

Research Center for World Buddhist Cultures, Ryukoku University
Special Lecture 2016

Theme	Can Women Attain Enlightenment through Vajrayāna Practices?
Date	April 11, 2016, 17:00~18:30
Place	Ryukoku University, Ōmiya Campus, Seikō, second floor conference room
Presenter	Dr. Yael Bentor (Professor, Hebrew University of Jerusalem)
Commentator	Dr. Sudan Shakya (Associate Professor, Shuchiin University)
Opening Remarks	Yūshō Wakahara (Professor, Ryukoku University)
Moderator	Takahiko Kameyama (Research Assistant, Research Center for World Buddhist Cultures)
Sponsor	Research Center for World Buddhist Cultures, Ryukoku University
Cosponsor	Ryukoku Learned Society (Ryukoku gakkai)
Supporter	Research Center for Buddhist Cultures in Asia, Ryukoku University
Number of Participants	20

【Main Point】

Dr. Yael Bentor, a scholar of Tibetan Buddhism and language, gave a lecture titled “Can Women Attain Enlightenment through Vajrayāna Practices?” In the lecture, Dr. Bentor examined the Pāli, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna Buddhist view on women, and pointed out that the influential figures in Tibetan Buddhist tradition, such as Tsong-kha-pa, declared the possibility that not only men but also women actually attain enlightenment within their bodies through the practices of Vajrayāna Buddhism. Such

view of Dr. Bentor seems to be completely different from those of previous works, and significantly unique.

■ Pāli Literature

According to some Pāli *Sutta*, Pāli Buddhist literature, such as the *Bahudhātuka Sutta* [*Sutta* 115. 15] in the *Majjhima Nikāya*, women basically cannot attain enlightenment. It is also said that women are not able to reach the following five states: Fully Enlightened One, Wheel-turning Monarch, Indra, Māra, and Brahmā. On the other hand, however, there are the Pāli texts which state that women are able to realize Arhatship. In addition, the episode of the Bhikkhuni Somā suggests the possibilities that both men and women equally attain enlightenment.

■ Mahāyāna Literature

The generalization that the Pāli Buddhist tradition is to be characterized by a misogynic attitude, while the Mahāyāna is more egalitarian is now known to have been an exaggeration. Of course, *kulaputra* and *kuladuhitr* (sons and daughters of good families) are referred to in an equal manner in the Mahāyāna sūtras. However, it isn't the whole things. According to the early Chinese translation of the *Sukhāvativyūha Sūtra* translated during 2nd or 3rd century, there are no women in Amitābha's Pure Land. Women have to be transformed into men in order to be born there. In the *Bodhisattva-Bhūmi*, Asaṅga strongly asserts that women cannot be enlightened. However, the *Lotus Sūtra* includes the famous episode that the eight year-old daughter of Sāgara, the Nāga king, attained enlightenment by means of changing into a male body. And also, in the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Verses* (*Aṣṭa-sāhasrikā-prajñā-pāramitā Sūtra*), there is another episode that the Buddha predicts Gaṅgā-devī will be born as a man and attain enlightenment in the Buddha Lands.

■ Vajrayāna Literature

In the manuals of Vajrayāna practices, the practices which a man and woman perform together are generally described from the perspective of the male practitioner. On the other hand, the "tantric union" is designed to be a mutually liberative practice for both female and male participants. As Tsong-kha-pa (1357-1419), one of the most influential figures in Tibetan Buddhist tradition, says, the female and male practitioners respectively represent "wisdom" (*prajñā*) and "means" (*upāya*), and the union of such wisdom and means is considered to be a foundation of the Bodhisattva's path to enlightenment. Unlike the Pāli and Mahāyāna, in the Vajrayāna Buddhism, practitioners do not have to undergo death and rebirth in order to attain enlightenment. The path to attain enlightenment is equally open to both male and female.

【Conclusion】

As described above, Dr. Bentor's view on the possibility that women attain Enlightenment is different from those of previous works. She actively attempts to discover the significance of women in Vajrayāna Practices.

Both the Pāli and Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions basically negate the possibility that women can attain enlightenment. However, as clearly indicated in the story of the daughter of the Nāga king or that of the Gaṅgā-devī, they also struggle with the tensions between two positions to disallow women to attain enlightenment and to allow them. In addition, the *Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra* explains "Neither with female body nor with a

male body is true enlightenment attained...for there is no achieving perfect enlightenment in any way.” The idea of “emptiness” is the foundation of this thought.

If, as Tsong-kha-pa explains, the female practitioner and male practitioner are respectively regarded as the wisdom (*prajñā*) and means (*upāya*), is their relationship equated with that between object and subject? Or, the female practitioner may be merely used by the male practitioner for the purpose of his attainment of enlightenment. Are these statements really justified?

As Miranda Shaw describes, there should be no barriers to the female Vajrayāna practitioner’s attainment of enlightenment at any level.

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