

Sakyadhita

International Association of Buddhist Women

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Sakyadhita's 30th Anniversary: Celebrating the Daughters of the Buddha
Rotraut (Jampa) Wurst

Visakha: The Chief Female Benefactor of the Buddha
Asoka Bandarage

Sexual Assault and Rape Awareness
Upasaka Khemacari

In Memory of a Refuge-Maker: The Angry Asian Buddhist
Chenxing Han

Calm, Clear Compassion
Malia Dominica Wong, OP

The Ethics of Giving
Karma Lekshe Tsomo

Learning Leadership in Hawai'i
Namgyel Lhamo

Buddha in Your Heart
Margaret Coberly

Debate: A First in Buddhist Women's History
Akasha

Tangling with Death and Bureaucracy
Rotraut (Jampa) Wurst

When an Upasika Unties the Knot
Thuc Cong (Tathaloka)

The Gender Question
Rotraut (Jampa) Wurst

News

Further Reading



CELEBRATING THE DAUGHTERS OF THE BUDDHA

by Rotraut (Jampa) Wurst

The 15th Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women, held at The University of Hong Kong from June 22 to 28, 2017, also commemorated the 30th anniversary of Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women. Attended by more than 800 participants, male and female, from 32 different countries, the conference focused on the theme, "Contemporary Buddhist Women: Contemplation, Cultural Exchange & Social Action." This theme encouraged lively discussions on the breadth and depth of Buddhist women's activities.

Sakyadhita's "herstory" began with the first international gathering of Buddhist women in 1987 in Bodhgaya, India, where the Buddha became enlightened. This initial gathering, the first in 2,500 years of Buddhist history, opened the doors for women to exchange their experiences and knowledge of diverse Buddhist traditions, to become acquainted, and to discuss issues of great importance, including whether and how disrupted lineages of women's ordination can be restored. Since that extraordinary conference, Sakyadhita conferences have been held in many different places, such as Thailand, Sri Lanka, Ladakh, South Korea, Mongolia, and Indonesia. In accordance with Sakyadhita's aim of social equity, the conferences are open to all – men, women, and children of all religions and none.

The 15th Sakyadhita in Hong Kong featured daily morning meditations taught by teachers of diverse Buddhist traditions, including Theravāda, Korean, Vietnamese, Tibetan, Nichiren, and Zen. At the morning and afternoon panels, speakers discussed topics related to Buddhist women in Hong Kong and across cultures, mindfulness, Buddhism and social action, family,

education, gender equality, and monastic life – topics that were brought to life in innumerable workshops. Some talks provided insights on new topics: “Himalayan Feminism” by Sonam Choden, “Social Change, Breath by Breath” by Shelley Anderson, “Learning Monastic Discipline and the Communal Life of Myanmar *Thilashin*” by Hiroko Kawanami, and “Following Old Trails, Breaking New Ground: Establishing the First Tibetan Buddhist Nunnery in Germany” by Thubten Choedron and Thubten Jampa.

There were so many wonderful workshops, it was hard to decide where to go. Very exciting! The spectrum was immense. For example, there was “Chaos, Creativity, and Gender” by Ruth Richards and Ting Chuk Lai, and “A Photographic Journey with Himalayan Nuns” by Olivier Adam. Olivier, a world-renowned photographer, documented the Hong Kong conference as a volunteer, just as he did in Indonesia. He not only donates his time and travel expenses, but he also offers his wonderful photos to Sakyadhita and is a great joy to work with. His photos clearly convey the special atmosphere of the conference.

Meditation workshops were also held in the afternoons; for example, “The Benefit of Meditation” by Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, president of Sakyadhita International since 2013. Many workshops dealt with art, such as “The Art of Mindful Batik,” and “Empty Hand, Empty Brush: A Contemplative Immersion into Brush Painting,” which incorporated body and breathing exercises before working with brush and ink. Other workshops dealt with music, such as “Music and Zen Buddhism: Playing Handpan to Understand One’s Inner Self,” and, naturally, *Dharma Rap*.

I have led *Dharma Rap* workshops ever since the 10th Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, 2008. Since that time, it has become a tradition to include a rap performance at the closing ceremony of the conferences. Using rap music is a way of reaching out to the younger generation by presenting *Dharma* in an idiom that young people can relate to. Another workshop I organized, “LGBTQQI,” has also become a tradition over the years, providing an important forum for discussing sexual diversity. Interest in this workshop is very high among both monastics and laity, allowing many people to speak out and ask questions in a safe space for the first time.

As usual at the Sakyadhita conferences, a range of cultural programs and Dharma talks were presented in the evenings, and at the end, we enjoyed a two-day tour to sites of cultural interest. After 30 years of dedicating her life to working for Sakyadhita, Ven. Prof. Karma Lekshe Tsomo retired from organizing the international conference. Now this task needs to be distributed to different committees, which is both exciting and challenging. But with her encouragement, we are confident that the conferences will continue every two years.

We are pleased to announce that the 16th Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women will be held in Australia! Details will be available on the Sakyadhita website. Members will also be informed by email, so please remember to renew your membership for 2017!



Buddhist women share ideas and experiences.

SEXUAL ASSAULT AND RAPE AWARENESS

by Upasaka Khemacari

Recently, the news has been focused on sexual misconduct and the subject is now an open topic of discussion. Sexual intimidation, misconduct, assault, and rape can happen to anybody of any gender. However, because of power inequalities, sexual misconduct between men and women is the most frequent, or at least the most frequently reported. This short essay includes general observations and is not meant as advice to specific individuals or to any particular circumstances.

It is important to recognize that sexual assault is not about sex. It is about power and punishment. Therefore, the victim can never be “at fault”; the fault is always with the perpetrator.

What can people do to protect themselves? This question has no simple answers. For devout Buddhist practitioners and monastics, the question is even more difficult. Before I discuss some strategies, we need to cover some general fundamentals.

Most people rarely think about crime, whereas many criminals think about it all the time. What may seem foreign to us is ordinary to them. Sexual attacks and rape are not unusual and often go unreported. People do not like to talk about these things, but silence about sexual crimes makes them more common and more hurtful to the victim. According to the National Violence Resource Center, one of every five women and one of every 71 men will be raped in their lifetime (rcnv.org), and it is probably much higher. In general, about a third of all people, at sometime during their lifetime, will be subject to physical or emotional sexual coercion. Most people do not report it.

Sexy people are not, “asking for it”, do not “deserve it,” and are not more likely to be attacked. Remember, sexual assault is about dominance and punishment rather than desire for sexual pleasure. And, the attackers are not necessarily young, single, or highly sexed individuals either, because the attack is not about sex. Most assailants attack many times, until they are reported and caught. Attackers almost never act only once. One organization reports around six incidents take place before being reported (projectcallisto.org).



Panel presentations on Buddhism and Social Action

Attackers often start with an act of violence such as a punch to the face. The attack then escalates to rape, and sometimes ends in murder. The violence can often be extreme and a victim may even suffer broken bones before the rape, and endure further humiliation afterwards by acts of disrespect such as being urinated on, because the perpetrator views the victim as an object, a class of thing, rather than as an individual.

Anyone can be a victim and anyone can be an attacker. People traveling in groups are much less likely to be assaulted. Having been attacked once does not ensure that it won't happen again. Only by avoiding behaviors that make you more vulnerable can you be safer. Having been attacked once before, and being in denial about the attack, can even make one more vulnerable to another attack because you could trust the same person in similar circumstances. A repeat attack is even possible if the attacker is known to you, especially if the first attack goes unreported.

It is possible for a sexual assault to be physiologically pleasurable, but not mentally. This is anatomical; the nerves of the erogenous zones and genitalia are wired for pleasure. Stimulating them may give rise to sensations of pleasure, just like being forced into a cold room makes one feel cold. This

does not mean that one "enjoys" the sensation; it is simply physiology. This should never be a cause for guilt. Human beings have no control over their nerve endings. Mentally, an assault causes fear, pain, and anguish, and the fact that the genitals may feel pleasure or tingling causes unwarranted confusion and guilt. To continue feeling guilt gives power to the attacker long after the attack ended.

It is important to have compassion towards oneself after suffering a frightening and painful assault. And, in order to avoid self-recrimination, this compassion must include forgiving oneself. Feeling guilt or shame, thinking 'If only I had not done this, not been there, not trusted that person, or not seen the warning signs,' is blaming the victim. Those who are assaulted did nothing to deserve it, are not at fault, and need not share any blame.

Buddhists recognize that the perpetrators of assault are also suffering. The mind of an attacker is unbalanced and is creating bad *karma*. In this respect, it is good to forgive them. If that is difficult or impossible, trust that the consequences of the action (*karma*) will ripen in time and feel compassion for the sorrowful state the attacker will be born into. If that too is difficult or impossible, then practice self-forgiveness, self-compassion, and then try to extend that to the attacker. Use

this practice to give up anger, which can be very damaging to oneself. Gradually, practice letting go and try to put the incident behind you. By not focusing on it, the hurtfulness loses its power.

Forgiving does not mean that one should let the person get away with the crime. There are civil laws in every country. Making a report might be humiliating and troublesome, but it is necessary to protect other people from a similar assault.

The *vinaya* (monastic codes) clearly absolve blame for those who experience sexual assault, since there was no desire for the incident to happen. There is no *karmic* consequence for the victim of the assault, no transgression of precepts, and no need to disrobe. If one created unwholesome actions during the attack, this need not hinder one's practice. Remember the story of Angulimala, the serial killer, who created unimaginable bad *karma* but still became an *arhant*. In the *Surangama Sutra*, there is a story about a prostitute named Matangi, who tried to seduce Ananda, but then renounced desire, became a *bhikkhuni*, and entered the Dharma path.

Avoiding dangerous situations is wiser than attempting to fight someone off. Fighting someone off is not always possible or successful. There are resources that offer support for victims of sexual assault, such as the National Sexual Assault telephone hotline: (1 800-656-HOPE). Turn to professionals and compassionate friends for help. There is no need to tell everyone about the incident, just those who can help.

What Can Be Done to Avoid Attack?

It is important to understand the varied circumstances in which attacks take place. A benefactor may demand sex in return for a favor. A person in a position of authority may exploit someone who is vulnerable. A relative may be opposed to a family member's decision to join the sangha and be convinced that having sex would sway the person to give up the religious life. A trusted person may exploit someone who is emotionally disturbed or upset. Someone may taunt a person with offensive sexual comments, and then if displeased by the response, may take the verbal assault further until it escalates into rape.

A friendly stranger may offer someone a lift. A taxi driver may take someone to a remote spot for a gang rape. A householder may invite a nun to bless his house, but when the nun arrives, he is alone. Someone may lie in ambush for a person. Someone may break into a residence and attack a person alone there. A stranger may punch someone unconscious and drag the person to a secluded spot.

There are many circumstances that can go wrong, however, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (bjs.gov), most attackers are either acquaintances or family members and the potential for being attacked by a random stranger is rare. Rarest of all is the committed stalker who identifies a victim beforehand.

Safeness must become a normal habit and not descend into paranoia.

Mindfulness is the Best Protection

Reflecting on these circumstances, it becomes clear that increased mindfulness would be protective. Often a threat is not obvious. Even when it is, we may choose to ignore it. People often wear ear buds, or are looking at their phones, or just have their senses shut down.

Mindfulness can protect us, especially if we extend our awareness to our surroundings and interactions. Mindfulness can keep us safe by preventing paranoia and fear. As in all things, a middle way between fear and over-confidence is best. Mindfulness must be constant and include an awareness of internal states, both of oneself and others. Being attentive to body language gives us clues about whether a person is trustworthy or intent on harm. Even assuming no ill intent, it is best to avoid places where harm can happen.

Mindfulness of our surroundings and other people is essential – constant but not intrusive. We need to know what places and times are safe. A place that is safe in the daytime may not be safe at night. In an unfamiliar place, it is good to ask the locals. Even if an area seems safe, be alert. With practice, we can begin to trust our intuition. Make sure a place is as secure as possible before meditating or sleeping. Make it a habit to look after oneself. Awareness of the surroundings, including people, will ward off most dangers.

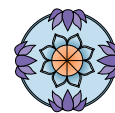
Avoid being either timid, slumped over, or aggressively confident. People who look like victims or behave like victims may become victims. People who behave arrogantly or provoke challenges are likely to be challenged. The confidently humble usually go unnoticed.

Buddhist Practices

Chanting the *Paritta Sutta* or *dharanis* of protection help us stay safe, but at the time of an attack, we are likely to forget. There is no substitute for mindfulness practice and continuous awareness of our surroundings. We cannot rely on externals to keep us safe.

After an attack, Buddhists practice compassion for the sufferings of others, including attackers, victims, and ourselves. In times of stress, Buddhists recall the unsatisfactory nature of things. They also reflect on impermanence, remembering that all conditioned phenomena will pass away; nothing remains and all are not-self.

The company of good friends is very strengthening. We can put aside any feelings of shame or blame and practice loving kindness for everyone, including ourselves. Recalling the Buddha's teachings, we continue to strive diligently for liberation. In that enlightened state, the woes of this tainted world will seem powerless.





IN MEMORY OF A REFUGE-MAKER: THE ANGRY ASIAN BUDDHIST

by Chenxing Han

"Any project about young Asian American Buddhists sounds amazing, so I will be happy to support in any way I can." These were the first words that Aaron Lee wrote to me. Having known him up to this point only as "Arun," the pseudonym used by the author of the Angry Asian Buddhist blog, I wasn't sure what – or who – to expect when my master's thesis advisor, Scott Mitchell, introduced us over email.

I knew from perusing Arun's blog posts that he was male, though many assumed the Angry Asian Buddhist was female. But other identifying details remained a mystery. Despite his impassioned articles on issues of race in American Buddhism, Arun's ethnicity was ambiguous. Was he Thai, Cambodian, or Vietnamese (he seemed to know these languages)? Or perhaps Japanese (he seemed familiar with Shin Buddhism in America)? Maybe Burmese or Bangladeshi (he shared Buddhism-related news from these countries)? Geographically, Arun was hard to pin down, too. The blog revealed connections to the Bay Area, Southern California, Paris, and rural Illinois, among other places. Even his Buddhist affiliation was not entirely clear. He mentioned an affinity for Theravada Buddhism, but also wrote about visits to Mahayana Buddhist communities.

It did not take long after that first email to learn that Aaron was Chinese (specifically, Toishanese) and Polish-Russian Ashkenazi Jewish, grew up in the Bay Area and Illinois and now lived in Southern California, and had strong connections to multiple forms of Buddhism. This latter point is somewhat of an understatement. After he connected me with dozens of Buddhist individuals and organizations for my research project, I wondered whether the assumption that "Aaron knows all Buddhists," which was becoming a running joke, might not be too far-fetched. As if to drive home this point, Aaron once told me the story of how, during a cab ride, he discovered that he knew one of his driver's relatives, a Bangladeshi Buddhist.

Over the next five years, until his too-soon death from

lymphoma in October 2017 at the age of 34, I had the honor of getting to know Aaron the person along with his Angry Asian Buddhist persona. In a 2012 interview with *Tricycle* magazine, Arun made clear that the two should not be conflated. Writing under a pseudonym made it possible for him to be any Asian American or, indeed, anyone advocating for the visibility and engagement of Asian American Buddhists, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, nationality, and so on.

Jeff Yang's description of the Angry Asian Man blog, an inspiration for Arun's writing, could well be applied to the Angry Asian Buddhist: "It is occasionally 'angry,' but primarily better described as open, passionate, and defiant about the rights of Asian Americans to be included, the need for Asian American voices to be heard, and the responsibility of Asian Americans to participate." I saw Arun's blog posts as a skillful means to combat the marginalization of, raise awareness about, and encourage participation from Asian American Buddhists, especially younger generations.

While Arun the blogger would sometimes employ a strident and sarcastic tone, Aaron the person was full of warmth and wit. His humor, generosity, curiosity, optimism, and enthusiasm were infectious. The first time we met in person, he had driven up to the Bay Area to attend TechnoBuddha, a conference for young adult Buddhists sponsored by the Buddhist Churches of America. In previous years, he had helped organize the conference. Despite being time-strapped and sleep-deprived as a first-year MBA student, Aaron spent hours completing an interview with me. The recording of our conversation is brimming with his signature stories and analogies, often punctuated by laughter.

Later that year, when I traveled to Southern California to



conduct more interviews, Aaron somehow found the time to give me a tour of several *sanghas* (including a meditation group where he was better known by his Vietnamese name Phu, and a *Mahayana* temple whose youth group he had supported over the years). He introduced me to various Buddhist friends, Asian American and otherwise, and treated me to numerous vegetarian meals. This was in addition to hosting me, baking espresso cookies, and driving me to the temples and restaurants he was eager for me to see. I returned

to the Bay Area thoroughly inspired by our conversations, overly caffeinated from the cookies, and happily armed with the newfound knowledge of how to compactly store plastic bags. (I've been folding them like paper footballs ever since).

In developing my research on young adult Asian American Buddhists into a book manuscript, I had the opportunity to read through more than eight years of Arun's blog posts. Tracing the evolution of his online writing. What struck me most was that Arun did not fancy himself the final arbiter of the issues he wrote about. Instead, he fervently grappled with the ideas he was exploring, consulting people both online and offline to check his own biases. "Angry" moniker notwithstanding, Arun willingly admitted his mistakes and apologized for miscommunications. Aaron and I reflected often on the complex realities of race and religion in America and the difficulties of commenting on these topics with precision and compassion. Far from being the rantings of a misanthrope, his writings are, in my view, (sometimes tough) love letters to the American Buddhist community from someone who sincerely studied and shared the Dharma, and wholeheartedly wanted to build more inclusive *sanghas*.

In recent years, Arun's blog posts became infrequent, as other priorities took precedence. Still, he celebrated seeing other Asian American Buddhist voices in print. After his cancer diagnosis in 2016, Aaron shared with me his motivation for a new blog:

"Be the Refuge" is something that I've thought about a lot since my diagnosis. When I was in pain, I used meditation as a refuge for my mind. In the hospital, I used my speech and actions as refuge for my family and caregivers – providing them with a space where they could feel calm, positive and helpful. In organizing marrow drives, I try to create a refuge for my friends from the powerlessness of being able to "do nothing" – a space where they feel empowered to provide meaningful assistance toward finding my cure.

Even though Aaron was able to beat the odds and find a match, the bone marrow transplant and other grueling treatments he undertook ultimately did not result in a cure. Yet even as his prognosis turned for the worse, Aaron was remarkably sanguine. He spoke of how, even if he died, he hoped his efforts to encourage more people, especially other mixed-race individuals, to sign up for the bone marrow registry could save others' lives.

"I'm not sure if I can align 'Angry Asian Buddhist' with 'Be the Refuge,' but maybe one day..." Aaron had mused. In fact, having heard from multiple interviewees about the sense of relief, recognition, and belonging they felt when reading the Angry Asian Buddhist blog, it would seem the blog was a refuge all along. At his memorial, held at Hsi Lai Temple in Los Angeles, many of us commented on how Aaron felt like an ongoing presence in our lives, urging us to create refuges – solidarity, community, and coalition – for and with each other.

That sunny afternoon, we joined our voices in chant as each of us carried a flower to the altar, raised it to our eyebrows with hands clasped in prayer, and bowed in respect. The seemingly endless procession of people overflowing out of the memorial pagoda were, I knew, just a small fraction of the lives that Aaron had touched. I watched as the enormous offering bowl, at first lightly sprinkled with buds, became a mountain of multicolored carnations. Looking at the photo of a beaming Aaron on the altar, it seemed as if he was saying to all of us, as he once wrote to me: "Whenever you may feel your energy flagging, know that somewhere I am quietly yet furiously cheering you on with a big smile :)"



CALM, CLEAR COMPASSION

by Malia Dominica Wong, OP

The words of the Master Pure Peace rang loud and clear: "If you don't stop, you are going to die. And if you die, you cannot continue to do good." Of course, she was right. This was my second bout of a major illness. My body had begun shutting down again.

Packing a bag, I cleared out my calendar. Five days. I committed to leave everything behind and focus only on the present moment, taking refuge with my *Dharma* sisters and teachers at the Chinese Buddhist temple. This decision reminded me of a bookmark that read, "Matter of life and death: Chant the name of the Buddha." I cut off all lines of communication, leaving cell phone and computer behind. With my last breath, I decided to give up everything for practice, spiritual cultivation.

It may sound grueling to wake up at 4:30 am to prepare for morning chanting, but, as a Catholic sister, waking up at 4:30 am and leaving for school at 5:30 am is normal. The sisters in my convent chant morning prayers, Gregorian style, at 5:30 am on school days. I am grateful to the nun who gets up even earlier to prepare breakfast for us all.

Master Pure Peace had left instructions for me with Pure Suchness, her *Dharma* sister who manages the temple. All I needed to do was rest and memorize the Great Compassion Mantra and the *Heart Sutra*. The power of the Great

Compassion *Mantra* is unexcelled. It is hard to explain. I really did try to memorize it. I carved out a daily schedule of Chan meditation while the others did the morning chanting. At 7:30 am, after breakfast and some light housekeeping, I began memorizing the Great Compassion Mantra, interspersed with walking meditation, until lunch at 11:30 am.

This was not the first time I had tried to memorize the Great Compassion Mantra. After the first day, I gave up, changed course, and tried to memorize the *Heart Sutra*. Sister Pure Suchness was kind and gentle, but also a strict taskmaster. She pointed at the Chinese characters on the hanging scroll and asked me to recite them. I explained that, although I was Chinese, I was American-born and could only read about every third character. I told her I was working on understanding the meaning and trying to memorize it that way. But she, being of the old school, emphasized memorization first. Understanding would come eventually, she said. I really did try hard.

Beyond the Great Compassion Mantra and the *Heart Sutra*, my greatest practice was the Ten Wholesome Actions. Long ago, Sister Pure Suchness taught me the phrase: “Calm, clear body. Calm, clear speech. Calm, clear mind.” I often reflected on this phrase. To me, it meant reaching the quantum-zero point of balance, perfection, and wholeness. I now saw it as the key to bringing myself back to health and harmony, in body, speech, and mind.

As Sister Pure Suchness explained, “Calm, clear body” refers to the virtues that purify the body: not to kill, steal, or engage in inappropriate sexual activity. To my mind, it also meant taking care of oneself: eating healthfully at regular times, taking appropriate rest, avoiding extra stress, taking regular exercise, and so on. Being at the temple to focus on my health was a rare and precious opportunity. I only needed to listen carefully to my *Dharma* sister’s words, accept her help, pause, and take a fresh look at my life.

Sister Pure Suchness explained that “Calm, clear speech” refers to the virtues that purify one’s speech: no lying, slander, harsh words, or gossip. Just as a naturopath had connected the dots that began my physical decline, I began tracing the subtle causes. Too much work had burnt out my adrenal glands. A year-long oppressive situation had stolen the remaining life in me. As I practiced at the temple, I did not ask “Why?” or resort to words of anger or blame. Instead, I chanted the name of the bodhisattva Quanyin over and over and over again. Listening carefully, I found my voice and true kindness again.

Sister Pure Suchness explained that “Calm, clear mind” refers to the virtues that purify the mind: no covetousness, malice, or incorrect views. As I continued trying to memorize the *Heart Sutra*, the only line that really stuck with me was the Perfection of Wisdom Mantra. Like a grounding wind, it spiraled into my mind, drawing me deeper into the vortex of understanding. What was important in my life? Another means of purification, the practice of repentance, led me to greater openness and compassion.

On the last day of my retreat, I awoke still restless. As

the nuns chanted the morning *sutras* and I meditated, I felt dissatisfied with my progress. I had found the rhythm of taking care of myself and was sure to grow stronger. But I could not memorize either the Great Compassion Mantra or the *Heart Sutra*, as recommended. Suddenly, as the nuns finished their chanting and it was time to get up from my zafu, I dropped into a deep powerful stillness. For a moment, I froze. A feeling of deep peace, clarity, and strength came over me.

My retreat ended on this happy note. As I left the temple, I expressed my gratitude to Sister Pure Suchness and the other nuns there. A bounce had returned to my step. I had returned home.



THE ETHICS OF GIVING

by Karma Lekshe Tsomo

The contemporary revitalization of Buddhism has occurred in tandem with the emergence of a thriving global Buddhist market economy. The conjunction of Buddhist ideals of *dāna*, generosity or selfless giving, and corporate capitalism has provided fertile ground for the commodification of an ancient renunciant tradition. Countless appeals for deserving charitable initiatives land in Buddhist followers’ mailboxes on a daily basis. The benefits of this meeting of Buddhist transnational giving and economic globalization are visible in the flourishing of Buddhist temples, institutes, and artistic endeavors around the world.

As economic expectations rise, however, so do Buddhists’ expectations of appropriate giving and just rewards. The cultivation of wealthy donors for the welfare of Buddhist projects has become an industry and a visible symbol of increasing expectations. This essay will explore the apparent contradictions in the constellation of renunciation and generosity; the fortunes of Buddhist temples, organizations, and individuals; and unbridled greed and consumerism. It considers the interface between virtue and responsibility, along with the potentially disastrous consequences of unwitting virtue.

The Buddhist goal of liberation means freedom from mental defilements or destructive emotions, freedom from suffering and dissatisfaction, and freedom from rebirth. Among the



destructive emotions, the cluster that concerns us includes desire, greed, clinging, and attachment. Some religions focus on hope for blessings, including material benefits. Many Hindu practices promise worldly boons. Modern Christian Evangelists preach a prosperity gospel: accepting Jesus as one's lord and savior results in material rewards, which are evidence of God's grace.

Traditionally, Buddhists aspired to a life of renunciation as a homeless wanderer (*sramana*) or, as a householder, at least tried to reduce desires. Enjoying material wealth was the result of good deeds created in the past, but the emphasis was on giving, not receiving, and on decreasing desires, not multiplying them. Today in the Buddhist world, however, acts of generosity are supporting a thriving global economy and some temples have become conspicuous displays of gold and jewels. Are Buddhists in the temple praying for enlightenment or prosperity?

An Economy of Merit

Buddhists believe that offering alms to monks is a meritorious action. The merits one accrues are believed to assure the donor and the donor's deceased relatives a better rebirth in their next life. The five benefits of practicing generosity are included in the *Anguttara* (v. 34):

1. Everybody will like you.
2. All your friends will be good people.
3. You will have a good reputation.
4. You will have lots of self confidence.
5. You will have a heavenly rebirth.

The tradition of almsgiving has been practiced in South Asia for thousands of years. Giving (*dana*) is a key Buddhist practice; in fact, it is the first of the ten perfections (*paramita*). Practiced together with morality, concentration, and wisdom, the practice of generosity is conducive to liberation from *samsara*. Some *bodhisattvas* go so far as to compassionately donate their limbs, like when the Buddha in a previous life gave the flesh from his thigh to the hungry tigress to prevent her from eating her cubs.

The merit accrued through the practice of generosity depends on three factors: the intention of the donor, the status of the recipient, and the nature of the gift. To give a pure offering to a monastic with pure intentions is thought to generate especially good merit; to give pure offerings to four or more fully ordained monastics with pure intentions is even better. In practice, this means giving offerings that are earned through right livelihood to someone with pure morality, without any expectation of return, such as praise, fame, or something in exchange. In an era of increased prosperity for the fortunate, this often means offering expensive gifts to those regarded as the most worthy recipients, that is, famous monks. This type of generosity, however well intended, can easily be tainted with pride, desire for personal recognition, or at least the desire for a higher rebirth. A common pitfall is that monks may become corrupted by the excessive generosity of devoted lay followers, especially laywomen, and become enamored of material wealth and bling.

The complex intersection of Buddhism and global economics turns on several key Buddhist principles, especially generosity, renunciation, merit, and the law of cause and effect. The first of these key concepts, generosity (*dana*) or giving, is a means to develop freedom from attachment to possessions, body, and life. The three types of generosity – giving material goods, Dharma teachings, and protection from fear – are practiced to promote the happiness of oneself and others, in this life and the next. Generosity is regarded a wholesome mind state; indeed, even the thought of giving something, no matter how small, is considered wholesome. The practice of generosity receives effusive praise; giving, especially to worthy recipients such as the Three Jewels, creates the cause for health, wealth, and beauty. The highly touted example of generosity, preserved in the Vessantara Jataka,¹ is the prince who gives away his wife and children, a legend in which Buddha Śākyamuni in a previous life perfects the virtue of generosity. The greater the generosity, the more virtuous. In the minds of many Buddhists, the net aggregate of wholesome thoughts, words, and deeds have become conceptualized, even concretized, as merit.

The second key concept, renunciation, is a staple of many religious traditions, with a very long history, especially in



South Asia. Renunciation means to renounce attachment and craving, including craving for sense pleasures, craving for existence, and craving for non-existence. Attachment to physical objects, mental states, or to the cyclic of existence is regarded as foolish, since all compounded things are impermanent and subject to decay. The idea is that by relinquishing attachment to the pleasures of this world, the practitioner allows space for and nurtures spiritual growth. Buddhist teachers emphasize that human life is short and human desires are endless; if we spend our time following our desires, this life will end before we have a chance to get down to serious *Dharma* practice. Instead of moving forward with mental cultivation, we will get caught up in meaningless activities, waste the opportunity for spiritual development, die with regret, and take rebirth “at the mercy of *karma* and delusion.” There is nothing inherently wrong with wealth; in fact, wealth is presented positively in the Buddha’s teachings. Being prosperous in this lifetime is interpreted to be the result of wholesome deeds in the past. The practice of generosity gives results in wealth and prosperity, which is a blessing because it gives one the leisure to engage in spiritual practice and because it enables one to perfect the virtue of generosity and put compassion into action by helping those in need.

The third key concept, the law of cause and effect, simply means that all actions give rise to consequences of like kind. Skillful actions give rise to pleasant consequences in this and future lives, whereas unskillful action give rise to unpleasant consequences. The practice of generosity creates the causes of future prosperity, whereas stinginess creates the seeds of future poverty. Since all beings want to be happy and no one wishes to suffer, it makes sense to sow the seeds of future happiness and prosperity rather than the seeds of future misery and poverty.

Human beings naturally benefit from the wholesome actions they create. Giving is its own reward, both as a wholesome action and also in its potential to bring joy. By giving, we open our hearts and grow in compassion. By sharing love and kindness to others, we help alleviate their suffering. Giving loses this potential if it is a calculated business transaction. The practice of giving, done with the pure motivation to help others, sows seeds that result in well-being for both the giver and receiver. Buddhists therefore highly value the practice of *dana* and many seek to practice it daily by giving alms to monks.

Based on these three core Buddhist concepts, it is common for Buddhist to practice generosity with enthusiasm. Some Buddhists even regard the practice of *dana* to be a moral imperative in a world of suffering. To make offerings to the Three Jewels – the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha – is considered especially meritorious. Representations of the Three Jewels are placed on the altar and offerings such as fruit, flowers, water, scent, and so forth are placed before them, with a bow of respect. It is common for adherents to make offerings to monasteries and to the Sangha, especially offerings of alms, robes, and medicines. These days other requisites are also offered, such as toothpaste, toothbrushes,

soap, towels, and so forth. Gifts of money are offered to monastics in some traditions, but are not accepted by all, for example, in Thailand.

Gradually, however, with greater wealth in the hands of Buddhists of a certain economic bracket, offerings have become larger and the anticipated results commodified. Many Buddhist parishioners have come to interpret the concept of merit in concrete terms, as if their acts of generosity are an exchange in which their donations to the temples and the monks (rarely nuns) earn them gold stars or brownie points towards enlightenment. Over time, donations to temples and monks may become aggregated into what appear to be Buddhist corporate structures. When Buddhists support renunciants and temples, their offerings are thought to earn merit that will bring them wealth, power, and beauty in the future. Their generosity also materially benefits the temple, and may be solicited, encouraged, and rewarded by worldly benefits such as public approval, improved social status, and recognition on plaques and in publications. If the donor’s motivation is tainted by these rewards, it is said to decrease the benefit karmically, but the plaques and publications endure undeterred.

In place of simple, functional buildings, which may seem most appropriate for renunciant communities, wealthy donors tend to support the construction of elaborate temples glistening with gold. The virtue of giving, ordinarily understood as sharing happiness and good fortune with others, is strategically directed toward high-ranking monks and Buddhist institutions, usually celibate communities. Offerings to famous, worthy, and ascetic monks and to well-respected monasteries are thought to accrue especially great merit. Large donations to build glitzy temples and Buddha halls are easier to come by than donations for education, meditation, or Buddhist social welfare projects.

What is going on in the minds of Buddhist donors when they make these donations? Some donors give simply because it is the custom in Buddhist countries to support monks and monasteries. Some see it as being helpful. For some, *dana* is a natural expression of their spiritual values; it is ethical to share one’s prosperity with others, especially the needy. In addition, and far more commonly, devotees interpret the practice of generosity as a means to ensure the future happiness of their families and themselves.

Many Buddhists also understand the practice of generosity as a way to compensate for misdeeds committed in the past. The logic is that wholesome actions such as generosity created in the present help outweigh or compensate for unwholesome actions created in the past. The name of a well-known temple in Bangkok, Wat Kanikapon, literally means “the temple built from the earnings of prostitutes.” Built by a famous madame in 1833 known as Grandmother Faeng, the temple was supported by the prostitutes at her nearby brothel and continues to enjoy the support of prostitutes to this day. Although the concept of making offerings to make amends for misdeeds insinuates a system of dispensation resembling indulgences, especially when money changes hands, it is

more subtle, operating according to the impersonal logic of cause and effect. And although the *karma* (cause/effect) system that equates good deeds with fortunate results and dastardly deeds with unfortunate results is said to be “inexorable,” a surfeit of skillful actions is assumed to diminish the effects of unskillful actions.

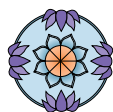
As is well known, Buddhists consider their actions to be a matter of personal choice and responsibility. Actions not only have *karmic* consequences, but also have social consequences. The decision to make donations to monks and monasteries has consequences not only for those monks, but also for the world economy and the environment. One example is the current trafficking in ivory that is used for carving Buddhist and Christian images. Another is the custom of offering large sums for monks and materials to conduct Buddhist funerals, which can literally bankrupt families. Another is the waste that results from overly abundant offerings. However well intentioned, misguided generosity may have unintentional consequences of feeding corporate capitalism, compromising the environment, and contributing to human greed.

Paradoxically, the virtue of generosity, designed to divest donors of their attachments to wealth, can be corrupted by greed and ignorance, with donors vying to outdo each other in extravagant offerings and opulent temples. To reverse this trend, Buddhists need to be educated to recognize the interconnections between personal ethics, economic ethics, consumer culture, environmental ethics, and social justice, and the global impact of our personal choices. By questioning the misguided interpretation of virtue as a continual piling up merit in the form of material offerings, it is possible to “cut through spiritual materialism,”² and take responsibility for the quality, quantity, and consequences of our generosity.

Notes

1. For a recent translation, see Steven Collins, *Readings of the Vessantara Jataka* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016). Patrick Jory discusses the political implications of the legend in Thailand’s *Theory of Monarchy: The Vessantara Jataka and the Idea of the Perfect Man* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2016). Other studies include H. Leedom Lefferts and Sandra Cate, with Wajuppa Tossa, *Buddhist Storytelling in Thailand and Laos: The Vessantara Jataka Scroll and the Asian Civilisations Museum* (Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2012); and Katherine A. Bowie, *Of Beggars and Buddhas: The Politics of Humor in the Vessantara Jataka in Thailand* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2017), who mentions feminist views of the legend (260–61).

2. The term “spiritual materialism” derives from Chogyam Trungpa’s *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* (Boston: Shambhala, 2002).



LEARNING LEADERSHIP IN HAWAII

by Namgyel Lhamo

From August to December 2017, I had the opportunity to attend the Asia-Pacific Leadership Program at the East-West Center in Honolulu, Hawai‘i. I was one of the G-17 cohort. During the four months of the intensive program, I interacted and engaged in discussion on various pertinent topics with 23 other fellows from 15 countries. It was a platform to think and dream big.

My motivation to learn leadership skills was rewarded with a teaching and learning process unlike anything I have ever experienced. Such a program is unique in the world. With the skills I gained, I feel confident that I will begin a lifelong journey to implement the knowledge and skills I learned from the Asia-Pacific Leadership Program. The skills and experience I gained are highly relevant to the work I do to benefit nuns in Bhutan. I think these leadership skills would be very useful for all Buddhist practitioners. I hope some other Buddhist women will be able to participate in this program in the near future.

The semester-long leadership program focused on three areas: interpreting emerging issues facing the Asia Pacific region, developing leadership capacity, and professional development. Lectures, discussion seminars, outdoor challenges, simulations, an intensive field study experience, independent work, and online activities are implemented as teaching methodologies to achieve the goals of the program. In addition, different methods and learning styles are incorporated as valuable methods for understanding the concepts and principles.

The program introduces participants to many tools that are relevant to leadership and to other aspects of professional life. We learned time management skills, organizational planning, and writing skills. Some strategies were especially compatible with good leadership and useful for achieving organizational goals. We learned to organize workshops using a methodology called World Café. We also learned how to stimulate thinking and influence people to help bring about change, using the knowledge and skills that people are best at. Moreover, we learned appreciative inquiry toward new tasks, assuring a safe working environment for people, facilitating the expression of opinions and decision making, and building trust.

Many of the skills we learned in the program will have great practical benefit for our work and professional life. For example, we learned to use a strategic management template that can be adapted for office and personal use. We learned tools for analyzing and solving complex problems in a collaborative way. Another tool was a framework for solving problems that organized them from simple to complex to chaotic, looking at the cause-and-effect relationships among them. Meeting in small groups helped us understand how people experience and apply the same information in different ways. These methods will be very useful for resolving problems that arise daily for Bhutanese nuns.



and even for healing our planet. Some of the “ice breakers” we learned will be very useful at workshops, to help the nuns open up and feel comfortable. We also learned how to improve our communication skills, including public speaking and the “elevator pitch.” That was quite amusing, since we don’t have many elevators in Bhutan!

The course work and discussions also allowed me to explore myself. They provided me the space to reflect, think outside the box, and feel comfortable with who I am. Every new day peaked my curiosity and sparked new hopes. This process of exploration helped me to dream bigger. I feel freshly energized and inspired to apply what

I have learned in my work with the nuns of Bhutan. I have been able to reflect on my weaknesses, such as my lack of leadership skills, poor writing skills, and limited communication skills. My work entails initiating and implementing thoughtful decisions, effective delegation of tasks, allocating resources, and delivering training and workshops. This program has made me see myself and my roles and capabilities in a different and more positive light.

In a hierarchal and patriarchal society such as Bhutan, it is sometimes difficult for nuns to think about the idea of leadership. The concept seems quite abstract. Nuns may feel anxious about leadership, because leadership seems rather remote from what they experience in everyday life. Due to different cultural practices, nuns may be perceived as incapable and unfit to run and manage their own nunneries. However, nuns can be leaders in their own right and in their own way, working effectively and harmoniously with peers and juniors in their own communities. Nowadays, nuns are beginning to take up new and dynamic roles as teachers, managers, and caretaker, professional skills such as finance and administration. Developing leadership skills will be an opportunity for them to become more capable of leading, making decisions, and managing risks. Equipped with new knowledge, skills, and aspirations, with the dream of bringing enhanced leadership to nuns in my country, I hope to be a catalyst to bring about change among nuns in Bhutan. I am confident that, over time, nuns will play major roles in transforming monastic communities and society in Bhutan.

In spite of the diversity in language, culture, and values, there were many opportunities to learn from the participants of the G-17 cohort, almost as many as from the course itself. Each fellow contributed ideas about his or her own leadership approach, based on personal expertise and experience, which made the learning process really worthwhile. The different learning styles adopted daily in the classes made interactions with the cohorts easier and more dynamic. I had much to grasp and imbibe from each individual interaction. Group work also provided a platform to share and exchange what little I know with the group.

This journey of learning continued beyond the four walls of the classroom as all the fellows I lived with on the beautiful university campus on the island of Oahu. The intercultural exercises helped to open many doors and promoted friendships among the exceptional women and men in this diverse group, who will one day take up important portfolios in their countries.

Overall, the opportunity to be a fellow of the G-17 was an eye opening experience that completely transformed my professional career. I remain grateful to all the wonderful people who helped make it happen. I sincerely hope that more Buddhist women will be able to participate in the program and benefit from it as much as I have.

BUDDHA IN YOUR HEART

by Margaret Coberly

It’s not easy to live life in a relaxed way. At times the pressures of modern daily life reach far beyond the energy level required to complete them. When that happens, it is best to stop, relax, and realize that the vision we hold in our minds of ourselves and what we have set out to accomplish is unrealistic. It is missing images of conscious resting: time to be quiet within ourselves and contemplate the truth of impermanence. How futile it is to contradict the passing of time! And, all the while, the light of the Buddha’s teachings rests in our hearts.

It’s a wonderful thing to be productive, helpful, and responsive to the happiness of others. It’s also important





to be aware of our own state of mind and perceptions as we do those things. Introspection helps us recognize the limits of our preconceptions, tainted by jealousy, fear of loss, sentimentality, pride, and so on.

Relaxing allows space for an awareness of our own intentions. Being calm and content is just as important as results that can be immediately seen. It's not lazy to withdraw into, or spend time alone in, contemplation. When thrust into the fray of conventional socializations, inner awareness is essential. When an interaction generates a negative reaction, we can stop and re-frame our thinking.

The Buddha's teachings transcend the structures we impose on the illusory reality that swirls around us. The Buddha takes us beyond those limitations to think outside the limitations drawn by our own minds. The compassionate Buddha directs us to light our own inner lamp and kindle the teachings dormant within us.

Just for a few minutes, stop and feel the peace of the Buddha filling your heart.

DEBATE: A FIRST IN BUDDHIST WOMEN'S HISTORY by Akasha

In December 2016, for the first time in history, 20 Himalayan nuns were awarded the *geshema* degree, the highest philosophy degree in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. This achievement is the culmination of efforts that began in the 1980s, but we are getting ahead of our story. To understand the monumental significance of this major breakthrough in women's history, we first need to ask: What is a *geshema* degree?

The term *geshema* is the feminine equivalent of *geshe*, a degree in philosophy that was conferred at the three major monastic universities in Tibet – Drepung, Ganden, and Sera – which were exclusively male. It is unlikely that anyone was thinking about *geshemas* when the Buddhist School of Dialectics was founded in Dharamsala in 1973. As an educational experiment, the principal of the school, Lobsang Gyatso, set out to combine a traditional monastic curriculum and liberal arts education. The goal was to create an academic

environment where young monks who had completed their secondary education could pursue the traditional curriculum in Buddhist studies. To prepare future generations of teachers, translators, and administrators, these students needed a solid Buddhist education as well as general knowledge, so they could present the Buddhist teachings in the language of the modern world. The challenge he faced was how to impart a profound knowledge of Buddhist texts – a project that might take great scholars a lifetime – with English, poetry, history, science, and other subjects. Students could then take the *geshe* exams at a monastery in South India, if they liked.

The program in philosophy undertaken at the great monastic universities of Tibet is based on specific texts, studied in sequence.¹ The initial text, *Collected Topics*, presents the tools of logic, followed by *Mind and Reasoning*, a text on Buddhist psychology. The study of these texts takes two years, accompanied by intensive daily debates. The next five years is spent studying Maitreya's Ornament of Clear Realization and *Dharmakirti's Pramana-varatika-karika* to further develop the skills of analysis needed to fully understand Buddhist literature. Students who complete (survive!) these demanding studies then undertake a three-year detailed examination of the various schools of Madhyamika philosophy. Following this, they study Abhidharma (higher knowledge) and Vinaya (monastic discipline). Altogether, the program takes at least twelve years.

In this program, logical analysis is considered the most efficient way to master the texts and the key to understanding them deeply is debate. Each of the different Tibetan monastic colleges had its own textbooks and its own tradition of debate. Each begins with learning techniques for making very fine distinctions, using precise language. Defining terms precisely is so important that the methodology is collectively known as *tsenyi* (literally, "definitions").

The next step is to dissect notions of what is real and what is not real. A clear grasp of the subject is developed moment-to-moment in the interactive process of debate. An enthusiastic back-and-forth exchange of varied topics and perspectives is designed to foster heightened awareness. As the students gleefully jump in and challenge each other's ideas, they glean insights into all facets of the subject under consideration for





The nuns of Jamyang Chöling demonstrate the art of philosophical debate that leads to the geshe degree.

that day. Skillfully applying the tools of deeper and deeper analysis, they gain a more nuanced understanding of the topic, pushing the mind to its furthest reaches.

It was not until the 1980s that women gained access to systematic philosophical studies. Before then, the only option for women was to study with a private tutor, if she could find one. After a Western nun was allowed to study at the Buddhist School of Dialectics in the 1980s, a few monasteries for Himalayan nuns gradually began to offer similar programs. In time, the programs expanded and a new generation of scholar nuns started studying Buddhist philosophy and energetically debating it.

The twenty nuns who received the geshema degree in 2016 completed their studies at five monasteries in India and Nepal: Dolma Ling, Gaden Choeling, Jamyang Choeling, and Jangchub Choeling, and Khachoe Ghakyil Ling. Another six nuns received the degree in 2017. All these nuns received the same training as the monks and passed exams in the same subjects, administered under the auspices of the Ministry of Religion and Culture of the Central Tibetan Administration in Dharamsala. Full ordination is still not available to nuns in the Tibetan tradition, so a special course in Vinaya studies was arranged for them. After completing their degrees, the *geshemas* began a systematic program of tantric studies. We

join in expressing great appreciation for their dedication and accomplishments, confident that their Dharma studies will bring great benefit to them and their students.

Note

1. Books describing the Tibetan monastic education system include Georges B. J. Dreyfus, *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping: The Education of a Tibetan Buddhist Monk* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Michael Lempert, *Discipline and Debate: The Language of Violence in a Tibetan Buddhist Monastery* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Daniel E. Perdue, *Debate in Tibetan Buddhism* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1992); Daniel Perdue, *The Course in Buddhist Reasoning and Debate: An Asian Approach to Analytical Thinking Drawn from Indian and Tibetan Sources* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2014); and Katherine Rogers, *Tibetan Logic* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2009).





TANGLING WITH DEATH AND BUREAUCRACY

by *Rotraut (Jampa) Wurst*

Every Buddhist knows that life is impermanent. Every Buddhist knows the First Noble Truth: “Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; union with what is displeasing is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not getting what one wants is suffering; in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering.”

It is easy to remember this when times are good. We can keep the teachings in our heart. But then, when our partner of many years is very sick and is going to die, it is difficult to accept that we cannot prevent that.

We try to be a good Buddhist, keep our precepts, do our daily practice, recite our *sadhanas*, and do our meditation, but it is really not easy. We have read so many Buddhist books, studied Buddhism well, even have a degree in Buddhist studies. But when we see our partner suffering terribly and cannot do anything to help, when the doctors only seem interested in earning money, and we feel upset, are we still a Buddhist?

When our partner passes after a long illness, we can accept the loss intellectually. We know that it’s a relief for our partner, but our grief seems boundless. If we feel distraught and cannot accept the loss emotionally, are we still a Buddhist?

We feel desperately lonely and frustrated, and then, on top of that, the bureaucracy creates more problems. When we are grieving, we want to think about our partner, our family, and all the good times we shared. Instead of having time to be still and face the grief, the hospital and government offices are calling, writing letters, making demands, wanting signatures, demanding our time, and taking our money. In the precious moments after our deep loss, we want to spend time with fond memories of our great love, yet our life gets wrapped up and wasted tending to bureaucracy.

Admittedly, all these things – the phone calls, the paperwork, the appointments, the signatures – are necessary. Life in this bureaucratic world must go on. But all the stress of a death in the family reveals very clearly how vulnerable

humans are. When life is good, it is easy for us to say, “Oh, yes, I am a Buddhist!” During times of grief and devastating loss, though, we waver. Confronted by walls of seemingly senseless bureaucracy, we begin to feel desperate, because we are so sad.

In times of adversity, when we lose our best friend and closest companion, then the strength of our practice becomes evident. Has the practice really transformed our mind? Do we understand the First Noble Truth deeply? Are we still a good Buddhist or just a pretender?

That question seems too simple, too binary. Surely we won’t forget our Buddhist principles. We will make it through this. We won’t forget our meditation. Our practice is not only for the good times. It is for times of grief and suffering. The teachings help us through these horrible situations. With love and mindfulness, we will survive the tragedy of grief and the wasteland of bureaucracy. The Dharma is a lifeline. It will help us through these hard times!



WHEN AN UPASIKA UNTIES THE KNOT

by *Thuc Cong (Tathaloka)*

Divorce, popularly known as “untying the knot,” is normal in worldly life, but information about divorce is hard to find in the Buddha’s teachings. In his article “Untying the Knot,” Bhante Shravasti Dhammika confirms, “I have been unable to find anything in the Tipitaka that the Buddha says about divorce; indeed I can’t even find a Pāli word for it. When I had to deal with my divorce, I tried to handle it in the Buddhist way, but was unable to find any incident of a formal divorce in the Tipitaka. I had to follow some examples in the Jatakas to guide myself through this drama.

I was 63 years old when my husband decided to leave me for a younger woman. But the main reason for him leaving me was that I was “too Buddhist!” Imagine how boring it is for a nice-looking man in his sixties to live with a woman who refuses to sleep in his high and fancy bed, wears no stylish hair, dresses only in brown or white, eats nothing after lunch,

listens to Dhamma talks instead of music, and has no interest in fashion or traveling the world. I understood his situation, so when he suggested a divorce, I was more than happy to accept. I thought of some *bhikkhunis* whose husbands sent them to the Great Pajapati Gotami as a gesture of ending the marriage. It was a very nice way to say “That’s it,” and it ended the relationship beautifully. I wish....

As a matter of fact, divorcing at an old age was not a bad decision. I had spent more than four decades with him and, now that I am aging, I should think of the day I will breathe my last breath. I need to collect some merit as the “waybread” for my departure.

Now a withered leaf you are
and now Death’s men draw near,
now you stand at the parting gates
but waybread you have none.¹

Our only daughter was grown up and living in another city. I had no want for the worldly assets, so it would not be a complicated divorce. While many women who are divorced by their husbands cry, get angry, or ask for a huge alimony, I did not ask for anything or shed not even a tear over the ending of the marriage. With a focused mind, I prepared for my departure aiming at a serene place to practise all by myself. I took some basic belongings, my favorite Buddha image, my Pāli chanting and Buddhist sutta books, plus my favorite meditation mat and cushions. These things were valuable to me and I was sure that if I left them behind, nobody would want them.

Leaving a marriage of 41 years and the matrimonial house where I had stayed for more than 20 years felt sad, of course, but I felt no attachment. The property at 2020 45th Street in Edmonton, Alberta, was the house. The marriage of 41 years was also the house. And the house constructed of the three roots of poison – greed, anger, and delusion – was also a house. The *Dhammapada* mentions that the Buddha stopped building the house after he had spent a long, long time searching for the builder:

Through a countless number of painful rebirths
have I gone seeking the creator, the house-builder...
House-builder you are seen;
you shall never ever build this house again!
All your rafters are now broken.
The main roof beam is shattered!
This mind has reached the unconstructed
destruction of craving.²

As a “daughter of the Buddha,” I, too, had to stop building my house. And to accomplish this goal, I had to leave the houses that I had kept inside for a long time.

While it was hard for a woman in her mid-sixties to rebuild a life after untying the knot, it was not impossible for me to live a meaningful life without sufferings – at least without

sufferings from an unmatched marriage. I looked at the knot as the *kilesas* (destructive emotions) that tie people up in *samsara*, as mentioned in *The Knots Collection* in the *Abhidhamma*. I took untying the knots as untying my *kilesas* and that was a good thing to do – nothing to cry over. After so many years of practicing Buddhism, I find the Buddha’s teaching so useful and helpful.

Once my divorce was over, my married life became a past chapter of my book. As a divorcee, I have more time to practice, attend more meditation retreats, and focus more on purifying my mind. If I lived during the Buddha’s time, I would go before the Tathāgata, bow to him, and say, “Magnificent, Master Gotama! Magnificent! Just as if he were to place upright what was overturned, to reveal what was hidden, to show the way to one who was lost, or to carry a lamp into the dark so that those with eyes could see forms, in the same way has Master Gotama – through many lines of reasoning – made the Dhamma clear. I go to Master Gotama for refuge, to the Dhamma, and to the Community of monks. May Master Gotama remember me as a lay follower who has gone to him for refuge, from this day forward, for life.”³

*Buddham saranam gacchāmi
Dhammam saranam gacchāmi
Sangham saranam gacchāmi*

Notes

1. Dhammapada 235.
2. Dhammapada 154.
3. “To Long Nails,” *Dighanaka Sutta* (trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu), www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.074.than.html.





THE GENDER QUESTION

by Rotraut (Jampa) Wurst

The *Sutra of the Teaching of Vimalakirti* (*Vimalakirtinirdesa Sutra*) tells a story about Sariputra and a goddess. In this story, Sariputra expresses the belief that one has to become a man in order to become enlightened. When the goddess, by her supernatural powers, changes him into a woman and changes herself into a man, he realizes that becoming enlightened ultimately has nothing to do with the body.

There are many Buddhist stories about sexual transformation. Gender and its relation to achieving enlightenment has been a topic of discussion in Buddhist societies for centuries. Against this background, during the 20th century, the Sakyadhita International Conferences on Buddhist Women began to pay special attention to issues of Buddhism and gender. The workshops and panel presentations about LGBTQI¹ issues held at the Sakyadhita Conferences in Vietnam and Indonesia were important breakthroughs that initiated conversations and further research on gender issues throughout the Buddhist world.

To begin the discussion, we need to examine what we mean by “female” and “male.” The question is well worth considering. At 15th Sakyadhita Conference in Hong Kong, we celebrated 30 years of Buddhist “herstory,” women’s readings of Buddhist history. We often make assumptions about what it means to be female or male, but these identifications are generally based on social conditioning. When we look more closely at what it means to be a “woman” or a “man,” it is difficult to pin down. From a Buddhist perspective, identifying female and male sex organs or physical attributes is clear enough, but when we try to identify something in a person that is essentially female or male, those essential characteristics cannot be found.

One very interesting conversation I had at the conference in Hong Kong comes to mind. I met a lovely woman who asked me an unexpected question: “With which pronoun would you like to be addressed?” The question blew me away. The woman smiled kindly and it was clear that she had no intention of harming anyone. She was simply asking a straightforward question from a kind heart.

In my work, I myself sometimes ask students and clients this question. Asking which pronoun people prefer can be a useful way to open a conversation. But to have this question addressed to me was a complete surprise. Because I wear my hair short, do not wear any makeup, and do not behave in a “girly” way, people often assume that I am a boy or a man. Some even address me as “Sir.” When I go through security at the airport, ready to catch a flight, the security officers always seem to get confused about whether I am a woman or a man. When the security guard check for counterband, like weapons or lighters or other things that are forbidden on a flight, they seem unsure whether to send me to the line for women or for men.

Once when I traveled to Myanmar, I learned that women, whether lay or ordained, are not allowed to enter some Buddhist temples. When I visited Lake Inle, I found that women are expressly forbidden to put gold leaf on five sacred golden Buddha images. On that trip, the other women in my group were very happy to have me along. Because I was perceived to be a “young boy,” I was allowed to put gold leaf on the images without any problem.

Later on, as we were walking through the temple, we came across a military police officer with a machine gun. He looked at me suspiciously, and scrutinized me closely from head to foot and back up again. Frightened, I remembered something I had seen Michael Jackson and other celebrities do on music videos: grab their private parts. Luckily, I was wearing a Burmese *longji* in men’s style and, under that longji I was carrying my purse, camera, and other valuables. So I found my valuables :) The officer gave me a friendly greeting and went away.

Sometimes it is very convenient to be able to pass for a man, especially when you are traveling alone. Sometimes it is safer to be taken for a man. So when the lovely woman at the Sakyadhita Conference in Hong Kong asked for my preferred gender pronoun, I had to think about the question carefully. I decided to opt for “she,” because my body is female. Despite how I appear and how I behave, I can comfortably identify as “she.”

Have you ever thought about this question? Have you considered which pronoun would like to be addressed with? It is worthwhile to consider how we categorize ourselves and how others may categorize us, often by stereotypes. It is worth thinking about the little boxes we put people in and to remember that human beings have many diverse identities. There are billions of individuals in the world and too few little boxes to contain them all. Questions of gender are very thought-provoking and reflecting on them is not illegal ;)

Note

1. LGBTQI stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and intersex. Many other forms of sexual diversity may be added, too.



2017 NEWS

Sakyadhita Germany

Sakyadhita Germany will hold a meeting, at the Tibetische Zentrum in Hamburg at 10 am on August 4, 2018. The guest speaker will be Bhikkhuni Thich Nu Tinh Quang from Sakyadhita Canada. She will conduct a workshop in conjunction with the meeting.

Sakyadhita Hawai'i

The first local chapter of Sakyadhita was registered in the State of Hawai'i as a non-profit cultural, religious, and educational organization in 1993. Since that time, the chapter has organized many cultural and educational activities, including a four-day visit of H.H. Dalai to Hawai'i, seminars, and retreats. Its current objective is to create La'i Peace Center as a community resource, offering peace education, respite for mothers, meditation training, conflict management skills, and leadership training for children and adults.

La'i Peace Center will be based on Buddhist principles of nonharm (*ahimsa*), ethical conduct (*shila*), compassion (*karuna*), loving kindness (*maitri*), and wisdom (*prajna*), as well as values of gender equity and appreciation of cultural diversity. Programs will include training in meditation, conflict resolution, peace leadership, organic farming, non-violent communications, and other skills. Programs will benefit all sectors of the community, with some programs designed especially for woman and children.

The peace education programs at La'i Peace Center will draw on 2,600 years of Buddhist teachings and practices, and also on contemporary methods of peace education. Programs in compassionate communications will be created for primary and secondary schools, to be shared throughout the world. Periodic retreats will be organized for children, youth, healthcare practitioners, martial artists, and members of diverse religious communities. Sakyadhita Hawai'i welcomes your creative ideas and support, with aloha.

**Sakyadhita Korea**

Sakyadhita Korea was founded in 2013 and has been active in organizing many events. First, members have organized a number of meditation courses, including a "Mother-Daughter Retreat" and a one-day "Meditation in the City." They have also invited a number of speakers to give talks, offered courses on Buddhism, and conducted English-training workshops for translators and interpreters. Recently, they published a book titled "Buddhism and Feminism" in Korean.

The Executive Committee members for 2016–2017 include co-presidents Dr. Bongak Sunim and Dr. Eun-su Cho, and committee members Jinmyeong Sunim, Ilchung Sunim, Oin Sunim, Hyoseok Sunim, Jiwon Sunim, Young Hee Lee, Dr. Young Sook Jeon, and Jeong Sook Jo. Further information about Sakyadhita Korea and quarterly newsletters can be found at <http://sakyadhita.kr>.

Sakyadhita USA

On April 17, 2017, SUSA held a one-day conference at the University of the West in Los Angeles on the topic, "Diversity in the Dharma: Buddhist Women Engage Race and Exclusionary Politics in America." The conference was a satisfying experience for SUSA members, UWest staff, and general participants alike. A brief recap of the day's events can be found online: <http://sakyadhitausa.org/conference.html>. The next SUSA eZine will be dedicated to this conference, so stay tuned.

After seven years of hard work and leadership, Charlotte Collins retired from the presidency. She will continue to handle the finances and electronic presence (website, etc.) for another year and will also continue working on SUSA's quarterly eZine.

The new slate of officers includes co-presidents Elise DeVido and Carol Winkelmann, acting secretary Lisa Battaglia, treasurer Charlotte Collins, continuing board member Gunasari Bhikkhuni, and new board member Karen Gelinas, who is a UWest doctoral student and liaison with Uwest. Continuing advisory board members include Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Asayo Horibe, Tathaaloka Bhikkhuni, and Jacqueline Kramer. The continuing editors of the quarterly eZine are Charlotte Collins, Elise DeVido, Carol Winkelmann, and Lisa Battaglia. Tathaaloka Bhikkhuni and Pamela Ayo Yetunde are regular guest editors.



FURTHER READING

Susan Bessenger. *Echoes of Enlightenment: The Life and Legacy of the Tibetan Saint Sonam Peldren*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Pema Chödrön. *How to Meditate: A Practical Guide to Making Friends with Your Mind*. Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2013.

Pema Chödrön. *Living Beautifully: with Uncertainty and Change*. Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 2012.

Soen Master Daehaeng. *My Heart is a Golden Buddha: Buddhist Stories from Korea*. Seoul: Hanmaum Seonwon Foundation, 2014.

Caitlin J. Griffiths. *Tracing the Itinerant Path: Jishu Nuns of Medieval Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016.

Michaela Haas, *Bouncing Forward: Transforming Bad Breaks into Breakthroughs*. New York: Enliven, 2015.

Anna Halafoff. "Songdhammakalyani Monastery and Gender Equity in Modern Buddhism," *Religion and Development in the Asia-Pacific*, ed. Matthew Clarke and Anna Halafoff. Abington, U. K.: Taylor and Francis, 2016.

Chenxing Han, "Diverse Practices and Flexible Beliefs among Young Adult Asian American Buddhists," *Journal of Global Buddhism* 18(2017) 1–24.

Abbess Kasanoin Jikun (trans. Janine Beichman and Beth Cary). In *Iris Fields: Remembrances and Poetry*. Kyoto: Daishō Imperial Convent, 2009.

Sumi Loundon Kim. *Sitting Together: A Family-Centered Curriculum on Mindfulness, Meditation, and Buddhist Teachings*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2017.

Drimé Kunga and Yeshé Tsogyal (trans. Chönyi Drolma). *The Life and Visions of Yeshé Tsogyal: The Autobiography of the Great Wisdom Queen*. Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 2017.

Amy Paris Langenberg. *Birth in Buddhism: The Suffering Fetus and Female Freedom*. New York: Routledge, 2017.

Amy Paris Langenberg. "Buddhist Blood Taboo: Mary Douglas, Female Impurity, and Classical Indian Buddhism." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84:1(2016) 157–91.

Karen Muldoon-Hules. *Brides of the Buddha: Nuns' Stories from the Avadānaśataka*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017.

Thomas Patton. "The Wizard King's Granddaughters: Burmese Buddhist Female Mediums, Healers, and Dreamers." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84:2(2016) 430–65.

Brooke Schedneck. *Thailand's International Meditation Centers: Tourism and the Global Commodification of Religious Practices*. New York: Routledge, 2015.

Masatoshi Ueki. *Gender Equality in Buddhism*. New York: Peter Lang, 2001.







Acknowledgments

This newsletter was compiled and edited by Margaret Coberly, Rebecca Paxton, and Karma Lekshe Tsomo. Layout by Anoop, Gita (Shindo) Gayatri, and Allen Wynar. Photos by Olivier Adam. Illustration on page 17 by Gloria Staackmann. "Guanyin" sculpture on page 18 by Patrick Beldio, cast clear acrylic and a pearl, 2' high, Private Collection.

We greatly appreciate all Sakyadhita members, donors, and volunteers. The form for 2017 memberships and online donations are on the Sakyadhita website: www.sakyadhita.org. Thank you for your kind support!

Sakyadhita International
11474 Mc Dowell Court
San Diego, CA 92131 U.S.A.

Sakyadhita Membership

Support Buddhist Women by Joining Sakyadhita!

- ☐ I'd like to renew my Sakyadhita membership
- ☐ \$300 Lifetime Membership
 - ☐ \$150 Lifetime Membership (Nun/Student/Unemployed)
 - ☐ \$150 Benefactor
 - ☐ \$75 Supporter
 - ☐ \$30 Regular Member
 - ☐ \$15 Nun/Student/Unemployed
- ☐ I'd like to make a donation to Sakyadhita of \$_____

PLEASE PRINT:

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____

Country: _____ Phone: (Home): _____

Phone: (Work) _____ E-mail: _____

Ideas and Interests: _____

Please include a check or money order in U.S. dollars only. Thank you for your kind support!