

Invoking the Middleness of 'Ma ning' Toward the Dissolution of Gender

Dualism

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An in depth analysis of the practice and tenets of Buddhism reveals an appealing potential for healing a planet of people because of its scientific approach, foundation of insight meditation, and its premise that all identity, including sexual, is a construct and an illusion. I was, however, surprised to discover that the original, Eastern Buddhist practice is misogynistic and runs counter to its non-dualistic philosophy. Yet, due to its intellectual approach to spirituality, Buddhism does contain a plasticity to evolve to a new and dispassionate acceptance of the differences and equality of maleness and femaleness with its claim of anatman or egolessness and equanimity with all sentient beings. Surprisingly, in Eastern practice, Buddhist adherents are fiercely attached to the ancient Vinaya that insist that women are inferior to men in every way.

In this essay I explore the foundations of sexism in eastern Buddhist practice, i.e., Tibet, Thailand, and India. I assert that Eastern Buddhism holds its adherents from attaining true and complete freedom and enlightenment with its dualistic application of gender categorization based on the 2500 year old Vinaya. I also contend that this practice can

evolve if the monastic order embraces and abides by equanimous, non-dualistic Buddhist philosophy, thereby effectively correcting its dualistic practice.

Because of its commitment to science, deeply insightful roots, and growing appeal to the general population, Buddhism has an opportunity to catalyze the evolution of all of humanity. The conception that women are weaker and less capable than men is pervasive. This essay offers an argument that recasts already established Buddhist tenets into more progressive forms that can ultimately lead to true liberation.

Development of Sexism in Buddhism

The Buddha is said to have at first refused women – his foster mother in fact – the path to enlightenment. When pushed by Ananda, his right-hand aide, the Buddha conceded that women could indeed attain awakening, but that “their presence in the order would render Buddhism vulnerable to deterioration and would weaken the Dharma” (Gyatso, 91). Ananda convinced the Buddha to allow women to learn the practice. However, the Garudharma – the famous Eight Heavy Rules which endure today in Eastern monastic circles – were created, ensuring a nun’s subservience to monks. In short, the Eight Heavies legislate that all nuns must defer to all monks and accept them as their ritual and authoritative superiors (Gyatso, 91). Whether the Buddha really supported the rules or

was just politically astute, it is true that lay supporters of that time would not have supported the formation of a community of independent, single women and, would not have respected, followed and underwritten the Buddha's monastic order if women were included (Gyatso, 92).

But how was it imagined that women would undermine the order in the first place? What did the idea of woman in the sangha represent? One popular example of a negative portrayal of women is the retelling of the Buddha's enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, where women are depicted as sexual temptresses. As the story goes, Mara, the tempter, sends his daughters to dance seductively in front of the Buddha to distract him from his goal of enlightenment. Women were historically depicted as the personification of lust, aversion and craving, the core of our dukkha (Byrne, 185). In Mahayana and Theravada Buddhist literature, Hell is populated by old, repulsive women, and monks are encouraged to visualize this image to deepen their understanding of the impermanence of beauty and the body (Byrne, 184).

The Socially Constructed Female

Birth as a female was considered inferior to birth as a male because of the socially imposed constraints of being a woman, such as the 'suffering' of childbirth and being subjected to the will of her husband and his family. This led to the belief that there must be some karmic cause for

female birth and that women must “ethically right themselves” to attain male birth before progressing onto the path of awakening. The suffering was explained by the idea that birth as a female was a form of karmic punishment for immoral acts performed during past lives (Appleton, 48).

These ideas have pervaded Theravada Buddhism to the present day where women are considered spiritually inferior to men. Studies have shown that many Eastern Buddhist women believe their sex is decided by previous actions and that this explains the extra suffering endured by women. One Sri Lankan worker explained: “I would rather have been a man; to be born a woman is a sin. I am a Buddhist, and to be born a man is a privilege. Those who have done good things – or have not done bad things – will have an opportunity to be born men” (Byrne, 180). Many Thai women are convinced that they carry a heavy load of negative karma due to the simple fact of their gender. Making offerings to the sangha is the primary way most laypeople hope to gain merit. Monks are fields of merit and so benefit from this belief. This might explain the predominance of women in the Buddhist lay community as servants. Nuns are unable to formally teach the monks, must eat poorer quality food at tables while the monks sit on raised platforms receiving donations of exquisite food, and must take care of the cleaning and general running of the monastery (Byrne, 182).

The Middle Sex

There are essentially three genders in Eastern medicine and philosophy: male, female and the unacceptable middle sex, which includes all physical and emotional differences from the two main genders. Ayurvedic and Tibetan medical practices traditionally speak of three options for the sex of a baby. This third sex includes the hermaphrodite or 'pandaka,' the term used for the excluded third sex category. This category is used to exclude women from ordination due to various deficiencies or irregularities in their menstrual cycle. In the classic Indian medical work, *Carakasamhita*, a more mainstream Indic tendency considers the third sex a deviation from maleness in dubbing the condition 'napumsaka' or "not-male." According to the Vinaya, the pandaka is excluded from the teachings of Buddhism (Gyatso, 100).

Buddhist scholar, Janet Gyatso does not give us a time frame, but argues that somewhere in the history of Eastern Buddhism, the middleness of the pandaka class became a marker of stability and equanimity. The middleness or 'ma ning'– the Tibetan term for pandaka – is called the "abiding breath between male exhalation and female inhalation; the stable psychic wind, as opposed to the shaking male wind or agitated female wind. It is the balanced yogic channel, as opposed to the too tight male channel, and the too loose female one" (Gyatso, 101).

(Perhaps it is difficult to see from my track changes, but there are extra spaces before and after your dashes here. There should be only one space before and after. :) The Ma-ning concept presents itself as an equalizing abiding breath.

In Ayurvedic medicine, the 'ma ning' pulse is thought of as the "bodhisattva pulse" –the pulse of the exalted enlightened beings. We can think of the ma ning pulse, then, as the transcended pulse, beyond gender. This middle ground begins to echo the venerable Buddhist Middle Path and moves us to the realm of inclusivity. We can see how the middle term - which covers the gray area in between two opposite poles, and, because of its indeterminacy, can assume features of either of those two poles – could come to symbolize inclusiveness. Now, the gray area of the middle or third sex, as a marker of stability and equanimity between the masculine and the feminine, can be re-appropriated as the balance point, the transcended pulse, beyond gender and towards enlightenment.

The excluded middle sex, historically forming the intellectual barrier to women's participation in Buddhism can now point the way to true liberation, not just for women but for men and for Buddhist philosophy as a whole, forming a bridge across the dissonant gap between philosophy and practice.

The Vinaya

The Vinaya represents the laws of a sangha, a community of renunciates. Arguably, the most important regulation, and the one considered the most difficult of all to maintain, is sexual abstinence (Gyatso, 108.)

There is a preoccupation with sexuality and women in the Vinaya. Sexual uncontrollability is a feature commonly attributed to both the pandaka and women. Vinaya stories surrounding the celibacy rules are filled with stories of women raping monks, exposing themselves, and running up to sit on monks while they sleep under a tree. There are also stories of female patrons trying to convince monks that the gift of sex is the highest gift a lay donor can offer (Gyatso, 111). Nowhere is the monastic presumption of oversexed women more overt than in the striking discrepancy in the monastic rules where any erotic physical contact with a man results in a nun's irreversible expulsion from the order, while a monk will only be expelled if he has full-fledged sexual intercourse. In another rule, the monk preceptor is ritually entitled to interrogate a nun about her private parts and menstrual cycle to determine her eligibility for ordination (Gyatso, 113).

From its earliest texts onward, the Vinaya literature weighs heavily on essentialism and the privileging of maleness for moral worth in the

practice of the Dharma, in essence allowing anatomy to determine spiritual value. This preoccupation is grossly misaligned with the tenets of non-duality, which are germane to the foundations of Buddhism. According to the Vinaya, “someone whose sexual organ was ambiguous would themselves be of ambiguous, changing, or unreliable moral worth, incapable of taking vows or even practicing the Dharma at all” (Gyatso, 118). Here is where the opportunity resides for an equanimous and liberating correction in ‘policy.’ Removing the ‘ambiguity’ and recognizing a middle term, the *ma ning* connects genders and transforms the duality, “illustrating by its very mutability the impossibility of any definitive demarcation, least of all exclusion” (Gyatso, 104). A shift in The Vinaya's focus to non-dualistic gender categorization, by recognizing (rather than excluding) the middle term, points the way to inclusivity and gender non-duality.

Eastern Buddhist Preoccupation with Sex and Projected Male Fear

The Eastern Buddhist preoccupation with the *pandaka* and female capriciousness reveals anxieties about uncontrollable sexuality. No figure is more centrally associated with sexual uncontrollability in Buddhist literature than the female. The notion of the *pandaka* becomes a mirror of monastic fantasies about women and the male fear of becoming female (Gyatso, 112). Sexual uncontrollability is a feature common in the texts to

both pandakas and women. There are aspects of women's lives that are depicted in the Jataka, stories of the Buddha's past incarnations that denigrate their existence as females. If, for example, they are being punished because as men they chased other men's wives, as in the past life stories of Ananda and Isidasi and many others found in the Jataka, then it follows that there is a sexual preoccupation in the male psyche projected on women for 'other men's wives' is a male distraction, not women's.

As we have seen, gender dualisms negatively affect the psyche and conditions under which women practice Buddhism in the East, restricting them to service rather than meditative practice and burdening them with a socially constructed self-loathing for their own gender. We also know that men have been privileged and have been led to believe that they really *are* privileged as part of that same construction. It follows, through the law of causality and karma, that there is an (as yet) unknown and undiscovered negative effect on men as well, albeit buried in the appearance of privilege and superiority. The Buddhist aspiration of liberation for all cannot be realized without the complete acceptance of all sentient beings that seek nirvana.

Dualistic thinking when combined with positive and negative valuation is at the heart of sexism. One side of the dualism has a positive value while the other is considered an absence of the first and has

negative value. “The sacred vs. profane dichotomy evident (in this and so many other religious traditions), positions women both theologically and in practice, on the side of the profane” (Byrne, 189). A focus on the liberating potential of non-dualistic discourses reveals the damage that has been wreaked through the dichotomizing of male and female and the subordination of, for example, the Buddhist nuns (Byrne, 190). The equanimous middleness of the pandaka seems to hold the key to untying the knot of gender dualism in the Vinaya.

Buddhist teachings focus on overcoming dualisms; however, Buddhist practice perpetuates these dualisms in the sphere of gender. To realize the liberating potential of non-dualistic thought it is necessary to make transparent the dualistic practices that defy it. Invoking the middleness of the pandaka class as the transcendent marker in the practice provides the space to experience beyond gender to equanimity - a hallmark of the Buddhist practice - and inclusivity. Calling on ‘ma ning,’ the “abiding breath,” the ‘bodhisattva’s pulse’ that resides between the two genders is a way to create that bridge. The ma ning can be considered the Middle Path to gender neutrality. With this transparency achieved, non-dualistic discourses can be utilized to illuminate and eradicate the male karmic trap of gender privilege for the institution of Eastern Buddhism and bring women into the fold completely, allowing all genders then, access to true liberation.

Conclusion

To overcome sexism in Buddhism, the practice of meditation needs to be understood as deeply related and connected to the foundational non-dualistic philosophy of Buddhism. It is time for the institution of Eastern Buddhism, which resists giving equal rights to Buddhist women, to consider the way in which its own clinging to gender is further entrenching the dukkha that the Buddha taught we can be free from. Eliminating the constraints of the obsolete social construction of oppressive gender valuation makes room for freedom for equanimity, self-knowledge and exploration of what it is to 'be.' Through the practice of meditation, we come to understand ourselves as boundless and free as a human collective, the ultimate goal of liberation.

Through this progressive application of Buddhist philosophy, the way opens for a conception of 'being' as interconnected rather than separate. 'Being' as interconnectedness has radical implications not only for feminist theory, but also for the evolution of humanity as a whole. Evolving to the non-dualistic experience of the middle path, we can begin to cultivate the notion of our interconnectedness in which we recognize both our oneness and our difference. We need to let go of attachment to prescribed gender roles so that true interconnectedness can become a lived experience for men and women. By invoking 'ma

ning' the "abiding breath and stable psychic wind," the Buddhist practice becomes effectively married to its philosophy of equanimity and inclusiveness.

Until the very institution that holds this practice in place frees itself from the constraints of attachment to gender dualism and valuation, true enlightenment and freedom for all cannot be attained. Male practitioners of Eastern monastic Buddhism need to honestly examine their views of male sexuality by taking responsibility for their own fears and sexual distractions, evolve and update their views of women, and acknowledge the duplicity of their philosophy as it relates to their practice. It is time to concede that true enlightenment cannot be realized while the duplicitous duality of gender and sexual misappropriation continues in practice. The venerable middle path, symbolized by the middle sex, opens the way for the eastern monastic order to its complete awakening.

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