

Introduction

Scholars investigating sexual stereotypes in our society are becoming increasingly aware of assumptions made about women and the effect of these assumptions on women. Traditional religious stories, images, and ideals absorbed by members of a culture are frequently vehicles of misogynist views. This presentation of literature from the more recent Buddhist tradition known as Mahāyāna attempts to provide examples of the variety of images of the feminine which may have been potent forces in formulating the self-concept of women in Buddhist societies.

Are Buddhist portraits of women the same as those in Western society? Do the images of the sacred and the divine, as constructed by male Buddhists, include the feminine? Are notions of sexuality viewed as compatible with notions of the sacred? The following readings are designed to furnish answers to these questions.

Many sympathetic to the teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism believe it to be an egalitarian religion, more supportive of women than either the earlier form of Buddhism or other religions. Indeed, there are positive images of the feminine in the Mahāyāna tradition, and laywomen and nuns play an active role in Buddhist religious practices. However, texts preserved in the Buddhist canon reveal a wide spectrum of views, most of which reflect male attitudes, the educated religious elite, whose views do not often reflect sexual egalitarianism.

Like Judaism and Christianity, Buddhism is an overwhelmingly male-created institution dominated by a patriarchal power structure. As a consequence of this male dominance, the feminine is frequently associated with the secular, powerless, profane, and imperfect. Male Bud-