reformist Buddhist sects such as the Nichiren schools and the Jodo Shu, however, actively welcomed women as practitioners and Honen (1132-1212) went so far as to criticise the established sects for forbidding women access to their most sacred sites. Individual Zen teachers, too, perhaps upholding the tradition of iconoclasm which characterises the school, also sometimes spoke out against conventional views on the inferiority of women.

2. The *Ketsubon Kyo* (literally 'Bloodbowl Sutra') seems to have originated in China (where it became equally as widespread as Japan) and have been transmitted to Japan sometime in the fourteenth century. See Takemi, below, for a discussion of texts and dates.

3. As Bloch argues:

In the early centuries of Christianity among the Church fathers, the flesh becomes gendered as specifically feminine, and the female gender is estheticized in a way, and to a degree, that it had not been in previous tradition. At the same time the realm of esthetics is theologized, with the result that whatever belongs to the realm of either the feminine or of the esthetic is devalued within an ontological perspective according to which everything conceived to exist beyond the flesh, and thereby gendered masculine, alone has claim to full Being (1992: 46). (Or, in the Buddhist case, only when embodied as masculine can full Enlightenment be won).

4. For a fictional biography of Murasaki see Liza Dalby's *The Tale of Murasaki*; Murasaki's own diary is published as a Penguin Classic under the title *Diary of Lady Murasaki*; Murasaki's *Tale of Genji* should be read in the Edward Seidensticker translation which is far superior to the earlier translation made by Arthur Waley.

5. Dogen (1200-1253) often criticised the view that any male practitioner of the Dharma was of higher status than all women practitioners. In his sermon, the *Raihaitokuzui*, which is featured in his famous

collection, the Shobogenzo, he mentions a number of Enlightened women teachers in the Ch'an tradition of China, and says that a male disciple who is lucky enough to encounter such a teacher should bow to her in homage, for it is 'like finding drinking water when you are thirsty'. Dogen further attacks the idea of the 'inferiority' of women on doctrinal grounds, asking:

What demerit is there in femaleness? What merit is there in maleness? There are bad men and good women. If you wish to hear the Dharma and put an end to pain and turmoil, forget about such things as male and female. As long as delusions have not yet been eliminated, neither men nor women have eliminated them; when they are all eliminated and true reality is experienced, there is no distinction of male and female.

It is significant, as Levering (1998:78) points out, that large sections of the Raihaitokuzui in which Dogen further criticises conventional views held about women seem to have been omitted from editions of this text which circulated before the eighteenth century.

6. For a modern rehearsal of this age-old argument, see Subhuti Women, Men and Angels, Windhorse Publications, Birmingham 1994.

7. Origen comments 'There are some women ... who are indiscriminate slaves to lust, like animals, they rut without discretion' (cited in Brundage, 1987:

64-5). Tertullian went even further, writing:

You are the devil's gateway: you are the unsealer of that forbidden tree: you are the first deserter of the divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert – that is, death – even the Son of God had to die (cited in Bloch, 1992:40).