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WOMEN IN MAHAYANA BUDDHISM

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Abstract

The article studies the role of women in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition. The authors emphasize a tolerant and respectful attitude toward women in the Mahayana tradition. The experience of Buddhism associated with the emergence of female monasticism was a revolutionary phenomenon. Foundation of female monastic communities contributed to the social status of women in Asian countries. The idea of gender equality proclaimed by the Buddha continues its development in the subsequent period. Mahayana Buddhism recognizes relativity, conventionality of gender differences, and does not oppose women and men. The Mahayana teachings on tathagatagarbha or the Buddha, present in every person, regardless of gender, improved the religious status of women. The doctrine of bodhichitta plays an important role in the Mahayana tradition. It is based on the statement that during their reincarnations in samsara all creatures were mothers for all other living beings. Identification of love and compassion with the image of mother emphasizes an important role of women in Mahayana Buddhism. The tantric Mahayana tradition improved the status of women. According to Tantric Buddhism, women have the same potential for achieving enlightenment. In Tibet-Mongolian Buddhism, the female cult became widespread because of the popularity of mystical tantric practices which assigned the most important role to the female element. Globalization, the influence of Western culture and sociocultural transformations contributed to new religious and cultural phenomena, and foundation of female Buddhist organizations. The article describes the female Buddhist movement, analyzes activities of the international association "Sakyadhita" or "Daughters of the Buddha".

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Keywords: Buddhism, Mahayana, woman, gender, Sakyadhita, female Buddhist organizations.



1. Introduction

The relevance of the research is due to current global development trends associated with the increasing role of women in society, development of international feminist movements, crises of ethnic cultures, globalization and a simultaneous surge in interest in religion which is called revenge of God (Kepel, 1994). In addition, Buddhism, its unique culture and humanistic philosophy, based on tolerance, compassion, peace and non-violence generate interest among the world community (Ulanov & Badmaev, 2015). The relevance of the study is also due to the revival of Buddhism in a number of countries (Russia, Mongolia, etc.), where this religion was previously persecuted (Abaeva, Badmatsyrenov, Galsanova, Tsedendamba, & Tsetsenbileg, 2018).

2. Problem Statement

On the one hand, gender issues were ignored by the Buddhological studies; on the other, feminist theology, popular in the West, did not address the issue of women in Buddhist culture due to the fact that feminist theology developed mainly in Europe and North America, where Buddhism was not popular. In addition, tolerance of the Buddhist tradition which extends to the gender issue forced many representatives of religious feminism to refrain from criticism, and special research on this issue.

However, later the Western scientific community realized that gender issues are relevant for the Buddhist cultural tradition. Therefore, Buddhist gender attitudes generate research interest. Despite the fact that most of studies are devoted to the role of women in specific regional traditions of Buddhism, there are few works devoted to the role of women in Buddhism. However, many of them are of popular science nature. In this connection, the work “Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism” by Gross (1993) is an essay combining approaches related to comparative religion, religious feminism and buddhist philosophy. In this paper, the author reassess Buddhism. R. Gross analyzes the history of Buddhism and its main ideas from a feminist point of view. Agreeing that some prejudice towards women can be found in early Buddhism, Gross (1993) says that individual misogynistic statements in ancient Indian Buddhism do not determine its attitude towards women.

Among the works devoted to the position of women in Mahayana Buddhism, one can mention the work by Paul (1979) “Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in the Mahayana Tradition”. In her work, the author studies gender attitudes and philosophical views on the status of women in the Mahayana tradition. According to Paul (1979), despite the fact that the Mahayana teachings proclaim the ideal of gender equality, in practice we can find a departure from the principle of equality in achieving enlightenment. Paul (1979) studies a variety of Buddhist texts restricting female rights and proclaiming an ability of women to reach enlightenment.

From the standpoint of feminist theology, Tantric Buddhism is considered a special branch of Mahayana. In her work “Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism”, Shaw (1994) concludes that women played a key role in the history of early Tantric Buddhism in India in the Pal period. She emphasizes that basic principles of the tantric movement demanded great respect for women. Shaw (1994) makes convincing arguments in favor of the importance and high status of women in the tantric Buddhist tradition. At the same time, she says that some Mahayana texts claim that women can reach enlightenment

only in the next birth in the male body. According to Shaw (1994), this philosophy had negative effects on the religious and social status of women.

The works by Blackstone (1998), Rao (1992), Havnevik (1989), Batchelor (2006), Ruch (2002) study regional gender attitudes of Buddhism.

Analysis of works devoted to this issue shows that in modern Buddhology there has been accumulated impressive data on the role of women in Buddhist culture of various countries and regions. At the same time, there is an urgent need for generalization, systematization and philosophical analysis of the available data which determines the purpose of the study.

3. Research Questions

The research deals with the issue of the role of women in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition. It is known that Mahayana ("Big chariot") is one of the two main Buddhism directions. Mahayana is often referred to as "northern Buddhism," since it is widespread in countries and regions north of India and Indochina - China, Korea, Japan, Tibet, Mongolia, etc.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to analyze the role of women in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition.

5. Research Methods

The methodological basis of the research is the systemic and sociocultural approaches that make it possible to study the role of women in Buddhist culture. The comparative approach is used for comparing various Buddhist traditions, their attitudes to women.

6. Findings

It is known that the Buddha respected women and proclaimed equality of people regardless of their status, caste, race, ethnicity or gender. In addition, the Buddha was the first who founded a female monastic community which became the first female organization in the world that has existed for more than two and a half thousand years. Thus, women were provided with a higher religious status than laymen. It is known that the Buddha did not deny a female ability to achieve high spiritual development, including the state of an arhat (saint). According to ancient Buddhist sources, female nuns reached enlightenment.

However, the Buddha did not immediately decide to found a female monastic community and agreed to ordain the nuns only after lengthy requests from women. It was due to difficulties the monks encountered. The early Buddhist monks had a beggarly lifestyle. They had nothing expect for a few monastic things. They lived in small groups or even alone. In searching for food, they had to travel long distances begging alms. Without weapons and observing the principle of non-violence, it was extremely difficult for them to protect themselves from wild animals or robbers. In such circumstances, it was even harder for women to have a monastic lifestyle.

At the same time, the Buddha agreed to found a female monastic community if the nuns follow the “Eight Rules” (garudhamma). According to these rules, the status of nuns was somewhat lower than the status of monks. However, it is necessary to take into account that the ancient Indian society was patriarchal. Therefore, restrictions imposed by the Buddha were a compulsory measure that protected the monastic community from the radical orthodox. In addition, the nuns had to keep more vows than the monks. This provision was also forced, because it took into account physiological differences between female and male bodies. They can also be considered as a specific form of protection from potential negative situations.

However, even despite these minor restrictions and peculiarities of female monasticism in Buddhism, the step taken by the Buddha was revolutionary for that period. Buddhist attitudes toward women contrasted significantly with the positions of Brahmanism and Hinduism. In India, only men from the three highest varnas had the right to study the sacred Vedas. For women, it was forbidden. Brahman, who dared to teach the Vedas to women, was forever banished from society. Buddhism was originally open to all people, regardless of their castes, races, nationalities or genders.

In general, the emergence of the female monastic community, initiated by Buddhism, became a revolutionary phenomenon. The emergence of female monastic communities contributed to the status of women in society and their social status in Asian countries. Foundation of female monastic community (sangha) reflected a respectful attitude of the Buddha Shakyamuni towards women, his desire to correct the gender deficiencies that existed in the patriarchal ancient Indian society. The idea of gender equality was being developed in the subsequent periods.

The Mahayana tradition raised the spiritual status of women. It recognizes relativity, conventionality of gender differences, and does not oppose women and men. The sutras of the prajnaparamita cycle which play an important role in the Mahayana canon, argue the voidness of all things, extend voidness and conventionality to all binary oppositions, including the gender ones. The Mahayana teachings on tathagatagarbha or the Buddha’s nature which is present in every person, regardless of gender, also contributed to the religious status of women (Takasaki, 2000).

In Mahayana Buddhism, the fundamental value is bodhichitta, as a sincere desire to reach enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. Analysis of the Mahayana texts shows that on the basis of faith in reincarnation, the existence of kinship ties is recognized. It is emphasized that every living being was a mother for everyone else. Buddhists convinced of reincarnation represents all living beings as their mothers. Identification of love and compassion with the image of Mother shows the important role of the feminine in Mahayana Buddhism.

The tantric tradition in Mahayana raised the status of women. According to Tantric Buddhism, women have the same potential for reaching enlightenment as men. In Tibetan Buddhism, the female cult is widespread due to the popularity of mystical tantric practices, in which the most important role is assigned to the female element. Buddhist sources tell about many wonderful women who have reached quite significant heights on the path of spiritual development. Many Indian and Tibetan women-yoginis are worshiped in the tantric tradition (Famous Yoginis, 1996).

The spread of Mahayana Tantric Buddhism contributed to the legal status of women. For example, the influence of Buddhist humanism can be found in the Mongol-Oirat laws of 1640. According to this code, for adultery, a woman was punished only with a fine in favor of the owner of the ulus (noyon).

According to Yasa of Genghis Khan, adultery was punishable by death. This mild punishment for adultery contrasted with the legal norms of many other nations (Ulanov, Badmaev, & Holland, 2017).

In addition, female deities are very popular in Tibetan Buddhism, in particular, Tara whose cult is very popular among Tibetans, Mongols, Kalmyks, Buryats, and Tuvans. Tara decided to refute the view that full Enlightenment can be reached in a male body. Tara, showed people that there are no significant differences between men and women.

In Chinese Buddhism, Guanyin is one of the most popular Buddhist saints. The image of Guanyin goes back to the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, who helps people find salvation. It is believed that Avolokiteshvara is embodied in various forms. For example, in the Tibetan tradition, the Dalai Lama is revered as an earthly embodiment of Avolokiteshvara. In the Chinese tradition, Avolokiteshvara is most associated with its female embodiment – Guanyin. It is due to the fact that compassion, the main attribute of Avolokiteshvara bodhisattva, is genetically related to motherhood (Yu, 2001).

The revolutionary reforms of the 20th century, including in the countries of the Buddhist East, changed the status of women. Various religious female movements and organizations, in particular religious feminism, contributed to the interest of researchers in studying the role of women in religion. The influence of Western culture and sociocultural transformations contributed to the emergence of new religious and cultural phenomena, foundation of Buddhist organizations.

In order to unite Buddhist women from Eastern and Western countries, the international association “Sakyadhita” or “Daughter of The Buddha” was created. It was founded by nun Karma Lekshe Tsomo, belonging to the Mahayana direction. In 1977, she became a Tibetan monk. Since then, she has worked hard to improve the quality of female Buddhist education. The popular edition *Women Deliver* recognized Karma Lekshe Tsomo as one of the 100 outstanding personalities who made a significant contribution to the female status.

In 1987, the first international conference of Buddhist women was held in the sacred place of Bodhgaya (India). This conference was one of the most important events in the history of the Buddhist community. The spiritual leader was E.S. Dalai Lama XIV who delivered a welcoming speech in support of the aspirations of female Buddhists. During this event, laypeople and nuns from various Buddhist traditions and different countries exchanged views on the female status in their lay and monastic lives (Tsomo, 2006).

The activity of this association is based on the Buddhist idea about the equality of men and women. Sakyadhita seeks to achieve real equality in Buddhism and provide equal opportunities to obtain Buddhist education, regardless of gender. This organization aims to support all Buddhist women, regardless of their spiritual dedication and status. Among other goals of the organization are improving the status of women throughout the world, maintaining dialogue and harmony between representatives of Buddhism and other religious traditions; encouraging research on the status of women practicing Buddhism; maintaining, the peace through distribution of humanistic ideas of the The Buddha (Tsomo, 2006).

7. Conclusion

Respectful and tolerant attitudes towards women are characteristic of Buddhism, especially the Mahayana tradition. The first female monastic communities are examples of perception of women as equal

members of society. Penetration of Indian Mahayana Buddhism into other Asian countries contributed to the high status of women in the East and progressive development of society.

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