

AN ANALYSIS OF GENDER DISCOURSE IN BUDDHISM

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Abstract

This paper explicitly examines gender discourse in Buddhism by investigating the tension between its philosophical commitment to spiritual equality and its historical engagement with patriarchal institutions. Through the account of canonical texts, feminist perspectives and contemporary gender theory, this paper attempts to explore whether Buddhism can be a gender-neutral tradition. While core doctrines such as non-self and dependent origination challenge the essentialist notions of gender, institutional practices have often favoured hierarchical distinctions between men and women. It argues that Buddhism embodies both emancipatory and confined dimensions within the framework of gender discourse and evolving site of philosophical and social negotiation.

Keywords

Buddhism, Gender discourse, Feminist Buddhism, Women's Spirituality

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Introduction

Searching for gender neutrality in religious practices is an inevitable discourse nowadays. The article strives to explore the question of whether Buddhism can be a gender-neutral religion. Generally, Buddhism advocates a spiritual life rather than focusing on tolerance of other religions and focuses on experience. There are two generalisations that Buddhism provides. The first generalisation, earlier gender disparity persists in certain Buddhist communities. Especially, with women, Buddhism maintains rigid principles for access to the teachings of Buddha. The second generalisation, later, Buddhism advocates an equal opportunity for both men and women for the attainment of enlightenment. However, we equally find in Buddhist practices and texts that are discriminatory towards women and misogynistic at certain points. This debate proposes that Buddhism does not provide equal opportunity for both males and females. It is a belief that women have gone through the phase of rebirth, which is because of the law of karma. Societal and cultural norms influence the practice of Buddhism and its embodiment of gender equality. In certain Buddhist institutions, traditional gender roles and other conventional norms may lead to the unequal treatment of women and limit their access to certain roles or opportunities for spiritual advancement. Such generalizations create a dilemma in the practice of Buddhism.

In this regard, the paper explicitly examines gender discourse in Buddhism through textual, historical and feminist perspectives. It explores how Buddhist teachings equally resist and reframe patriarchal structures. It, further explores contemporary feminist reinterpretation that tends to reconstruct Buddhism as a more inclusive and egalitarian tradition.

Early Buddhism and Historical Context of Women in Buddhism

Buddhism, rooted in the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, has often been perceived as a path of liberation and spiritual awakening, emphasizing the transcendence of worldly distinctions. The purpose of Buddhism is to alleviate suffering and attain liberation from the cycle of rebirth. In other words, Buddhism intends to achieve individual enlightenment known as nirvana, or awakening, which is a state of complete freedom from suffering and the cause of suffering. The four noble truths serve as an essential part of understanding this. By recognizing and overcoming attachment, desires and ignorance, individuals can transcend and attain liberation. There is also the implication of the cultivation of moral and ethical conduct, compassion, mindfulness and wisdom. Additionally, Buddhism encourages the understanding of the true nature of reality which encompasses recognizing the impermanent, interdependent and non-self-nature of phenomena to overcome

ignorance and delusion which are the root cause of suffering. However, although Buddhist practices and teachings may alleviate suffering and free us from suffering, Buddhist women within all religious practices have faced challenges and hardships due to their access to the teachings of Buddha. First and foremost, it was started with Buddha's stepmother Prajapati who was not able to access the teachings of Buddha. Scholar, Diana Paul interpreted early Indian Buddhism as misogynistic. But the text shows a mixed attitude towards women which is ambiguous and self-contradictory. The capability of women to attain nirvana and to pursue the path of awakening is acknowledged by Buddha. It is claimed that the entrenchment of the order of bhikkhunis provided women with an opportunity to live their lives in the world, study and practice Buddhism and attain spiritual liberation.

However, despite the positive aspects of Buddhism, it entails gender bias and limitations on women. Because there is a practice of androcentric record keeping which only keeps the opinions of men but not women. Buddhism as an androcentric text shows the hierarchical relationship between men and women. The most sensitive statements about the nature of women or their abilities are given by Buddha. Womenfolk are uncontrollable, envious, greedy, and weak in wisdom, a woman's heart is haunted by stinginess, jealousy and sensuality [1]. As evidence, Ananda, the champion of women was forced to confess several faults, including two regarding women, he obtained the admission of women into homeless life, and he allowed women to view the body of the Buddha and defile it with tears [1].

Earlier, some misogynist doctrines became part of the Pali canon and early Indian Buddhism at some point, though Kajiyama Yuichi and others argue convincingly that these ideas could only have come into the late literature. It asserts that a Buddha would not be a woman and a woman could not be a Buddha became widespread in early Buddhism. It was often stated by the reasoning that a woman cannot become a Buddha because she cannot fill any of the five stations¹ but must bear the three kinds of subordination [3]. This reasoning became extremely widespread as a justification for an explanation of women's low status in Buddhism. It is used up to the present time and has become especially popular in East Asian Buddhism. According to Church, even arahant status is denied to women in some texts, despite the clear record of the Therigatha. Words are put into the Buddha's mouth: "It is impossible, monks, it cannot come to pass that a woman should be an

1. The *five stations* are to become, during the rebirth process, Brahma, Indra the four guardian gods, a universal monarch, and an irreversible Bodhisattva, according to one list. The "three subordinations" are to father when young, to husband while married, and to son when old.

arahant who is a fully enlightened one” [1]. Further, it claims that cultural stereotypes about women are highly reflected in Buddhist scripture. The text often portrays women as a distraction to men’s spiritual development, being considered in terms of desire and temptation. Their physical beauty is also portrayed as a danger for men seeking spiritual liberation. Such unbearable attributes make women feel inferior to men.

As with earlier Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism existed in the context of a patriarchal society strongly informed by androcentric values and modes of thought. Gender stereotypes of the surrounding culture constantly influenced both women and men. And, as for earlier Buddhism, those gender stereotypes suggested that women are less intelligent than men, less able to control themselves sexually, more interested in worldly concerns, especially reproduction, and less inclined toward spiritual disciplines. The words put in the mouths of the conservative representatives of older Buddhism in Mahayana texts probably accurately summarize popular attitudes towards women. In most of the texts to be considered in detail, those misogynist attitudes are countermanded, retracted, or demonstrated to be false. But in some documents, they stand. A particularly virulent example, the opinion of an important philosopher, is found in Asanga’s *Bodhisattva Bhumi*, an important text. He explains why Buddhas are never female: “Completely perfected Buddhas are not women. Precisely, because a bodhisattva, from the time he has passed beyond the first incalculable age (of his career), had completely abandoned the woman’s estate. Ascending to the most excellent throne of enlightenment, he is never again reborn as a woman. All women are by nature full of defilement and weak intelligence. And not by one who is full of defilement and weak intelligence is completely perfected Buddhahood attained” [1].

Patriarchy and Gender Hierarchy in Buddhist Tradition

Buddhist women had gone through the hardship of religious practices to attain liberation and access the teachings of Buddha. As it is mentioned above, Buddha’s aunt and foster mother Prajapati wanted to become a nun, but it became impossible for her as she had to go through monastic ordination. There are eight rules called *Garudharma*. These eight rules made it difficult for women to leave their husbands and children. And these rules are nothing but a gender hierarchy of men over women.

In Mahayana, it is claimed that the problem is about biology as Buddha cannot have a female body. It advocates the spiritual disadvantage of female rebirth. In other words, women must be reborn as men before attaining Buddhahood. Such narratives strengthen androcentric norms concerning spiritual authority and enlightenment [2]. Hence, women seemed to go through such an imposition of

sexual transformation. Women had gone through such painful stages to transform their sexual orientation. This suggests that the position of women in Buddhism was very painful and to get their subjectivity recognised they adopted the male supremacy in their bodies. On the other hand, for men, there is no restriction on becoming female as a result of bad karma. Such restrictions make women feel inferior to men. They feel their bodies are not pure as they are not accessible to ordination. But when women transform their bodies into male bodies to ordain, it was not necessarily focused on the understanding of their bodies as to how they got them. Buddhists intend to preclude women from their apparent bodies. In this context, I argue that why women are associated with the body? Why are women confined to limited representation in society? Women are not only for biological reproduction. The definition of women should not be confined to the body. One's body should not be limited by the identity of experience. If we consider the body as text, there will be different meanings for each part of the body. Every movement of the body signifies a different meaning. Precisely, embodiment is important to promote inclusivity and equality for all despite the diverse embodied experiences. Hence, we cannot define women's bodies only in terms of sexuality and limit women's accessibility to the teachings of Buddha.

Here, I argue that such imposition on women resembles the French philosopher Lacan's thought of the Symbolic order² [3]. For Lacan, if women get to be recognised, they must have to enter the symbolic world. We enter the symbolic order through language acquisition which introduces us to a network of signifiers such as words, and symbols that represent objects, concepts and social relations. Likewise, Prajapati enters the symbolic order by shaving her head to gain her subjectivity amongst the monks by order of the Buddha. Hence, Buddhist nuns cannot enjoy their spiritual life freely and have the same privileges as monks. In many Theravada countries like Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand, the order of nuns has died out and attempts to revive it are often met with great resistance. In these countries, many women live as nuns, although as *de facto* nuns they are not accorded the same status [4]. Moreover, it is claimed that the order of nuns is only confined to women, yet the teachings of Buddha are permeated with the negative image of women.

The exclusion of women from attaining ordination in several Buddhist traditions further advocates institutional inequality. In Theravada Buddhism, the

2. Symbolic order is specially used by French Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan to mean the realm of language that is masculine language. It is a crucial concept in Lacanian psychoanalysis that highlights the role of language in structuring our subjectivity and mediating our relationship with the world.

Bhikkhuni legacy disappeared for centuries in countries such as Thailand and Myanmar, limiting women's access to formal religious authority [5]

From a feminist perspective, such inequalities establish the contradiction between Buddhist metaphysics and social practices. Simone de Beauvoir's argument "One is not born, but becomes a woman" is strongly implemented in the Buddhist context where gender identities are culturally constructed but still institutionally reinforced [6]. Therefore, essential identity may be philosophically denied by Buddhism but the gendered system of power relations generates it.

Mahayana Buddhism, Gender Equality and Inclusive Treatment

In Mahayana texts, it tries to avoid the generic masculine language and introduce gender-inclusive language. The words "good daughters and good sons" are not taken as a gender-based language rather; these are taken as the dharmic relationship in terms of Bodhisattva norms of the Mahayana path. Good daughters and sons who teach others are called Kalyana Mitra. So, both women and men who teach are taking on each other as good friends in the role of teaching. Laywomen are also depicted in Mahayana sutras. Queen Shrimala, the dharma teacher of this text is depicted as a good friend and considered a female Buddha. Her teaching was so effective and welcoming. In Therigatha³, both nuns and laywomen may have their skills and compassion for the achievement. It reflects on impermanence, insight into the nature of reality, reflections on the body, descriptions of the path to liberation, and accounts of overcoming various hindrances. It serves as an important part of the spiritual achievements of these early Buddhist nuns and inspires practitioners, both male and female to pursue the path of liberation.

Moreover, in later Buddhism, we can see a glimpse of expecting sexual differences. Over 2000 years back in Buddhism, queer people were discouraged from accessing Buddha's teaching. In Buddhism, there was a belief system that the fruits of one's past moral actions are manifested in the body. Buddha's Perfect body is the result of his virtue. Queer sexuality had negative implications in monastic life, yet it is claimed that it can't be excluded from Buddhist practices in general. As Buddhists do not have a clear-cut doctrinal system that dictates the treatment of transgender beings within the sangha, each authority is left to decide case by case whether or not the transgender being should be allowed entry. For instance, Kathoey

3. Therigatha is a collection of poems attributed to the early Buddhist nuns, known as Theri, who were enlightened disciples of the Buddha. Theri means 'elderly nun' or venerable nun in the Pali language in which these poems were composed. The Therigatha highlights the depth of wisdom and liberation achieved by these female practitioners, countering the prevailing notion in ancient Indian Society that spiritual attainment was only possible for men.

performers who are transgender women or non-gender-conforming gay men in Thailand have access to the ordination in their sex assigned at birth.

The most significant development is the emergence of Bhikhuni ordination movements in Sri Lanka, Taiwan and other Buddhist regions. The movements assert that exclusion of women from the absolute ordination contradicts the Buddha's core ethical teaching on compassion and liberation [7]. In the present era, we have seen female monastics largely occupy the position of leadership and contribute to Buddhist scholarship.

Moreover, the doctrine of anatta or non-self-advocates Buddhism's gender neutrality. According to that doctrine, there is no permanent or fixed self, but it is a momentary entity as human beings are constantly changing processes like gender not as a fixed essence, but as a fluid and constructed experience. Buddhist accounts of impermanence (anicca) and dependent origination (pratityasamutpada) deconstruct the essentialist notions of identity. This argument breaks the rigid gender binaries. If all identities are socially and culturally constructed and interdependent, then no inherent metaphysical self can be associated with masculinity or femininity.

Feminist Critiques of Buddhism

Modern feminist scholars have criticised Buddhist tradition for materialising patriarchal structure while simultaneously claiming spiritual universality. Rita Gross asserts that Buddhism entails both sexist social institutions and liberating philosophical recourses [1]. According to Gross, Buddhist tradition cannot be comprehended theoretically, but must also be scrutinised in the historical power structure. Feminist critiques are almost determined by androcentrism within the norms of Buddhist narratives. The body of Buddha is often understood as male, and its spiritual nature is inherently associated with masculinity. The literature of Buddhist tradition represents women in a stereotypical way such as mothers as temptresses, or symbols of attachment.

Judith Butler in her theory of gender performativity argues that gender is not a natural essence but a socially repeated performance [8]. In this sense, Buddhist religious practices rituals and institutional roles contribute rituals and institutional roles contribute to the repetition of gendered roles that materialise masculine norms.

Buddhism, Embodiment, and Gendered Subjectivity

In the context of embodiment, Buddhist tradition asserts that attachment to the body becomes a source of suffering. However, feminist phenomenologists like Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, and Iris Marion Young argue that both subjectivity and identity are constructed by the lived bodily experience.

Merleau-Ponty's account of phenomenology of embodiment asserts that human existence is essentially embodied [9]. In this sense, questions arise: can liberation be achieved by transcending embodiment or does liberation emerge through embodied experiences? Feminist Buddhist scholars largely advocate embodied spirituality that values bodily existence rather than negating it, and challenge the conventional norms of representing women's bodies as obstacles to enlightenment. Instead, embodiment becomes a site of ethical awareness, rationality and spiritual transformation. This argument advocates that Buddhism's denial of a permanent self may contribute to the philosophical critiques of stable gender identity while also encouraging a more fluid understanding of subjectivity.

Conclusion

From the bulk of the discussion, I argue that Buddhism, to a certain point, is not seen as a gender-neutral religion. In Buddhist tradition and community today, to some extent, we can still see that women have been subordinated and discriminated against by men, although there is flexibility. The devaluation of women serves Buddhism as an androcentric religion. Hence, it is clear that the teaching of Buddhism is not found inherently emancipatory. Buddhist practice is sometimes seen as textually, and structurally a gender-discriminatory religion. Although there are some stories favouring a positive attitude towards women, we cannot explain away sexism, and androcentrism and give a verdict that Buddhism provides equal opportunities for both women and men and the other gender.

However, it argues that Buddhism's notion of non-self, impermanence and compassion challenge the rigid binaries and promote principles of equality and inclusivity. The ethical teachings of Buddhism are to serve all human beings with compassion universally, non-violence, mindfulness and the pursuit of wisdom. There are five precepts for moral conduct, which encourage practitioners to refrain from harming living beings, stealing engaging in sexual misconduct, speaking falsely and using intoxicants. Therefore, I argue that in embracing a gender-neutral approach, Buddhism can transcend traditional gender roles, and expectations, allowing the individual to explore their spiritual journeys without restrictive boundaries regardless of the mixed attitudes of both males and females and other genders. Acceptance and recognition of women's ordination and other genders among different Buddhist countries, communities and monastic lineages encourage gender equality, inclusivity, and respect for all beings, and create an environment where everyone can find solace, support and personal growth within the teachings of Buddhism. The aspiration for equality and inclusivity would keep continuing to shape Buddhism's evolution across the world.

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