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Feminism & Buddhism

It is often difficult to find religions or schools of thought that support feminist ideas because of the historical masculinization of thought, religion, and philosophy. In this paper, I will argue that several ideas within the Buddhist tradition relate to feminism and help to advance certain goals of the movement. I will specifically focus on the concepts of emptiness and essence as tools for feminist philosophy. I will also argue that Buddhism inherently promotes gender equality as a necessary condition of the tradition of thought and not just as a feminist interpretation. To make a thoughtful analysis and comparison of Buddhism to the ideas of feminism, I will be using texts from Robert Wright, Rita Gross, and Stephen Batchelor.

When referring to the feminist movement and feminism in general throughout this paper, I will be focusing specifically on the gender hierarchy and gender equality. The definition of feminism is the social, political, and economic equality of all people regardless of gender identity, race, sexual orientation, or other identities. Feminism is necessarily intersectional, and the applied Buddhist concept of emptiness is helpful to all minoritized identities. However, because most of the historical contexts and examples rely on gender identity, that is the intersection I will focus on most in this paper.

The idea of emptiness from the Buddhist perspective is complex and difficult to grasp. Emptiness is not some abstract idea that is separate from reality but allows people to better understand and cope with the world around them. As Batchelor puts it, "A life centered in awareness of emptiness is simply an appropriate way of being in this changing, shocking, painful, joyous, frustrating, awesome, stubborn, and ambiguous reality." The world is empty of certain things including independent self-existence. Things do not inherently exist independently of one another, but everything exists within and because of everything else. All things exist interdependently. This means that things do not have specific essences, because without their individual parts the whole object cannot exist.

It is difficult for most people to accept the idea of emptiness and reject essentialism. The world is inherently structured by binary categories. The most prominent example of this is gender. Gender hierarchies have existed for many centuries, and it is difficult for some to accept that the categories of man and women are intrinsically empty. Most assume they need to be able to categorize other things and people in order to make sense of the world around them. Frustration emerges when people try to challenge the categories of gender. Transgender people receive backlash because it complicates the world for those who are cisgender, but if cisgender people could accept the interconnectedness of the world and reject their need for essentialism, there would be more support for gender identities that deviate from the binary categories.

Wright discusses the idea of essentialism in his chapter, "The Upside of Emptiness." He explains Paul Bloom's idea that essentialism is part of human nature and something that results from instincts. I agree with this to a certain extent, as stated previously, and I believe that humans feel the need to assign essence to certain things (including other humans) because it is the easiest way to understand themselves in relation to others. I relate these ideas to the concept of implicit bias. Implicit bias is "Also known as implicit social cognition, implicit bias refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner" (Understanding Implicit Bias). Implicit biases result from beliefs about essences of whole groups of people. When someone has implicit bias about a group or class of people, they assume each member of that community holds the same kind of essence.

The assumption of essence inherently limits our experience within the world. When people associate a particular essence with certain groups of people, they miss out on interactions with those groups. Stereotypes, stigmas, and generalizations are examples of the assumption of essence within society. Different groups appropriate or have designated for them particular stigmas associated with their identities which then assigns them an essence that is not truly representative of that group. Because of these assumed essences, implicit bias occurs. People are immensely complex and should be taken for different things, not just the assumptions and essences that are assigned to them for arbitrary reasons such as the color of their skin or their gender identity.

Implicit biases are subconscious, but they can be managed through exposure. When people have positive experiences with someone from a group toward whom they have implicit biases or prejudices, they are likely to realize their assumptions or assigned essences are incorrect. They are able to realize the emptiness of the categorization that they have assigned to these people. This theory is known as the Contact Hypothesis. The Contact Hypothesis, also known as the Intergroup Contact Theory, "states that under appropriate conditions interpersonal contact is one of the most effect ways to reduce prejudice between majority and minority group members" (Schiappa et al.). Often times, people will avoid the group that they are prejudiced against, prejudice which is a direct result of false generalizations that portray a group in a negative way (Schiappa et al.). What Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes identify as generalizations, I would assign the concept of essence.

If the positive representation of minoritized characters increases, it follows that public opinion about and support of the minoritized group will also increase. When people realize essence cannot be assigned to an entire community by exposing themselves to people from the community against which they hold prejudice, they are able to better experience the world because their interactions become more intersectional rather than becoming complacent and comfortable within their own experiences.

Batchelor recognizes the difficulty in separating essences from people and accepting emptiness: "To experience emptiness is to experience the shocking absence of what normally determines the sense of who you are and the kind of reality you inhabit. It may last only a moment before the habits of a lifetime reassert themselves and close in once more. But for that moment we witness ourselves and the world as open" (Batchelor). We are socialized to make distinctions and categorize one another based on perceived essences. It can be difficult to rid ourselves of those habits, but when it does happen, it is enlightening. Emptiness promotes feminist ideas because it pushes people to reject their implicit biases and promote the well-being of others who may not belong to their social group.

The rejection of essence and the adoption of emptiness allows for the advancement of minoritized identities. Emptiness has been utilized in the past for the empowerment of women specifically within the Buddhist tradition. Buddhism has argued against the idea that men are inherently superior to women because categories including gender are empty, and women therefore have the ability to achieve Nirvana and other goals of the tradition (Gross 91). Women have not been denied the opportunity to be honored and recognized as important figures within the Buddhist traditions, as is typically seen with other religions and schools of thought. Because man cannot exist without woman and vice versa, and because the categories of 'manness' and 'womanness' do not necessarily exist, there is no room for a gender hierarchy. "Furthermore, taken together, the concepts of emptiness and Buddha nature provide a very firm basis to argue that gender equality is a normative, rather than an optional position for Buddhists" (Gross et al.).

A potential objection to this argument would be the implications of the ways gender is socialized. The categories of man and woman do have meaning within the world for the most part, and most people do not understand them to be arbitrary. It would be difficult if not impossible to understand the world as interconnected because of the ways in which language is structured to create binary categories and even with the adoption of the idea of emptiness, it may not be possible to fully escape assigning essence to certain groups of people.

I believe this objection is valid and I do think it would be impossible for everyone to see the world as interconnected and void of essence. Essentialism is a primary way that humans make sense of their perceptions. However, the argument that I would like to make is if the world and things within it could be viewed as empty, then the advancement of disenfranchised and minoritized groups would follow. The argument that everything in the world is interconnected and depends on each other provides support to the feminist agenda of creating a world in which all people can be considered equal.

Feminism can borrow ideas from the Buddhist tradition in order to improve the equality among different groups of people. Though we categorize and assign essence to units as a way of understanding, and though implicit biases can result from this assignment, it is possible to reduce implicit bias through parasocial and intersocial contact. Viewing the world as free from essence expands possibilities of experience for people whereas assigning essences limits the experience of the world.

Works Cited

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