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I HEAR HER WORDS



AN INTRODUCTION TO **WOMEN IN BUDD**

life, and that we can each act with ethical integrity or choose to flout moral codes are universal concerns found both within the vestiges of societies that existed in history and in communities around the world today.

As with other religions, ethics are an important part of Buddhism. This is the case with all Buddhist traditions, as ethics are fundamental to what it means to be a Buddhist. Whilst it is the case that formulations of ethical codes and ideas about ethical agency change, ethics remain the backbone of the tradition. Ethical principles can be found detailed in the earliest Buddhist canons, reformulated in later literature, and are the foundation of Buddhist monastic codes. These ethical principles, do not, at first glance, appear to be concerned with gender equality. This impression occurs if we conceive of gender equality from a rights-based point of view, that is, that it is the right of any individual woman to be treated fairly. To the contrary, Buddhist ethics are guiding principles for the practitioner. They are articulated to encourage appropriate treatment of others and oneself. At their base, both systems are concerned with non-harm, but they use different language and are engaged in for different ends – one religious, the other social and political.

The fundamental ethic of Buddhism is ahimsa, or non-harm. Each of the other ethical precepts comes out of this primary one. In Theravāda Buddhism, there are three popular and well-used lists of ethical precepts, one of which is shared with Mahāyāna. The first precept on each list is concerned with causing injury or harm. This is because respect for life (non-harm) is the fundamental moral imperative. This first list of five precepts is to be observed by the Buddhist laity:

- abstention from injury to living beings
- abstention from taking the not given
- abstention from sexual misconduct
- abstention from false speech
- abstention from taking intoxicants which cloud the mind

The first four of these five accord with universal ethical principles concerning the sanctity of life and fundamental comprehensions

of right and wrong. The last one of the five, however, is particular to Buddhism. This final precept is specifically concerned with abstention from substances that will harm the practitioner's ability to meditate, perform Buddhist observances, and gain self-mastery over the mind. The next longer list of eight includes other precepts which are concerned to deter frivolous habits that may affect one's ability to practice. These include eating too much or at the wrong time or indulging in other luxuries such as attending entertainment shows.

Another set of ethical precepts, popular in both Theravāda and Mahāyāna circles, is a list entitled the Ten Good Paths of Action. This list of ten divides into three precepts relating to bodily action, four relating to speech, and three concerned with the mind. This list has also proved popular with Western audiences, as the elements of it coincide more effortlessly with Western moral codes. The ten precepts are:

- abstention from injury to living beings
- abstention from taking the not given
- abstention from sexual misconduct
- abstention from false speech
- abstention from slanderous speech
- abstention from harsh speech
- abstention from frivolous speech
- abstention from covetousness
- abstention from hatred
- abstention from false views⁶

These three lists of common formulations of ethical precepts in Buddhism are not the only ones. Another list, found in some Mahāyāna texts, for example, includes a precept not found here but that relates to ensuing discussions in this book – not to praise oneself and disparage others.⁷ There is one other simple, important point on Buddhist ethics to note before turning more to the topic of women. Buddhist ethics has been termed an 'ethics of intention', and indeed, it is the intention behind the action, rather than the action itself, that is deemed to be ethical or not. Each day we are alive, we cannot help but do harm; we

may tread on an ant whilst walking, or accidentally drop a glass vase that shatters into fragments that scratch another. This harm caused is not intentional, so it is not unethical, in Buddhist terms. If, however, we set out to find a trail of ants and take pleasure in stamping on them, or we deliberately throw a vase at someone with intent to injure, these actions are unethical, because of the intention behind them.

The Principle of Non-Harm

The exact nature of what constitutes harm, and who decides, are at the heart of questions about Buddhist ethics and gender equality. The issue is not whether it is right to enact harm upon another human being or not. Rather the concerns are with what exactly is harmful and why. The primary question, therefore, when attempting to address these issues – both within Buddhist texts and Buddhist traditions and more broadly – is this: Is discrimination ever justifiable? Or does it always and invariably cause harm? That is to say, is it ever acceptable to treat one group of people differently to another because – due to some facet or characteristic – they deserve special treatment? If that is the case then the discrimination that results in the differential treatment is justifiable, and helpful rather than harmful.

The verb ‘to discriminate’ has a much broader application than its more usual modern uses suggest. It simply means to recognize a distinction between two things, with ‘to differentiate’ being a synonym. We are able to discriminate between a red circle and a blue circle because we can see they are different colours. Few, however, are likely to treat a red circle less well than a blue one (or vice versa) simply because they are different colours. This simple example is a good way to highlight how discrimination that causes harm can come about.

Few people, I imagine, would deny that there exist biological differences between men and women, so that on some occasions (however rare they may be) men and women require differential treatment. Men cannot conceive and give birth, therefore when a pregnant woman needs some help related to the fact of her pregnancy, in such an instance treatment of her will be different to

treatment of any man.⁸ That there is at least some limited amount of divergence is undeniable. Many proffer other potential differences between men and women, some biological and others resulting from social conditioning. This can give rise to discrimination that causes harm.

Discrimination that causes harm can manifest when *acknowledgement* of difference becomes *judgement*. Exaggeration of potential small differences can bring about harm, whether intended or not. Discrimination then, the noticing of difference, can be the tipping point, where awareness morphs into judgement and harm ensues for that judgement. This process, when awareness of difference and need for adjusted treatment turns into judgement and discrimination that causes harm, can be exemplified by the treatment of women within the history of Buddhism. This can be seen using the example of the eight special rules.

The eight rules have shaped Buddhist tradition, and acted to favour those who wish to cast women as inferior, by apparently propagating the view that women are indeed lower than men, and need to act accordingly. But this may not be why the rules came into existence. The contrary is also possible, if we examine historical context. It is quite possible the rules came into being in order to protect nuns from harm. As the rules appear to so categorically ascribe an inferior position to women vis-à-vis men, that might seem instinctively unlikely. But within the historical situation out of which the rules came, it is possible to imagine a scenario in which the rules were set in place to safeguard nuns.

In the early phase of the tradition, Buddhist nuns were an oddity on the Indian landscape. These women renounced family ties and social responsibilities, chose not to marry, shaved their heads, and wore plain robes. For women to make such choices was difficult for ancient Indian society to comprehend. Normative roles for women at the time were largely domestic; they were expected to marry and raise children. Any other sort of independence for women was generally frowned upon. Early sacred Hindu texts even prescribe that women should not, and by implication cannot, be independent.⁹ An often-repeated quote from one important such text is:

Men must make their women dependant day and night, and keep under their control those who are attached to sensory objects. Her father guards her in childhood, her husband guards her in youth and her sons guard her in old age. A woman is not fit for independence.¹⁰

From a modern perspective, it may be difficult to comprehend how people could be puzzled by woman's motivation for religious practice. But in this ancient Indian context, the evidence indicates that this was the case. A woman alone, or acting independently, was unconventional. It was even the case that such women were viewed as sexually available. An unguarded woman was considered available for any man who might decide to act on his desire to have sex with her, regardless of whether she was willing or not. Again, early Hindu texts – that provide us with a context for the ancient Indian setting out of which Buddhism grew – advocate such acts as appropriate behaviour, acts that would be illegal and classified as rape or sexual assault in most modern countries. Some rules in the monastic code of conduct for nuns, therefore, are in place as a means to protect nuns from this type of harm; a type of potential harm that they were in danger of because of their unconventional status, as unmarried women. Certain of the rules governing monastic behaviour refer specifically to this. Monastic codes differ amongst the different Buddhist traditions, and the rule I relate here is one example of that. In some monastic codes it is presented as one rule with four parts, in others it is arranged as four separate rules. I will relate the version of the rule from the Pāli canon, in which it is one rule with four parts.

Each of the parts has its own narrative alongside it: a story that recounts the (apparent) initial reason why that part of the rule was made. In the first part, a nun is said to quarrel with other nuns, and therefore decides to go to visit her family. She leaves the nuns' dwelling and travels alone along the road to her village. When the other nuns who have been sent to find her do so, they ask 'Were you violated when you were travelling alone?' She replies that she was not. Nonetheless a rule is made that nuns should not travel alone. Next, two nuns are travelling together and desire to cross a river. The

boatman tells them he cannot take them together, they must go in his boat one at a time. This they do, but each of them is violated by the man. His insistence they go separately was a connivance to get each one of them alone. A rule is then made that nuns should not cross rivers alone. Third, a man conspires to get a certain nun alone who is part of a group staying overnight at his village. A rule is made that nuns must not be away from the group at night. Lastly, a nun stays behind from a group to defecate. This brief separation from the group is enough for her to be accosted and violated, so a rule is made that nuns must not stay behind a group.

It is quite possible that, initially, the eight rules were put in place to protect nuns. As noted above, there was little understanding of why women might choose to become nuns in ancient India, and no respect for their celibate status. Women were expected to be under the guardianship of men. If they were not they were viewed as sexually available. Therefore, in order to make clear that nuns were not sexually available to any man who sought to gratify himself, the community needed to make clear to villagers, townsfolk, city dwellers, and all inhabitants of north India that the nuns who followed the Buddha were under the guardianship of the monks. If monks are seen to be overseeing the activities of the nuns, the status of monks as the guardians of the nuns is established. Then the nuns are considered to 'belong' to the monks and thereby unavailable to other men. If this is the case there was no malfeasance; the rules were not originally put in place to cast nuns in a lower status to monks, but to safeguard them from sexual assault.

With regard to questions of ethics, intention, and harm, we can see then that gender issues are far from straightforward. As in this case, we can view history by highlighting factors that reshape perspectives on a problem. But such reassessments are not always possible. The question of gender equality and Buddhist ethics also highlights that ethical engagement on a mundane level is connected with political viewpoints. For anyone who considers themselves a liberal, who believes that women are equal to men, anything – like the eight special rules – that casts women as inferior causes harm, because such things denigrate women, and deny their capability and agency.

Such a position, however, presupposes a viewpoint that women and men are equal. If one does not hold such a view, then unequal treatment is not unethical, as it is not harmful but appropriate. Take this example of a Thai monk, who speaks openly about his views on women in front of women, as if he has no comprehension that his words may cause harm. This is an episode recounted by Sid Brown of an experience during fieldwork in the mid-1990s that formed the basis of her book on women in Thai Buddhism. She comments on how these women, known as *mae chis*, are not always respected and valued:

... most Thais I met through channels not related to *māechī* were surprised to learn that I would be interested in *māechī* – clearly because they did not consider them worthy of study. Understanding that my project involved learning about Buddhism, they recommended that I turn to monks, the agreed-upon experts. . . Sometimes they explained that in Thailand women's duties in relation to Buddhism are to sustain the monks, the true practitioners. One particularly exasperating conversation began when I asked one monk about the relation of women to Buddhism and he replied, identifying Buddhism with monks and monks with the recognised sangha, 'Women are very helpful to the sangha. They can help the sangha very much because they can do things that monks cannot do, like cook.' Neither of the two *māechī* who were with the monk and me at the time of this conversation – sitting right there with us – lived amongst monks. Neither cooked for monks. One lived in a *samnak* [monastery] made up of women only; the other lived alone in an apartment . . . when I indicated these two *māechī* beside us and asked how women such as these serve Buddhism he said, 'It is the same, they can cook for monks too.' He laughed and continued, 'You know what we call monks, yes? The belly of Buddhism.' He did not see any discrepancy between his words and the reality sitting right there in front of him.¹¹

The ethical question here then must be: Does the monk intend to cause harm? It is only if he intended to cause harm that his speech and behaviour can be deemed unethical. At first glance, it would seem that no harm is intended, as he appears to have no awareness of the possibility that others might perceive his words and his views as harmful to women. If one believes that women are indeed inferior to men, and are only good for domestic activities such as cooking, then to say so is simply a statement of fact, and not a statement based on prejudice. It is not unfair or unjust. In which case, can it be called unethical? For those who do believe that women are men's equals, and that women are as able as men, such beliefs and statements are indeed harmful. It is here that Buddhism and feminism are counterpoised; as here, from a modern, liberal standpoint, there is a need to raise awareness such that women's true character and abilities can be perceived correctly.

The last of the three mind precepts on the second list of ten is concerned with ignorance, which is also referenced in the quote that begins this chapter. Ignorance as an aspect of Buddhist doctrine is discussed in chapter 3. But, with regard to this precept, can we say that the Thai monk who spoke with Sid Brown was wilfully ignorant? If we can, would this then be a confirmed breach of the ethical precepts? Can we claim this of him, even if he was raised and schooled within a society that maintains traditional values and roles for women? Can we accuse him of wilful ignorance if he has been taught to hold such views as this his entire life? We return to these questions in chapter 3 where I highlight the interconnectedness of Buddhist ethical systems with doctrine and philosophy.

to make progress on the path, both the desire for pleasure and the experience of it are obstacles. Desire for pleasure should not be acted upon. If desire for pleasure is acted upon, and pleasure experienced, this will inevitably lead to the arising of more desire. The renunciate who follows the path set out by the Buddha should take steps to ensure they relinquish desire. Of all desires sexual desire is one of the most challenging, as it is amongst the most powerful. A monastic must work to overcome this. Hence, the texts that situate male desire for women as a product of the mind and mental events that needs to be overcome are doctrinally endorsed, as they accord with fundamental Buddhist principles. Those that position women as the problem are not.²

In this chapter, I focus on Indian Buddhist texts. Many Buddhist texts are difficult to date. Some include teachings and practices that likely date from the time of the Buddha. To the extent that a timeline can be adjudged, it does appear that the earliest Buddhist canons do not include the most negative comments about women. The farther in time we move away from the historical Buddha, the more likely we are to find texts that are increasingly negative about women. If we acknowledge this trajectory, that the worst passages about women come later, it does then appear that the Buddha himself had a positive view of women. The Indian texts that are the focus of this chapter date potentially from the time of the Buddha to the seventh century CE.

Nuns Overcoming Desire

Only a limited number of the many narratives on the lives of women in Buddhist literature focus on female desire or female sexuality. When female desire is discussed, it is more commonly in narratives in which men are the main characters and the women peripheral to the story. In one canonical example, however, there are short stories of nuns who demonstrate that they are no longer enticed by worldly pleasures. The actions of these nuns reflect those of the Buddha.

In legendary accounts of the life of the Buddha, when he came close to achieving Awakening there were attempts to stop him. These