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**Bernard Faure: The Power of Denial**

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## INTRODUCTION

**T**HIS BOOK is the second part of a project on the place of sexuality and gender in Buddhism. The first part, published under the title *The Red Thread*, dealt with the question of monastic discipline, especially the rule against illicit sex and its transgression. It also addressed the question of the so-called degeneration of the monastic order in Japan, in particular with the widespread practice of monks marrying or having concubines, and the equally prevalent monastic homosexuality (or rather pedophilia). Sexuality, denied in principle, became crucial, and Buddhism attempted to coopt or transform local cults (in which women played a large role), being in turn transformed by them. In the case of Japan, for instance, Buddhism tried to specialize in imperial rituals dealing with the prolificity of the imperial body and the prosperity of the imperial lineage.

Whereas *The Red Thread* focused on male monastic sexuality, this work centers on Buddhist conceptions of women and constructions of gender. Although this artificial dichotomy between sexuality and gender is somewhat unfortunate, and potentially misleading, it is used heuristically, as a tool for sorting out the staggering complexity of the issues.

The present volume deals more specifically with the status and agency of women in a typically androcentric tradition like Japanese Buddhism. My general argument is that Buddhism is paradoxically neither as sexist nor as egalitarian as is usually thought. Women played an important role in Buddhism, not only as nuns and female mystics, but also as mothers (and wives) of the monks; in addition, in such capacity, they were the representatives of local cults, actively resisting what was at times perceived as a Buddhist take-over. Among these women, we also find courtesans and prostitutes, who often were the privileged interlocutors of the monks.

Women were divided, not only due to their own separate agenda, but also as a result of male domination, and some were clearly more oppressed than others. Preaching nuns, for instance, seemed to side with the male institution in threatening other women with eternal exclusion from deliverance. Thus, we are faced with a broad spectrum of situations: from exclusion to inclusion (or the other way around, depending on one's viewpoint, with discrimination as a case of "inclusive exclusion"); from agency or passivity within the patriarchal system to "life on the borderline"; to passivity or agency in the "ténèbres extérieures," rejection or voluntary departure from the patriarchal Eden or Pure Land.

Until now, the story or history of women in Buddhism has been represented in a relatively linear fashion: as a shift from oppression to freedom,

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a teleological narrative of progress and liberation (from so-called Hīnayāna to Mahāyāna, or again, from an elitist ideology to a more open and democratic one). While some scholars see Buddhism as part of a movement of emancipation, others see it as a source of oppression. Perhaps this is only a distinction between optimists and pessimists, if not between idealists and realists. In both cases, the identity of Buddhism (and of women) is seen as rather unproblematic. Things, however, are unfortunately (or fortunately) more complicated. As we begin to realize, the term “Buddhism” does not designate a monolithic entity, but covers a number of doctrines, ideologies, and practices—some of which seem to invite, tolerate, and even cultivate “otherness” on their margins; it also refers to various levels of discourse (ideological, institutional) that, although globally related at a given period, have relative autonomy and distinct dynamics. Thus, even the most reactionary ideology, while operating according to its own repressive dynamic, can be put to very different uses (some of them ironic, subversive) when it is articulated to specific cultural and institutional contexts, and manipulated by antagonistic historical agents. These tactics and strategies of inclusion, exclusion, and/or discrimination were permitted (yet constrained) by a certain number of models, whose combinations are, if not endless, at least more numerous than usually recognized by partisans on both sides of the gender divide. Among them, we can mention:

1. male power (androcentrism, misogyny, patriarchy)
2. female power (biological, religious, political)
3. equality through conjunction of sexes (yin/yang)
4. complementarity through conjunction of sexes (Tantric or Daoist ritual)
5. rhetorical equality through denial of sex/gender (Mahāyāna doctrine)

### “SOARING AND SETTLING”—TOO SOON?

Many studies have been produced over the past twenty years about practically every aspect of women’s lives in Western societies. Reacting against what she perceived as a certain female parochialism in gender studies, Nathalie Zemon Davis insisted that the focus should be on the relations between sexes rather than on women only. In the case of Buddhism, however, there is no need yet to worry about having too many studies focusing *only* on women. We are still at the first stage, where we may need to listen carefully in order to hear the voices of women, in the interstices, or through the “italics” (the specific slant) of men’s discourse.

Studies on Buddhism and gender have begun to appear, but they are usually limited to one tradition (in general Tantric or Tibetan Buddhism),

or in pushing a specific agenda. I will not give here a survey of previous scholarship, but will simply point out some of the advances and remaining problems. Most recent studies tend to adopt one of two approaches: the first discusses the Buddhist bias against women, or the more or less successful Buddhist attempts to overcome this bias, while the second consists mainly in attempts to reveal the active role of Buddhist women, to emphasize female agency and thus counter the stereotype of women as passive cultural subjects. The latter is still a Western-centered approach, since a major Buddhist criticism revolves around the notion of woman as seductress; that is, precisely her active (and damning) influence. The present work combines these two types of approach, while keeping their limitations in mind.

It is worth bearing in mind Susan Sered's remark that "the writings of most feminist anthropologists carry either an implicit or explicit message that the blurring of gender categories is what will lead to the demise of patriarchy." Sered's findings suggest a different scenario: according to her, "women's religions" stress rather than play down gender differences—even if "they tend to choose the less sexist ideology available." In these religions, Sered argues, "the women's sphere is considered as good (if not better) than the male sphere, and women fully control the female sphere."<sup>1</sup> Going one step further, Sered argues that it is ironic that few scholars interpret women's religiosity in terms of motherhood. She wants in particular to emphasize motherhood over sexual intercourse, which she sees as a "lurking phallogocentric obsession in Western scholarship."<sup>2</sup>

Historically, Buddhism has monopolized the afterlife and the major rites of passage—birth, death, and rebirth—while leaving the sacraments of life (adulthood, marriage) to Confucianism or Shintō. This is why we have Confucian "precepts for women," whereas Buddhist attempts—for instance Mujū Ichien's *Mirror for Women* (*Tsuma Kagami*)—remain general descriptions of Buddhist morality and practice, common to both sexes. Thus, women could find little in the Buddhist teaching that they could apply to normal life. Outside of monastic life, Buddhism was a teaching for times of crisis (childbirth, illness, death). Its impact on women was, on the whole, negative, inasmuch as it asserted the sinfulness of female sexuality and gender. What, then, would it mean for Buddhism to truly become a "woman's religion" in the sense emphasized by Sered?

Many feminist scholars have emphasized the misogynistic (or at least androcentric) nature of Buddhism. The point is almost trivial. By presenting Buddhism as a monolithic ideology, however, there is a danger of repeating the same gesture by which Buddhist ideologues attempted to construct a seamless orthodoxy. This alleged unity is what we must undermine, in order to find—within Buddhism itself, and not only outside—the many voices that have been covered, to let them contribute to the

deconstruction, both internal and external, of Buddhist orthodoxy. Buddhism cannot simply be ignored, or suppressed; this would be to fall in to the same scapegoating mechanism one criticizes. Rather, we must live with it, and provide a more in-depth critique that would attempt to nip its sexism in the bud. At the same time, we need to recognize that the egalitarian ideology of Buddhism, even if it has until now mostly been ignored in practice, can indeed be used to subvert the existing gender hierarchy—unless, taking the hard-core feminist approach, one considers that the genealogical flaw of this unequal egalitarianism makes all dialectical overcoming impossible?

Not surprisingly, feminist interpretations of Buddhism vary considerably, and are even sometimes at odds with one another. I have to defer to others in discussion of specific points, but I will simply emphasize the methodological problems in this type of work. First among these is a certain hermeneutical naïveté or wishful thinking that insists on taking texts at face-value and on reading them through one single code; second, a certain ideological problem, the danger of ventriloquism when speaking in the name of a silent other; third, a problem due to the lack of sociohistorical context.

The search for the women “hidden from history” cannot, as such, justify an egalitarian reading of the tradition. As John Winkler remarked, sentences of the type “Men and women enter this visionary world together” must be taken with a grain of salt.<sup>3</sup> Or again, to quote feminist authorities, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar: “Since creativity is defined as male, it follows that the dominant literary images of femininity are male fantasies too.”<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, as Toril Moi points out, “it is not an unproblematic project to try to speak *for* the other woman, since this is precisely what the ventriloquism of patriarchy has always done: men have constantly spoken *for* women, in the name of women.”<sup>5</sup> Joan Kelly notes that “we could probably maintain of any ideology that tolerates sexual parity that: 1) it can threaten no major institution of the patriarchal society from which it emerges; and 2) men, the rulers within the ruling order, must benefit from it.”<sup>6</sup> There are, as we will see, various examples of egalitarian discourse in Western and Asian cultures, but they usually have failed to translate into social realities. The Buddhist “rhetoric of equality,” in particular, remained general and abstract, never becoming a collective, social and political equality.

It might be difficult to retrieve the social context in the Indian/Tibetan case(s), and thus to prove or disprove the egalitarian rhetoric. To make sense of the active role of woman (in the form of *śakti*) in Indian Tantrism, scholars like Agehananda Bharati have argued that in certain parts of India women were actually known to take the active role in sexual matters. This, however, does not mean that women had a higher status. Fur-

thermore, a comparison with the Chinese and Japanese contexts, where a similar rhetoric clearly conceals male power, inclines us to think that the same, *mutatis mutandis*, was taking place in India and Tibet. Some have also argued that Tibet constitutes an exception, as admittedly Tibetan culture was much less misogynistic than Chinese and Japanese cultures. But in Tibetan Tantrism at least, women were not represented as active energy (*śakti*), but as passive wisdom (*prajñā*). Susan Sered has documented the existence of religious traditions in which women played a major role (for instance Okinawan religion).<sup>7</sup> These traditions are few and far between, however, and Tantrism does not seem to be one of them, despite what a superficial glance at its egalitarian rhetoric may suggest.

There has been a tendency to exaggerate female submission, without recognizing women's capacity to play and subvert the (male) game well and to laugh off "small men." Is it not, in last analysis, to interiorize in a subtle way the male contempt toward women, these women who are said, a little hastily, to be utterly passive? This, however, does not allow us to deny, or excuse, the relentless sexism of the Buddhist tradition.

Attempts at retrieving female agency or women's voices, when not checked by interpretive vigilance, may end up in presenting just another biased image (or hearing voices). As Joan Scott points out, it "also runs the risk of conflating valuation of women's experience and positive assessment of everything they did."<sup>8</sup> The question then may boil down to this: do two biased images counterbalance each other, and are they the same thing as a "neutral" account (assuming that such an account would be possible)? From a political standpoint, a feminist counterargument to patriarchy, even biased, may be seen as legitimate. From a scholarly standpoint, things are a little different, even though we now know that all accounts are gendered, and no "neutral" account is possible. But the supposed "differend" comes from the fact that we are not dealing simply with a debate opposing the male position to its female counterpart. In both camps, we also find wolves in sheep's clothing and sheep in wolves' clothing.

In their search for role models and a "usable history," feminist scholars tend to project current normative conceptions and ideologies onto past cultures, and to thus perpetrate anachronisms. In order to avoid cultural fallacies, it is therefore important to look closely at the historical and anthropological records. This close scrutiny should, however, itself be informed by feminists insights, and question its documents in terms of gender. It ought to be an ideological critique, or lead toward it. Such critique must be a genuine critique of ideology (in the text as well as in its own discourse), not merely an "ideological" critique denouncing one ideology (Buddhism) in the name of another (feminism).

Retrieving the female voice, what feminist scholars have dubbed as “her/story,” is a legitimate approach, but not exclusive of others. There are more women in the Buddhist tradition, and they have been more active and influential, than is usually assumed. Yet it is precisely the need to retrieve these voices that suggests the tradition, at least from a certain point onward, has tended to cover them—and it is this cover-up that we must examine. A mere denial of the sexist nature of the scholarly tradition (leaving intact the Buddhist tradition) seems misleading, even if it has some tactical and political usefulness. In the black-and-white world of gender ideology, one-sided arguments will always be more attractive than nuanced analysis.

Much feminist work on Buddhism has been concerned with “singing the praises of exceptional women” or chronicling the indignities suffered by women. This approach, however, is increasingly criticized as being blind to cultural and historical contexts and inequalities other than those related to gender, and so as being complicit in perpetuating the image of women as passive victims. A more nuanced reading would acknowledge that, while some women were passive victims, others were not. The responsible historian needs to attend to both sides. All models, whatever their initial validity, become counterproductive when they are determined by an ideological or political agenda, and are flawed from an historian’s viewpoint.

### THE CULTURAL APPROACH

Feminist works on Buddhism have not yet achieved the level of sophistication evident in feminist works not only in Western social history, but also in recent works on Chinese and Japanese women’s history.<sup>9</sup> In *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, a study on women and culture in seventeenth-century China, Dorothy Ko makes several points about Confucianism and Chinese society that seem equally valid for Buddhism and Japanese society. She notes, in particular, that the normative discourse of Confucianism and the imposition of a patriarchal ideology do not mean that women were “silenced.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, as Priscilla Ching Chung puts it, “subservience of women to men did not mean total subordination of all women to all men but the subordination of specific women to specific men within their own class, and only in terms of personal and family relationships.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, “any historical study of women and gender should be class-, locale-, and age-specific.”<sup>12</sup> The theory of male domination should also be nuanced: men also dominate other men, women dominate other women, and social institutions repress both to various degrees. As Norbert Elias has well shown in his study of curialization, life

at court was self-imposed misery, a kind of “noblesse oblige.” The fact that it was self-imposed may alienate our sympathy, but it does not alleviate the misery.

The current criticism of the “woman-as-victim” model is prefigured by the work of earlier anthropologists such as Margery Wolf. Wolf convincingly argued that women could wield power in ways that were not recognized in a patriarchal gender ideology. She also showed that women’s status varied at different points of their life cycle: there was little in common between the new wife and the elderly mother; whereas the former was stripped of any power, the latter was empowered by the Confucian family structure.<sup>13</sup> But Ko equally rejects the alternative model of “woman-as-agent,” and offers a more flexible “range of constraints and opportunities that women in 17th century China faced.”<sup>14</sup> As Emma Teng remarks, it is clear “that recent scholarship overturns older stereotypes of the Chinese woman as uniformly oppressed and unempowered. As such, this kind of research represents a powerful challenge to Eurocentric assumptions about the backwardness or victimization of the Chinese woman. A challenge to common assumptions about the nature of Chinese culture, it is also a challenge to the feminist model of liberation from tradition.”<sup>15</sup>

Like the seventeenth century for Chinese women, the Edo period in Japan seems to have been the best and the worst of times for Japanese women. The normative literature and legal codes suggest that women were increasingly repressed. We already need to differentiate between classes, and between high and low culture: the patriarchal spirit that was a dominant trait of warrior culture may not have affected peasant culture to a significant degree. But even in the elite culture, women may have retained much more informal power in their social and domestic lives than is indicated in these sources. The “logic of practice” that governed these lives may have allowed them in many cases to turn a basically unequal situation to their advantage. What they had lost on the outside, in the public realm, they may have gained on the inside, in the domestic realm. I will return to this point. I just wanted to emphasize here that women’s culture, for all the patriarchal ideology transmitted by Confucianism, Buddhism (and soon Shintō), was not as passive as we have been led to believe. We need to take into account real practices and subjective perceptions before passing judgment. We also need to get a better understanding of the actual dialectics at play in the exercise of power, and how boundaries between genders were constantly renegotiated.

Patriarchy is by no means as monolithic or univocal as certain feminist critics have claimed. It has its own contradictions, its fault-lines, and women are not always simply its silent, passive victims. As Toril Moi points out, “Feminists must be able to account for the paradoxically pro-



ductive aspects of patriarchal ideology (the moments in which the ideology backfires on itself, as it were) as well as for its obvious oppressive implications if they are to answer the tricky question of how it is that some women manage to counter patriarchal strategies despite the odds stacked against them.”<sup>16</sup>

Power relations obtain inside both sexes, and we should avoid demonizing one and idealizing the other, even if the need to repair the injustices done in the name of patriarchy seems more pressing at this time. Women are not all sisters. This truth is hinted at in many tales involving young girls and their stepmothers, or their grandmothers, like Cinderella, Snow White, or Little Red Riding Hood. The story of Cinderella (and its Japanese Buddhist variant, that of Princess Chūjōhime) could be read according to several codes, the gender code being only one of them. It can be seen as the fruitless competition for male recognition in a patriarchal society, where man “divides to rule.” It can also be read in terms of alliance and kinship, as a tale about a mother who sees her child’s marriage (and her own future) threatened by a rival. The jealousy between the stepmother and the girl can also be interpreted according to the age code as a form of the generation conflict—as in the tales of Snow White or of Little Red Riding Hood.<sup>17</sup> In the case of Buddhism, too, women were divided (and the division was, if not created, at least maintained by monks), and some were more alienated than others. Some (the nuns) sided with the male institution against the “wandering women,” mediums, and so forth.

## GENDER REVISITED

One of the primary questions informing this book is that given that Buddhism is essentially a discourse on salvation and holiness, to what extent is this discourse hopelessly (or hopefully) gendered? How do the models for men and women differ? It is more difficult, in the case of Buddhism, to see to what extent holiness shows in itself the marks of sexual difference, and this for one reason in particular: the fact that the Buddhist *Golden Legend*, unlike its Christian analogue, is essentially masculine. We are constrained by the available sources: we may want to write an alternative history, but we have (and will have) no alternative corpus. There are very few “Lives of Eminent Nuns” in comparison with the abundant hagiography of eminent monks. We may hope to discover some Buddhist Hildegard of Bingen, but the fact of the matter is that Buddhist female saints wrote relatively little. Neither did they bleed as much as their Western *consoeurs*, although they did use their blood to write, whereas for Western saints writing became a substitute for the blood of

martyrs.<sup>18</sup> But one can still safely assume that, in the case of Buddhist women, another notion came to superimpose itself on the idea of holiness, which one could perhaps define as a rejection of sexuality and of the body: that of the need for purity, or rather purification, and above all purification from (and of) their blood. In the contact with popular religion, Buddhist holiness (and its implied rejection of the body and sexuality) gives way to sacredness, which implies purity, or rather purification from all defilement (in particular the defilement from blood). Both elements, holiness and sacredness, and the attendant defilement from sexuality and from blood, converge in the case of women. Such is the twofold truth of Buddhism: as a discourse about holiness addressed *also* to women (this discourse is what I focus on in the first part of the book) and as a recipe for better life (or “worldly benefits,” Jp. *genze riyaku*), with its arsenal of techniques (love rituals and the like).

Like most clerical discourses, Buddhism is indeed relentlessly misogynist, but as far as misogynist discourses go, it is one of the most flexible and open to multiplicity and contradiction. In early Buddhism, for instance, genders are not fixed, but fluctuating, and cases of transsexualism seem a common occurrence. Buddhist attitudes toward women are part of monastic attitudes toward society and lay people. We find two types of antifeminism in Buddhism: first, the early ascetic or monastic attitude, which posits that “a bodhisattva should wander alone like a rhinoceros.” In principle, female ascetics are accepted, but in practice, it is difficult for them to follow this ideal. Lonely women tend to get raped, and the Vinaya reports how, after such a case, the Buddha is said to have prohibited women from wandering alone in the forest. The second type results from the fact that when Buddhism becomes more worldly, it tends to accept the social prejudices of the patriarchal societies in which it tries to take root.

It may not be necessary to emphasize the double entendre of the subtitle of this study, “Buddhism, Purity, and Gender”—a reference to Mary Douglas’s seminal book. Joan Scott has made a convincing point for the use of the notion of gender as an analytical category. But in the process, this analytical mode tends to become overly purified, epistemologically but also morally, severed from its rowdier elements, turning at times into a rather aseptic notion almost as dogmatic as some of the traditions which it claims to deconstruct. It may have been necessary to detach gender from sex, but the oblivion or obliteration of sexuality has its own dangers, when the real need is to connect the two (or more) discourses on women/gender and on sex/sexuality. As it is commonly used, the concept of gender seems to accept uncritically the nature/culture split which stipulates that whereas nature is given, culture is fluid. But as Thomas Laqueur has shown, whereas the conception of biological sex changed drastically over time, that of gender remained stable. “Gender” is not only a proper, seri-

ous synonym for “women,” it also tends to leave out sex and desire, and to give a clean, expurgated (and at times puritan) version of history. Sexual relations are seen as peripheral at best. The term “gender” itself (as opposed to biological sex) is not as neutral as the claims made on its behalf would suggest. It implies a rather abstract, clean view of what’s really going on between man and woman (or any other genders).

My approach, while duly emphasizing the *primacy* of gender as an epistemological or experiential given—the fact that all beings are gendered, or, more precisely, that the self (mine and that of others) is gendered—will attempt to focus on the social construction of a specific gender (woman), but also show that gender difference is only *one* among various socially constructed differences (class, race, age among them). This difference, when it is seen as the only one, may come to obscure the others. In contrast with reified differences, I want to emphasize the “difference” of gender as a root metaphor for, and a privileged access to, the notion of difference in tradition and society. I have for instance, in my earlier work, tried to deconstruct the Chan (Zen) tradition in order to show its inherent multiplicity, and to value its *difference*. Looking at the role and status of women in this particular tradition, and in Buddhism in general, is to look at the heart of the differentiating process. This emphasis on the process of differentiation is a way to always destabilize any particular type of exclusive difference. At the same time, one must avoid dematerializing actual differences, as if everything were possible; as if, for instance, sexual difference became immaterial, as if the exception (transsexualism, androgyny, the sexual freedom of the “sky-walker”—a reference to the *dākinī*, not the Star Wars figure) could become the norm without in turn becoming oppressive. We need to reflect on what Susan Gubar calls the “disjunction between the nowhere of the cyborg’s utopian fluidity and the everywhere of ordinary people’s embodiment.”<sup>19</sup> Or again, in Susan Bordo’s words: “Denial of the unity and stability of identity is one thing. . . . The epistemological fantasy of achieving multiplicity—the dream of limitless multiple embodiments, allowing one to dance from place to place and self to self—is another.”<sup>20</sup>

We are confronted with two diametrically opposed and equally plausible models of interpretation. In the first, the sexual difference is fundamental, irreversible, dominating everything—and so forces us to reinterpret, rewrite everything—even and above all the theoretical egalitarianism of Mahāyāna. In the second model, the sexual difference is secondary, derived at the level of ritual. Let us be clear about this: the point is not to express full agreement with the abstract egalitarianism of Mahāyāna, but to note that, on the ritual level, the difference is merely used as an expression of a more fundamental fault-line between human and nonhuman (for instance, human and animal, the familiar and the strange, the profane and

the sacred). It becomes properly symbolic. Sexual difference is according to this view not only an empirical phenomenon, but more radically the first and fundamental stage of difference as such. It allows us “to free ourselves from the fascination of the One and to opens to the law of the ‘two.’”<sup>21</sup> Which is appropriate to Buddhism? Is sexual difference the red thread that runs throughout Buddhist thought, or is it merely one expression of a more fundamental rift? For instance, the stories of fox-women or nāga-girls, which we will discuss, can be seen as encounters with the nonhuman, in which women serve merely as symbolic markers, as figures of the other.

With respect to the first model, which relies on the feminist insight that all human beings are “gendered” and considers the sexual divide profound and beyond mitigation, Carolyn Bynum notes that “experience is gendered. In other words, not only do gender symbols invert or reject as well as reinforce the gender values and gender structures of society, they also may be experienced differently by the different genders.”<sup>22</sup> This “differend” dominates everything, and obliges us to re-read (and rewrite) the entire tradition, even, or above all, the theoretical gender equality found in Mahāyāna or Vajrayāna literature: in a word, the entire history of “man.” Every book, like Milorad Pavić’s *Khazar Dictionary*, should have two versions, a male and a female. No more generic “homo religiosus” or Buddha. The buddha-nature in all sentient beings is also a male or a female one. Furthermore, this divide is not neutral; it always implies a hierarchy, a different potential of desire and pleasure. The Greek myth of Tiresias illustrates the point nicely. The Theban Tiresias once was taking a walk when he saw two snakes mating; he separated them and instantly became a woman. Seven years later, at the same spot, he saw again two snakes mating. He (she) separated them again and became once again a man. Having become famous for these metamorphoses, he was called by Zeus and Hera who were having an argument as to who, man or woman, had more pleasure in love. Tiresias only could tell. He did so by revealing women’s best-kept secret, saying that, on a pleasure scale of one to ten, woman had nine, man only one. This could be read as a plea for androgyny. But, although he was fortunate enough to experience a change of sex, even Tiresias could not become an androgyne—not even the gods can. Tiresias eventually became blind after being successively a man and a woman. This story, which shows among other things that the sexes are not equal, and that for once men can be shortchanged, doesn’t sound like a story invented by them.

It has become almost trivial to emphasize that all scholarship is gendered, and that there is nothing like a value-free knowledge. As Thomas Laqueur observes, “Sexual difference thus seems to be already present in how we constitute meaning; it is already part of the logic that drives

writing.”<sup>23</sup> Even awakening, the ultimate goal of Buddhism, might be gendered. It might designate a state in which, instead of perceiving gender differences as mere indices of a social and spiritual hierarchy, one has, on the contrary, the feeling of “being male or female in relation to primordial or ultimate truth.” Paraphrasing, one could say that, like the narrative according to David Lodge, awakening is too often conceived as the culminating point of mystical experience, a kind of—male—orgasm. As such, it may have little to do with the multiple female *jouissance* and its “thousand plateaux,” a kind of intensely pleasurable gradualism. “Sudden awakening,” according to this perspective, looks suspiciously like precocious ejaculation.

According to the second interpretation, the sexual polarity is derived, secondary. Let us make no mistake here: this does not mean that we are simply returning to the Mahāyāna ideology or rhetoric of equality (that would be a third, or rather a first, interpretation, which we do not wish to retain here). It is not a metaphysical argument, but an anthropological constatation that, in the mythical, ritual, and symbolic contexts at least, the male/female polarity is used mostly to express a more fundamental cleavage: between man/woman and animal, familiar and strange. The cleavage itself becomes symbolic. According to Maurice Bloch: “The symbolism of gender and sexuality . . . should be understood as being used in rituals in an ad hoc manner to act out a more fundamental and central logic concerning the establishment of a form of human life which has apparently escaped the biological constraint of death. . . . The conjunction between human[s] and animals can be used to exactly the same ends in rituals as the conjunction and disjunction between female and male.”<sup>24</sup> As Bloch points out, gender and animality are alternative symbolic resources that can be used together or separately to signify or create the transcendental. What speaks there is not so much gender, but ideology, and ideology can work with either gender.<sup>25</sup>

Paradoxically, the same feminist scholars who claim that gender is fundamental often end up reducing gender to its sociological parameters alone. Thus, we keep hearing that gender is socially constructed. Of course it is, but this is a somewhat trivial and trivializing truth, which privileges a rather insipid sociological approach. There may be more in sexual difference than meets the sociological eye. From a philosophical or existential viewpoint that emphasizes the subject, sexual difference is not only an empirical phenomenon, but the primary difference itself, the very secret of our being, the blind spot, this *differance* that produces us, as well as our vision or our speech, and as such cannot simply become the object of our discourse. We can reach only reified phenomena, not their source. Being a man or a woman is not simply the result of some political or social scheme imposed on us, something I might decide to

change at will. Even my will to change it would be gendered, would be part of this mystery which is lost in sociological approaches. Thus, the problem is, as Thomas Laqueur has it, to “see difference differently.”<sup>26</sup>

We can thus reconcile the two apparently contradictory viewpoints: the gender difference is in the last instance determined by ideology, but the sexual difference is real and fundamental (although it appears late on the ideological scene, and as derivative of gender difference). It is a more originary sexual difference, which Buddhism (as well as Western philosophy) must try to let resurface as the very *differance* if it wants to escape its dire destiny as an orthodoxy of the age of the Final Dharma. In this sense, the Buddha was justified to say that the admission of women in the saṅgha (that is, the ideological differentiation of genres) marks the beginning of the end. Women are now submitted to the “unisex” ideological model, in which they are viewed as inferior men. Their entry into the saṅgha, their emulation of a masculine soteriological model centered on the mind, marks the forgetting of their sexual difference, of their feminine “spirituality,” which denies the male/female, mind/body dichotomies. Ideally, women’s spirituality is more centered on the body, more open to the corporeal, fluid, porous, organic aspects of religious experience (where awakening can be conceived, not as a vision detached from the senses, but as an orgasm implying all senses, not only an *excessus mentis*, but an *excessus corporis*, hybris and hybridization). In practice, however, spiritualization usually means masculinization (and euphemization).

The unisex model described by Thomas Laqueur in the case of the West can be seen at work in Buddhism, as well. According to this model, woman does not constitute a distinct ontological category; she is merely a lesser man. In this form of male humanism called Buddhism, as in ancient Greece, man remains the “measure of all things.” In the West, as Laqueur shows, the distinction of genders has preceded that of the sexes, although the latter has now become the norm and foundation. Buddhism has not yet taken the full measure of this ontological-historical change. The distinction between genders is an abstract, ideological model (based on a certain political relation) that is inscribed on corporeal reality (as a relation between yin and yang, male and female, and so forth). It is not based on a clear awareness of the sexual distinction. In this sense, even the emphasis on gender difference, as it is currently advocated, and precisely because it is socially founded, is a kind of idealism or ideology that asserts the spiritual experience to the detriment of the sensible, corporeal experience, as of the irreducible difference, of the bodies.

The gendered approach to Buddhist history is not simply to try to retrieve or rediscover a feminine world (“her/story”), one that would stand next to the male world as another self-contained territory, but to reveal how feminized the dominant male world already is—to deconstruct it

from within, and to see the fault-lines in its discourse.<sup>27</sup> I am attempting neither a history of Buddhist women nor of women in Buddhism, but rather a revised history of Japanese Buddhism (one that includes women as a vital element of its developmental dialectic, and not only as a fetishized object of its discourse). Thus, it is not enough to retrieve women as a separate object of study, to see that they had their own history within and outside Buddhism; the point is rather to see how the history and doctrine of Buddhism were changed because of its relationship with women, and to examine how gender “gives meaning to the organization and perception of historical knowledge.”<sup>28</sup>

The Buddhist saṅgha was (and remains) a patriarchal institution, and as such it lends itself to the type of approach (and reproach) used by feminist theorists of patriarchy, in which male domination is seen as “the effect of men’s desire to transcend their alienation from the means of reproduction of the species.”<sup>29</sup> One could, for instance, point out the importance of the Buddhist discourse on embryology and on the “bitter trap” of reproduction.<sup>30</sup> Hence a tendency to see sexuality (for instance, Tantric sexuality) as an escape from that trap, a key to freedom. But here again, more often than not nonreproductive sexuality has been another trap, whereas in some cases motherhood can give women a key to power. Other feminist scholars (as well as linguists), in various “seminal” or “engrossing” works, have shown how inequality is “imbedded” in the sexual relation; indeed, in the syntax itself. As Catherine McKinnon succinctly summarizes: “Man fucks woman; subject verb object.”<sup>31</sup>

Joan Scott observes that gender, as an analytic category, is connected to sex, but neither is it directly determined by sex nor a determining factor in sexuality. According to her, however, the two basic types of inequalities, male appropriation of motherhood and sexual objectification, are based on a fixed definition of the body, a rather rigid physical determinism. This explains the feminist desire to disconnect gender from sexuality, but, as I pointed out, it also runs the risk of repressing the sexual element, rather than simply acknowledging the relative autonomy and connection between sex and gender.<sup>32</sup>

What relations inhere between inequalities of gender and other types? How pertinent are the other ritually invoked categories, class and race, to my work? What for instance, is the relation between women and *hinin* (outcasts), children, and other oppressed categories in pre-modern Japan, and the role of Buddhism in that regard? Buddhist works on women tend to be oblivious to class and political power, and the use of gender as analytical category—in the case of nuns, for instance—may at times even obfuscate the issue of class. On the other hand, race is not as much of an issue in a relatively homogeneous traditional society like pre-modern Japan as in our modern societies. This other approach, which has been

increasingly taken by recent Japanese historians such as Taira Masayuki and Wakita Haruko, considers gender to be not purely determined by patriarchy, but traversed by other types of determinism, changing and developing in relation to socioeconomic conditions of production.

Similarly, I try to combine these two approaches: that of patriarchal theory (where gender is seen as an independent category) and the socio-historical (and loosely Marxist) approach where gender is seen as the by-product of the economic and social structure.<sup>33</sup> Despite my reservations regarding some aspects of the notion of gender outlined above, I am comfortable with Scott's twofold definition of gender: first, as an element in social relationships based on *perceived* differences between sexes, and implying four constituents: a) culturally available symbols; b) normative concepts; c) institutions such as kinship, economy, and politics; and d) a subjective identity. The contextualization implies not only kinship systems such as the household and family, but also the labor market, education, the polity; but for traditional society, kinship remains a predominant factor. Second, Scott's definition views gender as a primary way of signifying relations of power. There is, not only a "di-vision of the world" (Pierre Bourdieu), but a "di-vision of Buddhism" (a "dual yet non-dual" teaching). The Buddhist worldview is a dual view of nondualism. The relations of gender and politics will become obvious when we examine the case of Japanese empresses. In Japanese patriarchal society, as it finds its classical shape under Tokugawa rule, the authoritative power is symbolized as power over women; at the same time (and around the same period), the utopian counterpower (in the Fujidō and other "New Religions," for instance) is symbolized by the sexual equality and freedom of women. But in both cases, women are only symbolic markers in a male political debate.

## GENDERING BUDDHISM

Gendering Buddhism means, first of all, to gender (and endanger) the Buddhist orthodoxy, the tradition and the concepts on which it thrived (like enlightenment), but also to gender scholarship. It is to show the role played by bodies in constructions of gender and the transformation of women into sexual objects;<sup>34</sup> it is also to illustrate how (some) women, far from being passive recipients of such gendered constructs, were able to play with them, to turn the tables, by becoming sexual and gendered subjects. In this way, Buddhism, the ascetic religion, was "domesticated," becoming a household commodity.

The Chan master Linji is well known for his praise of the "true man of no rank" (*wuwei zhenren*). We could, of course, easily argue that he is



still referring to “man.” Woman always has a rank, and usually a low one. But does “man” here mean *homo*, not *vir*; or could we eventually have, next to the “true man of no rank,” a “true woman of no rank,” expressions in which both “man” and “woman” could stand for *homo*? We will see that the so-called Five Obstacles were originally the cause of the impossibility of women obtaining five exalted ranks (including that of buddha) in the Buddhist hierarchy. In that case, “buddha” is only a rank, even if it is the highest; whereas the enlightened man should be the “man without rank.” For the time being, we will have to read the canon, and the entire Buddhist tradition, *en double bande*, taking into account male and female (not necessarily in that order) receptions of the teaching, and men’s and women’s elaborations on it.

The object, collectively called “women,” is, as noted earlier, far from monolithic. The factual (and fatal) divergences between women are compounded by masculine domination, which generates cleavages and opposition within each sex. The danger would be to reify this opposition. For instance, Pierre Bourdieu, in a recent book on the question, tends to fix the rupture between the two poles of domination without taking into account the speech of the dominated and the cultural autonomy of certain fringes of the subaltern culture.<sup>35</sup> Instead of some master-slave dialectic, we find in this model an insurmountable barrier between the centers of domination and the world of the dominated. According to one of Bourdieu’s critics, Olivier Mangin, such a sociology of domination “becomes the slave of its own grids of analysis, an analysis resting on a simple idea that domination is a ‘transcendental.’” Thus, political domination is regarded in the same mode as sexual domination.

There are, however, some deep fault-lines in feminist discourse. We often find, for instance, a radical opposition between egalitarian and differential conceptions. According to the egalitarian conception, male and female roles are social constructions. According to Bourdieu, the strength of the “male *sociodicée*” (theory of the origins of society) comes from the fact that it cumulates and condenses two operations: it legitimizes a relation of domination by inscribing it into a biological nature, which is itself a naturalized social construction.<sup>36</sup> According to the differentialist conception, motherhood inscribes the female population with an irreducible mark. We must denounce the fictitious universalism of “a masculine vision, cygenetic and warrior-like, of the relations between sexes.”<sup>37</sup>

Two basic conceptions of gender can be found in feminist works. According to the first one, gender is a social construction, which must be deconstructed, or denied. This model leads to a kind of androgynous, or rather neutral, conception of subjectivity, not so different from the kind we see at work in Mahāyāna. According to the second conception, gender, even if socially constructed, is the reality from which we, as subjects,

emerge, and with which we must work. The cards we have been dealt might be reshuffled, but the game still has to be played. Gender cannot be wished away, but on the contrary must be asserted. Instead of a history of gender (and its social construction), we have a gendered history. Or rather, any history of gender is always already a gendered history, even androgyny—as some feminists, as well as some philosophers since Plato, have dreamt it to be—remains a gendered androgyny. Gender, in this sense, is fundamental. The point here is to question how gendering *works*, not to deny gendering as such; in other words, to criticize the hierarchy between genders, and to reverse, or rather subvert, it. And, further, the difference must be asserted, instead of denied in the name of a unisex model, whether male or female.

Another feminist dilemma may be that, on the one hand, speaking to ordinary women about ordinary things that matter to them seems to be condoning women's exploitation (if, for instance, motherhood is seen as part of their "biological" exploitation). On the other hand, to propose a "superwoman" model seems to betray the cause of ordinary women, to assert an elitist view addressed to religious virtuosos (who tend to be educated, leisurely, Western, or Westernized women). A similar dilemma confronts Buddhism. Contrary to other great religions, it has little to say about the domestic sphere. Unlike Christianity, for instance, it did not try to legislate with respect to marriage and the rules of alliance. Buddhism limited its interventions to the entry and exit points of being (birth and death), or to specific times when relations with the ultramundane were needed for the well-being of the household. Thus, although Buddhist magical rites played a crucial role in the strategies of alliance and reproduction, they did not become the object of a specific (valorized) discourse, and thus have been neglected by scholars. It is, however, in this area that Buddhism had the most contact with "ordinary" women, at the risks of compromising its orthodoxy with "heterodox rites" (*gebō*) and of confusing its priests with marginals. When it comes to conjugal matters, Buddhism is strangely silent, almost indifferent: it lends its arsenal of love rites to men and women, in particular to women in search of a husband or desiring a male child. Buddhism also heals "feminine" (that is, venereal) diseases (related to menstruation and so forth). The soft underbelly of Buddhism has to do with the soft underbelly of women. Tantric sexuality, as it has been extolled by some feminist scholars, is also a rejection of "normal" (that is, conjugal and procreative) sex, and by the same token, of women's traditional status (and, which is not quite the same, of traditional women).

The question of gender leads to the question of transcendence (beyond polarity). If male/female constitutes a root metaphor for positions (not essences), there will always be a high/low, a tendency to valorize in sexual/

gender terms. One may dream of a purely postmodern *differance*, but even that approach needs a logocentric discourse to deconstruct. Georges Lakoff and Mark Johnson did not emphasize enough the sexual side of the “metaphors we live by.” Gender (male/female) is the root metaphor we live by. It is also this metaphor that was put into play by medieval Japanese Buddhists when they argued that women had to be reborn as male in order to obtain salvation. The tendency to reduce gender to other social data is often at the detriment of the fundamental feminist insight that all history, every experience, is gendered. To contextualize it is to neuter it.

The study of Buddhist teaching through the lens of gender leads us to question what we call “Buddhism.” Too often we identify it with orthodoxy, which is only the “straight” and rigid *doxa*. The most creative part of Buddhist discourse might be originating in the margins. Thus, it is important to explore less conventional elements of Buddhist discourse, as long as one remains aware of their marginality, and does not try to pass them off as orthodox, or even mainstream, Buddhism.<sup>38</sup> But we are here at the limit, where Buddhist discourse risks dissolving into its “others.” Egalitarian elements in Buddhist discourse are like embers that could be fanned into a fire, but this does not mean that there ever *was* such a fire. Any tradition, in order to survive, has to play with fire, to flirt with otherness, at the risk of losing itself. And Buddhism did lose itself in India, to take one example. But would it have been better, or even possible, to preserve identity through misogyny and other forms of xenophobia?

Finally, I cannot avoid a personal question, namely: can a male scholar, being both judge and interested party (but who is not?), write about women? Perhaps not, but about gender, yes. As long as we recognize that there is no neutral ground: this makes the situation of a male speaking about sexuality and sex/gender difference quite uncomfortable, and, in a sense, too easy—a little like a bourgeois claiming to work for the proletarian revolution. This book, like any book, is a gendered history—more precisely, a male-gendered one. It has no pretense of being “neutral” or “objective.” But again, I offer no apologies: I like differences, and I dislike the monolithic discourse of ideology, whether in patriarchal or in feminist garb.

The feminine viewpoint is probably forever (or at least in this present reincarnation) beyond my reach. Is to be a woman, however, sufficient to speak in the name of these silenced voices? The impossibility, if it is one, may extend to scholars of both sexes. To speak in the name of women is only to assume the same right as Buddhist monks, to reproduce the same effects of power. As noted earlier, there is a certain well-intentioned ventriloquism in the work of some feminist scholars who claim to make Asian women of bygone ages “speak.” As far as I am concerned, it would proba-

bly be safer to limit myself to deconstructing the dominant discourse of the tradition and to poach on Buddhist (as well as feminist) preserves, rather than attempting to break new ground and open new territories. But in so doing, I may find the traces of other, past poachers, and, not so surprisingly, discover that these elusive poachers were women. What we have in common, if not gender, would be a certain pleasure in crossing the lines, enjoying the thrill of transgression. Of course, my transgression remains timid and textual, whereas theirs was quite real. If, as Hélène Cixous once stated, “feminine texts are texts that ‘work on the difference,’ strive in the direction of difference,” then my work can be said to possess a certain feminine quality, one apparently at odds with my gender and sex. Not surprisingly, the kind of feminism I feel attracted to is a form of deconstruction that, in the words of Julia Kristeva, teaches us how to “recognize the unspoken in all discourse, however revolutionary, how to emphasize at each point whatever remains unsatisfied, repressed, new, eccentric, incomprehensible, that which disturbs the mutual understanding of the established powers.”<sup>39</sup> Here is the transference part that objectivist historians tend to forget: To every Buddhist, as well as to the author of these lines and the reader—the words used by Derrida in the case of Nietzsche could be applied: “Il avait affaire en lui à tant de femmes”—castrated women, castrating women, affirmative women.<sup>40</sup>

The first part of the book addresses the normative and symbolic discourses about women. The “common Buddhist” perspective described in this section reflects the standpoint available to a literate Japanese Buddhist, not the historically specific perspective that may satisfy a Western historian of religions. Chapter 1 examines the evolution of the female monastic order in Asia, and the constraints imposed on nuns. The next four chapters deal with what I have called the Buddhist rhetorics about women. Chapter 2 studies the Buddhist discourse on gender; it takes up the “rhetoric of subordination,” based on patriarchal topoi such as the Five Obstacles and the Three Dependences that denied full autonomy to women, not unlike the Eight Strict Rules had done to nuns. Another serious constraint was allegedly “biological,” and therefore this chapter also examines the blood taboos that developed around women, as well as the gendered bias of Buddhist “embryology.” Chapters 3 and 4 focus on what I call the “rhetorics of salvation and equality”: in particular, the soteriological discourse of Buddhism developed around themes such as the buddhahood of the *nāga*-princess and the promise made by the Buddha Amida to accept women in his Pure Land (with the “minor” condition that they should first be reborn as males). The Tantric and Chan egalitarian discourses are then exposed as ideological, and complementary to the rhetoric of subordination, rather than opposed to it. The second part (chapters 5 and

6) looks at various positive images of Buddhist women, as well as negative Buddhist images of women, to reveal that these images, in both cases, are much more ambivalent than they may look. Of particular interest is the image of the monk's mother: this is the subject of chapter 5.

The third part of the book emphasizes the role played in literature and society by "transgressive" women, examining the cases of various categories of women who, unlike the Buddhist nuns, were living on the fringes of or outside the Buddhist saṅgha. It shows how, with the implantation of Buddhism in Japanese society, a kind of Buddhist "dialectic of transgression" was able to develop in response to women's infringements. Chapter 6 analyzes the role and status of female mediums. Chapter 7 takes up in particular the logic of exclusion that characterizes the "prohibition against women entering sacred areas" (*nyonin kekkai*), focusing on the case of sacred mountains. Chapter 8 emphasizes the importance of courtesans and other "wandering women," and considers their colorful relations with Buddhist monks. Chapter 9, finally, relies on folkloric sources to explore the theme of the liminal woman in her many incarnations.