

Women in the Pure Land:
Eshinni's View of Rebirth as Expressed in Her Letters

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Introduction

The history of women in Buddhism has been dominated by cultural and doctrinal bias against them, both of these forces counter-influencing each other throughout the entire span of Buddhism's history. We know, however, that women were involved in Buddhist activities almost from the very beginning, not only in the role of nuns, but also as sponsors and supporters of the communities (*sangha*) of ordained practitioners. Unfortunately, Buddhist doctrine and history has been recounted mainly by men while the voices of women, expressing their own understanding of their spiritual path and state, are rare. The purpose of this paper is to examine the particular religious view of one Pure Land Buddhist woman, Eshinni, who lived in Japan during the Kamakura period and who was the wife of one of the most important religious figures in Japanese history, Shinran Shonin. Although what she has left us, a scant few letters to her daughter, are minuscule compared to the vast numbers of writings left by men of the time, they provide us a moving and evocative window into the self-understanding of particular women in Buddhist society.

We will look at Eshinni's letters in the context of Buddhist history. In order to do this, it will be necessary, as well as helpful, to first outline the place of women in early Buddhism and the cultural assumptions that defined the degree to which they were accepted into monastic communities. We will examine their predicament, as women in the context of the cultural and social forces which influenced Buddhist attitudes and helped shape its doctrine. Because Eshinni's views centered on the Pure Land tradition, we will next consider the attitudes encoded into one of the central Pure Land sutras. We will then examine the world in which Eshinni lived, the place of women in it, and the religious attitudes that shaped that society's view of them. Finally, we shall listen to Eshinni's own words, and try, thereby, to gain an intimation of how she and, by implication, other women actually viewed their own spiritual condition, i. e. whether they expected to be reborn in the Pure Land as women or transformed (as the tradition taught) into men first. We shall try to determine whether they accepted or rejected these views of themselves im-

posed upon them by men.

The Predicament of Women in Buddhism

The oldest reference to the Buddhist Sangha's attempt to incorporate and assimilate women into itself occurs with the story of Gotamī. According to legend, Gotamī was Śākyamuni's grandmother, who had raised him after his own mother, Māyā, had died. She approached Śākyamuni asking to be allowed to join the Sangha and train along with the monks. As such, she was requesting to become a female monk or *bhikkuni* (usually translated as “nun”). There are a number of different versions of this story, but all contain four significant elements:¹

1. Śākyamuni initially refuses to allow Gotamī to join the Sangha.
2. Dressed as a monk (having already adopted the monk's life) she follows Śākyamuni to his next abode, and continues to request admission into the order.
3. Ānanda argues on Gotamī's behalf, reminding Śākyamuni that he owes her a great debt because she raised him. Śākyamuni agrees to let her join the Sangha because he understands that women, like men, are capable of attaining enlightenment if they can become monks and practice the Dharma.
4. However, as a condition of Gotamī's and other women's entry into the Sangha, they must agree to accept special rules, eight in number, which will define their lesser and submissive status in the community.

Thus, while the various versions of this narrative all establish that women, equally or (at least) similarly with men, are capable of the aspiration and persistence necessary to embark on the path of practice, and have the capacity to achieve the same benefit (i.e. enlightenment) as a result, it also establishes that a women's place in the Sangha would, at least officially, be one of submission to her male counterparts. Hence, although ostensibly equal to the male monks, she is effectively categorized beneath them. The reason for this, given by these narratives, is that al-

1. see Mizu Nagata, “Transitions in Attitudes toward Women in the Buddhist Canon: The Three Obligations, the Five Obstructions, and the Eight Rules of Reverence,” trans. Paul B. Watt in *Engendering Faith: Women and Buddhism in Premodern Japan*, ed. Barbara Ruch, (Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, The University of Michigan, 2002), 283.

though women are capable of enlightenment, “their presence in the order would render Buddhism vulnerable to quicker deterioration...” They would “act like rust, or mildew, to weaken the Dharma.”² As such, a woman who wished to join the Sangha as a *bhikkuni* was required to submit to the “Eight Rules of Reverence” in addition to the *vinaya* regulations incumbent on all members. These eight rules place a greater burden on the nuns than the rules of the *vinaya* place on monks and accord the nuns a lessor authority than the males. For example, a nun, no matter how many years she has been in the order, is required to show deference and submissive respect to any monk, even one newly ordained.³ She is also held to a higher standard than the men: one regulation requires nuns to submit to the disciplinary authority of both the monks and nuns, while the men must submit only to their own male Sangha. Further, nuns may under no circumstances admonish monks, yet are required to submit to admonishment by even the least senior among them. Most telling among these rules is the one which requires a woman to remain a *śikṣamāṇā* (postulant) for two years before she may be given the complete precepts, while males may be fully ordained almost immediately. It is likely that placing women under stricter standards than men, despite their acknowledged capacity for enlightenment, reflected certain cultural attitudes toward women that were common in the general culture. Of course, there may well have been societal pressures that influenced the early Buddhist Sangha toward establishing such an unequal relation between men and women. Janet Gyatso suggests that it is possible lay supporters

...would have been disturbed by the formation of a community of independent, single women and that they would be mollified - and, most crucially, would continue to respect and underwrite the order - by the reinscription of such celibate women in a submissive relationship to their male masters.⁴

Thus, in order to maintain good relations with lay followers, the Buddhist order may have

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2. Janet Gyatso, “One Plus One Makes Three: Buddhist Gender, Monasticism, and the Law of the Non-Excluded Middle,” *History of Religions* 43, 2 (November 2003): 91.
 3. Nagata, “Transitions in Attitudes toward Women,” 284.
 4. Gyatso, “One Plus One Makes Three,” 91.

needed to set women apart in a submissive role that would mollify the concerns of a society with deep, some would say misogynistic, convictions about the role of women. It is certainly true that some Indian Buddhist texts “...bar women from any possibility of redemption.”⁵ Beyond this, there may well have been concerns among the monks about the disruptions to their celibate and disciplined lifestyle which might ensue were female practitioners to be accorded equal status and spiritual independence. We can speculate that early Buddhism assumed that such inequalities were necessary in order to maintain the harmony and stability of the order. It is not clear, however, that these concerns were uncritically shared by all Buddhists, or that no voices were raised to question these assumptions. In one version of the Gotamī story, Gotamī herself appears before Śākyamuni demanding an explanation for these discriminatory rules, particularly for the one requiring a nun to show deference to any monk, despite her own years of practice. To this Śākyamuni makes a mild concession but, in a related story, explains to Ānanda that this rule is necessary in order to preserve the respect and donations of the lay followers.⁶ These narratives of the origin of the “Eight Rules of Reverence” thus seem to be attempts to rationalize the unequal status of nuns on the basis of necessary pragmatism.⁷

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5. Hitomi Tonomura, “Black Hair and Red Trousers: Gendering the Flesh in Medieval Japan,” *American Historical Review* 99, 1 (February 1994): 133.
 6. Nagata, “Transitions in Attitudes toward Women,” 284-285. For an elaborate version of the Gotamī story which envisions her as a virtual female parallel of Śākyamuni, see “Gotamī’s Story,” trans. Jonathan S. Walters, in *Buddhism in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), 113-138.
 7. Rev. Patti Nakai offers a modern exposition on this theme: “Why were nuns more restricted than monks when, in Buddha’s lifetime, the Sangha had transcended society’s view of women as inferior? One reason, I think, was the way society treated nuns as opposed to monks...nuns, wherever they went, were subjected to much harassment; the verbal taunts about their chastity, which Indian society considered unnatural, sometimes escalated into physical assault. Probably because of several violent incidents, monks were asked to chaperon nuns in their various activities.... The monks may have started out in the spirit of giving assistance to their sister disciples, but the Vinaya rules requiring a male presence at the nuns’ religious ceremonies only reinforced the prejudiced view that women were unable to make any kind of spiritual progress without the guidance of men....the Vinaya reflects the belief in ancient India that, because women existed mainly to please men and have babies, they were much more sex-driven than men. Due to this belief, the compilers of the Vinaya felt women needed many and more specific rules about controlling their sexuality than men did....it seemed to be the monks who had a problem with sex, rather than the nuns. This would explain why a large part of Theravada texts is devoted to the depiction of women as disgusting creatures too repulsive to touch.” “Women in Buddhism, Part 2,” *The Living Dharma Library* (Website), Internet: <http://www.livingdharma.org/Living.Dharma.Articles/WomenInBuddhism2.html>, Accessed March 14, 2006.

Another text, although not directly related to the eight rules, provides a clue as to how some Buddhists, monks and nuns, may have viewed these issues. *Soma Sutta*, a short text in the *Samyutta Nikāya*, suggests that womanhood as an impediment to practice or enlightenment (and, perhaps by extension, as a problem for the Sangha) is rooted in delusion. In this text, such ideas are put in the mouth of Māra “the evil one,” in an attempt to distract Soma from her practice. He tells her:

That state so hard to achieve
Which is to be attained by the seers,
Can't be attained by a woman
With her two-fingered wisdom.⁸

Soma, recognizing the wiles of Māra, realizes that these words are designed only to “arouse fear, trepidation, and terror in me, desiring to make me fall away from concentration” and replies:

What does womanhood matter at all
When the mind is concentrated well,
When knowledge flows on steadily
As one sees correctly into Dhamma.

One to whom it might occur,
“I’m a woman” or “I’m a man”
Or “I’m anything at all” —
Is fit for Mara to address.⁹

Alluding to the fundamental Buddhist category of *anātman* or “not-self,” Soma dismisses the idea of male and female as merely dualistic and conditioned concepts, to be let go of once they have been examined and clarified as such. To say “I’m anything at all” means that one has not yet understood the import of the Buddha’s teaching. Unfortunately, this clear-headed appraisal of such cultural biases was not the mainstream view. Nevertheless, this text, along with the verses contained in the *Therīgāthā* or “Songs of the Female Elders,” contained in the Ther-

8. *Soma Sutta* from *Samyutta Nikāya* (V.2), trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi. *Access to Insight: Readings in Theravada Buddhism* (Website), Internet: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/canon/sutta/samyutta/sn-05-002-bb0.html>, Accessed April 1, 2006.

9. Ibid.

avāda Canon (*Khuddaka Nikaya*), demonstrate that, despite the limitations imposed upon them - and the cultural attitudes which underlay these restrictions - women did practice with a certain degree of independence and, like Gotamī and Soma, displayed a marked determination and inner freedom. What is especially notable about the poems of the *Therīgāthā* is the way the women who composed them express a kind of joy and relief in the freedom they have found through the Buddha's teachings. This freedom is often expressed in comparison with their former state as wives or daughters:

So freed! So thoroughly freed am I! —
from three crooked things set free:
 from mortar, pestle,
 & crooked old husband.
Having uprooted the craving
that leads to becoming,
I'm set free from aging & death.¹⁰

There is, in fact, almost a tone of exultation in these verses, suggesting that, whatever the limitations imposed upon them by the *vinaya*, these nuns had found, in nun-hood, a life of unprecedented liberty and independence, not simply from delusion and samsara, but from their lives as women in society, which includes the sexuality that effectively binds them (through childbirth) to their domestic roles. This sexual element may be suggested and symbolized in the form of the household implements disparagingly referred to in these poems, such as the mortar and pestle, and “my moldy old pot:”

So freed! So freed!
So thoroughly freed am I —
 from my pestle,
 my shameless husband
 & his sun-shade making,
 my moldy old pot
 with its water-snake smell.
Aversion & passion
I cut with a chop.
Having come to the foot of a tree,

10. *Therīgāthā* (Verses of the Elder Nuns) from *Khuddaka Nikaya: Thig I, Chapter I, The Single Verses*, (V. 11: *Mutta*), Translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight: Readings in Theravada Buddhism* (Website), Internet: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/canon/sutta/khuddaka/therigatha/thig-01-x-tb0.html#sutta-1>. accessed April 9, 2006.

I meditate, absorbed in the bliss:
“What bliss!”¹¹

However, we must consider these few texts in their proper context; the stories and verses in the Buddhist Canon which present, or defend, a female point of view are few and they certainly had little impact upon the tradition, compared with the texts that present women as dangerous and defiled beings. This is understandable given the fact that religious ideals, although influencing cultural constructs, are seldom able to override long-held assumptions and beliefs. In fact, such ideals often integrate with already held notions and compound them further. In the long history of Buddhism, the female has frequently been perceived as a disturbing element and a source of disorientation. Since Buddhism set as its goal the eradication of the cause of suffering, i. e. the continuation of cause and effect as manifested in the continued creation of karma, the perceived magical power of women as vehicles of procreation was inevitably understood by many Buddhists as a prime cause “whereby beings were chained to a constant round of rebirths in samsāra.”¹² Thus, although a tolerated participant in the Sangha, a woman is not primarily defined by the tradition as a member of a community of individuals aspiring for spiritual attainment. Rather, she is seen firstly in terms of her female-ness, that is, as a symbol of sexuality:

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.¹³

Not all scholars, however, agree with the appraisal that the early Buddhist tradition was

11. Ibid. *Thig* II, Chapter II, Pairs of Verses, (Vv. 23-24: *Sumangala's Mother*), Translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *Access to Insight: Readings in Theravada Buddhism* (Website), Internet: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/canon/sutta/khuddaka/therigatha/thig-02-x-tb0.html#sutta-3>. accessed April 9, 2006.

12. Dharmachari Jñānavira, “Homosexuality in the Japanese Buddhist Tradition,” *Western Buddhist Review* 3. Internet: <http://www.westernbuddhistreview.com/vol3/homosexuality.html>, accessed 13 March, 2006.

13. Dharmachari Jñānavira, “A Mirror for Women? Reflections of the Feminine in Japanese Buddhism,” *Western Buddhist Review* 4. Internet: http://www.westernbuddhistreview.com/vol4/mirror_for_women.html, accessed March 13, 2006 4:33:59 PM.

fundamentally misogynistic or that *vinaya* rules specifically pertaining to women were by definition discriminatory. In an article comparing the rules for monks and nuns, In Young Chung argues,

...The additional rules for bhikṣuṇīs in the pārajika dharmas were designed to safeguard bhikṣuṇīs from potential motherhood, which would be disruptive both to a bhikṣuṇī individually and to the larger saṃgha. [they] treat sexual matters very seriously for this very reason. These rules not only attempt to guard the chastity of bhikṣuṇīs, but also try to protect them from their fertility. Again, some of the additional rules for bhikṣuṇīs in the saṃghāva” seṣa dharmas provide extra safeguards against falling victim to the lustful desires of men. The punishments for offenses against the four additional rules in the saṃghāva” seṣa dharmas support bhikṣuṇīs by requiring three admonitions, which give more opportunities for bhikṣuṇīs to expand spiritual development.¹⁴

Thus, according to Chung, the purpose of the additional rules for women was essentially to protect and edify. However, even from this perspective, we might interpret that this “protection” actually involves a manifestation of the above stated problem, i. e. that of identifying women firstly in sexual terms. This seems to be the case because, although nuns would indeed require protection from the “lustful desires of men” in the context of communal life and if pursuing a mendicant life, the thing she is really being protected against - her fertility - is fundamentally the potency of her own sexuality. In other words, it is assumed a woman’s powerful sexuality renders her incapable of upholding the precept of celibacy without special rules which limit her independence in relation with the monks. This, however, is not surprising given the social and cultural context of both India and China. The *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sastra* articulates “three obligations” inherent upon women, which demonstrate this cultural attitude: “as regards proper conduct for a woman, if she is a child she should be subordinate to her father and mother, as a young woman, subordinate to her husband, and in old age, subordinate to her children.”¹⁵ And although Chung argues that the extreme discrimination against women required in the “Eight

14. In Young Chung, “A Buddhist View of Women: A Comparative Study of the Rules for bhikṣuṇīs and bhikṣus Based on the Chinese Praatimok.sa,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 6, (1999). Internet: <http://jbe.gold.ac.uk/6/chung991.htm>, accessed March 13, 2006 4:25:15 PM.

15. Nagata, “Transitions in Attitudes toward Women,” 279.

Rules of Reverence” makes this text suspect as an authentic and authoritative component of the *vinaya*,¹⁶ the fact is that, as Buddhism migrated throughout Asia, this attitude remained a conspicuous element, to the extent that it may have encouraged the submission of women in places where this trait had not previously been dominant, for example, in Japan, as we shall see.

In any case, cultural attitudes that attempted to place rigid control on women were very common in both India and China. Forms of the “three obligations,” for example, are referred to in the Confucian classics as well as in *The Laws of Manu*, a Brahman legal text; with the notable difference that, in the Brahman and the Confucian texts, the woman is subordinated only to the father, instead of to both parents, as is the case in the Buddhist documents.¹⁷ That the first of the Buddhist “three obligations” text includes both parents may indicate traces of a matriarchal culture in the area where Buddhism first developed.¹⁸ Whatever the origin, the tension between these cultural attitudes about women, on the one hand, and fundamental Buddhist assumptions of non-duality and *anātman* (which ultimately negate any absolutization of such judgements), on the other, are played out in the development of the Pure Land tradition, an approach to Buddhism that, by definition, attempted to be inclusive, offering salvation to both men and women equally.

16. Chung, “A Buddhist View of Women.”

17. Nagata, “Transitions in Attitudes toward Women,” 280.

18. Ibid.

The Pure Land Sutras

In approaching the question of the place of women in the Pure Land tradition, we must remind ourselves that, as is the case with other issues of Buddhist life, there is often a wide divergence between the way something might be understood in doctrinal terms, and the way it is actually practiced. As Paul Harrison points out, in discussing “the Buddhist Religion,” we are “drawn inevitably into abstractions, generalizations, and oversimplifications which could never do justice to the rich diversity of all past and present forms of the Buddhist tradition.”¹⁹ In the first place, as is the case with the vast majority of Buddhist texts, gender is seldom a central focus of concern, nor is it much referred to in scriptures which are central to the Pure Land tradition. In the cases where women, *as women* (or rather the perceived *problem* of women) are discussed, we should not be surprised to find in those scriptures the very same preconceptions and prejudices which are found throughout Buddhist history, both culturally and doctrinally. This does not necessarily mean that women were always subject to these prejudices or that such concerns were always in the forefront of most women’s actual engagement with Pure Land teachings.

Although there are many texts which are important to the Pure Land tradition, there are three specific sutras that have come to be considered central; these are the *Larger Sukhāvātī-vyūha-sūtra*, the *Smaller Sukhāvātī-vyūha-sūtra*, and the *Amitāyur-dhyāna-sūtra*. Of these, only the *Larger Sukhāvātī-vyūha-sūtra* (henceforth referred to, for convenience, as the Larger Sutra) has anything to say about women. The major passage of concern in the Larger Sutra is the “Thirty-Fifth Vow” of the Bodhisattva Dharmakara, whose vows encompass his aspiration to become a Buddha and create an all-inclusive Buddha-Land to which (apparently) any being has the opportunity to be re-born into and where (he) may then achieve enlightenment under ideal practice conditions. This particular vow expresses Dharmakara’s aspiration to make his Pure Land available to the women who are currently living in *samsāra*:

19. Paul Harrison, “Women in the Pure Land: Some Reflections on the Textual Sources,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 26, No. 6 (December 1998): 553.

May I not gain possession of perfect awakening if, once I have attained buddhahood, any woman in the measureless, inconceivable world systems of all the buddhas in the ten regions of the universe, hears my name in this life and single-mindedly, with joy, with confidence and gladness resolves to attain awakening, and despises her female body, and still, when her present life comes to an end, she is again reborn as a woman.²⁰

Thus, in order to save women, as well as men, Dharmakara has made a vow that specifies that his Buddhahood (and therefore the creation of his Pure Land, called *Sukhāvati*) would be contingent upon the provision that any woman desiring to be reborn there would not suffer her next re-birth in a female body. There is no such provision enabling men to escape their gender so we must presume that it is specifically the female gender that would encumber a woman desiring to be reborn into the Pure Land. This raises the question of why the practitioner would need to have her female gender removed or transformed.

One of the preconceptions behind the inclusion of the thirty-fifth vow into the text of the Larger Sutra may have come from the commonly accepted notion of the “five obstructions.”²¹ This concept originated in India and attempted to explain why women were not capable of attaining five particular states, that of Brahmā, Indra, Māra, Cakravartin king, or Buddha.²² These human and divine entities, originating in Hindu thought, have been transformed in Buddhism into protecting deities or, in the case of Māra, inhibitors of the Dharma (Māra attempts to seduce practitioners away from their practice, as we saw above in the case of Soma).²³ It was argued by early sutras, in a somewhat circular fashion, that it was impossible for women to attain any of these states:

One of the qualities of a wise person is that he knows that a female cannot become

20. Luis O Gómez, *The Land of Bliss: The Paradise of the Buddha of Measureless Light (Sanskrit and Chinese Versions of the Sukhāvativyūha Sutras)*, (Honolulu and Kyoto: The University of Hawai'i Press and Higashi Honganji Shinshū Ōtani-Ha, 1996) 170. This is a translation of the Chinese version of the text (attributed to *Saṅghavarman*). Although the Larger Sutra exists in a Sanskrit version, there is evidence (cf. Harrison, op. cit., 564) that this version is among the oldest.

21. Originally referred to as “five states”; for some reason it was translated into Chinese as “five obstructions.” Nagata, “Transitions in Attitudes toward Women,” 280.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid., 280-81.

a ruler of the world of humans and gods.....He knows that it is not reasonable for a woman to become an arhat or truly enlightened one. He know that it is reasonable for a man to become an arhat or truly enlightened one. He knows that it is not reasonable for a woman to become a Cakravartin king, Indra, Māra or a Brahmā.²⁴

Whether or not the doctrine of the “five obstructions” accounts for the actual inclusion of the thirty-fifth vow, the doctrine continued to be used in interpreting or rationalizing the vow’s existence. This is important to consider in the light of the popularity which the Pure Land teaching eventually achieved among women, and the fact that it was often specifically propagated as a path particularly suited to them. As James Dobbins points out,

...it would be wrong to think that [Pure Land Buddhism’s] overtures to women were based on a principle of religious equality with men. Rather, Pure Land doctrine contained some of the same androcentric assumptions of other forms of Buddhism that relegated women to an inferior position. Hence, women who embraced its teachings had to endure the censure of their feminine identity on the one hand and to devise for themselves a constructive ideal of Pure Land on the other.²⁵

It is fair to suggest that in the formulation of the Pure Land teachings, women were provided with an opportunity to bypass, through the provision of the thirty-fifth vow, what had become a widely accepted doctrinal truth. In the following section, we will examine the actual experience of a woman in the specific Pure Land context of the Japanese Jōdo Shinshū school in its early period. We shall see how these “androcentric assumptions” (including the “five obstructions”) were expressed and to what degree they influenced the actual religious experience of the women who followed this teaching.

24. Ibid. 282.

25. James C. Dobbins, *Letters of the Nun Eshinni: Images of Pure Land Buddhism in Medieval Japan*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai`i Press, 2004) 74.

Women in the Japanese Pure Land Tradition

I. Eshinni

Referring to the doctrine of the “five obstructions,” one scholar raised a very appropriate question:

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.²⁶

Through the letters of one medieval Japanese woman, we have been vouchsafed a glimpse of the attitudes of women followers of the Pure Land movements of the early Kamakura period. The discovery of Eshinni’s letters in 1921 has afforded us a glimpse into the world, of Buddhism as practiced by ordinary women of this time, which has been otherwise hidden in the shadows of a history chronicled mainly by men. As the wife of Shinran Shonin, one of the major figures of Kamakura Buddhism, Eshinni’s words are a reliable expression of the concerns of Pure Land women of this period. Unfortunately, as Dobbins notes, there is a “tendency to mistake the religious ideal presented in the great doctrinal treatises for the historical reality of how religion was actually practiced.”²⁷ Dobbins points out that one must always consider whether a religious document is “prescriptive or descriptive in nature.”²⁸ In her letters, Eshinni, dealt with everyday matters of life. She discusses religion in the context of everyday life and concerns and therefore provides us with a description (though a very spare one) of the kind of attitudes Pure Land women of the time might have had.

26. Jñānavira, “A Mirror for Women?...”

27. James C. Dobbins, “Women’s Birth in Pure Land as Women: Intimations From the Letters of Eshinni,” *The Eastern Buddhist* 28 (Spring 1995): 109.

28. Ibid.

II. Purity, Defilement, and Danger

There are some considerations we should take into account as we explore these attitudes. As mentioned above, negative attitudes and beliefs about women were fairly common and rather deeply rooted in both Indian and Chinese cultures. In Japan, on the other hand, there is some evidence that its culture, previous to the importation of continental influences (including Buddhism), may have viewed women in a more positive light. Japanese women may, in fact, have played a much more important role in their society than their Chinese counterparts. In these early times, “descent was traced through the female line in some families.”²⁹ According to Dobbins, both men and women in medieval Japan held wealth independently, even in marriage. In addition, matrilineal inheritance practices within matrilocal families meant that women exercised considerable influence and power until the such a culture gave way to the patriarchal one which came to subsequently dominate the society.³⁰ The position of women in this period was “most clearly symbolized in Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess from whom the Japanese believe themselves to have descended.”³¹ Even more significant is the issue of purity or defilement.

Concerns revolving around the dangers of female defilement and impurity is a common one in many cultures and certainly became integrated into Buddhist notions of women. The thirteenth century Japanese monk Mujū Ichien (1226-1312), building on the views of the Chinese monk Tao-hsuan (596-667), wrote on the seven grave sins of women. These “sins” seem to center on the understanding that women are creatures possessed of uncontrolled desires and attachments which lead to jealousy, shamelessness, delusion, and vanity intended to seduce men. Most significantly, they possess bodies which are “unclean and foul due to pregnancy, childbirth, and the regular menstrual discharges.”³² Thus, although deceptively beautiful and sensual on the out-

29. Karen A. Smyers, “Women and Shinto: The Relation Between Purity and Pollution,” *Japanese Religions* 12 (July 1983): 8.

30. Dobbins, “Women’s Birth in Pure Land as Women,” 78.

31. Smyers, “Women and Shinto,” 8.

32. Rajyashree Pandey, “Desire and Disgust: Meditations on the Impure Body in Medieval Japanese Narratives,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 60 No. 2 (Summer 2005): 202-203.

side, women (and their frightening sexuality), were seen as actually “impure and defiling” and a mortal danger to men.³³ Indeed, the

...understanding of women as polluted because of their role in childbirth does not seem to have been resisted by Buddhist teachers in Japan in any systematic way. Indeed, 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 (this was known as the ‘prohibition of women’ or *nyonin kinsei*).³⁴

For the early Japanese, however, these same “defilements” may have been seen from a more positive perspective. It is common to many cultures that the various states of a woman’s body, especially where there is blood, involve taboos. In early, pre-Buddhist, Japanese beliefs, “fertility was at the core of all beliefs, and purity was at the core of all ritual” yet “the conditions of a woman’s sexuality were not seen as merely polluting.”³⁵ In these taboo states (menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, etc.), women may have been considered, not polluted, but rather “sacred to the gods...far from being a defilement, [this] would be a sign of religious consecration...”³⁶ In fact, there is a Japanese saying that “When a woman is menstruating, she is purified, becoming the wife of the *kami* (*Gessui no aru aida wa junsui ni ‘kami no tsuma’ to naru*).”³⁷ Thus, female sexuality was seen as involving a kind of possession by the gods and therefore “purity was not seen as the absence of sexuality.”³⁸ In any case, at this earlier stage, impurity was seen as a temporary condition in both men and women, not a permanent state of defilement, as women would later be defined as inhabiting.³⁹ Consonant with this attitude, women possessed greater direct economic and political power as well:

In the first century and a half (592-770) of Japan’s imperial rule...emperorship was accorded to women as frequently as it was to men, until the imperial seat, along with all bureaucratic posts, became gendered male...Aristocratic and warrior-class

33. Ibid., 203.

34. Dharmachari, “Homosexuality in the Japanese Buddhist Tradition.”

35. Smyers, “Women and Shinto,” 9.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid., 10.

38. Ibid., 11.

39. Tonomura, “Black Hair and Red Trousers,” 131.

women were significant heirs of property and even adopted children in order to pass down their property⁴⁰

However, during the long process of under which Japanese society became centralized and bureaucratized, and was profoundly influenced by Buddhism and Confucianism, imported from China and Korea, a patriarchal system, encouraging the subjugation of woman, was gradually established. As a result, Japanese women began to be discriminated against and lost some of their previous power in regards to marriage and property.⁴¹ Buddhism tended to emphasize the defiled nature of women, due to her sexuality, and emphasized the doctrine of the “five obstructions” which, according to Dobbins, functioned as a kind of code to express the idea that women could not attain Buddhahood in female form. Rebirth as a male (*henjō nanshi*) was deemed necessary and this concept was used to rationalize the religious exclusion of women in medieval Japan.⁴²

In this way such things as sex, menstruation, and childbirth, which had previously been understood as being imbued with a sacred quality, were now thought unclean.⁴³ By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the patriarchal system had become firmly established and the subjugation of women had become “a pervasive ideal, if not a historical reality.”⁴⁴

During the time of Eshinni, however, women still exercised certain prerogatives. In this way they were still able to assert themselves with a large degree of independence.⁴⁵ Perhaps it is not too much of a stretch to surmise that, in her time, women still retained a vestige of an earlier

40. Ibid.

41. Smyers, “Women and Shinto,” 12.

42. Dobbins, *Letters of the Nun Eshinni*, 95. Not all Buddhists espoused these ideas. One important dissenting voice was that of Dōgen (1200-1253), the founder of the Soto school of Zen Buddhism in Japan. He wrote: “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.” Quoted in Jñānavira, Dharmachari, “Homosexuality in the Japanese Buddhist Tradition.”

43. Smyers, “Women and Shinto,” 13.

44. Dobbins, *Letters of the Nun Eshinni*, 75.

45. Ibid. 76.

self-understanding in which women naturally manifested deep connections to the spiritual realm, *as women*. Given this possibility, we may intuit a clearer picture of Eshinni's beliefs about her own spiritual potential and the manner in which she viewed her own birth in the Pure Land, despite the doctrinal rationals of which she was likely aware.

III. Women in Shinran's Teachings

In the third section of Shinran's great work, the *Kyō Gyō Shin Shō*, there is a famous passage which expresses a lofty vision of the total equality of all beings in the context of Amida Buddha's compassion as manifested in the heart/mind of faith (*shinjin*):

In reflecting on the great ocean of *shinjin*, I realize that there is no discrimination between noble and humble or black-robed monks and white-clothed laity, no differentiation between man and woman, old and young. The amount of evil one has committed is not considered; the duration of any performance of religious practices is of no concern. It is a matter of neither practice nor good acts, neither sudden attainment nor gradual attainment, neither meditative practice nor nonmeditative practice, neither right contemplation nor wrong contemplation, neither thought nor no-thought, neither daily life nor the moment of death, neither many-calling nor once-calling. It is simply *shinjin* that is inconceivable, inexplicable, and indescribable. It is like the medicine that eradicates all poisons. The medicine of the Tathagata's Vow destroys the poisons of our wisdom and foolishness.⁴⁶

In this passage, Shinran is expressing his understanding that, in *Shinjin*, in which the Pure Land follower acquires the aspiration and virtue of Amida Buddha, there is no differentiation of person, practice, talent, or gender. All such categories are irrelevant because, for Shinran, it is not through our own power (*jiriki*) that we are able to realize birth in the Pure Land, but through the power of Amida Buddha (*tariki*), who represents transcendent true reality. In this sense, there simply is no male/female or good/evil duality - there is only the oneness of Amida, experienced as *shinjin*.

We might think that this would have been an acceptable way of disposing of the prejudi-

46. *Collected Works of Shinran* (Vol. 1), translated, with introductions, glossaries, and reading aids, by Dennis Hirota, Hisao Inagaki, Michio Tokunaga, and Ryushin Uryuzu, (Kyoto: Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, 1997) 107.

cial attitudes toward women expressed in the thirty-fifth vow and the “five obstructions.” However, Shinran does not seem to have eliminated these ideas. He seems, for whatever reasons, to have felt it necessary to retain and to defend them, using them, in fact, to emphasize the dire position of women and their particular need to be rescued by Amida Buddha. In the *Jōdo Wasan*, explaining the thirty-fifth vow, he writes:

So profound is Amida’s great compassion
That, manifesting inconceivable Buddha-wisdom,
The Buddha established the Vow of transformation into men,
Thereby vowing to enable women to attain Buddhahood.⁴⁷

Thus, women have been enabled by Amida to attain Buddhahood through the mechanism of transformation into men. Without this assistance, the attainment of women would be impossible, not simply because of the karmic burden common to all beings, but specifically because of her female gender and its fundamental impurity. In the *Kōsō Wasan* he writes:

If women did not entrust themselves to Amida's Name and Vow,
They would never become free of the five obstructions,
Even though they passed through myriads of kalpas;
How, then, would their existence as women be transformed?⁴⁸

In one of his shorter works, the *Nyūsnutsu nimonge* (“Hymn of the Gateway of Entrance and Emergence), Shinran notes that certain beings cannot be born into the Pure Land as they are; they must first undergo transformation:

Women, the disabled, and those of the two vehicles
Are never born in the Pure Land of happiness as they are;
The sages of the Tathagata's pure lotus
Are born transformed from Dharmakara's lotus of perfect enlightenment.⁴⁹

These passages demonstrate that Shinran, at least in writing, never abrogated the idea that women could not attain birth or become Buddhas while retaining the body of a female. It is possible that these ideas were simply so well accepted that no one thought to question them directly.

47. Ibid. 341.

48. Ibid. 377.

49. Ibid. 624.

Existing as established “facts,” it was necessary instead to find a way around such obstructions. Further, Shinran may have been motivated, in these passages, to defend the possibility of women’s salvation against the views of those who ignored the fate of women. As such, he addressed the issue of the the thirty-fifth vow in such a way as to show it could be circumvented, while still acknowledging its integrity.

Further, Shinran might have understood these ideas about women as being provisional in nature. In one of his “Hymns in Praise of Prince Shōtoku” (*Kōtaishi Shōtoku hōsan*), envisioning the prince as the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, Shinran writes:

He appeared in China
To benefit sentient beings;
He was reborn five hundred times
As both man and woman.⁵⁰

Shinran certainly celebrated that, as far as the practice of Pure Land Buddhism was concerned, there was absolutely no difference between conditions such as gender, religion, and social status. In a passage from the “Essentials of Faith Alone,” (*Yuishinshō*) a text written by Seikaku, one of Hōnen’s disciples, and which Shinran thought very highly of, it is stated:

...it makes no difference whether one is walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, nor is discrimination made regarding time, place, or circumstance, nor is distinction made between householder and monk, man and woman, old and young, good and bad. Who, then, is left out?⁵¹

Further, there exists a slightly later statement, written by Nyodō (1253-1340), the founder of the Sanmōto branch of Jōdo Shinshū, which offers a rare, explicit, avowal that women, through *nembutsu* practice, may be born into the Pure Land “even as women.”⁵² However, this passage, in language similar to Shinran’s statements of equality, is intended to demonstrate the

50. Ibid. 435.

51. Ibid. 688.

52. This statement reads: “The layman, even as layman, can attain birth in Pure Land if he chants [the *nembutsu*]; the woman, even as woman, will be ushered into Pure Land...Since no distinction whatsoever is made in it as to the purity or impurity of one’s body, it is the practice to be followed...” Dobbins, James C, *Jōdo Shinshū: Shin Buddhism in Medieval Japan*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989; reprint edition, Honolulu: University of Hawai`i Press, 2002) 127.

power of the *nembutsu* teaching, which can override even such defiled beings as women; it is still taken for granted that women are particularly defiled beings, who would not otherwise be able to attain birth.

In the end, we cannot know for certain how Shinran actually understood the place of women in the Pure Land. He may never have questioned the truth of the “five obstructions” or the belief that women must be transformed into men in order to be born into the Pure Land, or he may have felt it necessary to acknowledge these ideas in order to ensure credibility for the Pure Land school among scholars of the established schools. On the other hand, the practical implications of his teaching seem to imply that concepts which separated out categories of persons (male/female, lay/monk) either in this world, or in the Pure Land, were of little or no significance to the follower of the Pure Land schools who understood such categorization as trivial in light of the overwhelming salvific power of Amida Buddha.⁵³

The question that may be asked is whether Pure Land women in Shinran’s time anticipated their own birth as themselves (as women) or whether they expected to be transformed into men. Eshinni’s letters may provide us with some indication of the kind of expectations they might have had.

IV. Eshinni’s Letters

Given that the notions of female defilement and spiritual exclusion were pervasive in medieval Japanese society, it is likely that Eshinni was aware of them, at least to some extent. We can have some confidence that she knew of the thirty-fifth vow of the Larger Sutra, which facilitated the transformation of women upon their next rebirth so that they might enter the Pure Land. There is some evidence, provided by her own letters, that suggests she did not wholly accept these views. This evidence is comprised of two parts: First, her reference to a dream Shinran had, in which Shōtoku Taishi appeared to him and, second, specific references to her own birth in the

53. Dobbins, *Letters of the Nun Eshinni*, 65.

Pure Land.⁵⁴

In Shinran's dream, also recounted with slight variation in Kakunyo's *Godenshō*, Shōtoku revealed a verse to Shinran in which he (Shōtoku) would become a woman in order that Shinran might be relieved of his sexual torment. The actual verse is lost, however it is likely that the corresponding version in the *Godenshō*, known as the *Nyobonge* verse, accurately conveys its content.⁵⁵

If you the believer, because of the fruition of past *karma*,
are driven to make love to a woman,
Then I shall take on the body of a beautiful woman to be ravished by you.
Throughout your entire life I shall adorn you well,
And at death I shall lead you to birth in the paradise.⁵⁶

In this version of the story, it is Kannon who appears to Shinran, rather than Shōtoku - however Shōtoku is identified with Kannon.⁵⁷ It was common for monks troubled by their vows of celibacy to symbolize Kannon as a female lover in order to help them maintain their vows. The *Nyobonge* verse, however, directs Shinran to give up his celibacy and live the life of a married man, suggesting, perhaps, that the Pure Land path is to be followed within sexual and family life rather than in the life of celibacy.⁵⁸

Eshinni relates this incident in her third letter, where she also recounts her own dream, in which she envisioned Shinran as Kannon. Because of the traditional association of Kannon with Amida, working to save sentient beings, the image of this bodhisattva in female form might well have been a confirmation of the feminine for Eshinni. The common image in her time was of the male priest guiding women to the Pure Land; this unusual depiction of a female Kannon, representing herself in sexual terms, leading a monk to the Pure Land may have encouraged Eshinni

54. Ibid., 104.

55. Ibid., 101, 171 n64.

56. Ibid., 101

57. Ibid., 100.

58. Ibid., 101

to envision her own birth without the need for transformation into a male.⁵⁹

Regarding this, Dobbins suggests that female sexuality, normally considered defiled, is here “presented as the power creating an enduring bond that leads her mate to the Pure Land.”⁶⁰ If Eshinni was in fact Shinran’s first wife, and if the *Nyobonge* verse reflects the content of the verse Eshinni refers to in her letter, we can speculate that Shinran viewed Eshinni as this manifestation of Shōtoku/Kannon. In relating this event, Eshinni also refers to her own dream, in which she saw Shinran appear as Kannon.⁶¹ If both Shinran and Eshinni regarded each other as manifestations of Kannon, this would have had a great impact on Eshinni’s self-understanding. Such an image would argue against the doctrinal views based on notions of the defiled nature of women, such as the “five obstructions.” It might also have suggested that, from the ultimate perspective of Amida Buddha, there exists no distinction between male and female.

Secondly, insight into Eshinni’s conception of her own birth in the Pure Land, and by extension, the birth of other women as well, is also found in her letters, specifically in letter number ten. This document, which contains the only direct expression of her own religious beliefs, was written in her eighty-seventh or eighty-eighth year to her daughter Kakushinni (as were all the extant letters). Here, Eshinni expresses that she is feeling the affects of her age (although she does not “cough or spit up phlegm”) and that she is “waiting for that time.”⁶² Once again, as she has done in previous letters, she discusses the robe (*kosode*) that Kakusinni had sent her, which she will use as a “deathbed garment.” There is a particular poignancy about this letter, which underscores the expression of Eshinni’s religious hopes. In articulating her wish that she might have one last chance to see her daughter and grandchildren while still “in this world,” she writes:

I myself will be going to the [Pure Land] paradise very soon. There everything can be seen without any darkness, so be sure to say the *nembutsu* and come to the paradise to be with me. Indeed, when we go to the paradise and meet again,

59. Ibid. 101-102.

60. Ibid. 102.

61. Ibid., 26-27.

62. Ibid. 39.

nothing whatever will be in darkness.⁶³

The tone and context of this passage suggests it would be very unlikely that Eshinni assumed she and her daughter would be transformed into men as part of their birth in the Pure Land; indeed, it seems quite obvious she expected to meet Kakushinni there as herself, as a woman. In an earlier letter (number eight), urging Kakushinni to write to her often, she had written, “Particularly since you are my youngest child, I have [always] thought of you as dearest....it would be truly heartbreaking for me never even to hear from you.”⁶⁴ Her anticipation for reunion in the Pure Land, therefore, must have been to actually see her beloved daughter again, not a male transformation. In the same letter ten, Eshinni also bids Kakushinni to encourage the Lady Wakasa (who seemed to have been an old friend and had carried this and others of her letters), that “she should be sure to say the *nembutsu* and come to the [Pure Land] paradise to be with us.”⁶⁵ One gets the impression here that Eshinni envisioned the Pure Land as a place characterized by feminine affection and warmth and the continuation of the bonds of family and friends. This is not surprising, for her letters contain numerous references to the instability of the times, to famine, uncertainty, and death. In one letter (number three), describing the bad crops in her region, she writes, “I do not know what to do to grow things, so this world seems less and less dependable.”⁶⁶ It is quite understandable that, for her, the Pure Land would be place of clarity, stability and the joy of reunion with her loved ones.

63. Ibid. 40.

64. Ibid. 35.

65. Ibid. 40.

66. Ibid. 28.

Conclusion

In this paper we have considered the role of women in the history of Buddhism. Throughout this history, women have been variously characterized as dangerous, a source of impurity and temptation, and being incapable of attaining enlightenment on the same terms as men. Although these notions essentially contradict the fundamental teachings of Śākyamuni Buddha, such ideas were so pervasive in the various societies in which Buddhism developed that it is not surprising Buddhism internalized and rationalized them. Even the Pure Land tradition, which developed specifically as a path for defiled beings with heavy karmic burdens, retained (at least in principle) this discriminatory position, insisting that a woman's birth in the Pure Land yet required her transformation into a male. In light of this, we have looked at the letters of Eshinni, asking whether a devout woman, in a Buddhist society holding such views, expected to be transformed into a male or whether she imagined her own spiritual path in feminine terms.

The letters of Eshinni seem to confirm that she held the attitude that women are born in the Pure Land *as women* and are not transformed, according to doctrine, into men. Interestingly, according to Dobbins, this view was "...apparently the prevailing assumption among ordinary people, for there are definite intimations of it in popular literature."⁶⁷ Thus, although doctrinal and scriptural sources, written largely by men, present an overwhelmingly negative view of women, actual practice may have offered women a more affirming self-understanding.⁶⁸ Eshinni's letters are a small voice of reaffirmation of the feminine in Buddhism and in the Pure Land tradition; they bequeath to us a powerful and poignant expression of the universality, compassion, and ultimate equality at the heart of the Buddha Dharma. We can be grateful that Eshinni's words have somehow survived for us to hear today.

67. Ibid. 104.

68. Ibid. 105-106.

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