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Lotsawa Workshop: Celebrating Buddhist Women's Voices in the Tibetan Tradition

by Sarah H. Jacoby

Together with Padma'tsho (Southwest Minzu University), Holly Gayley (UC Boulder), and Dominique Townsend (Bard College), I had the honor of hosting a translation workshop dedicated to the writings and teachings of Tibetan Buddhist women, both historical and contemporary, at Northwestern University in October 2022. The gathering was the second Lotsawa Workshop funded by Tsadra Foundation, with the support of Luce/ALCS and two departments at Northwestern University: Religious Studies and Asian Languages and Cultures. I am pleased to report that audio and some video recordings of this workshop are now available to the public.[1] I invite you to share in this conversation with us!

A key impetus for the second Lotsawa Translation Workshop came from the Buddhist nuns at Larung Gar in eastern Tibet who published a groundbreaking compilation of 52 Tibetan-language volumes of writings by, for, and about Buddhist women in 2017. Titled the *Dākinīs' Great Dharma Treasury* and published by the Ārya Tāre Publishing Committee, this compilation opens up new horizons for the translation of Buddhist texts from Tibetan. It includes a wide array of genres and texts from across the centuries, including canonical accounts of early Buddhist nuns, the life stories and songs of experience of eminent Buddhist women in Tibet, accounts by female *delog*s who travel to the realms beyond death, works of Buddhist philosophy by Larung Gar *khenmo*s, supplications to female tantric deities, and advice to nuns and *yoginī*s practicing meditation in retreat. Inspired by this wealth of writings, the theme of this Lotsawa Workshop was translating Tibetan texts by and about women across time, including genres ranging from classical Buddhist texts to modern Tibetan women's writings.

Some of the many questions we explored during the Lotsawa Workshop include:

1. How should we weigh the relative values of fidelity to the Tibetan source text and the wish to create inclusive Buddhist communities for the future?
2. What norms and guidelines can we establish for Tibetan translators to use gender neutral language whenever possible and appropriate?
3. Are there themes, genres, and stylistic differences associated with women writers and female voices in Buddhist texts? How can we best render these in English?

The workshop fostered a collaborative ethos marked by intergenerational and international exchange. Participants came from Bhutan, India, Malaysia, France, England, Canada, and the United States, and among them were many Tibetan and Himalayan women. We were fortunate to host a number of remarkable Buddhist nuns, including Venerables Tenzin Dadon, Damchö Diana Finnegan, Ani Choyang, and Karma Lekshe Tsomo. Another very special part of the event was the presence of translators dedicated to writings by and about Tibetan women and also Tibetan and Himalayan women writers, including Kunzang Choden from Bhutan, Tsering Yangzom Lama from Canada, Nyima Tso from Dharamsala, Kelsang Lhamo from Boston, and Tenzin Dickie from Boston.

The Proceedings

The Lotsawa Workshop was an intensive and immersive four-day experience intended to offer practical support to newer translators and graduate students, incubate fresh approaches to the translation of Buddhist texts from Tibetan, cultivate a greater sense of community among those engaged in translation, and provide a forum for Tibetan and Himalayan writers to share their work. Most of all, we prioritized frank and probing discussions among all the participants – senior and junior, Buddhist practitioners and scholars, translators and writers. To do this, the format for the four-day workshop combined keynote lectures, panels, and break-out sessions in the mornings with afternoons dedicated to working on translations-in-progress in small groups. There were three Workshop Sessions (that were not recorded) over the course of the long weekend, so that each participant had ample time for discussion and feedback on their translation-in-progress.

The opening keynote dialogue between Sarah Harding and Tenzin Dickie exemplified the wide-ranging focus on women from classical Buddhist texts to modern Tibetan poetry and prose that was a hallmark of this workshop. The keynote speaker Luise von Flotow provided a history and methodological overview of feminist translation studies in her talk on "Feminist Translation and Translation Studies: In Flux toward the Transnational." The first plenary session, called "Reflections on Translating Women's Lives and Teachings in the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition," featured panelists that bridged generations, geographies, and Buddhist monastic identities, including Janet Gyatso, and Venerables Tenzin Dadon, Ani Choyang, Damchö Diana Finnegan, and Karma Lekshe Tsomo.

The second plenary session, called "Literary Perspectives from Tibetan and Himalayan Women Writers" brought an array of Tibetan and Himalayan women writers together to discuss their craft, including Kunzang Choden, Tsering Yangzom Lama, Nyima Tso, and Kelsang Lhamo, moderated by Tashi Dekyid Monet and Francoise Robin.

Breakout sessions covered often-discussed as well as cutting-edge themes, including "Women's Voices in Tibetan Texts," "Power Dynamics in Fe/male Literary Dialogues," "Translating Voices from the Margins," "Inclusive/Feminist Approaches to Buddhist Translation," "Literary & Liturgical Representations of Women & the Feminine," "*Yab yum* Symbolism, Heteronormativity, and Translating Sexual Yoga," "Translation Fidelity or Intervention: When should translators sanitize misogyny, explain it, reproduce it, or refuse to translate it?" "Translating Contemporary Women's Writing," and "Buddhist Tropes of Masculinity." There was never a dull moment!

One highlight of the workshop was a video sent to us directly from Larung Gar for the occasion of this workshop by the main editor of the *Dākinīs' Great Dharma Treasury* with advice for us about translating parts of the collection. Another highlight of the workshop was the Friday evening reading called "A Celebration of Tibetan and Himalayan Women Writers," hosted at the Tibetan Alliance of Chicago

in Evanston, Illinois. MC'd by the editor of the website High Peaks, Pure Earth,[2] Dechen Pemba, the evening featured powerful readings by Kunzang Choden, Tsering Yangzom Lama, Nyima Tso, Kelsang Lhamo, and Tenzin Dickie, further animated by delicious Tibetan food, singing, and dancing.

Another very helpful event was a resource share on Saturday night featuring a presentation by Jann Ronis about the Buddhist Digital Resource Center,[3] Alex Gardner about the Treasury of Lives,[4] and Dechen Pemba about High Peaks, Pure Earth.

Most of all, throughout the workshop I felt a sense of joy to see so many brilliant and inspiring translators, writers, and Dharma practitioners come together to appreciate Tibetan and Himalayan women's writing. I hope there will be many more occasions like this one!

Sarah Jacoby is an associate professor in the Department of Religious Studies at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, USA. She is the author of Love and Liberation: The Autobiographical Writings of the Tibetan Buddhist Visionary Sera Khandro *(Columbia University Press, 2014).*

NOTES

[1] The recordings can be found here: https://conference.tsadra.org/past-event/the-2022-lotsawa-translation-workshop

[2] https://highpeakspureearth.com

[3] https://www.bdrc.io

[4] https://treasuryoflives.org

Amplifying the Voices of Tibetan Women

by Katarina Stanisavljevic

Scholars and translators from near and far gathered at Northwestern University in October this year for the 2nd Lotsawa Translation Workshop organized by Sarah Jacoby, Padma 'tsho, Holly Gayley, and Dominique Townsend. The workshop, focused on the theme "Celebrating Buddhist Women's Voices in the Tibetan Buddhist Lineage," and brought together an exciting configuration of academia's brightest stars in Buddhist scholarship, translation, and feminist thought. I very much appreciated the keynote address by Lama Sarah Harding and Tenzin Dickie, which prompted the audience to amplify the voices of Tibetan woman, both historical and contemporary.

As a whole, the conference raised three main topics that especially interested me. First, it discussed the task of translation and how translating works by and about Tibetan woman empowers women's voices and creates more equitable and ethical translations. Second, it celebrated contemporary Tibetan writers. Third, it generated dialogue about feminist issues for Buddhist women.

In the first panel, we heard from respected monastics Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Choela Tenzin Dadon, Ani Choyang, and Damchö Diana Finnegan about aspects of power, hierarchy, and oppressive structures of inequality within the monastic system and in women's ordination. Karma Lekshe Tsomo reminded us that "nuns are disruptive agents" and aptly said that woman have been given no power unless they create it. Renowned scholar Janet Gyatso raised the topic of essentializing the feminine and asked what we can identify as the virtues of the feminine and the feminist.

Throughout the event, compelling breakout sessions buzzed with translation questions. Some discussed word choice and hidden meanings within the coded script of the feminine. Some discussed how to translate or not translate misogynistic passages in classical works. Others raised questions about when and whether it is appropriate to omit or to footnote sexism and gender bias.

In addition to a rousing and generative gathering of presentations and workshops, Sarah Jacoby opened up a conversation about a visionary project: translating the anthology titled *Dakinis' Great Dharma Treasury*. This anthology is the largest compilation to date of works by and about revered Buddhist women: 53 volumes collected by nuns from Larung Gar, published in Tibet in 2017. All 53 volumes were made available in the Buddhist Digital Resource Center, an online archive, just in time for the workshop. This collection makes strides in closing the gender gap of women's representation in a sea of male masters, teachers, and renowned yogic figures. Though the project could take many years to complete, the vision it represents a big step in the right direction for bringing forward the life stories, histories, and teachings of powerful Buddhist women throughout history.

Since 2010, Katarina Stanisavljevic has been a practitioner of Zen Shiatsu Bodywork Therapy, a Japanese holistic healing art that combines the Chinese Medicine meridian and point system with therapeutic manual touch treatment. She currently treats clients at Heartwood Center for Integrative Health and Healing and offers classes and personalized healing sessions online. Studying and practicing with the 5 Elements is a foundational aspect of her work with clients. Katarina also teaches yoga and meditation to teens in a non-profit program serving Chicago's inner city youth. She is completing her undergraduate studies at Northwestern University with a focus in Buddhist Studies. Learn more at www.LivingHeartCentered.com.

Lotsawa Workshop: Notes for a Keynote

by Sarah Harding

At this workshop, I think I'm representing the old school, while my co-presenter Tenzin Dickie represents the new school and modern creativity. Of course, old school means no school, no schooling. Just winging it! In some ways, I am proud of being a successful imposter. Almost wish I hadn't defiled my perfect record by finishing my B.A. at Naropa, but it was irresistible since it was free and I was already teaching graduate classes.

Nevertheless, I did get a homework assignment from Professor Jacoby: to read *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and*

Their Interpreters, edited by Catherine Mooney. It was very instructive. In fact, I didn't even get to the introduction to have my first epiphany. It came in the Foreword by Caroline Walker Bynum:

> The saints are odd subjects for historical research. They are, as the current jargon has it, "socially constructed." Whether we speak of officially designated *sancti* or of those revered locally without papal canonization, there is no saint without an audience. Fashioned and authenticated in a complex relationship between clerical authorities and the adherents who spread the holy person's reputation for virtues and miracles, the saint herself or himself is lost to view almost from the beginning.[1]

It only took me about 30 years to figure that out.

But I kept searching, maybe spurred on by a random misremembered line from a poem that went something like, "... wanted her as lover, wanted her as goddess, somehow forgot everything in between." That somehow seemed like the story of my life. So I've been desperately seeking Niguma, Sukhasiddhi, and Machik, even though everything written by or about them was mediated by men.

I doubt that I'm expected to say anything serious here, but I can't help bringing up my favorite pet peeve: the attribution of women's accomplishments to men: brothers, husbands, teachers. This is pervasive throughout Tibetan literature, and everywhere else, right up to the present. It's personal for me in many ways. Right after this conference, I'll be going to New York to see a revival of my mother's play of fifty years ago. It's called "Funny Girl." Right? That's what you have to be if you're not taken seriously. If I go and say, "Oh, my mother, called Mrs. John Harding, wrote this play," it'll mean nothing, other than her marriage to a much less successful actor. She's invisible with that name. Her thirty-some movies and plays and pioneering work with the Screen Writers Guild would be unrecognized. Luckily, in that business, which is "the business," women are allowed a screen name and she took one from her matriarchal lineage, Lennart. If, inadvertently, my father was sometimes called Mr. Lennart, he'd go off in a sulk. So fragile.

The situation was not much different with the women I was desperately seeking in Tibetan history. Desperately seeking Niguma, source of an entire lineage, who was rumored to be the consort of Naropa – her brother, for heaven's sake! Actually, that rumor was started by our honorable forefather, Herbert Günther, based on a misunderstanding. It is ironic, since I heard him, in person, say that the problem with academia is that scholars just repeat the mistakes of other scholars.

Then there's Sukhasiddhi from Kashmir, a Shangpa Kagyu foremother with a seemingly real story about her being banished from home by her husband at age 60 for giving rice to a beggar, and her enterprising startup of a microbrewery. Then she met one happy customer, the yogi Virūpa, and suddenly she became 16 years old and white! Does that seem suspicious to anyone else?

And, of course, there's Machik Labdron, the progenitor of a whole lineage and system of practice in Tibet. But it seems she needs to be connected to a man, and what better way to do that than to say she is the "consort" of somebody famous. In this case, she becomes connected to Pha Dampa Sangye, despite almost no historical evidence, other than one ritual to which she came late and left early. Not only that, but the connection needs to be with an Indian man, in what Namkhai Norbu called Tibetan low self-esteem in regards to everything Indian. For Tibetans, India is the *Phags pa'i yul*, Land of the Aryans.

That reminds me of when I was interrogated by the Indian CID (Criminal Investigation Department) in Calcutta in the 1970s for hanging around Tibetans. The main drift of the loaded questions was about my sponsor. If it was not a husband, father, or brother, then it must be the U.S. State Department. I was promptly banished.

And then there are the tantric deities. How often do we see women identified as the partner *(yum dang bcas pa*) of a male deity. Often, female partners don't even get their own name. The only counterbalance is the occasional goddess or *dākinī* who gets to hold a *khatvānga*, representing the male. Yet I feel like there's a kind of desperation on the part of female Buddhists to find validation in the old symbols, such as Tārā or Vajrayoginī, or doctrines such as the suspicious 14th tantric vow to refrain from disparaging women. There seems to be a kind of hunger among actual women in searching for much-needed role models, which is the project here.

But, as José Cabezón perfectly stated: "Much more dangerous than Greeks bearing gifts is the patriarchy bearing female symbols."[2]

As translators and authors, I think we can really help mend this lopsided view. It would be a kindness to the reader – at least to me. For example, I don't think it's unfaithful to say "Cakrasaṃvara and Vajravārāhī" in place of "Cakrasaṃvara and partner (*bde mchog yum dang bcas pa*) or disingenuous to carefully research stories of women without immediately assigning a sexual nature to their relationships with men. Words of relationship have many levels of meaning. We don't want to rewrite history, but the process has tended to go just one way, whereas it can go both ways. I don't think that a search for women's actual voices is necessarily imposing modern feminism on traditional cultures, as is the trending backlash right now. We are all here together in modernity. With so many exchanges of ideas, there's no more East and West, old and new. Dissolving stereotypes. I'm quite sure that almost any living Tibetan is better at using technology that I am.

We don't need to desperately seek Tibetan women authors, because they are right here, such as my co-presenter Tenzin Dickie, who I am so happy to call a colleague, translator, and teacher. In addition, I'd like to express my gratitude to Sarah Jacoby, Holly Gayley, Padma 'tsho, Dominique Townsend, Joshua Shelton, the Luce and Tsadra Foundations, all the esteemed women authors gathered here, and to everyone else involved in the Lotsawa Workshop and the *Dakini's Great Dharma Treasury*.

NOTES

[1] Caroline Walker Bynum, "Foreward," *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, ed. Catherine M. Mooney (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), ix.

[2] José Ignacio Cabezón, "Mother Wisdom, Father Love: Gender-based Imagery in Mahāyāna Buddhist Thought," *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 189.

Celebrating Buddhist Women's Voices in the Tibetan Tradition

by Chime Lama

The 2nd Lotsawa Translation Workshop, convened at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, from October 13 to 16, 2022, and co-organized by Sarah Jacoby, Padma 'tsho, Holly Gayley and Dominique Townsend, was a celebration of Buddhist women's voices in the Tibetan tradition.

The opening keynote dialogue on Thursday, October 13th was led by Tenzin Dickie and Sarah Harding. Dickie spoke of contemporary Tibetan literature through the lens of the contemporary Tibetan essay, evoking the power of truth as displayed in the Buddhist tradition. This dovetailed into a discussion of female speech that is often transmitted through code. Indeed, the famous 33rd king of Tibet, Songtsen Gampo, is said to have received a coded message from his younger sister, Semarkar, whose failed political marriage to the king of Zhangzhung, Liknyashur, did not bode well for Tibet, possibly prompting the Tibetan king to invade and conquer Zhangzhung.

The morning of Friday, October 14, began with a panel entitled, "Reflections on Translating Women's Lives and Teachings in the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition." The panelists were Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Choela Tenzin Dadon, Ani Choyang, Damchö Diana Finnegan, Janet Gyatso, and the moderator was Sarah Jacoby. Important topics were raised during this discussion, such as the recent full Buddhist ordination vows for nuns in Bhutan, personal accounts of receiving inspiring teachings from a Tibetan female Buddhist teacher shared by Janet Gyatso, and the living legacy of Gelongma Palmo's *nyungne* practice.

Following the morning panel, breakout groups took place with such fascinating topics as "Women's Voices in Tibetan Texts" (presenters: Sarah Harding, Kelsang Lhamo, Karma Lekshe Tsomo), "Power Dynamics in Fe/male Literary Dialogues" (presenters: Holly Gayley, Jue Liang, Sherab Wangmo) and "Translating Voices from the Margins" (presenters: Rekjong, Dominique Townsend, Laura Brueck). In "Translating Voices from the Margins," Rekjong shared a poem written by the Tibetan female poet, Songchuk Kyi, who could be understood as living in an exile *bardo* (liminal space) between Tibet and India. For Songchuk Kyi, her state of exile may cause less of a shift from center to periphery, and more the loss of a center altogether. Laura Brueck shared an excerpt from Ajay Navaria's story, "Yes, Sir," wherein roles reverse when a higher caste Indian man finds himself as the subordinate of a lower caste man. Questions of presentation and priority were raised: which language is given primacy within a text and which language is relegated to a footnote? Participants discussed the effects that visibility has on marginalized peoples and what is exchanged by virtue of greater exposure.

In the afternoon, workshop sessions ensued, during which translators presented their translations-in-progress, receiving informed feedback from their respective readers and participants. That evening, all were welcomed at a public dinner and reading titled, "A Celebration of Tibetan and Himalayan Women Writers," featuring readings by Kunzang Choden, Tsering Yangzom Lama, Nyima Tso, Kelsang Lhamo, and Tenzin Dickie. The reading was MC'd by Dechen Pemba with interpretion by Rekjong. Both poetry and prose were shared in English and Tibetan. The event was graciously hosted by the Tibetan Alliance of Chicago that also organized multiple Tibetan songs and dances by Tibetan children.

On Saturday, October 15, Luise von Flotow presented the keynote lecture titled, "Feminist Translation and Translation Studies: In Flux toward the Transnational." Participants were asked to consider translation as a production rather than a reproduction. Departing from the tradition of the timid, self-effacing translator, feminist translators demonstrate an approach that encourages greater agency and transparency, with clear descriptions of the changes they make to a text noted in the preface and footnotes. Flotow shared how the *Therīgāthā* that contains records of the first Buddhist nuns was used to teach students about feminism.

Following the morning panel, breakout groups took place with such fascinating topics as "Women's Voices in Tibetan Texts" (presenters: Sarah Harding, Kelsang Lhamo Karma Lekshe Tsomo), "Power Dynamics in Fe/male Literary Dialogues" (presenters: Holly Gayley, Jue Liang, Sherab Wangmo) and "Translating Voices from the Margins" (presenters: Kali Nyima Cape, Julie Regan, Willa Baker). In "Yab Yum Symbolism, Heteronormativity, and Translating Sexual Yoga," the presenters commented on how Buddhist

texts maintain androcentrism. More female voices are heard in what Baker describes as shadow stories, through which women are given the chance to express the experiences they have undergone in their spiritual communities, even if they are painful. The question was raised: Does being a good Buddhist mean being an *agreeable* Buddhist, one who accepts everything the teacher says? Regan shared multiple texts that offer an alternative to tantric couples, beyond male and female.

On Saturday afternoon, Padma 'tsho and Sarah Jacoby moderated "A Conversation about Translating the Dharma Treasury," featuring advice from Larung Gar by the volumes' main editor. *The Ḍākinīs' Great Dharma Treasury* (Mkha' 'gro'i chos mdzod chen mo) was published by the Ārya Tāre Publishing Committee in 2017 and is a compilation of 52 volumes of writings about Buddhist women. After a presentation on the Dharma Treasury, two video recordings were shared with the audience containing messages from the head editors of the collection who reside in Larung Gar in eastern Tibet. Padma 'tsho and Jacoby shared their wish to translate multiple volumes of this collection and welcomed input from audience members who have experience with such projects. On Saturday evening, participants gathered for a resource share to learn about the Treasury of Lives, the Buddhist Digital Resource Center, and other digital resources. One salient topic was the desire to increase the number of texts and entries devoted to Tibetan women.

On Sunday, the last day of the Workshop, participants gathered in the morning to attend a panel on "Literary Perspectives from Tibetan and Himalayan Women Writers." Panelists included Kunzang Choden, Tsering Yangzom Lama, Nyima Tso, Kelsang Lhamo, and Tashi Dekyid, moderated by Francoise Robin and Tashi Dekyid. The panelists shared their writings, histories, and perspectives. Nyima Tso of Dharamsala shared her efforts to publish an anthology of Tibetan female writers. Nyima Tso and Kuzang Choden, among others, expressed their strong desire to see more Tibetan children's books of high quality. For this to be accomplished, Tso explained, more time and effort need to be deliberately committed. One take-away from this panel was how it is up to Tibetan women to write about and support other Tibetan women. Tibetan women also have a major role to play in preserving and continuing the Tibetan language for future generations.

Following this panel, the final breakout groups convened: "Translation Fidelity or Intervention" (presenters: John Canti, Nancy Lin, Elizabeth Callahan) took up the question of when translators should sanitize misogyny, explain it, reproduce it, or refuse to translate it. Other groups focused on "Translating Contemporary Women's Writing" (presenters: Somtsobum, Dechen Pemba, Chime Lama) and "Buddhist Tropes of Masculinity" (presenters: Charlene Makley, Kevin Buckelew, Joshua Shelton). In another group, "Translating Contemporary Women's Writing," Somtsobum shared a story by Tsedron Kyi titled, "a kha kha" that describes a husband who murders his first wife and hides her corpse in a meat storage building. As fate would have it, the son born of his second wife is the rebirth of his former wife who exposes his father's deceit. Ongoing issues within Tibetan society were raised and discussed, including misogyny and domestic abuse. Dechen Pemba, editor of the online forum High Peaks, Pure Earth, stressed the importance of supporting Tibetan female writers, relaying how HPPE is committed to promoting and amplifying the voices of modern Tibetan women writers across the globe.

The 2nd Lotsawa Translation Workshop ended with a catered lunch and closing remarks from the Workshop organizers. The event brought together Eastern and Western scholar translators of Buddhist texts and Tibetan literature, contemporary Tibetan creative writers, and supporters of both parties. Participants shared with each other about their on-going translations and projects, contemplations, at times voicing different views on translation approaches and feminist beliefs. The Workshop served as a great opportunity for meeting and sharing ideas among knowledgeable peers, among whom new and exciting projects may be birthed.

Chime Lama, is a Tibetan American writer, translator, and multi-genre artist based in New York. She holds an MA in Divinity from the University of Chicago and an MFA in Creative Writing from the City University of New York: Brooklyn College. She serves as the poetry editor of Yeshe: A Journal of Tibetan Literature, Arts and Humanities. *Her work won the 2020 Himan Brown Award in Creative Writing, the 2021 Bonnie Perlsweig Mintz Award in Editing, and has been featured in* Exposition Review, The Margins, Stonecoast Review, Street Cake, Volume Poetry, Tribes Magazine, Tricycle, *and multiple anthologies. Her poetry has been translated into Portuguese, and appears in* Cadernos de Literatura em Tradução, n. 24 *(Notebooks of Literature in Translation), edited by Shelly Bhoil, and translated by Thiago Ponce de Moraes.*

Reflections on Translating Women's Lives and Teachings

Karma Lekshe Tsomo

The recent Lotsawa Workshop at Northwestern University, outside Chicago, attracted some of the most significant contemporary translators and writers of Tibetan literature. The two-day workshop included plenary panels, breakout groups, and translation working groups.

The first plenary panel took up the topic, "Translating Women's Lives and Teachings in the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition. The workshop convener, Sarah Jacoby, asked the speakers to reflect on these questions:

- What does valuing and respecting women in Tibetan Buddhist tradition mean to you? Why does this matter to you?
- What should we as a community of translators who share an interest in women and gender in Buddhism be doing this weekend and more generally in our work? Do you have advice or suggestions for us?

- Can you tell us about one Buddhist woman who you've encountered in your research or everyday life who represents what's most important to you? Do you try to embody her example? How do you/should we do that?
- How has translating writings by and about Buddhist nuns and laywomen changed our understanding of Tibetan Buddhism?
- In what ways is translating the lives of Buddhist women a feminist project and in what ways should it be?
- To what degree and in what moments do the texts we have about women's lives reflect an awareness of their own condition as women?

When I reflected on these questions, a few ideas came to mind. To me, valuing and respecting women means allowing them the freedom to express their ideas and feelings, and to live without fear, and to encourage them to achieve awakening. A community of translators can help bring women's amazing stories to light. Translating Buddhist women's writings is thought-provoking and inspiring, and if the translations of Buddhist women's writings are thought-provoking and liberating to women, that matches my understanding of feminism.

Women's reflections on their lives, in the texts, often include descriptions of their limitations and sufferings, with some praying for a male rebirth or giving over their power to men, whereas others sing verses of realization and freedom. Most often, the stories are about freeing themselves from suffering. In the biographies that survive, women often despair of women's weakness, but eventually they transcend all limitations. The typical trajectory is from aspiring for liberation to finding it, especially for nuns.

The women's biographies are also didactic, reinforcing fundamental Buddhist teachings in Tibetan Buddhist communities, for example: the sufferings of having a human body, praises to the teacher and the Triple Gem (Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha), and the Five Remembrances: we will all experience sickness, old age, death, separation, and the consequences of our actions.

On one hand, we have these inspiring stories and archetypes of awakening in female form, yet on the other hand, we see the realities of women's struggles and sufferings on the ground, including disparagement, neglect, discrimination, domestic violence, silencing, and oppression. Buddhist women's biographies help bridge the gap between the magnificent vision of women's perfect awakening and women's everyday social realities. Our own lives may tell similar stories.

Embodying Gelongma Palmo

One of the most famous nuns in Tibetan religious history is Gelongma Palmo, a princess named Lakśmīnikāra (also Kamala) was born into a royal family in Kashmir in the 10th or 11th century. There is no evidence that Gelongma Palmo ever traveled to Tibet, nor is it even certain that she was

an historical figure. Yet she became very famous in Tibet, especially as the progenitor of the *nyungne* fasting ritual of Avalokitśvara (Chenresig).

According to the narrative accounts – biographical literature, hagiographies, and oral sources – the princess was exceptionally beautiful, such that kings and dignitaries sought her hand in marriage, but she refused, saying that if she married one, the others would be unhappy. Instead, like Buddha Śākyamuni, she renounced her life of luxury in the palace and became a nun, a renowned Dharma teacher, and the abbess of a large monastery of several hundred monks.

Sadly, when she was 25 (or maybe 15) years old, she contracted leprosy and was expelled from her monastery. For years, she endured great pain, was disfigured and despised, and faced many hardships while living in the forest, with a solitary female companion, Sampelma. One day, after losing her toes, fingers, and right hand, and experiencing the depths of physical and psychological suffering, she had a powerful vision of Avalokiteśvara, the thousand-armed *bodhisattva* of compassion, who transmitted the *nyungne* fasting practice to her. After engaging assiduously in the practice, with great determination and devotion, her leprosy was cured and her limbs were restored.

Nyungne is a devotional practice that focuses on the *bodhisattva* of compassion, Avalokiteśvara (Tibetan: Chenrezig), in the form with 1,000 arms and 11 heads to see the sufferings of sentient beings. The two-day *nyungne* practice involves taking eight precepts with strong *bodhicitta* motivation and continuously reciting the text, with visualizations, prostrations, with fasting and silence on alternate days. Although *nyungne* may be undertaken by anyone, male or female, women are especially attracted and devoted to the practice. Many towns and villages in the

Himalayas have special temples dedicated to *nyungne* and women throughout Bhutan, Mongolia, Nepal, the Buddhist republics of Russia, and around the world gather periodically for *nyungne*, especially during the fourth lunar month (Saga Dawa) that commemorates the birth, death, and awakening of the Buddha.

One reason that *nyungne* is especially popular among women in Himalayan Buddhist cultures is that it can be practiced independently, in small groups, in homes and village temples, outside male-dominated religious institutions. Devout Buddhist women seem to appreciate the freedom to organize their own activities in solidarity with female spiritual friends.

Machig Labdron Cuts Through Self-Cherishing

Another practice that is popular among women in Himalayan Buddhist cultures is *chöd* (literally, "cutting through"), founded by Machig Labron in the 11th–12th centuries. As a child, Machig Labdron was renowned for reciting the Prajñāpāramitā texts at breakneck speed and her teachings are firmly grounded in this Perfection of Wisdom tradition.[1] The successful practice of *chöd* entails and engenders an understanding of key Buddhist teachings, including the perfection of generosity, the foolishness of self-cherishing, the wisdom understanding emptiness, the pure luminous nature of the mind, and the altruistic aspiration for awakening that is deeply committed to liberating all beings from suffering.[2]

The practice of *chöd* is an especially effective way to practice generosity because it entails giving away parts of our own body, our most cherished possession. As we visualize donating our body parts to benefit sentient beings, we begin to chip away at our self-grasping and self-cherishing, the greatest obstacles to awakening. *Chöd* sparks insight into the three characteristics of existence – suffering, change, and no-self. The practice presages the physical dismemberment and dissolution that awaits us all at the time of death. As we offer up the body as food to needy, greedy sentient beings, we develop detachment and deep compassion for others. By letting go of misconceptions about the self, we cut through self-grasping and overcome all fears. By cutting through self-cherishing, we generate impartial compassion for all sentient beings. Overcoming self-grasping and self-cherishing, we awaken from the slumber of ignorance.

Although Machig Lobdron lived almost a thousand years ago in the unique cultural milieu of Tibet, her teachings on *chöd* and her example as a woman of realization still have special significance for women in cultures throughout the world.[3] Today, in a time of great awakening for women, understanding the philosophical foundations of this liberating practice can help us appreciate the depth of her wisdom. I find her example as a woman philosopher exhilarating.

The practice of *chöd* originated with Machig Labdron, a woman, but that does not mean that *chöd* is exclusively for women. Like the *nyungne* fasting ritual, *chöd* can be practiced by anyone. Nevertheless, there is no denying that women are enthusiastic, highly accomplished practitioners of *chöd* and *nyungne*, which are mainstays of Buddhist practice wherever Tibetan Buddhist traditions have reached, from India to Siberia, from Kalmykia to Beijing, and around the world.

Lopönma Paldron of Bhutan

A famous recent practitioner of *nyungne* was Jamyang Chödrön, known as Lopönma Paldrön, who was born in Bhutan in 1926. She studied *pecha* privately and was a skilled poet. She completed *ngön dro* when she was 13 and did two three-year retreats near Talo in Punakha District. Due to her excellent practice and scholarship, she became the abbess (*lopönma*) of Jachung Karmo Monastery when she was 25. She completed 1,000 two-day *nyungne*, the fasting practice of 1,000-armed Chenresig transmitted by Gelongma Palmo.

A number of miraculous events are attributed to Lopönma Paldon. For ten years, from 1976–1986, she meditated at various sacred sites, in caves, and cremation grounds. She was then re-appointed as the abbess of Jachung Karmo Monastery, a position she held until she passed away in 1997, at the age of 81. A stupa housing her relics was constructed at the monastery.

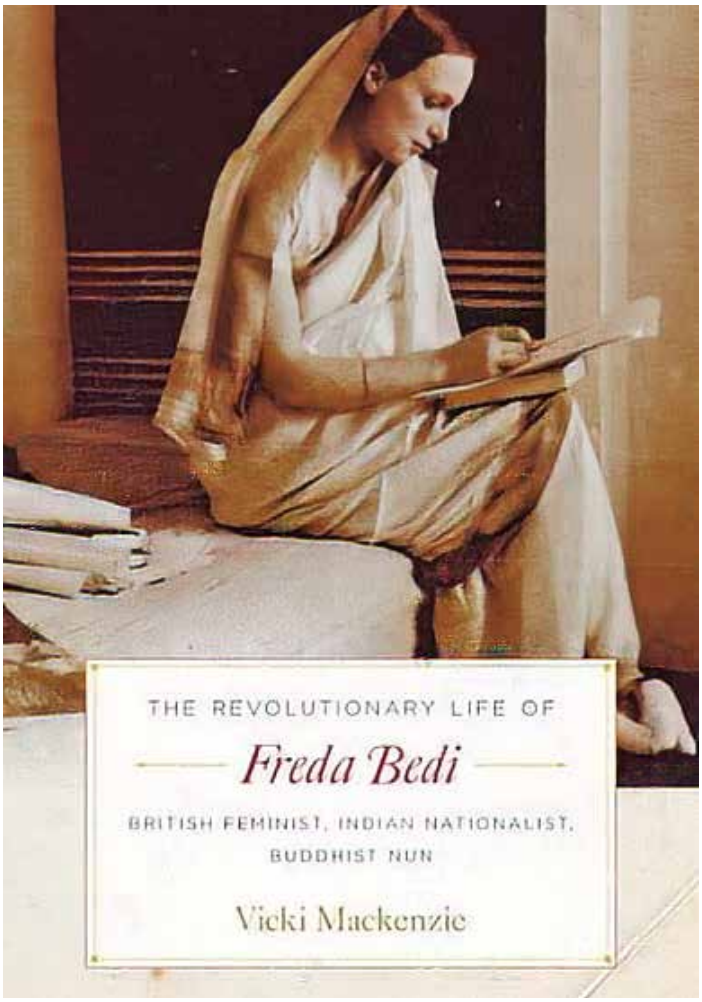
A nun who stayed at Jachung Karmo when Lopönma Paldrön was abbess remembers her as being extremely kind

and fully devoted to Chengrezig. Even when she became very old, she did *nyungne* practice just as the young nuns did. She never abbreviated the *nyungne* prayers but always recited them completely, with love and keen interest. Her *tulku* (recognized rebirth) has not yet been found.

The Revolutionary Karma Khechog Palmo

Another extraordinary 20th-century scholar-practitioner was Freda Bedi, better known as an English woman who a translator of culture, political ideals, and Buddhist texts. While studying at Oxford, she met and married a fellow student from India and became active in the movement for Indian independence. After she moved to India, she continued her activism, working for social change, education reform, and gender justice, both on the grassroots level and in the halls of political power, all while raising a family.

When thousands of Tibetans began flooding into India after 1959, fleeing the Chinese communist invasion of their country, she became a leading advocate for the refugees. Among them were a number of learned lamas who had managed to escape and were living in very precarious conditions scattered around India. She founded the Young Lamas Home School College in Dalhousie to help nurture the next generation of Tibetan Buddhist teachers, including Chogyan Trungpa. She met her teacher Gyalwa Karmapa in Rumtek, Sikkim, where she became a nun in 1966, receiving from him the name Karma Tsultrim Kechog Palmo. In Rumtek, she continued her charitable activities, translated Buddhist texts, and periodically went into retreat.



In 1972, with the blessing and encouragement of Gyalwa Karmapa, Kechog Palmo traveled to Hong Kong, where she received *bhiksuni* ordination at Miu Fat Temple. With this, she became the first documented nun to become fully ordained in the Tibetan tradition, leading the way for hundreds more to follow. Following her full ordination, she gave teachings and empowerments to students around the world, especially in South Africa and California. In 1995, at the age of 16, Jamyang Dolma Lama, the daughter of Bero Khyentse Rinpoche, was recognized as her rebirth.[4]

What's at Stake

All four of the nuns profiled here have made their mark in Buddhist women's history in unique and significant ways, against all odds. Women in Buddhist societies have been excluded from the institutions where Buddhist philosophy and ritual were taught and had precious few opportunities for any sort of formal education. Not only did they lack access to systematic Buddhist education, most women did not have access to secular education or even literacy. To point out the obvious, without access to literacy, women lacked opportunities for in-depth studies, rarely became widely recognized teachers, and were effectively erased from large swaths of history. Today, obstacles to basic secular education for girls are being removed and progress is being made in many corners of the Buddhist world to open up access to Buddhist learning as well. The achievements of nuns of the Tibetan tradition to master the most difficult texts of Buddhist philosophy are being publicly recognized and Buddhist women both lay and ordained are becoming translators and writers.

For women, the stakes are huge. As the recent Lotsawa Workshop clearly showed, the advantages of education show up in every aspect of women lives. Not only can women read and translate the stories of women's lives and the teachings preserved in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, they can also write their own stories, breaking through barriers and inspiring others with their courage, compassion, and wisdom.

NOTES

[1] Machik Labdrön (trans. Sarah Harding), *Machik's Complete Explanation: Clarifying the Meaning of Chöd: A Complete Explanation of Casting Out the Body as Food* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2003).

[2] A useful source for understanding emptiness is Geshe Rabten's *Echoes of Voidness* (Boston: Wisdom Publications,

1983). For understanding the mind, see Lati Rinbochay and Elizabeth Napper, *Mind in Tibetan Buddhism* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publication, 1980). For understanding generosity, see Ellison Banks Findly, *Dāna: Giving and Getting in Pali Buddhism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2003). For understanding the altruistic aspiration to enlightenment, see Losang Gyatso, *Bodhicitta: Cultivating the Compassionate Mind of Enlightenment* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publication, 1997).

[3] Janet Gyatso discusses the attribution of *chöd* to Machig Labron in "The Development of the Gcod [*chöd*] Tradition," *Soundings in Tibetan Civilization* (New Delhi: Manuhar, 1985), 320–41.

[4] Vicki Mackenzie, *The Revolutionary Life of Freda Bedi: British Feminist, Indian Nationalist, Buddhist Nun* (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2017), 178.

Flocks of Golden Beings

by Bhhiksuni Pema Deki (Emma Slade)

If it were hundreds of years ago, perhaps I would say I saw a flock of golden beings, the patches of their cloth glinting and catching the light. Making up a crowd of beaming joy, they gathered under a tent in the forest and drank tea together, looking at one another in the understanding of a deep and profound bond and enormous gratitude to all who made it possible.

On June 21, 2022, in Paro, Bhutan, on Bhutan Nuns' Day, these luminous being gathered around the temple dedicated to Gelongma Palmo, the female practitioner famed for the Nyungne practice. Many threads were woven together to create the this extraordinary historic event, one I honestly did not know I would see in my lifetime, yet alone take part in. The event was historic in enabling female monastics to take full Bhikshuni (Tibetan: Gelongma) ordination within the Vajrayana lineages, which has been impossible for many centuries until now.

The event also felt historic in the conditions it recalled – reminiscent to many who will have read the Sutras and their way of describing conditions for teachings and insight. Here in Bhutan also, there was the blessing of the Dharma King, His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, and the support of both his parents: his mother Her Majesty Tshering Yangdoen Wangchuck and his father His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck. There was the essential support of the great Dharma practitioner the Chief Abbott of Bhutan, His Holiness Je Khenpo, accompanied by the necessary ten esteemed gelongs, to bestow the vows. The work of the Bhutan Nuns Foundation was the third key element supporting the vision of those above and supporting the organising of much of the event. Finally there were those willing and suitable to take the 364 vows: the one hundred and forty-two nuns.

Perhaps the auspicious gathering of these conditions was best confirmed at the start of the first day of taking vows when, at the arrival of His Holiness Je Khenpo, a beautiful rainbow was seen to circle the sun. Who can explain such things? The rainbow seemed to seal the shining radiance of the event, as if the sky lit up with the joy of what was taking place on earth.

It was an incredible start and my state of awe continued as more and more of the ceremony unfolded. Although I am fairly familiar with the meticulous care with which Buddhist events occur in Bhutan, it was as if each moment of this had been polished to perfection.

From different places throughout Bhutan, India, Ladakh, and myself from England, we came together – women who had been living by the *getsulma* vows for a required minimum of seven years. Our ages, faces, and languages were different but there was an extraordinary sense of a particular Sangha arising. Through the course of a total of five days, 142 nuns came together to help each other, get to know each other, share tents and food and queries over what we had to do and say and so forth, and together become Gelongmas in the Himalayas.

Luckily we had Khenpo Nima Shar from Tago Dordena, the Buddhist monastic university outside Thimphu, to guide us and help us prepare for the various stages of the ceremony, which was conducted in the traditional way with groups of three nuns taking vows together. We were given new Gelongma names, all of which began with Jigme ("fearless"),

divided into groups of three, and allocated places to sit based on our grouping. The Khenpo, tall and professorial in nature, patiently helped us understand each of the many necessary steps involved. I asked him how he felt to be at the event: "It's a great opportunity for me to be part of this." Every nun I asked said, "It's a great opportunity for me." All expressed great gratitude to Their Majesties and to His Holiness Je Khenpo. Everyone was filled with this sense of an auspicious "opportunity" or "chance," and this created a powerful positive feeling of what is truly possible.

I kept pinching myself that this was really happening. I knew the Buddha had mentioned the four-fold Sangha as a necessary condition for the thriving of Buddha-Dharma in the world. I wondered, could this leap forward imply a great thriving was about to begin?

Below the beautifully decorated temple, stupa, thangka, and ceremonial tents was an area of dining tents and, below that in the forest a family of tents had been erected: some tall, green ones for up to eight nuns, and some smaller medium-height, dome-shaped ones for two people. I was in one of the latter ones with a Bhutanese nun from Wangdi who had been doing the 440,000 preliminary practices twice in retreat. Luckily, she had brilliant English. I was so grateful for that, as my basic grasp of Dzongkha and keen eye for hand gestures and facial expressions were not going to be enough to safely get me through the next few days without incident! We quickly became inseparable, placing our camping mattresses, pillows, and belongings neatly in the tent, which was just long enough to hold me! I was so grateful for her help through all the days and her patience with my never-ending "What was that? What did he say? Ten prostrations or 30 prostrations?" type of questions. I really did not want to be like the one person in the class who goes left when everyone else goes right. One of the first things to get right was a perfectly shaved head.

Gradually, through the course of three days, the outer robes turned from red to the deep yellow of full ordination. To ordain all 142 nuns took three days in total so it was a gradual turning, with those already fully ordained no longer allowed to eat after midday and those still in red forming a shorter and shorter dinner queue until finally everyone was saffron and everyone was drinking tea. I was personally thrilled to be ordained on the second day, at 2.52pm on June 22, 2022, to be precise, with Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo present. Everyone is told the exact time when the Gelongma vows enter them. For me personally and of course for her three nuns from Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery, it was just wonderful to have her as a precious part of the historic event. Her example as a practitioner in female form was a great inspiration to all the nuns present.

On the final day, His Holiness the Je Khenpo of Bhutan made a moving speech, speaking very clearly about the reasons he felt this ordination was correct. He felt that the statue of the Buddha in front of him kept smiling at him as he considered his decision to bestow the vows. One of my new Gelongma friends from Mongar Nunnery said she could not stop the tears from falling when she heard his words. For a culture not keen on public displays of emotion, this was a moving expression of how much his words pierced her very heart.

Although I had experienced the strength that comes from

taking vows when I took my Getsulma vows in 2014, still I had no idea of what it might feel like to receive Gelongma vows, particularly in such incredible circumstances. After all, how can you imagine, let alone know beforehand, how it might feel?

My first awareness was that the vows are about refraining from many things, which is a basic teaching for training the mind to avoid the three poisons. The vows feel very helpful as a form of mental practice.

All I can say is that I felt so very grateful for this chance and so inspired by the words of His Holiness Je Khenpo and the supportive words of Her Majesty, the Queen Mother, Tshering Yangdoen Wangchuck. To be given these vows is a clear statement of being taken seriously as a Dharma practitioner and renunciate. The vows have given me clear guidance on how to live, largely based on acts of refraining from certain actions, or renunciation. While that may sound severe, a peaceful mind is built on foundations of refraining from anger, greed, and so on. In fact, these vows are a source of profound peacefulness and freedom. Going forward, I felt sure that these vows would be like the wooden rafters of a building, while in retreat and in living a life most help to sentient beings.

Personally, taking these vows, I found that something inside profoundly changed my relationship with my perceived self. Deep within, I felt an ability to care deeply for myself, perhaps indeed as a mother might. I don't mean this in an egotistical way but in a healthy, loving way as a mother may look at their child wishing them complete happiness and joy in their chosen path.

On the final morning, all 142 nuns in saffron robes gathered with our newly offered alms bowls and, together, went forth out of the forest on a traditional alms round through Paro. This meeting with the lay people of the town felt very beautiful, like looking again and again into the eyes of the other with such mutual respect. Sounds like a simple thing, but in this world it felt enormous.

Above us. the bright blue sky of a summer's day in Bhutan echoed the vastness of a sky opening up across the world. As we eventually parted, I found myself moved to tears to see this golden flock scattering in all directions to touch many different places.

The Story of Khujjuttara, Little Crooked Back, Retold from The Buddhist Legends

by Margo McLoughlin

This is one episode in an ongoing series of Jataka stories and Buddhist legends told by Margo McLoughlin. The Jataka tales relate the previous births of the Buddha in both human and animal form. The Buddhist legends recount miraculous events from the life of the Buddha following his enlightenment. Each story includes a verse from the Dhammapada, a popular collection of sayings of the Buddha. The legends are considered part of the commentarial literature. Margo has translated and expanded this story.

In ancient India, in the city of Kosambi, in the household of Ghosita, the banker, a baby girl was born to a woman enslaved since birth.

It was a difficult birth. When the midwife handed the infant to her mother, she said, "This one will have to use her wits to survive in the world. She will be no beauty. See her little hunchback."

It was true. Even at birth, the child had a tiny hunch upon her back. She must have been given another name, but everyone called her Khujjuttara, "Crooked Back." It was said with great affection.

She grew up in the household of Ghosita the banker. There, she quickly learned how to make herself useful. "Keep your eyes and ears open," her mother said to her. "Know when to be silent. Know when to speak."

Ghosita, her master, soon discovered that Khujjuttara could relay a message to a customer word for word exactly as he had spoken it. She had a gift for listening. She had a gift for paying attention.

Ghosita the banker was a follower of the Buddha. He was ever seeking opportunities to practice generosity. When the King of Kosambi, King Udena, married the orphan, Samavati, Ghosita decided he would give a gift that was precious to

him indeed. He would give Khujjuttara to be the new queen's serving-woman.

Samavati was fond of sending messages to friends in the city, or to her adoptive family.

Khujjuttara would be a welcome addition to the household of King Udena and his three wives.

A young woman of Khujjuttara's station could move easily through the streets of the city of Kosambi, wandering at will under the flowering Margossa trees, stopping in the market or sitting by the Yamuna river, cooling her feet in the stream.

Because of her habit of listening with her full attention in the household of Ghosita the banker, Khujjuttara had developed a deep love of sounds of all kinds, but perhaps especially the soft clatter of the wind in the shiny-leafed banyan trees, or the sound of water—water running down gullies, water spilled from a jar, rain pattering on the eaves, elephants spraying themselves, or splashing in the shallows.

"Water-sound," she would say, and stop to listen.

Or "Wind-sound," standing very still, listening to the wind in the trees.

Khujjuttara enjoyed her new duties, in the household of the queen, even when it meant she had to venture out in the heat of the day on an errand. She was fiercely loyal to Samavati, and refused to gossip with the slaves and women who served the king's two other wives, Magandiya and Vasubhattakiya.

Queen Samavati grew fond of her. They were about the same age. One had been given the gift of beauty. The other had the gift of an attentive mind.

Samavati would send Khujjuttara to buy flower garlands from the king's gardener, Sumana. Every day she gave her eight pieces of silver. Khujjuttara had never handled coins before. She loved the weight of them in her little purse. She loved the sound of them jingling against each other. She loved the feeling of power that it gave her. Eight pieces was such a lot of money for flower garlands.

The first time Khujjuttara went to Sumana to buy them, she wanted to make sure that she got the best and the most with the queen's money. Sumana gave her a basket heaped high with garlands of jasmine and mallika.

"This is worth four pieces," he explained.

"Oh, that will be quite enough," said Khujjuttara, delighted, and without really thinking about it she kept the other four pieces.

And there they were, jingling in her little purse, as she made her way back to the palace.

There was an orphanage on one corner and the children were playing in the street.

Khujjuttara stopped to greet them.

"Are you hungry, little ones?' she said to a group of four.

"Always," they answered.

"Here," she said and gave each one of them a piece of money.

"Buy some food and share it with the others."

They shrieked with delight and went scampering into the market, coming back with rice cakes and rice balls.

So that's how it went.

Everyday Khujjuttara set off with eight pieces of money to buy garlands, and everyday she only spent four.

Queen Samavati never knew the difference, and the children at the orphanage began to wait for Khujjuttara, and help her with her basket of flower garlands, and kiss her hands, and leap around her.

From Khujjuttara's perspective, she was merely distributing the king's wealth, where it ought to have been distributed anyway.

And it gave her great joy.

Sumana, the gardener noticed how happy Khujjuttara looked. As a follower of the Buddha, he took delight in other people's happiness. He asked her if she would like to come to his home and hear the Buddha speak.

Khujjuttara said yes.

That's how it happened.

A young woman, standing by the doorway of the garland-maker's home, riveted by the sound of this voice – the voice of the Buddha.

The Buddha was giving a teaching on generosity. "Bhikkhus," he said, "if beings knew, as I know, the result of giving and sharing, they would not eat without having given, nor would they allow the stain of meanness to obsess them and take root in their minds. Even if it were their last morsel, their last mouthful, they would not eat without having shared it, if there were someone to share it with. But, bhikkhus, as beings do not know, as I know, the result of giving and sharing, they eat without having given, and the stain of meanness obsesses them and takes root in their minds."

Khujjuttara's heart settled.

Here was water sound, wind sound, truth.

Here was home.

Khujjuttara spent all eight pieces on garlands that day, and came back to the palace with twice as many baskets full of garlands as on other days.

Queen Samavati was surprised, not just by the great quantity of garlands, but by the shining appearance of her friend and servant.

"Khujjuttara , where did all the flowers come from?"

"O Queen, I spent all eight pieces on garlands, but today only. On the other days, I gave four away. Please forgive me."

"But where have you been? Whom have you seen?"

Queen Samavati could hardly keep herself from falling on her knees before Khujjuttara, so struck was she by the girl's radiance.

"O Queen, I have seen the Buddha. Shall I tell you what he said?"

"Please."

"He said, and Khujjuttara repeated the Buddha's words, with the Buddha's inflection and with all the sincerity of his wish for others to understand the benefits of giving: "Bhikkhus, if beings knew, as I know, the result of giving and sharing…"

The Queen listened, enrapt.

After that, if the Buddha was staying in Kosambi, at Ghositarama, Pavarikambarama, Kukkutarama, or Badarikarama, Khujjuttara would go and hear him teach the Dhamma, and then return to Queen Samavati and repeat, word for word, everything she had heard.

And though the women of Queen Samavati's household received the teaching second-hand, they were blessed by Khujjuttara's memory, sincerity, and faith, for the messenger was more than just a carrier of words. With her quick mind and generous heart, she understood the teachings. What she passed on was much more than an echo. It was filled with the truth of her own understanding.

Margo McLoughlin is a storyteller, writer and teacher, based in Victoria, on the west coast of Canada. While on staff at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, Margo began studying Pali, the language of the earliest Buddhist teachings. For the past twenty years she has been translating, adapting and performing the Jataka tales and other stories from the Buddhist tradition. For more about Margo, please visit: margostoryteller.net. Experience her storytelling: Buddhist Legends: The Weaver's Daughter https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jfSF-cxqZU4

Heart Essence Literature Through Time

by Elaine Lai

Five years ago, in 2018, while I was studying Tibetan at the Rangjung Yeshe Institute in Kathmandu, Nepal, I received the reading transmission (*lung*), empowerment (*dbang*), and instructions (*khrid*) for the *Fourfold Heart Essence* (*Snying thig ya bzhi*). The ten-day ceremony was led by Sangye Nyenpa Rinpoche (1964–) at Benchen Monastery and was attended by many lay and monastic Buddhists from all over the world. This event marked the beginning of what I suspect will be a lifelong study of Heart Essence Dzogchen traditions.

Heart Essence has come to dominate Nyingma practice traditions. Today, the *Fourfold Heart Essence* is regarded by contemporary Dzogchen practitioners as the "unsurpassed, utmost secret" that subsumes the entire Buddhist path, yet we know very little about the contents of *Fourfold Heart Essence* and how it came to be popularized in Tibet. Today, contemporary practitioners of Dzogchen are most familiar with Jigme Lingpa's treasure (*gter ma*) revelation known as the *Heart Essence of Longchenpa*, which was popularized in the 18th century, largely influenced by the *Fourfold Heart Essence* that had been circulating much earlier.[1]

Fourfold Heart Essence is comprised of hundreds of texts of varying length, attributed to different authors. Though named "Fourfold," the collection is actually divided into five parts. There are two main Heart Essence traditions: (1) *Heart Essence of Vimalamitra*, attributed to the Indian Master Vimalamitra and other Great Perfection masters, such as Garab Dorje, Mañjuśrīmitra, Śrī Sinha, and Jñānasūtra; and (2) *Heart Essence of the Dākinīs*, attributed to Padmasambhava (Lotus-Born), who is considered a second Buddha for many Tibetan Buddhists. There are also three collections that function as commentaries of the two Heart Essence traditions: (1) *Quintessence of the Guru*; (2) *Quintessence of the Dākinī*; and (3) *Profound Quintessence*. These three commentaries are attributed to the prolific scholar and practitioner of Dzogchen, Longchenpa (1308–1364).

From *Seventeen Tantras* to an Eighteenth Tantra

Heart Essence of Vimalamitra cites the famous *Seventeen Tantras* as scriptural authority,[2] but *Heart Essence of the Dākinīs* yokes an additional 18th tantra to these *Seventeen Tantras*. This particular tantra, titled *Tantra of the Sun*: *Blazing Luminous Matrix of Samantabhadrī*, is the topic of my dissertation. The text is explicitly connected to the treasures revealed by Padmasambhava and seems to be elevated as the primary source text for *Heart Essence of the Dākinī* and *Quintessence of the Dākinī*, sometimes cited even more frequently than *Tantra Beyond Sound*, which is regarded as the root tantra of the *Seventeen Tantras*. In terms of content, the text functions as a digest of the entire Heart Essence doctrine and practice, roughly structured around the ground (primordial gnosis), the body as the basis, the path of practice, and fruition. Unlike the *Seventeen Tantras*, it is written in very clear prose and the lines are metered, which suggests that it is an indigenous Tibetan composition rather than a translation. Most interestingly, whereas all the other *Seventeen Tantras* feature masculine Buddhas speaking to different retinues, this text features a female *buddha*, Samantabhadrī, dialoguing with a group of *dākinī*s, female embodiments of enlightened energy.

The elevation of the feminine in both the narrator and audience of *Tantra of the Sun* is further reflected in its history of revelation. According to some histories of *Heart Essence of the Dākinī*, Padmasambhava received the *Seventeen Tantras* along with this 18th tantra, which is described as the pith summation of all *Seventeen Tantras*, from the Indian Master Śrī Sinha.

Padmasambhava. He then organized these teachings into the cycle *Heart Essence of Dākinī*. When King Trisong Detsen's eight-year-old daughter Princess Pema Sal (c. 8th century) died suddenly from a bee sting, Padmasambhava revived the princess from the *bardo* (intermediate state) and transmitted *Heart Essence of the Dākinī* to her, to be revealed again at a later date. Yeshe Tsogyel then concealed these teachings as treasures. Six centuries later, the young princess took rebirth in the form of a young monk named Pema Ledreltsal (1248 or 1231/2–1307), who withdrew the treasure, *Heart Essence of the Dākinī*, from the rock at Daklha Tramo Drak in Dakpo and transmitted the teachings to three disciples: Gyalse Lekden (1290-1366), the Third Karmapa Rangjung Dorje (1284–1339), and Rinchen Lingpa. Longchenpa, the next rebirth of Princess Pema Sel, received the *Heart Essence of the Dākinī* from Gyalse Lekden (Pema Ledreltsal's former disciple) and codified it in the *Fourfold Heart Essence* along with his commentaries.

Significance of this Study

Because *Tantra of the Sun* is intimately associated with the *Heart Essence of the Dākinī*, it is a crucial window for understanding Heart Essence developments in Tibet at the turn of the fourteenth century, a time when Longchenpa was in the midst of codifying the sprawling and growing amount of Heart Essence literature into the *Fourfold Heart Essence*. *Tantra of the Sun* marks a pivotal turning point in the indigenization of Heart Essence teachings in Tibet and in the overall reception history of Indian tantra in Tibet. Because *Tantra of the Sun* co-emerges with treasure revelations made by Padmasambhava and the rising prominence of female figures linked to the Tibetan imperial court, such as Yeshe Tsogyel and Princess Lhacam Pema Sel, this tantra also reflects Nyingmapa mediations between history, memory, and revelation. My dissertation seeks to analyze the significance of this proliferation of the feminine in scripture, practice, and historical memory in the formation of Heart Essence traditions overall. The first part of my dissertation will introduce this important tantra by discussing its historical, textual, doxographical, and philosophical developments in the context of Heart Essence and broader tantric and sūtric literature.

One important reading ethic I have adopted is to engage with the tantra from its own multiple logics to understand how the text is performing its own nondual narration of samsāric time and its corresponding paths to liberation. One of my thematic interests is to understand how *Tantra of the Sun* embodies space and time, how it performs time and space on its readers/practitioners, and how it moves across time, dialoguing with other Dzogchen and non-Dzogchen texts over time. The second part of my dissertation thus provides a structural and content analysis of *Tantra of the Sun*, including how it relates to or departs from other Buddhist literature more broadly and how it is cited in *Heart Essence of the Dākinī* and *Quintessence of the Dākinī*. In this section, I aim to unpack the performative, affective, and transformative dimensions of *Tantra of the Sun* by providing an analysis of how form (narrative, temporal structure, the Five Excellences),[3] and style (language, use of similes or images like the matrix, *bhaga*, etc.) work as an ensemble and to what effect. I will argue that the structural form of *Tantra of the Sun* mirrors its eschatological content, performing multiple temporalities on its readers, ultimately collapsing the distinction between ground, path, and fruition. The third part of the dissertation will provide the first full-length English translation of *Tantra of the Sun*.

My interest in the theme of time is sourced in my deep commitment to understanding different modalities of temporality that narrativize worlds and beings, in this case, the practitioner of the Heart Essence tradition. Specifically, the developments of Heart Essence literature over time, the way the tradition employs its own histories, and *Tantra of the Sun*'s play in form and content, suggest a sensibility of time that is unique to Buddhist tantric worlds. Moreover, these notions of time serve as counterpoints to the imperatives of capitalist, modernist notions of time that have monopolized the imagination in our contemporary moment. My ultimate aspiration is that the fruits of my dissertation research will not only benefit contemporary Heart Essence practitioners, but also provide some narrative and theoretical tools to help all those interested in cultivating a more ethical and expansive relationship to time to find inspiration in Buddhist forms of literature.

Elaine Lai is a PhD candidate in the Religious Studies Department at Stanford University. This article introduces her dissertation, an in-depth study titled Tantra of the Sun: Blazing Luminous Matrix of Samantabhadrī *(Kun tu bzang mo klong gsal 'bar ma nyi ma'i rgyud).*

NOTES

[1] According to historians, *Heart Essence of Vimalamitra* was circulating by the 11th-13th centuries, but according to traditional Nyingma lineage histories, the two main Heart Essence traditions date all the way back to imperial Tibet and important 8th-century Indian Buddhist masters such as Vimalamitra and Padmasambhava.

[2] *Seventeen Tantras* are considered the scriptural basis of the Pith Instruction Series of the Dzogchen (Great Perfection) traditions. There are three series in total in this classificatory scheme: 1) mind series, 2) space series, and 3) pith instruction series.

[3] Five Excellences is a translation of the Tibetan *phun sum tshogs pa lnga*, a narrative framing device that roughly corresponds to the who/what/when/where/how of a *sūtra* or *tantra*. Specifically, the Five Excellences are: 1) the Excellent Teacher, 2) the Excellent Place, 3) the Excellent Retinue/Audience, 4) the Excellent Time, and 5) the Excellent Teaching.

Thrangu Nuns Making Significant Strides in Higher Education

by Karen Greenspan

The power of education to enable confidence and create positive change in the world is undisputed. It is therefore significant that Thrangu Tara Abbey in Kathmandu, Nepal, is investing in higher education for many of its aspiring and motivated nuns, who are also developing their debating and skills in sacred Vajrayana Buddhist dance. During my recent trip to Nepal, I visited Lumbini Buddhist University, located in Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha. The university, established in 2004, offers Bachelor's and Master's programs in Buddhist Studies, Humanities and Social Sciences, and Development Studies and Applied Sciences.

Among a student body of approximately 2,000, there are currently eight Thrangu nuns between the ages of 25 and 38 pursuing Bachelor's degrees in Buddhist Studies. They are enrolled in courses such as Buddhist Philosophy, Buddhist Literature, English Language, English Literature, Nepali Language, and more.

I met with three congenial and confident Thrangu nuns – Pasang Drolma Lama, Karma Drolma Gurung, and Jamyang Lhamo. True groundbreakers, they all originally came from villages in the high Himalayan districts of Nubri and Manang. When they were girls (ages 13-15) and were making their monastic commitments, no one in their homelands had attended university.

Pasang Drolma explained that to qualify for the opportunity to study at Lumbini Buddhist University, the nuns had to complete their *shedra* (secondary school for monastic education) studies as well as two to three years of service to the nunnery in the capacity of teacher, chant master, or administrative manager. Presently, the eighth nun Karma Yangchen Lhamo was approved to begin her university studies and has joined the cohort of students in Lumbini.

Tashi delek! May all be auspicious! And may many more follow in these esteemed nuns' lotus footsteps!

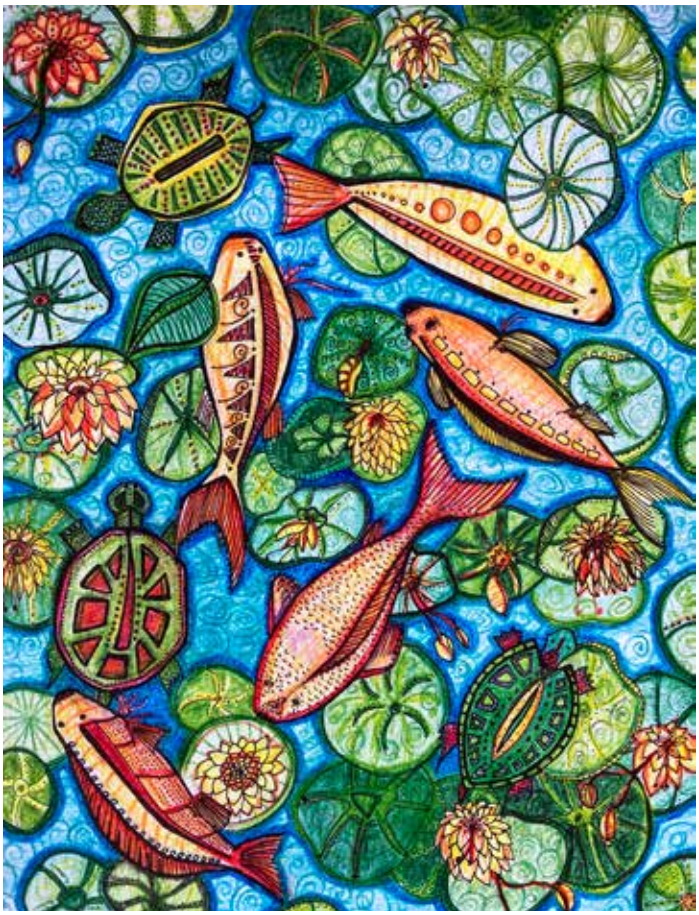
Karen Greenspan is a New York City-based dance journalist and student of Buddhadharma. A frequent contributor to Tricycle Magazine, Fjord Review, Dance Tabs, Ballet Review, Natural History, and Buddhistdoor Global, among other publications, she is also the author of Footfalls from the Land of Happiness: A Journey into the Dances of Bhutan, *published in 2019. Karen is currently researching sacred dance traditions that have recently opened up to female Dharma practitioners, which is what led her to visit the Thrangu Tara nuns.*

Reflections on Buddhism and Structural Change

by Leah Kalmanson

As part of a book panel on Daniel Capper's new book *Roaming Free Like a Deer: Buddhism and the Natural World*[1] at the American Academy of Religion's annual meeting in 2022, I had the opportunity to think more deeply about an issue that has concerned me for a while, namely, the possibility of structural or systemic socio-political change orchestrated on Buddhist models.[2] A central question in Capper's book is whether Buddhism does, or can, address suffering at what we might call a structural level. The answers he gives at first left me feeling quite pessimistic. Capper provides various examples of Buddhists who go to radical extremes to help a single creature, but who nonetheless do not display any systematic regard for animal welfare. Further, he discusses stories in Buddhist literatures about human-animal interactions that relay liberational messages, but which reflect no particular stance on ecological sustainability, or even vegetarianism, in the associated Buddhist cultures and communities.

I struggle with examples such as these, because, as I see it, Buddhism is preeminently positioned to offer structure-level analyses of the causes and conditions that lead to the arising of suffering. Karma, it would seem, is ultimately a structure-based analytical framework. For example, in Buddhist moral reasoning, when something happens, one does not ask, "Who is the agent of the act?" and one does not answer "*That* entity, right there." Rather, we ask, "What impermanent aggregate is causally connected to this action?" and "What karmic causes and conditions are in place that enabled this aggregate to arise and this act to occur?" We see this reasoning at play across the spectrum of Buddhist traditions.



In the early literature, King Milinda asks whether a person can be punished in the evening for a crime committed in the morning. His monk interlocutor explains that the causal connections between the latest aggregation of consciousness and prior ones are what allow for moral accountability.[3] Much later in Buddhist intellectual history, in Kamakura Japan, we hear the Pure Land teacher Shinran instruct his student to murder a thousand people. When the student protests that he is incapable of even a single murder, Shinran explains that this is not because the student is a good person but because the student lacks the karmic causes that enable murderous action to arise.[4] In sum, all worlds – from the human realm to the heavens and hells of our world system, to the pocket universes of the purified lands of other Buddhas – are held together by the karmic causes and conditions that enable their temporary existence. Thus, due to Buddhism's overall anti-essentialism, the various worlds and the entity-like aggregates that occupy them are entirely processual and functional – they are structures through and through, with no substances to be found. It seems that a structure-level analysis is the only analysis possible.

However, Capper's book takes us in a different direction. He introduces a methodology that he terms "relational animism," which is meant to capture the sense in which Buddhists can and do respond to animals or plants as human-like agents but only on a case-by-case basis. In other words, the animistic response arises in relation to specific aggregates in specific situations and does not reflect any structure-level approach to suffering, in the natural world or the human one.

Reflecting on this preference for a case-by-case approach to suffering and liberation, I have come to think that there are at least two ways to talk about sensitivity to context. On the one hand, we might say, like a good critical theorist or good feminist: Do not apply abstract or rule-based moral reasoning indiscriminately to all cases; and do not reduce accountability to individual actors alone; instead, seek the structural causes and conditions that have enabled specific situations of oppression to arise, situations in which all actors are relationally constituted and implicated via networks of intersectional identities. On the other hand, we might talk about sensitivity to context in terms of being precisely and compassionately attuned to the exact aggregate in front of us who is suffering. Capper's methodology helps disambiguate the former from the latter, in terms of Buddhist thought and practice.

The latter does seem appropriate, given Buddhism's anti-essentialist philosophy. In other words, especially in the East Asian branches, we find Buddhism upholding the phenomenal world as the site of liberation and not some transcendent reality beyond the present. What is directly before our eyes is what counts. Hence, there is a radical openness to present conditions and a radical willingness to respond outside the bounds of norms and doctrines. This is part of the dynamic that Capper's relational animism tracks. Throughout the book, we see Buddhists adopt vegetarianism, or not, regardless of what is established in the canon. We see Buddhists interact with animals as if the animals were people, or were Buddhist practitioners themselves, or even awakened beings, regardless of what some doctrine somewhere says about the relative capacities of animals for practice and attainment.

After reading the book, I reflected on possible examples that demonstrate Buddhism addressing suffering on a large scale. The edicts of King Aśoka came to mind, but I think Capper's overall point will hold: despite various attempts, either historical or contemporary, to institute social and political policies in line with Buddhist values, the situation on the ground, in terms of how people are actually treating animals or managing the local environment, seems disconnected from the compassionate ideal. This point is what led to my initial pessimism. Still, I wonder whether that pessimism is less about Buddhism in particular and more about the resignation that philosophers in general have to face regarding the failures of most good ideas.

That said, another example came to my mind: the thousand-armed and thousand-eyed Avalokiteśvara, who has a thousand eyes to see suffering taking place all over the world and a thousand arms to reach out and help wherever suffering is happening. When addressing suffering on a large scale, Buddhism does not turn to a structure-level analysis but instead invokes the supernormal power needed to alleviate massive amounts of suffering on a case-by-case basis. The key focus still comes down to the suffering aggregate directly before our eyes, but the catch is that we need a thousand eyes.

Buddhism does not want to back away from the situation at hand to get a better view of the underlying structural causes of suffering; rather, what Buddhism wants is the superpower to see everything up close.

As I reflect on this, it seems to me that in the age of the Internet we may feel as if we have immediate awareness of all the suffering taking place all over the planet, in real time. It is as if we are in the position of Avalokiteśvara, whether we like it or not, and whether or not we are capable of sustaining such compassionate attention. Perhaps I am still not optimistic, but I will offer at least the suggestion that Buddhism has resources for speaking about this "whole mass of suffering,"[5] impossible to untangle, which can only be addressed by pulling on it one thread at a time. I hold out hope, then, that Buddhism's overt focus on individual suffering, and its demand that we aspire toward a supernormal response, might yet speak to us today even as we do seek structural interventions.

NOTES

[1] Daniel Capper, *Roaming Free Like a Deer: Buddhism and the Natural World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022)

[2] For example, Leah Kalmanson, "Lessons from the Sanjie: Merit Economies as Catalysts for Social Change," *Studies in Chinese Religions* 5:2 (2019): 142–150; and "An Inexhaustible Storehouse for an Insurmountable Debt: A Buddhist Reading of Reparations," in *Buddhist Responses to Globalization*, edited by Leah Kalmanson and James Mark Shields (Lexington Press, 2014).

[3] See Chapter XI, section 2 "There is no continuous personal identity," in Eugene Watson Burlingame, *Buddhist Parables* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1922), available online at https://archive.org/stream/buddhistparables00burl/buddhistparables00burl_djvu.txt.

[4] See "A Record in Lament of Divergences," passage 13, in *The Collected Works of Shinran*, Vol. 1, translated by Dennis Hirota et al. (Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha, 1997), available online at http://shinranworks.com/related-works-by-other-authors/a-record-in-lament-of-divergences/

[5] See, for example, the Buddha's discussion of the complex and interconnected causal relations that lead to "this whole mass of suffering" in *Early Buddhist Discourses*, translated and edited by John J. Holder (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), especially chapters 3 "The Greater Discourse on Cause"

Wang Peihua: A Buddhist Laywoman in 18th-Century China

by Meijie Shen

The Buddha's teachings about impermanence are often seen in the *Agama Sutra*. After more than two millennia, despite the great developments and improvements in terms of material life, human beings still suffer constantly from a sense of insecurity. In recent years, the pandemic outbreak and the endless mutations of the virus further remind us

of the uncertainty of our existence and the limitation of our agency.

Although the cause of gender equality and social justice has come a long way, thanks to feminist activists and movements, women today are still faced with the insidious vestiges of oppression from persisting patriarchy, as seen in the recent overturning of Roe v. Wade. To effectively navigate the patriarchal backlash requires resilience and perseverance. Skillful and persistent negotiation, rather than head-on confrontation, will most likely bring about profound changes in the long run.

This article looks at the life story of a mid-eighteenth-century Chinese Buddhist laywoman by the name of Wang Peihua (1767-1792). Wang's story illustrates how a housewife from a prestigious Confucian family skillfully negotiated with the straitjackets of gender norms, though not without compromises, in order to pursue her personal religious goals. By doing so, she managed to live a celibate life within marriage and practiced like a monastic. She also demonstrates flexibility through her acceptance of social customs that were simply too ingrained to change and her transformation of an undesirable situation into a source of motivation. Due to patrilocal custom and partially her own ill health, during the seven years of her marriage, which

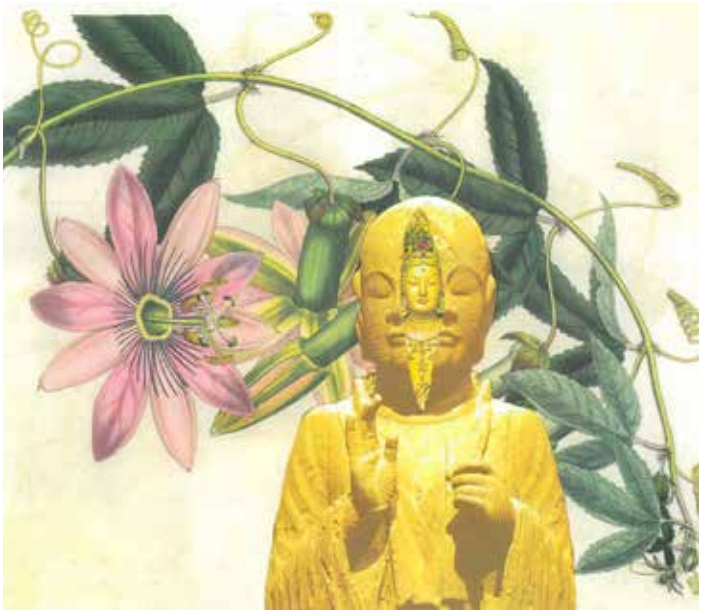
ended with her premature death, she was never able to see her own parents again. However, she encouraged herself by subscribing to the saying that "Buddhist practice itself constitutes filial piety" and left this world without resentment or attachment.

Around the third watch on the night of the full moon of August 2, 1792, in a majestic household located just outside the Forbidden City in Beijing, the daughter-in-law of the illustrious Hanlin academy scholar Wāng Xuejin (1748–1804) and the principal wife of his son Wāng Yanguo (1769–1823), née Wang, passed away at the age of twenty-five. Upon hearing the news of her death, the poor and the elderly nearby the capital flocked to her funeral to say goodbye. People wailed in mourning, offering their condolences and gratitude for her charity work, which she had tirelessly carried out without missing a single day until her death. In fact, her charity work earned her an entry in the local gazetteer of her native Taicang prefecture, which was published in 1802. To those disadvantaged people, she was a compassionate and warm-hearted Samaritan, always ready to help when they turned to her. To her family, friends, and anyone who had read her writings, however, she was much more than merely a good woman. She was, in the fullest sense of the word, a "good woman," *shannüren*, the parlance for "Buddhist laywoman" in Chinese at the time.

Wang Peihua hailed from a gentry family from Taicang. Her family were descendants of the great Wang clan of Taiyuan. We do not know much about her father Wang Gan except that he served as a magistrate in Guangdong province. Her mother was the daughter of Mao Yong (*jinshi* degree in 1748) and niece of Wāng Xuejin's mother, née Mao (d. 1789). Therefore, Wang Peihua was the grandniece of Mme. Mao, her future grandmother-in-law. When she was still a little girl, Mme. Mao held her, remarking, "This is indeed a lady!" and arranged the betrothal of Wang Peihua to her second grandson, Wāng Yanguo. According to Wang Peihua's biography, she turned out to be dignified, upright, and amicable, due in large part to her good upbringing. A filial daughter, Wang was adored by her parents and given an education in the Four Books, normally reserved for sons, instead of only the didactic manuals of codes of conduct designed to prime daughters to be proper Confucian wives.

Eking Out a Religious Life in Marriage

At the age of nineteen, Wang Peihua duly married into the Wāng family and quickly earned praises from her in-laws for her propriety, deference, and diligence. While it is difficult to ascertain her engagement with Buddhism in her pre-marital life, it is at least safe to say that Buddhist study and practice became the fulcrum of her life after joining the Wāng family, a proper Buddhist family. Like many of their gentry contemporaries, although located at the top echelon of the scholar bureaucracy in a Confucian society and polity, the Wāng family, headed by Wāng Xuejin, was Confucian by profession and Buddhist by avocation. They constituted



an embodiment of a larger movement in intellectual history: the significant deepening integration of Buddhism with indigenous philosophical schools (Confucianism and Daoism) from the Ming Dynasty and onwards, popularly known as "*sanjiao heyi*" or "three teachings merged into one."

One of the defining features of a Buddhist family is its inclusive nature. It is therefore not surprising that all the womenfolk of the Wāng family were engaged in the praxis of Buddhism. Wang Peihua's mother-in-law, Cao Hongyi (circa 1780), was also a devout Buddhist laywoman. Hailing from the illustrious Cao family of Shanghai, Mme. Cao was highly literary and left a poetry collection of her own, titled *Huixiangshi shicao* (Drafts of Poems from the Studio of Fragrance of Wisdom). Her responsibility for household management sidelined her literary pursuits and religious quest until "in her middle age when she suffered from infirmity." Only then was Mme. Cao able to "turn her mind to Buddhism; she kept a vegetarian diet, meditated, chanted, hand-copied Buddhist sutras, and lived every day with discipline." Like her husband, who had his own residence, "Meditation Abode of Layman Chunfu," her no-nonsense attitude toward Buddhist practice was reflected in the name of her own residence, the "Hall without Unnecessary Karmic Connections." When Mme. Cao began to engage more intensively in her own Buddhist practices, she turned over all of the household responsibilities to Wang Peihua. The mother-in-law and daughter-in-law remained fellow Dharma practitioners on the path. Together with the other female members of the Wāng family, they gathered together to perform the evening ritual of chanting in Sanskrit every night.

Wang Peihua got along especially well with Mme. Mao, her grandmother-in-law/grandaunt. Their closeness was attributed not just to their matrilineal connection, but also their shared interest in Buddhism. Like most women at that time, Mme. Mao began to devote herself fully to Buddhism after middle-age. She did not just chant *sūtra*s, but also

investigated them intellectually during her later years. While Wang Peihua attended to her, Mme. Mao would often expound on Buddhist texts to her. The many illuminating moments during such informal tutelage appear to have inspired Wang Peihua. Here we witness the traditional form of maternal transference of knowledge from an elderly woman to a young one, except that this time, what was being passed down was wisdom related to collecting the mind instead of getting distracted attending endless family affairs.

Right after Wang Peihua married and moved into the Wāng family home, she took the initiative of seeking to install a concubine for her husband, appealing to the Wāng family repeatedly and earnestly to make her maid Zhu Ji (circa 1767–1795) the concubine. Her request was approved, and Miss Zhu gave birth to a boy in the early spring of 1788, shortly before Wang Peihua herself gave birth to a son in the fifth month of the same year. When the whole family, led by Mme. Mao, went to thank Wang Peihua for her magnanimity and reproductive contribution, she declined. Instead, she went down on both knees and pleaded with Mme. Mao to allow her to practice Buddhism with her, asserting with utmost sincerity in front of everyone that she wished nothing but to "remain a pure body and attend to Mme. Mao, sweeping the floor and burning incense, to the end of her life." Her request was granted, no doubt because she had dutifully fulfilled her obligation by producing a male heir.

This vignette is strongly reminiscent of another literary Buddhist laywoman, Tao Shan (1756–1780), a contemporary and townswoman of Wang Peihua. Immediately after her wedding ceremony, Tao tried to devote herself entirely to Buddhist practices by petitioning her husband's family for the preservation of her virginity. It was, as one might expect, emphatically dismissed as a preposterous idea. Indeed, for most laywomen, a personal avocation, be it literary or religious, comes second to their primary vocation of being a proper Confucian wife and mother. These roles stipulate the responsibilities of housekeeping and attending to the old and young, which encroach upon the time that could otherwise be used for Buddhist study. Moreover, the procreative duty foisted upon women made the observance of celibacy impossible. Although celibacy is a precept required of monastics only, serious and pious lay practitioners wish to observe it, too. For laywomen, sadly, observing celibacy means turning the female body into a site of direct conflict between the Confucian emphasis on family lineage and the Buddhist teachings on detachment. Therefore, while most laywomen could manage to keep a vegetarian diet or steal a few moments for practices such as chanting, to excuse themselves entirely from conjugal and reproductive duties was impossible until after they had fulfilled their duty of childbearing and childrearing.

It is perhaps not a coincidence to see that in Peng Shaosheng (1740-1796)'s *Biographies of Buddhist Laywomen* (*Shannüren zhuan)*, undivided devotion to Buddhism usually occurs around middle age. In the Wāng family, neither Mme. Mao, Mme. Cao, nor a certain family relative Mme. Lu started practicing Buddhism until middle age. In the epitaph Wāng Xuejin penned for Mme. Lu, a widow, he praised her lifelong Confucian virtue and final religious achievement, stating that her "feminine virtue" constituted the prerequisite for her spiritual achievement."

The purported conflation of this virtue and spirituality was foregrounded in eulogistic writings about laywomen. Male authors sought out virtue as the common ground for different religio-philosophical schools, especially for Confucianism and Buddhism. For example, Hanshan Deqing (1546-1623), one of the "Four Great Masters of Late Ming," was famous for his Buddhist apologetics that stated "the [Buddhist] Five Precepts (*wujie*) are precisely the [Confucian] Five Principles (*wuchang*)." Indeed, virtue is deemed essential in both Buddhism and Confucianism. The Confucian "Five Principles" teach the cultivation of virtue for becoming a perfected human being (*junzi*). Buddhist precepts of virtue and morality are the foundation for concentrating the mind, which leads to wisdom. However, when it comes to women, the seemingly universal virtue turns out to be gender specific. As Wāng Xuejin's epitaph for Mme. Lu reveals, it is "feminine" virtue according to Confucian gender norms that earns approval. The subtext of "feminine virtue" is actually the "appropriate" exercise of female sexuality. When the husband is alive, using it to continue the patrilineal bloodline constitutes virtue; when the husband is dead, preserving chastity constitutes virtue.

Wang Peihua was savvy enough to strike a good balance between examples like Tao Shan and Mme. Mao by negotiating the norms. First, she was realistic and strategic enough to make an effective compromise. Even with favorable conditions such as living in a Buddhist family and being related to the grandmother-in-law, she dared not broach the subject of celibacy without any bargaining chip to ensure the success of her request. Only after she consummated her marriage, installed a concubine for her husband, and secured two male offspring did she muster the courage to request celibacy. Even though she had fulfilled her obligation, she still had to resort to the grand pretext of filial piety toward the Buddhist matron sitting at the top of the familial hierarchy, her grandmother-in-law, to maximize the power of her request. Meanwhile, Wang Peihua seemed resolved to seek liberation early on, while she was still a new bride. The fact that she played a proactive role in securing a concubinage for her husband betrayed her tepid interest in the connubial bliss promised by marriage. From her own words, a lyric composed on the occasion of the Double Seventh Festival, we know that her renunciation was deeply rooted in her recognition of the unsatisfactory nature of life, including married life.

Turning Regrets and Illness into Motivation for Buddhist Practice

Wang Peihua made good use of her hard-earned celibacy and exerted herself to devotional and meditative practices. Illness might also have contributed to her diligence and

sense of urgency; she had always had a weak constitution and medication was not effective. We never see Wang Peihua talking about her illness or any psychological malaise such as low spirits, hypersensitivity, and depression in her writings, though. Her reticence concerning the etiology of her ailments is unsurprising; as with the literary norm, well-raised women from the gentry class were invariably unforthcoming about their physicality. However, they did often write about illnesses, using them as a framework and focusing on their responses to being sick. Illnesses were often described in emotional terms and bundled into the blanket expression *chou*, meaning sorrow or melancholy. Since women writers were indeed subjected to more obvious sufferings than their male counterparts, aside from their fair share of existential angst as human beings, there are also the biologically dictated inconvenience of menstruation and life-threatening childbirth. Combined with the social dictate of seclusion and the mutilation of foot-binding, their sorrow was understandable.

The late imperial literary aesthetic of "taking the frailty associated with illness as a fitting signifier of femininity" made illness a "feminine" condition increasingly aestheticized in art and literature.[1] This further encouraged women's identification with suffering. Wang Peihua, however, despite her lifelong ill health, unconsciously bucked the trend of indulging in aestheticizing illness and poeticizing its ensuing melancholy. Only in her final moments did Wang Peihua write a poem about her illness, or rather, her state of being ill. Her composure is probably attributable to her Buddhist learning and training. Suffering is a fact that does not need to be reiterated; it is the first of the Four Noble Truths in the very first Dharma talk given by the Buddha. What needs to be done is to liberate oneself from suffering through Dharma practice. Although there were many women writers who waded and wallowed in their sickness, some of them managed to turn their illness into an alternative space for spiritual practice. Relatedly, another close contemporary of Wang Peihua and one of the ten female members of the Clear Brook Poetry Club of Suzhou, the Buddhist laywoman Jiang Zhu (1764–1804), viewed illness as a kind of spiritual training that led her to the Way. Wang Peihua, forever sanguine and resilient, turned her failing health into an opportunity to practice detachment, acceptance, and mindfulness:

Improvised Verses in Sickness

Simplifying affairs and being adaptive to
conditions are enough for recuperation.
What is the need of wasting breath to inquire of
Vimalakīrti [about illness]?
Even if he has a panacea worth a thousand
pieces of gold up his sleeve,
How could that compare to sitting in solitude
on a meditation cushion?

In this poem, Wang Peihua's calm in the face of death even emboldens her to question the attention Vimalakīrti received when he appeared to "fall ill." Vimalakīrti, though assuming the appearance of an ordinary layman, was in actuality a *bodhisattva* who outflanked Mañjuśrī, the *bodhisattva* who embodies supreme wisdom, in a Dharma debate. Vimalakīrti had been long hailed as the paragon of lay Buddhists and his eponymous *sūtra* was often cited to buttress the universality of buddha-nature and, by extension, the equal status of laypeople to monastics in being endowed with innate wisdom. When her strength and mobility were presumably sapped by sickness, Wang Peihua readily subsumed her previous practice into mindfulness, the essence of Chan, the spiritual efficacy she swore by.

Although Wang Peihua was praised for being filial by her father-in-law in the biography, to express her devotion to her own parents was difficult, if not impossible. As was the patrilocal custom, she had to follow her husband's family when they left the south for the capital to take up office in the central government. Given that she died exactly seven years into her marriage, in Beijing, it stands to reason that she probably never saw her own parents again. How did she

reconcile herself to the long separation from her parents and the attendant regret?

On a Cold Night, I Matched My Father-in-law's Rhymes

Both of us bow to the compassionate clouds [of Guanyin] several times a day.
Who first saw the "one flower"?
Often, I sweep the floor, burn incense, and sit.
Meanwhile, I attempt carrying water and chopping wood.
In the grove of marvelousness, [the moon] is looming.
Amidst the room of silence, the reed dust heralds [breakthroughs].
Practice is filial piety.
Still, I cannot help sending a sprig of plum blossom to the Ridge
for missing my parents (in east Guangdong).

Earlier, I noted that many of the sentimental tropes traditionally attributed to the feminine are manifestly absent in Wang Peihua's writings. What we see is a devoted seeker of spiritual liberation, who takes the aesthetic of emotional restraint in Chinese poetics further by virtue of her Buddhist detachment. Thoughts about her aged parents, from whom she has been separated across the empire for years, seem to be her only vulnerability. She sent this epistolary poem to her father-in-law, with whom she hoped to travel south but was detained in the capital due to illness, trying to console herself by subscribing to the famous Buddhist apologetics that "practicing Buddhism constitutes filial piety." She devotes the first three and half couplets to detailing her diligent practices, which include devotional practices of Guanyin and Chan mindfulness, aiming to extend the equanimity she feels on the meditation cushion to the rest of the day. Her hard work is not unrewarded: she is gets glimpses of the moon, a byword for enlightenment in Chan discourse, marking ineffable spiritual breakthroughs in meditation. The allusion to reed dust signals meditative breakthroughs as subtle as the reed dust that heralds the coming of spring. Her restrained gesture of sending a sprig of plum blossom as a token of solicitude expresses a young daughter's intense yearning for her aged parents but does not compromise her Buddhist dedication; instead, it reveals her sincerity and humanity.

This longing for her parents continued to the end of her life; Wang Peihua never made it to the south to see them again, as show in this poem, which appears to be her last words:

Written While Ill

Among the "four forms," the form of a life span dissolves first.
Lifelong, I have regretted being unable to perform my filial [duties].
The *gāthā* of "six resemblances" is chanted thousands of times.
The quest for the luminance of thusness will continue after these eyes are closed.

The title is an understatement of her critical condition. Judging from the first couplet, at age twenty-five, she already knew that her death is imminent. There is no trace of self-pity, though. Her limited lifespan exemplifies the emptiness of longevity, one of the four illusory forms, realization of which befits a *bodhisattva* according to the *Diamond Sutra*. Her only regret was being unable to spend time with and attend to her parents.

As an advanced Chan practitioner, she does not let her attachment overwhelm or distract her from right mindfulness at the last moment, a moment of great importance to practitioners. She persistently chants the closing *gāthā* of the "six resemblances" from the *Diamond Sutra*, the Buddhist contemplation on our conditioned existence in this fleeting world:

All conditioned phenomena
Are like a dream, an illusion, a bubble, a shadow,
Like the dew, or like lightning.
Thus is the way we shall perceive them.

Through this practice, she tries to set her mind steadfastly upon liberation, symbolized by the luminance of the heart-mind (coded as "thusness" in Chan discourse) and thus turns not just illness but also death into an opportunity for deepening her practice. Her pent-up sorrow is fully acknowledged and then resolved into total resignation. She permanently closes her eyes to this world and life; but her spiritual quest for enlightenment continues after her physical form dissolves. Her last poem confirms her lifelong endeavor of abiding acceptance, finality, and detachment.

Conclusion

Buddhist women nowadays enjoy much more space compared to their pre-modern counterparts. Wang Peihua, faced with the inescapable fate of marriage and reproduction, carved out a space within married life where she could live and practice like a monastic. Laboring under chronic health concerns, she rose above the poetic trope of romantic sorrow and used illness as motivation to diligently practice detachment and meditation. Her resilience and skillfulness in negotiating gender norms and social conventions enabled her to make the best use of her life (as short as it was), illness, and death as a spiritual practice. Her determination can inspire others today to exert themselves to transform life into spiritual practice.

NOTE

[1] Grace Fong, "Writing and Illness: A Feminine Condition in Women's Poetry of the Ming and Qing," *The Inner Quarters and Beyond: Women Writers from Ming through Qing*, ed. Grace Fong and Ellen Widmer (London & Leiden: Brill, 2010). 30.

Solitude and Dignity in a Sacred Indian Himalayan Spiritual Landscape

by Sourajit Ghosh

Presenting Buddhist female monasticism in an Indian sacred geography and creating a women-friendly spiritual landscape raises a plethora of questions, emotions, and deep-rooted concerns. The significant work of Karma Lekshe Tsomo's *Sisters in Solitude* led me on a complex quest across the Indian Himalayas back in 2016 that has continued to the present time. As a novice scholar back then, the burden of additional *vinaya* precepts for female mendicants and the silent obligation of the *gurudhammas* planted deep questions in my mind. What is the identity of a contemporary *bhikṣuṇi* given the shadows of age-old practices that contrast vividly with the independence and dignity of women in a 21st-century spiritual space? How far have we, as a human society, recognized the legacy of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī? How deeply are we committed to this heritage and the exceptional narrative of women's leadership in forging independent spiritual careers and refusing an identity under the shadow or protection of men?

In the contemporary setting, where we talk about principles of equity and inclusion, a basic question haunts me: Are nuns merely "red-robed bald women?" This was the shockingly derogatory term I heard a villager use in a rural setting when I asked directions to a nunnery during my fieldwork in the Himalayas. The experience made me question how sincerely Buddhists today recognize and support the tremendous efforts and achievements of our Dharma sisters who follow the path forged by Gotamī, Khemā, Utpalavarnā, and Dhammadinnā. These illustrious nuns were recognized by the Blessed One himself for their exceptional qualities, their deep understanding of the teachings of the Buddha, and their exceptional skill in teaching the Dhamma to the lay community. How do we foster the awareness that our Dhamma sisters may offer society extraordinary wisdom if we listen in a careful, compassionate manner, as an offering to their deeply awakened minds?

In light of these questions, I attempted to understand the gaps between the identity formation of a contemporary daughter of the Buddha in contrast to the expected roles for women embedded in the *vinaya* narratives. Although the ideal is for Dharma practitioners to excel in wisdom and leadership qualities, there will always be shortcomings due to external factors. Nuns in the Tibetan tradition lack full ordination, but they have recently gained access to philosophical studies leading to the *geshema* degree and increasingly participate in ritual practices. This raises a question about the relative value of adhering strictly to rigid *vinaya* rules in contrast to practicing toward full realization and advanced states of compassion.

A great deal of contemplation is needed to understand the implications of the *vinaya* rules; it is not simply a matter of rigid adherence to rules based on blind obligation. The *vinaya* rules are a product of an earlier time and need to be questioned and revised for the contemporary era. In several cases, the Buddha himself interceded and improvised rules to make spiritual practice for women more comfortable. The mind of a practitioner should primarily be governed by compassion, not rigid thoughts, which are prone to grasping and illusion.

In my observations at a few nunneries in North Bengal and Sikkim, I found the circumstances to be quite different from my earlier experiences at nunneries in Himachal Pradesh. In Himachal Pradesh, I found highly articulate female monastic leaders who had benefitted from the guidance of institutions such as the Tibetan Nuns Project and the guidance of H.H. the 14th Dalai Lama and other respected teachers.

Observing nuns who live in informal monasteries (*gompa*s) with just a handful of nuns inclined me to think in a parallel direction. I witnessed extraordinary coordination among nuns practicing in two different traditions – Japanese Nichiren and the Tibetan tradition – living in close proximity in the same sacred geography of North Bengal and Sikkim. The beautiful mutual respect and cooperation among Dhamma sisters belonging to different traditions raised a question in my mind: Are the differences among sects, schools, and traditions important? What is more important than being a daughter of the Buddha? Are the small differences among the *vinaya* codes more important than the willingness to unite as sisters in the Dharma?

Fortunately, I was accompanied by a nun practicing in the Japanese Nichiren tradition who was my research assistant. She was almost like an elder sister guiding me in the way I think about the dimensions of female monastic practice.

At the end of July 2022, I had an opportunity to engage in dialogue with a few Tibetan nuns and a nun practicing in the Japanese tradition to understand the perspective of female Buddhist monastics in the Indian Himalayas. Initially, the discussion centered on the daily routine of the Tibetan nuns and their understanding of female monasticism. In my understanding, their reality is highly dependent on a respected *rinpoche* or *guru* and they have great faith in the teachings of their spiritual guides. This made me wonder about how much these female Himalayan Buddhist monastics study about the legacy of the early *bhikṣuṇi sangha*. How do the great nuns of early Buddhist history inspire them? Who are their role models and lineage holders? Are they familiar with Gotami and the 500 Śakyan women who went forth in a quest for an independent spiritual career?

Ideally, one should receive instructions on the mode of practices from lineage holders and simultaneously know the teachings and thoughts of the early nuns. How do they prioritize their aspirations based on these role models? The nuns understood my concern about the urgent need for nuns of the Tibetan tradition to have more readings and discussions on the teachings of the early *bhikṣuṇi*s. They agreed that the early *bhikṣuṇi*s paved the path for women to create an independent spiritual space for practice. How are the narratives of the early *therī*s perceived by contemporary nuns?

The nun who practices in the Japanese tradition felt that more emphasis should be placed on reading about the early

bhikṣuṇis and their deep faith in following the *vinaya* (monastic codes). She mentioned a beautiful aspect of the *vinaya*, that the codes are meant for discipline, but compassion should flow rigid boundaries to address human factors that are beyond boundaries. Society needs the spiritual guidance of the elder nuns. The expectations of society need to be addressed and fulfilled with an open mind, rather than getting entangled in complexities, such as the differences between the Dharmagutaka, Mūlasarvāstivāda, and Theravāda schools of *vinaya*.

To realize that compassion drives female Buddhist monasticism more than the complexities of the *vinaya* codes was a moment of deep contemplation for me. We have the example of Tārā's commitment to help all. Is that not a greater motivation for female monastics across the Indian Himalayas than differences between *vinaya* traditions, sects, schools of thought, and cultures? In welcoming Dhamma sisters of all cultures and inspiring them to carry forward Gotamī's legacy, encouraging them to work for the well-being of society, we become united as daughters of the Buddha.

Sourajit Ghosh is a Ph.D. student at Nālandā University in India.

Review of Bhikkhuni Dr. Suvimalee*'s Path of the White Swans in the Sky*

by Nanda Pethiyagoda Wanasundera

When Bhikkhuni Dr. Suvimalee phoned me to say she had completed another book, this time about a dedicated female renunciant (*meheni*) whom she admires very much, I expected a biography. As indicated by its subtitle, *An Account of a Sri Lankan Hermitage and its Head Nun*, the book is much more than that.

Before critiquing the book, I want to first say that originally I was a bit skeptical about the issue of whether ten-precept women (*dasasil mātā*), even those wearing yellow robes, could succeed in being ordained as fully ordained nuns (*bhikkhunī*s). My skepticism was due to having listened to senior male monastics (*mahanayake*s) who said the *bhikkhunī* order could not be restored because there were no living *bhikkhuni*s of the Theravāda tradition to conduct the ordination.

Since then, liberal-minded Sri Lankan *bhikkhu*s have come forward to ordain nuns so that now there are many nuns following the *bhikkhunī* precepts. The *bhikkhunī* order is firmly established in Sri Lanka and doing much good. In the villages, in particular, this fourth pillar of the Buddhadhamma renders great service. I am now fully convinced that the *bhikkhunī* order is essential. There are excellent *bhikkhunī*s all over the island who are an asset to the monastic order (*sangha*) and a blessing to us laypeople. One such community of *bhikkhunī*s is the subject of Bhikkhuni Dr. Suvimalee's book, *Path of the White Swans in the Sky*, published in 2022 by the Galgamuwa Visakharama Charitable Trust. This Trust was set up under her patronage in 2019 to facilitate the religious education of *bhikkhunī*s and to meet the basic needs of Visakharamaya and other forest monasteries for nuns (*bhikkhunī aranya*s).

In this review, I comment on select portions of the book, beginning with a statement in which the author introduces the focus of her book. Dr. Suvimalee says, "In this short account what I have tried to bring out is the inner motivation and spiritual struggle of a strong character despite her seemingly ethereal delicateness." Here she is speaking about Bhikkhuni Badalgama Dhammanandani, who heads the Visakha Aramaya in Galgamuwa, Veyangoda, and also serves as the head *bhikkhunī* of the Naugala branch monastic community (*aramaya*).

In the second chapter, "A Brief Journey into the Past," Dr. Suvimalee writes of her arrival at Visakharamaya in 2007: "I was thrilled to live in the environment of a traditional rural hermitage," and the cohort at that time: "There were twelve candidates for the training programme of 415 months." She goes on to describe Visakharamaya in 2019, by which time the *aranya* had vastly expanded.

Chapter 3, "Metta and Karuna," and Chapter 4, "Facing the Vicissitudes of Life," detail the childhood and early adult life of Bhikkhuni Badalgama Dhammanandani. Born in 1953 in the village of Petigoda in Gampaha District as the fifth of seven siblings, she was named Ranmenika. Her early childhood was circumscribed by a lack of money. She had to give up schooling after Grade 2, since no one was available to escort her to school and back. The life of the village and the villagers is described in these chapters. Included are three "intrusions" in Ranmenika's childhood and life as the head nun of the *aranya*: the adoption of a squirrel, the rat-snake episode, and the invasion of the *bodhi* terrace by black ants (*kuros*). In all these "intrusions," her compassion and loving kindness are evident. At 19, Ranmenika helped her family's livelihood by weaving handloom cloth. She was so impressed by the Buddha's teachings that she wanted to renounce lay life. At first, her mother refused to give her permission but relented when she realized how determined her daughter was to enter the life of a ten preceptor in robes.

In Chapter 5, Dr. Suvimalee gives a history of the revival of the *bhikkhunī* order in Sri Lanka and elsewhere. She includes details about the life and work of Bhikkhu Batagama Medhanandabhidana Thera, who was the chief monk of the Yogashrama at Naugala, Kegalle, and the revered teacher and ordination master of many *bhikkhu*s, *bhikkhunī*s, ten-precept nuns (*dasasilmatha*), and laypeople. He studied the Buddhist texts diligently and decided it was possible and good to give higher ordination to *dasa sil matha*s (ten-precept nuns). In 1958, he gathered ten preceptors into a society called the Dasa Silmatas at Naugala, which evolved to become the International Sasanaloka Bhikkhuni Society of Naugala. Dr. Suvimalee includes the history of the revival of the *bhikkhunī* order in Taiwan and California as well as in Sri Lanka.

Chapter 6, "The Creek that Became a River," details the founding of the Dasa Silmata Society of Naugala and the early history of Visakharamaya Aranya. Ranmenika became

ordained, taking the name of Badalgama Dhammanandani. Chapter 7 outlines her academic achievements: a BA from the Vidyodaya Pirivena in 1999 and an MA degree from the Postgraduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies at the University of Kelaniya. Chapters 8 and 9 describe the residents who lived around Visakaramaya, and its benefactors, both male and female.

The title Suvimalee Karunaratne chose for this book, *Path of the White Swans in the Sky*, reflects her artistic nature. She happily continued writing while she was a *samanera* (novice) and now as a *bhikkhunī*. Two quotations are encapsulated in the title, one from an anonymous poem and the other from the *Dhammapada*. The poem reads:

> The path of the white swans
> Glittering in the distant sky
> Leaves no trace for the eye
> Enthralled by earthly bonds.

The verse from the *Dhammapada* is: "They for whom there is no accumulation … their course like that of birds in the air cannot be traced."

I first heard of Dr. Suvimalee when she was working for the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation, reading short stories on an arts program. She won many awards for her creative writing, including two State Literary Awards, one for the novel *Vine* (2001) and one for a book of short stories titled *Mandara Flower Salon and Other Stories* (2004). She holds two MAs in Buddhist Studies and a PhD from the University of Peradeniya. She worked on the Buddhist Encyclopedia from 2001 to 2004. She received ordination as a *samanerī* in 2004 and higher ordination as a Theravāda *bhikkhunī* in 2007. She taught as a senior lecturer at the Sri Lanka International Buddhist Academy, Kandy, from 2010 to 2014, and currently resides at Visakaramaya, Galgamuwa, Veyangoda.

Dr. Suvimalee's style of writing expresses serenity and piety on every page. She does full justice to the *bhikkhu*s and *bhikkhunī*s, and is particularly associated with the head nun of Visakaramaya, the subject of her biography. Readers will be convinced of the virtue of these religious figures and the service they have rendered both to those in robes and lay persons.

I began this review on a personal note, confessing my original doubts about founding the *bhikkhunī sāsana* in Sri Lanka. Later, I became convinced of its value and utter necessity. This book has further substantiated my conviction. We have many very pious and dedicated monastics in Sri Lanka, blessing the island and its people.

Nanda Pethiyagoda Wanasundera is a Sri Lankan writer who has published numerous articles, short stories, and two novels on the culture of the country. In addition to teaching for 20 years, she has published People & Events, a regular column in the Daily News *in Sri Lanka for more than 30 years. She also worked as an information officer and librarian at the National Science Council, the Overseas School of Colombo; the British Council, and the Centre for the Study of Human Rights, Faculty of Law, University of Colombo. She was a close associate of the late Ven. Bhikkhuni Ayya Khema (German) and Ven. Bhikkhuni Vayama (Australia).*

Buddhist Women's Orders Return to Their Ancestral Motherlands: First International Theravada Bhikkhuni Ordination in Bangladesh

by Dipen Barua

For the first time in the contemporary history of Bangladesh, six Bangladeshi Theravada women were fully ordained as *bhikkhunis* in the newly established *sima* (Pali. boundary) at the Damdama Bhikkhuni Sangharam and Meditation Center in Chattogram on 20 October 2022. New *bhikkunis* Dhammadinna, Krisha, Chala, Kushala, Apurna, and Vineeta had each undergone extensive *Dhamma-Vinaya* training for several years prior in preparation for their higher ordination. Among the six new *bhikkhunis*, all of whom were from Bangladesh; three were from the Barua Buddhist community, and three were from ethnic Buddhist communities in the Chattogram Hill Tracts.

*Bhikkhu*s, *bhikkhunis*, and distinguished guests from Bangladesh and overseas attended the ordination. Foremost among them were senior *bhikkhuni*s from Sri Lanka, who assisted in the ceremony proper: Venerable Padukke Sumitra Mahatheri, chief abbess of Susilawasa Aramaya; Ven. Dapane Sumanapali Mahatheri, chief abbess of Sri Sucharitha Wardhanaramaya Madampe; and Ven. Madulle Vijithananda Theri, chief abbess of Sakyadhita Training and Meditation Center. Their roles were as *bhikkhuni pavattini-upajjhaya* (*bhikkhuni* preceptor) and as *bhikkhuni kammavacacarini* (officiant teachers, examiners, and instructors), together with the ordaining *bhikkhuni* sangha, which also included Ven. Bhikkhuni Tushita from Vietnam.

Ven. Padukke Sumitra Theri is a Buddhist meditation master (*kammatthanacarya*) and is known as Bhikkhuni Maha Upajjhaya in Sri Lanka. She was among the first three Sri Lankan *bhikkhunis* formally appointed as *bhikkhuni* preceptors in 1998. Both Ven. Dapane Samanapali Theri and Ven. Madulle Vijithananda Theri have been awarded the highest honors in Sri Lanka. All three have served many times in international Theravada *bhikkhuni* ordinations.

As is proper for a dual ordination, the *bhikkhuni sangha* was supported by eminent Bangladeshi *bhikkhu*s who, despite past opposition from several members of the *bhikkhu* sangha in their home country, bravely and determinedly offered their full support for the dual ordination of these six *bhikkhunis*. Ven. Bhikkhu Varasambodhi Mahathera, of Bodh Gaya, India, was the certifier of the ceremony as *upajjhaya* (*bhikkhu* preceptor), while the role of *bhikkhu kammavacacariyas* was taken up jointly by Ven. Jnanabangsha Mahathera and Ven. Chandrakirti Mahathera, together with the ordaining *bhikkhu* sangha. Ven. Jnanabansha is the founding president and insight meditation teacher of Ananda

Kutir Vipassana Meditation Center in the Rangamati Hill Tracts. Ven. Chandrakirti is from Nirvangiri Aranya Kutir in Khagrachari, Bangladesh.

The organizer of the ordination ceremony, the Bangladesh *bhikkhuni sangha*, expressed its deep gratitude to the *bhikkhunis* from Sri Lanka and other countries for their continued support, cooperation, and courage. The Bangladeshi Buddhist community also deeply appreciated the contribution of the *bhikkhuni* sanghas of Sri Lanka and Thailand in assisting with the first full ordinations of female Bangladeshi monastics – first in Sri Lanka and now for the first time in their home country. Among many noteworthy activities, the Bangladesh *bhikkhuni* sangha is establishing the first Bangladesh Bhikkhuni Sangharama and Meditation Center and publishing an annual journal titled *Gautami*, to which many social activists and concerned groups contribute articles about women's rights and feminist issues. The sangha also organizes alms-giving events and Dhamma talks in many villages, while regularly going out into the community for alms rounds and offering regular Buddhist pastoral care for women and children.

This article is excerpted from an article published in *BuddhistDoor* on January 13, 2023. The complete article can be found here:

https://www.buddhistdoor.net/features/buddhist-womens-orders-return-to-their-ancestral-motherlands-first-international-theravada-bhikkhuni-ordination-in-bangladesh/

Dr. Dipen Barua is an honorary lecturer at the Centre for Buddhist Studies at The University of Hong Kong. He has authored a book and published several articles in Bengali and English, on the subject of Buddhist studies, women's issues, Buddhism in South and Southeast Asia, and cultural heritage.

Activities of Sakyadhita Nepal

by Nani Bajracharya

Sakyadhita Nepal was very active in 2022. Among the activities the branch organized were a class on the *Mahasatipatthana Sutta*, a Buddha *pariyatti* (teachings) class, a Zoom interaction on The Role of Bhikkhunis in the 21st century, Sakyadhita Nepal building construction, and a training course in parliamentary procedure. Sakyadhita Nepal's 11th Annual General Meeting was held in Dharmakirti Vihar in Kathmandu.

Members of Sakhyadhita Nepal hope to attend the 18th Sakyadhita Conference in Korea this year to share the national branch over the last two years. Sakyadhita Nepal conducted a few important programs, such as a talk show about the contributions of respected Buddhist nuns of the various monasteries in Nepal in the 21st century.

The mayor of Kathmandu, Bidya Sunder Sakya, laid the cornerstone for the construction of a new monastery on the

site that was previously Kimdol Vihar. We revived classes on the *Mahasatipatthana Sutta* that had been discontinued during the pandemic.

Sakyadhita Nepal organised one-day meditation programs at Changathali and Sumangal Vihar for those who had completed the course in *cittanupassana* (contemplation of the mind) and *vedananupassana* (contemplation of the feelings) under the guidance of Bhikkhu Panya Sarvante. We conducted a joint training program with the women of Udaya Samaj about meeting procedures. Sakyadhita Board member Urmila Tamrakar gave a talk program on "Buddhism as Education, Religion, and Philosophy" via Zoom for members and others. We also conducted a virtual talk show about exemplary Buddhist women during the time of Śakyamuni Buddha on International Women's Day.

Plans for this year include opening a plan being made to open a *pariyatti* center for education in ethics for the local community at Teku, Kathmandu. The motivation is to teach and realize the true value of kindness, good conduct, and honesty so as to form a strong foundation for a better society.

News from Sakyadhita Australia

by Helen Richardson, President of Sakyadhita Australia

At a recent committee meeting of Sakyadhita Australia, Ven. Thubten Chokyi, vice president and spiritual advisor, said we should "rejoice in what we have achieved, providing the space for women to engage with each other and to share the Dhamma." We are a very small group, but inspired by the mission of Sakyadhita, we have big objectives: to bring Australian Buddhist women together by providing a communications network. Further, to build community, reduce gender injustice and awaken Buddhist women to their potential. Accordingly, over the past year, we have organized webinars with inspiring speakers and have been busy on social media. At the other end of the country, we saw the graduation of two nuns in the Tibetan tradition: Ven. Thubten Pema and

Ven. Lozang Thubten, at Chenrezig Institute in Queensland.

The in-depth teachings offered at Chenrezig Institute are advanced comprehensive, practice-oriented courses of Buddhist study for both ordained and lay students wishing to extend their understanding of Buddhist thought and/or to receive a qualification which will enable them to become teachers within FPMT (Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition) centers. Ven. Thubten Pema also completed the extensive program offered by Lama Tsongkhapa Institute in Pomona, Italy.

Chenrezig Institute follows the FPMT's Basic Program, an intensive course of study of 12 subjects, which include the major texts studied in Gelug monasteries, a course designed by Kyabje Lama Zopa Rinpoche. Since the program started at Chenrezig Institute in 1997, four full rounds of the core and supplementary Basic Program subjects have already been completed, as well as an extended two-year study of Madhyamika at the higher FPMT Masters Program level and various Highest Yoga Tantra retreats. Hundreds of students have been able to attend at least some of the modules, with some completing the entire program, including the examination and retreat commitments, to become Basic Program graduates who have gone on to teach at various FPMT centers.

We have found webinars the perfect way to bring people together from the far-flung reaches of Australia, particularly during lockdowns. We have been inspired by recent speakers: Beth Goldring on Engaged Buddhism, Shaila Catherine on Focusing the Mind, and Ayya Suvira telling the story of Ranjani de Silva (who initiated the first nuns' ordination after 1000 years), and Karma Lekshe Tsomo reporting on the current situation of nuns worldwide. These webinars have all been posted on our Youtube channel.[1]

Our other main activity is fundraising. This year, we supported the nuns of Sri Lanka who are in an extremely difficult economic situation. We were delighted that Ranjani de Silva, former Sakyadhita President, personally distributed funds to nunneries in Sri Lanka. Our treasurer, Sharon Thrupp, is multi-skilled. In addition to giving a Mindful Writing Workshop during the year, she also organized a pilgrimage in Japan to follow the 2023 Sakyadhita Conference in Korea.[2]

Australian Buddhists are a diverse mob. We have branches of most global Buddhist traditions, both through immigration and home-grown Buddhists. It is a challenge to represent them all. We hope that we can grow and continue this grassroots Dhamma work.

NOTES

[1] Youtube Channel: www.youtube.com/channel/UCpSsA3CHOtemTGfYLAs9WGA

[2] For details about the Japan pilgrimage: https://mailchi.mp/6bdb8063045b/pilgrimage-to-japan-2023?e=95d8fcb20a

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https://sakyadhita2023.kr/en