

Sakyadhita

International Association of Buddhist Women

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The 17th Sakyadhita Conference, A Virtual Feast

The global pandemic has caused all manner of changes in our plans and priorities. We are learning many lessons: to be flexible, let go of expectations, transform obstacles to the path, and be grateful for every little thing. Recognizing change as a basic Buddhist teaching, Sakyadhita shifted the 17th Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women to a virtual format and the results were very satisfying indeed. From December 26 to 29, 2021, more than 1,140 people who might have hesitated to travel abroad at this moment in time were able to experience a remarkable Dharma event safely from the comfort of their own homes and monasteries.

After months of planning to hold the 17th Sakyadhita conference in Sarawak, East Malaysia, it became apparent that traveling to an in-person gathering would be too risky. Rather than cancel the conference, we decided to switch to an online format. The overarching theme of the conference was "Buddhist Women Beyond Boundaries: Interfaith, Interdependence, and Environment." A team of professional producers and multiple international teams of Sakyadhita volunteers enabled Dharma friends and allies from around the world to enjoy a feast of learning, sharing, and inspiration.

The opening ceremony featured a welcome by Dr. Sharon A. Suh; a keynote address by Dr.



Malia Dominica Wong OP; chanting from Malaysia, Korea, and Seattle (U.S.A.), a multicultural dance by Donny Tan of Sarawak, and Buddhist music by Imee Ooi of Malaysia. Paper session topics included "Navigating Contested Waters: Skillful Nurturing and Harmonious Co-existence," "Women Navigating Buddhist Identity and Difficult Embodiment," and "Friendships beyond Religious Identities." The closing ceremony included a keynote by Dr. Hema Goonatilake; chanting from Malaysia, Zangskar (Ladakh), and Vietnam; and an invitation from the Korean Bhikkhuni Association to the 18th Sakyadhita Conference to be held in Korea in 2023.

Workshops over the three days included flower origami, awakening inter-arts, movement meditation, female Buddhist leadership, spiritual friendship across traditions, and education beyond boundaries. A common response was how much people learned and how encouraged they were by the extraordinary work of Buddhist women everywhere. Reactions to the Tara Dances (www.Taradhātu.org) and other workshops were: "Incredibly kind and caring," "Touched my heart deeply," "Meaningful," and "Beautiful and empowering!"

The geographical diversity of the participants was astonishing, from Phnom Penh to Iowa, from Kailua (Hawai'i) to Peng Hu (the largest island off the coast of Taiwan), from the traditional

territories of the Salish peoples to Bedulu Village on Bali (Indonesia), from the Order of Interbeing in Germany to Seoul (Korea), and from Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia) to Dhammadharini Bhikkhuni Monastery (Northern California), the gathering was a veritable Who's Who of human goodness.

Meeting Dharma sisters and friends from so many countries and backgrounds is a rare opportunity. Although meeting by Zoom was a different experience than meeting in person, the digital format was welcomed by those who are not usually able to attend the Sakyadhita conferences. During a global pandemic, meeting virtually is a great option and at the Sakyadhita conferences, everyone is welcome. Although there were no male speakers this time, there were plenty of male performing artists. To tune in and watch the conference events again, visit: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCKIIIkEfXmMbUHPVGBva-FA/>

We are grateful to everyone who helped make this remarkable gathering possible!

Author Meets Critics:

Sharon A. Suh's *Occupy This Body: A Buddhist Memoir*

The American Academy of Religion (AAR) is the largest gathering of religious studies scholars in the world. Annual meetings attract thousands of dedicated, cutting-edge scholars of diverse religious traditions, including Buddhism. At the 2021 AAR, held in person in San Antonio, Texas, and virtually, a panel was held to discuss Sharon A. Suh's recent Buddhist memoir. The speakers have generously allowed us to share their reflections here.

Rejecting the Mara of Marketing

Sophia Rose Arjana

Occupy This Body: A Buddhist Memoir is a study of Buddhism that is engaging, poignant, and transformative. Unlike many scholarly books, it is absent of the jargon that would require an undergraduate to reach for their dictionary to look up terminology that is foreign to them. My first reaction when reading this book was how great it would be for the college classroom, a book that allows students to learn about a religion from a first person's life experience. In fact, this book is being included in my World Religions class in the spring semester. I look forward to the wonderful conversations it will inspire.



Sophia Arjana

All of this being said, the place where I wish to focus on in my comments is the body, the way female bodies are idealized, commodified, and used in popular culture, and the role that white consumerism has in this subjection of the body to the disciplinary forces of the marketplace. This includes the bodies of white women and Asian women, Black women, indigenous women— all women.

I recently wrote a book about how bodies identified with the Orient are commodified as part of the mystical marketplace. In some instances, it is not just the traditions of the East that are looked upon as salvific, but also bodies from the East, which are considered sites of healing, transformation, and enlightenment. As I was reading *Occupy This Body*, I found myself thinking about the ways that colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism are so damaging to people's bodies and minds, and how this is connected to both the fantasies of the East and the bodies that inhabit Oriental landscapes. Specifically, I thought of the ways that practices like yoga are part of the therapeutic cultures peddled by everyone from Joel Osteen to Gwyneth Paltrow. As I write in my book,

Foucault's technologies of the body come into play when we look at the mystical health programs and wellness practices that rely on Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Feminist scholars have voiced concern over the pressure on women to link economic success to wellness. The neoliberalism of the wellness industry often conceives of a body in ways that are unreachable for most women, who do not have the luxury of 'balancing' work and pleasure/wellness.¹

Linked to these technologies of the body is the identification of spiritual or religious wellness to being thin. Thinness, such a focus of this culture, is often marketed as a path to, or sign of, spiritual health. Joel Osteen has marketed thinness as a sign of the good, modern Christian life, and Gwyneth Paltrow's company, *goop*, uses thinness as a way to sell an aesthetic of "the minimalist body" that is connected to "sensations of scarcity."²

It is mostly white entrepreneurs who make money off of the imagery of scarcity and while there are exceptions, the commodification of so-called "Eastern therapies" is a project tied to modernity—the quest for enchantment, the desire for meaning, and the idea of the body as a kind of symbol of these life journeys. While the white consumer is entranced by all of this, there is also a global impact in the ways in which yoga, Sufism, and other practices tied to the Orient are capitalized upon. The mystical marketplace and its focus on bodies influences the ways many individuals see themselves.

This is where I would like to return to *Occupy the Body*, and more specifically to the question of how people break free from the chains of capitalism and the global market. This is, in my view, very much the problem of us being 'conscripts of modernity,' where we are all forced to participate in a particular vision of modern life. Many examples of this dilemma are voiced in this book, but above all, this quote is one I returned to repeatedly:

Today Korean women's body ideals are projected most prominently in the Korean pop industry where young girls with the right surgically altered look are selected to join girl K-pop groups where they sing and dance in unison both provocatively and innocently. They are both cute and sexy; Korean and Western; tall and thin; beautiful and charming. The Korean pop industry dictates that the girls get breast enhancement surgery, eyelid surgery to remove the epicanthal fold, rhinoplasty to change the shape of their noses, and sometimes cheekbone enhancement. They are expected to subject their bodies to these modifications in order to become a synthesis of all things deemed

beautiful for Korean women—ideals of Western beauty—big eyes, long legs, and big breasts. In other words, the message to young Korean girls today is to be as Korean as you can and as Western as you are not naturally-born to be.³

In this passage, we see the exploitation of Orientalism and most notably, its mystical, spiritual qualities tied to the bodies (and landscapes) of the East. This is often done in a way that privileges white bodies and their authority, enabling them to take up space, positions of authority, and make money. The overwhelming power of whiteness is often present in these same spaces.

At a later point in the book, the author notes this, through the overwhelming force of white bodies in yoga spaces, “I’d visit a meditation center in the city from time to time, where I’d find that I was usually one of the only women of color present. I’d also discover that most of the Asian American Buddhist temples that I visited didn’t include a lot of meditation; most of the practices were devotional in nature and meditation seemed an afterthought.”⁴

The last sentence in this passage raised a set of questions for me, and ones that I have thought a lot about since. Why is meditation separated from devotion? Is this a reflection of the modern condition, where “religion” is privatized and the spiritual quest is somehow separated from the proper religion? Is this not an erasure of religion and a kind of colonizing of tradition?

Is there an alternative?

The popularity of yoga with white consumers, spiritual seekers, and others is evident in the quote above, but also in yoga gatherings like the Hanuman Festival in Boulder, where the majority of teachers are white and where minorities are in tiny, at times indiscernible numbers. Again, there is a taking up of space, through white bodies, that translates to the taking of a share of the marketplace as well.

Let’s now circle back to the topic of bodies K-pop girl bands. As the author of *Occupy This Body* states, the disciplining of the body in accordance with white standards is evident in the example of girl and boy, female and male, K-pop. There is something striking about this, for the appeal of K-pop to Western consumers is in part its *difference*—it is Asian and thus like many of the products that are tied to the East, the idea of the foreign, exotic, aspect is likely part of its popularity.

At the same time, the bodies involved are also influenced by, and even in accordance with, Euro-American beauty ideals. Like much of what is marketed in the mystical marketplace, there is an element of colonialism within the product. In therapeutic wellness, like yoga, the religious element—thus the Asian religion and the Asian individual—may even be erased. In K-pop, the West still has a voice, proclaiming loudly that the performer must attempt some semblance of whiteness, albeit through impossible beauty

standards that only exist in a Hollywood fantasy, helped by cosmetic surgery, camera angles, starvation diets, and airbrushing.

What is the alternative, then? As the author of *Occupy This Body* states, it is to reject all of this, to: Recognize the tricks of the mind. Recognize the body is in process. Acknowledge the “Mara of marketing and popular culture.”⁵

As I read this last quote, I thought, rather ironically, of an example of this rejection of the Mara of popular culture within a text of *popular culture*. In this example, we have a rejection of popular culture, or at least, a reframing of it that includes an undeniable *occupation of one’s body*.

In the Ms. Marvel comic, Kamala Khan is the new Ms. Marvel. Kamala, as a Muslim and the daughter of immigrants from Pakistan, occupies a different body than the comic book super-heroines of the past. Critically, as a super-hero, she can choose her own body. Initially, she wants to look like Carol Danvers, the previous Ms. Marvel—blonde, buxom, tall, lanky. Danvers, like many other famous characters of American comics, occupies a particular body that serves the white, male gaze.

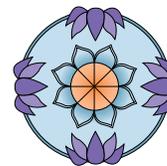
But ultimately Kamala rejects this. She occupies her own body. Kamala even constructs her own costume that rejects the objectification and sexualization of girls and women, complete with a scarf that she wears in different ways, around her neck, flowing behind her like a cape, as a *hijab*, or as a disguise in the style of a *niqab*. Her body is her own.

In reflecting on Sharon Suh’s powerful call to reject the “Mara of marketing and popular culture,” I am left with this powerful image in my head—of Kamala rejecting a body she can’t really occupy and instead *accepting the body that she is*. This may be an easier goal for superheroes than mortals, but it is a lesson that Sharon Suh teaches us in her beautiful and transformative book.

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NOTES

1. Sophia Arjana, *Buying Buddha, Selling Rumi: Orientalism and the Mystical Marketplace* (London: Oneworld, 2020), 149.
2. *Ibid.*, 106.
3. Sharon A. Suh, *Occupy This Body: A Buddhist Memoir* (Nepean: The Sumeru Press, 2019), 54.
4. *Ibid.*, 175.
5. *Ibid.*, 181.



Buddhist Bodies, Human Bodies: Embodiment as Narrative

Mark Unno

Sharon Suh's *Occupy This Body* is a compelling narrative on many levels: Buddhist, Asian American, feminist, cross-cultural, and individual. As someone who has had the privilege to read this work in draft form and has come to know Sharon as a scholar-practitioner and as a person from before this work and into the present, this memoir is above all a human story, and I think this is what makes it most compelling, and most significant. On the one hand, we can see in this work the potential to critique, to call into question traditional boundaries of scholarship and practice, and bridge divides as well as transgress previously defined parameters, particularly in scholarship. On the other, it is a very distinct, unique narrative, highly individual. What this tells me above all else is that *person* comes before *scholarship* in a very specific way.



Mark Unno

Traditionally, scholarship is considered excellent if it is objective and stands apart from the subjectivity of the scholar. While many fields have or are attempting to move beyond such a dichotomy, including women and gender studies, race and ethnic studies, anthropology, and literary studies, there are many fields, including Buddhist studies, where there is still a strong *assumption* of the superiority of objective, textual research that stands independently of the subjectivity of the researcher. No doubt, there is a place for all of the textual studies that have taken place, based on mastery of multiple, difficult Asian languages, and close study of various historical strands of Buddhist thought and practice. The humanities on the whole have been built on the study of language, text, and history including areas dealing with women and gender studies, literary studies, and religious studies. An example in Buddhist studies is Vanessa Sasson's *Yasodhara*, a reconstruction of the life of Yasodhara that centers the story of this key Buddhist woman based on detailed research on relevant sources in ancient Pali texts. However, *Occupy This Body* is a different kind of work, a narrative based on embodiment, grounded in subjective awareness, and that is its most distinctive characteristic.

In some sense, Sharon's *Occupy This Body* is not scholarship in the usual sense. It is an intensely personal *memoir*. It would be challenging to have it blind peer-reviewed by an academic press. She wasn't attempting to advance scholarship in an incremental manner, based on the scientific or quasi-scientific models that still form the foundation of scholarly evaluation. Yet, I believe that *Occupy This Body* is a

very significant work for us to discuss here at the AAR, only not for the reasons some people might expect.

What is *Occupy This Body*? It is a beautifully written, elegant, autobiographical account of Sharon Suh's life and work, of which the academic and practice-based engagement with Buddhism is a part, but not the whole of what her life is about. It is as much or more the searing, courageous, and vulnerable; insightful, wise, and loving story of a person's life. It is her story and hers alone. She is Korean American, the daughter of first-generation immigrants to the U.S., a woman who received an elite education, engaged with Buddhism and Buddhist studies, but also yoga, various medical professionals, had a wide range of relationships, marriage, children, divorce, and further adventures. It is a story that will resonate differently for a vast array of people, some portion of whom it will not resonate much because there will not be a critical mass of resonant strands, *just like any other memoir*. No matter how we break it down, we cannot fully digest this work from a cultural studies or Buddhist studies perspective. To truly encounter this work, I believe one must be able to honor the unique individual, the only one to whom this story belongs – Sharon Suh herself. Yet, isn't that true with anyone?

In reading *Occupy This Body*, I was particularly struck by the *quiet intensity* of the person who disclosed herself throughout this work, her personality, her commitment to excel in everything she did, her prose, which flows so smoothly that the most searing, vulnerable passages are conveyed as if on a feather, gently, almost like tending to another being:

As a young girl, silence protected me from my mother's rage, but it was detrimental to my ability to feel and listen to my body's needs. . . . It took heading to a meditation hall to check into my body and begin to ask it what it wanted (15).

As people of color, we need to learn to be present in our bodies and practice taking up space too,' [Asha] reminds us. . . . I begin to wonder if I can learn to occupy my body through meditation and mindful awareness, and as I do, Asha reminds us, "It is important to take up space with a gentle and softened heart that can withdraw from the onslaught of socially-constructed *dukkha* (suffering) (189).

Even the funniest passages come through a kind of mist, as though surprise, humorous embarrassment, and wisdom are all rolled into one, such as when she discovers a frog in the lettuce she is chopping at a Buddhist retreat: "*Oh my god, I have killed a frog in my attempt to not kill a thing!* My cool, calm demeanor quickly faded" (193). (Fortunately, the frog was not dead, just cold.)

There is so much to reflect on and write about in this work, but I will have to be selective, in the interests of time

and space. In particular, I will focus on a three things: (1) the cruelty of the suffering inflicted on Sharon's female body at the hands of others, in particular as it was channeled through her mother – the *double bind* of the requirement to *eat, eat, eat!*, on the one hand, and continual scrutiny on being 'overweight,' on the other; (2) the intensity of the male gaze to which every inch of her body is subjected to continually; and (3) the determination to find her way out of this impossible torture of her female body through melding her own spiritual and somatic path, a unique combination of her own making – study of Buddhism personally and academically, meditation retreats, including those for people of color; yoga; mindful eating retreat and programs. Out of this, Sharon not only finds her own way, she is able to share this with others.

First, like any child might, Sharon shares stories of love and difficulties with her parents. Yet, clearly, the primary difficulty was with her mother, whose cruelty was extreme. It is moving to read these words that come to Sharon long after her mother's passing: "It has been twenty-five years since my mother died and it is only now, nearly half my life later, that I have begun to rewrite the narrative that she passed on to me. . . I knew that my mother must have internalized many of the social pressures and cultural ideals of being a Korean woman because I could see through meditation that I had the capacity to cut the strangling thread of her . . . [and] my own storylines and begin to rewrite the narrative for myself and for my daughters" (178).

While the relationship to her father Sharon describes is complex and multifaceted, it is less fraught than that with her mother and brought more moments of affection, inspiration, and intimacy. Nevertheless, it is difficult to completely separate Sharon's mother's self-concept and the cultural intensity of the male gaze that was cast upon her, on the one hand, and the cultural matrix of which Sharon's father was a part, on the other.

Second, of course the male gaze is not only a product of traditional Korean culture. It continues to affect and afflict Sharon throughout her relationships moving forward, like an unwanted spotlight that glares and makes it difficult to see in the night. Having moved to Seattle with her husband Chris, Sharon becomes pregnant, and just when she thinks she has good reason to take more nourishment, her husband says to her, "Well, your ass does look a little bigger." Who is the real ass here?

Third, there is something a college or university education in the open environment of the US provides. Although the terrain might remain unequal in different respects, too many respects, there is enough opportunity for those who would dare to explore to find the resources and connections that can open the mind, heart, and body to new possibilities. Whatever its flaws, and there are many, the liberal arts curriculum allows for the kind of exploration that Sharon engages in, and through which she is able to find, first, hints and clues, then footsteps, then a feel for the Beast of Buddhism, then finally some handle, some way to *occupy this body*. In some ways it is reminiscent of the Ten Oxherding Pictures of medieval Chan/

Zen Buddhism, but it is a distinctly twentieth- and twenty-first-century American version in which Sharon finds her harness, not in Zen alone, or in one school of Buddhism, or even Buddhism alone, but in a tapestry of her own making, forged through an inner alchemy of mind, heart, and body -- for the body is the seat of the emotions, the emotions the heart of human understanding, and the mind, the fount of wisdom and insight.

I recall one time that Sharon said she was going to a (Zoom) lecture by Adrienne Marie Brown to take place at Arizona State University, and the way she described it with such enthusiasm made me want to attend as well. Because it conflicted with my schedule, I viewed the recorded lecture online. It struck me that Adrienne Marie Brown very carefully cited and honored the lineage of thinkers, practitioners, and activists who had inspired different dimensions of her work. In like manner, Sharon Suh notes those who have taught, accompanied, and inspired her – college professors, meditation retreat teachers of color, Buddhist teachers from established lineages, friends, and family members. It is a *mélange*, a spicy one at that, that reflects this one life, this one journey, that carries deep cultural, cross-cultural, Asian-Western, Buddhist-yogic, feminist postmodern resonances, yet remains singular, all its own: gentle, flowing, kind, self-loving, and compassionate, but in a way that does not retreat, is not retiring, pulls no punches, is not just mind-blowing but heart-blowing in the way she reveals so much buried deep within, to say, "I am here," "This is my story," but also "Do not be afraid," "You can do it, too," "You can find your own way."

The interface between community and individual is delicate, complex, tenuous, even more so if we attempt to extend this to the universal and the particular. I feel that Sharon's account, which is highly intersectional, will resonate deeply for diverse demographics, many of which will overlap, but not all. No one demographic can claim hegemony over the others – gender, race and ethnicity, culture, class, religion, or even time – past, present, and future – not if one seeks a vision that is truly equitable and inclusive. Genuine scholarship can serve human beings; in order to do so, it must serve actual people, not "humans" as an abstract, general category. True scholarship that serves people must begin by honoring the individual journey, whether we are studying a figure from the ancient past like Yasodhara, or a contemporary figure like Sharon Suh: *Person* before *scholarship*, i.e., the individual who is present over scholarly agendas and ambition.

Yet, there remains some confusion about how this works. One could say this about issues related to women and gender, sexual identity and orientation, race and ethnicity, and the like, but here, I will raise "Asian American," and "Asian descent" as an example, since we have so few accounts of Asian American scholars of Buddhism, and indeed so few even of Asian descent, in a field, by the way, that is Asia-related: Buddhist studies. The particular issue that I would like to raise here is one of representation. On the one hand, there will likely be resonances with *Occupy This Body* for

many Asian Americans and those of Asian descent, especially Asian American women. On the other, it is essential that we not make or take Sharon Suh to represent all Asian American women. Each person's story is their unique journey, and each person's story ought to be respected as such.

Nevertheless, Asian Americans are bonded together in Buddhism, Buddhist Studies, and in the academy, despite their vast diversity. That is because Asian Americans share the common experience of being *labelled* and *oppressed* from without, by the dominant white culture. Korean Americans being called "Ch---s," Chinese Americans such as Vincent Chin being beaten and even killed as being identified with the Japanese auto industry, Korean and Chinese American women in Atlanta being assaulted and killed in a frenzy of hypersexualized anti-Asian hate instigated by anti-Chinese sentiment, and the list goes on, with no recognition of the great diversity among Asian Americans, based on racial, ethnic, and cultural differences, or as individual lives.

Very few scholars of Asian descent, and even fewer Asian Americans specifically, are even allowed into Buddhist studies or even Asian studies generally. Why? Because Asia-related fields, among the most racist fields in the academy, are the unspoken unfettered intellectual colonies of the liberal white intellectual, the empty screens to project whatever liberal ideologies one likes, filling the field with white liberal supremacist fantasies, treating Asia, Asian cultures, and Asian religions as their objects of fetish, weaponizing historical conflicts and perceived deficiencies among Asian cultures in order to "divide and conquer," all the while seeking to control Asia-related fields as a white domain, lumping together scholars of Asian descent by way of monolithic stereotyping and exclusion. It is in such a context that Sharon Suh's account becomes even more significant, willing to take a stand, to say, "Yes, I am here," but also "No. That's not okay." *Person before scholarship. Scholarship in the service of actual human beings.*

In *Occupy This Body*, scholarship in service of actual human beings means, among other things, attention to embodied existence – embodied life, embodied death. It is through gradually coming to *acknowledge, recognize, step into, inhabit*, and yes, *occupy her body* that all of the study of texts, scholarship, engagement with Buddhism, other fields, practices such as yoga and slow and mindful eating *come to life*, often as sources of inspiration but also as subject to criticism. Her mind comes to life through connecting with the many facets of her emotions, both joyful and painful, bearing tears of laughter as well as tears of sadness. There is truth in the distinctive journey Sharon takes, which cannot be found in any text, so unique that only she could have lived it, imagined it, continue to dream, envision, step into. Yet, her knowledge of texts also becomes enlivened, richer, deeper, as I have read her work over the years. When I read her *Silver Screen Buddha: Buddhism in Asian and Western Film*, I both began to see film as *sūtra*, Buddhist scripture, but also with Buddhist traps, depending on the auteur, director, perspective – enlightened, enlightening, seductive (but by

and to whom?), natural and spontaneous, patriarchal and violent. Could she have had these insights without occupying her body?

Occupy This Body emerges at the intersection of what is ancient and what is new, the inspiration of the past but also its darkness, the originality that only comes from meeting the new, the ever changing present, that is inseparable from Sharon's identity as an Asian American woman, so rarely represented in Buddhist studies, and in the academy as a whole. As much as our cultural situatedness makes us who we are and offers us distinct opportunities, it takes much more – the courage and willingness to step into, immerse oneself in the difficulty of this body, but also its wisdom, heart, and beauty. How many Asian and Asian American students must have looked hopefully at a professor of Asian descent, how many women, how many students of color – and how their hearts must have lifted when that professor recognized their hope, their aspiration, their dreams, and nurtured them? I have no doubt that Sharon Suh is that professor. *Person before scholarship. Scholarship in the service of actual human beings.*

Sharon Suh, in her remarkable account, is on her journey, sharing with others even as she continues to deepen her awareness of how she steps into *Occupy This Body*, her body. As I turn the pages of her book, the words seem to lift off the page, come to life, bringing profound emotions to the surface, not just hers, but my own. I seem to sense the delicate tendrils of her heart, reaching deep, deep within, to love and affirm the journeys of her ancestors, and yes, those of her father and mother, who endured much, made Sharon endure much, all interconnected, so that when her wounded heart is brought into the illumination of Buddhist awakening, her wounded heart, yes, her wounded heart itself turns out to be the very portal opening unto the unfolding of great compassion, boundless compassion, limitless compassion and love. This, then, also creates a path for her to connect with her Asian, Asian American, brown, black, red, and white sisters and brothers, all creatures, human and non-human. I, too, am moved to stand with and by my Asian and Asian American sisters and brothers, my brown, black, red, and white sisters and brothers, my canine, feline, and all "-ine" sisters and brothers, the sky, the moon, and the stars.

Thank you, Sharon, thank you.

Mark Unno is a professor of Buddhist Studies and Department Head of Religious Studies at the University of Oregon, President of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies, and the fourteenth generation Shin Buddhist priest in his family lineage.



Remember: Korean American Women's Religious History

Helen Jin Kim

Memoir, “a story from a life,” is a powerful narrative to offer one’s contemporaries, but also an incredible gift to bequeath to future generations for historical reflection – as Sharon Suh has, and will, in her *haunting, enthralling, and inspiring* new work, *Occupy this Body: A Buddhist Memoir*.¹ Suh expands our collective memory of the post-Korean War immigration period of Korean American history in general, and Korean American women’s history in particular, thereby intervening in the white dominant historical narrative of American Buddhism.²



Helen Jin Kim

Indeed, in Suh’s memoir, we discover a primary source that will aid us in “suturing” the “submerged narratives of the religious lives of Asian Americans” at the intersections of Asian American history, American religious history, and the history of women, gender, and American religions – an intervention core to my own work as an American religious historian.³ Herein, I will discuss the historiographical significance of Suh’s memoir from the perspective of American religious history, and proceed in the order of the three adjectives I have used to characterize her work. Through a *haunting, enthralling* and *inspiring* narrative, Suh’s memoir awakens us from our collective amnesia, helping us to remember Korean American women’s religious history.

Suh’s memoir is *haunting*. Mother, the “hungry ghost,” hovers over the narrative like a ghost – sometimes, a nightmare – even when she is very much alive and a part of Suh’s life. How to capture the voice and record of a ghost and her long shadow? Suh captures an elusive figure with an elusive past by using a feminist archival practice in Korean American history.

The Asian and Asian American archive has a bias toward cataloguing the written records of men, both their published or unpublished documents. Yet the relative silence of female voices has afforded many scholars the opportunity to track down the stories of historical women, with whom we have recorded oral histories. Women recording women’s voices, through oral history, is a core scholarly practice in Asian American history, as in *Korean Picture Brides: A Collection of Oral Histories*, one of the earliest published records of Korean American women’s history.⁴ So is the authoring of memoir, or autobiography, as in Mary Paik Lee’s *Quiet Odyssey: A Pioneer Korean Woman in America*, a central text in Asian American studies.⁵ Women recording women’s lives, and women authoring their own stories, is a powerful feminist

archival practice in Korean American history, a lineage of which Suh’s memoir is a part.

Through feminist Korean American archival practice, Suh’s memoir fills gaps in our collective memory of Korean American women at mid-twentieth century. Recall that in the post-Korean War immigration period (1950–1965), Korean students, GI wives, and orphans dominate the selective immigration permitted in an era of Asian exclusion. Ji-Yeon Yuh’s *Beyond the Shadow of Camp Town: Korean Military Brides in America* is a pivotal text from this period which also uses oral history to study the lives of Korean immigrant military brides, whose stories index a history from “way, way, way down below.”⁶ In *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy and the Forgotten War*, Grace Cho, a direct descendant of this past, remembers a history of sex work, the U.S. military, and Korean women that “haunts” in the shadows of war and across the diaspora.⁷ Suh’s work fills in the narrative about a lesser known mid-twentieth-century Korean population: students. Susan Choi’s much acclaimed novel *The Foreign Student* fills in crucial gaps in our memory of student immigrants during this period, as we have less empirical documentation. The novel is centered on Chang Ahn, or Chuck, an immigrant at the University of the South who notably rooms with the son of a Klansmen and falls in love with a white southern woman, all while battling the trauma of the Korean War.⁸ Like Chuck, we learn that Suh’s father and mother similarly immigrate to the U.S. in the “late 50s and early 60s on student visas.”⁹ Like Chuck’s story, Suh’s family story is not historically rooted in the most commonly known post-1965 immigration period, but the second wave of immigration, immediately after the outbreak of war (1950–53). Both parents attend Missouri State on scholarships, so we get a window into the educated and middle to upper class population of post-Korean War immigrants.

Yet Suh’s work shares a haunting resonant with works from this post-Korean War period.

As in Grace Cho’s autoethnographic work, Suh’s haunting mother, and the haunting memory of mother, is foundational to the narrative, driving much of the drama of the text. Crucially, it is through that haunting lineage that we learn intimately about two generations of Korean American women – one who haunts and one who seeks to overcome the trauma of that haunting. But, unlike in Cho’s work, Suh’s text is not fueled by the drama of warring nations, but a war with one’s body, a war that mother inflicts upon self and daughter. If texts like Cho’s and Yuh’s tell us about the historical impact of warring nations upon Korean American women’s lives, then Suh’s memoir reveals the psychological and existential warfare inflicted upon Korean American women’s bodies and minds, in a decidedly haunted period of Korean American history, a period of history filled with military brides, orphans, students as well as literal and figurative “ghosts” who traverse the Pacific and back. Thus, the haunting of mother is set to the backdrop of a period of Korean American immigration history, spooked by the trauma of a brutal war most harshly inflicted upon the bodies

of women and children, such as military brides and orphans, but also perhaps, immigrant students like Suh's mother and her girl child, Suh herself. Though the Korean War is often cast as one that turned brother against brother, Suh's text perhaps also reveals to us how that immigrant generation lived in a world, violently divided at the 38th parallel, that also turned mother against daughter.

Suh's feminist archival practice powerfully awakens us from our collective amnesia to this mid-twentieth-century period of Korean American history. That alone renders her memoir a compelling text for her contemporaries as well as future generations. But it is in gaining access to the depths of mother's haunting that we also gain access to an *enthraling* and *inspiring* narrative about the liberative teachings of the Buddha, which have the power to break the traumatic hold that haunts the mind and body of the generation that follows mother's Korean War immigrant generation – that is, Suh and her daughters. In doing so, the text pushes us further into the post-1965 period of Korean American history, and takes us into a much welcomed direction into Korean American and Korean American women's religious history, which the aforementioned Asian American texts may discuss briefly but do not analyze at great length. If immigration policy, the infrastructure of war, as well as the racialized and gendered dynamics of structural inequality, are at the heart of the platforms for liberation in the texts mentioned above, then we find in Suh's text, the practices and teachings of Buddhism as the primary liberative apparatus, highlighting the power of religion and spirituality to overturn generational suffering in Korean American women's history. In so doing, Suh's memoir also interjects into the white dominant historiography of American Buddhism that other authors like Jane Iwamura and Chenxing Han have so helpfully sought to correct.¹⁰ And I love that a Korean American girl, teenage Suh, is the heroine of this narrative of religious history – it is *enthraling* and *inspiring*.

That Suh first discovers the teachings of the Buddha at her New England prep school is crucial to her argument about Buddhism's liberative capacity, as it is this educational context that helps to shape the courageous defiance that begins to transform a haunted past. Suh extends the trope of education from the post-Korean War immigrant generation to the post-1965 era, as we witness a Korean American girl, a teenager, who begins to unlock the key to her liberation, from her mother's haunting, through the teachings of Buddhism. In so doing, Suh extends her feminist archival practice of recording absent Korean American and Korean American women's narratives by *enthraling* us with a Korean American coming of age story at a New England prep school, which we rarely see in novels, history books, or cultural productions.

In centering the intellectual, artistic, and spiritually inquisitive Korean American teenage girl, Suh's feminist archival practice upends the stereotypical WASP coming-of-age trope dominant in the American cultural imaginary, shaped by coming-of-age novels like *A Separate Peace*, *Catcher in the Rye*, or Hollywood's *Dead Poet's Society*. (And, to my joy!)

Suh's story resonates with cultural productions that center the Asian American female coming-of-age story, as in the Hollywood block buster *Joy Luck Club* or recent TV series like *To All the Boys I've Loved Before*, *Never Have I Ever*, or *PEN15*. In each of these cultural productions, Asian American teenage girls have to re-narrate what their mothers have passed down to them, just as Suh does in this *enthraling* section of her memoir. I cherish the scene in which we witness teenage Suh sitting at her desk, soaking in the teachings of the Buddha, defying the traditions of race, gender, and religion in those hallowed halls of American WASP privilege!¹¹ From Mr. White's Japanese wife, Chieko, she first hears the teaching: "The Buddha or the Awakened One taught his early group of monks and nuns that the body is made of ever-changing elements and you are never the same person twice...." Prep-school Suh thereafter begins to reflect: "Wait a minute, I thought. Does this mean that I don't always have to be the same person? That change is okay? That maybe I won't always look or feel as bad as I do sometimes?"¹²

For Suh, the philosophical teachings of Buddhism are central to her "coming of age" as a Korean American teenager, which powerfully transforms and *inspires* the narrative. Suh digests the seeds of Buddhist teaching she first consumes as a prep-school teen, ultimately offering to her contemporary readers and future generations a crucial lesson: that we do not have to accept the ascribed racialized, misogynistic, belittling labels thrust upon us. Suh writes: "How radical is it to occupy our bodies and challenge the oppressive notion that we must somehow automatically be what those external labels of racism and sexism say we are? I can learn to occupy other spaces beyond the racialized, gendered ones....Wow, meditation really can be a radical act of freedom and self-love and help me let go of clinging to mental distortions."¹³ Or, "Hey, we have all been marginalized, rendered invisible, seen through the frame of racism, sexism, heteronormativity, and therefore we have all been fragmented. Didn't the Buddha tell us that we should let go of the projections thrust upon us by the dominant culture that we react to, and stumble with discomfort as we sometimes make that projection our own?"¹⁴

Suh powerfully illustrates through her memoir a way to reclaim mindfulness meditation for people of color in general and women of color in particular, "whose flourishing is undercut in the service of the happiness of the property-holding (physical and intellectual) white men," especially in the white-dominant American Buddhist academy and *sangha*, where the racialized project of the contemporary mindfulness movement has thrived.¹⁵ Yet she reveals through autoethnographic illustrations how meditation can be employed as a skillful means to overcome the haunting violence thrust upon marginalized peoples' bodies and minds. In so doing, she *inspires* her audience to join her in mindful and compassionate practice toward body and mind, as she leaves us with these last words, in Thich Nhat Hanh's tradition: "No mud, no lotus."¹⁶

Indeed, through feminist archival practice and a narrative that *haunts*, *enthralles*, and *inspires*, Suh awakens us from our collective amnesia, helping us to remember –

remember Korean American women's religious history, a gift she has courageously given to us, but also compassionately bequeathed to future generations. Thank you Sharon!

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NOTES

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5. Mary Paik Lee, *Quiet Odyssey: A Pioneer Korean Woman in America*, North American Women's Letters and Diaries (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990).
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9. Suh, *Occupy this Body*, 22.
10. Jane Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Chenxing Han, *Be the Refuge: Raising the Voices of Asian Americans* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2021); see my historiographic discussion in Helen Jin Kim, "Reconstructing Asian America's Religious Past: A Historiography."
11. Suh, *Occupy this Body*, 108–109.
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15. Sharon Suh, "We Interrupt Your Regularly Scheduled Programming..." In *Buddhism and Whiteness: Critical Reflections*, George Yancy and Emily McRae eds., (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019). 2.
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"I See You." Reflections on *Occupy This Body*

Ann Gleig

Whose bodies have been centered in canonical expressions of Buddhism?

Whose bodies have been allowed to belong in the white space of "American" Buddhism?

Whose bodies have mattered in Buddhist Studies?

These were the questions that Sharon Suh left me with after our first meeting on a 2012 AAR panel. In her typically electrifying fashion, she delivered a paper that contrasted the confidence of white male Americans who enthusiastically declared themselves Buddhists and Korean American women who were hesitant to reveal their Buddhist heritage. As Sharon continued, the former had received a disproportionate amount of scholarly attention compared to the latter, thereby reproducing the dominant racialized and gendered power dynamics of white convert Buddhism in the academy.



Ann Gleig

As a white scholar-practitioner working primarily on white convert lineages, Sharon's questions rocked me that day and have reverberated in my own scholarship and practice ever since. Nearly a decade later, the same questions have come to the forefront of Buddhist Studies as the field takes stock of its colonial past and seeks to move towards a more inclusive future. That we would all be catching up with Sharon does not surprise me. Nor will it surprise any reader of her most recent book *Occupy This Body: A Buddhist Memoir*. Here Sharon continues her centering of marginalized Buddhist bodies, this time placing her very own in full view.¹ We meet Sharon as a vulnerable abused child, a model minority in white America, a national swimming champion, a Harvard graduate, a mother of two, a Buddhist professor, a marathon runner, and a mindful eating teacher. Just as Sharon reveals her past, present, and even future selves, I want to use these temporal signposts to reflect on the significance of *Occupy This Body* for Buddhist Studies.

PAST: *Occupy This Body* as Auto-Ethnography

As its subtitle makes clear, *Occupy This Body* is a memoir. Here, however, I want to engage in some creative genre blurring and suggest that if we situate the book within the context of Sharon's past academic work, *Occupy This Body* is as much an act of autoethnography as memoir. Emerging out

of the postcolonial turn in anthropology, autoethnography is a research method in which the personal experience (“auto”) of the researcher is systematically analyzed (“graphy”) in order to understand the cultural experience (“ethno”) under analysis. As Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner show, incorporating personal experience adds insights into social, cultural and religious worlds that are often inaccessible to researchers due to practical and ethical reasons.² Autoethnography has been particularly embraced by marginalized populations who use their own stories to link the personal to the political and illuminate and disrupt systems of oppression.

Occupy This Body, I suggest, functions in a similar way. Linking Sharon’s own gendered and racialized body to the bodies of marginalized Buddhist practitioners, her work has long sought to render visible in protest to both the white space of mainstream American Buddhism and Buddhist Studies. Take, for instance, Sharon’s first book, *Being Buddhist in a Christian World: Gender and Community in a Korean American Temple*.³ Published in 2004, this was a groundbreaking ethnography of a group of first generation Korean American Buddhists in Los Angeles. First, it focused on Buddhist bodies who have been routinely erased from the story of Buddhism in America. As recent work has highlighted, despite Asian Americans making up third-thirds of the American Buddhist population, a disproportion amount of both mainstream and scholarly attention has focused on white convert Buddhists. Second, Sharon illuminated *distinct gender differences* in how her research populations practiced Buddhism, with females drawing on the psychological healing resources of the tradition and males favoring an intellectual approach. Through focusing on the lived experience of marginalized Buddhist bodies, Sharon shows Buddhism functioning as a source of self-empowerment that offers emotional resilience and relief in the daily lives of her gendered and racialized subjects. In this sense, the book disrupts the privileging of the male renunciate body that marks elite canonical Buddhism and has been reproduced and buttressed in Western scholarship that has historically prioritized Buddhist text and philosophy over lived experience.

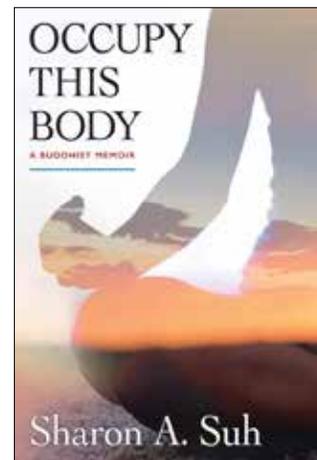
In her second book, *Silver Screen Buddha: Buddhism in Asian and Western Film*, Sharon continues to forefront marginalized Buddhist bodies through a critical gender and race analysis of Buddhist film.⁴ Here she decenters the primacy of the ascetic meditating monk as the ideal Buddhist body and brings the historically neglected population of lay Buddhist woman to the forefront. For Sharon, the privileging of male monasticism as the purest form of Buddhism is not only a result of elitism and patriarchy of the tradition itself but also an outcome of Orientalism and white privilege, which since colonialism has deemed the monastic meditative tradition the most authentic expression of Buddhism. As she explains, the cinematic omnipresence of the meditating Asian monk serves not only male monastic Buddhist desire but the persistent neo-colonial white desire to imagine (certain) Buddhist bodies as exotic Other.

Sharon notes that the monastic aversion to female bodies and sexuality, detailed vividly in classical Buddhism, continues in contemporary Buddhist films such as *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter ...and Spring* (2003) in which women are either absent or cast as tempresses (Suh 2015, 18). More positive images, however, can be found in films such as *Aje Aje Bara Aje* (Come, Come, Come Upward, 1989), which present an alternative vision of what Suh calls “an embodied female lay Buddhism where a female body can materialize virtue and a healthy sexuality that is productive to enlightenment.”⁵ Inspired by these portrayals, Sharon believes that Buddhist film can be deployed as “potential generative Buddhist text that can reshape and re-envision dominant discourses by and about the tradition.”⁶ To do so requires identifying and undoing the interrelated hierarchies of monastic, male, and white privilege, and recovering Buddhism’s historically marginalized others. Such a retrieval and reimagining accepts the messiness of everyday life and de-pathologizes female sexuality.

In *Occupy this Body*, Sharon, a second-generation Korean American woman, places another marginalized body at the center of her work: this time her very own. The book opens with an impactful encounter, one might even say a transmission, between two female lay Buddhists of Color: Sharon and Asha, one of the Black Buddhist teachers on a silent meditation retreat for practitioners of color. As Sharon grapples with incessant thoughts, a growling stomach, and searing pain in her back, Asha, “says something I have never heard in a dharma talk before. ‘I see you.’”⁷

“I See You.” The impact is instantaneous. As Sharon continues, “There is a palpable shift in the room and I can feel my own body begin to ease into the cushion while taking in this radical message. Despite thirty years of visiting meditation centers and temples as grad student, professor, and Buddhist, I have never heard a Dharma teacher, let alone a female lay Buddhist of color, tell me exactly what I needed to hear. It was if she could see straight into my heart, my head and my past.”⁸

“I See You.” With these three words, Sharon’s three books come full circle. She becomes one who *both* sees and gives space to Buddhist bodies that have been rendered invisible by gendered and racialized hegemonic power systems *and* one who is seen and given the space she needs.



PRESENT: Occupy This Body as “Female Lay Embodied Buddhism”

In *Silver Screen Buddhism*, Sharon offers Buddhist film as a generative site for a “female lay embodied Buddhism.” *Occupy This Body*, I suggest, moves from the aspirational to the actual in offering us a female lay embodied Buddhism. It is the story of how Sharon comes to recover and fully inhabit her own body, a body that had been wrestled away from her since she was force-fed as child, a body that has been subject to traumatic physical and psychological abuses from her mother, a body that had been regulated by Korean gendered norms and white American racialized norms.

How does one liberate one’s body from such intimate relational and ubiquitous societal forces? For Sharon, it is her encounter with Buddhism that brings such freedom. Moreover, it is Buddhism as mediated through the bodies of female lay Buddhists of color, from the stylish Japanese American Mrs. White to Asha, her Black American retreat teacher. These lay women open up the tradition for Sharon in a way that elite and dominant forms of Buddhism do not. As she explains: “Despite considering myself a Buddhist and having a doctorate in Buddhist Studies, I usually avoided regular practice because I felt out of place in predominantly white Buddhist centers...but here [on the PoC retreat] Buddhism has come alive for me precisely because the emphasis is on feeling and embracing the body. It is the first time that meditation has been offered to me as the radical act of taking up space and appreciating myself as a woman with a body and a complex history surrounding it.”⁹

Sharon’s female lay embodied Buddhism emerges from, expresses, and is embedded within the now decades-long racial justice work within and across American Buddhist communities. In thinking about *Occupy this Body* in the present, I want to put it into conversation with two sister books. One of these is Zenju Earthlyn Manuel’s *The Way of Tenderness*.¹⁰ An African American Zen teacher, Zenju has pioneered a Buddhist hermeneutics in which embodied difference – race, gender, sexuality – is placed at the center of awakening. For Zenju, it is essential to recognize that one’s particular body, a body that is always constituted by social forces, is the relative doorway into absolute truth. As a Black woman in a predominantly white Buddhist community, she shares, “I needed to bring the validity of my unique, individual, and collective background to the practice of Dharma.” She rejects a “disembodied” form of practice that is removed from the particularities of the world and embraces bodily difference as a doorway to liberation.

We see a similar expression in Sharon’s work. First, she recognizes the *particularity* of the gendered body. As she explains, “The desire to hide the less-loved parts of our bodies is certainly not an atypical obsession for women; most of us are raised to think that we are not good enough and that we shouldn’t reveal all parts of ourselves...Our female body is inscribed with social meaning and my body came with a particular inheritance of self-hatred and anxiety.”¹¹

Next, she shares how within the particular context of the gendered body, meditation is transformed from a practice of bodily detachment to a practice of bodily embrace. As Sharon explains, “Although I know that the Buddha offered such meditation practices to overcome desire for the body, it has always had a curiously opposite effect on me...I do not intend for body scan meditations to create a sense of detachment from my body. Instead I scan my body to help me learn how to occupy it.”¹²

Another sibling to *Occupy This Body* is Chenxing Han’s *Be the Refuge*.¹³ Like Sharon, Chenxing comes to the tradition as a “first generation” Buddhist who feels neither completely at home in the white space of American convert Buddhism nor within Asian American heritage communities. In her search for company, Chenxing uncovers thriving networks of young Asian American Buddhists, from multi-generational Jodo Shinshu Buddhists to new converts. Across their difference, she finds these young adults all share a commitment to an “intersectional Buddhism,” one that is “keenly attuned to issues of race, gender, sexuality.” Sharon is a big sister to these young “intersectional Buddhists.” Just like them, she understands, as Chenxing states, that, “the many manifestations of culture – race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and so on – are not a grime to be wiped off or a dross to be transcended, but phenomena that we must thoroughly explore and fully engage with if we are to realize a truly inclusive American Buddhism.”¹⁴

FUTURE: Occupy This Body as Embodied Buddhist Studies Manifesto

Just as Sharon suggests that Buddhist film can be deployed as a “potential generative Buddhist text that can reshape and re-envision dominant discourses by and about the tradition,” I suggest that *Occupy This Body* can be deployed as a potential generative Buddhist text that can re-envision dominant discourses by and about Buddhist Studies.¹⁵ It is not coincidental that this panel is taking place during a year in which two of the AAR Buddhism Unit sessions are taking stock of the field. One of these, “Buddhist Studies Manifestos,” puts out a call for Buddhist Studies Manifestos on the direction of our field.¹⁶ Always one step ahead, I suggest that with her 2019 publication of *Occupy This Body*, Sharon has already delivered us an embodied Buddhist Studies Manifesto.

This comes through a destabilization of a series of lingering binaries within our field that are related to exclusionary power hierarchies. One of these is the *objective/subjective* binary. Sharon’s memoir destabilizes the ideal model of the disembodied “objective” scholar removed from the “data” that is being studied. Reflecting a friction between theology and religious studies, such a model has generated suspicion of scholars who are also practitioners and siloed their work into the “engaged Buddhist” or “critical-constructive” unit. These divisions are not merely

intellectual; they have real impacts on real bodies in the field. Sharon signals this impact herself when she writes of her graduate experience: "I just couldn't admit to my cohort or my teachers that I was studying Buddhism for something more than becoming an intellectual and a scholar."¹⁷ Recently, I have been in conversation with graduate students who are afraid that disclosing their status as practicing Buddhists will have a deleterious impact on their job chances. At a time of intense academic precarity, I suggest that in maintaining these boundaries we are inflicting a violence on the students we are training. Nor is this something that we graduate from. I know of colleagues who maintain a strict separation between their scholarly and practice lives for fear of having their work placed in a silo or dismissed. This points to the fact that the objective/subjective is not just a methodological distinction but a hierarchical boundary that reverberates on intellectual, emotional, and practical levels.

In occupying her own body with such vulnerability and fearlessness, Sharon is offering her colleagues the same opportunity. She invites us to acknowledge that we are all embodied Buddhist scholars; we all have bodies, which are constituted by our social identities -- bodies that are not separate from the methodologies we employ, the texts or populations we study, or the knowledge we produce. Our choice, then, is not whether to have a body or not; our choice is whether we want to deny or occupy our bodies, and the impact that such a choice has on our scholarship, pedagogy, and collegiality.

A second binary is *text/ practice*. Despite a movement towards lived religion within Buddhist Studies, the philological and textual privileging that marked the early stages of our field still casts a large shadow. Many scholars, for instance, have been quick to point out the departure of the contemporary mindfulness movement from the classical tradition. In itself, of course, this is appropriate and necessary historical work. However, such historicizing has too often been accompanied by a ridicule and contempt for contemporary practitioners as well as policing the boundaries of the tradition by defining what is and what is not Buddhism proper.

Sharon's memoir disrupts this narrative because she comes to contemporary mindfulness as a Buddhist professor trained at Harvard. She is well aware that the practice is not textually faithful, or as she cheekily puts it, "not quite what the Buddha had in mind." And, yet she does not let textual prescriptions determine or limit her first-person experience. She does not laugh at the departure from canon, rather she embraces it as a lived practice that transforms her own particular historical and culturally situated body. She embraces it as a lived practice that emerges in new Buddhist communities of marginalized Black and Brown practitioners.

As with her earlier work, then, for me the gift of *Occupy This Body*, the gift of Sharon is her questions for Buddhist Studies: whose bodies are granted space in our field? What Buddhist bodies are considered worthy and legitimate to study? How do we as teachers nurture the bodies of our students? And what bodies do we as Buddhist scholars allow ourselves and each other to have?

Conclusion: Occupying Buddhist Studies

In conclusion, I will end with some questions for Sharon herself. In *Occupy This Body*, you talk about feeling invisible as a woman of color in predominantly white Buddhist communities. I am curious as to whether you have felt fully seen in Buddhist Studies, a field itself marked heavily by a white demographic in the context of its North American location. And, if not, what conditions do you think are necessary for Buddhist Studies to better see marginalized bodies, whether such bodies are those of our colleagues or our research subjects? Given that the classical tradition has often been used to dismiss contemporary intersectional Buddhists, how can we as a community of scholars, respect past expressions without dismissing present flowerings and foreclosing future possibilities? How can we acknowledge the depth and richness of the textual tradition and our depth of gratitude to those who have historically preserved it, without reproducing the power dynamics of both monastic and scholarly elites that have deemed some bodies as less than others, whether that "less than" be framed as less karmically virtuous or less authentically Buddhist than others? In short, Sharon, what would a Buddhist Studies that allowed for *all* Buddhist bodies -- past, present, and future -- to be seen and occupied look like for you?

Ann Gleig is an associate professor in Religion and Cultural Studies at the University of Central Florida. Her Dharma home is Dawn Mountain Tibetan Buddhist Center in Houston, Texas, and with all marginalized Buddhists.

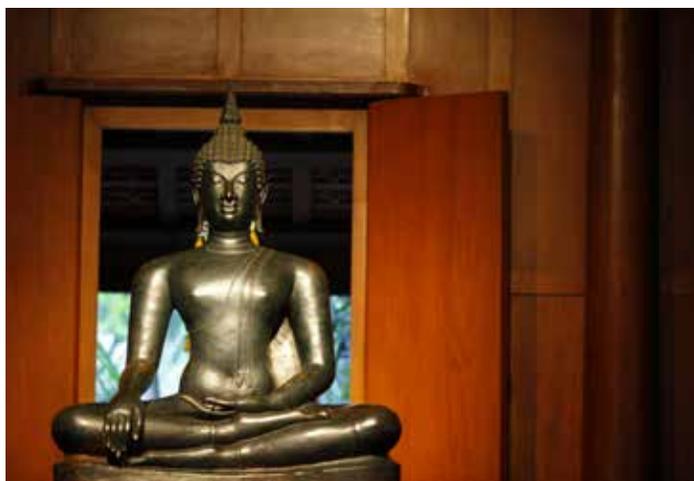
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10. Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, *The Way of Tenderness: Awakening Through Race, Sexuality and Gender* (Wisdom Publications, 2015).
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Ethical Reading and Buddhist #MeToo

Amy Paris Langenberg

In a 2017 essay, Buddhist Studies scholar Sarah McClintock contemplates what it means to ethically read a Buddhist text. McClintock describes how when different readers meet a text in different times and contexts, new meanings are produced.¹ These meanings emerge through this dynamic interaction between reader and text. In her essay, McClintock argues for a style of ethical reading that is active, reflective, and leads to a kind of moral transformation. She rejects the idea that ethics is purely a matter of rules and principles. McClintock warns, if we focus only on such rational justifications and ignore the way we are able to form new ethical ways of being while reading, we are “at grave risk of losing touch with ethics itself.”²



While we studied the racist and colonial history of Buddhist Studies as a field in graduate school classes, I was not asked to think in any sustained way about how the reading of texts was an ethical practice, at least not in McClintock’s sense. But in the years since, I have more and more come to understand reading as an ethical practice, one that transforms us for better, or sometimes for worse.

In order for a reader to reflect upon and allow themselves to *be* transformed, first they must trust the text, or at least cultivate an openness towards the text. Recently, I have found this to be a difficult starting point. This is because I have been researching sexual abuse in Buddhist contexts with my colleague, Ann Gleig.³ It feels increasingly impossible to me to engage openly with Buddhist texts that are not survivor centered or responsive to the trauma of sexual violation. And many of them are not.

Many of us resort to reading Buddhist texts when thinking about responding to harm. How, then, can we think about ethical reading in the context of sexual abuse in Buddhist communities? For me, ethical reading, the type that results in the positive moral transformation of selves and communities, needs to include an effort to understand the underlying biases of a text. Who is the text’s intended

audience? What authorities does it serve or question? What social norms does it assume?

Reading ethically also means asking questions about which texts we give authority or priority to, and which questions we, as readers, pose to texts (Buddhist texts, scholarly texts, oral texts). The questions posed and the authority given vary from context to context, and often reflect ethical commitments and institutional alignments. For instance, monks and nuns may prioritize commentarial texts or legal digests that are important within their lineages. If, however, they disagree on certain positions taken by authorities within the institutions to which they belong, they may prioritize instead the texts they feel are closest to the original teachings of the Buddha. The latter is a pattern of interpretation among monastic leaders who support the global movement for the full ordination of women.

Vinaya texts, which record precepts for monastic communities, are central to the articulation of classical Buddhist ethics. Thinking about Buddhist ethical responses to abuse, here I briefly explore two contemporary readings of the Vinaya that have affected or may affect living Buddhist communities responding to sexual abuse. One is survivor centered. One is not.

In 2011, the *Chicago Tribune* published a news article about sexual abuse cases at Thai Buddhist temples in Chicago, California, and Texas.⁴ The article is authored by Megan Twohey, the Pulitzer-prize-winning investigative journalist who, along with Jodi Kantor, broke the Harvey Weinstein story in 2017. Their investigation of Weinstein contributed to prompting the global reckoning with sexual violence and misconduct known as the #MeToo movement.

The *Tribune* story begins by recounting how a twelve-year-old girl complained to temple authorities at Wat Dhammaram, a large Thai diaspora temple outside of Chicago, of being fondled by one of the monks in residence. I can only imagine what it must have cost her to stand in that room in front of three men and describe in detail the violation she suffered. Temple authorities sent a letter to the girl’s family stating that the situation had been resolved shortly thereafter. While they spoke of their intention to send the monk back to Thailand after the young girl reported his behavior, nothing was done when he showed up to collect his things from Wat Dhammaram a month later. The temple in Long Beach California where he then secured a position through a friend was also not informed of the allegations. Regarding the fondling incident, a senior monk at the Chicago temple had this to say in justifying their decision to simply suspend him from the community: “As long as we don’t know any sexual intercourse, we have no reason to charge anybody on that ground... We were informed that he just touched body.”

As of the writing of Twohey’s article in 2011, this monk was facing a legal case in which he was charged with assaulting and this time impregnating a second teenage girl at the same Chicago temple.

As anyone that has spent time with *pārājika* 1 (the Vinaya

precept establishing celibacy) knows, culpable sexual contact is defined there in very specific terms. It must involve penetration of one of three orifices, and it cannot occur by accident or without intention. While sexually touching women and girls is also not allowed by monastic discipline, it is not a *pārājika*-level offense; that is, it doesn't lead to expulsion from the community. It does lead to a temporary "suspension" of the community, which is more or less the consequence given here. That is, the monk in question was suspended from the Chicago temple sangha, but not permanently expelled or made to disrobe. Notably, Vinaya discussions about what constitutes culpable sexual behavior rarely consider sexual trauma inflicted on a vulnerable individual to be an aggravating factor in evaluating the offense.

The Vinaya reading offered by the monastic higher up as reported in the *Tribune* article was a supportable interpretation of the text. But was it an ethical reading of the text given that it does not center the sexual trauma experienced by the young girl? Did it result in the moral transformation of the individual or the community after this instance of abuse?

In fact, this temple official's reading of the Vinaya as defining seriously problematic sexual behavior strictly in terms of penetration, with little regard for the vulnerability of the victim, does enable a sort of moral transformation. Unfortunately, it is a harmful one that allows those involved to ignore the harm done to a vulnerable person and, instead, protect the monastic insider. While this is certainly not the sort of moral transformation McClintock had in mind, it does count as a type of moral subject formation, one that would, and apparently did, enable further sexual violence by the monk in question.

My second example is an October 2021 *Lion's Roar* article by Bhante Sujato, an Australian monk and scholar.⁵ Sujato is well known for working with his teacher, Ajahn Brahm, to reestablish the *bhikkhuni* ordination lineage in the Thai forest tradition of Ajahn Chah. Sujato's recent essay, "The Buddha Would Have Believed You," explores ethical resources in the Vinaya for supporting and believing women who come forward to report abuse at the hands of Buddhist

teachers. In particular, Sujato focuses on the two *aniyata* or "undecided rules." These specifically involve cases where a monk approaches a lay woman sexually and is observed and reported by another "trustworthy laywoman." These rules are called "undecided" because the level of offense depends on what the monk is determined to have done based on the witnessing laywoman's testimony. Sujato believes that the *aniyata* rules, understood by him to be the authentic words of the Buddha, are authoritative canonical grounds for believing the testimony of women in cases of sexual abuse in general. On this basis, Sujato argues that "the Buddha would have believed [women]" and that "The Buddha understood that an institution is served by truth and accountability."

The Vinaya is not a survivor-centered tradition. Here, however, Sujato focuses only on two rules that *do* give grounds for centering survivor's experiences in order to support better responses to abuse in Buddhist communities. I find the ethics of Sujato's reading practices instructive here. He brings forward a text that a survivor-centered reader can engage with ethically. At the same time, his reading is not naïve. In his essay, he contextualizes these potentially transformative texts within the broader framework of Buddhist legal traditions and monastic institutions. Sujato points out, for instance, that, unlike in other sectarian Vinayas, the old Pali Vinaya commentary known as the *vibhaṅga* – and this is the Vinaya tradition most pertinent to the Theravāda tradition to which Sujato belongs -- only accepts the trustworthy laywoman's testimony as valid if the monk confesses. If he doesn't confess, her testimony is dismissed as invalid. Thus, according to Sujato, the Buddha's original intent to establish the principle of believing women is weakened and eventually displaced by later lawmakers' prioritization of the accused monk's claim.

In his essay, Sujato is also alert to certain readings of the Vinaya that might result in an ethical transformation that turns away from rather than towards abuse victim's trauma. He describes the moral hardening of those engaged in a reading of Buddhist ethics that center institutional interests and reputation. He writes, "When an accused abuser is exonerated, he doesn't take it as a chance to reflect on his conscience and reform his acts. He is being told by the patriarchy that he is invulnerable. His sense of narcissism and entitlement only swell, and his actions grow bolder." However, Sujato also offers the *aniyata* texts to Buddhist communities as an opportunity for ethical transformation in the wake of sexual abuse. "The Aniyata rules provide not only an early example of how [believing women and holding abusers accountable] can be applied in a monastic context, but also a model for how it can be applied in any community. It is far from a complete and final solution, but it gives us a place to start."

Centering the perspectives of survivors, Sujato looks to a foundational Buddhist text with an openness to listening and a desire to locate helpful ethical responses to abuse. This is not possible, however, without considering the dynamics of power in Buddhist contexts that automatically marginalize survivors and move to protect institutions and individuals





in up power position. The marginalization of the survivor and the protection of the abuser is exactly the pattern that accompanied the uncritical reading practice embraced by monastic authorities at the Dhammaram Temple in Chicago. And here I wish to forestall any move towards blaming these dynamics on so called "Asian patriarchy." Ann Gleig and I have seen similar dynamics across North American Buddhist communities that have experienced abuse.

Ethical reading practices involve seeking Buddhist texts as something transformative; however, ethical reading cannot be undertaken uncritically or naively. It requires an eye towards the underlying social logic of the text. (This is often called a "hermeneutics of suspicion" in academic circles.) Ethical reading is not what I was taught to do in graduate school. It is what Buddhist survivors of sexual abuse and their advocates have asked me to do.

NOTES

1. Sara McClintock, "Ethical Reading and the Ethics of Forgetting and Remembering." In *A Mirror for Reflection: Understanding Buddhist Ethics*, edited by Jake H. Davis, 185-202. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
2. *Ibid.*, 185.
3. Lilly Greenblatt, "Buddhist Scholars Receive Grant to Document Sexual Abuse in American Buddhism," *Lion's Roar*, July 26, 2019. <https://www.lionsroar.com/buddhist-scholars-receive-grant-to-document-sexual-abuse-in-american-buddhism/>
4. Megan Twohey, "Buddhist Monks Walk Away from Sex Abuse Cases," *The Chicago Tribune*, July 24, 2011. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2011-07-24-ct-met-monk-sex-cases-20110724-story.html>
5. Bhante Sujato, "The Buddha Would Have Believed You," *Lion's Roar*. October 1, 2021. <https://www.lionsroar.com/the-buddha-would-have-believed-you/>

Healing the Wounds of Trauma

Dory Shonagon

In the summer of 1981, His Holiness the Dalai Lama gave the first Kalachakra empowerment in North America at the Deer Park Buddhist Center in Wisconsin. I was there, inside the open-air temple close to the Wisconsin cornfields. Many miracles happened at that empowerment but, most significantly for me, I became a Buddhist and H.H. the Dalai Lama became my teacher.

That was 40 years ago and I am still a devout Buddhist lay practitioner. There are no words to describe all the benefits I have received by being a Buddhist. I have studied with exceptionally kind and learned teachers, such as H.H. the Dalai Lama, Geshe Sopa, and Geshe Donyo of Deer Park, Tsong Rinpoche, Serkong Rinpoche, Lati Rinpoche, and many others of the Gelupa school of Tibetan Buddhism.

I will speak here of just one major benefit that I have received by being a Buddhist, which is the healing of childhood trauma. My experience at Deer Park was that many new students came with trauma of many different kinds and I believe many traumas were healed at Deer Park. The lamas taught us how to strengthen ourselves and heal from whatever happened, so we could lead healthy lives.

My childhood trauma was that I was born into an alcoholic family. My father was the alcoholic and my mother was the co-dependent. My mother could not or would not stop her husband's abusive behavior toward the children. Many girls in the family, myself included, received our father's unwanted attention that turned into sexual molestation.

One of the biggest things about childhood trauma is that many, if not most people suppress the memories of their trauma. They try very hard to live a normal life without ever recognizing what happened to them or how it affects them in daily life. One of the first things you learn as a trauma survivor is you have to tell your story and say exactly what happened, as much as you can remember. This is important so that you can heal and so that the details of the trauma do not stay lurking below the surface of your life, threatening to make living a regular healthy life almost impossible.

Two things that helped me heal my childhood trauma were the Buddhist teachings and going for regular counseling. The dual track healing process that I developed first involved talking to regular lay counselors while taking Buddhist teachings at the same time. Seeing lay counselors over the years helped me to heal in many ways and to truly understand that I was not to blame for what my parents did to me when I was a child.

When I spoke with Buddhist teachers (*lamas*) during that process, even without telling them all the details of my childhood, I felt that their kindness and loving natures and teachings helped me to heal in a way I could not have without their help. One major teaching from the lamas that I feel was essential was that of the inner guru, because learning to develop and believe in your inner guru can help you to feel more secure in your life and your practice.

Besides talking to lay counselors and the lamas, I had to talk to my family. Although it was incredibly hard to talk with them, I did that, but was rejected and banned by all members of my family, except one sister. That one sister was able to tell me what happened to her, which was very similar to the abuse I had suffered at my father's hands. My sister's support was crucial because being banned and hated by your biological family is not an easy thing to live with. It is very common in these situations for families to reject what trauma survivors say. That does not make what happened to the survivor any less true.

Although my parents banned me from the family, I did nothing to harm them or exact revenge for what they did. I wished them well. I learned that you can have compassion for your parents in these situations and try to understand why they did what they did. Still, you must recognize what happened to you and how it affected you. Both my parents passed away long ago but their karma belongs to them and is not mine to determine. My duty is to heal myself and help others to heal whenever that opportunity arises in my life.

The Buddhist teachings helped me immeasurably. Of all the wonderful Buddhas I have studied and gotten to know over the years, the female Buddhas affected me most. Tara has ever been a consoler and healer in my life since I became a Buddhist. Mother Tara has helped me find a way to receive the mothering I didn't have when I was a child. I am stronger every year because of her help and I feel like I am always protected and well cared for by all the Taras.

Vajrayogini and all the *dakinis* (enlightened energy in female form) have given me strength and insight into daily living and helped me deal with people from a position of strength and compassion, which is essential. When I deal with people who challenge me or even wish me harm, I now feel confident enough to be with them and help them while standing strong in myself. It is hard to put into words how deeply Vajrayogini practice has changed me. Using the skillful means of Vajrayogini practice is powerful beyond description. I will always be grateful to the female Buddhas for supporting me in my Buddhist practice and daily life.

I will always be grateful to the Buddhist lamas who changed my life and helped me heal. Since becoming a Buddhist, I have been able to live a healthy, active, and good life. Most especially, of course, I am thankful to His Holiness the Dalai Lama who has blessed me over and over again and helped me save myself and find greater purpose in life by following the Buddhist path.

To any woman, whether a Buddhist or not, who has experienced trauma and has not been able to fully heal, I want to explain that it is never too late. The female Buddhas and the lamas are there to help you. There are lay counselors and Buddhist women like myself who try to help other women with similar problems. It is important to know that the healing process continues throughout life and that is good.



Female Pāli Masters in the Burmese Kingdom of Pagan

Alexandra Kaloyanides

In Burma's last kingdom, Buddhist women got a lot of attention. British colonial accounts fixated on how literate Burmese women appeared to be, especially in contrast to women in neighboring lands. American Christian missionaries saw the enduring strength of Buddhism in the country as coming from mothers and wives.¹ In Burma's last kingdom, the Konbaung Dynasty (which began in 1752 and ended with their defeat in the Third Anglo-Burmese War of 1885), Burmese kings and monks pointed to women's knowledge of the teachings of the Buddha as a sign that the country was – and should remain – a righteous, independent Buddhist kingdom.



In an 1861 royal Buddhist chronicle, the *Sāsanavamsa*, Burmese women are depicted as so excellent in their mastery of the Pāli language that they embarrass the men around them. King Mindon (r. 1853–1878) commissioned his royal tutor, the monk Paññāsāmi, to compose this Pāli-language chronicle of great monastics from the Buddha's disciples to the contemporary *sangha* leaders in his royal capital of Mandalay. The Burmese king and the monk prepared this text to impress a visiting delegation of high-ranking Sinhalese monks who were interested in the state of Buddhism in Burma as part of their project of reforming their monastic lineage. This delegation arrived in Mandalay on February 24, 1861, and was headed by the monk Ambagahavatte Saranamkara, who would go on a few years later to establish the Rāmañña Nikāya, one of the three major Buddhist monastic orders in Sri Lanka in the late nineteenth century and through the twentieth century. Paññāsāmi got most of his material from the 1831 Burmese text *Tha-thana-wun-tha-sa-dan tha-thana-lin-ga-ya*, but he did add a few new sections, including a curious section on highly educated women.

This odd section narrates a series of amusing stories about smart women in the medieval Burmese kingdom of Pagan besting those around them – even monks – with their sophisticated mastery of elaborate Pāli grammar. These stories include a mother correcting her twelve-year old daughter's Pāli declension paradigms; a father composing a Pāli riddle about his maid accidentally seeing his penis, a riddle only his daughter is able to solve, and a young girl shaming a monk for incorrectly using a first person pronoun with the third

person verb termination. These short, humorous vignettes all feature women knowing the intricacies of Pāli language rules better than men.

Take, for example, the story about the father's ribald riddle. It begins with a landlord bathing on the top floor of his home, having a kind of heatstroke, and then sitting down. A maid doing chores below stands up and sees the landlord's "hidden place" (*guyhahāna*). When the landlord realizes that this has happened, he composes the Pāli phrase *sākhāṃ olokesi* as a kind of riddle for his children to interpret. First he asks his son what it means and the son ventures that *sākhāṃ* means "tree branch," *olokesi* means "looks up at." After the son's incorrect "saw the tree branch" guess, the landlord then gives the riddle to one of his daughters who says that "*sā* means 'dog,' *kha* means 'the sky,' and *olokesi* means 'looked up at.'" Since "dog looked up at the sky" is also wrong, he then tries his other daughter, who correctly parses the phrase as: "*sā* means 'woman,' *kha* means 'the distinguishing member (*angajāta*),' and *olokesi* means 'having turned the face upwards, looked at.'" She gets the Pāli joke: "the woman looked at the penis." In this vignette, the son's wrong answer is funny because he mistakes his father's penis for a tree branch. The first daughter's guess is funny because she mistakes their maid for a dog (part of the humor likely comes from a sexist and classist dehumanizing of the domestic servant). When the second daughter correctly solves the riddle, she not only provides a satisfying answer to the phrase puzzle, but she also delights the reader by being the unlikely star Pāli student.

Trying to explain any joke makes it decidedly less funny, so I do not expect any readers to be laughing out loud. Furthermore, the humor here was created by and for a monastic male audience in the mid-nineteenth century. So while we will not laugh at these stories the way Paññāsāmi imagined his audience of Burmese and Lankan ordained men might have, we can still try to understand some ideas they attempt to convey. We can recognize the pattern of female Pāli masters demonstrating their command of the Buddhist canonical language in front of men who struggle to understand its complex rules. And we can put that pattern in the context of mid-nineteenth-century Burma when the Southeast Asian kingdom was competing with Lanka over which land was home to the most pure and powerful Buddhist institutions. Burma was also recovering from the Second Anglo-Burmese War of 1852 in which a large part of southern Burma, including the important port city of Rangoon, was lost to the British.

These stories allow us to glimpse some of the larger concerns in the Konbaung Dynasty, concerns about presenting Burma as a righteously independent land of the most supreme form of Buddhism, and the role of women in that presentation. Paññāsāmi's smart female characters seem tailor-made to impress the Pāli-reading Sinhalese delegation with the history and current state of Burmese Buddhism. When this particular monastic group was seeking to reform their own lineages, Paññāsāmi wanted to assure them that

they had come to the right place: a model Buddhist realm.

As recent events have made all too clear, this is not the only instance of political authorities using Buddhist practices to promote Burma as a pure Buddhist realm. This text provides evidence of this long-standing tradition, and also reminds us of the ways in which gendered bodies have been used to make the case for the country's pure Buddhism and right to stand as an independent political entity. The text also reminds us that Buddhist literature and history is filled with women, real and imagined, who master the Buddha's teachings.



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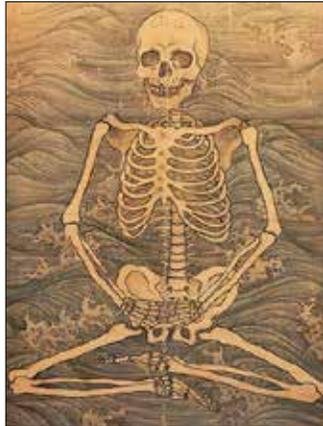
NOTES

1. In an 1857 letter held in the British library, the American Baptist missionary Ellen Mason wrote, "Woman is the teacher of Burma." Without Christian catechism, according to Mason, women use their influential position to support "idolatry." Furthermore, she claimed, all the men, even those who have received Christian education, "marry ignorant heathen wives," undoing any work Americans or the British have done to educate men in Burma. She believed that what the colonial government and its American allies needed to do was to educate these controlling women. Mason insists that "it is the women who will not believe this world is rolling in the sky; and it is the women who perpetuate ghosts, witches, and all manner of popular errors." Other missionaries are less offensive and harsh in their assessment, but there is a discernible pattern in their writings of describing Burmese religions, especially Buddhism, as being upheld by pious lay women. Ellen Mason, "7 February Letter to the Right Honorable Viscountess Canning from Calcutta." London: British Library, 1857.

A Buddhist Approach to Organ Donation

Diana Cousens

Contemporary modern medicine has made organ donation a possibility. This is a topic that Buddhists need to consider, as the donation of an organ is a form of generosity and may be lifesaving. However, there is not a single unitary view about organ donation among Buddhists. The views vary according to the division of Mahāyāna and Theravāda and are also informed by ideas about the stages of death. In Australia, we have a system of collective representation of Buddhist temples in the form of state-based Buddhist councils. These councils provide a voice to government on topics of concern and a public face for such things as interfaith dialogue. I am the vice-president of the Buddhist Council of Victoria and, in 2020, I liaised with a group of hospitals called Western Health to promote a new protocol on organ donation for the Buddhist community. It was adopted at the Annual General Meeting of the Buddhist Council of Victoria that year and can be read on the website. The adoption and publication of the protocol enables an informed discussion by both patients, their loved ones, and medical staff.¹



Examples of organ donation can be discovered in some very old Buddhist texts. It is the tradition that the historical Buddha (500 BCE) achieved a stage of perfection after many lives practicing virtues including generosity and the stories of these previous lives are found in the *Jataka Tales*. Sometimes this generosity involved cutting off a part of his body and giving it to others. One of the most famous stories is of how he cut his body and fed it to a hungry tigress, who had starving cubs. The shrine of Namo Buddha in Nepal is regarded as the location of this event and is a pilgrimage site.

Another story from the Buddha's past lives is of when he was born as the King of Sibi. A blind man approached him and asked him for one eye; the king offered both his eyes. At that point, the blind man revealed himself as the god Indra who gave blessings to the king for his intended generosity. These past life stories of the historical Buddha show the journey of the Buddha prior to enlightenment and demonstrate how he accumulated the necessary merit and wisdom to become enlightened. These great acts of generosity were a part of creating the causes and conditions for his final rebirth.

Therefore, the idea of donating parts of your body to help others is deeply entrenched in the Buddhist tradition. Among Buddhists from Thailand, Sri Lanka, Burma, and others who follow the Theravāda tradition, there is likely to be no objection. It is simply a matter of personal choice. On

the other hand, issues arise around organ donation for the Mahāyāna Buddhists of Vietnam, China, Japan, Korea, and most especially, Tibet. Questions arise because of beliefs about the journey of the subtle consciousness of a person, which is thought to travel from this body and this life into the next one. It is believed that a calm, smooth transition is helpful so as to achieve a good rebirth. Having your body cut open will upset the consciousness and this distress will make it hard to have a good rebirth. Of course, there is an assumption here that a person has a slow and observable dying process. A person who dies suddenly in a car accident or as a result of a violent attack will not have the graduated process that is idealized. There are also questions about how much bodily awareness a person has after brain death.

The idealized dying process is where monks and nuns chant in the room at the time of death. There is no disturbance from crying relatives and the person has given away all of their possessions. The body is undisturbed for eight hours or longer. While Western medicine declares death as brain death, the Mahāyāna and especially the Tibetan tradition considers that death has many stages. Brain death, particularly with the heart still pumping, does not look like death to Mahāyāna Buddhists.

To give a quick overview of the dying process as understood in the Tibetan tradition, it involves the following four stages. Buddhists believe that everything changes, nothing stays the same. The term *bardo* is a Tibetan term meaning in-between state, a state that is not fixed. From the perspective of the Tibetan Nyingmapa and Kagyupa traditions, even this life is an in-between state. I received these teachings from Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche and Orgyen Tulku in Kathmandu in 1987. The first *bardo* is the *bardo* of this life, from birth until the time when a person starts to die. The second *bardo* is the *bardo* of dying. This is the stage from acquiring a fatal illness to actually dying. The third stage, the *bardo* of *dharmata* is the stage where the consciousness and other subtle characteristics of a human being make the transition to the next life. The fourth stage, the *bardo* of becoming, occurs where the luminous nature of mind is accessible but not recognized, the person arises separately to their deceased body in a subtle form that is aware of the old surroundings, and they seek a new rebirth.²

During the *bardo* of dying, the body becomes cold; a person becomes confused and experiences a range of visions. Their consciousness dissolves into space and breathing stops. Those who have practiced meditation and who accept the dying process experience less suffering. They experience space dissolving in luminosity, as all the components of the mind become purified. This experience has names like "the great original state of primordial purity."³ Those who retain an awareness and an ability to concentrate during this process will have the opportunity to realize the nature of mind at this time, as the mind is in its essential state. For some Tibetan Buddhists, organ donation is problematic because it interferes with this stage of dying.

The Chinese and Vietnamese also share this concern

about the time of organ donation, but some are trying to make an accommodation with the value of making a lifesaving gift. The promise to give organs is treated as a compassionate vow and, as such, should be respected. The very revered Chinese master Sheng Yen has said, "If a person made a vow to donate his organs or was very compassionate, once death is properly determined, removing his organs to save another won't cause him any harm or vexation and anger."⁴ But he specifies that those with attachment to their body will be disturbed because the spiritual consciousness will be aware of what is happening. For those who are willing, it is a great act of generosity but the person must have ceased breathing and be properly determined as dead. I have consulted various medical friends and understand that a cerebral perfusion scan is the most reliable medical test of death. Sheng Yen also proposes that a deceased person would not experience pain if their body was anaesthetized prior to the organ donation. This would require a leap of imagination by medical doctors who would not imagine that a deceased person with no brain function could need an anaesthetic, but we are trying to find ways to accommodate different beliefs about death.

In conversation with the Australian Vietnamese Buddhist abbot Thich Phuoc Tan, the principal concern was the number of hours of chanting that would be allowed after a person's death has been determined by doctors. The traditional requirement is eight. However, it is important that only those who have offered their organs have them taken, and that before it happens the doctor reads aloud a statement to the person that reminds them that they made a vow to offer their organs, and so now their organs will be taken. A deceased person must be treated gently and with care and respect and this point is in the protocol.

If it is not possible to reconcile the requirement of eight hours chanting after death with the removal of organs that are still usable for surgery, then a compromise position would be to allow the removal of tissues only. Tissues include the corneas from the eyes, and cornea transplant can enable a blind person to see. Tissues can be harvested up to 24 hours after a person's death. This would be achievable and also enable the required amount of chanting.

So far, all I have touched upon are the practicalities of organ donation, given the specific concerns about not disturbing the consciousness at the time of death. These concerns are included in the Buddhist Council protocol and there are several other very important points. The first is that the donor should have identified themselves during their lifetime; in that way, no one has to guess what their wishes would be. If people would like to save the lives of others or make a huge contribution through donating something like corneal tissue, then the conversation needs to happen during this life. We need to start talking about organ donation and identifying ourselves as donors or as not donors. Either way, loved ones need to be informed and if you live in a country where you can join an organ donation register and you wish to be an organ donor, then please enter the register without delay. It is worth noting that, even in spite of all

these concerns about the consciousness at the time of death, I am aware of a very senior Tibetan lama and ritual master in Victoria who has registered as an organ donor. Another important lifesaving gift that one can make in this life is blood donation. In Australia, you can donate blood three times a year if you are in very good health. This is a very meritorious and important act of generosity and it luckily avoids all these questions about the consciousness at the time of death.

To return to organ donation, there is a huge number of complex questions relating to living donors and it is a serious problem that people may be pressured by their relatives to donate their kidneys, for example. No one has any spare organs. No one should be pressured into making an organ donation and all living donors must receive the same standard of care as donor recipients. Another major problem is organ trafficking and the sale of organs is expressly prohibited in Australia. The major international protocol concerning this is The Declaration of Istanbul on Organ Trafficking and Transplant Tourism which was first published in 2008 and updated in 2018 and it has been signed by over 100 countries. Among other things, it says that trafficking in organs should be criminalized. Our Buddhist Council protocol includes the statement that "living donors must have a bill of rights and an advocate to determine that they are not being exploited."

This topic also points to a number of other issues. Organ donation is a very expensive and complex procedure and it is useful to note that primary care, particularly the care of mothers and new babies, is often underfunded. Also, organs may fail because of a lack of preventative care or because of lifestyle illnesses like Type 2 Diabetes. In a world where there will never be enough organs for all, it is useful to remember that the historical Buddha founded his religion on the observation of the reality of old age, sickness and death. No amount of new organs will ever ultimately beat death, and it is a Buddhist perspective that those who have an attitude that accepts the impermanence of life will experience a better death.

I would like to include two prayers written for this paper by Annie Whitlocke, who is a Buddhist living in Melbourne and a professional palliative caregiver.

For the Recipient

This day we open our hearts in gratitude to the unknown person and their loved ones, who donated this precious, life sustaining organ.

Now our [recipient's name] lives.

The elements of earth, fire, water and wind moved from this cherished person, resulting in their much-grieved death.

These elements then took rise in our beloved [son/daughter/husband, etc.] and, as the element of earth gave strength and vigor, the element of fire gave warmth and life, the element of water gave the rush of fresh blood through the organs, and the element of air gave a fresh wind of renewal.

May our undying gratitude serve you well on your journey of your consciousness.

For the Donor

May the merit of offering these precious lifegiving organ/s sustain your next transition, beloved [name of person].

In humility we respected your wishes to continue to be of service to humanity.

Our tears are for your selflessness and your most glorious act of life, to offer to another in great need.

May the elements of your once vibrant body be transferred to another therefore resulting in the life sustaining elements of earth, water, fire and wind continuing on.

Countless people have been touched by your most glorious act of continuing precious human life.

Buddhist Council of Victoria Protocol on Organ Donation

1. Buddhists may elect to have their organs and/or tissues donated after death is medically determined.
2. A potential donor must have identified themselves during their lifetime, or advised their family that they wished to donate.
3. Some Buddhists require a period of at least eight hours chanting near to the body prior to the organs being removed. This requirement must be respected.
4. The doctor who is taking the organs should say out loud to the deceased person that they are fulfilling their vow made in their lifetime to donate the organs.
5. A deceased person must be handled gently and with respect.
6. It is recognized that living donors may be subject to exploitation and that this is unethical.
7. Living donors must have a bill of rights and an advocate to determine that they are not being exploited.
8. Living donors must receive the same standard of medical care as recipients so as to minimize harm.

NOTES

1. <https://bcv.org.au/buddhist-protocol-on-organ-donation/>
2. Tsele Natsok Rangdrol (trans. Erik Pema Kunsang), *The Mirror of Mindfulness: A Clarification of the General Points of the Bardo* (Kathmandu: Rangjung Yeshe Publications, 1987).
3. Ibid., 83–84.
4. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I2bqNCLRoCE>

Buddhism, Patriarchy, and Empowerment in Thailand

Julia Batanghari

Recently I attended a Dharma talk at the Orange County Buddhist Church, a Jodo Shinshu temple in Anaheim, California. The temple, which currently has approximately 900 sustaining members, was established in the 1930s. The temple's services are available on its YouTube channel and observing one of them was an eye-opening experience.

Reverend Jon Turner began his Dharma talk with the *Namu amida butsu* chant and asked the audience to join him in the practice of *gassho*, joining hands to signify respect. His talk, "The Buddha's Wife," focused on the Buddha's upbringing and familial relations. He noted that Buddhist stories arose 2,500 years ago within the highly patriarchal society of India. At that time, the caste system was also very strong in India, delineating an individual's standing in society. However, while Prince Siddhartha was a warrior prince, he was also a regular person with a wife, a child, and relatives. The women in his life included his mother, Queen Māyā, who passed away a week after giving birth to him; his aunt, Mahāprajāpatī, who raised him; and his wife, Princess Yaśodharā, who experienced deep sadness when her husband left her and their baby son Rahula to become a wanderer.

Some years after he achieved awakening, the Buddha returned to his hometown. As the story goes, Yaśodharā felt painful emotions and resentment when she heard the news of her husband's return.¹ These emotions intensified as he reconciled with his family members, several of whom became his followers and became ordained into the Buddhist *sangha*. The Buddha's father achieved *nirvana* before he passed away and his son Rahula became a monk. Eventually, both Yaśodharā and Mahāprajāpatī become nuns. In fact, Mahāprajāpatī initiated the monastic tradition for women. The story describes Yaśodharā's feelings of abandonment in a very gentle and compassionate way.

Although the Buddha's decision to admit women to the monastic order was a direct challenge to the staunch patriarchal culture that existed at the time, it would be far-fetched to say that gender inequality no longer exists in Buddhism. In various Buddhist communities around the world, women still struggle against patriarchal expectations. A prime example is Thailand, where women are subordinate in the country's patriarchal social structure. Thailand is a predominantly Theravāda Buddhist nation and does not



allow women to receive full ordination, the mark of gaining full membership in the *sangha*. In recent years, a *bhikkhuni* movement has emerged to reestablish the full ordination of nuns in the Theravāda tradition and to push for women's full participation in Buddhist monastic institutions.

An analysis of gender relations in Thai Buddhist culture reveals an important truth: the revival of the *bhikkhuni* order will not only serve to uplift women in the Theravāda Buddhist tradition but will also contribute more broadly to women's empowerment in Thai society.

There has long been debate about the extent to which Buddhism has been a factor in perpetuating negative views toward women. Portrayals of women as sources of sexual temptation in Buddhist texts have surely contributed to perceptions of women as inferior in Buddhist societies.² The Buddha purportedly warned monks to steer clear of women, referring to them as "a stain on celibacy" and stating that "nothing blinds men as strongly as women" (Suksod-Barger 26). The tale of Prince Siddhartha prior to achieving awakening is interpreted as additional evidence of the subordination of women. When the prince leaves his royal lifestyle, riches, and wife behind to seek enlightenment, the implication is that women, like other desires, pose a significant threat to the purity and virtue of the monastic order.

David L. Gosling explores various perspectives on the role of Buddhism in lowering the societal status of women. In Thailand specifically, he notes that in the magico-animist view, women are considered polluting to monks, not only by way of sexual temptation, but also through their menstrual blood, which is associated with magic powers that are "diametrically opposed to that of the monk."³ This implies that the spiritual inferiority of women is rooted in their very biology and is therefore intrinsic to female identity. In a similar vein, Martin Seeger notes that some believe women are simply unable to achieve spiritual awakening. In their minds, a woman must work tirelessly to build enough merit to secure her rebirth as a man and will only then be able to receive full ordination and attain *nirvāna*.⁴ Thomas Kirsch and Khin Thitsa go as far as to say that Buddhism "devalues women and serves as an ideology of oppression" (Gosling 122). In this view, women are stripped of their agency and reduced to mere obstacles in the path of the male spiritual journey.

Until quite recently, Thailand had aspects of androcentrism embedded in its laws, influenced to a significant extent by "the Brahmanical repression of women as represented...in the Manu Dharmasastras" (Gosling 122). Texts such as these affirm a husband's legal ownership of his wife, as well as the right of a husband to sell his wife. Thai Lanna law declared that "the material value of a girl was exactly half that of a boy." Although this Brahmanical text surely generated negative attitudes toward women in Thai society, it cannot be denied that ancient Buddhist texts also played a role.

The participation of women in the Buddhist monastic community has waned since the female order in the

Theravāda tradition died out approximately a millennium ago. Therefore, in present-day Thailand, while there are many *bhikkhus* (monks), there is no officially acknowledged *bhikkhuni* order. Instead, Buddhist renunciant women known as *mae chi* assume "social roles which are similar, and, in some cases, complementary to those of the monks" (Gosling 121). The *mae chi* practice celibacy, shave their heads and eyebrows, and surrender most belongings. Where they differ considerably from monks is in their societal status. Emma Tomalin reveals that many *mae chi* lack adequate support, with a good number residing in temples where they cook and clean for the *bhikkhus*. Whereas monks are believed to be "authentic 'fields of merit,'"⁵ *mae chi* are not. Because donations to *mae chi* produce less merit than donations to *bhikkhus*, people are more frugal in providing for them. Another major struggle the *mae chi* encounter is their inconsistent treatment by the Thai government based on a lack of agreement as to "whether they are actually religious or lay persons" (Tomalin 387). These factors give *mae chi* ample reason to support the revival of *bhikkhuni* ordination in the Theravāda tradition.

Be that as it may, there are many who disagree with restoring the *bhikkhuni* order in Thailand. Tomomi Ito notes that opponents frequently cite a rule in the Vinaya that requires both *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* to be involved in the *bhikkhuni* ordination process. This is a nearly impossible feat; the latter no longer exist in Thailand and the 1928 Sangha Act bans monks from ordaining women. Other critics of the renewal of the *bhikkhuni* order regard ordination status as "a non-essential formality or transient status which is less significant than religious practice for enlightenment."⁶ Some believe that the way to transform the status of women in Thailand is through reforming the *mae chi* institution rather than through reviving *bhikkhuni* ordination.

Nevertheless, there are promising arguments in favor of allowing Thai women to receive full ordination. The practical social benefits of Buddhist monasticism for the individual must not be overlooked. For instance, a free religious and general education is provided to young boys who live in temples as temporary monks. This is a valuable opportunity for boys from lower-income households. However, young girls from similar backgrounds are not afforded the same privilege, which increases the possibility that they may become victims of sex trafficking. Devising a way for young girls to become temporary nuns would help to mitigate this issue, as girls from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more prone to being trafficked. Opportunities for *bhikkhuni* ordination "would enable the institutionalization of education in the temples for girls" (Tomalin 389) and therefore would be advantageous both to the *mae chi* and to Thai girls and women overall. This would help prevent the incidence of domestic violence and HIV/AIDS in Thailand. Expanding educational opportunities for girls and women can help provide alternatives to prostitution. The gender hierarchy that underpins Thai Buddhism has had a negative influence on gender attitudes beyond the Buddhist community. For women to be perceived as a "lower rebirth"

reinforces the idea that women are inferior and therefore must be subservient to men. Until men and women are treated equally in Buddhism, it will be difficult to transform gender disparities in Thailand.

The revival of the *bhikkhuni* order in Thailand is strongly associated with women's empowerment. Patriarchal aspects



of Buddhist teachings have had a significant influence on the way women are viewed in predominantly Buddhist societies. Given this fact, the reverse should also be true: increasing gender equality in Theravāda Buddhism (for instance, by allowing full ordination for nuns) will elevate women. Providing women and girls with equal religious and educational opportunities as men will empower women and help combat sex trafficking, HIV/AIDS, and gender-based violence in Thailand.

Julia Batanghari grew up in Jakarta, Indonesia, and is majoring in International Relations at the University of San Diego, with minors in Business Administration and Asian Studies.

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3. David L. Gosling, "The Changing Roles of Thailand's Lay Nuns (Mae Chii)," *Science and Development in Thai and South Asian Buddhism*, 2019, 72–93.
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5. Emma Tomalin, "The Thai Bhikkhuni Movement and Women's Empowerment." *Gender, Faith and Development*, 2011, 37–50.
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History of Sakyadhita UK, 1987-2021

In the summer of 2020, an effort began to revive Sakyadhita UK, which had been dormant since 2010. Prompted by a social media thread about Buddhist women teachers and with input from Sakyadhita International, a meeting was organized of women interested in reviving Sakyadhita UK. The first meeting included Karma Lekshe Tsomo of Sakyadhita International, Jack Wicks of Sakyadhita Australia, as well as a dozen U.K. women, most of whom now form Sakyadhita UK's "development group." In subsequent meetings, we developed processes and platforms, from a website and Facebook page to a GDPR (data protection) policy and GDPR-compliant mailing list. We looked at organizational structure, ultimately deciding to adapt the previous constitution, which positions us as a constituted group (not a registered charity) and a national branch of Sakyadhita International. We explored a membership structure, receiving funding from external sources, and more. These six months of behind-the-scenes work prepared us to move forward with purpose and clarity. At the same time, it was useful to look back at the roots of Sakyadhita UK to understand how and when it came to be, as well as key aspects of its history.

Beginnings: 1987-2006

Following the first-ever international conference on Buddhist nuns, held in Bodhgaya India in 1987, committees for implementing the goals of Sakyadhita were set up and national representatives were appointed. Wendy Barzetovic was nominated to become the national representative and founder of Sakyadhita England by Ven. Lekshe.

Ven. Ayya Khema introduced her to Jacquetta Gomes (Bodhicarani Upasika Jayasili), whose advice resulted in a London venue and a mailing list, developed with the help of Ven. Lekshe.



Wendy maintained and developed Sakyadhita in England for eight years and was an executive member of Sakyadhita International for one year. Wendy networked and connected different people depending on their needs, sent out the Sakyadhita newsletter, fundraised, and held meetings with invited guests such as Ven. Ayya Khema and female speakers of different traditions to teach and give talks at meetings. Sakyadhita England also acted as a signatory to invite H.H. the Dalai Lama to visit and teach in England, as part of the Network of Buddhist Organizations. Wendy stepped down as the representative before the birth of her second child, when another representative was appointed.

Establishment: 2007-2010

On November 10, 2007, Sakyadhita UK was set up through the work of new committee of members: Ven. Könchog Jinpa Khandro (Beatrice Jutta Gassner), Wendy Barzetovic, and Sue Bloy. They attended various functions, held "council" meetings to see what women in the UK wanted from Sakyadhita UK and what they could contribute. They held a fundraiser and regular meetings around the country. They held annual general meetings (AGMs) appointing new members to the committee including Ven. Tsultrim Tenzin Choesang, who conducted a number Tsa Tsa workshops and teachings. They also raised donations for two Buddhist nunneries.

Ven. Choesang, a member of Sakyadhita International, joined Sakyadhita UK and became the membership secretary on the committee at an AGM held at Jamyang Buddhist Centre in London. She then became co-chair along with Acharya Modgala, who represented Sakyadhita UK at the 11th Sakyadhita Conference in Vietnam and presented a paper. Caroline Starkey joined the committee and represented the group at the 14th Sakyadhita Conference in Indonesia, presenting a paper on the Buddhist nuns in the U.K. Ven. Choesang remained the main contact until the recent interest in reviving Sakyadhita UK. Sue Bloy remains as the treasurer of Sakyadhita UK, while Ven. Choesang, Wendy, Sue, and Jacquetta serve as members of the development group to reform Sakyadhita UK with a new group of committed Buddhist women and the support of Ven. Lekshe.

Guideline of Good Practice to Achieve Equity

Sakyadhita Spain

Members of Sakyadhita Spain attended the 10th Conference of Buddhism in Catalonia held in Barcelona in December 2020. The theme of the conference was “Why is Gender Perspective Necessary in Buddhism?” This document gathers the results of the conference on how to achieve equity between men and women in Buddhist centers and practices.

What do we mean when we talk about gender? Gender is a social construction that varies depending on the age or society. It is assigned to people in different ways according to their sex and there are no neutral distinctions but hierarchical, and those imply inequalities. What do we mean when we talk about gender perspective? A critical glance to pay attention, to analyze, and act in front of gender inequalities.

Buddhism, like most religious traditions, comes to us strongly influenced by the cultural constraints that patriarchal societies have imposed in every place and time. This androcentric approach excludes women’s visions and experiences, and it is also the cause of much suffering. Because Buddhism is a living spiritual tradition, to remain an authentic path valid for all human beings, it must be flexible and able to adapt itself to the times in which it exists, as it has been the case throughout its own history.

As His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama has said many times, it is fundamental to distinguish between what is cultural and what is essential. We must be skillful in changing cultural aspects while keeping what is essential. Any gender discrimination in Buddhism has a cultural aspect and must be changed.

What can we do to incorporate gender perspective in Buddhist institutions? This decalogue provides ten guidelines for how to proceed:

1. Identify gender inequities, discriminations, and abuses of power in our community or center, and share this information with the sangha to find proper solutions.
2. Try to use an inclusive language in written and oral practices, in translated texts, in courses and teachings.
3. Teach the dharma and re-read canonical texts with a gender perspective.
4. Promote non-discrimination and equal opportunities in the monastic community.
5. Read, study, and promote teachings of women.
6. Recover women lineages of transmission and include them in recitals and in prayers.
7. Generate horizontal and non-hierarchical structures of organization.
8. Dismantle stereotypes and prejudices that disadvantage women.
9. Receive training to incorporate gender perspective.
10. Share with others the idea that incorporating gender perspective is a good Buddhist practice.

Dharma in a Pandemic

Sakyadhita Nepal



In the past year, Sakyadhita Nepal conducted only a few programs because of the global pandemic and the extended lockdown in Kathmandu. Most of our programs were conducted virtually. On October 24, 2020, Asst. Professor Urmila Tamrakar gave a talk on “Buddhism as Education, Religion, and Philosophy,” and on March 9, 2021, she spoke on “Women in Buddhism” in honor of International Women’s Day.

We began a series of talks by nuns from various monasteries, including Ven. Nyanbati Guruma from Sakyasingh Vihar in Patan, Ven. Agganyani from the International Meditation Center in Sankhamul, Ven. Dhammdina (Chameli) from Dhammakriti Vihar in Kathmandu, Ven. Anupama from Jay Mangal Vihar in Patan, and Ven. Mudita from Pranidhipurna Vihar in Balampu.

On November 27, 2021, we conducted our annual general meeting. We discussed our plans for the new Sakyadhita Nepal headquarters in Kimdole. Unfortunately, we were not able to conduct exams for students in our *pariyatti* education programs due to the lockdown. We continue to be dedicated and hopeful, despite the global health crisis.

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Sakyadhita welcomes your submissions and ideas for the next newsletter!

Membership

Express your support for the goals and work of Sakyadhita by becoming a member! Join by clicking the button on the Sakyadhita webpage