

**BUDDHIST WOMEN  
IN A GLOBAL  
MULTICULTURAL  
COMMUNITY**



**BUDDHIST  
WOMEN  
IN A GLOBAL  
MULTICULTURAL  
COMMUNITY**

*Edited by*

Karma Lekshe Tsomo

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## **Dedication**

This book is dedicated to the memory of Sramanerika Padma Chhokid. In the summer of 2006, Venerable Chhokid traveled to the 9<sup>th</sup> Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women in Kuala Lumpur where she became terminally ill. With great effort and the help of many friends she made the journey home to Spiti and passed away shortly thereafter at Yangchen Choling Monastery, high in the Indian Himalayas. Her life of kindness, courage, and selfless commitment to the Dharma continues to inspire everyone she knew.



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## Introduction

In much of the Buddhist world, Buddhists tend to remain isolated in their own communities, without much exposure to other peoples and cultures. Buddhists in multicultural societies such as Malaysia, Singapore, and Hawai'i, who are experienced in negotiating religious diversity, are the exceptions. The valuable skills needed to engage meaningfully with people of other cultural backgrounds should be available to Buddhists in more homogenous societies as well. As the global village draws members of the human family closer together, all aspects of Buddhist cultural life expand, demanding greater competency in global economics, health, education, political organisation, social structures, language, religion, geography, technology, and psychology.

How can Buddhists, coming from widely diverse cultural backgrounds and experience, learn to communicate more effectively among themselves and with Buddhists from other traditions and cultural backgrounds? It is often assumed that Buddhists around the world share the same ideals and worldviews, but Buddhists from Bangladesh and Mongolia, Burma and Korea, Australia and Nepal have very different life experiences and also different perceptions of Buddhism. The concept of a monolithic Buddhist perspective or consensus on any given topic is an illusion, since most Buddhists have never had the opportunity to sit down and engage in dialogue with Buddhists from other countries. Even when Buddhists speak the same language, the lifestyles of rich and poor, urban and rural, young and old vary starkly, just as in other world populations. There is still much work to be done to engage Buddhists with different cultural backgrounds and experience in genuine dialogue with each other.

It may be argued that Buddhists already constitute a global cultural community. For hundreds of years, long before cell phones, the internet, and satellite TV, Buddhists have been communicating, trading, sharing ideas, and exchanging cultural traditions. As Buddhist thought and practise was transmitted from India to Sri Lanka, China, Tibet, Korea, Japan,

Southeast Asia, and around the world, it has been a conduit of culture and the arts. For all its many cultural and philosophical variations, Buddhism is a common thread that links Asian cultures together and increasingly links Asia and the West. However, the demands of today's world are increasing exponentially. Buddhists need to build on these shared cultural links, expand their thinking, and create entirely new structures to meet these demands.

Globalisation is not a new phenomenon. Human beings the world over have been linked by connections of trade, religion, weather, and disease for millions of years. What is new today is the intimate nature of human beings' interrelatedness brought about by improved means of transportation and media communication. New technologies allow us to directly engage with people in other parts of the world in a matter of seconds. The increasing pace of global discourse and connectivity has brought members of the human family closer together as commerce and culture become more interdependent than ever before.

With these interconnections, there are new opportunities for cultural exchange and human understanding, but huge communications gaps and misunderstandings also abound. Differences of language, wealth, religion, health, geography, and political perspective continue to challenge human relations. In today's complex and rapidly changing world, ignorance is more dangerous than ever. Therefore, fostering cross-cultural education and dialogue is increasingly critical for human happiness and peace in the world. As part of the human community, women also participate in these increasingly close and frequent exchanges. Intercultural dialogue among Buddhist women began in earnest with the 1<sup>st</sup> Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women in 1987. Since then, bonds of friendship and understanding have fostered a profound level of intellectual and interpersonal dialogue unknown to earlier generations of women. As participants in Sakyadhita's vision of a Buddhist global village, we are discovering how to best communicate and work to build each other's strengths.

International discourse generally involves elites with similar values, education, and experience, and often excludes the voices of women. At first glance, it seems nearly impossible for people from vastly different cultural backgrounds, speaking different languages, raised with different social norms, and viewing the world from different perspectives to hold a meaningful conversation. Yet, if the human species is to flourish, it is essential that people from all strata of society learn to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries. Intercultural discourse is not merely

a matter of personal enrichment, it is also essential for addressing the serious issues that face humankind today: poverty, violence, human rights, nuclear power, media ethics, international security, human trafficking, economic ethics, health, and myriad other pressing concerns.

Any discussion of creating a global multicultural community must begin by exploring the notion of culture, the set of beliefs and practises that characterise the way human beings organise themselves into groups. It is generally acknowledged that cultures are fluid organisms, open to new influences and changing over time. Cultural differences exist even within any given society and can be the source of surprise, misunderstanding, and amusement. For example, in Asian Buddhist languages, there is a clear difference between a woman and a nun. Asian nuns do not consider themselves women, because of clear distinctions between the identity and lifestyle of nuns and other women. In Asia, nuns and laywomen observe different social protocols; they are expected to sleep in different areas, eat at different tables, and behave differently. Transgressing these social expectations may be perceived as ignorant, selfish, inappropriate, or even arrogant. In English and other Western languages, however, nuns are subsumed in the category “women.” In the West, nuns are treated no differently than other women; for nuns to sleep apart, eat apart, or behave differently than other women might be perceived as ignorant, selfish, inappropriate, or even arrogant. In other words, social expectations in Asia and the West regarding terminology and behaviour for nuns and women in general are diametric opposites. The Sakyadhita International Conferences on Buddhist Women, which have brought Buddhist nuns and laywomen from Asia and the West together since 1987, have been perfect occasions to explore these cultural dichotomies. In these remarkable gatherings, Buddhist women are pioneers in learning to negotiate different cultural expectations in actual practise – exploring, expanding, and transcending their own cultural horizons.

Another example of cultural diversity is the language used to address monastics. In Asian Buddhist cultures, the decision to live a renunciant lifestyle is highly respected and that respect is expressed in the terms used to address nuns and monks. To call a renunciant by name without a qualifier such as “venerable” or “teacher” sounds very rude in Asian societies and each Asian has specialised language and protocols for expressing respect. Traditional Buddhist usage may be perceived differently in other cultural contexts, however. In Western cultures, the ideal of social equality suggests that everyone be addressed with equal respect. Although this ideal is not applied evenly to all members of Western

societies, by any means, to address a nun or monk as “venerable” may sound pretentious to the Western ear and may even create resentment. Since words have power and may arouse strong emotions, learning to use language across cultures is a special skill that requires mindfulness and practise. Situations can become even more complicated when dealing with different levels of ordination and dozens of different languages. At the Sakyadhita Conferences, Buddhist women have had opportunities to discuss, reflect, and practise these different forms of address.

There are no fixed Buddhist protocols and there are many challenges to creating terminology that would be agreeable to all. Many English-speaking Asian Buddhists today use Venerable as a term of address for both nuns and monks, regardless of their ordination status. One concern is to include all nuns, regardless of ordination status; another is gender equity. It is not uncommon to hear *bhiksus*, male novices, and even laymen addressed as Venerable, Most Venerable, Mahathero, His Eminence, and His Holiness, while ordained nuns may be addressed as “aunties” or “mothers.” Because Buddhists are concerned with human suffering, it is important to be aware of and to question the gender discrimination that is reflected in such language. Language is an important aspect of intercultural communications, so it is important for Buddhists to practise using language skilfully and precisely to expand human understanding and express wisdom and compassion.

Intercultural communication is not simply about language, of course. Realms of meaning can be conveyed through music, art, healing practises, meditation, gestures, and silence. These nonverbal means of communication can be used to advantage in developing patience, kindness, peacefulness, and other qualities to help calm and heal our chaotic world. Sometimes simply seeing a woman address a gathering from a microphone can be a catalyst that inspires action and leadership. Watching the sacrifices of a compassionate caregiver can prompt someone to give generously or pursue a career in public health. Seeing a thousand women light candles for world peace can inspire international peacebuilding. These are real-life examples of the many benefits that accrued from the 9<sup>th</sup> Sakyadhita Conference in Malaysia. They demonstrate how an organisation can benefit its members in countless ways and strengthen their voices.

Skill in communications has enormous implications for interpersonal relations, as well as for labour relations, interfaith dialogue, and diplomacy among nations. Beginning to see through our assumptions and fixations about how things are and how they should be – the illusions we have – and beginning to feel others’ hopes, dreams, and fears will not only free us



psychologically, but will also give us a deeper understanding of the Buddha's teachings. Fixed mental images about ourselves and others simply get in the way of a wholesome, unfettered, openhearted approach to life. With practise, we become more adept at setting aside our personal interests and working together on issues of importance to all women, all Buddhists, and all of humanity. Coming together, we begin to realise that we all drink from the same waters and breathe the same air. When the skies and waterways become polluted, we all feel the effects. As a human beings, we all suffer the devastating effects of global conflict, exploitation, poverty, and disease. As women, we develop empathy and compassion for the special sufferings of women and children caught in a vicious cycle of poverty and oppression. As Buddhists, we realise that by purifying our minds of selfish concern, we can expand the scope of our compassion to include the Earth's suffering billions and begin to work actively to alleviate their suffering.

Buddhism originated in a specific cultural context in northern India more than 2500 years ago, but it has never been limited by ethnic or cultural identity. The Buddha attracted a following assembly of many different kinds of people, in which no one was rejected on the basis of family history. The early Buddhist Sangha broke through boundaries of gender, caste, and colour, at a time when boundaries were far more rigidly fixed than today, to create a community of like-minded spiritual friends (*kalyanamitra*) travelling the path toward liberation together. Over many centuries, the Buddhist teachings spread to many vastly diverse lands, until today it spans the globe, reaching virtually every country in the world. From the classical texts and contexts, the Buddhist teachings and traditions have been translated into many languages and are now available electronically at the click of a mouse. People of many nationalities travel the globe interpreting the teachings in a vast array of cultural settings

Cross-cultural communications have been ongoing for hundreds of years of Buddhist transmission, requiring new ways to tell the story and new strategies to express Buddhist values. Today more than ever, as the Dharma moves beyond boundaries and confronts new cultural biases and influences, its transmission requires skilled and knowledgeable interpreters. The Buddhist principles of mindfulness, concentration, wisdom, and loving kindness are tailor-made for this process and flexible enough to adapt to circumstances. Practising these principles, Buddhist women can become agents of social change in a troubled world. By fostering a truly global perspective, they are valuable partners in multicultural dialogue, fostering and encouraging the best in everyone for the good of the world.



## *Introduction*

I am very grateful to all the scholars, practitioners, artists, and activists who have contributed their wealth of knowledge and experience to make this book possible. The book is the result of years of collaboration among hundreds of women from many different cultural backgrounds, speaking from their own first-hand experience of living, working, practising, and communicating across cultures. The essays included here touch on many aspects of Buddhist culture and Buddhist women's pioneering efforts to expand their cultural horizons through travel, education, meditation, and social activism. The essays document the achievements of women and the contributions they have made, not only to their own families, temples, and communities, but also to multicultural dialogue internationally.

I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to the organisers, assistants, and supporters of the 9<sup>th</sup> Sakyadhita Conference on Buddhist Women in Kuala Lumpur in 2006. I especially wish to thank Bhikṣuṇī's Chang Heng, Lee Terk, and Sing Kan for their courageous leadership and to all those who collaborated so selflessly to make this conference such a remarkable success. My boundless gratitude goes to Evelyn Diane Cowie, Becky Paxton, and Christie Yu-Ling Chang for their invaluable friendship, creativity, cheerfulness, and editorial skills. Without them, this project would have been impossible. This project has been a global multicultural endeavour throughout, involving many languages, cultures, and international communications. Everyone involved has been enriched – learning to more effectively and authentically transmit the depth and beauty of the Buddhist wisdom traditions. We continue in the commitment that Buddhist women's pioneering efforts will help ensure that these priceless ancient traditions continue to enrich the global community.



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**DIALOGUE ACROSS CULTURES:  
GLOBAL NETWORKS**



# **Roots/Routes: Transmitting the Buddhadharma across Time and Place: Challenges and Implications for Contemporary Buddhist Women**

Sharon A. Suh

We are currently living in an historic moment of time-space compression. What was once foreign and far away is now readily available at the click of a computer mouse, the speed dial of a cell phone and instant text messaging.<sup>1</sup> As we become more wireless and immediate in our methods of communication and are able to travel incredible distances through time and space, it seems crucial to consider what happens to us when there are fewer and fewer actual wires, cords, and ties connecting and rooting us to place. What happens when we travel across borders either as immigrants or refugees and have no sense of roots, resources, and identity in the new land?

Certainly globalisation, multiculturalism, transnationalism and hybridity are terms that have acquired a certain cachet and denote a sense of sophisticated chic.<sup>2</sup> Globalisation and wireless connections have enabled us to encounter a tremendous wealth of diversity in cultures, traditions, economies, religions, etc. Indeed, one aspect of globalisation and multiculturalism is the sense of what the Buddha calls interconnectedness and what Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, calls interbeing. Yet at the same time, we must interrogate and critique our easy use of the terms globalisation and multiculturalism, for these terms are deeply tied to the economic, political and social buying, selling, and control of people, cultures, objects, and religions. Have globalisation and multiculturalism really enabled us to interrelate and communicate in meaningful ways that bring about social, political, religious, and economic justice? Or are most of us still limited and isolated in our own biases, ignorance, and individualism, despite the presence of so much diversity? I would like to offer some critical inquiry into the challenges of thinking about globalism and multiculturalism and map out the terrain of key issues and questions that must be asked when addressing women in a global multicultural world.

Let me first begin with a simple working definition, for globalisation is certainly not a monolithic term. In general, globalisation has been understood in two general ways: "The first and most general is worldwide interconnectedness... the increasing movement of people, ideas and knowledge, goods and services, culture, crime, technology, and more across international borders."<sup>3</sup> The second aspect of globalisation is "the *particular* form of *economic* globalisation prevailing in our world today."<sup>4</sup> According

to ethicist Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, economic globalisation is defined by the following set of characteristics: “rapid increase in the movement of goods and services as well as capital – trade and investment – across international borders,” privatisation, accelerating commodification of life experiences and life forms, strategic marketing of Western consumerist ways of life around the world, commodification of money, and the increasing power of unaccountable economic players relative to more or less democratic governments in order to enable these developments.<sup>5</sup>

Buddhism has historically provided important solutions to the problems of consumption for over 2,500 years, yet I would argue that we still need to examine what happens to a religion when it can be commodified, *objectified* and transformed into a product for sale on the internet at the click of a mouse. What are the implications for the practitioners of a tradition when its rituals, doctrines and practises are priced for the wealthy and offered with such catchy titles as *Buddhism in a Box*? I am often struck by the immense disparity between the acquisition of Buddhism by the wealthy and the challenges to practise faced by so many Buddhist women around the world who have struggled for full participation and recognition as fully ordained nuns.

In my own work on Asian American Buddhism in the U.S., I ask this question simply because, when thinking about the construction of global forms of Buddhism, I am struck by the relative ease with which a dominant culture can borrow, transform, and create a form of Buddhism that often marginalises the Asian immigrants who brought the Dharma to the U.S. in the first place. Similarly, it seems that oftentimes the devotional practises of Buddhism are downplayed and the meditative practises come to be the defining characteristics of the Buddhist traditions as it travels to different milieu. When seen through the lens of meditation alone, Buddhist practises of social engagement and social justice often are overlooked and the tradition becomes reductionistic and isolationist. Yet there are extensive networks of international global support through Buddhist institutions such as Tzu Chi (Ciji) Foundation, based in Taiwan, that have moved across time, place, and religion to provide relief from natural disasters, public health epidemics, and poverty. While there are trends toward the commodification and objectification of Buddhism, we must continually work to transform the international image of Buddhism to include its compassionate forms of social engagement: education programmes, healthcare, disaster relief, movements for political and religious freedoms, and efforts toward economic justice and inter-religious dialogue.

It is certainly no secret that many American converts to Buddhism are quite wealthy upper-middle-class practitioners who wish to challenge the ill effects of rabid consumerism and, as has often been expressed, the authoritative Jewish and Christian traditions. Yet, as someone who studies Buddhism in North America, I am forced to ask what happens when this

new form of Buddhism develops as “American Buddhism” yet does not interact, respond, or reflect the concerns of non-racially dominant Buddhists? In other words, what happens when, in constructing a new form of Buddhism, the voices of minorities are not heard? In what ways are we blind to the particular struggles that many Buddhist immigrants encounter while living in a new land? What damage do we do to the practise of Buddhism when these voices are continually marginalised in the narrative of a country’s Buddhist community? In what ways do we perhaps unintentionally create a Buddhism that is of one colour? While these questions are particular to my own experiences in the United States, the topics of race, diaspora, and gender have also been central themes at the Sakyadhita conferences.

The introduction of Buddhism to the U.S. has its origins in the arrival of Asian immigrants who came to fill a need for cheap labour and continued with the arrival of such famous Zen masters such as Suzuki Roshi and the rise of the Beat poets who embraced the free spirit of Zen associated with the rise of the countercultural movement. I have noticed that many images of Buddhism in the U.S. tend to overlook the faces and practises of actual Asian Americans for a more abstracted image of distant monks on the high Himalayas connecting with the lowlands via laptops in commercials selling high-speed internet connections. In the long lineage of Orientalist fantasies of faraway places, the media image of the Buddhist monk comes to symbolise that which is at first inaccessible yet desired – the abstract sacred world. This abstract Other is then brought into the immediate present – for the sake of the consumer who wishes to have that which is far away right now. This longing for the Other has been described by philosopher Martha Nussbaum as Descriptive Romanticism, which not only idealises but freezes the desired Other in a timeless captivity of our own imaginations and, at the same time, denigrates what one finds in one’s own culture.<sup>6</sup> I do not wish to imply that all American Buddhists lack commitment, but, rather, that in the United States there are many who perceive Buddhism not so much as a religion but rather as a commodity that is available for purchase through *mala* beads, t-shirts, CDs, and statues.

Certainly, multiculturalism has had its heyday as a feel-good concept, but depending on time and place, it also sometimes stands for a widening of vision without the concomitant transformation of perspective and attitude in the face of difference. In other words, multiculturalism can sometimes be a catch word that denotes an acceptance of others, so long as that which defines the multi in multicultural is somewhat assimilated and, in effect, controlled.

While Buddhism in the U.S. is still at a very young stage of development, having really grown with the change in Asian immigration status since the 1965 Immigration and Nationalities Act, it provides a unique example of the complexities of the global, multicultural nature of

Buddhism. This is precisely because Buddhism in America is not monolithic; rather, it consists of both Asian immigrants of the first, second, third and fourth generations, white Euro-American converts, African Americans and increasing numbers of Latino practitioners. In addition, all over the U.S., one can find numerous temples representing Theravāda, Zen, Pure Land, Jōdo Shinshū, Korean, Chinese, Tibetan, Shingon, and Nichiren traditions as neighbours in one city. Now at first glance, it seems that indeed Buddhism in America is indeed a global and multicultural phenomenon. Yet there are some critical issues that must be attended to in order to get an accurate picture of the flourishing of Buddhism in this particular locale.

Currently, various Buddhist communities in the U.S. are engaged in the process of creating a new form or perhaps a new *yāna* of Buddhism – American Buddhism – yet, despite the multicultural nature of Buddhism in the United States, the voices that have yet to be adequately heard from and invited into dialogue and construction of this new *yāna* are those of non-white women who are deeply involved in practise.

I would like to share with you some of my recent thinking about women in Buddhism, thoughts which emerged from a recent conference on “Women Practising Buddhism: American Experiences” in April of 2005. My hope is to show how an examination of Buddhism in the U.S. indicates that the issues of race cannot be overlooked when theorising about Buddhist women in a global and multicultural world. In my own work on Buddhism in the United States, my reflections and critique come from my own examination of the Korean American Buddhist communities that have emerged in the United States since the 1970s. My interest in looking at Asian American communities involves the context of immigrant lives and asking how people find resonance in the Buddha’s teachings to help them cope with the concerns and issues of living as recent immigrants, such as:

- racism;
- inability to speak the dominant language;
- disadvantaged economic status;
- increasing assimilation and acculturation of their children;
- difficulty in teaching the Buddhadharma to their children and
- inadequate temple resources to teach younger children; and
- religious marginalisation in their own ethnic group.

Clearly, these issues are global and international concerns. In my talks on Buddhism in the United States, I often note that we need to bring to the table the voices of those who have been largely left out of the conversation so far – minority women. We need to include women, who are perhaps the largest supporters of Asian Buddhist temples, in the conversation and the process of constructing new forms of Buddhism in America. When we do so, we begin to see how the Buddhist tradition offers immense resources that help practitioners come to terms with the struggles of everyday living.



Yet, interestingly, one of the common responses that I have heard about the reasons for not having more Asian American Buddhists included in conferences and panels is simply a lack of English speaking skills and some insurmountable cultural divide. I would respond that, as technologically advanced as we are, we can certainly spend the time and resources to bring in interpreters. When we lose the critical voices of Asian American women, we misrepresent and misconstrue the Buddhist tradition and recreate forms of racial discrimination where Asian American voices and practises are not considered valid enough to construct the new American Buddhism.

Moving from the U.S.-specific context to the international context, we need to further question what we mean by global, multicultural Buddhist traditions. Whose voices make up these communities and whose voices are left out? When thinking about Buddhism from a global perspective, I often think about the women in Buddhist countries who are struggling for full ordination status, legal recognition, access to education, political freedom, and national independence, who may be jailed for vocalising their views. I think of women struggling to feed their children. The list of women who are struggling in the international context goes on and, without organisations like Sakyadhita, many of these struggles would be localised, without the global support necessary to forge real change.

Interestingly, many contemporary feminist scholars of Buddhism maintain that women are responsible for transforming and revitalising the Buddhist communities to make them gender equitable. Although the active presence of women in Buddhism has been well documented, there is often an assumption that the transformative work is done primarily by Euro-American women. This assumption results in a separation between Asian forms of Buddhism, also known as “traditional” Buddhisms, and what is commonly understood to be a more gender-liberated Buddhist community. “Traditional Buddhism” has come to denote that which is “Other,” “foreign,” and “unassimilatable.” Consequently, the contributions of Asian women to the development of gender-equitable Buddhism are often overlooked.

I would like to raise the following questions for us to consider:

What groups of individuals constitute the concept of a nation and what forms of Buddhism are considered authentic?

Where do diasporic Buddhist communities fit in their own new homelands?

How can attending to the needs of ethnic Saṅghas in all nations challenge our understanding of what it means to be Buddhist?

What are the various ways that women in Buddhism have resisted both patriarchal and racial forms of oppression?

What can we learn about Buddhism and feminism when we learn to listen to women who are deeply engaged in the Dharma, but whose voices have yet to be heard?

Although the majority of Buddhist Dharma teachers have historically come from Asia, most of their students have been white Euro-Americans converts. The process of conversion has been well documented in works on American Buddhism, but there is little written about the Asian American Buddhist women in the United States who have helped transplant and, as a result, transformed the tradition. Women do much of the work of maintaining and transmitting Buddhist traditions to younger generations in Asian American Buddhist communities. Therefore, we need to focus attention on the specific work done by Asian American women in diverse communities of Buddhists, such as the Cambodian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Thai, and Vietnamese Sanghas.

The Asian American women I am speaking about are largely laywomen. Their primary form of practise is lay devotion rather than meditation. This is another reason why their presence is often effaced in discussions of American Buddhism. Western Buddhist feminists often overlook laywomen's devotional practises, in spite of the fact that they have long argued for the equality of women in this over 2500-year-old religion. Most books on American Buddhist women reflect a fascination with meditation at the expense of lay devotion. Non-meditative practises are characterised as "popular religion" and, therefore, as less authentic forms of Buddhism. The problem with this hierarchy of practises is that for most Asian American lay Buddhist women, devotional practises are their main forms of practise. Hence, Asian American women's practises are devalued as less worthwhile endeavours. I argue for a reconceptualisation of Buddhist practise. We need to take seriously the centrality of lay devotion in Buddhist women's lives. If we fail to do so, we distort the nature of Buddhism in America. Additionally, valuing meditation over lay devotion reinforces a mind-body dichotomy that values the mind, which is the locus of meditation, over the body, which is the locus of devotional practises such as bowing.

In thinking about globalisation, multiculturalism, and Buddhism, we need to look at the centrality of religion in diasporic communities and its intersections with race, immigration, ethnicity, culture, and political and economic contexts. In particular, we also need to address how immigrant religious institutions often serve as the primary sources of: preserving ethnic identities, offering social and economic safety nets, and mediating the experience of relocation, resettlement, and acculturation.

The traditional view of the role of religion in the lives of immigrants to the U.S. have stressed assimilation and the melting pot image where cultures of origin and ethnicities have been subsumed under the category of one of three religions in the U.S. – Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish. This view fit the reality of the time prior to the 1960s, when most newcomers were white ethnics of European origin and became thoroughly incorporated into American life within a generation or two. But for those immigrants,

particularly from Asia, who were allowed to enter following the amendment of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, the paradigm of assimilation was not and is not necessarily appropriate, precisely because race is not completely assimilable. For many non-dominant communities, race and religion are inextricably linked. To accurately understand and examine Asian American communities in North America, it is imperative to note that race matters.

I would like to conclude with the assertion that, in theorising globalisation and multiculturalism, we must be willing to acknowledge that the transmission of the Dharma across time and place, and the power and ability to define new forms of Buddhism, cannot rest in the hands of the few with most resources. Rather, we must acknowledge and make an effort to include the diversity of voices and forms of practises that make up the multiple Sanghas internationally so that we can avoid a reductionist and commodified form of Buddhism.

### Notes

- 1 Harvey, David, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1989).
- 2 E. San Juan, Jr., "Interrogating Transmigrancy, Remapping Diaspora: The Globalization of Laboring Filipinos/as", *Discourse* 23:3 (Fall 2001): 52-74.
- 3 Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, "Batalden Applied Ethics Symposium: Globalization – Who Wins and Who Loses?" Augsburg College, March 3, 2006.
- 4 Ibid., p. 2.
- 5 Ibid., pp. 3-4.
- 6 Martha Nussbaum, "The Study of Non-Western Cultures," in *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, ed. Martha Nussbaum (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997).

## 2

# Pioneering Buddhist Women across Cultures

Hema Goonatilake

Buddhist women through the centuries have been challenging patriarchy in different cultures and in different ways. These challenges began with Pajāpatī Gotamī in the sixth century BCE and continue up to the present day. This paper reviews the challenges to patriarchy offered by these pioneering women as models relevant to contemporary times.

### Demonstration to Win Equal Rights in the Monastic Order

Pajāpatī Gotamī, the Buddha's own aunt, was the first Buddhist woman to challenge institutionalised patriarchy. Her request to be admitted to the Buddhist order was declined by the Buddha three times. A determined Pajāpatī Gotamī and her retinue of royal women cut off their hair, donned saffron-coloured robes, and walked nearly a hundred miles to stage the first recorded women's demonstration to win equal rights in the monastic order. When they arrived in Vaiśālī where the Buddha was residing at that time, Ānanda, the Buddha's attendant and disciple, saw Pajāpatī Gotamī with swollen feet, all covered with dust and crying outside the gateway and pleaded with the Buddha to grant the women admission to the order. The Buddha conceded that the spiritual potential of women and men is equal. He agreed to admit Pajāpatī Gotamī, but reportedly declared that, with the entry of nuns, the order would last just 500 years. According to the *Bhikkhunī Khandhaka* of the *Cullavagga*, the Buddha decreed eight important observances (*attha garudhamma*) before Gotamī was given permission to enter the order. The first of these eight special observances is that a *bhikkhunī* ordained even for a hundred years should make salutation to a *bhikkhu* who has just been initiated. In the *Cullavagga* record, Pajāpatī Gotamī alone received higher ordination by accepting those observances. The rest of the royal women were ordained by monks, however, not by the Buddha, and there is no evidence that they agreed to abide by the eight observances.<sup>1</sup> Yet, it cannot be denied that these rules involve the subordination of nuns to monks.

Although Gotamī reportedly accepted the eight special observances imposed on her "like a garland of jasmine flowers," she did not hesitate to

register her defiance. This is well attested by a passage in which, on a later occasion, she requested the Buddha to withdraw the first and most offensive of the eight. In its place, she enjoined him to institute a protocol between nuns and monks of greeting and paying respect according to seniority, similar to the protocol observed among monks. The Buddha is said to have rejected her request, pointing out that the followers of other religious sects were not in the habit of honouring and saluting women. This request by Gotamī is the first recorded institutional protest against male supremacy in the Buddhist order and perhaps the first such protest anywhere.

### **Pioneering Poets**

The admission of women into the monastic order opened up new avenues for women. Women whose lives had been restricted to the roles of wives, mothers, tenders of the household, and caretakers of the sick got the opportunity to serve as teachers and spiritual masters. The *Therī gāthā*, a Pāli text, contains 522 poetic expressions of joy uttered by the *therīs* (elder nuns) who attained liberation after having long been victimised by oppressive husbands and societal expectations for women. The fact that these verses were included in the Theravāda canon demonstrates that the literary contributions of the *therīs* were recognised as outstanding. These poetic expressions of the spiritual experiences of the *therīs* during the Buddha's time are recognised as among the first poetic expressions by women in literary history.<sup>2</sup>

### **The First Woman Ambassador**

Therī Sanghamitta is the first recorded female ambassador in history. In the third century BCE, she was commissioned as an envoy by a head of state – her father, the Indian Emperor Aśoka – to travel to Sri Lanka to meet another head of state, King Devanampiya Tissa.<sup>3</sup> In 306 BCE, Thera Mahinda, Emperor Aśoka's son, arrived in Sri Lanka and delivered his first talk in Anuradhapura to an audience headed by King Devanampiya Tissa. The first to gain the first stage of attainment (*sotāpatti*) after listening to the Buddha's teachings expounded by Thera Mahinda were not monks, but the royal women in the audience. Anulā, the wife of the king's younger brother, and her entourage then informed Thera Mahinda that they wished to enter the monastic order. He suggested that the king send a message to his father, asking him to send his sister to perform the ordination.

Consequently, Emperor Aśoka arranged for his daughter Therī Sanghamitta, a *bhikkhunī*, to sail to Sri Lanka along with 16 other nuns carrying a branch of the *bodhi* tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment. The subsequent ordination of Anulā and her entourage by Sanghamitta and her colleagues marked the beginning of the *bhikkhunī* order in Sri Lanka and heralded a new era for women.

From that time on, Sri Lankan *bhikkhunīs* helped create and shape the religious and cultural landscape of Sri Lanka. Their religious influence continued for centuries, up to the eleventh century, when the *bhikkhunī* order disappeared after an invasion from South India that destroyed all the monasteries on the island.<sup>4</sup> There is evidence to suggest that nuns possessed their own version of the Vinaya and their own distinctive traditions of interpretation.<sup>5</sup> There also existed an unbroken succession of nun teachers beginning from the time of Sanghamitta. This succession of teachers had no links with the line of teachers among the monks.<sup>6</sup>

### Pioneer Feminist Historiographers

It has been argued that the *Dipavamsa* (The Island's Chronicle), the first historical document of Sri Lanka (indeed, for South Asia) was written by *bhikkhunīs* during the fourth century CE.<sup>7</sup> The later chronicle *Mahāvamsa* (The Great Chronicle), written in the sixth century by the monk Mahānāma, though based on the earlier *Dipavamsa*, totally ignores the detailed descriptions of the development and expansion of the *bhikkhunī* order to other parts of the country and the spiritual and intellectual attainments of the nuns.

Another matter of central interest is the variant narratives regarding the Sri Lankan nuns in the two chronicles. The attainment of *sotāpatti* (stream enterer) by Anulā and her attendants, "the first case of the attainment of a stage of sanctification which occurred in Sri Lanka," appears in Chapter 12 of the *Dipavamsa*, but does not appear in the *Mahāvamsa*. The later chronicle gives only a partial, male-only history of the religious and cultural development of the country. The *Dipavamsa* chronicle, a fourth-century "nuns' tale," is thus the earliest example of a recorded "her story" in Sri Lanka, and perhaps anywhere in the world.<sup>8</sup>

### **Historical Journeys by Women**

Similarly, although the event is not mentioned in the *Mahāvamsa*, the *Dipavamsa* describes travels made by nuns to foreign countries to spread the Buddhadharmā.<sup>9</sup> Two nuns, Sivala and Mahāniha, spread Buddhism in Jambudvīpa (India) in the first century CE. A Sanskrit inscription found in Nagārjunakonda, a well-established centre of Mahāyāna learning in South India, also refers to nuns from Tamrapanni (Sri Lanka) who engaged in spreading Buddhism there.<sup>10</sup>

The most significant travels made by Sri Lankan nuns are not mentioned in any of the Sri Lankan records, but only in Chinese sources. According to the *Pi-chiu-ni-chuan* (Biographies of Buddhist of Nuns) compiled by Pao-chang in 520 CE and the biographers of Gunavarman and Sanghavarman, two teams of Sinhalese nuns travelled to Nanjing, China, in the fifth century. The first delegation, headed by Devasara (Tie-suo-luo), arrived in 429 CE and the second in 433 CE. The Sri Lankan *bhikkhūṇī*s conducted a higher ordination at Nanlin Monastery to more than 300 Chinese nuns who, until then, had received ordination only from monks. The travels made by these two teams of Sri Lankan *bhikkhūṇī*s to Nanjing, China, in the fifth century CE perhaps are the longest recorded travel by women anywhere, up to that time.<sup>11</sup>

### **Empress Wu of China**

Empress Wu Zetian (625-705 CE), the only female monarch in Chinese history, is credited for her preeminent contributions to the development of Buddhism during the Tang Dynasty in China. She was portrayed as autocratic and ruthless by some historians and admired by others. She challenged traditional Confucian roles for women, and in gaining power, behaved in specifically male ways. At the age of 14, she became known for her wit, intelligence, and beauty. She was recruited to the court of Emperor Taizong and soon became his favourite concubine. Wu became a nun for awhile after the emperor's death, then returned to the imperial palace and became the favourite concubine and eventually the wife of Emperor Gaozong, son of Emperor Taizong. When the emperor's health failed, through a series of manipulations, she assumed full power over the empire. Because Confucian ideology did not permit a woman to ascend the throne, Wu's youngest son was placed on the throne, while she made decisions in his name.<sup>12</sup>

Wu led an aggressive campaign to challenge Confucian beliefs against women gaining positions of authority. In 690, when her youngest son left the throne, Wu Zetian was declared empress of China. She succeeded in changing the traditional male power structures at court and tried to establish a new dynasty that gave power to women. She declared that the ideal ruler was one who ruled like a mother does over her children. In order to elevate the position of women, she commissioned scholars to write biographies of famous women and also raised the position of women by offering them high political posts. Although she was ruthless in her quest for power, her rule proved to be benign. She found the most competent people to run the government, regardless of their birth, and sought to eliminate nepotism, bribery, and corruption. She revitalised the examination system whereby government officials were selected by merit and initiated the practise of personally interviewing candidates to identify the most talented candidates. She encouraged initiative and rewarded those who offered sound advice. She promoted public works projects to improve irrigation and increase agricultural production, and reduced taxes for farmers.

During her reign, Empress Wu favoured Buddhism over Daoism as the state religion. She moved the court from Xian to the old capital of Loyang and invited China's most gifted architects to build Buddhist temples. She financed the construction of huge monastic centres and many of the finest Buddhist cave sculptures were created during her reign. The 17-metre seated statue of Vairocana Buddha that was carved into the Thousand Buddha Caves at Loyang is said to resemble the empress.

### **The World's First Female Astronomer**

Sondok became the sole ruler of the Korean Buddhist kingdom of Shilla in 632 CE, at the age of 22. She learned about stars from the royal astronomers during her childhood years. At the age of 15, she hoped to discuss astronomy with Lin Fang, the ambassador from China, who was also an astronomer, but he was reluctant, because he considered woman's place to be in the home and not in the scientific world. He told Sondok, "Surely you cannot imagine that I would converse on such a serious subject with a young lady? It would be unnatural and wholly against the laws of propriety."<sup>13</sup>

Lin Fang convinced Sondok's father, the king, to introduce a new official calendar, claiming that the Chinese Sui calendar was superior to the Korean one. When a solar eclipse was about to occur, Sondok calculated



the time that it would occur, thereby proving that the calculations according to the Chinese calendar were wrong. This angered the Chinese ambassador, who lashed out at Sondok, saying, "Astronomy is not for women. Go do something female like look after silkworms." The king consequently forbade Sondok to study the moon and stars. At the age of 15, in a message she placed in her grandmother's ancestral jar, Sondok wrote, "Will we ever know the truth about the stars? I am too young to venture a theory about our universe. I only know that I want to understand more deeply. I want to know all I can know. Why should it be forbidden?"<sup>14</sup>

One of Sondok's special contributions to science was the construction of Chonsongdae Observatory. For many years, she begged her father to build this observatory, so that she could view the stars more closely. Chonsongdae Observatory was built according to her design, using 365 stones, one for each day of the year. The tower was built on a platform of twelve tiles, one for each of the twelve months, and had 27 levels, representing that the fact that Sondok was the 27<sup>th</sup> ruler of the Shilla Dynasty. Chonsongdae Observatory is 29 feet high and is still standing today, the oldest remaining astronomical observatory in East Asia.

Sondok was the king's eldest daughter and ascended the throne in 632, after the king died. Queen Sondok was the first woman to become the queen of a Korean kingdom. She became the most famous queen of a Korean state and revitalised Buddhism during her 14-year reign. Among the Buddhist temples and cave sculptures she built was Hwangnyong Pagoda, one of the other famous constructions of Korea. The nine tiers of the *pagoda* symbolised Shilla's ambition to conquer nine other East Asian nations and to protect the kingdom from foreign invasions. Unfortunately, this famous construction was destroyed during the Mongol invasion in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Today, she is perhaps best known for the cultural impact of her reign.

Sondok was also skilled in foreign relations and defence strategies. Her reign was a violent one, marked by rebellions and conflicts in the neighbouring kingdoms of Paekche and Koguryo. King Mu of Paekche had plans to destroy Shilla and the kingdom of Koguryo was strong enough to defeat even the forces of the emperor of Tang China. When Koguryo and Paekche allied against Shilla, Sondok sought help from the rulers of the Tang Dynasty and, with them, initiated plans to unify the Korean peninsula under Shilla rule. Sondok also sent many students to China to study, including Korean monks who studied Buddhism in China and returned to promote the study of Buddhism in Korea during her reign. Throughout the kingdom, many women were heads of families, since matrilineal lines of

descent existed alongside patrilineal lines. The status of women was elevated, with women in positions as advisers and regents during this period, and their status remained relatively high until the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when Confucian ideology, which placed women in a subordinate position, became dominant.

### **Women's Contributions to Himalayan History**

In the seventh century, Bhrikuti Devi of Nepal changed the course of Himalayan history by introducing Buddhism to Tibet and constructing the first temples in Tibet and Bhutan. It was the wish of the Tibetan king Srong btsan sgam po to advance his country diplomatically and culturally by marrying princesses from Nepal and China where Buddhist arts and architecture flourished at the time. When the king of Nepal gave his daughter Bhrikuti in marriage to the Tibetan king in the early seventh century, he sent a splendid image of Akśobhya Buddha, a sandalwood image of Tārā, and several other Buddhist images as part of her dowry. The princess travelled to Tibet with a team of sculptors, artists, painters, and Buddhist teachers headed by a monk named Śilamanju. Tibetologists have confirmed that this team strongly influenced the sculpture, painting, and architectural design of the Jokhang Temple and the 999 rooms of the Potala in Lhasa.<sup>15</sup>

In the eleventh century, a Sri Lankan *yoginī* named Chandramalī travelled to Tibet and translated six tantric texts from Sanskrit to Tibetan, works that have been incorporated in the Tibetan Tripitaka (*bKa' 'gyur*).<sup>16</sup> Chandramalī's contribution to the development of the Tibetan *Tripitaka* appears to be greater than those of Ananda Sri and Pruthvibandhu, two Sri Lanka monks whose translations are also included in the Tibetan Tripitaka.<sup>17</sup>

### **Pioneering Women of Southeast Asia**

During the seventh century, a daring Mon woman named Cāmadevī left her husband behind in the Mon principality of Lavapura and made the arduous journey to rule Haripunjaya and Kelang (today's Lamphun and Lampang in Thailand), two Mon principalities that predate the Tai kingdom of Chiang Mai. Because she was pregnant at the time, Cāmadevī's decision to travel alone, rather than under the protection of her husband, represented a defiance of social norms and an example of bold political leadership. One of the most significant events in the founding of

Haripunjaya was Cāmadevī's enshrining of relics at the *ceti* of Wat Phradhatu. This event is recorded in the *Cāmadevī vamsa* (The History of the Lineage of Cāmadevī) by Bodhirāṃsa, a monk who made efforts to restore Wat Phradhatu in Haripunjaya during the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>18</sup>

In the twelfth century, Indradevī, wife of King Jayavarman VII of Cambodia, guided her husband to rule the first empire in Southeast Asia guided by Buddhist principles. She is the first documented woman scholar and poet of Southeast Asia. The 102 poems Indradevī composed in Sanskrit are included among women's most significant contributions to world literature. In Cambodia today, she is revered as the symbol of scholarship.<sup>19</sup>

In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, a woman named Keo is credited with introducing Buddhism to Laos. Keo, the daughter of the Cambodian king Jayavarman Paramesvara, was given in marriage to Fa Ngum, the first ruler of the Lao kingdom. When Queen Keo found that the people of the Lao kingdom made human sacrifices, she requested her father to take steps to introduce Buddhism to Laos. Her father therefore sent three of his Sri Lankan monk advisors to Laos from Cambodia, along with a precious Buddha image called Praban that had been given to him by a Sri Lankan king. The Theravāda form of Buddhism flourished in Laos from that time on. The ancient capital of Luang Prabang is named after the Praban Buddha image, which remains the palladium of Laos.<sup>20</sup>

### **Buddhist Women's Contemporary Heritage**

Buddhist women's rich history continues to unfold today through Buddhist women's activism. One objective of this activism has been an effort to restore ordination for nuns in countries where it was not previously available. In Nepal, for example, Theravāda Buddhism was reintroduced by the Burmese monk U Chandra Mani Mahāthera in 1931. Immediately thereafter, three nuns named Ratnapālī, Dhammapālī, and Saṅghapālī organised an ordination for women to receive ten precepts. More recently, Ven. Dhammavati became the first *bhikkhunī* in Nepal in recent times by receiving full ordination in Los Angeles in 1998. Since then, she has been at the forefront of Buddhist social service and, as president of the Nepal Bhikkhunī Saṅgha, has especially worked for the welfare of women.

Education has been a cornerstone of efforts to benefit Buddhist women. In the late 1930s, three *bhikkhunī*s named Thich Nu Dieu Khong, Thich Nu The Quan, and Thich Nu Nhu Thanh began to promote the education of nuns in Vietnam. In Taiwan, the artist and scholar Bhikkhunī Shig Hiuwan

founded the Institute of Sino-Indian Buddhist Studies in the 1970s and Huaan University in the 1980s. Bhikkhunī Cheng-yen (Zhengyen), founder of Tzu Chi (Ciji) Foundation, Taiwan's largest charity organisation, has also promoted education in Taiwan by establishing Tzu Chi Medical College.

The nuns of Tibet have also pursued education in their struggle to keep their Buddhist traditions alive in exile in India. The first community to be established was Mahāyāna Buddhist Nunnery, founded in Dalhousie in 1962 to accommodate nuns escaping from the Chinese occupation of Tibet. Other nuns' communities, including Ganden Choeling and Jamyang Chöling in Dharamsala, Jangchub Choeling in Mundgod, and Kopan Monastery in Nepal, have gradually been established and now offer Buddhist education programmes for nuns.

### **Sakyadhita's Contribution to the Revival of the Bhikkhunī Order**

Bhikkhunī Karma Lekshe Tsomo, together with Ayya Khema, initiated the Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women in 1987. This organisation was the impetus for the restoration of the Theravāda *bhikkhunī* order after nearly a thousand years. In 1996, Bhikkhunī Kusuma from Sri Lanka blazed the trail by receiving full ordination in Sarnath, India, along with nine other Sri Lankan nuns. *Bhikkhunī* ordinations have been conducted in Sri Lanka since 1998 and ongoing training programmes are being offered to ensure the continuity of the *bhikkhunī* lineage there. Bhikkhunī Dhammananda from Thailand made history by receiving *bhikkhunī* ordination in Sri Lanka and is working to institute the *bhikkhunī* order in Thailand's conservative Theravāda tradition. Other pioneering Buddhist women have contributed greatly to the spread of Buddhism in Western countries, including Bhikkhunī's Tenzin Palmo, Karuna Dharma, Pema Chödrön, and Jampa Tsedroen, to name just a few.

These pioneering Buddhist women - then and now - have challenged the religious and social establishment by demonstrating their intellectual courage and integrity, each within her own cultural context. These women have become models by living Buddhism in their day-to-day lives and responding to the prevailing socio-cultural and political realities around them. Their lives and achievements provide a diversity of models to inspire Buddhist women to act in the world in ways that extend beyond the purely spiritual. By stepping beyond conventional roles to embody Buddhist values, they become exemplars for contemporary society.

## Notes

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### 3

## **Korean Buddhist Women's Reflections on the 8<sup>th</sup> Sakyadhita Conference**

*Bongak Sunim*

The 8<sup>th</sup> Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women in 2004 was a catalyst for significant changes for Buddhist women in Korea. The National Bhikṣuṇī Assembly of the Korean Buddhist Jogye Order (representing more than 80 percent of Korean Buddhists) hosted the event at Joongang Sangha University in Seoul. This large event required almost two years of preparation and major funding from both government and private sources. The National Bhikṣuṇī Assembly of the Korean Buddhist Jogye Order took the leadership in the planning and execution of the conference and, with the dedication and sacrifices of many staff members and volunteers, achieved a resounding success. The Korean Buddhist community had never organised such a large international gathering before, so it was difficult to predict the attendance. Ultimately, 1,800 participants from home and abroad packed the conference venue for the opening ceremony on June 27. The fine weather that Sunday was a propitious beginning. As if by the blessings of the Buddha, the monsoon rains mysteriously stopped and a typhoon headed our way changed its path just before the conference began. Pleasant and comfortable weather continued throughout the conference period.

Crowning the great success of the conference was a three-day temple pilgrimage tour – an especially good opportunity for participants to get a first-hand experience of Korean Buddhist education and practise. On the pilgrimage to Haeinsa, Bulguksa, Seoknamsa, Unmunsa, and Bongnyungsa, international participants gained direct knowledge of authentic Korean Buddhist culture and history that they could share with others. Korean participants felt very proud of the Korean Buddhist traditions they have worked so hard to preserve. Wherever I went after the conference, I heard people saying, “As a Buddhist, I was really happy and proud that I was able to be part of Sakyadhita.”

Historically, Korean Buddhism suffered persecution for more than 500 years under the Chosun Dynasty (1392-1910). Buddhist women, in particular, experienced great difficulties. At the time, Buddhist women were seriously marginalised in society and *bhikṣuṇīs* (fully ordained Buddhist nuns) were treated as pariahs. Following this period of decline,

Korean Buddhism was then faced with state-promoted Japanese Buddhism under the Japanese occupation (1910-1945), the Korean War in 1950, and internal conflicts over the marriage of clergy. From 1947 on, there was an effort to recover renunciant Buddhism from the influences of shamanism and secularised Korean Buddhism and to recover an authentic tradition of Seon Buddhist monastic culture. This Bongam Temple Movement, named after the Soen (Zen) temple where it occurred, was followed by a reform movement from within Buddhism to safeguard celibate monasticism. In 1954, the Korean Saṅgha collectively staged a campaign to recover the Buddha's fundamental spirit of renunciation. Concurrently with Korean society in general, the Korean Buddhist world underwent a transition toward modernisation. During the 1960s, many different, loosely organised Buddhist orders became integrated into a more unified whole.

In line with these reforms within the Bhikṣu Saṅgha, the winds of change also began to arise within the Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha. Buddhist women, both *bhikṣuṇīs* and laywomen, supported the Bhikṣu Saṅgha clean-up campaign and showed unusual devotion in bringing to life the spirit of renunciation. Through all this, the Korean Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha developed gradually alongside the Bhikṣu Saṅgha. After the Korean war, the Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha was finally able to establish Buddhist institutes and seminaries for education and practise, thanks to the efforts of *bhikṣuṇī* elders.

In 1994, the Buddhist Saṅgha, already suffering from a series of ideological conflicts and adaptations occasioned by the reforms, confronted the need for further reforms in monastic education and practise. These transitions and adjustments have contributed to the evolution of Korean Buddhism. All the challenges the tradition has faced throughout history have given rise to the stability evident in contemporary Korean Buddhism.

Today, Korean *bhikṣuṇīs* receive opportunities for education and practise that are equal to those of *bhikṣus*, without discrimination. The 8<sup>th</sup> Sakyadhita Conference reawakened us all to this tradition of equal practise and education within Korean Buddhism and was a good opportunity for Koreans to expand our horizons to learn more about global Buddhism, as well as to present our own priceless Korean Buddhist tradition to Buddhists from around the world. In unison, Korean Buddhists agree that the 8<sup>th</sup> Sakyadhita Conference was a great gift to Korean Buddhism, which has been marred by conflicts and tribulations since the 1994 Buddhist reformation. It did not come as a surprise when the Sakyadhita Conference in 2004 was selected as one of the ten most influential Buddhist news events of the year.



One of the greatest benefits of the 8<sup>th</sup> Sakyadhita in Korea was that participants from many different countries were able to share their various traditions, cultures, and friendship. Sakyadhita has become a forum for Buddhist women throughout the world to strengthen their ties of trust and understanding. As a means to promote friendship and cross-cultural understanding, Korean Buddhists set up exhibitions of temple cuisine, *chado* (the Way of Tea), calligraphy, carving, monastic robes (*kashaya*), and traditional Korean paper crafts. We also organised cultural performances of Buddhist music, including songs in sign language by women from various religions. An elderly *bhikṣuṇī* from a rural area of Korea told me, “I have never experienced so many wonderful sights and foods during my whole life as a *bhikṣuṇī*.” A laywoman told me she felt like she was in heaven for several days. She was so excited and delighted, she expressed her hope that such a conference could be held every year.

Many forward-looking changes have taken place in Korean Buddhism since the 8<sup>th</sup> Sakyadhita Conference. Within the Jogye Order, there are two affiliated organisations that speak for Buddhist women: the Buddhist Women’s Development Institute representing Buddhist laywomen and the National Bhikṣuṇī Assembly representing Buddhist nuns. In 2003, the Buddhist Women’s Development Institute began a programme to select 108 outstanding female Buddhists of the year. This programme recognises exemplary women Buddhists in different professions and segments of society and encourages them to work with a sense of responsibility and pride as Buddhists. The selection of 108 Buddhist women also helps establish a network of women professionals who are deeply committed to the welfare of women in the Buddhist community. The Buddhist Women’s Development Institute also helps Buddhist women develop as leaders by promoting the status of Buddhist women and transforming society’s perception of them. As part of their efforts, the Institute arranges lectures on gender equality, women’s leadership, preparation for marriage, education for women practitioners, women in the *sūtras*, and confronting discrimination inside and outside Buddhist institutions.

The potential of Korean Buddhist women was recognised with the unanimous election of Kim Uijeong as president of the lay Buddhist division of the Korean Buddhist Jogye Order in 2005. This organisation has 20 million members from around the country and this was the first time in the organisation’s 50-year history that a woman has been elected to this post. This election is an indication of the improved status of Buddhist women in Korea. The organisation is now actively involved in realising



gender equality in the home and in society at large, based on the principles of compassion and wisdom.

Meanwhile, the National Bhikṣuṇī Assembly of the Korean Buddhist Jogye Order has launched new activities to help globalise Korean Buddhism. In May 2006, the organisation's president, Bhikṣuṇī Myeong Seong, attended an international Buddhist conference at Mahachulalongkorn University in Thailand on the occasion of Vesak. The National Bhikṣuṇī Assembly wants to help revive the Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha around the world. The Assembly intends to systemise the ordination ceremony and host discussions in preparation for rebuilding the Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha in countries around the world. Senior members of the Assembly visited the president of the Korean Buddhist Jogye Order, Bhikṣu Ji Kwan, before they left for Thailand and requested the Headquarters of the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism to support the Korean Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha in this endeavour. In response, the president pledged the order's support for her efforts. As part of the Vesak festivities, Bhikṣuṇī Myeong Seong delivered congratulatory remarks on behalf of Korean Buddhists. Sunjae *bhikṣuṇīs* who cook and study traditional temple food, organised two photo exhibitions that illustrated the daily lives of *bhikṣuṇīs* at Unmun Temple and Korean temple cuisine, and *bhikṣuṇīs* sang Buddhist hymns at the opening ceremony.

As Buddhist cultural exchanges become increasingly frequent, *bhikṣuṇīs* are playing central roles. For example, the 27<sup>th</sup> Korea-Japan Buddhist Culture Exchange Conference, held at Zenkōji Temple in Nagano Prefecture from May 17 to 19, 2006, brought 40 nuns from both countries together for an official exchange for the first time. Zenkōji, a Japanese temple that is famous for an image of Amitābha crafted in the Korean kingdom of Baekje (18 BCE-660 CE), has been honoured as the site of enlightenment for as many as 300 nuns of the Jōdō (Pure Land) lineage and currently has the largest number of nuns of any temple in Japan. At the conclusion of the conference, when Korean and Japanese nuns exchanged gifts and ideas, Bhikṣuṇī Myeong Seong emphasised the important role that *bhikṣuṇīs* can play in continuing Buddhist cultural dialogue. Takatukasa Seigyoku, the co-abbot of Zenkōji, responded by saying that, although the Jōdō Order in Japan has only 300 nuns, continuous exchanges and cooperation between Korean and Japanese nuns would be of great benefit in the development of nuns in Japan. The 8<sup>th</sup> Sakyadhita Conference encouraged Korean nuns to take a more active role in Buddhist cultural exchanges and was an opportunity for them to

reevaluate their roles and responsibilities in developing Buddhism internationally.

Domestically, the Assembly is now establishing an advisory council of *bhikṣuṇī* elders. The Jogye Order is planning to institute a system to recognise *bhikṣuṇīs* who have practised more than 40 years. Another result of efforts to recognise the Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha was a conference on “The Practise Tradition of Korean Bhikṣuṇīs,” held on June 1, 2006. This conference helped shed light on the lives and practise of *bhikṣuṇīs*, including their valuable contributions to protecting temple grounds, from the Three Kingdoms Period until the present day.

Another indication of increasing gender equity is the number of nuns who hold official positions within the Jogye Order. Bhikṣuṇī Takyun Sunim has been working as president of the Department of Cultural Affairs since 2003 and a *bhikṣuṇī* named Sungjung Sunim was recently appointed as a senior official in the Department for the Protection of Regulations. The Central Council of the Jogye Order has proposed revisions to the Sanjoong General Assembly Regulations and the Regulations for Election of Central Council Members in the Constitution and Ordinances of the Jogye Order to safeguard against gender inequalities.

The purpose of all these efforts is to create a more equitable education and practise environment for *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs* and to realise equality in the management of the Jogye Order. On one hand, these efforts promote unity among *bhikṣuṇīs* and improve their status. On the other hand, these efforts are a great contribution to promoting the status of Buddhist women in Korean society as a whole. These advances are significant not only for Korean Buddhist women, but also for Buddhist women around the world, awakening them to the importance of their activities and helping them garner support from the wider society. I believe all this progress is a result of new understandings prompted by the 8<sup>th</sup> Sakyadhita Conference.

Another great achievement was the pilgrimage of Samsohoe, an association of Buddhist *bhikṣuṇīs*, Catholic sisters, and women from the Won Buddhist traditions who participated in the cultural events of the 8<sup>th</sup> Sakyadhita Conference. The association was established to practise love and compassion in daily life, transcending religious barriers. In February 2006, members of Samsohoe went on a 19-day pilgrimage with the resolve of bringing together Korean female ascetics and touching the hearts of the Korean people. Highlights of the Samshohoe pilgrimage included meetings with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in India and His Holiness Pope Benedict in Rome. In India, H.H. the Dalai Lama encouraged members by saying, “Women are the origin of all lives.” He expressed his appreciation that

female practitioners of Korean religions had united to deepen their understanding of each other and act in harmony together. The pilgrimage was a valuable lesson that destroying the walls between religions is an important mission for our times and a way toward peace. I strongly believe that the 8<sup>th</sup> Sakyadhita Conference inspired this historically significant pilgrimage.

Another significant fruit of the 8<sup>th</sup> Sakyadhita Conference was that all the young *bhikṣuṇī*s at Joongang Sangha University gained insight into the international character of Buddhist women as they prepared for and participated in the conference. They had a rare opportunity to meet Buddhist nuns and laywomen from around the world. Undoubtedly, the Sakyadhita Conference awakened them to what Buddhist women can do in the future.

## **Transforming Differences into Strengths: The Case of Buddhists in Singapore**

*Ai-Girl Tan*

From about the 1940s, there has been continuous discourse on the importance of intercultural education, intercultural studies, and multicultural communities. The essence of multiculturalism is to establish good and respectful values among individuals of various backgrounds for the sake of world peace, harmony, and humanity. Advocates of multiculturalism accept socio-cultural, biological, geographical, religious, spiritual, linguistic, and other differences as positive variations.<sup>1</sup> Adopting a non-discriminatory, inclusionary model, they call for an awareness of the traditions and social practices that diverse cultures use to give meaning and direction for living.<sup>2</sup> The well-being of each individual is fostered within her/his socio-cultural, personal, and historical context. Multiculturalism attempts to bridge differences within and between groups living in the same society<sup>3</sup> by recognising human diversity as a source of societal richness.<sup>4</sup> Members of a pluralistic society are encouraged to recognise their interconnectedness, interdependence, and inclusivity, and to create a safe community where people are able to preserve their rights and dignity and to freely express different viewpoints.<sup>5</sup>

Acquiring multicultural competencies is important for achieving positive individual, professional, communal, and societal outcomes. Multicultural competencies can be acquired only if individuals are aware of the assumptions, values, beliefs, customs, traditions, and biases of their own and other groups. Understanding the worldviews of culturally different individuals is key. Through effective inter-group communication,<sup>6</sup> the art of communications of different groups can be understood in an open manner.<sup>7</sup> At the organisational level, specific guidelines, policies, and vision statements should be outlined to infuse multicultural features and skills into the training curricula,<sup>8</sup> assessment,<sup>9</sup> and intervention programmes.<sup>10</sup> In schools, human diversity should be incorporated into all activities.<sup>11</sup> When individuals are given the opportunities to study multiple cultures, they are likely to develop multiple perspectives in life. The multicultural programmes should help individuals educate themselves and others about ways to integrate broad and conflicting bodies of information, and make sound judgements based on human respect and honesty.

### **Singapore's Multiethnic, Multilingual, and Multireligious Society**

Singapore gained independence from British colonisation on August 9, 1965, and spent a short period of co-existence under the Malaysian constitution. Singapore has a strategic position in Southeast Asia and a special historical connection with Malaysia. As such, Singapore retains Malay as the national language, identifies English as the working language, and affirms all ethnic languages as compulsory mother tongues to be learned in schools. Singapore is an island country of 699 square kilometres situated above the equator, at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula, strategically located along major air and shipping routes between China, Japan, Australia, and the Indian subcontinent.

Today, Singapore's multiethnic population of 4.24 million includes Chinese (76.2 percent), Malays (13.8 percent), Indians (8.3 percent), and others (1.7 percent).<sup>12</sup> The population is young (median age: 35.7 years), with 20.1 percent between 0 and 14 years old, 71.9 percent between 15 and 64 years old, and 8 percent above 65 years old. Since independence in 1965, Singapore has attained a high standard of living, with sustained social stability, economic growth, education, and health care services. The total dependency ratio per one hundred residents in Singapore is 39.1, much lower than in neighbouring countries (e.g., Malaysia and New Zealand, around 50), but compatible with those in Australia, Japan, and Korea (between 30 and 40). Literacy in Singapore is high (94.6 percent) for those who are 15 years old and above. The mean years of schooling in Singapore are 8.8. The unemployment rate (seasonally adjusted) is relatively healthy (4.3 percent) and the annual inflation rate is rather low (1.7 percent). Nearly all residents (93 percent) own their residences. Out of one thousand persons, there are 112 private car owners and 911 mobile phone subscribers. Various ethnic groups contribute to Singapore's linguistic, religious, and cultural diversity. Because English is not a native language for any of the major ethnic groups, it is regarded as a "neutral" language that can serve inter-ethnic communication "best."

Managing diversity is an important national agenda in Singapore. Three guidelines were identified to treat human diversity as sources of creativity: promoting mutual understanding of each other's beliefs, customs and habits; promoting mutual accommodation by tolerating each other's customs; and promoting mutual learning.<sup>13</sup> Constitutionally, every ethnic or community group is permitted to preserve its heritage and develop its own character within the national framework. Hindu temples stand alongside Buddhist temples and Muslim mosques; the Singaporean festival calendar includes Shivaratri, the Buddha's birthday, Id-al-Fitr, and

Christmas. Every religious group is allowed to enjoy freedom of worship, with a condition that the members of each group respect the freedom of worship of other religious groups.

### **Framework and Strategies**

I regard transforming differences into strengths as a creative activity. In this creative activity, a person with substantial support from his/her socio-cultural environment possesses opportunities to transform his/her different competencies into strengths and hence to assume new roles and responsibilities. The person, social institutions, and culture are three open systems.<sup>14</sup> Individuals, being open systems, interact with social institutions and culture to develop positive minds, behaviours, and perceptions, and to communicate their views wisely to others. Good communication and leadership are two essential components of competency.<sup>15</sup> Other components of competency include general intelligence, intrinsic motivation, domain-specific skills and expertise, creative skills and expertise, and personal characteristics such as perseverance, love, openness, kindness, conscience, and humour.<sup>16</sup> Culture preserves variations of positive values, behaviours, cognitions, feelings, and emotions. Social institutions identify desirable and sustainable variations to be transmitted to individuals by various means.

I propose a framework for transforming differences into strengths in multicultural communities. I outline principles for transforming differences and suggest strategies to cultivate positive perceptions of difference. I also delineate roles and responsibilities for Buddhist women to facilitate this transformative process.

The following are general guiding principles for transforming differences in multicultural communities:

Acknowledging differences (biological, psychological, socio-ecological and cultural) as part of life.

Taking group similarities (across and within) as resources to generate a dynamic flow of thoughts and behaviour.

Managing differences (for example, of belief, custom, language, and values) by identifying one common interest and taking this as a unifying force.

Working with diversity by introducing “flat” or “horizontal” structures of responsibility.

Creating open, safe, and trustful environments to elicit similar or different voices, opinions, comments, and feedback.

Constructing opportunities to facilitate networking among ordained and lay Buddhists, such as regular small group meetings, and residential support groups.

Accepting differences in abilities within and across ethnic groups, and using multiple criteria to identify talents and gifts of each individual.

Articulating different styles of learning, thinking, and coping, and taking styles as preferences, not as abilities.

Fostering awareness of insignificant differences between gender groups (for example, women and men have both limitations and strengths).

Acknowledging every person’s potential to be excellent in one or more domains; collectively, as a community, identifying the excellent self and building a pool of multi-excellent talents.

Participating wholeheartedly in all religious activities, respecting one’s own and others’ cultural practices, religious ceremonies, and linguistic usages.

Using multiple strategies to work with differences positively (for example, like a jigsaw, every person’s contribution is part of the whole contribution); problem-based learning to elicit self-directed and collaborative learning opportunities; team teaching to organise two or more experts for the same theme of discussion; peer tutoring to help the less fortunate, and so on.

### **Strategies for Cultivating Positive Perceptions of Differences**

Cultivating positive perceptions of differences is a prerequisite for increasing our repertoire of behaviour, emotion, and cognition for total well-being. In the broaden-and-build model, it has been shown that positive emotions broaden the person’s attention and behavioural repertoire, and thereby build social, intellectual, and physical resources to buffer stress.<sup>17</sup> People with positive affects likely use positive appraisal and problem-

focused coping.<sup>18</sup> Below are some suggested strategies for cultivating positive perceptions of differences and cultivating strengths.

The first strategy is to articulate similarities between gender groups. Searching for similarities can be an effective strategy to cultivate positive perceptions of differences. For example, the gender-similarities hypothesis suggests that there are more similarities between female and male persons than the relatively insignificant differences between them.<sup>19</sup> This strategy to articulate similarities between gender groups is important for Buddhist women, especially those who still hold misconceptions about male advantages in attaining the highest level of self-cultivation.

About 2500 years ago, Prince Siddhārtha Gautama taught the framework for liberation from suffering by being with suffering and being able to transform it into happiness. His philosophy and practicality were reformative, revolutionary, creative, innovative, and humane. He saw strengths in every person, with the potential to achieve the highest level of spiritual attainment. He regarded highly the abilities of both men and women. The practical interrelatedness and inclusivity among those living in communities following the teachings of the Buddha are based on non-violent and peaceful values such as love, compassion, and wisdom. The inauguration of the order of nuns was evidence of these values.<sup>20</sup>

The second strategy is to emphasise openness, self-discipline, and balance. Being open is indispensable for constructive experiences. The person who is open to all experiences is aware of his/her feelings, attitudes, and priorities, and becomes more realistic in dealing with new people, situations, and problems. Hence, the person lives fully, is more trusting and less fearful of emotional reactions, and becomes more comfortable in society. Self-discipline is essential to this process: for cultivating positive conduct, training in a positive mindset, and making compassionate contributions to others. One can alleviate unavoidable suffering by constructing meaning in life through love, humour, and conscience.<sup>21</sup> Balance is essential for moderating extremes of thought, emotion, and action. Balance is more likely to be achieved when people are fully open to their own and others' experiences, and able to maintain a flow of constructive, creative interactions.

The third strategy is to develop a repertoire of balanced and focused strengths through good practices. Buddhist meditation, for instance, is a unique way to develop calm and cultivate wisdom, which facilitates total wellness in a comprehensive health care context.<sup>22</sup> With the ultimate aim to attain *nibbāna*, meditators can, along the journey of their practise, maintain a satisfactory level of health care awareness. Meditation as a



relaxation technique is recommended for occupational stress management, coping with depression, and improving cognitive performances, such as metacognition,<sup>23</sup> self-reflection, and insight.

The fourth strategy is to cultivate profound happiness. The ultimate aim of transforming differences into strengths is to attain profound happiness or total well-being, conceptualised as liberation from suffering. The person is determined, self-regulated, and self-disciplined. The individual is the agent of his/her own self-transformation by willing to eliminate the suffering that results from craving (*taṇhā*) and by developing penetrative wisdom. S/he is ready to transform negative states of mind to positive ones.<sup>24</sup>

Attaining happiness involves control, mental development, and liberation of the body, speech, and mind. A moderate lifestyle, free of over-indulgence and scarcity, is a prerequisite for cultivating good conduct and a healthy mind. Living a life of moderation, a person can investigate the degree to which happiness facilitates or impairs creativity and cognitive functioning.<sup>25</sup> The practise acknowledges the reality of change (*anicca*), pain (*dukkha*), no enduring self (*anatta*), actions and consequences (*kamma*), and the path towards liberation (*nibbāna*). Happiness highlights self-realisation, or the degree to which a person is fully functioning.<sup>26</sup> Meditation is an effective technique for attaining profound happiness. In meditation, a person trains his/her mind to be familiar with positive mental states and wholesome qualities such as compassion, generosity, and wisdom.

### **The Case of Buddhists in Singapore: Good Practices**

Buddhist devotees make up about 18 percent of the total Singapore population. In the past two decades, the number of Buddhists has increased (e.g., among Chinese from 39.4 percent in 1990 to 53.6 percent in 2000).<sup>27</sup> Buddhist communities in Singapore are multilingual, multiethnic, and multitrade (e.g., Mahāyāna and Theravāda).

Singaporean society expects all religious organisations to take part in inter-religious activities. In providing community-based support, Buddhist organisations co-operate with other spiritual, non-profit, and welfare organisations. Dialogue among different religious groups helps establish a common platform for understanding and social well-being.

In recent years, reforms have been made in Buddhist education for Saṅgha and laity in academically inclined Buddhist communities. Issues raised in the reforms include: increasing professionalism among Saṅgha

members; identifying effective and creative pedagogies from the Buddhist scriptures; incorporation of thinking, learning, and classroom management strategies from other disciplines; establishing socially and culturally relevant Dharma studies curricula; and establishing support groups for parents with children with behavioural issues. Workshops and evening classes on teacher education have been organised on an ad hoc basis and an intensive search for counselling professionals is underway. Retreats, seminars, talks, and conferences are organised to raise public awareness of the benefits of Buddhist teachings and practices.

Several English-speaking Tibetan and Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhist groups provide end-of-life care and in-patient care services at hospices and palliative wards. Lama Zopa Rinpoche has visited Amitabha Buddhist Centre several times to guide new hospice volunteers. Bright Vision Hospice was the first community hospital led by a Buddhist nun to provide end-of-life care in Singapore. Bright Vision Hospice and Metta Home Care are staffed by devotees inclined to Chinese Mahāyāna practices. The Buddhist Fellowship, San You Counselling Centre, and Singapore Buddhist Federation hope to establish a network of spiritual support groups for end-of-life care.

Singapore aspires to be an international Buddhist education hub. The establishment of the Brahm Institute, a non-profit education institute, is encouraging. The multilingual competencies of Singaporeans can be useful for translating Buddhist texts.

### **New Facets of Buddhism**

The success of Singapore lies in its pragmatic, dynamic, and pluralistic approach. For nearly one century, Singapore Buddhist communities have benefited from the excellent work of renowned masters such as Shing Yun, Sheng Yen, and Yin Shun, and numerous Buddhist educational institutions in East Asia and Southeast Asia. In recent years, the establishment of English-speaking groups from outside Asia, by such teachers as Ajahn Brahm, Sangye Khadro, and Tenzin Palmo, has provided inspiration for Buddhist practise and world peace. These new movements are generating interest in Buddhism as a way of life among young, educated, English-speaking Buddhists in Singapore. Teachers, mental health care professionals, and others are integrating Buddhist ethics<sup>28</sup> and meditation practices into their work.

Buddhists today have the opportunity to be educated at mainstream institutions of higher education and also community-based Buddhist institutions. Some women in Singapore have become nuns or committed

themselves to working full-time in Buddhist monasteries after obtaining Bachelor's degrees in various fields. Some of these women have assumed lay leadership roles in Buddhist organisations. In this way, Buddhism in Singapore serves as a platform for reinventing culture.<sup>29</sup>

In a global society connected by information technology, Buddhist women in Singapore are exposed to a variety of Buddhist traditions. Buddhism in this new environment emerges in multiple facets: as a personal practise, a socially engaged activity, and a knowledge base for new techniques and codes of ethics in mental health. These new opportunities challenge the Buddhist community to establish structures to facilitate change toward the goal of total well-being and liberation.

The first responsibility for Buddhist women in Singapore is to convince themselves and others that they have ample opportunities to develop competencies and to share and teach Buddhism. Buddhist women need to develop positive perceptions of their own potential and to construct stimulating environments for learning and practising Buddhism. In a highly intellectual and relatively gender-equal society, Buddhist women need to feel empowered to adopt teaching roles in society.

The second responsibility of Buddhist women is to adopt leadership roles. Building confidence, Buddhist women can become role models for others, especially women. Living in a relatively affluent society, Buddhist women in Singapore should be encouraged to become researchers and advocates of positive change, not only within their local Buddhist communities, but also in the international Buddhist community and human society as a whole.

Buddhist education in Singapore currently focuses on basic and intermediate Buddhist teachings. Buddhist organisations need to combine their energies, build sophisticated infrastructures, and generate high quality programmes for Buddhist education, research, as well as innovative, meaningful community programmes. Buddhist women in Singapore should be encouraged to share their competence, not only in community projects, but also in scholarly research, policymaking, and national and international conferences.

Living in fast-paced Singaporean society, many Buddhist women are professionally trained. Efforts are needed to organise them socially and spiritually. Hence, the third responsibility of Buddhist women is to establish networks of care to support each others' spiritual growth, Dharma study, and meditation through seminars, regular meetings, conferences, and publications. As a form of community service, professional Buddhist women should be encouraged to use their expertise to assist less advantaged women.

The fourth responsibility of Buddhist women is to lend their services, skills, and expertise to improve community education, health care, and socio-economic structures. Singaporean Buddhist women can use their language competencies to assist in translation, interpretation, and sharing of Dharma practices in the international community. They must be proactive in initiating dialogue and sharing information about sensitive issues, such as the head scarf issue and the adoption of girls in Buddhist temples.

In general, the challenge is to transform differences into strengths in the global multicultural community. Singapore's Buddhist community is a case study in how certain principles and strategies can be used to transform differences into strengths. The challenge for everyone, especially Buddhist women, is to reflect on our roles and responsibilities to create peaceful multicultural communities for the good of humanity.

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## 5

# **Women's Spirituality, Sensuality, and Sources of Sustenance: A Cross-Cultural Psychological Exploration**

*Julie Thomas*

Long ago, in an age where there was nothing else, some monks, impressed by the offerings and devotions of Princess Moon of Wisdom (Tārā), said to her:

“If you pray that your deeds accord with the teachings,  
Then indeed on that account you will change your form to that of a man,  
As is befitting.”

Her reply to these monks after much discourse was:  
“In this life there is no such distinction as ‘male’ and ‘female,’  
Neither of ‘self-identity,’ a ‘person’ nor any perception (of such),  
And therefore attachment to ideas of ‘male’ and ‘female’ is  
quite worthless.  
Weak-minded worldlings are always deluded by this.”<sup>1</sup>

As is evident from this interchange, historically in male-dominated cultures women have struggled with the ways in which they have been viewed, portrayed, and treated. This, in turn, has had a continuing impact on how women view themselves and their own potential, and the manner in which they treat other women. I will approach this issue by examining four stereotypes of women: woman as virgin, woman as wife and consort, woman as mother and the great mother, and, finally, women as gaining insight and inspiration from *yoginīs* past and present.

### **Woman as Virgin**

A chaste woman or a virgin is honoured and even becomes an object of adoration, for her purity and her sexual innocence, for example, the Virgin Mary. Yet, at the same time, even undercover, such as in the habit of a nun, her fully blossomed body becomes a source of trepidation and anxiety to those around her. Her sensuality and attractiveness are often viewed with suspicion. Or, she may be viewed as an object of lust and a

commodity that can be used or abused to sell almost anything. Bollywood, Hollywood, and popular culture abound with such images.

At the same time, women are also considered weak and inferior. This is evident in religious texts, where women are depicted as impure, subordinate, as unnecessary distractions, objects of revulsion, or obstacles to men's liberation. For example:

Furthermore, these unclean (female bodies)  
Are not found without paying a price.  
In order to obtain them, I exhaust myself  
And (in future) will be injured in the hells.<sup>2</sup>  
Women are ever the root of ruin, and of loss of substance; when  
men are to be controlled by women how can they gain happiness?  
... A woman is the destruction of destructions in this world and the  
next; hence one must ever avoid women if he desires happiness for  
himself.<sup>3</sup>

During his teachings on these texts in recent years, H.H. the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama has pointed out that these statements need to be read in context, in view of the time period in which they were made and the audience of monks. Regardless, some of these negative attitudes toward women still persist today.

In order to combat this attitude of suspicion regarding their physical attractiveness, women spiritual seekers over the centuries have resorted to renouncing their beauty in various ways. The classic story of Karaikkal Ammaiyar, the Shiva *bhakti* woman saint (a bronze statue dates her to the Chola period, circa 1050) illustrates this. Recognising that a young and beautiful woman is a contested social entity, she sought to renounce her body and transformed it into the socially undesirable form of a ghoul. Further, she sought to witness the Lord's dance of destruction at the cremation ground (popularly viewed as an inauspicious arena) and to subsequently live there:

She has shriveled breasts  
And bulging veins,  
In place of white teeth empty cavities gape.  
With ruddy hair on her belly,  
A pair of fangs, knobby ankles and long shins  
The demon-woman wails at the desolate cremation ground  
Where our lord,  
whose hanging matted hair  
blows in all eight directions,

Dances among the flames and  
refreshes his limbs.<sup>4</sup>

The other classic story is that of the Japanese nun Eshun (1362-ca.1430).<sup>5</sup> Eshun was a beautiful woman who never married, refusing to even consider it. When she was past the age of thirty, she approached her older brother Ryoan Emyo, a well-known monk who founded the temple of Saijoji, and asked him to ordain her. He refused saying, "If I ordain you or other women, the monks would be corrupted by your presence." He added that this life was only meant for the "*daijobu*" ones, that is, those who are heroic, noble, grand, and, of course, manly! In response, Eshun went home and cut off her hair. She then picked up a hot poker from the kitchen fire and scarred her face in several places. She put on plain clothes and returned to the monastery to see her brother who, upon seeing her this way, relented and allowed her to practise there. She continued to face much harassment from the monks, however, despite her disfigurement, until she finally immolated herself on a pyre.

Both these incidents ironically reveal the difficulty men have in controlling feelings of lust and attachment and taking responsibility for them. Yet in patriarchal cultures, the onus is always on women to "prove" their purity, spiritual resolve, and non-attachment to the body. The onus is never on men to understand and deal appropriately with their male sexuality. Men's failure to accept responsibility for their sexuality leads to women's accounts of sexual abuse that have historically been ignored, ridiculed, or worse. The woman herself becomes a target of suspicion, as in Sigmund Freud's famous (or infamous) seduction theory. Freud's clients consisted primarily of Victorian women who disclosed to him their accounts of sexual abuse. Freud initially believed these women and postulated that the origin of their hysteria lay in their sexual abuse as children, confident that the father was responsible. Freud later retracted this theory, however. He was still persuaded that seduction played a significant role in the etiology of hysteria, but instead of acknowledging the impact of sexual abuse on these women's emotional and mental states, he postulated that the women's communications were coded messages – distorted, censored, and meaningfully disguised. In short, he reformulated his theory to say that the women had, in essence, fantasised their accounts of abuse; this, in turn, exacerbated their "neurosis" or "hysteria."<sup>6</sup> This tendency to blame the victim for her abuse is something that has persisted in societies across the world, perpetuated by both men and women.



### **Woman as Wife and Consort**

As a consort and a wife, a woman may gain a measure of respectability as being the “better half” or as a necessity to raise the *kundalini* energies to attain divine bliss. Yet, her purity, honour, and fidelity are still questioned. The story of Sita and Draupadi as depicted in the Ramayana and Mahabharata epics, respectively, illustrates this.

In Indian culture, Sita is considered to be the epitome of chastity, fidelity, and purity. She is abducted by the evil demon Ravana and subsequently rescued by her husband Rama, with the help of Hanuman, the monkey god, and Lakshman, Rama's brother. The fact that Sita had lived in another man's palace, however, causes some to doubt her chastity. She is obliged to undergo a test by fire. She sits in a fire, but emerges unharmed and is therefore absolved of all charges. In the original version of the Ramayana, however, after Rama and Sita return to Kosala capital of Ayodhya, rumours that Sita committed adultery while a captive of Ravana continue to spread and people therefore begin to disrespect her. As a result, Rama, who has become king, decides to banish Sita, who is now pregnant, from his kingdom. While wandering in the forest, she meets a sage named Valmiki, who later becomes the author of the Ramayana. In Valmiki's *ashram*, Sita gives birth to the twin sons of Rama, named Lav and Kush. These two children learn from Valmiki to sing the Ramayana as a poem and then go everywhere telling people Rama's story. When they arrive at Rama's court and tell him the story, Rama recognises his sons and brings back his wife Sita. Sita decides to prove her loyalty to Rama by asking Mother Earth to swallow her if she was loyal to Rama. Mother Earth testifies to her loyalty by opening up to swallow her and Sita disappears into earth. Rama subsequently jumps into the river and ends his life, followed by many others.

The other classic story is that of Draupadi, an extremely beautiful, intelligent, and virtuous woman whose body smells like a freshly blooming lotus. There are few women in Hindu mythology who are aggressive and speak their mind in a world of men. Draupadi is one of them. She is considered by many to be the first feminist in Indian mythology. She is married to five Pandavas and given away at a dice game by the oldest, Yudhisthira, without being consulted. She is then dragged forcibly into court by her long black hair. Raging with anger, Draupadi appeals to the assembly to raise their voices against such gross injustice, but no one says a single word. The Pandavas also sit in silence, with their heads downcast. Draupadi asks, “What right did Yudhisthira have to put me at stake while gambling?” Again, no one speaks. Duryodhana, one of the Kuru brothers,

becomes very angry at Draupadi. He orders his younger brother Dussashan to forcibly remove Draupadi's clothes in the midst of the assembly. Even then, no one protests. Out of desperation, Draupadi appeals to Krishna. Immediately Draupadi's *sari* begins increasing in length. Dussashan becomes tired of pulling at her *sari*, which never comes to an end. At last, completely exhausted, he falls down unconscious. This story demonstrates that, when all else fails, it is a woman's faith that sustains her, not her husband, even if she has five of them!

Religious texts frequently include unfavourable portrayals of wives. In fact, the ordinary word for "woman" or "wife" in Tibetan is *kye men* (*skyes dman*), which means "low born." The *Ugradatta-pariprccha* states: "... Three other thoughts are these: that a wife must be regarded as an obstacle to virtue, to meditation and to wisdom. And yet three more: she is a thief, a murderer or a guardian of hell."<sup>7</sup>

Women's emotional nature, "instability," and wrath are also feared. The "dark feminine" is seen as a destructive force that could unleash havoc and confusion. For a woman to gain or be given power is very threatening to traditional patriarchal social systems. This is evident in traditional relationships, marriages, and institutions around the world, including in the United States, where the possibility of electing a woman to the highest post of government is only a recent phenomenon. Historically, therefore, women have been seen as needing to be controlled and subjugated to the more rational, logical steadfastness of the male. The descent of the Ganges as needing to be modulated by Shiva is a good illustration of this point. Ganga was a goddess residing in heaven, but was brought down to earth in the form of a river to provide salvation to the ancestors of King Bhagirath. It is said that not only did Ganga save King Bhagirath's ancestors, but she also provided a means of purification for the entire population of human beings on earth. Yet, when Ganga incarnated on the Earth, Shiva was requested to capture her in his hair to modulate her power and to allay fears that she would be so powerful as to flood the whole Earth.

Ironically, however, when evil forces need to be controlled, it is often a woman who is called upon, such as Kali, the fierce form of Durga, or female protectors like Palden Lhamo, who is considered to be the wrathful form of Saraswatī, the goddess of learning, eloquent speech, and music. In such cases, it is understood that a woman can have both a peaceful and a wrathful side, and the latter manifests only to subdue negativity and evil forces. These protectors are often called upon, by both men and women, to achieve peace and harmony.

### **Woman as Mother and Great Mother**

It is as a mother, however, that a woman often (re-)gains the status of veneration. Her ability to “give birth to” accords her a unique status. She is now viewed as caring, compassionate, and willing to sacrifice her own needs for the well being of others. Her sexuality at this point can now be overlooked and even forgiven!

The Fifth Dalai Lama's poem to his mother is a beautiful rendition of the qualities of a mother and his great love for his own mother:

O holy and wise being, who  
Carried me in your womb for ten months  
Without any concern for your own hardships,  
My all-kind mother, I acknowledge my debt to you.

He describes the loving kindness of his mother when he was a newborn, a toddler, and so on, and continues:

You ran to save me when  
I walked toward fire, and  
Flew like an eagle when I fell into water,  
O compassionate one, great *dākinī*, my all-kind mother.

I knew no fear or shame, so you taught me with gentle prods;  
I knew not good from bad, so you spoke of these to me.  
You even taught me to ride horses and to play with good friends.  
O compassionate one, great *dākinī*, my all-kind mother.

When occasionally we had to part from one another  
You cried tears of sadness at our parting,  
And while apart your heart beat always with concern for my safety.  
O compassionate one, great *dākinī*, my all-kind mother....<sup>8</sup>

Although one can point out individual cases of mothers not having done this, it is fair to say that in both Asia and the West, mothers are accorded special status.

In some cases, even without literally having given birth, a woman can become the object of devotion, due to her mother-like qualities. For example, in addition to giving birth, Mother Mary is considered to be the Great Mother and is known to offer protection to all who seek refuge in her.

Mother Teresa's selfless devotion to the poor, destitute, and orphaned in India is legendary. Mata Amritanandamayi, a *sanyasinī* who has an *ashram* near Trivandrum, the capital of Kerala, is affectionately referred to as the "hugging mother." She literally embraces every human being with great warmth and compassion, just as a mother would embrace her only child. And lest we get trapped into thinking that these qualities are restricted to women, His Holiness the Dalai Lama is considered a living embodiment of Avalokiteśvara, the *bodhisattva* of compassionate. He is known throughout the world for his selfless dedication to the welfare and peaceful co-existence of all sentient beings.

### Woman as Past and Modern-day *Yoginī*

How do women, lay and ordained, view themselves in light of these contradictory images and expectations? How do I view myself as a woman – a virgin, sex object, consort, mother, terrifier, *yoginī*? Am I one with them or separate from them? Or am I simply an aggregate of all of them?

On reviewing the clinical literature, one finds that out of every 100 people, approximately 13 men and 21 women develop depression at some point in their life.<sup>9</sup> While there are many reasons for the higher frequency of depression in women, it is very striking to note that depressed women very often report a very critical and negative sense of self that they cling very tightly to. Very often this negative view of themselves is based on the contradictory and confused messages they have received about being a woman. As long as she replays in her mind these negative, contradictory messages she keeps herself stuck in a depressed rut. Young adolescent girls are also known to suffer from eating disorders at a much higher rate than young men, a condition that frequently occurs together with other disorders, such as depression.<sup>10</sup> As Mary Pipher discusses in her book *Reviving Ophelia*, young women around adolescence, in their desire to fit in and be seen as attractive to the opposite sex, begin to lose their voices and authenticity. Many young girls begin to lose their self-confidence and self-esteem as they use external criteria of a patriarchal culture to define themselves. Hence an examination of how we, as women, view ourselves is very critical for our own healing.

Bhikṣuṇī Tenzin Palmo, a contemporary Buddhist nun whose remarkable life story is documented by Vicki Mackenzie in *Cave in the Snow*, points out some of women's natural strengths:

1. Sharpness, clarity, intuitive force, associated with *prajñāpāramitā* (Perfection of Wisdom), who is represented in female form.

2. The nurturing, soft, gentle qualities associated with women, qualities that make it easier to develop *bodhicitta*, the compassionate wish to liberate all beings from suffering. Compassion and wisdom combined are necessary to attain enlightenment.
3. The ability to respond quickly to those in distress.
4. The ability to generate *tummo*, the mystic heat, quickly.<sup>11</sup>

She dismisses the weaknesses that have been traditionally postulated by men as lacking any real merit:

1. The curse of the menstrual cycle.
2. The notion of a woman's volatility.
3. Attachment to physical comfort and worldly objects.
4. The need for home and family.<sup>12</sup>

Tenzin Palmo points out that, for women who long to fulfil their deepest spiritual yearnings, the real obstacles are the chauvinistic attitudes of patriarchal culture. Karma Lekshe Tsomo points out the following examples of gender discrimination:

1. The difficulty women face in accessing qualified teachers, a quality religious education, and adequate educational facilities.
2. Negative portrayals of women in religious texts.
3. Women's lack of equal access to full ordination.<sup>13</sup>

Although some progress has been made on these points, there's still a long way to go. To this list I would add:

1. The predominance of male teachers, some of whom who still hold sexist attitudes.
2. Sexual exploitation of women in the guise of it being a tantric practise.
3. The lack of accountability of male teachers with respect to their ethical conduct.
4. Women's internalisation of negative attitudes toward women.

As a psychologist and Buddhist practitioner, I would like to examine this last point further – the way we view ourselves as women and the views we hold of other woman. As long as we view ourselves as inferior, incapable, and incompetent, we will engage in a self-fulfilling prophecy. It is important for us, as women, to realise that at the ultimate level, as Tārā affirmed in her earlier quote, one's form does not prevent one from attaining full enlightenment.

Like several other *lamas*, the much-loved *lama* Kalu Rinpoche affirmed: “Regardless of whether you are a man or a woman, if you have faith, confidence and intelligence, if you have *compassion and wisdom*, you can become enlightened. The reason for this total equality of opportunity is the nature of mind itself, which is neither male nor female. There is no such thing as the intrinsic nature of one person's mind being better than someone else's. On the ultimate level, the empty, clear, and unimpeded nature of mind exhibits no limiting qualities such as maleness or femaleness, superiority or inferiority.”<sup>14</sup> An old *lama* from Kangyur, when asked if a woman could achieve enlightenment, was adamant: “On the outside there is difference but the heart is the same. What is enlightenment but the heart knowing itself?”

Women need to question why we do not recognise and “own” our own potential. In this context, we need to examine the self that we so strongly cling to. Does this self really exist in the way we believe it does? What would happen if we began to loosen our grip on this self? What is the true nature of the self? Why do we often end up becoming our own worst enemies?

In addition, we need to examine our attitudes and beliefs towards other women, including ways in which women create divisions among ourselves based on sexism, racism, ageism, classism, and heterosexism. Women need to evaluate and begin to recognise the ways we may consciously or unconsciously participate in the beliefs of the patriarchal culture. If we define ourselves using the lens of patriarchy, we may contribute to the subjugation of each other and engage in a fierce, never-ending competition among ourselves. These habits, imbibed from patriarchal attitudes, may lead to jealousy, hostility, disparagement, and control of women by women in relationships between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, sisters, and friends, even Dharma friends.

Ironically, these tendencies help oil the wheel of the patriarchal machine and keep it moving forward. It is time for women to recognise this and take ownership in redefining how we view ourselves and our own potential. This does not minimise the very real obstacles women face on the conventional level or deny the necessity of continuing to push forward in a united voice

for change. Recognising the obstacles women face, on a conventional level, Tārā made this vow: “There are many who wish to gain enlightenment in a man’s form, and there are but few who wish to work for the welfare of sentient beings in a female form. Therefore may I, in a female body, work for the welfare of beings right until Samsāra has been emptied.”<sup>15</sup>

It may also help to remind men that the patriarchal system also ends up restricting their own potential. Very often, in a desire to disassociate themselves from what is considered feminine, men separate themselves from the very qualities that make them human, such as compassion, vulnerability, and the ability to communicate and express feelings effectively. The greater frequency of problems associated with men, such as addictions and violence, stem in part from men’s fear of intimacy, characterised by some as “male relational dread.”<sup>16</sup> The patriarchal system thus enslaves both men and women. To free ourselves, men and women must cooperate and work together to overcome the oppressive nature of the patriarchal system.

In conclusion, I would like to acknowledge the tremendous contributions that monastics of all traditions, including Western Buddhist nuns, have made in moving Buddhist women forward. Without their dedication and persistence, the current global exchange among Buddhist women of different cultures would not be possible. I would also like to honour the founding mother of Buddhism, Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī, who was Śākyamuni Buddha’s aunt, nurse, and stepmother. She was the first ordained nun, the founder of the first order of Buddhist nuns, the first leader of the great *bhikṣuṇī* assembly, and the first woman Buddhist teacher.<sup>17</sup> Yet very rarely do we hear her name or see her image in the Buddhist literature. Vaddhesī, who was Mahāprajāpatī’s nurse, exemplifies in a poem the tremendous persistence women have shown, despite the struggles and challenges they face, and the tremendous solace and strength women have received from female monastics in accomplishing their goal:

It was twenty-five years  
Since I left home,  
And I hadn’t had a moment’s peace.

Uneasy at heart,  
Steeped in longing for pleasure,  
I held out my arms and cried out  
As I entered the monastery.

I went up to a nun  
I thought I could trust.

She taught me the Dharma,  
The elements of body and mind,  
The nature of perception,  
And earth, water, fire and wind.

I heard her words  
And sat down beside her.  
Now I have entered  
The six realms of sacred knowledge:  
I know I have lived before,  
The eye of heaven is pure,  
and I know the minds of others.

I have great magic powers  
And have annihilated  
All the obsessions of the mind.  
The Buddha's teaching has been done.<sup>18</sup>

In light of the varied conflicts that are dividing our world today, I would like to end with the first verse of the peace prayer of St. Francis of Assisi, which beautifully illuminates our common goal as spiritual practitioners, irrespective of gender, race, age, class, nationality, or religion:

Lord [Buddha], make me an instrument of your peace.  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love.  
Where there is injury, pardon.  
Where there is discord, unity.  
Where there is doubt, faith.  
Where there is error, truth.  
Where there is despair, hope.  
Where there is sadness, joy.  
Where there is darkness, light.

## Notes

- 1 Jonang Taranatha, *The Origin of Tārā Tantra*, trans. and ed. David Templeman (Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works & Archives, 1981), p. 1.
- 2 Shantideva, *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, trans. Stephen Batchelor, Chapter 8, Verse 71 (Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1979), p.100.
- 3 Shantideva, *Śikṣa Samuccaya, A Compendium of Buddhist Doctrine*, trans. Cecil Bendall and W. H. D. Rouse, Chapter. 4 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1922), p. 77.



## *Women's Spirituality, Sensuality, and Sources of Sustenance*

- 4 "The Sensuous and the Sacred: Chola Bronzes from South India," trans. in Norman Cutler, *Songs of Experience: The Poetics of Tamil Devotion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 77.
- 5 Excerpted from Sallie Tisdale, "Women of the Way; Discovering 2,500 Years of Buddhist Wisdom," *Tricycle* 15:3 (Spring 2006): 15-16.
- 6 Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), p. 95.
- 7 Quoted in the *Śikṣa Samuuccaya*, p. 83.
- 8 Erdene Senge, *Zanabazar* (Ulaan Baatar: State Publishing House, 1989), pp. 68-69. According to this text, when Zanabazar returned to Mongolia from his second trip to Tibet (about 1660), he offered his mother his own translation of this poem by the Fifth Dalai Lama. Translated into English by Glenn Mullin.
- 9 P. R. Halgin and S. K. Whitbourne, eds., *Abnormal Psychology: Clinical Perspectives on Psychological Disorders* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2007), p. 252.
- 10 Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: Grosset/Putnam, 1994), p. 20.
- 11 Vicki Mackenzie, *Cave in the Snow: Tenzin Palmo's Quest for Enlightenment* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1998), pp. 133-34.
- 12 Ibid., pp. 134-36.
- 13 Karma Lekshe Tsomo, ed., *Buddhist Women and Social Justice. Ideals, Challenges and Achievements* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), pp. 1-19.
- 14 Mackenzie, *Cave in the Snow*, p. 137.
- 15 Taranatha, *The Origin of Tārā Tantra*, p. 2.
- 16 Stephen J. Bergman and Janet L. Surrey, "The Woman-Man Relationship: Impasses and Possibilities," in Judith V. Jordan and Natalie S. Eldridge, eds., *Women's Growth in Diversity: More Writings from the Stone Center* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1997), p. 263.
- 17 Susan Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women: Translations and Commentary on the Therigatha* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1991), pp. 13-19.
- 18 Ibid., pp. 28-29.



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**RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER IN  
GLOBAL BUDDHISM**



## 6

# **Beyond Caste, Sexism, and Racism: Re-establishing Buddhadharma in the Land of the Buddha**

*Dharmacharini Jnanasuri and Dharmacharini Karunamaya*

On October 14, 1956, in Nagpur, central India, a half million people followed Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar and converted from Hinduism to Buddhism. In the weeks that followed, many millions of others also converted. This was the beginning of the mass conversions to Buddhism of people who were formerly known as “untouchables” in the Indian caste system. It also represented the reintroduction of the Buddhadharma to India, the land of its birth, after more than 700 years of virtual extinction.

To be born an “untouchable” literally means that even one’s touch is deemed polluting to a caste Hindu. “Untouchables” are born outside the Hindu caste system, the oldest form of social stratification and hierarchically ordered inequality in the world. Technically, after Indian independence from Britain in 1947, discrimination on the basis of caste was made illegal. But even now, in many areas of India deep-seated prejudices and inhumane customs continue to exist. For this reason, members of these communities refer to themselves as Dalits, literally meaning “broken people” or “the oppressed.”<sup>1</sup>

## **Caste Discrimination Today**

Today, the number of Dalits exceeds 160 million; Dalits themselves estimate the number to be over 260 million. Most Dalits live precariously at the margins of Indian life, ostracised by much of society and relegated to the bottom of India’s caste system. In a form of social apartheid, they are routinely assigned menial and poorly paid jobs, such as removers of human and animal waste, street sweepers, scavengers, grave diggers, cobblers, and leather workers, and are often forced to work as bonded labourers and in similar degrading conditions. Consigned to the lowest stratum of society, they are often harassed, abused, and persecuted, especially if they attempt to better their living conditions or assert their rights. Although the government has passed legislation to protect the rights of Scheduled Castes

and Tribes, only a minority of Dalits have benefited from these provisions. Whole villages in India still practise caste segregation.

Today, 57 years after Indian independence, transgressions against Dalits, including rape, assault, and murder, are still so common that they are rarely reported by newspapers. In 1979, the Indian government approved the International Covenant on Civic and Political Rights (ICCPR). Yet more than 20 years later, the United Nation's Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) reported that entrenched discrimination against Dalits continues in severe violation of human rights. For example, after the 2004 *tsunami*, some Dalits who suffered from the tragedy were refused access to health care and relief services because of their "untouchable" status.<sup>2</sup> As a result of continuing transgressions against members of this community, in 1999 Brad Adams, Asia director of Human Rights Watch, petitioned the Indian government for equitable treatment of the Dalit community.<sup>3</sup>

### **Origins of the Caste System**

The *Manusmṛiti*, the Laws of Manu, a Sanskrit text compiled around the first century CE, divides society into four main divisions, or *varnas*, which were then divided into thousands of sub-castes. Each caste and sub-caste has its own set of duties and practises exclusion, to different degrees, against castes and sub-castes lower than itself. Today, even Indians who practise other religions, such as Christianity, Sikhism, Islam, or Buddhism, may adhere to caste identities when seeking marriage partners. Over time, these divisions became institutionalised and people who were not members of these castes were marginalised and excluded from society. Thus, Dalits are considered ritually impure and may be denied entry into temples and religious festivals, and access to drinking water, toilets, and electricity. From 1998 to 2002, recorded atrocities against Dalits rose from 7,445 to 33,507.<sup>4</sup> Innumerable other atrocities went unreported and most cases went unpunished.

Caste discrimination is linked with illiteracy, alienation, and extreme poverty. The vast majority of India's estimated 20 to 60 million bonded labourers are Dalits. Dalit children are frequently sold into bondage to pay off debts owed to caste creditors. Members of the Dalit community are barred from entering temples and from using upper-caste water taps, requiring them to travel long distances to get water. Poverty and illiteracy are endemic in Dalit communities; only a small percentage have access to safe drinking water, electricity, and sanitation facilities.

## **The Situation for Women**

Gender discrimination is an issue that affects all Indian women, creating a two-fold challenge for Dalit women.<sup>5</sup> According to Hindu tradition, a woman must serve her father when she is young, her husband after she marries, and her son later in life. The widespread preference for male children is an indication of the devaluation women face even from the time of their birth. The high incidence of female feticide and even female infanticide, despite the fact that they are illegal, has started to skew the ratios of males to females in various areas of India.

Dalit women find themselves the victims of gender discrimination and caste discrimination simultaneously, with rape and other forms of violence used as means of intimidation against lower caste women.<sup>6</sup> In 2000, the U.N. Committee for Elimination of Discrimination Against Women cited concern for the growth of violence against Dalit women. In spite of legislation, numerous social injustices continue to pose major obstacles for Dalit women. For instance, between 2000 and 2001, the Home Ministry reported a 16.5 increase in the incidence of rape in India, perpetrated primarily by caste gangs on Dalit and low-caste women. Despite increased awareness of women's issues and efforts to empower women in Indian society, patterns of dual discrimination continue to keep Dalit women the poorest and most frequently victimised of the dispossessed.

## **Dr. Ambedkar and Buddhism**

The origin of this modern mass conversion to Buddhism can be traced to the life and work of Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891-1956). Despite being born into an "untouchable" family, Ambedkar earned doctorates from the London School of Economics and Columbia University, sponsored by the Maharaja of Baroda. He became the first law minister of independent India and was largely responsible for drafting the Indian Constitution. Throughout his life, he was a tireless advocate of human rights and participated in a range of acts of civil disobedience to that end. He especially championed the rights of the oppressed, including women. In 1950, he resigned his ministerial position over the Nehru cabinet's refusal to pass a bill protecting women's rights.

There came a time when Ambedkar realised that the only way to be free of the pernicious effects of the caste system was to change religions. At one point, he declared, "Though I was born a Hindu, I will not die a Hindu."<sup>7</sup> After exploring the world's different religions for many years, he eventually

chose Buddhism as being most suited to helping the former “untouchables.” He contended that “to remain in Hinduism and to attempt to abolish caste system is like sweetening poison.”<sup>8</sup> Finally, on October 14, 1956, he converted to Buddhism, along with 400,000 followers. Successive waves of Dalit conversions followed. Unfortunately, six weeks after his very public acceptance of Buddhism, Dr Ambedkar died and left these new Buddhist converts without leadership or guidance. Buddhism among the Dalits at this time was less a religious or spiritual conviction than a social statement or aspiration of freedom from oppression. Often, it became entangled with political activity.

### **The Story of Dharmacharini Jnanasuri**

On July 1, 1942, I was born into a very poor and “untouchable” (Mahar) family in Nagpur. The city of Nagpur is famous as the place of Dr. Ambedkar’s conversion. In those days, the life of the “untouchables” was worse than the life of an animal. Members of this community enjoyed no human rights and were shown no humanity. They were restricted from any participation in education, trade, or finance. They were allowed to hold neither money or land, so they had no source of livelihood. They were not permitted to touch a high caste Hindu and could not allow their shadow to fall over one, since even their shadow was considered polluting. All they could do was serve those who belonged to the high castes and eat what was left on their plates. Such a miserable lot was the life of these “untouchables.”

Ambedkar took birth into “untouchable” community and, after facing many struggles, was able to complete his education. Even though he was highly qualified, he faced much ill treatment from the upper castes and it was due to these experiences that he began his career as a social reformer. He assured members of his community that they were human beings and therefore had the right to live as human beings. It was my good fortune that my father was involved with Dr. Ambedkar’s social welfare activities. As a result, from my childhood, I learned to do social work in the community. In my childhood, I also faced prejudice and mistreatment. In school, the upper-caste teachers were always biased against low-caste students. Even at a young age, I was affected by my teachers’ abuse. Because of my poverty and torn clothes, the teachers and other students used to make fun of me. Although I was good in studies, I was suppressed and never appreciated.



As I was growing up, conversions away from Hinduism to other religions became more common. Dr. Ambedkar decided to leave behind the inequalities of Hinduism and convert to Buddhism. It was my great fortune to be part of the historical event of conversion that took place on October 14, 1956, in Nagpur. Even after more than 50 years, I still clearly remember the events of the day when U Chandramani led Dr. Ambedkar in accepting the teachings of the Buddha. Dr. Ambedkar then turned to the huge crowd of people and led them in also accepting the Buddhadharma. No one knew exactly what Buddhism meant, but everyone was sure that, as Buddhists, they would be seen as equals and no longer treated unfairly. Sadly, even after converting to Buddhism and feeling that we had achieved some equality, caste Hindus still reverted to their old perceptions at times and treated us with prejudice.

At that time, I was about 13 years old. In school, we still had to face ill treatment from the teachers. We were living in a poor slum area in Nagpur at the time. In the slum, I used to teach poor and illiterate people how to chant the Tisarana Panchasila, the three refuges and five precepts. Even at that young age, I was able to explain the meaning to them.

Only six weeks after the conversion ceremony, Dr. Ambedkar passed away. This was a big shock to his huge numbers of followers, for they no longer had anyone to guide them in how to follow the Buddhadharma. We looked to the book he had written, *The Buddha and his Dharma*, and to the 22 vows about how to be a Buddhist that he had explained to us during the conversion ceremony. The whole Buddhist community was left in disarray, without a clear direction. Many people reverted to Hinduism, because they had so little understanding of the Dharma.

In 1979, Bhante Sangharakshita's Trailokya Boudha Mahasangha (TBMSG) came into existence. As the Indian branch of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO), this organisation has been active ever since, in both teaching the Dharma and promoting humanitarian work in Maharashtra and other states of India. We felt that this organisation could provide proper guidance through Dharma retreats. In 1982, I had the opportunity to participate in such a retreat in Aurangabad. Meditation and Dharma study were the main focus. From this experience, I came to believe that this group had the right focus in teaching and guiding people on the Buddha's path. From that time onward, I have practised Buddhism continuously.

In 1987, I became a *dharmacharini*<sup>9</sup> (an ordained member of our order) and was given the name Jnanasuri. Since that time I have been engaged in helping women to become aware of the Dharma. The path has not always been easy for me, because I had to be aware of my own family

responsibilities while also being engaged in practising the Dharma and organising Buddhist activities.

India is a male-dominated society where women are dependent on their husbands. It is very difficult for a woman to be independent of her husband and to make her own decisions. This makes it more difficult for women to leave their homes and families to attend Dharma retreats. But today, through perseverance and skilful negotiations, many women manage to take part in retreats and other Dharma activities. These women are also engaged in trying to spread the Dharma, in their own way. Many women have come forward to join the order of *dharmacharinis* and to help in improving conditions for their Dharma sisters. Women still lag far behind men in numbers and development, but the situation is slowly improving.

Today separate women's retreats and Dharma classes are led by *dharmacharinis* and other committed women. Many women have benefited greatly from Dharma classes and discussions. Today it is clear to see that many women are deepening and broadening their understanding of the Dharma.

In the last few years, there has been a great increase in demand for Buddhist retreats. In our activities, we try to respond to the needs of all sorts of women, whether they are educated, illiterate, poor or rich, from urban and rural areas. All participate in the same retreats together. These women are keenly interested in learning more about the Buddhadharma and in developing their understanding through meditation and reflection. Indian *dharmacharinis* have received invaluable help from foreign *dharmacharini* sisters who have devoted their lives to benefiting us. Here I would like to express my gratitude to them. It is because of them that we Indian Buddhist women are now realising our dream of having our own independent women's retreat centre.

## **Conclusions**

We have seen that, although there have been efforts and even legislation to eradicate caste discrimination in India, abuses continue to this day. In its report on caste and discrimination, Human Rights Watch made a recommendation to the United Nations, asking that U.N. agencies actively address caste discrimination in India, through "programmes and strategies designed to curb abuse and encourage accountability."<sup>10</sup> When the Indian government submitted its first report to the Committee for Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 2000, the Committee raised many questions on the plight of Dalit women. Noting that Dalit women

seem to be as yet an unaddressed sector, the Committee asked for various particular measures. The report concluded: "The Committee is concerned with the continuing discrimination, including violence, suffered by women of the Dalit community, despite the passage of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989. The Committee considers that widespread poverty, such social practices as the caste system and son preference, as reflected in a high incidence of violence against women, significant gender disparities and an adverse sex ratio, present major obstacles to the implementation of the Convention."<sup>11</sup> At the time of the mass conversions, Dr. Ambedkar stated that for discrimination to be completely eradicated the whole of India needed to become Buddhist.

In India generally, there is a growing awareness of the challenging issues facing women in all levels of Indian society. A new women's trust was established in 2004, called the Arya Tara Mahila Trust. The aim of the trust is to empower women, especially those from impoverished backgrounds, to help themselves and their communities. The trust does this by supporting women, both through humanitarian work and Dharma activities.

It is estimated that this year, to coincide with the 50-year anniversary of the conversions, up to one million people will convert to Buddhism. It is very important that Buddhists have the freedom to practise their faith with dignity, and without discrimination. The weight of cultural and social conditioning is even more stacked against women, particularly women from Dalit backgrounds. It is vital that women, too, have the freedom and dignity to practise Buddhism. There is still much to be done.

## Notes

- 1 *Broken People: Caste Violence Against India's 'Untouchables'* (New York: Human Rights Watch, March 1999).
- 2 Huggler, Justin, "'Untouchable' Caste Find Themselves Deprived of Tsunami Aid," *The Independent* (U.K.), 22 January 2005.
- 3 Indian Committee of the Netherlands/Landelijke India Werkgroep. "India: End Caste Bias In Tsunami Relief" (Reuters Foundation, 14-1-2005).
- 4 This research was conducted by the Human Rights and Law Unit of the Indian Social Institute and reported in "Rise in Crimes Against Scheduled Castes, Tribes," *The Hindu*, July 20, 2004. Specific case studies are included in P.C. Sikligar, *Atrocities on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes: Prevention and Implementation* (Jaipur: Mangal Deep, 2002).
- 5 Studies of Dalit women include Meena Anand, ed., *Dalit Women: Fear and Discrimination* (Delhi: Isha Books, 2005); Mamta Rajawat, ed., *Dalit Women: Issues and Perspectives* (New Delhi, Anmol, 2005); and Anupama Rao, ed., *Gender and Caste: Issues in Contemporary Indian Feminism* (New Delhi, Kali for Women, 2003).
- 6 Sukhadeo Thorat and Umakant, eds., *Caste, Race and Discrimination: Discourses in International Context* (New Delhi: Rawat, 2004), p. 19.

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- 7 Sangharakshita, *Ambedkar and Buddhism* (Windhorse Publications, Glasgow, 1986), p. 61.
- 8 Eleanor Zelliot, *Ambedkar's Conversion* (New Delhi: Critical Quest, 2005), p. 11.
- 9 *Dharmacharis* and *dharmacharinis*, male and female members of the Trailokya Bouddha Mahasangha, (Friends of the Western Buddhist Order) commit themselves to make the practise of the Buddhist path - going for Refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha - the central focus of their lives. The order is neither lay nor monastic; some order members live at home with their families and work in the world and some live celibate lives, sometimes living in communities or retreat centres. Generally members of the order do not shave their heads or wear traditional robes, although occasionally those who are celibate (known as *anagarikās*) may do so. Dharmacharis/inis take the same precepts, and practise on an equal basis. The precepts are a traditional set of ten ethical precepts covering actions of body, speech, and mind.
- 10 *Broken People*, p. 20.
- 11 Thorat and Umakant, *Caste, Race and Discrimination*, p. xix.

## What's Buddhism Have To Do With Black Women?

Zenju Earthlyn M. Manuel

*She walks through the gate,  
Heavy footed,  
Gazing out from the darkness of skin,  
Seeing no church pews,  
She sits chanting,  
Why have I come without knowing whose house I have entered?*

At the ruins of an ancient temple I removed my sandals, outside, near an open space where the door used to be. Sporting dreadlocks and sweaty brown skin, I stepped inside the ruins, planting my flat wide feet in the mix of dung and mud. It was 1995, Tamil Nadu, India. There in the temple that had only one wall and the sky as its ceiling, I wondered what it must have been like a thousand years ago to chant there, to sit in silence listening to cow bells and wooden wagons. I faced a crumbling limestone statue of Shakti, and despite the fact that she had no eyes, no nose, and chipped lips, I could feel the ripples of her presence throughout the centuries. Although I had been practising Nichiren Buddhism for seven years, I felt in that moment, in that temple, a sense that I had been introduced to Dharma, the teachings of the Buddha a hundred thousand million *kalpas* ago.

Whether that is true or not, I do experience meeting the Dharma as something that you don't do once. It occurs as often as one is awakened to the suffering and joy of life. So, sometimes I say that I first heard the Dharma from my mother, when she said something like this at a time when I was disappointed by church members, "You can't look at other people's lives and decide if you are going to pray or not." In other words, if I judge a spiritual or religious practise by its people, I would never practise, because there are no perfect people. Human beings are human beings and *other* people have very little to do with how far I go down a chosen path of awakening. On the other hand, I might say that Martin Luther King, Jr. was my first Dharma teacher. His message of non-violence and peace sank deep

into my eleven-year old heart, especially at a time when four little girls my age had been bombed to death.

Given that, I would say that I didn't go out of the way of my life to meet the Dharma, but that it met me at the door of my own suffering. When it came knocking to take up full residence in my life, I actually ran the other way. I was afraid of something so new and different from the Black church I was raised in. I told the teachers that I did not have any room for chanting, sitting down after work, or altars that were Japanese. Still the teachers didn't go away, bringing me candles, incense, and books to read. I had met my match. They were more stubborn than I could ever imagine. But it wasn't their persistence that kept me still long enough to invite the Dharma in. It was the fact that I never sent the teachers away, because I recognised the innate kindness and compassion of the Buddha's words they shared. I recognised the teachings as something I had been yearning to hear. I recognised the *bodhisattva*s sitting next to me... not their faces, but their sincere intentions for a world of peace.

Immediately upon accepting the path of the Buddha, I began to see the depth of suffering within and around me. It was almost unbearable, causing me to doubt the teachings, meaning I had taken on something that might get the best of me. But with the help of many teachers, I began to see that both suffering and joy would be the material used in practising the teachings. My life would serve as the ground in which Buddhism would come alive.

Today, the Sōtō Zen that I practise is felt in my body. I can feel the healing that is taking place by how I see life, with the curiosity of a child. I can feel the chants grace my thick lips and my southern Louisiana ancestors knowing that all is well with their daughter chanting in Pāli, Sanskrit, ancient Chinese, and Japanese. It is all very natural to me. I welcome the Dharma as it has welcomed me long before I was born. However, no matter how much I welcome the teachings as a way of life, there are many complex questions about taking on a practise that has yet to become part of the everyday lives of black people in the United States or elsewhere.

So, when I mentioned to my younger sister that I was exploring being a Zen priest she asked, "What's Buddhism got to do with black people, anyway?" Although Śākyamuni Buddha's teachings came from the earth of ancient India, I knew in the moment when she asked the question, that the teachings had everything to do with me and with every other suffering living being. Of course, she wanted to know how I came to explore being a Zen priest, when she knew me as a devout Christian, a courageous warrior of the black civil rights movement, and a dedicated Pan-Africanist. She knew me in my Afro, African headwraps, African jewellery, reading aloud

poetry to her by black poets such as Langston Hughes, Nikki Giovanni, Margaret Walker, and Gwendolyn Brooks. Instead of watching television on some evenings, we would actually perform the poetry for one another, sitting on our twin beds, speaking through the words of the poets about our experiences of being young, black, and female. She needed to know how I was going to help her by being a Zen priest. In that moment, I couldn't find a way to convey to her that much of what I experienced in being black was much like what the Buddha taught.

When I was thirteen, I remember one evening our family was sitting at the dinner table at our home in southern California. My older and younger sisters were in their places with me somewhere in the middle, and my parents each at one end of the table. Something was especially strange about the taste and texture of the meat we were eating. Not being big on meat as a child, I remember frowning and asking what kind of meat was it. My father proudly said in his thick Creole accent, "Possum. I caught it in the backyard." I didn't know what a possum was, but I stopped eating the meat because it was caught and killed in the yard I played in daily. Yet, I could see my father's pride at bringing something to our bare table. Life was hitting us hard at the time, as my parents were ageing with three teens, my mother 55 years old and my father 73. It wouldn't be long before we received our first bag of food for Thanksgiving from a welfare office. It would be our last bag, because we could not stand the humiliation. We would never speak of those hard times again, because it was frightening to talk about being black without anything – not having.

Regardless of that period in my life as a child, I never thought of myself as poor. Poor was being without food. Poor was being without a house, without shoes. If we had those things, then everything was fine. If we did not have them, someone in the neighbourhood, a church member, or a relative would see that we had what we needed. As long as someone else had them, we did. This was how generosity was expressed in the 1950s and 1960s among black people, most of whom were new arrivals from the southern region of the United States. When someone from the church shared with us, it was a generosity filled with compassion, giving because they understood or because they were in the same circumstance. Maybe they only had one dollar, but they would give fifty cents to someone, just because they had a dollar. It was not giving because of feeling guilty about having more than the other; it was giving to be giving, without any praise. Most often there were no expectations of receiving because of what was given.

A communal sense of having and giving were essential to our survival, an insurance that no one would be left behind. This expression of

generosity, based on being interrelated, was what the Buddha taught. It was generosity, or *dāna*, one of six *pāramitās*, based in the compassion that I experienced long ago in my community. Therefore, the teachings of Buddha were relevant to my black experience of life and were not odd to me.

However, in my early years of practising, the Buddhist rituals were different than what I had been accustomed to in church. Without communion, baptism, the singing, praising God out loud, and talking back to the minister, it was difficult to believe that there was any religion going on inside the Buddhist environment. I had been accustomed to religious services that included a goal of soul revival. As a child I enjoyed attending revival meetings held to bring souls to Christ. In these ceremonies, which could last for weeks, the weeping and wailing I heard around me was evidence of people being touched or rejoined to spirit. I remember sitting under a huge green circus tent in the heat of summer in Los Angeles. As my family and I walked into the revival meeting, I could smell the hay used as flooring. I loved that smell, because I knew it meant we were about to be rejuvenated. The revival meeting was the time to rededicate ourselves as black people; it was a time to truly face what it meant to live a spiritual life. It was a time to become conscious of that life. Under the sway of night lights hanging in the tent, we were brought back from soul-sleeping, from despair, from our feeling stuck and not growing as black people. In this soul revival we recalled happiness, as we celebrated the act of renewal in song and baptism. In essence, we lived again. We flourished.

Would a practise steeped in the Dharma do the same? Better yet, is a Buddhist practise meant to do the same? Both of these questions are important to the exploration of the Buddha's teachings in the lives of black people.

Having lived inside oppression, African Americans have experiences of being dominated, alienated, and isolated through a systematic dehumanising process. This way of living has created a longing to be rejoined with a larger humanity that has been denied or taken away. In these circumstances, there is a recognition that we can resign ourselves to limitations and inferiority in ways that lead us on journeys of salvation, seeking enchantment and finding ways to survive.

Historically, we have been swimming to shore ever since the Middle Passage in which we came to be slaves in this country. The Middle Passage, for Africans who became slaves, was a journey of horrors from Africa across the Atlantic Ocean, to the so-called New World. The shore we searched for was metaphorically the ground on which we might stand as human beings. In seeking this ground, we came across Christianity.



Why Christianity? Perhaps the sermon by the character Baby Suggs in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* could explain some of it. In the story, the character Baby Suggs gave a sermon that was not about heaven, hell, and sinning, but about the beauty of being God's people. In the story, spirituality existed in gathering places among the trees. This spirituality was a commitment to each other's well-being and joy. It was a sharing of freedom within community. Morrison named Baby Suggs an unchurched preacher, "uncalled, unrobed, unanointed, [letting her] great heart beat in the presence of the slave community. Baby Suggs' message was, 'In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard.'" Sugg's sermon of self-acceptance was a kind of spirituality that helped the people to embrace their spirits, despite dehumanising social conditions. It was a spirituality that co-existed alongside efforts toward liberation from suffering.

This type of spirituality in the novel *Beloved* was born of a lived experience of slavery. Although Christianity brought a disempowerment to slaves that couldn't be seen until later years, Christianity also brought a spirit of dignity and a sense of being divine that the slaves recognised from their African past. Despite the intent of slave masters to use the Bible to coerce slaves into compliant behaviour, slaves were creative in bringing an African spirit to the teachings of the Bible. By bringing their African spirit, slaves used the Bible to resist the master and forged a path by which they survived. In essence, the conditions of slavery did not completely cut the slaves off from their ultimate source of the meaning of God, religion, and moral understanding. Through great ingenuity, slaves brought together the Christian meaning of God with African Buddha nature, so to speak.

I came to Buddhism with a sense of a community that strives together. I came from a background of being connected to human beings through our souls as sisters and brothers. I came with a sense of dedication and commitment to serving others, to be like Harriet Tubman, to be like Sojourner Truth. However, it was the truckload of life's suffering that prevailed above heritage in my choosing the path of Dharma.

Upon entering the path of the Buddha's teachings, I grieved the communal sense of African-American-influenced Christianity, which was based on a shared history of dehumanisation, specifically slavery. Being a Christian, in my sensibility, was being black, and therefore entering the Buddhist path at one time felt like leaving the African American community. Whereas the Sōtō Zen tradition in which I practise offers Sangha, meaning community, it is a community that hardly pays attention to the impact of slavery in relationship to the practise. So, I have asked myself, "What would make a Buddhist community feel like home to black

people?” I suspect that a religious practise embraced by African Americans would have deep rituals and teachings filled with compassion, love, and wisdom. The practise would be inclusive of all people, creating both an individual *and* collective experience. Most important, the practise would have a quest to end suffering, especially dehumanisation, by saving all beings. In this way, one can see how African Americans could easily embrace the Buddha’s teachings.

Yet, there is no Dharma gate marked for black people only. Still, we can acknowledge that there is a history between the people of the African diaspora and the teachings of the Buddha. Although European literature and perspectives on the history of Buddhism is extensive, little to none has been done on the link between Africans, African Americans, and the Buddha. In my bones I know something is missing. There is an awareness on my part that the Buddha’s teachings affect the lives of those who suffer oppression, such as the black Tamil Indians, Dalits, and the Untouchables – held down by a caste system. Additionally, Nagārjuna, the great scholar of the Mahāyāna teachings, espoused the freedom of enlightenment to the black Indians of southern ancient India. And because Buddhism spoke of liberation, I assume that it did not flourish in a country where ancient Hinduism, the traditional religion, supported the caste system. At the same time, when the Buddha spoke of the great rivers, the Ganges, the Yamuna, the Aciravati, the Sarabhu and the Mahi, giving up their former names and identities when they reach the great ocean, he was expounding the teaching of liberation. Imagine what this might have meant to the lower castes. Although it is speculative that ancient India is where Africans connected with the Buddha due to suppression or lost history, considering Africans as part of the Buddhist movement from its beginnings is a crucial and valid historical perspective to unearth.

However, for certain, as early as 1950, and in the 1960s and 1970s, a few African Americans and people of African descent crossed the illusionary boundary of religious practices populated by black people, such as southern Baptist churches, African Methodist churches, Pentecostal churches, and the like, to explore a practise based on Śākyamuni Buddha’s teachings. Their courage and innocence pried open the unfamiliar Dharma gate for black people to consider what the Buddha taught. Imagine going to a foreign land, a temple in your own country, without knowing the language and the customs, then deciding to stay and make the place your home. At the same time, imagine that there is something familiar about the land that reminds you of yourself. So, you stay, and the first language you learn is chanting and/or breathing. You learn the customs of lighting

incense and candles, bowing and sitting down. There you stay for years, until some of the confusion becomes clear.

Many pioneer African American practitioners and practitioners of African descent have been practising with great patience from 15 to 20 or even 30 years, yet the black community has heard little from them. Despite the fact there are several publications available with the voices of practitioners of colour, these works have limited distribution.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, I would like to widen the gate by presenting the voices of four African American women who have entered the gate. Since they are black women, it is important to consider that these Dharma practitioners came with a historical experience of suffering affected by slavery in the United States. Therefore, their perspectives on ending suffering, in relationship to the Buddha's teachings, contribute to the ever-evolving practise of peace and liberation.

Each of these Dharma sisters is a reflection of me in that she is over 50 years old and has been practising compassion, love, and wisdom for more than ten years. They are Dharma sisters that have sat in the pain and walked in the joy of their lives, willing to face all of what is brought to their tables. In talking with them, there was a realisation that the nature of our lives has yet to be fully revealed and that sharing how we practise is liberation from what has already been said about black women. If the world understood the suffering of black women, women living in dark bodies all over the planet, then the world would understand the depth of the human condition. We would understand what the Buddha meant when he said there is suffering.

There were many questions to ask my friends, but for a start I asked them what in your life brought you to the path of Dharma? And, why have you stayed? Presented here is a paraphrase of their actual words.

### **Shahara Godfrey**

How to live black and female is a challenge. I am engaged and responded to in the world as a black woman. I entered the path of Dharma with that challenge. That challenge includes dealing with inequality, racism, sexism, and being rendered invisible. As a mother, it also includes dealing with my daughter, who is also black and female. With that challenge, I needed a path of freedom – a path older than God. I needed a place of no doors, no borders. I do go to church, but I needed something internal to sustain me over the long haul. Eventually, I saw a flyer for a retreat led by two African American Dharma teachers that said, “Black people do you want to be

free?” I answered by attending that retreat, formally beginning my commitment to practise.

I have stayed on the path of Dharma because, in practising freedom, one needs refuge. When, finally, I am not being engaged, by others or myself, as a black woman, in that freedom, I will need refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, Saṅgha. Knowing that I can be free in the midst of inequality and invisibility, and have a mind as vast as the sky, is reason enough to stay.

### **Bola Cofield**

When I realised through therapy and other healing processes that suffering was caused by me, it was clear that I needed a practise that would turn me toward my life. At the time I fully entered the path of Dharma, I was challenged with my participation in a Ph.D. programme. Being in that programme brought up fear, shame, confusion, and a sense of overwhelm. I knew it was something – something about “me.” A therapist said, “Your body is dying to meet you.” This meant I had disconnected from my emotions and therefore my body. I was avoiding the suffering.

I had always been attracted to meditation. But on the path of Dharma, meditation allowed me to deal with my mind, not making life a “big unmanageable thing,” but rather life as body and breath. When I breathe, I immediately know where I am. I am open to who I am in the breath. I can trust something bigger than “me.”

I have stayed on the path of Dharma, because the breath is where I can get beyond the construction of being a black woman, daughter, friend, healer, and so on. I get to practise compassion, which is a sober and true way of dealing with emotions. In the past, when I felt unworthy in the Ph.D. process, I would be on the floor, because I couldn’t hold this feeling. Now, I know I can start over where I am. I sit: mind goes, I breathe, and start all over again, in the moment.

### **Anita Carse**

When I entered the path of Dharma, I wasn’t aware of my own life. I wasn’t living my life. There were many distractions, including relationships with my family. I was unhappy and I knew it was time to make a change.

As an artist, I always thought about going to art school, but was afraid that I would lose my love for art. So, in the midst of my unhappiness in life, I decided to go to art school and explore the fear of it. It was through art that I began to sit. Art became a practise, an endless process of coming to

the centre of my life. Although I began sitting meditation at home, without the distractions of an established Saṅgha, I later joined a community of Buddhist practitioners for a period of time. However, with a sitting meditation practise at home, combined with the discipline of practising art, I was able to walk a path filled with the substance of my life and beyond.

Eventually, the unhappiness, the suffering in my life, all began to ease. I found new ways of relating to family and friends. I began letting go of old ways, views, and patterns of being in the world. This was liberation, but it put me in the space of asking, “Now, who am I? Who am I without this or that?” I was lost without the things that I let go of. It was terrifying, an endless journey.

Yet, I’ve stayed on the path of Dharma, because I am less restless. I’m in a resting place, because I don’t have to choose this or that. The path of Dharma is a difficult rigour, but also a nourishing rigour. I have to be honest with myself on this path and not play little tricks with myself.

Being an African American woman is part of the work, but is not the issue for me. Struggle around identity is exhausting because it is such an issue in the world. Today, I can connect with everything in the world that is so infinite – suffering as human beings. And yet, being on the path gives me a way to trust and still acknowledge the complexities and textures of life.

### **Noliwe Alexander**

When I entered the path of Dharma, I wanted a clearer way of living in the world, a way to approach life through love. At the time, there was much suffering in my life. I would ask, ‘Why is this happening to me?’ I realised that, in some way, the suffering was about things I was holding onto. Mostly, I was holding onto suffering.

As I began sitting meditation, it became clear that much of how I suffered was being attached to the outcome of my striving, projecting into the future, and attempting to control all aspects of life. Over time, there were no more pity parties, no more asking why this is happening to me. Being in the present became a way of walking on the planet with a lighter step. I could catch my breath every day, through good and bad. I can look at what is affecting me in the present. I’m happier than in the past. I have a son and he has said that I am happier because of my practise of meditation. It has given him a different perspective of how to walk in this world.

I've stayed on the path of Dharma because I have more to learn, more to learn about the Buddha's teachings. I need to understand more how the teachings apply to life.

We are not done. There are many other questions to ask. And there are questions that have been asked, but there is no answer. We are dark women, having been rooted in the earth. We are not dark women, having flown into the sky. We have tasted nectar that we've called liberation. We cannot pass it on, for it is in our veins, only to be seen through our eyes after a long time sitting.

## Notes

- 1 For example, see Angel Kyodo Williams, *Being Black: Zen and the Art of Living with Fearlessness and Grace* (New York: Penguin Compass, 2002); Jan Willis, *Dreaming Me: From Baptist to Buddhist, An African American Woman's Spiritual Journey* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2002); Marianne Dresser, *Buddhist Women on the Edge: Contemporary Perspectives from the Western Frontier* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1996); Jarvis Jay Masters, *Finding Freedom: Writings from Death Row* (Junction City, CA: Padma Publishing, 1997); and Sumi D. Loundon, *Blue Jean Buddha: Voices of Young Buddhists* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001).

## **Losing Ground in Gender Equality in a Multicultural Society: Buddhist Women's Experience in Nepal**

*Sumon K. Tuladhar*

Observers have pointed out that Buddhist women generally experience less discrimination and have more freedom than women in many other cultures, but still face constraints and inequalities:

In theory, Buddhism is egalitarian, affirming that all sentient beings have equal potential to achieve perfect enlightenment. Because the goal of Buddhism is the transformation of consciousness, and consciousness has no gender, there should be no bar to women's equal participation in Buddhist practise. This egalitarian ideal is not always realized in Buddhist societies, however. It can be convincingly argued that women in Buddhist societies enjoy greater social freedom than women in many other societies, yet they do not enjoy full equality in Buddhist societies or institutions.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay, I endeavour to show that, despite their unique religious freedom, Buddhist women in Nepal are currently accommodating themselves to Hindu culture as practised in Nepal, resulting in a loss of their freedom and status in society.

Nepal is rich in cultural and ethnic diversity. The 1991 census and subsequent research shows that there are around 60 caste and ethnic groups and 19 spoken languages. Ethnic groups are identified by caste, ethnicity, language, and religion. The constitution of Nepal recognises this diversity and prohibits all forms of discrimination based on caste, creed, sex, or religion. The state is committed to the promotion of multiculturalism. However, minority cultures and religions continue to suffer losses in the natural process of accommodation to the dominant culture.

Hinduism is the predominant religion in Nepal, but a diversity of other religious groups also exists. The population is 10.74 percent Buddhist, 4.2 percent Muslim, 3.6 percent Kirat, and 0.45 percent Christian. On the basis of inscriptions and epigraphic evidence, Buddhism in Nepal can be traced back to well before the fourth century CE, when the majority of the population was Buddhist. However, a majority of the country's rulers have been from a Hindu religious background. Since the Licchavi era (879 CE), there is historical evidence that rulers applied many strategies to implement

the caste system based on Hindu philosophy. These strategies were successfully implemented subsequent to the reign of King Jayasthiti Malla (1372-1395), who divided Newar society into 64 different caste groups. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Prithvi Narayan Shah unified several separate states and established Nepal as a single country. He not only unified the states, but he also introduced Hindu Khasa imperialism into Kathmandu, where the population was predominantly made up of Buddhist Newars.<sup>2</sup> Drastic social assimilation started to take place under this royal imperialism. With the imposition of direct rule by the Rana Dynasty (1846-1951), the rulers clamped down on Buddhist society and religion so tightly that the Buddhist monasteries (Baha and Bahi) started to loose their assets. Buddhist monks were expelled from the country and those who preached Buddhism were threatened with expulsion.

In 1950, democracy dawned in Nepal. People experienced a brief period of political and religious freedom. However, in the 1960s, King Mahendra began to clamp down on the non-Hindus once again and declared Nepal to be a Hindu state. This was confirmed by the new constitution brought about by the 1990 revolution. Needless to say, religious beliefs and cultural traditions are always influenced by political events, the economic situation of the country, and changing course of history. Nepal is a typical example of the acculturation of Buddhist socio-cultural practices to the mainstream religion.

The status of women is low in Nepal, regardless of religious affiliation. One of the most telling statistics is the maternal mortality level at 475 per 100,000.<sup>3</sup> Women represent only 7.5 percent of those in civil service positions, including the health sector, despite the fact that 90 percent of women are involved in agriculture, the mainstay of the economy, and earn about 50 percent of the household income. Anthropological studies have shown that the status of women is generally lower in the *terai* regions and higher in the hill communities, which includes people of Tibeto-Burmese stock in northern and eastern Nepal. The majority of hill communities were originally Buddhist and gradually adjusted to the predominantly Hindu culture, due to state policy that decrees one country, one language, and one religion.

Although Buddhism is quite progressive in terms of gender parity, Buddhist women in Nepal, as in many other countries, have lost ground in gaining gender equality. When it comes to women, the Buddhist virtue of generosity seems to come to a standstill. The relationship between political power centres and Buddhist institutions is a crucial factor here. Early Buddhist thinkers developed a theory that linked kingship and the Saṅgha. The *viḥāra*, the main hub of Buddhist activity, lent legitimacy to a ruler's



claim to power and fashioned rules to avoid conflict between Buddhist society and state power. T. T. Lewis notes that in the case of Newari Buddhism, the tradition had to adapt itself to Brahmanical society, which diminished Buddhism's ability to maintain textually-defined hierarchies and its classical ideological distinctiveness.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the fact that the Buddha was born in Nepal, Buddhism in Nepal has witnessed many ups and downs. Inscriptions dating to the Licchavi era (c. 450-c. 750) reveal that Mahāyāna Buddhism was very popular in the Kathmandu Valley during this period. During the twelfth century, Vajrayāna or Buddhist *tantra*, a branch of Mahāyāna, flourished throughout the valley. There is evidence that even the royal families embraced Buddhism. The famous account of the Nepali princess Bhrikuti Devi and her marriage to the Tibetan king Songtsan Gampo in the seventh century testifies that Buddhism enjoyed widespread popularity. When the princess was married to the Tibetan king, she took Nepali Buddhist artifacts with her to Tibet as her dowry. She also took Nepali artists with her to build a Nepali-style *stūpa* in Tibet. As Lewis recounts, Newari artisans are said to have erected the Tsuglakhang, the first and most central Buddhist temple in Lhasa. In the fifteenth century, the reputation of Newar artisans had spread so widely that the Mongolian kings of China summoned a Newari artist named Arniko to Peking to build temples and make images for them. In many monasteries in Tibet, the *mantra* “*om mani padme hum*” has been found inscribed in Newari script, called Ranjana Lipi. From these records, it is evident that Nepali artisans were instrumental in the spread of Buddhism to Tibet. Even today, Tibetans and Newar Buddhists regard each other as close cousins, with Buddhism the common link. These transnational relations were possible because of the royal family's strong devotion to Buddhism. Among the most important figure in these relations was Bhrikuti Devi, whose image is enshrined in the important Jokhang Temple of Lhasa.

In Nepal, three different sects of Buddhism exist side-by-side: Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna. Mahāyāna Buddhism advocates the ideal of the *bodhisattva*, who embodies wisdom and compassion, whereas Vajrayāna advocates the rituals of *kriya* and *charya tantra* and presents lucid explanations of Buddhist philosophy. For example, during the *vrata* ritual, the priest tells a story that teaches the eight Buddhist precepts. Another common ritual is the Guru Mandala Pūja, a symbolic offering of the phenomenal world and the practitioner's body to the Three Jewels: Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha. These rituals are limited to men. Religious specialists are married priests, not celibate monks. All the priests are male and, even though the wives of the priests may be present at the *pūjas*, they are subordinate. One unique Buddhist ritual is the Nyaga Sona Pūja, which

a man and a woman (preferably husband and wife) perform together. The major Vajrayāna Buddhist rituals give men and women equal status, called *shakti* and *upāya*, power and skilful means. Even so, this equal status is limited to rituals and does not translate to an equal status for women in society.

Buddhism is thoroughly embedded in popular *pūjas* and rituals. During periods when the rulers treated Buddhism harshly, the priests very skilfully preserved Buddhism covertly in symbolic rituals. Consequently, today it is often difficult to differentiate between Hindu culture and Buddhist culture. Both emphasise the importance of rituals as a means to purify the mind and reach enlightenment. Thus, multiculturalism in Nepalese society has influenced Buddhists to assimilate into the mainstream culture, which is Hindu. Therefore, for many Buddhists, acculturation has resulted in a loss of their own Buddhist culture.

Vajrayāna Buddhism has a long history in Nepalese Buddhist society, whereas the recent history of Theravāda Buddhism goes back only to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The status of Buddhist women in Nepal described in this article is their status reflected in Vajrayāna Buddhism. The indicators I have used to assess the status of women in Nepalese society are the status of the girl child in the family, growing into womanhood, and women's access to divorce.

In both Buddhist and Hindu households, boys are preferred to girls, although a study has shown that Newari Buddhists prefer the first child to be a girl. Buddhists prefer sons over daughters, but not obsessively so. A girl child is selected and worshipped as the Kumari, a goddess, in Newari society. It is believed that girls develop faster than boys, so the rice feeding ceremony for girls is held a month earlier than for boys. Both girls and boys undergo certain rites of passage during adolescence. For example, the Ihii and Bara Tayegu ceremonies are held for girls and the Bratabandh ceremony is held for boys.

As a girl grows into womanhood, she is considered polluted during menstruation. She is not allowed to perform religious rituals, but the taboo is less strictly observed than among Hindus, where she is not only considered polluted, but is treated as an untouchable and confined to a certain space. At the time of marriage, when a girl leaves her natal home, the priest of the girl's family makes a speech in which he hands her over in front of everyone in the wedding procession. He explains to the priest of the groom's family how lovingly the girl has been raised and demands that she be treated with the same affection in her in-laws home. Among Hindus, a similar speech is made, but the expectations are different. The priest says,

“We are handing our beloved daughter over to you. If you adopt and feed her, it is virtuous and, if you kill her, it is non-virtuous.”

After marriage, a Buddhist woman is regarded as equal in status to her husband by her husband's family. She pays respect to her elders and is treated the same as junior members of the family. After marriage, a Hindu woman must pay respect to all members of her husband's family, including those who are junior to her, and assume the lowest status in the family. Among Buddhists, a married woman maintains her identity. She does not change her last name and when she is invited to weddings and other celebrations, the invitation is issued in her name. Among Hindus, a woman loses her identity upon marriage. When she receives an invitation, it is issued in her husband's name. After marriage, Hindu daughters are considered separate from their natal families and do not even mourn the death of their parents. By contrast, Buddhist women continue to be considered very valuable members of their natal families even after marriage.

Among Hindus, sons are necessary for death rituals. It is said that, “Without a son, the door of heaven is closed.” The law permits a man to marry a second wife if the first one does not give birth to a son. After the death of her husband, a woman is considered inferior to her son. The Hindu scholar Manu said, “A female must be supervised by her father while she is a girl, by her husband when she is a woman, and by her son when she is widowed.” Among Buddhists, by contrast, married daughters are essential for performing death rituals. After the death of her husband, she becomes the head of household.

Buddhist women are free to leave their husbands any time they wish. The ritual for declaring a divorce is very simple: a woman just returns ten beetle nuts that were sent from her in-laws' house. She is then free to re-marry. Among Hindus, marriage is a permanent state. If a woman's husband dies or divorces her, she remains her husband's property and cannot re-marry.

Unfortunately, women's status in Nepalese Buddhist society is currently in jeopardy and there are signs that it is on the decline. These days people have begun to issue invitation cards for a woman in her husband's name. Some Buddhist families have begun to expect women to use honourific terms to address even junior members of their husband's family. Some well-to-do Buddhist families have begun observing these customs very strictly.

## Conclusion

Women in Buddhist societies need to be on the alert and revert to Buddhist traditions of learning and culture, not to rituals. Buddhist education is essential for teaching compassion to the younger generation. Compassion is the key principle for ensuring equality among people, regardless of ethnicity, gender, or other differences. Especially in the confused world today, compassion and tolerance must be developed in everyone's mind. Only then will harmony, respect, and understanding bring unity amidst diversity.

## Notes

- 1 Karma Lekshe Tsomo, "Almost Equal: Obstacles on the Way to an International Bhikkhunī Saṅgha," *Bridging Worlds: Buddhist Women's Voices Across Generations* (Taipei: Yuan Chuan Press, 2004), p.177.
- 2 The Khasas are hill people who speak Nepali as their mother tongue. After the invasion of a Hindu Khasa king from Gorkha, Khasa culture, language, and religion were imposed on the Newar community in the Kathmandu Valley.
- 3 UNDP Human Development Report, 1999.
- 4 T. T. Lewis, *The Tuladhars of Kathmandu: A Study of Buddhist Tradition in a Newar Merchant Community*. Ph.D. dissertation (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International), p. 11.

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# BRIDGING CULTURE IN ART



## 9

# Music for the Heart and Soul

*Imee Ooi*

Music can touch our hearts and minds deeply. It is a very effective way of expressing emotions, transferring messages, and even delivering hope. Thus, learning the Dharma through music, using music as a bridge to bring Dharma to people, and letting people embrace Dharma through it, especially in this modern era, is a heartwarming journey of wonder and joy. It is an experience where religion, art, and life come together as one.

I have been blessed in this moment to be able to have a life as a musician dedicated to producing Buddhist music. In this, my belief, passion, work, and happiness are all enjoyed together in one space, one time. Many people have expressed the opinion that I am a gifted person with a special talent to be able to present such auspicious music. However, I believe that everyone has the potential to contribute something to others. It can be anything, from cooking a meal to a simple gesture of care and kindness. Writing music just happens to be something I can do well.

“Where does your inspiration come from?” I am often asked. Eventually, I realised that I do not need a particular environment, setting, or mood to gain inspiration, like being high on a mountain, strolling along the beach of a great sea, watching a sunset, or meditating under the moonlight. I live a very ordinary lifestyle. Many times, the inspiration behind my musical compositions comes simply from the ancient sound of *mantras* and the lines of *sūtras*, from having a strong belief in the Dharma, and a heart that aspires to spread blessing and the teachings to more people. Continuously repeating and chanting these lines as a daily practise often unfolds hidden melodies within. The practise not only brings an endless flow of inspiration in my music, but it has also helped me discover a deeper level of peace, clarity of mind, and especially, the joy of living.

On many occasions, when I have completed a musical work and played it back to listen, I have been very touched by the music and wondered whether it was indeed my creation. Was the music really coming from me? These compositions have always sounded fresh and unfamiliar, like a new message, a new lesson to my heart and soul. As I rejoice at the fruits of my music composition, I quietly attribute it to a guiding hand from beyond, as if some supernatural power is helping me.

Once I asked Bhikkhunī Man Ya, a Buddhist nun whom I respect deeply and feel very close to, whether this feeling of “being guided by a supernatural power” can be explained and analysed logically. She gladly attributes my experience to the revelation of a subconscious mind, the hidden talent of one who is deep in concentration, who puts all her heart and mind into her work in a truthful, kind, and loving way, with a pure mind. “This is only natural, just like a person who is always happy and at ease with the environment will treat others well and with kindness. Naturally, these attitudes will grow and become the virtues of that person. The music that flows from the heart and mind of a person with such virtue will definitely touch the hearts and minds of the listeners, like a transfer of energy,” she said.

I also have very beautiful dreams. They are always about my beloved grandmother who passed on ten years ago. She appears in the form of a *bodhisattva* in colourful lights, giving me words of acknowledgment and encouragement, telling me I’ve done the right thing, telling me to go on and never give up.

Through my little experience over the past ten years, I have learned that good Buddhist music should not be created under strict, rigid conditions like setting a goal or a target beforehand, trying too hard to achieve, or trying to surpass others. I always try to write with a spirit free from attachments. Though this is very difficult, I know it is possible, starting in very small ways. To write well, just let the melodies flow naturally and freely and do not rely on a particular time or mood to write. Hold firm to your faith in the teachings, be truthful about your own abilities, and believe in the benefit of spreading the Dharma through music. In this way, inspiration will flow abundantly and one will see good results.

My advice to friends who want to try writing Buddhist music is to work diligently and study conscientiously to acquire proper knowledge, so as to understand and practise the texts and teachings you wish to write about. Always open up your heart and mind, improve your personal virtue and integrity, be humble, recognise your mistakes, and work within your own abilities. This daily homework will certainly serve as a realistic way of finding the right ingredients, all in harmony, to produce good music.

Regarding Buddhist women’s participation in the field of Buddhist music, I believe that all daughters of the Buddha with musical talent or knowledge can contribute in their own way, at their own level of experience. They can start by nurturing their children at home, teaching music in a Dharma class, singing at a Buddhist gathering, or simply sharing



music that brings positive energy with friends and relatives at any time, at any place.

Buddhist women can also cultivate a trend of sharing Buddhist music in society. The appreciation of Buddhist music, cultural performances, and arts can become part of our daily activities. Such an appreciation is healthy and certainly a way of cleansing our hearts, because the core values and spirit are based on the teachings of the Buddha.

Music transcends boundaries of religion, race, and nationality. Through the years, I have been very pleased and grateful that my music has travelled to many countries and been listened to by people of many religions and faiths, not just Buddhists. I believe that music with positive energy and a positive message can touch a person very immediately. One need not necessarily understand the language or content being expressed. *Mantras* and *sūtras* are not easily learned and understood. Presenting them through music is a gentle approach – a beautiful first impression to the further quest. We should never undermine our ability to contribute to the limitless horizons of spreading the Dharma.

I encourage you and hope that my words will inspire you to embrace Buddhist music and allow its beauty to touch your lives. I hope that Buddhist women will promote Buddhist music and make it part of the artistic culture of our times. I am very grateful to my family for their unconditional love and care and to my friends and colleagues for supporting me with harmonious relationships and a peaceful atmosphere in which to work. I deeply appreciate the messages of encouragement and love received from people all over the world who know me through my music. I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

May all beings be happy and well.

## 10

### **Singing the Dharma: Practise through Music**

*Hyeseon Sunim*

Music is a universal language, as the proverb goes. To put this more technically, it can be said that music is one of the most, if not *the* most, effective means of cross-cultural communication. It is for this reason that music plays a key role in delivering religious messages beyond any language barrier.

This paper concerns *seonbōpka*, a new kind of Buddhist vocal music which both the Korean and international members of the Hanmaum Seonwon play as a form of practise. In what follows, I will first explain *seonbōpka*: its emergence, composition processes, and characteristics. This will be followed by a discussion of the functions and effects of *seonbōpka* on individuals and society. In the last part of the paper, I will present clips from a benefit concert held in 2004, demonstrating the ways in which music can contribute to modernising and globalising Buddhism.

*Seonbōpka* means “a song of Seon teaching.” It was conceived of in the early 1990s by Daehaeng Sunim, the founder of the Hanmaum Seonwon of the Korean Buddhist Jogye Order. The lyrics of *seonbōpka* are usually selected from Buddhist verses written by Daehaeng Sunim, and its melodies are composed by professional musicians. In form, *seonbōpka* is a simple song that anyone can easily learn to sing. Here is an example:

#### **All You Sentient Beings Herein!**

- I. When the river is clear, the moon is reflected.  
When the river is murky, the moon hides away.  
It is not that the moon comes following the clear water  
Or the moon goes away chased by the murky water.  
Getting rid of all agonies, the mind becomes calm.  
When the mind becomes clear and pure  
Buddha appears spontaneously

[refrain]

Green mountain is wordless, running river doesn't leave a trace

Like nature, when the mind is solemn and constant  
That mind becomes the Buddha at once.

- II. The truth of the Buddha's teachings is just like this:  
When the mind is clear, the Buddha appears,  
When the mind is clouded, the Buddha is not visible.  
Buddha did not come from somewhere.  
Buddha did not go anywhere.  
Guarding well against the thieves of the six hindrances,  
Becoming free from the functioning of the six hindrances,  
Sentient beings become the Buddha at once.<sup>1</sup>

*Seonbōpka* generally describes Buddhist teachings or the inner state of a Seon practitioner. It also encourages Seon practise for those who wish to attain equanimity amidst the commotion of day-to-day life. The most important characteristic of *seonbōpka* is that it is not a eulogy dedicated to the Buddha or a *bodhisattva*. The significance of this characteristic of *seonbōpka* can be understood by comparing it with other well-known Buddhist music genres.

Korean Buddhist music is largely divided into the traditional and modern categories, represented by *pōmp'ae* and *ch'anbulga*, respectively. The epigraph of National Master Chin'gam of the Silla Kingdom records that the Seon master Chin'gam studied *pōmp'ae* in Tang China and introduced it to Koreans in the 9<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> *Pōmp'ae* is the oldest and most distinct form of Buddhist music in Korea, and is still performed today on special occasions. It is essentially solemn ritual music that takes three days to be presented full-scale. Only properly trained monastic members are authorised to perform *pōmp'ae*. The "authentic" form of this elaborate ritual art has been transmitted from generation to generation through a strict master-apprentice relation within a narrow circle of monks.<sup>3</sup>

Modern forms of Korean Buddhist music, *ch'anbulga*, are composed in a Western style. They were created in the 1920s under the influence of Christianity.<sup>4</sup> *Ch'anbulga*, which exemplifies the new type of music, literally means "a song praising the Buddha." In spirit, *ch'anbulga* is similar to the music that followers of the Buddha offer to their teacher as an expression of veneration after Dharma talks. Therefore, singing *ch'anbulga* is in keeping with the age-old practise of paying tribute to an enlightened being. However, in actual practise in Korean temples, *ch'anbulga* functions more or less as the Buddhist equivalent of Christian hymns.

The aim of *ch'anbulga* was to modernise Buddhist rituals and thereby popularise Buddhism among the masses. *Ch'anbulga* was welcomed by lay Buddhists for its simplicity and has spread steadily since the 1920s. In the 1980s, Korean temples began to organise choirs as they adopted *ch'anbulga* as a regular feature of their Dharma meetings. This development has contributed to conveying Buddhist messages to a broad range of congregations. Hence, *ch'anbulga* has become the most popular and familiar genre of Buddhist music to Koreans today.

*Seonbōpka* is akin to *ch'anbulga* in that they are both simple songs. However, they differ in content and purpose: *ch'anbulga* is oriented toward external powers, whereas *seonbōpka* focuses on internal ones. In other words, *ch'anbulga* communicates one's faith and devotion, whereas *seonbōpka* is centred on one's mind and meditation.<sup>5</sup> In tone, *seonbōpka* is more contemplative than *ch'anbulga*, although both are fashioned in the Western scale.

The absence of devotional elements in *seonbōpka* reflects several important aspects of Daehaeng Sunim's teaching. Master Daehaeng emphasises that we should probe into our mind instead of seeking help from outside of ourselves. She teaches us to entrust everything to *hanmaum* (one mind) and just observe its empty, yet enormously powerful workings. All of us have Buddha nature within us, which she calls *juingong* (empty owner).<sup>6</sup> Although *juingong* enables and empowers us, many of us are unaware of it, deluded by a tendency to rely on others.

*Seonbōpka* is intended for a broad range of people, and it is especially beneficial for busy urban dwellers. We can sing *seonbōpka* while engaging in other activities. Daehaeng Sunim defines meditation as an everyday activity, not a special action that can be taken only in certain places and times. *Seonbōpka* provides a practical method for putting this teaching into practise. Singing *seonbōpka* is a practise in and of itself, as it helps us to internalise the Buddhist teachings and discover our own Buddha nature.

One of the factors that makes *seonbōpka* easily accessible to everyone is the use of *hangŭl*, the vernacular Korean. Daehaeng Sunim's verse is composed in *hangŭl*, not in literary Chinese, as is the case with many traditional Buddhist poems. The use of *hangŭl* has a particular appeal to younger generations of Buddhists.

As a form of Seon practise, *seonbōpka* also serves as a means of compassionate action on a social level. Members of the Hanmaum Seonwon choirs gather together regularly to practise *seonbōpka* as a group. One of the important activities for them is organising benefit concerts. The Hanmaum Seonwon has held a choir festival every year since the early

1990s. Proceeds from these concerts are all donated for the poor and sick in society. The 2002 concert was for children suffering from heart disease and the 2004 festival was for liver cancer patients.

These charitable activities show how *seonbōpka* functions as a medium of social communication between the Buddhist community and society at large. These activities also nurture a strong sense of unity and fellowship among the festival participants. By singing *seonbōpka* together, they can overcome differences in their educational backgrounds, socio-economic classes, professional orientations, regional affiliations, and even in their monastic statuses as lay or ordained. Moreover, *seonbōpka* facilitates cross-cultural communication between the Korean and international members of Hanmaum Seonwon. A good example is the 2004 benefit, attended by many ethnic Germans from the Kaarst branch temple.

The effects of *seonbōpka* as a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural means of dialogue are described by two Germans of the Kaarst branch temple. One interviewee stated:

They [*seonbōpka*] go right into the heart and guide us to our *maum* [mind]. When we gather to sing together, throwing everything in our melting pot, the songs sound in us and resound in our being. All our fears, worries, and burdens melt away, because our hearts can open. Thus we have all changed through the singing.... Since we started practising for the choir festival in Korea, our hearts expanded and we awakened somewhat, because we could feel and realise ourselves through the singing.... The study of *maum* [mind] or *kwan* [observation] sometimes sounds very abstract,<sup>7</sup> but Kūn Sunim [the Master]'s songs comfort us at once. They reach my deepest inner depths and gives me new courage. It is a meditation and path.

Another interviewee confessed that the words of *seonbōpka* were difficult to understand, but found that singing in a choir had a very positive impact on his/her practise:

When I first heard *seonbōpka*, I had mixed emotions. The Korean words were very difficult and even the German translation was not always easy to understand. But each and every melody was so touching that the music went right to the heart and left an indelible mark there.... During the performance, we all became one voice and one body, and it was a wonderful feeling. During the performance, I wished it would never end. And what is also very astonishing is that

after returning to Germany and singing the songs during the Sunday ceremonies, even today the same experience comes back again and again.

*Seonbōpka* can be a less demanding and more enjoyable way of practise in today's hectic way of life. Buddhist music has a prominent place in Korean culture and *seonbōpka* has reinforced this tradition. At the same time, *seonbōpka* has helped contemporary Korean Buddhist music to reorient itself from a devotional art to a contemplative practise. This critical contribution reflects Daehaeng Sunim's on-going endeavour to modernise Buddhism in Korea's rapidly changing society in an age of the internet and globalisation.

### Notes

- 1 Hanmaum Seonwon ed., *Hanmaum yojŏn* (The Principles of Hanmaum) (Seoul: Yŏsiamun, 1996), p. 733.
- 2 Pak, Pŏm-hun, *Han'guk pulgyo ūmaksa yŏn'gu* (A Study of the History of Korean Buddhist Music) (Kyŏngnam: Changgyŏnggak, 2004), p. 158.
- 3 *Pomp'ae* was traditionally monopolised by monks. However, Donghŭi Sunim learned the art from Master Song'am and was the first *bhikṣuṇī* to become an official heir and Intangible National Treasure for *pomp'ae* in Korean history.
- 4 The first *ch'anbulga* was composed in 1927 by Paik Yongsŏng.
- 5 Daehaeng Sunim points out that "most of the lyrics of *ch'anbulga* tend to postulate Truth as if it were an external object rather than to locate it in us; therefore they may result in distancing us from Truth." *Essentials of Hanmaum* (Anyang: Hanmaum Seonwon), p. 139.
- 6 The term *juingong* contains a linguistic pun. "Jui" means "owner." *Juingong* refers to a protagonist or a central figure. Written in Chinese, the last syllable "gong" also implies emptiness.
- 7 The term *kwan* is from *kwanbōp*, which refers to the method of practise taught by Daehaeng Sunim. It consists of three stages: trust, entrustment, and observation.

## Understanding Buddhism through Fiction Films

Hyangsoon Yi

Film plays an important role as an educational tool today. One teacher explains the main reason for this phenomenon: “Because students live in a media-oriented world, they consider sight and sound as ‘user-friendly.’”<sup>1</sup> Multi-media are particularly useful in presenting religious traditions of faraway cultures. These media include not only educational documentaries but also commercial fiction films.

More often than not, however, fiction films about religion pose questions on their ethnographic authenticity and interpretive objectivity.<sup>2</sup> Although these concerns are often raised in an intra-cultural context, they take on more complex implications in an inter-cultural viewing situation. This paper examines cross-cultural and inter-religious issues related to fiction films about Buddhism, focusing on recent works from Korea: Kim Kidŭk’s *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring* (*Pom yŏrŭm kaül kyöul kŭrigo pom*, 2003) and Chu Kyöngjung’s *A Little Monk* (*Tongsŭng*, 2003).

One of the advantages of using a fiction film as a way of understanding Buddhism is that it provides the spectator with multiple channels of information. The coordination of pictorial, linguistic, and musical inputs enables the spectator to approach abstract religious subjects relatively easily. To the distant observer in the West, Buddhist rituals, arts, and architecture that are unfurled on the silver screen offer a multi-dimensional experience. Such an exposure generates in the spectator a sense of proximity and immediacy with regard to a larger socio-cultural system from which the specific local Buddhist tradition has evolved.

Narrativity is another key factor that makes Buddhist films attractive and more importantly, accessible.<sup>3</sup> The majority of films about Buddhism revolve around a well-constructed plot. In terms of their reliance on a storyline, Buddhist films do not differ greatly from more traditional genres of cinema. The classical narrative film is based on a chain of events that are linked in terms of the conventional notion of cause and effect.

Although visuality and narrativity serve as two chief sources of the cinematic force, they are the sources of trouble as well.<sup>4</sup> Problems of visuality can occur in any type of film. But narrativity in Buddhist films can raise unique issues, because these works tend to incorporate the concept of *karma* into their narrative structure. This Buddhist system of causality does not always correspond to the conventional Western logic of cause and effect which upholds the structure of the classical narrative film. Hence, the notion of *karma*, unless it is skilfully integrated in a film text, can disrupt a narrative flow.

In handling narrativity and visuality, one should keep in mind that they are not separate but interrelated. Their complex interactions can be illustrated by the aforementioned Korean films. Kim's *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter...and Spring* and Chu's *A Little Monk* are commonly applauded for their beautiful cinematography. They present Buddhist monastic life against the backdrop of picturesque natural landscapes. The outstanding camera work of these films provides the spectator with a great deal of visual pleasure.

While the artistic merits of Kim's and Chu's images deserve critical recognition, it should also be noted that their visual language is fraught with Zen mystique.<sup>5</sup> The spatial settings of their film narratives are far removed from the social world. The floating temple in *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter, and... Spring* in particular epitomises a Seon utopia that is disconnected from society and is untainted by its ills. This is, of course, until a girl suddenly shows up in the secluded hermitage. To the spectator unfamiliar with Buddhism and specifically Korean Seon monasticism, the idealised natural environ of the hermitage speaks of Seon as transcendent of the here and now. This other-worldliness could be misconstrued to imply that Seon is esoteric, apart from ordinary everyday reality.

The enchanting visuality of the two films is likely to exoticise the Seon tradition. From a cross-cultural point of view, the seductive power of the Seon in Kim's and Chu's works invites a comparison with D. T. Suzuki's characterisation of Zen as "pure experience."<sup>6</sup> It is for this reason that the emphasis on the exquisite imagery of the monastic space in the two Korean Buddhist films is viewed as harbouring the dangerous Suzuki effects.

Analysed from a Buddhist stance, Kim's and Chu's film narratives also display thematic ambiguities, which are largely attributable to the directors' inadequate use of the concept of *karma*. A good example is found in the elderly monk's self-immolation sequence in *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter and... Spring*. Ritual suicide as an extreme form of devotional act



is known to have been committed in medieval China, but records of its occurrence are not found in the history of Korean Buddhism. The sequence, therefore, represents a historical distortion.

The sensational effect of the sequence results from the filmmaker's fusion of fact and fiction. Kim's dazzling colour scheme makes the already bizarre process of auto-cremation all the more impressive. The sequence is further vested with a sacred aura by insinuating the legendary Seon masters who met their final moments in the full lotus posture. Passing in this mode is a desirable form of death for monks and nuns in popular Korean Buddhist lore. The old monk's ritual suicide, therefore, erases the dividing line between fantasy and reality.

Kim not only appropriates the lore of the fantastic monastic death, but also invents an eccentric ritual. It is simple but outlandish: the old monk denotes his suicide by covering his eyes, ears, and mouth with pieces of paper on which the Chinese character "shut" is written. This is the same form of suicide which the disrobed young monk attempts inside the Dharma hall as a fugitive murderer. Repeated twice in the course of the film, Kim's fabricated custom takes the guise of a pseudo-ritual. In cinematic design, theatricality takes priority over authenticity and his daring colour turns the ritualistic self-cremation process into an exotic visual feast.

The characterisation of the old monk in *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter and... Spring* involves the concepts of *karma* and reincarnation and also the motif of the serpent. The film links the old monk and serpent at the end of the ritual suicide sequence by featuring a water snake swimming near the burning boat. In another scene, a serpent crawls on the top of a small chest in the room of the deceased master. These two scenes, although apart from one another in the narrative sequence, lead the spectator to suspect a meaningful tie between the old monk and serpents. A decisive connection is finally established when the camera deliberately focuses on a coiled serpent on the top of the master's robes. The spectator cannot but read the animal as the reincarnation of the old master.

This conclusion, however, mars the film's moral structure seriously and confuses the spectator. Up to the point of the self-immolation sequences, the film has alluded to the spiritual attainment of the old monk repeatedly. The most dramatic revelation of it takes place when he controls the movement of the boat from afar. Here lies the interpretive dilemma; if he is enlightened, he cannot be reborn as an inferior animal such as a snake. This argument is based on the law of *karma* and also on Korean Buddhist folktales, the majority of which depict the snake as a

symbol of greed. Yet the spectator from a culture in which the serpent is not viewed negatively would read these scenes differently.

Regardless of one's cultural perspective, however, a keen observer would not fail to notice Kim's incoherent treatment of the snake motif. In the first spring chapter, a snake is tortured to death by the mischievous little monk. In the summer, the grotesque scene of mating snakes catches the curious eyes of the young monk. The snakes in this sequence embody sexual desire, foreshadowing the youth's own intense romance with a sick girl who comes to the hermitage to pray.

The serpents and, in fact, all the animals in and around the floating temple are an integral part of Kim's film representation of nature as pristine. What is noteworthy about the animals, trees, rocks, cascade, and other natural elements is that they are strongly evocative of the Christian myth of Eden. In the film, the first sexual union between the young monk and invalid girl reminds the spectator of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. In Genesis, the serpent tempts Eve to disobey God and eat the fruit of the forbidden tree. Persuaded by the wicked animal, she not only eats the fruit but also treats Adam to it. This "original sin" causes them to be expelled from paradise. Kim's idea of Seon is thus loaded with Christian mythical motifs.

Compared with Kim's film, Chu's *A Little Monk* puts more weight on the role of *karma* in the narrative by treating it as a central conflict. It is directly pertinent to the little monk, Tonyōm, who was born of an illicit love affair between a *bhikṣuṇī* and a poacher. Tonyōm is raised by an old monk who knows his mother and the secret behind his birth. Much of the plot deals with Tonyōm's desperate wait for his mother and with his growing interest in the outside world. When a young lady who has lost her own son wants to adopt Tonyōm, the old monk reluctantly agrees but stresses that the boy had better practise in the temple because of his bad *karma*. When the master discovers that Tonyōm has killed hares to make a shawl for his mother, he breaks his promise about Tonyōm's adoption, and the disheartened little monk finally decides to leave the temple in search of his biological mother.

The logic of *karma* in Chu's film may be understandable and acceptable to some spectators, including Buddhists, but it can be unsettling to others. From a cross-cultural point of view, the old monk appears to be a hard-hearted disciplinarian whose blind adherence to the abstract ideas of *karma* and monastic precepts destroys the little boy's chance of happiness in the real world. The master's action lacks human warmth. Spectators may also find it difficult to understand that he denies both Tonyōm's biological mother and his adoptive mother opportunities

to fulfil their motherhood. The question that ultimately bothers the Buddhist audience is whether such an action is truly wise and compassionate.

To an inter-religious spectator, Tony ōm appears to be innocent boy persecuted for no fault of his own. In other words, he is portrayed as a victim of a cruel religious system which requires a child to pay for the wrongdoings of his parents. The filial burden on the little boy is too heavy from the Western humanistic perspective. Also, the nature of the sin Tonyōm's parents are said to have committed is ambiguous; their affair may have been a genuine romance, forbidden as it was. These discrepancies in cross-cultural and inter-religious approaches resonate with the conflicting emotions which the spectator feels toward the tragic human stories and delightfully charming temple scenery.

*Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter and... Spring* and *A Little Monk* demonstrate the growing interest of the Korean film industry in Buddhist temple life. Filmmakers take the movie camera into the inside world of reclusive mountain monasteries, bringing various ethnographic elements of the Korean Seon tradition to the theatre. As is testified by the critical acclaim accorded to Kim's and Chu's works in international film festivals, narrative fiction films about local Buddhist traditions have attracted global attention. This popularity is clearly reflected in the increasing number of Buddhist films in our neighbourhood video/DVD rental shops. As more and more movie-goers in traditionally non-Buddhist countries are exposed to the reel version of Buddhism, a scrutiny of its impact on the cross-cultural audience is emerging as a critical task for all of us.

## Notes

- 1 Linda W. Post, "Frankly, My Dear," *English Journal* 76:1 (1987): 28.
- 2 The controversy over Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) is a representative example. In 1979, a well-known Korean director named Im Kwon-Taek attempted to make a film which was tentatively entitled *Piguni* (*Bhikṣunī*), but he faced fierce protests by Buddhist nuns due to its sexual content. The project was eventually cancelled.
- 3 The term "narrativity" can be understood as a process by which events are organised in terms of a story.
- 4 "Visuality" indicates pictorial qualities that appeal to the sense of sight.
- 5 Although "Zen" and "Seon" refer to the same Chinese character, I distinguish them in this paper in order to draw attention to a complex of cultural nuances and implications which "Zen" has garnered in the West.
- 6 Bernard Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights: An Epistemological Critique of the Chan Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 8-9.

## Enlightenment in the Chan Paintings of Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan

*Jenlang Shih*

Chan painting has its origins in traditional Chinese painting and was greatly influenced by the Chan school of Chinese Buddhism. Traditionally, an artist in the Chan school of painting must be well-versed in both Chan practise and the creative art of painting. In this sense, Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan (1912-2004) was an exemplary modern artist in the Chan school of painting.

Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan was a Dharma master with interests in such diverse fields as education (especially what she called Enlightened Education), Chan meditation, Chan painting, calligraphy, Chinese literature, and Buddhist literature. In her early years in southern Guangdong, Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan received a college education, majoring in literature and art. She then studied art under the guidance of Mr. Jianfu Kao (1879-1951), one of the Three Masters of the Lingnan School, and was recognised with the title, Lingnan Distinguished Female Artist. She later travelled to many places, including Sichuan and Yunnan provinces in China, Southeast Asia, Europe, and the United States, where she was invited to exhibit her art work. She also studied art in India, where she was influenced by the Buddha images in mural paintings at the Ajanta Caves. In 1958, she left the family life and took ordination from Bhikṣu Tanxu of the Tiantai School. With that, she delved further into the world of Buddhism, advocating Prajñā Chan, a school of Chan that pointed directly to the enlightened mind of the Buddha. In this way, her whole life was dedicated to Chan practise.

Because of her dedication to art and her continuous, conscientious practise of painting throughout her life, Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan was able to depict her own experience of Confucian and Buddhist thought and practise through her art. Her Chan paintings convey her Chan practise and the essence of enlightenment. Her creative work therefore points to something beyond the images themselves.

A prominent characteristic of Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan's paintings is her clarity of purpose, which is to convey her life philosophy through art. In the early stage of her career, the central themes of her paintings were generally taken from poetry of the Tang and Sung Dynasties. Later, she tended to use more Buddhist epigrams, poems of Chan masters, and Chan itself as the subject of her paintings. Taking Chan as the theme of a painting invited

viewers to meditate on the core message of Chan. Since the ultimate concern of Chan is enlightenment, her painting made it possible to understand Chan practise and get a glimpse of enlightenment.

In addition to her Chan practise and painting, Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan wrote many essays on the theory of Chan and the practise of Chan painting. These essays have been compiled into several volumes, including *Reflections of Chan*, *Chan Paintings and Chan Words*, *Chan Poems and Chan Masters*, *Chan Talks*, and *Essays on Buddhist Art*.<sup>1</sup> She was therefore not only a Chan practitioner and Chan painter, but also a commentator on Chan painting. In this essay, I will discuss her ideas on Chan painting and illustrate them through some of her masterpieces, demonstrating the contrast between Chan theory and practise.

### **Chan and Enlightenment**

The Sanskrit for *chan* is *dhyāna* (meditation), better known as Zen in the West. In Chinese, the term means “to purify the idle thoughts in the mind” and attain the state of single-mindedness needed to sustain clarity of the mind. Śākyamuni Buddha discovered insights and achieved enlightenment through Chan practise. Chan means to purify our polluted minds of greed, anger, and ignorance, and return it to its original state of clarity. Chan practise is a process of transformation from ordinary human experience to sainthood, and finally to Buddhahood. The Buddhist scriptures called the *dhyāna sūtras*, or texts on meditation methods, describe this practise. The ultimate goal of Chan practise is to attain enlightenment, that is, to achieve the original nature of clarity and non-contamination. From the enlightened state of mind arises the compassion to help all sentient beings to realise their original nature. This is the *bodhisattva* way of practise, which culminates in reaching perfection as a Buddha.

Among Chinese Buddhist schools, the Chan school especially stresses the enlightened state that is attained through Chan practise. “By pointing directly to [one’s] mind, it lets one see into [one’s own true] nature and thus [attain] Buddhahood.”<sup>2</sup> From the end of the Tang Dynasty onwards, *koan* practise was widely used to rid the mind of idle thoughts, thereby realising one’s Buddha nature. After the Tang and Sung dynasties, Chan Buddhism became widespread and influential. The word Chan is pregnant with layers of meaning. It seems to include Chan practise of the Buddhist teachings, enlightening experiences achieved through the practise, and even the state of Buddhahood itself. Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan once commented that the Buddhist teachings are the Buddha’s mouth, while Chan is the Buddha’s heart.”<sup>3</sup> Since the word “Buddha” means awakening, “the Buddha’s heart” means

awakening enlightenment. In this sense, it is evident that Chan's main significance is enlightenment.

Because the primary focus of Chan is enlightenment, it is natural that Chan paintings reveal the essence of Chan practise and a Chan state of mind. It goes without saying that, as a Chan practitioner, Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan embeds Chan meaning in her paintings.

### **Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan's Chang Practise and Theory of Chan Painting**

Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan's Chan practise started at a young age. Even as a young woman, she was in the habit of keeping silence, living alone, and taking solitary walks. Later in her life, she began to study the Chan school of Buddhism and took an interest in Chan meditation. She used to say, "A cave in the mountain is more than enough for sitting alone."<sup>4</sup> In the course of time, her Chan practise developed into a realisation of Prajñā Chan.

According to Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan, form and emptiness are intertwined. Through practising *prajñā*, the wisdom of emptiness, one rids oneself of defilement and vexation. At the same time, through wondrous forms, the complement of emptiness, one is able to cultivate the compassionate spirit of a *bodhisattva*. In this way, from Chan *samādhi* arises the wonder of usefulness. Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan was a living example. Her profound Chan practise was demonstrated in her busy daily activity. In the hustle and bustle of her routine schedule, she was able to maintain as calm and composed as in meditation. At the advanced age of 79, she founded Huafan University, the first Buddhist university in Taiwan. Even in the midst of her teaching job and Dharma-related work, she found time to write and paint. Her capacity to act with grace under pressure indicates the depth of her Chan practise.

Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan's Chan practise was also expressed in her Chan painting and her talks in this field. In addition to her many paintings that creatively express her Chan state of mind, she also wrote many essays on Chan painting and Chan practise, later collected in book form. The central concepts of Chan painting elucidated in these essays are: (1) a Chan painter must be versed in Chan practise; (2) the title of a Chan painting reflects its theme; (3) the subject of Chan painting is primarily landscape, using correct proportions and composition, usually with much left unpainted, suggesting the cool freshness and "suchness" of Chan; and (4) a Chan painting may be painted in one stroke. The following paragraphs elaborate on these four points.

First, a Chan painter must be versed in Chan practise to be original. Otherwise, the so-called Chan paintings could simply be copies of others'

work.<sup>5</sup> As a Chan practitioner, the artist is able to convey to the viewer realisations achieved through the practise, thereby offering the viewer a taste of Chan awareness. In Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan's view, if a so-called Chan painter is not a Chan practitioner, then even if the painting resembles a Chan work, it is at best an imitation, with no inner spirit. By contrast, an artist who is a true Chan practitioner is able to express Chan teachings and insights in a painting. In this sense, the work emerges from a Chan state of mind. To view the painting is to see the artist's Chan state of mind, as the painting reveals it.

Second, the title of a Chan painting reveals its theme. When she was young, Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan was greatly influenced by her mentor, Mr. Jianfu Kao, who taught her that a painting must convey a theme. The perception of this theme precedes the brush, as the saying goes, so that the painting becomes a medium for the artist's thoughts.<sup>6</sup> This saying goes hand-in-hand with the age-old Chinese literary criticism: "A literary work should carry the Tao with it as it goes."<sup>7</sup> Art is a means to express the artist's philosophy of life. A Chan painting represents a Chan message to purify the human mind. Normally the message is suggested by the title, as a prompt to help the viewer understand the painting's hidden meaning. The titles of Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan's paintings make this clear. For example, the titles of two paintings connote Chan practise: "Measuring One's Strength by Crossing a Dangerous Cliff" and "Resting One's Feet at a Cool Place, Not Adding More Wine to the Glass of Fame and Fortune." Two other titles signify tidings from a Chan state: "The Moon" and "Water Reflects the Moon." Another title suggests the persevering spirit of Chan practise: "The Plum Blossoms and I are Able to Withstand the Cold." Other titles suggest different methods of Chan practise: "Neither-walking-nor-sitting Samadhi" and "Hiding One's Six Senses Like a Turtle." Yet other titles depict the state of Chan enlightenment: "Investigate the Tidings of Silence" and "Plum Blossoms Start to Bloom in the Snowy Night."

Third, Chan paintings typically depict landscapes. This is because Chan practitioners are fond of living in forests or near water. In her article, "Landscape Painting and Chan Painting," Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan remarks that the clear sound of water and mountains naturally conveys a note of fresh coolness that goes well with an unrestrained Chan state of mind. Landscapes in nature have a quality of openness, which can inspire a sense of limitlessness in the human mind. In other words, nature exerts a subtle influence on human beings. This reflects Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan's belief in the importance of environmental education. Therefore, a simple landscape speaks not only of the greatness of nature, but also expresses great ease to the viewer. For this reason, the structure of a Chan landscape painting is

important. Special attention is given to the placement of each object, to proportion, and to empty space – what is left out in the picture. To crowd the painting is stifling, whereas emptiness allows space to breathe and to wander the great ocean of nature. Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan once called the empty space in a picture “the corner art.”

Finally, a Chan artist paints in one stroke. Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan aptly named this genre of painting “one-stroke painting” and specifically used the term to designate the paintings of Shihtao of the Ching Dynasty. In Shihtao’s collected paintings, subject and object become merged into one.<sup>8</sup> According to this theory, from the moment the artist begins the painting until it is finished, the mind must be concentrated on painting, without any distraction at all. This requires the artist to conceive the painting and construct it beforehand – to have the landscape in the universe of the mind, in advance. This enables the artist to spontaneously create the painting in just one stroke. Like unchecked water in a river, the universe in the mind is transformed into a landscape on paper. I often attended Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan as she was painting and witnessed her great concentration at the time of creation. She painted whatever came to her mind and took only ten minutes or so to finish a painting. It was as if she was inspired and seized the moment, without hesitation or pause. Once she explained that she had conceived a whole painting before it happened and was compelled, as it were, to give birth to her idea without thinking or stopping.

These four points – Chan practise, the theme, the landscape, and one stroke – allow us a close look and better understanding of Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan’s Chan painting. Her painting was an expression of Chan theory in practise and also an expression of her Chan state of mind. Some examples of her paintings and their interpretations will illustrate these points.

### **The Enlightenment State in Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan’s Chan Paintings**

The subjects of Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan’s Chan paintings were mainly landscapes of mountains and rivers. The painting “Probing into the Tidings of Silence”<sup>9</sup> was composed in France in 1957, when she was in the midst of a trip around the world. At the time, she was 45 years old and still a laywoman.<sup>10</sup> The painting was small, but carried a world of meaning in its tidings of silence. In the painting, a Chan practitioner sits alone in the bottom-left corner, while a bird flies in the upper-left corner. To the right is a mountain cliff drawn in coloured ink. The contrast of the bird in action and the mountain in stillness suggests that the Chan practitioner is the only one able to maintain a balance between these two extremes. By transcending the mere inactivity of the mountain and the over-activity of the bird, the



practitioner's mind is well-tuned and harmonious. To the left is a vast nothingness.

In a painting called "The Moon,"<sup>11</sup> the moon hangs above a lonely mountain, upon which stands an old pine tree. The subtitle, "Restless like a heavenly river; wheeling forever like a lonely moon," conveys the feeling that, just as the universe is abundant with lives upon lives, the light of one's original nature is without end. The image can be likened to the Chan reference to the unborn and undying nature that is both silent and illuminating.

A painting titled "A Shaft of Eternal Light Illuminates from Past to Present"<sup>12</sup> illustrates a line from Chan Master Shiwu's poem:

The absence of birds highlights the  
Emptiness and silence of the mountain;  
The falling shadows of ten thousand pine trees  
Are loaded with greenness.  
The nothingness of *kalpas*  
Clearly belongs to the other side,  
While a shaft of eternal light  
Illuminates from past to present.<sup>13</sup>

This poem compares our thoughts to the mountain birds. If the birds stop flying, light and clarity arise in their empty silence. In the same way, in stillness and silence, ordinary people are able to cross from the mundane to the transcendent. The painting becomes a *koan* that reaches beyond the confines of space and time.

Chan paintings often evoke a Chan state of mind in which images and emptiness become merged in the viewer's mind. As when faced with a *koan*, the painting seems to reveal a hidden meaning. In "Communication of the Mind Transcends Confining Space," two monks face each other from the peaks of two mountains, communicating beyond the limitations of distance. The two mountains face each other as well, completely in balance. The inscription reads: "The wonderful Dharma is crystal clear. The spiritual mind pierces one-pointedly." This verse reminds us that human communication depends on the wondrous mind, which is Chan mind.

The practitioner guards not only the mind, but also the six senses. In "Ride the Six Sense Organs as a Turtle Does,"<sup>14</sup> a practitioner guards the six senses against contamination from the six types of dust, that is, the objects of the six sense faculties: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and consciousness. The image is a turtle that withdraws its head, tail, and four limbs to protect itself. This painting serves as a reminder and a stimulus to Chan practise.

The painting titled “The Samadhi of Neither Walking Nor Sitting”<sup>15</sup> illustrates that Chan practise is in everyday life, not just in sitting or walking meditation. In “Hanging in the Empty Sky, the Bright Moon Illuminates a High Mountain,”<sup>16</sup> the bright moon is a simile for the clear, bright Chan state, in which everything is illuminated. Chan masters compare the bright moon to our innate Buddha nature.

The painting “The Bridge, Not the Water, is Flowing”<sup>17</sup> takes its title from a Chan poem by Fu Dashih (Chin Dynasty):

Carrying a hoe  
While the hand remains empty.  
Still walking, I ride a buffalo.  
Crossing a bridge,  
Yet the bridge, not the water,  
Is flowing.<sup>18</sup>

In this poem, the bridge alludes to the phenomenal world – forever changing and flowing away – while the water symbolises our enduring Buddha nature. What endures should be valued above the impermanent phenomenal world, which is forever fleeting and vanishes away.

The title of another painting, “Rest your Feet at a Cool Place, Don’t Add More Wine to the Glass of Fame and Fortune,”<sup>19</sup> advises us against seeking fame and fortune, which are impermanent and lacking in essence. Craving leads to intoxication and confusion, as if drunk with wine. To rest one’s feet at a cool place means to pay attention to the substance of life.

In “Plum Blossoms Begin to Bloom on a Snowy Night,”<sup>20</sup> we see a Chan practitioner sitting in meditation in a hut, facing a candle. The message conveyed is that enlightenment arises after years of serious practise, like plum blossoms that open and deliver their fragrance in the midst of winter’s severe cold. The title is adapted from Master Hanshan’s poem:

Plum blossoms begin to bloom on a snowy evening  
Their subtle fragrance sent flying in the late night.  
It comes directly to me, sitting alone facing a cold lamp.  
The smell rushes over and opens my nostrils.<sup>21</sup>

Bhikṣuṇī Hiüwan said, “The essence of this Chan poem is like water; its taste is only known by one who tastes it.” The Chan state conveyed in a Chan poem can only be understood by a realised practitioner, just as the taste and temperature of water are revealed to the one who drinks it. It is the last line that makes this verse a Chan poem. The experience of a smell that

rushes over and opens the nostrils is something known, but only to an enlightened Chan master whose eyes, ears, and other senses are fully opened, not to an ordinary writer. Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan often compared the enlightened state to plum blossoms. In another painting, titled “The Plum Blossoms and I are Able to Withstand the Cold,” a nun in yellow robes wanders in an ocean of plum blossoms. The painting is a self-portrait, with Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan’s spirit likened to a plum blossom.

## Conclusion

Among the large collection of Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan’s paintings, only a few have been cited here to illustrate the Chan nature of her art. Hopefully these paintings will help draw more students to the world of Chan painting and Chan practise. Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan has certainly earned a place in contemporary Chan art history and will be remembered for generations to come.

Chan practitioners and painters are rare today, and female practitioners and painters like Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan are rarer still. An examination of her paintings is therefore meaningful both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, the paintings serve as the basis for art criticism; practically, they serve as examples for future generations. The portraits of Chan practise with their hidden messages of enlightenment have artistic value and are also inspiring. Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan’s creative Chan paintings and theoretical contributions to Chan aesthetics demonstrate the non-duality of Buddhist theory and practise. It is hoped that her work will inspire others to carry this heritage forward.

## Notes

- 1 All published by Yuanchuan Press, Taipei.
- 2 This verse is first found as a fixed formula in the *Zuti shiyuan*, dating from 1108. See *Chan Dust*, pp. 228-30; Essay 1, p. 176. Quoted from Heinrich Dumoulin’s *Chan Buddhism: A History*, vol. 1 (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1988), p. 85.
- 3 Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan, *Chan Origin* (Taipei: Yuanchuan Press, 1988), p. ii-iii.
- 4 Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan, *Essays on T’ian-t’ai* (Taipei: Yuanchuan Press, 1988), p. I.
- 5 Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan, *Chan Paintings and Chan Words* (Taipei: Yuanchuan Press, 1988), p. 33.
- 6 Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan, *Essays on Buddhist Art* (Taipei: Yuanchuan Press, 1994), p. 276.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Bhikṣuṇī Hiuwan, *Chan Painting and Chan Words*, pp. 39-45.
- 9 Institute for Sino-Indian Buddhist Studies, *Retrospective of Master Hiuwan’s Fifty-nine Years of Creating Art* (Taipei: Yuan Chuan Press, 1988), p. 178.
- 10 *The Art of Master Hiuwan* (Taipei: National Museum of History, 1998), p. 149.
- 11 Ibid., p. 84.
- 12 Ibid., p. 72.

- 13 Bhikṣu Daoku, *Poems by Eminent Monks Living in the Mountains* (Taipei: Kuangwen Press, 1975), p. 151.
- 14 Ibid., p.120.
- 15 Ibid., p.119.
- 16 Institute for Sino-India Buddhist Studies, ed., *Cool Purity: A Retrospective Cool Purity Exhibition In Commemoration of The Enlightenment Art of Venerable Huiwan* (Taipei: Yuan Press, 2006), p. 19.
- 17 *The Art of Master Huiwan*, p. 86.
- 18 Cited in Ven. Huiwan, ed., *Ch'an Poems, Ch'an Masters* (Taipei: Yuan Chuan Press, 1990 ), p. 39.
- 19 *Cool Purity*, p.27.
- 20 Ibid. p. 20.
- 21 Daoku, *Poems by Eminent Monks*, p.179.

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# BUDDHIST WOMEN IN TRADITIONAL CULTURES



## Contextualising Guanyin: Buddhist Philosophy and the Effect of Gender Divisions

Adrienne Cochran

Guanyin is one of the most beloved deities/*bodhisattvas* in Buddhist cultures. Her unceasing compassion and nurturing qualities are an inspiration to all. Given that she is one of the most prominent women deities/*bodhisattvas* in a Buddhist pantheon filled with men, it is no surprise that women in particular are drawn to Guanyin as a role model. Indeed, in many Buddhist cultures, women are exhorted to be as self-sacrificing and gentle as Guanyin – to always put the needs of their families and friends before their own welfare. However, if women have not been properly grounded in the Buddhist philosophy from which Guanyin arises, then their self-sacrificing efforts may only enforce their low status in society. And, ironically, by remaining in the circumscribed place in which their society sets them, these Buddhist women are less able, ultimately, to do the *bodhisattva* work that Guanyin inspires.

As a remedy for the social biases facing women in Buddhist cultures, women need a thorough understanding of *śūnyatā*, the emptiness of phenomena and self, as it applies to their status in the family and society. Additionally, women should deepen their understanding of *maitrī* (loving kindness) and *karuṇā* (compassion) as it applies to themselves as well as others.

A good mother, sister, wife, or friend is one who has the strength and resources to guide and nourish her loved ones in life's journey. Nurturing others in her community seems to be the special task given to a woman – she is uniquely suited for it given her biological capabilities to give birth and life-sustaining milk, as well as her sensitivity to the psychological needs of her children. Given that, it seems that following the ideals exemplified by Guanyin to be self-sacrificing and constantly giving to others is precisely the way to become spiritually developed and to best serve her family. How many women reading this made a decision just last week to take care of one of her family's needs instead of doing her own meditation practise? Especially for women, there is always a good reason not to meditate or study Dharma. We think, our loved ones need us – we

have no right to selfishly place our own practise above their needs. This is what Guanyin would do, right?

Some might argue that it is not a woman's place to spiritually guide her family; only a man is capable of being a spiritual guide. Indeed, some of the writing in Buddhist texts seems to support this notion. The late Bokar Rinpoche notes, "The status of women in Buddhism often appears to have been inferior to that of men. For example, in the story of Wisdom Moon – the future Tārā – monks did not hesitate to sincerely advise her, for her own good, to aspire to a male existence for future rebirth."<sup>1</sup>

These types of pronouncements seem to justify the belief that it is not women's role, perhaps not even within their ability, to go beyond a certain level spiritually, much less guide others. However, in the story mentioned above, Wisdom Moon, who became the *bodhisattva* called Tārā, explains that it is clear that the monks do not understand the teachings – there is total equality between male and female – there is no distinction in the ultimate reality. The future Tārā goes on to say that she will remain in a female body until all of *samsāra* – the world of suffering – is emptied. Bokar Rinpoche notes that "to understand such wishes," of monks and other important spiritual figures who hoped that females might quickly become males in order to further their spiritual practise, "it is indispensable to look at the context of ancient India:"

The situation of women was considered socially very inferior. Entirely dependent upon men, women had very little freedom or power to make decisions. Doomed to family and domestic tasks, they only had limited access to the dharma. Under these conditions, it was far better to be male than female. In reality, today more than ever, Buddhism does not distinguish men from women, crediting them both with the same spiritual potential and the same capabilities to realize it.<sup>2</sup>

So in early Buddhism, in certain contexts, the primary division of labour within families was along gender lines: women tended to the material concerns of the family, while men tended to the higher, spiritual ones. But, according to Buddhism, social constructs are empty of meaning. That is, the social, political, and economic institutions, which include gender divisions, have arisen as result of past and present collective *karma*. There is no inherent reality or truth to these institutions. Indeed, the status of women has undergone a great shift all over the globe during the last one hundred years. However, the gender division of secular/spiritual labour is still implicitly prevalent in many Buddhist societies.



There is a problem with following this conventional gender division. Most of the pressing problems facing the world today are issues which involve nourishment. Currently, large groups of people need nourishment, as manifested by the rising rate of world hunger. Genocidal wars, natural disasters, loss of sustainable practises, and the current global market economy all contribute to this widespread problem. Many types of sentient beings, especially endangered species, need nourishment as well. Endangered species are losing their habitats and food sources when forests are clear cut, rivers are polluted, swamps are drained, and new developments are built. Even Mother Earth herself is unhealthy. All over the world great extremes in weather patterns are being noted, such as hotter summers, colder winters, and more intense storms. These extremes arise in part as a result of changes happening within significant biosphere systems – shifts that have been intensified over the last two hundred years by the continuous release of pollutants into the air, soil, and water. So, our planet also needs special care.

As a result of their experience in their given social roles, women intuitively understand the root of important global problems. Problems such as poverty, climate change, and ecological destruction stem originally from the type of ego-clinging that develops into the collective *karma* of corporate greed and a massive lack of loving attention towards the needs of others.

The source of these problems is based on a dualistic understanding of the world (self and others) and unhealthy attachments. First, a person egoistically clings to an idea of “self” and from this idea comes the idea of “others.” Next, from the idea of “myself” emerges the concept of “mine.” Arising from the fixation on “me” and “mine,” suffering occurs when a person tries to obtain what he or she desires and then has to deal with the pain, frustration, and anger when his or her expectations are not met.<sup>3</sup>

As any mother knows, a two-year-old struggles to have control of all the toys whether or not he or she is really playing with them at that time. Additionally, a child repeatedly grabs at things yelling “mine!” Not clearly understanding that he or she is being destructive, a two year old may slap others or break things in his or her desire to feel in control or as a reaction when his or her expectations are thwarted.<sup>4</sup> This lack of loving kindness towards others comes from ignorance – comes from not understanding that we are interdependent in our samsaric existence. Being stuck in his or her conceptual division of me/others and mine/theirs, a two-year-old is constantly suffering and creating suffering for others.

The same issues that are present in the daily life of a two-year-old can also be seen in the business decisions made by many multinational corporations – a dualistic understanding of self and others which leads to

greed and a lack of concern for the needs of others. For example, based on their desire for competitive success, some multinational corporations exploit their workers in order to increase their profit margins. These same corporations place their poison-spewing factories in countries which have few pollution controls and then dump their toxic wastes in the same places in order to cut their manufacturing costs. These destructive actions ultimately hurt everyone within Earth's fragile ecosystem. And finally, these multinational corporations convince consumers to buy products that they do not need, so that there may be continuous growth of the market economy. Advertising by these companies create in consumers a constant feeling of craving – and in order to fill this want, consumers compulsively buy more and more things to fill their emptiness. Given the similarity between the root of many global issues and the root of most concerns which mothers of two-year-olds daily experience, the world needs the spiritual wisdom of women just as much as it needs their secular services.

But how can a woman who is physically ill or unhealthy care for her children and family? If the mother is sick and ailing, then everyone in the family suffers from her lack of attention to them. Analogously, how can a woman whose spiritual practise is undeveloped care for her family? Without strong inner spiritual resources, a woman will not be able to teach the values needed by her loved ones. Without strong inner spiritual resources, a woman will not have the wisdom, equanimity, altruism, compassion, and joy to guide her family spiritually during these troubled and troubling times.

And in order to become spiritually healthy, women must do more than model themselves on the self-sacrificing nature of Guanyin. Guanyin is a fully realised being who has a thorough understanding of the emptiness of phenomena and self (*śūnyatā*). She is not caught up in ego-clinging; neither is she trapped by aversion to her ego self. Guanyin is able to be such a powerful *bodhisattva* because she has done the work of accepting herself as she is in the present/here/now – she sees her true Buddha nature. Also, the *bodhisattva* has no delusions about the need to conform to society's claims on her. Indeed, in one story, so that she might pursue her spiritual practise, Princess Miao Shan, the future Guanyin, rejects the strong wishes of her royal family to marry, instead entering a nunnery. Guanyin is clear about her spiritual priorities. To become spiritually healthy like Guanyin, women should examine whether they are experiencing ego-clinging in their own lives.

The same concept of “self” and “other” which leads to ego-clinging and consequently leads to the troubling actions of two-year-olds and corporations is also at the root of suffering which is generated by women's low status in society. Gender divisions in society are just an extension of the

“self” and “other” split. Society does not just deem that men are different from women, but it makes a further distinction by regarding men’s contributions to the community and family as more important than women’s contributions. This line of conceptual fixation leads to the social construct that men are superior to women. The resultant low self-esteem which arises in women is just a negative form of ego-clinging.

Paradoxically, even though women view themselves in a destructive way, they might still have an ego-fixation problem. And, based on this unhealthy fixation, women regard serving others, especially the men in the family, as more important than helping themselves. As Tārā noted, in ultimate reality all is equality – there is no distinction between men and women, between self and other. So, this negative self view is an incorrect one. Therefore, when a woman works to benefit her family, she should keep in mind that not only is her self empty, but also her family members are empty and her actions to serve them are empty as well. That is to say, her family members are not more real and important than she is.

Like Guanyin, a woman can never generate too much loving kindness or too much compassion. The reason why so many women are drawn to Guanyin is because she is such a pure example of perfect love. The *bodhisattva*’s full name is Guanshiyin, which is translated as “perceiving world sound.” Guanshiyin always hears the cries for help of those suffering and responds. Indeed, compassion is the seed which first generates the desire of the Buddhist practitioner to begin on the *bodhisattva* path – the desire to help all sentient beings reach enlightenment – and then compassion continues to be the main motivator for the practitioner to continue his or her spiritual growth. But ultimately this compassion must be combined with the understanding of the complete emptiness of self and other.<sup>5</sup> In Chapter 25 of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the Buddha explains how Guanyin manifests physically in whatever form is most efficacious for saving sentient beings. If the situation calls for a householder, then Guanyin becomes a householder and preaches the Law; if the situation calls for a nun, then the *bodhisattva* manifests as a nun and preaches the Law.<sup>6</sup> Guanyin is not attached to a particular view of the self or to a particular view of physical reality.

To borrow an illustration used by the Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche in his talk in Honolulu on January 29, 2006, the world of *samsāra* is an illusion, like a dream. From the perspective of a *bodhisattva* (like Guanyin), people who are caught up in the illusion of *samsāra* are like people having a dream. When the *bodhisattva* sees someone who is suffering, the realised being knows that it is as though the person is having a nightmare. And even though the person may be experiencing extremely painful events, the

suffering is not real. Out of compassion, the *bodhisattva* tries to help the struggling person wake up – help the person let go of his or her illusion. So, a woman inspired by Guanyin might wish to study the Dharma and practise meditation in order to understand this ultimate level of *bodhicitta*. Her Dharma study and meditation practise are the tools by which she cleans up her residue of ego-clinging that impedes her ability to manifest this deep level of compassion.

But how may a woman have true loving-kindness (*maitrī*) and compassion (*karuṇā*) for others if she does not first love herself? That is to say, how can *maitrī* and *karuṇā* be only outwardly directed if all are equal and empty in the ultimate reality? According to Pema Chödrön,

When we hear about compassion, it naturally brings up working with others, caring for others. The reason we're often not there for others – whether for our child or our mother or someone who is insulting us or someone who frightens us – is that we're not there for ourselves.<sup>7</sup>

If a woman sincerely desires to be compassionate, then she should be mindful of her thoughts, words, and actions as they apply to herself as well as others. This takes reflection and meditation. That is to say, we need to take the time to get to know ourselves. Pema Chödrön notes,

Inquisitiveness or curiosity involves being gentle, precise, and open – actually being able to let go and open. Gentleness is a sense of goodheartedness towards ourselves. Precision is being able to see very clearly, not being afraid to see what's really there, just as a scientist is not afraid to look into the microscope. Openness is being able to let go and to open.<sup>8</sup>

Being gentle, precise, and open are qualities that a woman may develop through meditation and reflection. By being gentle with herself, a woman does not harshly judge her actions, emotions, and thoughts, but merely notes them. For example, she merely notes, “I feel angry when my mother-in-law calls me a bad influence on my child.” By being precise, she notices possible habitual patterns or reactions, such as becoming defensive or fearful when someone questions her ability to nurture. She might also ask questions, like, “who is it who gets defensive and fearful?” Calmly trying to ascertain the location of her ego self might help the woman gain perspective in a certain situation as well as enriching her understanding of *śūnyatā*. When a woman is open, she relaxes into an experience and trusts being fully present in the moment, wherever it takes her. Since she is no

longer making conceptual judgements about what is good and bad, the woman no longer tries to have only good experiences, while shying away from bad ones. Instead, when her child is being extremely fretful and difficult to manage, she may observe, “this experience is intense.” Since she is fully present to the intense experience, she has the clarity to see the suffering of her loved one which is the source of the fretful behaviour. By being present, her compassionate response deepens. By experiencing gentleness, precision, and openness in this manner, the woman slowly chips away at her ego-fixations and false concepts about reality, which enables her to be more present to her loved ones.

When a woman is dedicated to getting to know herself, she is making a commitment which takes time, especially time to study Dharma and practise meditation. However, this process has the potential to yield rich rewards by enabling her to deepen her understanding of the nature of reality as well as embody *maitrī* and *karuṇā* on entirely new levels. A woman needs to take the time to develop her own spiritual awareness so that she may then be fully present to take care of the needs of her family – both on the physical and spiritual levels.

In one well-known story, Guanyin gives her father one of her eyes and one of her arms so that he might be healed. This is an extreme act of love and devotion, but Guanyin also has a complete understanding of the ultimate emptiness of her body which is the *skandha* of form, one of the five aggregates that make up her “self.” Moreover, the *bodhisattva* is a skilled meditation practitioner; so she is aware of her true Buddha nature. Her supreme self-sacrifice emerges out of her profound spiritual awareness. Guanyin is indeed an awesome role model – one that any Buddhist might emulate. But in order to achieve Guanyin-inspired acts, women should also study the Dharma of *śūnyatā*, practise meditation, and have *maitrī* and *karuṇā* for themselves as well as others. Only then may women fully live up to the Guanyin ideal which society exhorts them to follow.

## Notes

- 1 Bokar Rinpoche (trans. Christine Buchet), *Tara: The Feminine Divine* (San Francisco: Clear Point Press, 1999), p. 123.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, “No Ego,” *Bodhi* 7:4 (2005): 24.
- 4 Similar ideas are expressed in the documentary, “Words of My Perfect Teacher,” directed by Leslie Ann Patten, with Dzongsar Khyentse Norbu. National Film Board of Canada, 2004.
- 5 Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche, *Wild Awakening* (Boston: Shambhala, 2003), pp. 208-209.
- 6 *The Lotus Sūtra*, Chapter 25: “The Universal Gate of Bodhisattva Kanzeon”, trans. Burton Watson. <http://www.sgi-usa.org/buddhism/library/Buddhism/LotusSutra/text/Chap25.htm>.
- 7 Pema Chödrön, *Start Where You Are* (Boston: Shambhala, 1994), p. 4.
- 8 Pema Chödrön, *The Wisdom of No Escape* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001), pp. 4-5.

## Buddhism, Shamanism, and Women in Korean History

*Jeong-Hee Kim*

The sustainability of the earth and humankind is at the forefront of today's most talked-about topics. There is a growing awareness of the need to reform modern life across the political, economic, social, and ideological spectrum. An exploration of our present ecological world constitutes the first subject in our search for an alternative, sustainable world. In Korea, Buddhism is the religion with the largest number of followers and a majority of these are women. In Asia, eco-feminism (or bio-feminism, as I have termed it<sup>1</sup>) cannot be fully grasped without understanding the relationship between Buddhism and women.

Throughout history, what Korean Buddhist women knew was not the Buddhist philosophy of life. Rather, they had a grassroots comprehension of religion that was heavily influenced by shamanism and traditional thought. Korea received Buddhist *sūtras* written in Chinese characters in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, and produced only a handful of Buddhist *sūtras* in the Korean language, beginning in the 15th century. The teachings of the Buddha in the *sūtras* became widespread in the 1980s when most of the important *sūtras* were translated into Korean and made available to Korean readers. Before their translation into Korean, the Chinese-language *sūtras* were not understood by anyone other than Buddhist scholars or Buddhist priests studying under their masters. Buddhists at the time could learn the essence of Buddhism only through the teachings of senior monks.

This paper focuses on Buddhism in the past, Buddhism today, and the influence of both on Korean women. It addresses the following issues: first, the mixture of Buddhism and shamanism found in shamanist narratives; second, Korean women's encounter with the philosophy of Buddhism; and third, the significance of the shamanist narratives – heavily mixed with Buddhism – on modern-day followers. This paper does not view the narratives as petrified historical relics doomed to historical oblivion. Rather, it suggests that the narratives are a treasure trove of cultural texts that can enrich Korean and Buddhist culture.

### **The Co-existence of Korean Shamanism and Buddhism, and the New Transition**

The Buddhism that Korean commoners accepted throughout history was not the Buddhism transmitted through the *sūtras*. The *sūtras* in Chinese characters were meaningful only to a minority of elite high priests. The people partly absorbed Buddhist beliefs in the context of native or shamanistic traditions faithfully passed down from generation to generation, rather than accepting Buddhism as a new religion. In Korea, this compromise between shamanism and Buddhism is observed in two aspects: first, shamanism appropriated Buddhist content and, second, Buddhism incorporated shamanistic beliefs and practises.<sup>2</sup> Buddhism, once absorbed into shamanism, gained a new life more as an indigenous faith than as a form of orthodox Buddhism. In this case, aspects of Buddhism were borrowed merely as a means to enrich the native faith. Meanwhile, instances of Buddhism's acceptance of indigenous faiths and rituals have no bearing on Buddhist philosophy. This is obvious from the fact that Korean Buddhist temples have local, or grassroots shrines called *samseong-gak* (lit., three god/esses shrine).

Belief in *samseong* (the three god/esses) was generated as a hybrid form of local religion and Buddhism after the latter was introduced to Korea. The shrine is usually located behind the temple and holds sacred images of god/esses and an altar portrait of the Buddha. In *samseong-gak*, there are three local god/desses of shamanism or Buddhism: the mountain god/dess, Deokseong, and Chilseongsin. The mountain god of each temple is represented either as an old man with white hair and long mustache, or as a middle-aged female mountain spirit with a tiger, who is also an embodiment of a mountain god.

Deokseong is also called Nabanjonja and there is a diversity of opinion about his identity. One opinion holds that he is identical with Dangun, the legendary founder of Korea (ca. 2333 BC). Another opinion is that he is Bindurujonja, the first among the Buddha's followers, the sixteen *arhats*. The last and most popular opinion is that he is a saint seeking enlightenment without a master. He is believed to dispense good fortune, prevent disasters, and grant wishes.

Belief in Chilseongsin was generated as a mixture of Taoism and Buddhism. Chilseong means "the seven saints of the Big Dipper." These "seven saints" are worshipped as gods who bestow wealth and talent, ensure the long life of offspring, and provide rain and a bountiful harvest.



Old temples in Korea all have one among these: *samseong-gak*, *sansin-gak* (mountain god shrine), *deokseong-gak*, or *chilseong-gak*. Recently constructed temples have tended not to include such shrines. This can be explained by the fact that people in Buddhist circles feel ashamed about having a shamanist shrine at the site of a Buddhist temple. But many women still hold to their faith in the god/dess of *samseong-gak*, believing that their prayers to the deities there will be realised.

By contrast, *gut* (Korean exorcism) narratives provide an example of local shamanism's acceptance of Buddhism, rather than Buddhism's acceptance of the native faiths. The *gut* has been a religious ritual of the grassroots/local communities who perform them in order to expel *han* (resentment) from the local community. Such practises existed long before the transmission of Buddhism to Korea. *Han* has been the emotion and culture of the grassroots. The *gut* exorcism removes the people's suffering, ridding them of feelings of aggression, revenge, or chagrin. In this respect, *han* is similar to the Buddhist concept of compassion, which is one of the four pure practises. It is important to note the incorporation of Buddhist beliefs into *gut* narratives.

For example, in the *samseung halmang* exorcism, grassroots women explain the origin and history of Samsin and tell the story of Maengjinguk's daughter, who was born between the Tathāgata, her father, and Śākyamuni, her mother. The Supreme Being, the highest of the heavenly gods of Taoism, royally christens the baby as Saengbul Wang.<sup>3</sup>

The Korean word *samsin* is comprised of two elements: *sam*, meaning a placenta which envelops the fetus *in utero*, and *shin*, meaning god/dess. Like the word *deity* in English, *sin* has no gender and may refer to either a god or goddess; in fact, *sin* denotes both god and goddess. Accordingly, Samshin is the god/dess of life. The fact that the *samseung halmang* exorcism explains the local life god/dess's origins as the child of Tathāgata and Śākyamuni Buddha reveals that the *gut* narratives adopted themes from Buddhism.

Buddhism was introduced into Korea in the fourth century through China. The new religion was transmitted mostly to the elite classes of the three states on the Korean peninsula: Goguryeo, Baekjae, and Silla. The narratives of the *samseung halmang* exorcism allow the Buddha, the icon of the new religious power, to be incorporated as a parent to the local life god/dess. This was a double strategy, serving as a means to gain acceptance for the new upper class religion and, at the same time, preserve indigenous identity.



The god/dess controlling life was viewed as an all-powerful, supreme Great God/dess as early as 3000 or 4000 BC. The Great God/dess was demoted to a lower grade than the supreme male god. The position of Samsin in the *samseung halmang* exorcism is lower than that of the Supreme Being, the highest of the heavenly gods of Taoism. Nevertheless, the indigenous people never believed in the Supreme Being of Taoism, nor in the Buddha, despite the depiction of Buddha Śākyamuni as a parent of Samsin. Instead, they worshipped Samsin. Korean shamanism embraced the gods of Taoism and Buddhism, on the one hand, and believed in Samsin, the local life god/dess, on the other hand. Samsin thereby ascended to the same level of divinity as the Buddha and the Supreme Being of Taoism.

In the *jeseok* exorcism (the Korean shamanic rite celebrating the harvest god), another version of Samsin's story, Samsin is likewise called a Buddha. Here, too, indigenous women incarnated Buddhism in an accessible form. In one stream of formal Buddhist discourse, leaving home is the shortcut to enlightenment, which excludes women who give birth and run a household. What is encouraging to these women is a discourse about people living a life similar to theirs who are raised to the level of a divine being. They collectively created the Buddhist discourses they needed and internalised them by creating and sharing stories about figures like Danggeum Aeggi, the heroine of the *jeseok* exorcism. In this story, Danggeum Aeggi and a priest get married and raise a child. The *jeseok* exorcism was widespread, in various versions and every local area, evidence that this discourse was a living cultural narrative that affirmed women.

*Sekbosangjeol*, written in the Korean script, was compiled in 1446. The book was the first Korean version of the Buddha's life history, edited from several Chinese *sūtras*. But most *sūtras* were in Chinese, which meant that, except for a few elite priests, most people could not understand Buddhist thought. Under these circumstances, ordinary people could not access Buddhist beliefs directly. This is confirmed in the *gut* narratives. Although the percentage of Christians increased after the introduction of Christianity in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, most ordinary people relied on shamanism for spiritual consolation until the 1960s.

While the Buddhist practise of praying for compassion is still prevalent, it was generally after the 1980s that opportunities opened up for women to directly encounter Buddhism as a system of thought. I consider this is a turning point in Korean Buddhist history. The context of Buddhist modernisation, in several aspects, served as a background to these developments.

First, with the translation of the *sūtras* into the vernacular, Korean Buddhists were able to independently read such major *sūtras* of Mahāyāna Buddhism as the *Diamond Sūtra*, *Prajñāpāramitāhridaya Sūtra*, and *Garland Sūtra of the Buddha*. Faithful female Buddhists have routinised ascetic exercises and purifications based on the *sūtras* by reading and transcribing them. Furthermore, since pocket-sized *sūtras* began to be manufactured, Buddhists have been able to read the *sūtras* anywhere, even on the subway. Second, the development of information technology and media, including books, videotapes, cassette tapes, TVs, and VCRs have enabled Buddhists to repeatedly listen to or watch great masters teaching on the major *sūtras*. Third, innovative Buddhist movements, such as Master Gwangdeok's modern dissemination movement, the Jeongto Society movement, and Indramang movement, began and have been continued until today. Weon Buddhism, a transformation of the Korean way, first opened its doors to modernisation in the 1920s and has been exemplary in its *bodhisattva* activities.

To a certain degree, the modernisation of Buddhism seems to have influenced mainstream Buddhist circles that focussed on praying for compassion. Since the latter half of the 1980s, temples began offering periodic educational programmes to teach the basic Buddhist principles. The Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism integrated these kinds of programmes into the curricula of Buddhist colleges. A person who graduates from a two-year course at a Buddhist college and passes an exam is authorised to spread Buddhism. These disseminators take charge of educational activities to transmit the teachings of Buddhism, targeting Buddhist clubs in elementary and middle schools, universities, and prisons. They are primarily housewives and most of their activities are undertaken on a voluntarily basis.

The benefits acquired through systematic education in Buddhist thought and regular ascetic exercises are quite surprising. Practitioners live a life of small emancipations, diffusing conflicts through repentance, endurance, purification, and by handling private and official relations smoothly. The pacification of one's own mind brings about changes in relationships with others and society, as well as changes within oneself. Adherents not only experience peace in their personal relationships with husbands, in-laws, and co-workers, but by continuing their practise and study of the teachings, they also graduate from a Buddhist college operated by their association and may even acquire a certificate that qualifies them to teach Buddhism. While going through this process, they also hold memorial services to practise the deeds of a *bodhisattva*.<sup>4</sup>

These Buddhists, involved in learning Buddhist thought and performing ascetic exercises and *bodhisattva* activities no longer depend on *gut*. *Gut* is respected these days, not as part of a religion close to the grassroots, but as a cultural heritage. Koreans today, more than ever before, rely not on *gut*, but on ascetic exercises, Buddhist meditations, *yoga*, and so forth, to resolve their problems and purify their *karma*.

### **Is it Good that Shamanism is Disappearing Today?**

As explained above, Korean shamanism and Buddhism have shared a friendly coexistence for about 1,600 years. But Buddhists these days can easily listen to lectures on Buddhist thought, read aloud *sūtras*, and perform legitimate ascetic exercises, things that only religious specialists could do in the past. This is a revolutionary change that may be called spiritual progress. In accordance with these changes, Buddhism has come to exist independently, without having to co-exist with shamanism. I suppose that similar changes have taken place in all Asian countries. If so, is it enough that shamanism is preserved as part of an ancient cultural heritage that is displayed only at cultural events? I suggest, instead, that shamanism be seen as a living cultural heritage, which can still have a vital effect on human life. Shamanism has lost its prestige as a powerful religion, but its narratives need to be regenerated as major cultural texts in the postmodern age. The narratives of *gut* contain stories of great value for human beings living in an age of ecological crisis. Buddhism, shamanism, and other religions can co-exist through such a revival.

The first reason we need to revive *gut* narratives is that most of them are the creations of women, that is, non-patriarchal discourses. *Gut* narratives contain women's unbounded spirituality, a mentality free from slavish femininity, despite the pervasiveness of patriarchal ideologies. *Gut* narratives were transmitted orally, as a means for women suffering miserably under patriarchal domination to rescue themselves. *Gut* narratives are not history, but "her-story," melting women's *han* by giving them a life principle to hold tightly in their hands against the encroachment of patriarchal psychology in their consciousness. *Han* is a feminine, Korean kind of agony. A person with *han* does not go into a rage, but instead tries to melt her (or his) own agony away. A typical text that exemplifies this is the Baridegi narrative, in which Princess Bari goes to Seochonseyeogkuk in ancient India, takes miracle water, returns with it, and brings back to life the dead parents who had abandoned her. *Gut* narratives like this, together with the concept of *han*, are similar to Buddhist teachings that teach us that

we can attain inner peace if we can abandon the three poisons of greed, hate, and blindness. There are a few feminist readings of Korean shamanic narratives and I suppose there are similar narratives in other non-Western countries. In my opinion, we can find a foundation of Asian feminism in the oral and written texts of Asian shamanism, the basis of Korea's indigenous religion.

The second reason to revive the *gut* narratives is their ecological value. Shamanic tales allude to an animistic view of nature in which every component of the universe has its own life or soul. All things, ranging from the souls of the dead, authority figures, animals, trees, plants, mountains, lands, rivers, and celestial bodies such as the sun, moon, and stars, are objects of reverence.<sup>5</sup> Gregory Bateson said that animism, which expansively adopts the concept of personality and mind to nature, and totemism, which considers nature and human beings as the same, seem better suited and less damaging than those beliefs that commit the fundamental error of dividing the structures immanent in human relations, society, and ecology, from the mind.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, while confirming that the original forms of fairy tales have narrative and mythological schemes, human beings are sure to experience animistic thinking during childhood, no matter how precocious they may be. Regardless of how far humankind and society evolve, fairy tales defy logical schemes. Childhood seems to be a process of passing through the initial stage of phylogenic evolution. Furthermore, according to Jung, a myth can be the reflection of group unconsciousness. Consequently, the fairy tales we read to children shape their unconscious mind. The reason the unconscious mind is significant is that our behaviours are not always conscious, sometimes being influenced more by unconscious influences, sometimes to an overwhelming extent.<sup>7</sup> Herein lies the importance of myths and fairy tales that reflect the group unconscious and shape descendants' unconscious via existing narrative content.

Reading Greek and Roman myths is extremely popular in Korea these days, among both children and adults. Children read about Western myths in comic book serials that initiate them into the world of books. In non-Western Korean culture, this boom is excessive and even reveals a post-imperialist nuance. Despite the importance of Greek and Roman myths in Western societies, they are predominantly patriarchal in character. So, while it is good to let Korean children read them as secondary or tertiary texts, as primary reading for children, these myths can be harmful rather than instructive.

The aim of the existing feminist movement has been to change patriarchal institutions. So the essential feminist issue in the formation of non-patriarchal unconsciousness has not been given sufficient importance. When girls become disheartened at the plights of female characters, and boys believe Zeus is the model male, how can they create a world where both genders are happy together? If not with Zeus and Aphrodite, then what should we form a new unconscious with?

Let's imagine that, instead of playing with Barbie dolls, swords, guns, and fighting robots, or reading Cinderella or the Mermaid Princess, children grew up listening to grand-scale and pro-nature shamanic tales from parents, grandparents, or Buddhist temple teachers through oral stories or picture tales. Non-Western societies have many such stories and there are such narrations in Korea, such as the Old Woman Seolmundae, Mago, Jang Gil Sohn, Baridegi, Samseung Halmang, and Changsega. What if these tales were produced as animated films to give children opportunities to experience these stories on large screens? And imagine those tales become as familiar as Romeo and Juliet or Chunhyang-jeon<sup>8</sup> among children! Would the world be different when they became adults? I, as a mother who raised two children with non-patriarchal stories and toys, intuit that meaningful changes would be brought about in society.

The Pentagon invaded Iraq with the justification of finding terrorists and weapons of mass destruction, bombed civilian areas, and killed unarmed civilians. Humankind's cultural assets, the ancient heritages of the National Museum in Baghdad, were mostly destroyed by carpet bombing. These barbarities cannot be justified even in the light of Americans' anger and fear from the terror of 9/11. What we see here is a total insensitivity toward life and other religions and cultures. There is a total insensitivity to life in the abyss of American support for the Iraqi War. Koreans have also supported sending Korean troops to Iraq, falling into the same abyss. There will not be an end to war, nor an end to arguments for the justification of invasions, if we do not recover a sensibility that values life. This sensibility toward life can be recovered if we build a culture that enhances and promotes a sensibility that upholds life. Modern people cannot easily step out of the mainstream school system and the modern prejudices that it implants firmly within us. The modern school system, with its noble educational objectives, has been teaching us that such natural things as water, soil, and air are non-living things. Most modern people have come to view white/non-white people, Western/non-Western, men/women, mankind/nature, mind/body as opposites and mutually exclusive polarities through the hierarchical, dualistic teachings of Western modern thought.

I believe that the power by which we can overcome these obstacles lies equally in the non-Western, pro-nature narratives of shamanism, as in the teachings of the Buddha and Christ. These narratives and teachings suggest a sensitivity toward life as a supreme value. Love and compassion are sensitive toward life in ecological terms. So I, as a bio-feminist – the Korean version of eco-feminist – think that the books we recommend as primary texts for children should be narratives from shamanic tradition, Buddhist tales, Christ's Sermon on the Mount, and Aesop's Fables, rather than patriarchal stories. Humankind would grow nearer to peace as children in every country would have many stories from shamanic narratives. In the present state of affairs, it is unimaginable for children to hear goddess creation stories about nature, the universe, and human life during weekend children's schools in church.

How about Buddhism? Is it likely that children will hear various creation narratives from many different cultures in children's services at Buddhist temples? Korean Buddhist tolerance of shamanic shrines in their temples, namely the tradition of co-existing with other religions, suggests that this would not be difficult. The tradition that some elite priests are ashamed of, should, in fact, be a source of pride – namely, encouraging dialogue among various religions. These traditions need to be passed down in new contemporary ways, because shamanism is losing its prestige as a religion. What I notice is that shamanic narratives are grand texts on life, which could powerfully influence the substitution of a life culture for our contemporary culture of death. I expect Buddhism to join the revival and continuation of this grand text on life. Samseong-gak could be born again in a new mini-museum, which lets us hear the voices of mountain spirits and the earth goddess. In this way, I think Buddhism and shamanism can live happily together.

## Conclusion

Popular Buddhism in Korean history was not Buddhist thought nor the teaching of the Buddha proper, but an indigenous faith into which Buddhist themes were absorbed. The indigenous faith that can be considered the traditional grassroots life philosophy of Korea has been transmitted in the form of *gut* narratives. *Gut* narratives represent/embody the history and culture of women, a culture based on an animistic world view, in which women have maintained their spirit as the masters of the process of life within a patriarchy-centred historical reality. It can be concluded that we stand at a crossroads between choosing whether to simply conserve the

remains of women's culture as fossilised cultural remains, or use it as a clear path to transfer the spirit of mothers who create stories for today's daughters.

It does not seem that Buddhism as a pro-life philosophy, and the shamanic narrations that accepted Buddhism as their subject matter, are incompatible. We can aim to become a *bodhisattva* or live a life of compassion that internalises Buddhist notions, growing up as children with an internalised pro-life sensibility by being close to shamanic tales and becoming parents who transmit these tales to our children. This does not apply merely to Buddhism. Korean culture has already matured and gained a superb ability to fuse disparate elements. It does not consider it strange when a Christian prays on a mountain and places a pebble on a small stone tower. Life is not separation, not two.

### Notes

- 1 Jeong-Hee Kim, "Bio-Feminist Ethics Found in the Lives of Buddhist Women: A Little Emancipation at a Time," *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 11:3 (2005).
- 2 Tae-Gon Kim, "Compromise Between Shamanism and Buddhism," *Korea Folklore* 19 (1986).
- 3 Uk-Dong Kim, *The Living Buddha King* (2000), pp. 46-47.
- 4 Kim, "Bio-Feminist Ethics."
- 5 Uk-Dong Kim, *Korea's Green Culture* (Seoul: Munye, 2000), p. 29.
- 6 Gregory Bateson, *Mind and Nature: A Necessary* (Unity: Bantam Books, 1980).
- 7 The degree of existence's transparency determines whether consciousness and unconsciousness are identical. K. G. Jung, *Analysis of Unconsciousness* (Seoul: Hongshing, 1990).
- 8 A Korean classic pre-modern novel about two lovers, Chunhyang and Young Master Yi.

## 15

# Teaching Thien Vietnam across Cultures

*Hue Can*

The lineage of Thien Vietnam (Vietnamese Chan or meditation) goes back to Bodhidharma, the twenty-eighth patriarch of Indian *dhyāna* (meditation). Bodhidharma brought his teachings to China and thus became the first patriarch of Chinese Chan. The second patriarch in this lineage was Hui Kha and the sixth was Hui Neng. Later, in Vietnam during the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the king of the Tran Dynasty became the first patriarch of Thien Vietnam. These patriarchs taught that enlightenment does not come from scripture, but from mind-to-mind transmission. Only through practise can one have a clear mind like a luminescent moon in a cloudless sky. The essence of Thien is that we are practitioners, not scholars. Everyone can become a practitioner of Thien by following the instructions.

Meditation is one of the best ways of sweeping out the mind so that it becomes clear of obstructions. After mastering the two primary steps of counting the breath and following the breath without counting, there are four principles of Thien practise: awareness of thought, senses meeting sense objects with no attachment, not getting caught on either side, and living with the truth. These are not necessarily in any order. Any of them will lead to clarity and ultimately to the true self, if practised regularly and steadily. Be careful not to overdo or neglect the practise.

### Awareness of Thought

The first principle is realisation or awareness of thought. When we meditate, we realise that we are thinking, but we should not follow our thoughts. We can become aware of how thoughts arise, one following another. As we watch the mind, aware of thoughts but not following them, we are sweeping away the dust that clouds our Buddha-nature. When the thinking stops, there remains only calmness, which is the real mind. The thoughts are like visitors to our house. We receive and entertain them, but don't follow when they leave.



## **Senses Meeting with Sense Objects, No Attachment**

The second principle concerns when the senses meet the sense objects. When the eyes see something, stop at that. Don't create anything else. The six senses should meet with the six sense objects only, then we will not fall into illusion. Usually the consciousness or perception is formed and this leads to suffering:

One rainy evening a Zen master asked his attendant, "Do you hear anything?" At once the monk replied, "I hear a toad screaming as it is attacked by a frog." "You disappoint me," said the master.

Do we do this? If we make all kinds of assumptions about what our six senses come into contact with, we go astray like the monk in the story.

When we look at the ocean, it is only water. There are waves, there are bubbles, there is foam. All these have their causes - the wind, the pull of the moon, the changing temperature. But can we just see the water, only water, without a second thought?

In this story the monk disappointed his master by adding his interpretation to what he heard. Instead of just hearing the sound of the frogs and toads, he thought that one was attacking the other and probably saw this in his mind's eye as well. This does not mean that we close our eyes when situations require action or our help. Indeed, we provide assistance when necessary. But once our assistance is completed, the mind is clear and there's no more attachment. This is like a river reflecting a swan flying overhead. Once it's flown over the river, there's no more image.

Two monks come upon a woman who wants to cross a river, but cannot do it alone. One monk picks her up and carries her across. Going on their way, the other monk is seething with anger, because he thinks his companion has broken his vow of no physical contact with females. So he reports the incident to the chief abbot. The abbot asks the first monk to account for his behaviour. The monk replies: "I carried the woman across the river and then I set her down on the bank. It seems my brother is still carrying her."

Be done with what is done. Also, if you do something for someone or give something to someone, that, too, is finished. Do not consider that person indebted to you.

And if at some time we step in a pile of dung, what should we do? Leave it there to annoy and contaminate us? Amputate our foot and be always lame? Wouldn't we rather scrape it off and be done with it?

### **Don't Get Caught on Either Side**

There is no absolute right or wrong. It changes according to time, situation, and other factors. But in our daily life we take sides and usually prefer the good over the bad. Practising meditation helps us avoid getting caught on either side. But how? Drop one side first and when there is only one side, then there is no side.

A woman had a baby boy who was so small and ugly that she didn't want it, so she gave it to a monastery. The monastery had no facilities to look after a baby, so the monks strung a net between the branches of a tree in the monastery garden where the child could sleep. Despite this unpromising start in life, the child grew into a wise monk and he still lived in the net. One day a mandarin passed by the temple. He was being carried in a beautiful palanquin by his servants. When he looked up and saw the net, he called to the monk in alarm, asking why he was sitting in such a dangerous seat.

The monk replied that his seat was much safer than that of the mandarin. "How can that be?" asked the mandarin, "My seat is luxurious and comfortable, How can it be dangerous?"

"There are many who would like your seat also," replied the monk, "Your subjects might rebel at any time and take your position by force, whereas no-one wants mine. Therefore I consider my seat much safer than yours."

The mandarin was impressed by the monk's answer, and, his curiosity awakened, then asked, "What is the essence of Buddhism?"

The monk replied: “Do no evil, do only good. Clear your mind. This is the whole of the teaching.”

“Is that it?” exclaimed the mandarin, “That is so well known that the village children sing it as a song.”

“Yes, every child knows it,” replied the monk, “But people of all types and all ages do not do these simple things.”

Buddhism is not religion, it is practise. It is also education. But unlike school or university, you never graduate. Buddhism is for every day of your life. We meditate to clear the mind, to get back to our true self, to the Buddha- nature which has been there all the time.

### **Living With the Truth**

Always live with the truth. Are we sincere with ourselves? We watch other people and are critical of them. In Thien this is known as “herding someone else’s buffalo.” It is so much easier to see other people’s faults. The body and mind are our false self; our true self is serenity, like a shiny mirror. The purpose of meditation is to progress to recognise and to live with it always.

To sum up, Thien Vietnam or meditation is universal. The four principles of Thien are simple. However, this noble pursuit takes courage. Everyone, regardless of gender, age, or ethnic background can practise it.

## Buddhist Nuns in Malaysia

Seet Lee Terk

The early influx of Chinese immigrants to Malaysia in the 17<sup>th</sup> century were mostly men who escaped from China at the beginning of the Qing Dynasty and settled in Melaka. The records also mention that Buddhist laywomen began to migrate to Malaysia around 1911. Buddhist monks travelled back and forth between China and Malaysia to do chanting and raise funds to build temples. Over time, Buddhist nuns also began to visit Malaysia and many stayed behind to help monks take care of the temples. As the number of *bhikṣuṇīs* grew, they became a major component of the Malaysian Buddhist community. Buddhist nuns in Malaysia traditionally adhered to the Mahāyāna tradition, practising the *bodhisattva* way. Accordingly, they became active in service to society.

Presently in Malaysia, *bhikṣuṇīs* outnumber *bhikṣus*. It is impossible to ascertain the exact number of *bhikṣuṇīs* in Malaysia, but about one thousand are registered with the Malaysian Buddhist Association. The commitment and contributions of these *bhikṣuṇīs* to society are acknowledged and well-received by the Malaysian government.

### Malaysian Nuns in the Early Days

During the early years following their arrival in Malaysia, the activities of *bhikṣuṇīs* revolved around the management and operation of temples and monasteries, in addition to daily Dharma practise. On the surface, it might appear that these *bhikṣuṇīs* did not make significant contributions, but in actual fact, the development of Buddhism was largely dependent on their efforts. The lives and accomplishments of several outstanding *bhikṣuṇīs* illustrate how instrumental nuns were in promoting Buddhism in Malaysia.

One prominent nun was Bhikṣuṇī Fong Lian, the founder of Phor Tay (Bodhi) Buddhist Institute in Penang. Through her determined efforts, this institute was established in 1935 with the noble objective of disseminating Buddhism, promoting education, and establishing an orphanage. To further these objectives, she invited Bhikṣus Tao Jie and Zhi Hang from China to teach Buddhism in Malaysia. Unfortunately, Bhikṣuṇī Fong Lian passed away on July 23, 1937, at the age of 36, but her legacy continues. Phor Tay Institute established Phor Tay Chinese Primary and Secondary Schools, and was among the few pioneering, self-supported Buddhist schools in the country.

Other *bhikṣuṇīs* engaged in activities such as the sale of vegetarian foods on new moon and full moon days to support their temples. Their daily activities were generally limited to personal Dharma practises, such as chanting. During these early years, not much emphasis was placed on education. Generally, these *bhikṣuṇīs* had been adopted and raised in temples, and although some of them received primary or secondary education, the majority had no formal schooling at all. Usually the *bhikṣu* or *bhikṣuṇī* who adopted them taught them chanting in the temple. They were skilled in chanting, but without much understanding of the *sūtras*, were not able to put them into practise. Nevertheless, they pursued their religious practise with strong faith and led quiet, renunciant lives.

### **Contemporary Malaysian Buddhist Nuns**

After the Malaysian Buddhist Association (MBA) established the Malaysian Buddhist Institute in Penang in 1970, temples and monasteries in Malaysia began to send young *bhikṣuṇīs* there to further their education in Buddhism. The Institute has successfully groomed a core of outstanding young *bhikṣuṇīs* who subsequently returned to help in the management and operation of their respective temples. Many of these educated, well-trained *bhikṣuṇīs* display great competence in running their temples independently. Presently, more than 90 per cent of the abbesses in Malaysian temples received their education at the Malaysian Buddhist Institute. In addition to *bhikṣuṇīs*, a sizeable number of young *dharmadutta* (Dharma messenger) speakers also received their education from the Malaysian Buddhist Institute.

At the same time, Taiwan has managed to attract a good number of young Malaysian women who wished to further their study of Buddhism. After receiving an education, many of these women receive ordination and prefer to remain in Taiwan. For example, two prominent Taiwanese Buddhist organisations, Foguangshan and Dharma Drum, actively recruit Malaysian *bhikṣuṇīs*. In addition to these organisations, Malaysian *bhikṣuṇīs* are found in many smaller temples in Taiwan. Should these *bhikṣuṇīs* return to Malaysia to help in the development of Malaysian Buddhism, they will definitely add a special dimension to Buddhism in Malaysia.

Besides Taiwan, countries such as India and Sri Lanka also have Malaysian nuns studying in their Buddhist institutes and universities. Their numbers are small, however, due to differences of language, environment, and culture. There is also a small group of Malaysian nuns furthering their studies in Hong Kong.

## Contributions of Malaysian Nuns

Malaysian nuns have contributed to the development of Buddhism in Malaysia in numerous ways, notably in education, social welfare activities, traditional temple management, Dharma teaching, bereavement services, and Zen cultivation. Most nuns involved in Buddhist education are graduates of the Malaysian Buddhist Institute, with a minority who graduated from institutions in Taiwan. The Malaysian Buddhist Institute (MBI) that was established in 1970 provides formal Buddhist education and is registered as a Buddhist institute with the Ministry of Education. Both the Malaysian government and overseas universities (in Sri Lanka, for example) recognise its academic qualifications for further studies. Upper secondary students can register with the aim of becoming teachers.

Currently, some of MBI's teaching staff are former students and the Institute is working to train future teachers and administrators. By recruiting former students as faculty, the Institute not only ensures a steady pool of qualified teachers, but also provides graduates with opportunities to pass their knowledge on to the next generation. The present director of Teaching Administration, hostel managers, and several teachers are former students at the Institute.

While some graduates stay on to serve the Institute, other MBI graduates have moved on to provide service to the larger society. Many of them have joined Buddhist organisations throughout Malaysia, assist in teaching Buddhism in Sunday Dharma Schools, or help organise Buddhist camps for students during the school holidays. Some *bhikṣuṇīs* run Sunday Dharma schools, kindergartens, free tutorials, libraries, and reading rooms in their temples and Buddhists centres. Through these activities, Buddhism is being disseminated to students of all ages and adults. Taken together, the *bhikṣuṇīs*' contributions to the development of Buddhist education are monumental and substantial.

There are also *bhikṣuṇīs* who are involved in pre-school education. In managing and teaching in kindergartens, these *bhikṣuṇīs* plant and nurture the seeds of Buddhadharma in the minds of the younger generation. A good example is Siang Lin Chiao Yuan in Melaka, which is the only kindergarten in Malaysia that incorporates Buddhism in its syllabus. Since its founding, the chairperson and principal of this kindergarten have been Sangha members. I currently manage this kindergarten.

## *Bhikṣuṇīs* in Social Welfare Work

In Malaysia, it is relatively common for nuns to be involved in social welfare work. Two distinguished *bhikṣuṇīs* who are well-known for their

social welfare work are Bhikṣuṇī Chang Heng, the abbess of Sau Seng Lum (SSL) Heamodialysis Centre in Petaling Jaya, and Bhikṣuṇī Chueh Lyan, the abbess of Pure Lotus Hospice of Compassion in Penang. Many other Buddhist monasteries also provide social services, but these two are registered with the government as charitable organisations.

Bhikṣuṇī Chang Heng became the abbess of SSL Buddhist Temple in 1978. Since then, she has been actively involved in social welfare activities. One of her endeavours is SSL Heamodialysis Centre, a charitable organisation established in 1996 in Petaling Jaya (Old Town). Starting with only four dialysis units, the Centre managed to increase the number to 53 and thereby expand heamodialysis services to a greater number of poor and needy patients, irrespective of race, creed, or religion. The latest development is SSL (Puchong) Dialysis Centre, a four-storey integrated medical centre that was recently built to accommodate an increasing number of patients. Ten disciples have successfully spearheaded efforts to generate a steady income for Bhikṣuṇī Chang Heng's social welfare activities.

In addition to the dialysis centre, Bhikṣuṇī Chang Heng organises activities on Sundays, providing training in four different areas: practical social welfare projects, medical treatment, education, and cultural activities. Recent activities include classes on Buddhism for children, a recycling project, SSL Computerised Library, a stroke rehabilitation centre, mobile medical check-up drives, and so forth. These social welfare activities are well-received and recognised by the Malaysian Government. In 1999, SSL was granted tax-exempt status by the Department of the Prime Minister. SSL also became an affiliate of the Nephrology Department at University Malaya Medical Centre and its patients are thereby eligible to consult nephrologists there.

In recognition of her contributions, Bhikṣuṇī Chang Heng was awarded a prestigious "Outstanding Malaysians Awards 2001 for Humanitarian and Voluntary Service" by the International Junior Chamber Association Malaysia. The same year, SSL successfully obtained ISO Quality Management System and Healthmark Certification by SGS United Records – the first NGO providing heamodialysis services to achieve this. Bhikṣuṇī Chang Heng's accomplishments testify to the significant contributions of a Malaysian *bhikṣuṇī*, not only to the development of Buddhism, but also towards promoting social welfare work in Malaysia.

Bhikṣuṇī Chueh Lyan is another Malaysian *bhikṣuṇī* who has made significant contributions in the field of social welfare. Backed by a group of trained nurses, she set up the Pure Lotus Cancer Solace Centre to offer palliative care to end-stage cancer patients. This is the first hospice centre

in Malaysia where the sick and suffering can find solace, the poor are not denied care, and the dying find peace of mind.

The Pure Lotus Cancer Solace Centre provides services to all patients, irrespective of race or religion. When necessary, counsellors of different faiths are called upon to assist and offer counselling to patients. Services are provided in six areas:

1. Out-patient Services: Providing counselling services three times a week to patients and their family members;
2. In-patient Services: Providing patients with counselling and treatment;
3. Respite care: Taking care of patients on behalf of a family member on a short-term basis;
4. Post-radiotherapy: Providing care after treatment;
5. Household visits: Providing dressing services; and
6. End-stage of life counselling: Preparing patients for the end-of-life journey, taking refuge, and providing consultation on a Buddhist funeral.

The Pure Lotus Cancer Solace Centre revives the hopes of many patients and helps them rebuild their lives. For Bhikṣuṇī Chueh Lyan, the dream does not stop there. She is planning to open a shelter for HIV-infected widows and their children as soon as possible. She is full of compassion and her exemplary *bodhisattva* spirit makes Malaysians proud of Malaysian *bhikṣuṇīs*.

### ***Bhikṣuṇīs* as Traditional Upholders of Temples**

Traditionally, the abbesses of temples (literally, “Way places”) were adopted as children and raised in the temples. They learned chanting and religious practises, and were eventually ordained by the elder *bhikṣuṇī* or *bhikṣu* of their respective temples. Not surprisingly, many of these *bhikṣuṇīs* succeeded to the position of abbess when the time came. These *bhikṣuṇīs* were well-trained in organising and conducting everyday and specially scheduled temple activities, including chanting and blessing services at the time of birth or death. Occasionally, they organised Dharma talks in their temples, inviting ordained or lay Buddhists as guest speakers.



They also organised retreats, such as ceremonies for taking refuge in the Three Jewels, and participated in joint activities with other temples and Buddhist centres. Today, more than half of Malaysian nuns fall in this category. They possess good interpersonal skills, are financially strong, and have great influence in Buddhist organisations.

### ***Bhikṣuṇīs* as Disseminators of Dharma**

Members of the Saṅgha regard the task of disseminating the Dharma as an integral part of their responsibilities. Some groups of *bhikṣuṇīs* take the task of teaching Dharma very seriously. Most of these *bhikṣuṇīs* graduated from MBI and hence have received good training and sufficient knowledge of Buddhism. They travel to give Dharma talks upon invitation, especially shuttling among colleges, universities, and youth associations. Not all of these nuns were brought up in temples, however. Most of them learned Buddhism through temple activities, Dharma talks, and readings. After gaining a true understanding of Buddhism, they developed renunciation, and subsequently sought ordination in order to realise their life's work of disseminating Buddhism. This group of *bhikṣuṇīs* possesses a higher level of education and language competencies, as well as good communications and organisational skills. These *bhikṣuṇīs* are also closer in age to today's youth, who are our hope for the future of Malaysian Buddhist successors.

### ***Bhikṣuṇīs* in Bereavement Services**

The involvement of Saṅgha members in funeral services is a Chinese Buddhism tradition. At one time, during the decline of Buddhism, it was common to see monastics only during funerals. Their main duties were chanting and family members of the deceased reciprocated by making an offering (*dāna*).

Today, a sizeable number of *bhikṣuṇīs* in Malaysia are still involved in funeral rites. Generally, these *bhikṣuṇīs* were raised in temples, where they learned chanting, funeral services, and similar practises. When they had acquired the necessary skills, these *bhikṣuṇīs* conducted funeral services upon request. Sometimes their services were recommended by a representative of a coffin shop. These *bhikṣuṇīs* place great emphasis on chanting and less emphasis on learning the Dharma. The only Buddhist crematorium in Kuala Lumpur is managed by a nunnery.

### ***Bhikṣuṇīs* as Zen Cultivators**

A recent development in Malaysia is the emergence of a group of *bhikṣuṇīs* who are very devoted to the practise and dissemination of meditation. Although their numbers are small, these nuns observe the teachings of the Buddha, practise actively, and participate in scheduled meditation retreats. Most of these *bhikṣuṇīs* decided to join the Saṅgha after participating in meditation retreats and subsequently generating the aspiration to attain liberation. They have good educational backgrounds, right understanding of Buddhism, and aspire to end afflictions as their immediate task. Some of them do not stay in temples, but in ordinary dwellings, supported by devotees.

Besides self-cultivation, these nuns usually teach and guide others to do the same. They either have a scheduled meditation practise at a fixed location or conduct sessions for beginners upon request by Buddhist temples or centres. They also give Dharma talks and are diligent in the study of Dharma. Once a year, they organise a “training the trainers” camp, where they meet to discuss Dharma and teaching methodologies.

### **Conclusion**

Although today Malaysian *bhikṣuṇīs* outnumber *bhikṣus*, in the early days, they were not given the same opportunities to develop themselves and prove their talents. Nonetheless, the contributions of the early generations of *bhikṣuṇīs* cannot be ignored, for they worked selflessly and persistently behind the scenes, without a thought of fame or gain. It is only very recently that Malaysian *bhikṣuṇīs* have taken the opportunity to prove themselves and demonstrate their capabilities in managing events by themselves. These *bhikṣuṇīs* have made significant inroads, not only in transforming the perception of *bhikṣuṇīs*, but also toward transforming the roles of Malaysian *bhikṣuṇīs* and promoting the development of Buddhism in Malaysia.

Slowly and steadily, Buddhist nuns in Malaysia are gaining acceptance and the respect they deserve from the general public. The activities they organise for the community are well received and supported by the people. Although a substantial number of nuns are serving outside Malaysia, the *bhikṣuṇīs* who remain in Malaysia are able to shoulder responsibility and provide adequate services to the community. Through their efforts and endurance, Malaysian nuns are proving their worth and emerging as one of the main pillars sustaining Buddhism in Malaysia.

## **The Buddha and the Spirit World: Healing Praxis in a Himalayan Monastery**

*Karma Lekshe Tsomo*

For centuries, among the diverse peoples of the Himalayan region, the Buddhist worldview has affected attitudes toward illness and health. The Tibetan medical system, Buddhist practices for the accumulation of merit, and tantric ritual practices for protection and blessing remain the primary resources for achieving physical and mental well-being. The concepts of rebirth and *karma* are used to explain the etiology of disease. But Buddhist beliefs do not tell the whole story. Healthcare decisions are simultaneously informed by indigenous beliefs about local gods, spirits, and the harmful or beneficent influences these beings can have on human well-being. Indigenous methods of healing, such as divination, oracle healers, and exorcism, are equally important in the lives of the people. Villagers in the Himalayan region rely on shamanic healing rituals, in addition to Tibetan herbal medicines, Western allopathic pharmaceuticals, and homeopathic and Aryurvedic remedies. In recent years, as Western medical care has become increasingly available, another dimension has been added. Often these systems will be combined to optimise the results. The purpose of this study is to investigate the variety of healing practices and multiplicity of beliefs that influence healthcare decision-making among Buddhists in the Himalayan border region, and how these diverse belief systems and healing practices interact and sometimes conflict.

### **Healing Systems in Dialogue**

The study takes as its focus the case of Kelsang, a young nun at Yangchen Chöling Monastery in the Spiti Valley of Himachal Pradesh in northern India who was afflicted by violent seizures in 2004. The seizures were diagnosed differently by practitioners of three different systems: a visiting German medical doctor diagnosed her condition as epilepsy, a Tibetan doctor diagnosed it as a disorder of the heart and nervous system, and a Buddhist tantric practitioner diagnosed it as the result of a curse on the girl's family home. The variant diagnoses of these concerned healing professionals and the interactions among them provide rich source material

for understanding the tensions that arise as indigenous cultures come into contact with modern medicine.

The young nun's story illustrates the range of beliefs and healing practices available in Spiti to treat an array of physical and mental afflictions, how these resources may be used concurrently, and how they may come into conflict. The search for a diagnosis and treatment for the young nun places Buddhist beliefs, shamanic practices, traditional Tibetan medical lore, and the Western medical system side by side. The resultant tensions recall the culture clashes between Hmong highlanders of Laos, an animist community, and the Western medical system that Anne Fadiman described in her book, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*.<sup>1</sup> Similar clashes are evident within a Himalayan Buddhist cultural frame.

To understand the diverse medical and religious elements involved in healthcare decision-making, I first present a typology of the medical systems available in the Spiti Valley and how they are accessed. Second, I discuss the religious practices and rituals that are used for healing and examine the diverse worldviews and metaphysical assumptions that underpin them. Third, I analyse the interrelationships among these divergent systems to identify points of convergence and conflict, in an attempt to better understand how the villagers of Spiti reconcile and utilise them.

### **Healing Body, Mind, and Spirit**

To date, little work has been done on the healing systems of the western Himalayas. A number of introductory books on Tibetan medicine by Yeshe Dhönden and others have appeared in English,<sup>2</sup> and some research on ritual healing has begun. But there is still much work to be done to understand the complex interwoven relationships between Buddhist tantric ritual, shamanic practices, Buddhist philosophy, and their healing applications. To learn more about Himalayan healing practices, I spoke with villagers and nuns in Pangmo village and surrounding areas. Exchanges with nuns educated in Buddhist metaphysics who lived with Kelsang at Yangchen Chöling Monastery were particularly useful. Since 1988, these nuns have been receiving traditional Buddhist teachings and have gradually become the most educated women in traditional learning in Spiti Valley.<sup>3</sup> Although they were as mystified as anyone about the intensity and unexpected incidence of the seizures, they were knowledgeable about the range of possible causes and methods of treatment.

The people of the Spiti Valley identify themselves as Buddhists belonging to the Tibetan tradition. His Holiness the Dalai Lama, their primary spiritual guide, has travelled to the remote Spiti Valley a number

of times to give teachings and perform tantric ritual ceremonies. Until recently all the ancient monasteries in the valley were for monks, the largest being Tabo, Kyi, and Dankar. Since 1988, three monasteries for nuns has been newly founded: Yangchen Chöling in Pangmo, Sherab Chöling in Morang, and Dechen Chöling in Pin Valley.

Typical of the majority of Himalayan Buddhists, the people of Spiti rely on the Buddhas, *bodhisattvas*, lineage masters, and other enlightened beings as their objects of refuge. Their religious practise is patterned on the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, including both *sūtra* and *tantra* streams of Mahāyāna. At the same time, the people acknowledge and respect a range of other beings, including local gods and spirits. As one observer has commented, “confounding the outsider, Himalayan Buddhist holy places tolerate deities and legendary beings who wander in from other faiths or the powerful local spirit world and who may be accorded shrines of their own under the roofs of more classic icons.”<sup>4</sup> Shrines of individual family deities are found in virtually every home.

When Buddhism was first introduced to the Himalayan region during the eighth century, instead of banishing or deriding indigenous beliefs and practices, local deities were harnessed to protect the newly imported faith. The Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* became dominant alongside household protectors and other local deities. Although Buddhist scholars can clearly distinguish between *sūtras* and *tantras*, these categories become merged in the popular mind. The distinction between tantric rituals and indigenous shamanic practices is also somewhat unclear.

Buddhist cultures are typically congenial toward local gods and spirits, conscripting them in the service of the Buddhadharma. Villagers speak of age-old contract agreements with protective deities, who may protect specific families, natural sites such as springs, or entire villages. The distinction between gods and spirits is complex, imprecise, and somewhat irrelevant to the practical needs and everyday lives of Himalayan peoples. Gods are not necessarily benign and local spirits are not necessarily mischievous or harmful. A pantheon of visible and invisible sentient life inhabits the natural landscape. Himalayan people treat these deities with respect, sometimes mixed with veneration, awe, or fear, in hopes that these deities will dispense blessings and good fortune to those under their protection. If the deities are pleased, they respond by imparting health, happiness, and prosperity to the family or community, but if they are neglected, offended, or receive insufficient offerings, they may also neglect or harm their constituencies. To propitiate these deities and ward off any malign influences, villagers offer incense at household shrines and in vessels on the roofs of their homes.

Whether dealing with enlightened beings of the Buddhist pantheon or local deities, the emphasis is on relationality and complementarity. Human beings, animals, and other beings – benign and malign, visible and invisible – all live together in an integrally interconnected universe. An awareness of these relationships informs all aspects of life, including health and psychological well-being.

Perhaps influenced by Buddhist rationality, the people's approach to health and well-being is pragmatic. For example, people in the Himalayan region have no innate psychological resistance to recently introduced Western health services, but they need to be convinced of their efficacy. They readily accept those aspects of Western medicine that have proven effective, such as TB treatment, while hesitating to accept those aspects that they experience to be unreliable or to have side effects, such as certain methods of birth control. Knowledge about the larger framework of Western medical science and physiology is largely absent. Western-trained health professionals in the area recognise that Himalayan women, who have had limited access to health care or health care training, until very recently, have little scientific knowledge about the human body and how it functions. At the 5<sup>th</sup> Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women held in Lumbini, Nepal, in 2000, health educators from various countries shared their knowledge of health, hygiene, bacteria theory, and water purification techniques in a week-long seminar attended by 185 Himalayan women. These educators explained the theory behind medications such as antibiotics and gave advice about the use and misuse of Western medicines.

The villagers in Spiti are willing to consider and to avail themselves of every available healing option that will help protect the health of themselves and their families. Attitudes toward health and well-being are holistic, incorporating methods of treating the mind as well as the body. Tibetan medicine and Western medicine, the two dominant healing systems, are used in conjunction with Buddhist teachings, merit-making, contemplative practices, Buddhist tantric rituals, and shamanic practices such as divination and healing rites. Tantric ritual practices and indigenous shamanic practices have traded influences over many centuries. Over time, a holistic approach to health care has emerged that encompasses all available medical systems to achieve physical health, a range of religious practices to achieve mental health, and a range of ritual practices to negotiate relationships with a pantheon of supernatural forces who are believed to be capable both of imparting blessings and inflicting harm. The villagers are pragmatic in their approach, leaving all options open in an attempt to identify the most effective methods of treatment.

### **Cultural Intersections in a Young Girl's Life**

The story of Kelsang, a twelve-year-old novice nun at Yangchen Chöling Monastery in Spiti Valley, will help illustrate the variety of healing beliefs and practices that coincide and sometimes collide in the lives of Himalayan villagers. The cast of characters in her story includes members of Kelsang's family, including her mother; Tsering, a woman leader of Pangmo Village and grandmother of Kelsang; Thubten, Tsering's son and Kelsang's uncle. The story also involves the nuns of Yangchen Chöling Monastery, where Kelsang had been admitted as a novice the year before. These include Chichim, a 36-year-old nun at the monastery who hails from Kelsang's natal village of Chichim; Pema, the head nun of Yangchen Chöling Monastery; and Dolma, one of the senior nuns at Yangchen Chöling and Kelsang's aunt. As events unfolded, her story also involved Tanya, a German-Italian medical doctor who was visiting Spiti; Lama Tsarlo, a tantric practitioner (*sngaks pa*) from Pin Valley; and myself.

One day in July of 2003, on a visit to Yangchen Chöling Monastery, Tsering, the leader of the senior women's dance troupe, a prominent and relatively wealthy woman from Pangmo village, came to ask my help. She expressed deep concern about Kelsang, a twelve-year-old nun whom I had met the year before at Yangchen Chöling Monastery. When I first met Kelsang, she was a very naughty little girl. She was very curious, but also quite rambunctious, and I had some misgivings about her future as a nun. She continually appeared at the door of my room with another, well-behaved little nun in tow. These two young girls were among a group of twelve young girls who had come to me the previous year requesting to become novices at the monastery. To divert their attention from my video equipment, I asked them if they knew how to do prostrations, which they performed with gusto and some amusement. Children who are naughty when they are young sometimes turn out quite well. With training, precocious and confident children can become leaders.

Tsering explained that Kelsang had been suffering from seizures for many months. The attacks had become more and more serious and frequent with time, and she was deeply concerned about the child's well-being. Since the onset of the attacks, the Yangchen Chöling nuns had done many Buddhist prayers and tantric rituals in hopes of alleviating the girl's suffering. They had also taken her to see Tashi, a highly qualified *am chi*, or traditional Tibetan medical practitioner, in Hansa Village. Tashi had initially diagnosed her condition as a heart problem and had provided her with a supply of traditional herbal medicines. When we visited him later for advice on her condition, we told him that Tanya, a visiting German doctor,



thought Kelsang was suffering from epilepsy, but he did not agree with this Western medical diagnosis.

When Tsering came to see me, she requested my help in finding treatment for the young girl, stressing the seriousness of her condition and pleading for compassionate intervention. Tsering told me that the girl's mother was a hopeless alcoholic, her father was dead, and the family was destitute, with only a small bag of *rtsam pa* (barley flour, the staple food of the region) to their name. Because the mother was drunk much of the time, the girl had not received proper care at home. The village people, as well as the nuns at Yangchen Chöling Monastery where she had been living, were all at a loss as to how to deal with the situation. I agreed to help and said that I needed to see her first, so we dispatched the monastery jeep to the village of Chichim, with a senior nun nicknamed Chichim to fetch her.

Tsering pleaded with me repeatedly to intercede and try to help the girl, implying that without proper care, the girl's condition was dire. Whether the appropriate course of care should be medical, ritual, or spiritual was left to my discretion. When I asked for some background information on the girl's condition, Chichim and the other nuns told me that she had begun having seizures about six months before. Gradually the seizures became more and more severe, until eventually the girl was unable to eat, talk, or care for herself. The nuns had done everything they could think of to help – taking her for traditional Tibetan medical treatment, reading Buddhist *sūtras*, reciting prayers, and performing specific tantric rituals. As Kelsang's condition worsened, they began saying special daily prayers for her benefit and requested divinations from respected *lamas* to determine which tantric rituals would be most effective for her recovery.

The next evening, after a four-hour drive over unpaved roads each way, the jeep returned with Kelsang. I sat next to her in the kitchen, in a circle of nuns arranged around the kitchen fire. The young girl looked terrified. I could see the tension in her shoulders and her entire body, as she anticipated another attack. In contrast to the playful, naughty child I remembered from the previous year, her face was hardened into an expression of intense anxiety mixed with suspicion, reflecting her fear of another violent seizure. Her eyes kept staring at her hands, because, as the other nuns told me, the attacks generally started there and then quickly spread to violent seizures that beset her entire body. The girl did not speak, eat, or smile, in stark contrast to her very alert demeanor the year before. Her entire body was full of tension. After the nuns served the meal, she tried to take a spoonful, but was barely able to navigate the distance from bowl to mouth. She appeared frightened and was totally unresponsive to overtures from the nuns, her



monastic family. After a few mouthfuls, she gave up and slumped back to the wall, until we encouraged her to lie down and rest.

After dinner, I went to consult Tanya, a German doctor who was visiting the monastery through an Austrian project called Spiti Hilfe. The objective of the project is to help forge a coalition between traditional and Western medical practitioners in Spiti. Tanya, an Italian-trained allopathic physician practising family medicine, had examined Kelsang when the girl arrived at the monastery from Chichim and it was her firm conviction that the young girl should be taken to Kaza hospital, two hours away, to be evaluated by a doctor and hospitalised, if necessary.

The next day Pema and Dolma took Kelsang to Kaza Hospital for a check-up. The hospital staff admitted the young nun to the hospital and began giving her a series of injections. The injections, we were told, were a medication to control the seizures. When I returned to Kaza a few days later, the nuns told me that Kelsang was a little bit better, but still was not able to communicate, eat, or do anything on her own.

That day, as we waited for Pema and Dolma to return from the hospital, we drank tea at the home of a former monk named Lama Tsarlo, who is renowned for the accuracy of his divinations (*mo*) and the efficacy of his tantric ritual practices. After discussing what to do next, we decided it would be a good idea to request a divination to determine the best course of action. In Himalayan cultures, when facing a life-threatening situation or when there is any major decision to be made, the immediate response is to seek a divination from the most highly qualified practitioner available. As we looked across the table, we realised that one of the most highly qualified people in Spiti was sitting directly across the table from us – Lama Tsarlo. I reached in my bag and pulled out a white ceremonial scarf (*kha btags*), tucked 50 rupees into it, and requested Lama Tsarlo to perform a divination to determine what course of action we should take to relieve Kelsang's suffering.

Lama Tsarlo took up his prayer beads and, repeatedly counting the beads with both hands from the periphery to the centre, came to some determination that led him to consult a particular page in the divination text on the table in front of him. From the text, he learned that a harmful force (or forces) was troubling the young girl. Consulting the text carefully, he told us that there were some items in the girl's family house in Chichim that seemed to be cursed. The harmful items were apparently associated with horses, perhaps a bit or a bridle. He explained that people from Chichim often travelled for purposes of trade to Changtang (Northern Plains), a remote area that stretches for hundreds of miles along the Ladakhi/Tibetan border, and sometimes brought back items that appeared to be cursed.

Tibetan traders come to Changtang with horses and carpets, which they traded for Indian cloth and manufactured goods. Sometimes these traders cheated at business, which drew the ire of the loser, who might then cast a spell or curse in retaliation. Not surprisingly, the practitioners who are considered most skilful at the rituals to counteract these curses also live in Changtang. He recommended that the offending items be removed from Kelsang's family house to lift the curse, so that Kelsang might recover.

When the villagers of Chichim heard about Lama Tsarlo's divination about cursed equestrian equipment hidden in the house, they laughed and said, "That household is so poor, he'd be lucky to find a small bag of *rtsam pa*!" But when Lama Tsarlo went to Chichim Village and searched the house the next afternoon, imagine everyone's surprise when he dug several items matching that description out of a small hole in the corner of one room and threw them out, far away from the house. The villagers' attitudes immediately changed to deep respect for Lama Tsarlo and they began inviting him to check their houses, to see whether there might be other items in the village that were causing misfortunes.

Meanwhile, just at the same time that Lama Tsarlo threw the offending items out of Kelsang's family house that afternoon, the nuns caring for Kelsang at Kaza Hospital noticed a sudden improvement in her condition. She sat up in her hospital bed and started to talk, which she had not been able to do for several days. Those who witnessed these events could not help but think that Lama Tsarlo's method of treatment had a healing effect. The medical doctors at Kaza Hospital had already begun administering daily injections of Western medications for epilepsy, but it was difficult to determine what effect these medications had on Kelsang's condition. By the time I saw her the next year, little Kelsang's seizures were under control, but she had clearly suffered serious mental impairment from her ordeal. Fortunately, her relatives were taking good care of her, but, tragically, her ordeal became a serious obstacle to her future personal development, both as an individual and as a Buddhist monastic.

Kelsang's seizures continued forcefully and erratically over the next year. The tantric rituals Lama Tsarlo recommended were enacted and the nuns continued to do prayers for her daily, but they seemed to have little effect. The Tibetan doctor lamented the fact that strong Western medicine had interfered with the natural remedies he was confident could have cured her. None of the available remedies seemed effective to cure her. She continued to suffer from unpredictable, debilitating seizures and eventually was taken home to Chichim to be cared for by her mother.

One day in the spring of 2005, Kelsang suddenly went missing. Her family and the villagers of Chichim searched everywhere for her, even

combing the forest, but their efforts were in vain. They were never able to find her. She could not be declared dead, since her body was never found. The nuns at Yangchen Chöling continue to perform prayers for her *in abstentia*.

### **Competing Worldviews**

Although the circumstances of Kelsang's short and tragic life are unusual, the Buddhists of Spiti remain philosophical, approaching the experiences of illness and death as concomitant with the human situation. While her disappearance cannot be explained scientifically, since her body was never found, the nuns and villagers are reluctant to draw conclusions. In the Buddhist worldview, however, death is inevitable for all living beings, for some, even during childhood. There may even be those who understand her disappearance and presumed death as a blessing of sorts, since she experienced such enormous suffering during the last year of her young life. The compassionate care of the Yangchen Chöling nuns certainly surrounded her during her ordeal and all concerned could take consolation in the fact that all possible healing methods available in the Spiti Valley had been exhausted. But since all attempted interventions failed her, where does that leave Buddhist adherents? Even if death is certain for all sentient beings, and it is, what factors determine the circumstances and timing of one's death? Was Kelsang's human lifetime simply exhausted? Was it her *karma* to suffer and die young? According to the law of *karma*, living beings experience the consequences of their actions and it is beyond the power of ordinary human beings to explain the precise workings of cause and effect. Yet, as logical as this sounds, there remains an element of mystery – that the process is somehow beyond human beings' power to manipulate. For Buddhists, the consolation is the good deeds Kelsang accumulated during her time as a nun and the comforting fact that she received compassionate care at the monastery. If all goes well, in this view, she will attain a fortunate rebirth, based on her virtuous actions, even those of a young child.

In a different matrix, the experience of the young novice Kelsang provides a useful case study in the confluence of healing traditions in the Himalayan region. Buddhist contemplative practices, tantric rituals, and shamanic healing rituals can be effectively used in conjunction with Tibetan herbal medicines, Western allopathic pharmaceuticals, homeopathic remedies, and Aryurvedic remedies. This wealth of available healing methods gives villagers a variety of alternative healing options rooted in ancient Buddhist, pre-Buddhist, and Western scientific worldviews. However, as the nuns of Yangchen Chöling Monastery and other villagers

in the Himalayan region have experienced, the success of conjoining these methods is by no means guaranteed. Questions remain regarding the relative effectiveness of each method and the interactions among them. The multicultural nature of the remote region of Spiti is evident in the healing practices available in the region. Spiti therefore is a rich repository of knowledge about traditional healing systems and a crucible for studying the effects of Westernisation and globalisation on an ancient culture.

## Notes

- 1 Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998).
- 2 Among the most useful studies of Tibetan healing praxis are Linda H. Connor and Geoffrey Samuel, *Healing Powers and Modernity: Traditional Medicine, Shamanism, and Science in Asian Societies* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 2001); David Crow, *In Search of the Medicine Buddha: A Himalayan Journey* (New York: Tarcher, 2001); Tenzin Choedrak with Gilles van Grasdorff, *The Rainbow Palace* (London: Bantam, 2000); Elisabeth Finckh, *Studies in Tibetan Medicine* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 1989); Theodore Burang, *The Tibetan Art of Healing* (London: Robinson & Watkins, 1974); Terry Clifford, *Tibetan Buddhist Medicine and Psychiatry: The Diamond Healing* (San Francisco: Weiser Books, 1990); Rechung Rinpoche, *Tibetan Medicine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976); Yeshe Dhönden, *Health Through Balance: An Introduction to Tibetan Medicine* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 1986); and Yeshe Dhönden, *Healing from the Source: The Science and Lore of Tibetan Medicine* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2000). Also see "Tibetan Medicine: The Science of Healing," in *In Exile from the Land of Snows: The Definitive Account of the Dalai Lama and Tibet Since the Chinese Conquest* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), pp. 137-55.
- 3 This story is told in Karma Lekshe Tsomo, "Change in Consciousness: Women's Religious Identity in Himalayan Buddhist Cultures," *Buddhist Women Across Cultures: Realizations*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1999), pp. 169-89; and Margaret Coberly, "Crisis as Opportunity: Nuns and Cultural Change in the Spiti Valley," in *Buddhist Women and Social Justice: Ideals, Challenges, and Achievements*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004), pp. 193-204.
- 4 Barbara Crossette, *So Close to Heaven: The Vanishing Buddhist Kingdoms of the Himalayas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), p. 64.

























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**BUDDHIST WOMEN IN  
CONTEMPORARY CULTURES**



## **Thai Buddhist Nuns and the Thai Buddhist Nuns' Institute**

*Kritsana Raksachom*

In Thai society, Buddhist nuns are not completely accepted, since Thai law does not officially recognise them as religious persons. Officially recognised religious persons are entitled to certain rights by the government, but the law does not extend these rights to nuns. The situation of nuns in Thailand is very different from that of the monks. When monks become ordained, they are automatically respected and receive support from the Thai government and society. Without legal status or social recognition, no laws protect Thai nuns and their lives are difficult. In spite of this, nuns work hard to contribute to society with the hope that they will eventually be accepted and their efforts will be recognised by the world community.

In former times, most nuns were elderly and not highly educated. Today nuns are more highly educated and are even receiving advanced degrees. The focus of Thai nuns' contributions is to help people develop in three areas: education, spreading the Dhamma, and social welfare. Toward these objectives, the Thai Buddhist Nuns' Institute was established in 1969 and has developed continuously, until now there are twenty-five branches nationwide.

### **Education**

Educational activities are classified into five categories of study: Dhamma, Abhidhamma, Pāli, meditation, and general education. Dhamma study is provided inside temples. Some temples in Thailand do not teach Dhamma, so monks and nuns must seek out temples where Dhamma study is available. The Dhamma study course consists of learning about the Buddha's life, Buddhist philosophy, the rules of discipline, and various types of moral conduct. This Dhamma study programme has three levels, each level requiring one year, so three years are needed to complete the programme.

The course in Abhidhamma studies entails learning about all the Buddhist texts and commentaries that are included in what is called

Abhidhammathasaṅgaha. There are nine classes, requiring seven-and-a-half years to complete. The Abhidhamma School is located at Wat Mahathat in Bangkok and it is considered one of the most famous schools of Abhidhamma. The students include monks, nuns, and laypeople. Laypeople are especially interested in joining this programme.

The course in Pāli entails learning the language of the scriptures that contain the teachings of the Buddha. Pāli is a sacred language, since it is the language used for chanting in the temples and recounting the various stories about the Buddha. This course of study consists of nine classes and requires nine years to complete. Each year there is one examination; if students do not pass the examination, they must take the examination again. Some students spend twelve to twenty years to complete the Pāli study course.

The course in meditation teaches the theory of meditation for purifying one's mind in order to achieve the highest aim of Buddhism, *nirvāna*. All Buddhist nuns ordained in Thailand must complete a course in meditation practise. Some nuns have done very well and are now able to teach meditation to others and to establish meditation schools. Some Buddhist nuns who teach meditation to the public have become very popular.

The general education course includes vocational skills, secondary education, and higher education. Buddhist nuns may study at government schools or private schools that teach vocational skills to gain specialised expertise. The Pak Tho branch of the Thai Buddhist Nuns' Institute in Ratchaburi Province is an example of a school where nuns and lay girls can pursue secondary education. Buddhist nuns may also study at non-formal educational institutes. At the university level, nuns may study for a bachelor's degree, master's degree, or doctorate at two Buddhist universities in Thailand – Mahamakut Buddhist University and Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University – or at any of the government's open universities throughout the country.

### **Spreading the Dhamma**

Although Thai society does not fully or officially accept Buddhist nuns, nuns are willing to work for the good of Thai society through teaching Buddhadhamma, constructing kindergartens at institutes where nuns serve as teachers, teaching children at various government schools, teaching meditation to laypeople, counselling, teaching Abhidhamma, and teaching at Buddhist universities.



Nuns who teach Dhamma can be classified into two types: those who teach Buddhism and those who teach meditation. Teaching Buddhism includes teaching Dhamma, Abhidhamma, and Pāli language. These different aspects of teaching Buddhism can be found at Buddhist nuns' institutes, temples, and government schools. Nuns may also teach meditation and some have become quite successful at it, especially recently, as more and more people become interested in learning and practising meditation.

At the Thai Buddhist Nuns' Institute in Chai Nat Province in the central part of Thailand, there are two types of Dhamma activities: teaching Dhamma to children and teaching Dhamma to adults. Teaching Dhamma to children refers to Dhamma study programmes for children from nine to twelve years old. The subjects covered include ethics, character development, and meditation practise. Cooking activities are also included, especially on national holidays such as the birthday celebrations of the king and queen. On these occasions, children from four schools come to stay at the Nuns' Institute to join in Buddhist activities organised by the nuns.

Teaching Dhamma to adults includes teaching meditation to villagers, including how to practise mindfulness in daily life, how to engage in wholesome activities, and how to avoid unwholesome activities. This type of teaching is deeply satisfying for some people. For example, I have become a consultant on various types of spiritual suffering, including problems such as polygamy and estrangements between parents and children. The success of Dhamma teaching programmes in Chai Nat Province has resulted in closer links between laypeople and nuns, and a growing respect for Buddhist nuns among Thai children. When children in these programmes meet nuns outside the classes, they greet them respectfully and their parents also generate greater devotion to the nuns. When laypeople have personal problems, they feel comfortable to consult nuns. Adults who come to learn Buddhism and practise meditation develop greater devotion and bring food to share with the nuns. At the same time, Buddhist monks in this region have gained a positive impression of the nuns and are ready to help and encourage them in their work.

A committee of nuns established the Thai Buddhist Nuns' Institute in 1969, 37 years ago. Thai Buddhists have been aware of this institute ever since, but they only pay respect to those nuns who work for society and teach Dhamma. If nuns have no clear role in society, they are regarded as lay people who observe the eight precepts and are not invited to perform religious ceremonies. If nuns are experts in teaching meditation, the public

accepts them and thinks highly of them, but only in those provinces where they carry out their work.

### **Social Welfare**

When people are extremely poor and have no food for their families, Buddhist nuns are ready to help. During natural disasters, such as the *tsunami* disaster, the Thai Buddhist Nuns' Institute helps victims by making donations. The Nuns' Institute in Kanchanaburi Province takes care of children and provides an education for them. I had an excellent opportunity to help the Nuns' Institute in Chai Nat Province by teaching Buddhism and helping the local society, and became the head of a team working there. On occasion, I have invited monks and nuns from various places to come together to work at important Buddhist festivals, since the facilities to perform certain religious and social activities have to be borrowed. The nuns request rice donations from monks and the general population to support the children staying at the Nuns' Institute.

### **Conclusion**

Buddhist nuns must work and study conscientiously to transform the perception of nuns. These days, young women are more educated than in the past and many are interested in taking temporary ordination. They prefer to become nuns for seven to fifteen days, without shaving their heads, especially during important Buddhist festivals such as Visākha Pūja Day. Yet, even though Buddhist nuns are working very hard in Thailand to bring ethical values and peace to society, the government has never officially or formally accepted their status as religious persons. Until Thai Buddhist nuns gain that status, they will continue in their roles as volunteers working to preserve and spread the Buddhadhamma, Thai culture, social and ethical values, peace, and happiness for the benefit of Thai society.

## **Contributions of Buddhist Women in the Malaysian Buddhist Youth Movement**

*Ai Sim Hea*

The Malaysian youth movement has made valuable and long-lasting contributions to the development of Buddhism in Malaysia. Documenting the movement is therefore an essential aspect of Malaysian Buddhist history. From the time of its formation in 1950 through its active expansion, the Malaysian Buddhist youth movement has stirred the interest of Buddhist youth. This keen interest among Buddhist youth groups in Malaysia eventually culminated in the establishment of the Young Buddhist Association of Malaysia (YBAM). However, amidst the historical records of this significant Buddhist youth movement, there is no concrete documentation concerning the participation and contributions of Buddhist women in the movement. In fact, there is a dearth of research on the topic of Malaysian Buddhist women.

After reviewing existing literature on the history and development of Buddhism in Malaysia, including documents on the inception and expansion of YBAM, I thought it would be worthwhile to undertake research on the participation and contributions of Buddhist women in the youth movement in Malaysia. Such research will serve as food for thought, or a platform, for Buddhist women in Malaysia to gain knowledge and a better understanding of their role not only in the Buddhist youth movement, but also in the history of Malaysian Buddhism as a whole. By understanding the many roles they have played, Buddhist women will come to realise the significant contributions they have made to the growth of the Buddhist youth movement in Malaysia. It is hoped that this brief article will provide directions for further research on the responses of Malaysian Buddhist women to the needs of sentient beings and their contributions to furthering Malaysian Buddhism.

### **The Foundation of the Buddhist Youth Movement**

The Malaysian youth movement was initiated by an American Buddhist, Bhikkhu Sumangalo, in 1950. Under his tutelage and active promotion,

Buddhist societies were set up throughout the country. Bhikkhu Sumangalo also encouraged these Buddhist societies to form youth groups. According to Bhikkhu Sumangalo, young people are important pillars of Buddhist societies, in particular, and the broader society, in general. Hence, if the youth did not have faith in Buddhism, efforts to set up Buddhist societies could be deemed a failure. Motivated by this affinity and mission, Bhikkhu Sumangalo tirelessly travelled the length and breadth of Malaysia to promote the Buddhist youth movement. Buddhist organisations were established in big cities and small towns, and Buddhist youth groups were set up within these organisations. The Dharma wheel of Buddhist teachings in Malaysia was set in motion and continued to turn more actively as the youth movement gained momentum. One by one, Buddhist organisations were set up throughout the country, and within these organisations, Buddhist youth groups were formed. Thus, the Malaysian Buddhist youth movement was launched in a big way.

The newly established Buddhist organisations and their respective youth groups heeded Bhikkhu Sumangalo's call to provide a diversity of activities to accommodate the varied interests of the youth. Among the many Buddhist activities Bhikkhu Sumangalo introduced were Buddhist Sunday schools, Buddhist hymn singing, dancing, games, festival celebrations, youth fellowship gatherings, and goodwill visits. The activities of these Buddhist organisations were both practical and dynamic, so as to draw young people to Buddhism. Such diversity and vitality appealed to the youth, who were attracted and inspired to join the Buddhist organisations and their youth groups. These efforts received overwhelming support from the public.

Bhikkhu Sumangalo initiated the organisation of a Malaysian Buddhist Youth Conference in Penang, which was held from December 24 to 27, 1958. This conference resulted in the formation of the Federation of Malaya Buddhist Youth Fellowship (FMBYF). Since then, the Buddhist youth movement has continually been promoted throughout the country. Bhikkhu Sumangalo became revered as the "Father of the Malaysian Buddhist Youth Movement."

### **The Formation of a Nationwide Buddhist Organisation**

In the 1960s, due to both external and internal factors, the FMBYF and the Malaysian Buddhist youth movement encountered some daunting challenges and subsequently entered a troubled phase of their existence. It was not until 1970 that circumstances began to change and both the FMBYF and the Malaysian Buddhist youth movement emerged from these difficulties. It was during this time that Buddhist youth groups met at the

University of Malaya to discuss their movement's future development. The outcome of this discussion was the birth of the Young Buddhist Association of Malaysia (YBAM). The formation of YBAM, a nationwide Buddhist organisation, symbolised the second wave of the Malaysian Buddhist youth movement. YBAM spearheaded the Buddhist youth movement started by Bhikkhu Sumangalo and there was no turning back. The organisation has carried on the torch of the Buddhist youth movement in Malaysia ever since. In contrast to the difficulties of the 1960s, the formation and activities of YBAM will be remembered as significant milestones in the history and development of Buddhism in Malaysia.

### **The Significant Role of Youth in the Malaysian Buddhist Community**

The Malaysian Buddhist youth movement has been significant in the expansion of Buddhism in Malaysia. The movement has also upheld the responsibility of safeguarding the continuation of Buddhism in Malaysia. Buddhist youth groups have played a fundamental role in training potential Buddhist youth leaders and an increasing number of young devotees. Buddhist societies run by lay Buddhists were set up in big cities and small towns throughout Malaysia. During the early years, there was a shortage of ordained Sangha members, so these lay Buddhist groups helped to spread Buddhism in their local communities. They were able to speak a number of local languages, including Mandarin, English, Malay, Cantonese, Hokkien, and so on. This gave them an advantage when interacting with local people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, whether they were professionals, intellectuals, or people of the working class.

With the keen commitment and spirit of togetherness among Buddhist organisations, Buddhist youth groups, and dedicated members and devotees, Buddhism gradually gained ground and built a solid foundation on Malaysian soil. The Buddhist youth movement also promoted good relationships and communications between Mahāyāna and Theravāda, the two main traditions of Buddhism in Malaysia. The unity forged among Buddhists across traditions by the Malaysian youth movement was a great contribution to the sustainable development of Buddhism in Malaysia.

In the past, Buddhism in Malaysia was regarded as a superstitious religion practised by elderly people. This was due to the fact that traditional, non-Buddhist customs and ways of worship were introduced in the name of Buddhism. Such practices inevitably created many misunderstandings about Buddhism, which hampered efforts to attract young people to Buddhism.

However, during the 1950s and 1970s, the Buddhist youth movement decisively promoted the authoritative teachings of the Buddha, as well as

the practise and implementation of the Buddhadhamma through such activities as Buddhist youth camps, Buddhist Sunday Schools, and Buddhist hymn singing. These activities were so skilfully organised and presented to the youth that many of them were moved to participate in these activities and embrace Buddhism. Subsequently, public opinion about Buddhism was transformed as the public gained a better understanding of the Buddhadhamma and developed a new perception towards Buddhism.

As the core of the Malaysian youth movement, YBAM spared no effort to introduce the correct teachings of the Buddha to the general public through a variety of activities, specially targeting young students in Malaysian primary and secondary schools, teachers' training colleges, and universities. Buddhist societies were set up in these schools, colleges, and universities to reach out to students in their own learning environment. The efforts and activities of these dynamic and creative youth enabled Buddhism to become more open and relevant, which resulted in Buddhism being recognised as a major religion in Malaysia. Buddhism's increasing visibility as a force to be reckoned with in Malaysia's multicultural society was a boost to Malaysian Buddhism. Many intellectuals and professionals adopted Buddhism. Public opinion toward Buddhism became more favourable and Buddhism in Malaysia acquired a new image. This change in the public's perception of Buddhism enhanced the development of the Buddhist youth movement. Many of these changes were due to the relentless efforts of YBAM to introduce programmes and activities that reached out, not only to the youth, but also to the general public in Malaysia. Indeed, YBAM is to be lauded for its tremendous success in drawing young people to the teachings of the Buddha, inspiring them to adopt a healthy lifestyle amid the stresses and challenges of modern society.

### **Cooperation Between Saṅgha and Laity**

The Buddhist youth movement has successfully demonstrated the spirit of equality among the fourfold assembly of Buddhists (*bhikkhus*, *bhikkhunīs*, *upāsakas*, and *upāsikās*) in the propagation of the Buddhadhamma. The *bhikkhus*, *bhikkhunīs*, laymen, and laywomen are like the four wheels of a vehicle that, with mutual cooperation and the combined efforts of all, proceeds steadily and safely toward its destination. This is in accordance with the teachings on equality taught by the Buddha: no distinction of colour, no discrimination of caste, sex, race, class, and language. Everyone is treated with the same respect. The Young Buddhist Association of Malaysia helped established harmonious and cooperative relationships between the Saṅgha and the laity in their joint responsibility to lead the Buddhist youth.

YBAM strives to spread Buddhism to beings far and near, to develop moral education, and to make Buddhism a relevant and respected religion in Malaysia. The typical organisational structure of YBAM can be seen through the organisational charts of the national and state central committees, committees comprised of Saṅgha members and laypersons, both men and women. The leadership structure, that is, national president, secretary general, general treasurer, etc., also reflects the mixed membership of Saṅgha members and laity, both female and male. Appointment to such posts is based on the competence and commitment of these members to contribute to the continual movement of the Dhamma wheel.

### **Nonsectarian and Multilingual**

Conditioned by its multiracial, multicultural, and multilingual environment, Malaysian Buddhism is a microcosm of this multiethnic heritage. The main streams of Buddhism are the Mahāyāna, Theravāda, and Vajrayāna traditions. Membership in the Young Buddhist Association of Malaysia comes primarily from the Mahāyāna and Theravāda groups, which use Mandarin and English, respectively. The executive committee of YBAM can communicate and interact with the Mahāyāna and Theravāda groups without fear or favour, and regard all members as disciples of the Buddha, regardless of tradition. Such is the uniqueness and strength of Buddhism in Malaysia.

### **Buddhist Women's Contributions**

The contributions of Buddhist women toward the development of Buddhism in Malaysia deserve acknowledgment. The extent of Buddhist women's participation in the Malaysian Buddhist youth movement is strongly influenced by several factors, including the traditional role of women, customs, changing social conditions, abilities, and personal will. In the past, Buddhist women re-enacted their traditional roles by offering *dāna* and working behind the scenes during blessing ceremonies. These women were very devout and concerned for the well-being of their families and the community. They offered financial assistance to aid the construction of temples. As time went by, these Buddhist women branched out and became more involved in social welfare and charity activities, and in Buddhist education. Gradually, women's sections began to form in various Buddhist societies. Women began to demonstrate leadership qualities and organisational abilities. In these ways, women's activities expanded beyond their traditional roles as providers of *dāna* and background support. They

have advanced into the dynamic world of leadership, management, and teaching activities.

During the past decade, with advances in educational standards among women, increasing numbers of Buddhist women have willingly moved to the forefront to serve the cause of Buddhism. Well-educated and skilled, these women are very well-positioned to contribute to the efforts of YBAM in promoting Buddhism in society in general and among Malaysian youth in particular. Women organise activities such as seminars for Buddhist women, life camps, family discussions, and so on. These activities inadvertently nurture greater awareness among women participants regarding their roles and significant contributions to the development of both Buddhism and society.

### **Malaysian Buddhist Women in the Youth Movement**

Starting in the 1950s, the Buddhist youth movement contributed greatly to the vitality of Buddhism in Malaysia. However, there was a visible absence of Buddhist women leaders. One reason for this absence was that Buddhist women were not properly organised at that time. Gradually, however, Buddhist women began making their presence known, beginning with activities such as offering *dāna* and taking a more active role in social work, charity, and education. Ultimately, as women's sections (or "ladies' sections") became established, Buddhist women were able to demonstrate their full support to the Buddhist youth movement in a more organised and efficient manner, whether through financial support or educational services. These Buddhist women also acted as models for their family members and relatives. Many of these women encouraged their children to join the youth organisations. Unfortunately, there exist no proper records to document Buddhist women's contributions.

During the 1970s, Buddhist women began to play a more active role in the Malaysian Buddhist youth movement. Buddhist women were appointed to the state and national committees of YBAM and many outstanding nuns took part. Their success in these activities was an affirmation of Buddhist women's capabilities.

By the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Buddhist women had come a long way. Rather than taking a back seat and merely extending traditional women's work to their respective Buddhist organisations, they have become a very visible force on the frontline of the Buddhist youth movement. Working side-by-side with men, they participate in the planning, management, promotion, and implementation of Buddhist youth activities. For example, in 1998-2000 and 2002-2004, I became the first Buddhist woman to be deputy president of the Young Buddhist Association of Malaysia. I participated as chairperson of the fifth Six-year Plan Steering Committee.



At the state level, many Buddhist women also held the post of chairperson of YBAM State Liaison Committees and led youth activities. The list includes Bhikṣuṇī Chuan Wen, Bhikṣuṇī Chuan De, Bhikṣuṇī Ji Min, Chong Pow Kim, Ooi Ean Peng, and myself. There were also many Buddhist women who held leadership positions as vice president, secretary general, and treasurer in YBAM.

It should be noted that these young women did not neglect their traditional roles while rendering service to the Buddhist youth movement. In the course of helping out with youth activities, these women simultaneously fulfilled their roles as wives, mothers, and daughters in their respective families. It should be stressed that in the 1970s, leadership at YBAM was predominantly male. As these male leaders travelled throughout the country to help propagate Buddhism by setting up Buddhist societies and carrying out activities, their absence from home meant that daily household responsibilities and caring for children were left to the womenfolk in their families. Women took responsibility and carried out these tasks very efficiently. Their support enabled male leaders to execute their *dhammaduta* (Dhamma messenger) work without anxiety about their families. Hence, in appraising the role of YBAM and the Buddhist youth movement in Malaysia, the complementary roles played by women and men deserve consideration. During the 1980s, increasing numbers of young Buddhist men and professionals joined Buddhist organisations and began participating in their activities, while building their careers at the same time. The support and selfless contributions of the women in their lives deserve recognition.

### **Conclusion**

The role of Buddhist women in the Buddhist youth movement is two-fold. First, women are a visible force, engaging in activities and providing services at the forefront of the movement. Second, they are an invisible, complementary force, providing assistance and services in the background. Whether visible at the forefront or invisible in the background, the efforts and contributions of Buddhist women toward the cause of Buddhism and the Buddhist youth movement are worthy of acknowledgment and appreciation. Buddhist women have demonstrated great patience, mental strength, and skill in balancing the demands of their varied roles effectively.

## **Bhikṣuṇīs as Leaders in Contemporary Taiwan**

*Hong-Xiang Shi*

During 5000 years of Chinese history, women have taken a secondary place in the family and society. Even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, although women played very important roles in every aspect of society, women in China, as elsewhere, were still very much disadvantaged and subordinate to men. In Buddhism, the same was true. Although Buddha Śākyamuni's aunt Mahāprajāpatī was able to enter the Saṅgha and became a great nun, she was bound by the eight special rules (*gurudharma*s) that assigned women to second place. Like their counterparts in other societies, Buddhist women have long been treated unequally.

Taiwanese Buddhism originated in mainland China. Shortly after the great master Bhikṣu Taixu landed on the island in 1917, upon the invitation of Bhikṣu Shanhui from Lingquan Temple, he predicted that Taiwan would be a place for Buddhist nuns. Bhikṣu Taixu made this statement in a talk titled "My Perspective on Buddhism" delivered at Shengde Hall in Taichung. Fifty years after the master's prediction, Buddhist nuns in Taiwan indeed had begun to take leading roles. Four discernible stages for the transformation can be delineated: the Japanese period, the recovery period, the period after martial law was lifted, and the period of pluralistic development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **The Japanese Period**

Before the Japanese took control of Taiwan in 1895, Buddhists tended to practise a combination of three traditions: Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. At that time, women were not allowed to renounce the household life and become nuns until they were 40 years old. There were unmarried women who dedicated themselves to the temples, but did not shave their heads. These practitioners were called "vegetarian women," a term that distinguished them from nuns.

When the Japanese took over Taiwan, they permitted women to receive the precepts of a Buddhist laywoman (*upāsikā*) from monks. Japanese Buddhism also permitted monks to take non-vegetarian food and to take wives. This made it permissible for these priests (commonly called

“monks”) to stay in the same temple with women, with the men managing important affairs and the women doing all the difficult chores. Under the circumstances, women did not have many opportunities for higher education or temple leadership.

At this time, all monks and nuns had to go to Yongquan Temple in Fujian Province of China to receive full ordination. After the ordination, the monk could go elsewhere for further study and practise, but nuns had to return to their own temples to help with chores. Some nuns ran their own temples and began to take laypeople as their disciples. The temples often needed outside support, so outsiders became involved in the temple management, which created some problems later on. Such temples were called “nuns’ places” and the nuns were called “vegetarian women.” These nuns did not usually take male disciples and had to work hard for their living. If they were rich enough, they could donate a handsome sum of money to the temple and stay there without having to work. Female practitioners of this type were often quite content with such a life.

### **The Recovery Period**

When the Japanese ruled Taiwan, they not only implemented their own forms of Buddhism on the island, but they also forced people to believe in their gods and ancestors. But people in Taiwan still worshipped their own gods in a secret way. When the China nationalist government (KMT) recovered the island, a great number of monks also arrived, greatly stimulating the development of Buddhism on this island. First, a Triple Platform Ordination was held at Daxian Temple, in which novice precepts, full ordination precepts, and *bodhisattva* precepts were conferred. Second, many distinguished monks were invited to teach and give precepts. Third, the number of nuns greatly increased, from a ratio of 50:50 to a ratio of 3:1.

Earlier in Taiwan, it was impermissible for a *bhikṣuṇī* ordination to be conducted jointly by both monks and nuns. This restriction was lifted in 1970 when Bhikṣu Baisheng held an ordination at Linji Temple in Taipei. From this time forth, it became possible for nuns to receive ordination in a ceremony that included *bhikṣuṇī* preceptors as well as *bhikṣu* preceptors. The first nun to confer the precepts was Bhikṣuṇī Tianyi. As a result of the institution of this dual ordination procedure, Buddhist nuns gained much greater importance in the order.

Another important breakthrough was an incident at Longhu in 1976. Longhu Temple was a place for female practitioners that planned to conduct the Triple Platform Ordination. It was initially decided that Bhikṣuṇī Tianyi would preside over the ordination and that the ordination would be given to nuns only. However, objections came from all directions. Later, it

was decided that a two-part ordination would take place: an ordination for men at Chaofong Temple and an ordination for women at Longhu Temple. But still many arguments about procedures occurred. Finally, a number of precept masters from other temples decided to withdraw from the event, making the ordination both special and controversial. According to Bhikṣuṇī Wuyin of Xiangguang Temple, three remarkable achievements occurred at this event. First, young practitioners were able to get involved in the ordination arrangements. Second, young nuns were able to take ordination. Third, the tradition of nuns receiving full ordination became firmly established in Taiwan.

### **The Period after Martial Law**

On July 14, 1987, the Nationalist government abolished martial law. On January 1, 1988, restrictions on the press were lifted. On May 1, the period known as Mobilisation for the Extermination of Civil Turmoil came to an end. Such policies, bolstered by an economic boom that began in 1971, greatly promoted the development of Buddhism on the island. Many Buddhist schools were opened, the number of Buddhists increased, numerous Dharma teachings and Dharma events were held, a large number of Buddhist publications appeared, and many great Buddhist teachers emerged. During this period, Buddhist organisations flourished and a variety of media channels opened up, allowing Buddhist teachings to be broadcast on radio and television. Unfortunately, this period also gave rise to a number of religious groups that practised teachings contrary to Buddhist doctrines and made money by calling themselves Buddhists. Some became quite notorious.

Nevertheless, Buddhism flourished under these ideal conditions, in a time of great prosperity. An approach known as Buddhism for This Life (*rensheng fojiao*), which had been advocated earlier by Bhikṣu Taixu, laid a solid foundation for further Buddhist development in the country. Such development greatly benefited Buddhist nuns. Nuns had better educational opportunities, greater resources that enabled them to establish their own temples, and more opportunities to teach. In July 1996, a group of 23 nuns led by Bhikṣuṇī Mingzong founded a preparatory committee for the first *bhikṣuṇī* association in Taiwan. In September 1996, the first organisational meeting was held, and in November the Bhikṣuṇī Association of Chinese Buddhism was formally established, with Bhikṣuṇī Jingding as the first chairperson, Bhikṣuṇī Puhui as vice-chair, Bhikṣuṇī Mingzong as secretary, and Bhikṣuṇī Changduan as chief manager. According to Bhikṣuṇī Mingzong, many objections were raised during the process. Detractors claimed that it was wrong and anti-Buddhist to let nuns run their

own business. The nuns even received some threats, but they remained firmly determined.

Once the association was established, Buddhist nuns naturally had a better chance of holding positions and authority in other Buddhist organisations. For example, out of 24 counties in Taiwan, 13 have nuns as chairpersons. This is good news for women practitioners, of course. However, there are also pitfalls. For example, what are the future prospects for female ascendancy in Taiwanese Buddhism? The question deserves careful consideration.

### **The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Period of Pluralistic Development**

From the very beginning, members of the Buddhist community were ranked in a specific order: *bhikṣu*, *bhikṣuṇī*, *śrāmaṇera*, *śrāmaṇerikā*, *śikṣamāṇā*, *upāsaka*, and *upāsikā*. Nuns always followed the monks and occupied a lower position. Yet when skills and labour are needed, nuns are often in top positions. It is widely recognised that nuns often do a much better job than monks in maintaining temples and organising events. They are highly regarded for being more considerate and more careful. Once, I heard a senior monk say that whenever he visited a *bhikṣuṇī* temple, it was always clean, well-appointed, offering tasty and nutritious food and a polite and warm reception. Buddhist nuns have proved that they can perform just as well as *bhikṣus* and are now playing important roles in society. Nuns stand poised to play even greater roles in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

At present, monks still hold most of the top positions in Buddhist organisations and receive all the glory and recognition, while nuns do all the work and receive little applause. One day these realities will come to light and the nuns will be recognised for all their hard work. Only then will *bhikṣuṇīs* take their rightful place side-by-side with their male counterparts. Only in this way will *bhikṣuṇīs* become fully recognised as leaders and teachers of Buddhism.

### **Waking Up in the New Millennium**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is a century of pluralism and Buddhism will also inevitably become more pluralistic and heterogeneous. New doctrines and new interpretations of old doctrines will surely appear. Under the circumstances, it is important that Buddhism not become twisted and distorted. Nuns must develop new skills in writing and teaching to help Buddhism develop further.

Nuns must develop leadership skills and train their disciples to shoulder the tasks of charity work, education programmes, and cultural programmes. To lead these programmes, nuns and laywomen alike must be trained in management and interpersonal skills. These are the most important lessons for the young disciples.

In an era of internationalisation and globalisation, both monks and nuns need to develop language skills and to cultivate harmonious relationships with people of diverse backgrounds. Our spiritual lessons will definitely benefit people of all walks and all kinds. *Bhikṣuṇīs* will take on increased responsibilities; they will give ordinations, teach the precepts, work closely with their disciples, and solve their own problems.

*Bhikṣuṇīs* need to develop a greater sense of solidarity, interacting more often and forsaking personal interests. They need to develop a greater awareness of differences in an increasingly pluralistic society. *Bhikṣuṇīs* need to cultivate deportment and develop confidence. With these goals in mind, they are certain to become leaders in the Buddhist world.

## New Opportunities and Challenges for Buddhist Women in Nepal

*Bhikkhunī Nyanawati*

The histories of Buddhism and Nepal are closely intertwined. Śākyamuni Buddha was born Siddhārtha Gautama, a prince of the Śākya clan, in Lumbini over 2,500 years ago and spent the first 29 years of his life in Kapilavastu. Siddhārtha Gautama's consort, Yaśodhara, was born and brought up in Devadaha. Nepal is also regarded as the birthplace of at least two previous Buddhas of this fortunate aeon (*bhadrakalpa*): Krakucchanda and Kanakamuni.<sup>1</sup> Śākyamuni Buddha visited his homeland, including Kapilavastu, Devadaha, and adjoining areas, at least nine times during his lifetime to teach the Dhamma to his parents, relatives, and fellow countryfolk. As a result, Buddhism was established and flourished in Nepal during the sixth century BCE.

Śākyamuni Buddha is regarded as the first Dhamma teacher in history to give equal treatment to women in terms of spiritual attainment. Not long after his enlightenment, he founded the *bhikkhunī* order for the religious development of Buddhist women. Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī, the stepmother of the Buddha, who was born in Devadaha and married to King Sudhodana of Kapilavastu, led 500 Śākyan women to become the first Buddhist women of Nepal to receive ordination. Yaśodhara, the Buddha's former wife, also led 500 Śākyan women followers to join the order of Buddhist nuns. It is very inspiring for Buddhist women to learn that at least twelve *bhikkhunīs* received the great honour of being *edadaka* (foremost), recognised for their outstanding qualities and Dhamma attainments, by the Buddha. For example, among the female disciples of the Buddha, Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī was recognised as foremost in seniority and experience, Yaśodhara was acknowledged as foremost among those who had attained supernormal powers, and Nanda was lauded as foremost in meditation.

Sakyadhita's lofty objective to foster gender equity and promote the welfare of all Buddhist women was first put forward long ago by the Tathāgata himself, and his personal secretary, Ānanda. The task before us today is to revive the age-old spirit of Buddhist women appropriately in the modern context.

There was a dark time in Nepalese history 600 years ago, when Buddhists faced severe state suppression at the hands of King Jayasthiti

Malla. This ruler banned all Nepalese women from taking ordination as *bhikkhunīs*, thus effectively dissolving the order of nuns in Nepal and allowing the Buddha's descendants to receive only a limited, conditional ordination for four days once in a lifetime and only with the ruler's express permission. This government ban remained in effect in Nepal for at least five centuries, until Theravāda Buddhism was revived and full ordination for monks was reinstated by the late Saṅgha Mahā Nayaka Pragyānanda Mahāsthavir in Kathmandu in 1930. This revered monk was able to break through the state suppression and open the door to ordination for Nepalese Buddhist women in 1931 by enabling three pioneer Buddhist women of Nepal to go forth under the compassionate guidance of the great Burmese monk U Chandra Mani Mahāthera at Kushinagar, India. Those Nepalese women were not able to receive full ordination as *bhikkhunīs*, because the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha tradition in the Theravāda Buddhist world had already collapsed by that time. Ratnapālī, Dhammapālī, and Saṅghapālī became the first Nepalese Buddhist women in modern Nepalese history to be ordained. They were ordained with ten precepts and known as *anagārikā*.

Today, there are 145 Theravāda Buddhist nuns practising Buddhism in 32 nunneries in Nepal. Of these, 26 nuns are currently studying Buddhism abroad in various Buddhist institutions in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Taiwan, and India. Bhikkhunī Dhammawatī of Sri Dharmakirti Vihar of Nepal is currently the chair of the Nepalese Bhikkhunī Anuyayī Anagārikā Saṅgha. She was ordained as a *bhikkhunī* at Hsi Lai Temple in Los Angeles in 1988. At present, there are 31 nuns in Nepal who have taken *bhikkhunī* ordination; the others observe ten precepts.

### **The Roles Of Buddhist Women In Reviving Buddhism**

Buddhist women in Nepal have been playing a very active role in protecting, preserving, and promoting the recently revived Theravāda Buddhist community of modern Nepal by eagerly and consistently participating in Buddhist religious activities in large numbers. Motivated by their traditional interest in social and religious activities in Buddhist monasteries and study centres, women participate in far greater numbers than men in the Dhamma activities that are organised by monks and nuns in Nepal. Although Nepalese men still outnumber women in receiving monastic ordination, women far outnumber men in religious activities and in the *pariyatti* classes held for the study of Buddhism. A majority of the credit for the revival and sustained development of Buddhism in modern Nepal goes to Buddhist women.



At present, Buddhist women in Nepal can be categorised in three groups. The first group consists of young women studying Buddhism in various *pariyatti* centres and institutions, schools, colleges, and universities. The second group consists of educated nuns actively engaged in Buddhist education and meditation in various monasteries, centres, schools, and institutions, who are teaching courses on Buddhism and meditation in addition to their own practise of meditation. The third group consists of aged Buddhist nuns, who are often illiterate, but are active in religious activities for peace and spiritual development. The responsibility for spreading the Dhamma is largely borne by nuns in the second category.

All three schools of Buddhism, including Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna, are prevalent in Nepal. Among these, Buddhist nuns of the Theravāda school are currently active in promoting the Dhamma through a variety of religious activities. These activities include teaching Buddhist *pariyatti* courses in monasteries, schools, colleges, and *pariyatti* centres; teaching Dhamma in monasteries; writing and publishing books and magazine articles on Buddhism; teaching Buddhist meditation; promoting health awareness through activities related to health services; and spreading the Dhamma through education programmes in primary and secondary schools. In the last twenty years, as educational opportunities for Buddhist women have improved, nuns have become more active in all these areas and have increasingly assumed leadership roles in the Buddhist community.

### **Opportunities for Buddhist Women**

During the dark period of 104 years of Rana autocratic rule in Nepal (1846-1950), Nepalese women had hardly any opportunity to study or to develop their own independent identities. Virtually all women lived as wives, children, sisters, and mothers who were dependent on male members of society. After the revival of Theravāda Buddhism in Nepal and particularly after the establishment of democracy in 1951, educational opportunities expanded and traditional barriers that limited women to household activities resulted in more freedom to pursue educational opportunities; achieve economic independence through work in the government, non-government, and private sectors; engage in religious activities more freely; and even to enter monastic life as Buddhist nuns.

The increasing numbers of Buddhist *pariyatti* programmes in schools, monasteries, and nunneries in Nepal have created new opportunities for educated Nepalese Buddhist women and enabled them to make greater contributions to the Dhamma.<sup>2</sup> The new roles women are playing have contributed greatly to their own personal and spiritual growth. The

establishment of diploma, undergraduate, and post-graduate programmes at Tribhuvan University, Nepal's oldest university, and programmes in Buddhist Studies at colleges have opened new opportunities in higher education for Buddhist women. Lumbini University, now in its formative stage of development, will create more opportunities in the near future. With women pursuing higher education in Buddhist studies, it is anticipated that they will eventually gain new opportunities for research, teaching, and various other capacities in these institutions.

The recently reinstated House of Representatives declared Nepal to be a secular state and restored full democracy in Nepal as a result of a 19-day mass movement against the direct rule the king declared by royal proclamation on April 24, 2006. Nepal has since begun seeing spectacular new developments in the political field. The declaration of secular rule by the House of Representatives has called into question the provisions of the previous Hindu kingdom, giving Nepalese Buddhists more freedom to move ahead and develop new methods of spreading Buddhism in Nepal. Buddhist women are expected to take full advantage of these new opportunities.

### **Challenges Facing Women Today**

With the collapse of an age-old feudal economy based on landed property and income, women in Nepal today are increasingly becoming self-reliant and taking up jobs that will ensure their economic independence. As they break out of traditional patterns of domestic duties and begin to take up jobs in the public sphere, they are often faced with the responsibilities of both job and family. Many find that having to attend to wage-paying jobs as well as household obligations leaves less spare time for religious activities. These combined burdens often make women's lives increasingly difficult and competitive.

In addition to changes in the economic and domestic spheres, Nepalese women must also carefully negotiate the expectations of tradition and modernity. They now walk a fine line between maintaining traditional social and cultural practices, while simultaneously adopting a modern lifestyle. These often conflicting expectations frequently make their lives more difficult and complicated. Women find themselves walking a tightrope between ancient and modern expectations. Today, educated women are expected to do all the household chores – cooking, cleaning, raising children, tending to their education, and so forth – as well as hold an office job to help support the family, whereas men need only be concerned about their job. The new roles open to modern women are therefore both attractive and challenging, and difficult as well.

Additional challenges arise in the sphere of religion. New technological advancements are not yet available for imparting Buddhist education. Traditional styles of teaching Dhamma have not kept pace with developments in the social, economic, and political fields. As a result, Buddhist youth may find little that interests them in the Buddhist monasteries and nunneries that are frequented by young children and members of their grandparents' generation. Appropriate programmes presented in new and creative styles suitable to various age groups need to be developed for the benefit of the younger generation. Until now, religious activities have generally concentrated more on individual development, but the demands of society today require a new emphasis on institutional development. Unfortunately, Buddhist nuns in Nepal have virtually no background or formal training in developing institutions. For example, there are no Buddhist institutes, training centres, libraries, or social welfare facilities. Both nuns and monks must either study independently or go abroad. In either case, they face many challenges in trying to gather economic support for studies, healthcare, and other needs. They remain totally dependent on the individual charity of lay disciples.

### **Conclusion**

Although Nepal is the sacred birthplace of three Buddhas – Kakusandha, Konagmana, and Śākyamuni – there is still no Buddhist institute dedicated to the education and training of Nepalese Buddhist nuns and laywomen. Buddhist women in general and nuns in particular are in dire need of specialised learning in the fields of leadership, composition, public speaking, communications, and teacher training. Buddhist nuns are forced to pursue their studies in secular schools and colleges, where they are vulnerable to occasional inappropriate comments, unfair criticism, and unruly behaviour. Buddhist nuns in Nepal therefore have no choice but to learn Dhamma either in monks' monasteries or on a private basis. This situation requires immediate attention and improvement.

To fill the need for modern schools for Nepalese Buddhist children and provide opportunities for Nepalese nuns to become teachers in these schools, I have been operating Bhassara Secondary School at Lalitpur with residential facilities for Buddhist children. We are providing students with education in Buddhist ethics, *pariyatti*, and meditation, in addition to general subjects. Some Nepalese Buddhist nuns have already begun teaching at this school and we plan to expand these programmes to include more nuns, both as teachers and students, in the future. Lack of financial support is the main obstacle. The future of these benevolent activities will largely

depend upon the support and cooperation of well-wishers in Nepal and abroad.

### Notes

- 1 The five Buddhas of this *bhadrakalpa* are: Krakucchanda, Kanakamuni, Kasyapa, Śākyamuni, and the future Buddha, Maitreya.
- 2 *Pariyatti* here refers to study of the Buddhist scriptures, with the aim of gaining competence.

## **Buddhist Women in Canada: Researching Identity and Influence<sup>1</sup>**

*Mavis Fenn*

While the official date of the first Buddhist community in Canada is 1906, making 2006 Canada's Buddhist centenary, the tradition made its entrance into Canada long before 1906. As was the case in the United States, Buddhism first came to Canada with Chinese immigrants around the middle of the 1800s. The Chinese, largely men, came for the gold rush in British Columbia in 1858 and again in 1869 to build the great railway that stretches across Canada. Some stayed after the rush was over and the railway finished, working as labourers or establishing small businesses in "Chinatowns." Because wages were low and living conditions crowded, most had to settle for sending their earnings back home rather than returning to China to marry and bring a wife to Canada. Many married men were never able to return to wives and children left behind.

There is a Canadian documentary, *Under the Willow Tree*, that records the experience of women whose mothers and grandmothers came to Canada in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> Their life was hard: isolated from family, unable to venture outside, unable to speak English and with little money. Still, they raised families and helped to build a nation. And, they continued to come – Japanese, Tibetans, Vietnamese and Cambodians – and to bring Buddhism with them. The Canadian census of 2001 lists just over 300,000 Buddhists in Canada, about one percent of the overall population. Every province in Canada, including the far reaches of the Yukon territories, has some Buddhist presence. Most are Asian Buddhists and most came from 1962 onward when a series of changes to Canada's Immigration Act made immigration to Canada easier than it had been at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup>

Canada is a multicultural society. As a multicultural society, Canada does not ask immigrants to give up their religion, language, and culture as part of a Canadian "melting pot." Assimilation is not required, although adaptation certainly is. In *Buddhism in Canada*, Bruce Matthews argues that it is this multicultural mosaic that has allowed ethnic Buddhism to remain largely exclusivist in nature and he notes that there does not appear to be any kind of ecumenical movement among Canadian Buddhists.<sup>4</sup> Be

that as it may, Canadians are encouraged to share their particular cultures with other Canadians and Canadians are expected to be open to learning about and trying to understand the cultures of others.

The contact between cultures is often facilitated by women. Women play an important role in immigrant communities. Indeed, they often play a broader and more public role in Canada than they have in their countries of origin.<sup>5</sup> Access to social services, legal aid, education and so on are frequently facilitated through religious communities, in this case Buddhist temples, which also act as cultural guardians. In their role of bridging two worlds – the immigrant community and the Canadian community at large – Asian women may also come into contact with women who have chosen to become Buddhist, that is, women who have “adopted” Buddhism instead of or in addition to their original religious tradition.<sup>6</sup>

Until recently, the history of Buddhism as it has evolved in Canada among non-Asians has not been documented systematically. The recent work by Bruce Matthews, cited above, goes some way towards changing that situation, presenting a province-by-province snapshot of Buddhism in Canada. Here we learn that the first non-Asian Buddhist group founded in Canada was the Dharma Centre of Canada, a teaching and retreat centre founded in 1966 at Kinmount, Ontario.<sup>7</sup> But if we wish to know whether they have any female teachers or whether they interact to any degree with the Asian Buddhism communities in Ontario, we are at a loss. Even a web search fails to turn up much information on Canadian Buddhist women and there is none, to my knowledge, dealing with their interactions with each other cross-culturally.

It is my intention to remedy that situation. I have begun a project to document the presence and activities of Canadian Buddhist women, Asian and non-Asian, immigrant and native Canadian, and their interactions with each other. The balance of this essay will deal with the setup of that study, the numbers of women surveyed to date, and some preliminary insights into their views about Buddhism and each other.

Following the pattern established in *Buddhism in Canada*, my goal is to survey and interview women from every province and territory of Canada. Due to financial considerations, however, initial contacts have been primarily in Ontario and Quebec. Given that 42 percent of all Buddhists in Canada reside in Ontario, this seemed a good place to start.<sup>8</sup> The only criteria for inclusion in the survey is that one be Buddhist, female, and have some facility in English. The language requirement is due to the fact that when Asian and non-Asian women interact, they generally do so in English. Contact was established through a variety of means: personal

contact, referrals through personal contact, referral through colleagues, and contact through addresses listed on the *Buddhism in Canada* website.<sup>9</sup>

Women who agreed to be surveyed completed a three-part questionnaire. The first two parts of the questionnaire provided us with information that describes them in terms of age, education, religious tradition, ethnic background, country of origin, and whether or not they are Canadian citizens. This section of the survey also allowed us to identify their respective roles within their community: teachers, translators, advisors in both practical and religious matters, volunteers, and financial donors.

The questions in the final part of the survey dealt with the practices offered at their temples or Dharma centres, their personal practices, and whether or not their practise brought them into contact with Buddhists from other cultural backgrounds. Having identified some interaction, they were asked about whether or not they thought Asians and non-Asians viewed Buddhism in the same way and whether or not understanding differed between those “born” Buddhist and those who have “chosen” or “adopted” Buddhism.

The smallest sample to date is of non-Asian women. Only six have been surveyed for this paper. While nothing definitive can be said, some of the data supports earlier studies of Buddhism in the United States.<sup>10</sup> These women tend to be older than Asian Buddhists. Of the six, four were from 50 to 60 years old, while two were from 30 to 40. Five were Canadians by birth, while one was born in the United States. They were far better educated than the average Canadian. The minimum education was a college diploma/certificate, while four others held advanced degrees. One had both a college diploma and an undergraduate degree. One was Theravāda, two were Korean Zen (one of whom also practised Vietnamese Zen), one practised Karma Kagyu, and one both *zazen* and Vajrayāna. All were Caucasian. Five listed themselves as lay and one was ordained. As we will see shortly, however, two of those listed as lay were not traditional laity.

Two of the women who listed themselves as laity played important roles in teaching. One was a meditation instructor who led retreats and a regular sitting group. The other was a senior student of a Tibetan teacher who, along with other senior students, performed a mentoring function for less experienced meditators. While one of these women belonged to a non-denominational Dharma centre and the other is a member of a group led by a Tibetan Vajrayāna teacher, they and their groups share something in common: a desire to frame a Buddhist practise that fits with a Western lifestyle. The Karma Kagyu group is also called a Dharma centre, a term that implies a Buddhism more focused on meditation and teaching and less

on devotion and ritual. Further, the role of meditation advisor is a new role, one that was publicly and formally established. This creation of a new “title” within the group is a recognition of the fact that Buddhism, particularly in North America, is “lay led.” Few North Americans would seriously consider a traditional monastic life, yet many have attained levels of meditation traditionally attained only by religious specialists.<sup>11</sup> The Karma Kagyu laywoman also teaches Tibetan, has organised a children’s programme, and speaks frequently on behalf of the group.

The nun is ordained in the Vietnamese Zen tradition. Her Dharma centre is in a residential area of a medium-sized industrial city. In addition to meditation classes, the centre also runs self-development workshops. The members of the Dharma centre are largely non-Asian. This has provided both opportunity and challenge for the nun. The challenge is financial. The centre, in which the nun also lives, was donated to the centre by her. Expenses are covered, just, by a tenant, the community, and fundraisers. Her community is small and of modest means. Travel to Vietnam to receive ordination is difficult and participation in international conferences and events impossible. She notes that financial difficulties are common among nuns in the West as well as in Asia. Many Westerners erroneously assume that all nuns’ expenses are paid for by their “denomination.” Further, *dāna* is not a feature of Western culture and so routine gifts of food are not something upon which she can count. Two of her monastic friends engage in paid labour in order to meet expenses, and I know of other nuns who do so as well. This brings with it a host of related problems: when and where to wear robes, what kind of labour is acceptable, and whether it breaches the Vinaya.

This nun also finds opportunity in being a Western nun, for example, in acquainting others with Buddhism and helping to develop rituals or ceremonies that bring a Buddhist presence to Western culture. For example, the last time I visited the centre, I noted an announcement of a special ceremony for Mother’s Day. She also hopes to help Buddhism adapt to the modern Western context. Our discussion in this area concerned the possibility or advisability of modifying some of the monastic rules to fit contemporary lifestyles. This will be a contentious issue as Buddhism continues to plant roots in the West.

Non-Asian women rarely attended a temple and their interaction with Asian Buddhists was confined primarily to occasions like Wesak, special events, or visiting teachers. Two questions invited participants to reflect on the practise and understanding of Asian Buddhists. Generally, respondents believed that Asian and non-Asian Buddhists have a common



understanding of the Dharma. They pointed to the example of their mutual attendance at Dharma talks. Where they saw a difference was in the way Asians and non-Asians approach the Dharma. One non-Asian woman commented that Asians “are less motivated by angst” in their practise of Buddhism and have more faith in the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha, which allows them to “just practise.” Both groups noted that Asian practise was more communal than that of non-Asians. Based on her experiences at Buddhist gatherings internationally, one non-Asian woman noted that Asian practise was more tied to regional and ethnic identity and to lineages and group solidarity than that of non-Asians. Another respondent noted that non-Asians tended to want teachings and empowerments for personal practise and that many, if not most, couched their description of the Dharma in pseudo-scientific paradigms. Further, this respondent noted that the understanding and practise of non-Asian Buddhists tended to incorporate Native American, New Age, and personal development ideas and practices. Although one respondent engaged in merit-making practices, most felt that this was more of an Asian cultural practise than a specifically Buddhist practise.

My expectation, based upon the limited materials available on Canadian Buddhism, was that my findings would generally confirm those of American studies like Paul Numrich’s concerning “parallel congregations.”<sup>12</sup> Numrich found that Asians came to the temples he studied primarily for ritual and devotion and that non-Asians came primarily for meditation instruction and practise. While my research to date has affirmed this for non-Asian Buddhists, I found that many of the young Chinese Buddhist women I met through two local temples were also very interested in meditation, although they participated in ritual as well. These young women felt that the division was more one of age than ethnicity. I also expected to find tensions between Asians and non-Asians regarding styles of Buddhist practise. Paul Bramadat sums up those tensions by stating that Asians express the concern that Westerners are just “dabbling” with the Buddhist tradition while Westerners often comment that Asian practise is “culture bound.”<sup>13</sup> While both Asians and non-Asians comment on the more communal style of Buddhism practised by Asians, my research does not support the use of loaded terms like those above. Most respondents felt that the variations in practise were just based upon different cultural backgrounds. One respondent noted that Westerners take a more intellectual approach while Asian Buddhists place ritual and devotion more in the foreground. The overall view of all respondents was

encapsulated by the respondent who noted that both ways were “culturally different but good.”

Further, while there is certainly truth to Matthews’s comments about exclusivity in Asian Buddhist communities, I think that this comment needs some clarification. My research to date indicates that Asian Buddhists do not necessarily reach out to non-Asian Canadian Buddhists religiously, because they expect that non-Asian practise will necessarily be different from theirs. In short, they display a more sophisticated understanding of the cultural component of Buddhism than they have been given credit. Whether or not this attitude is typical within various Asian communities has yet to be established. If so, is that attitude related to Canada’s policy of multiculturalism? My consideration of the role language plays in Asian/non-Asian communication suggests that it might be. My limited experience is that Asian Buddhist communities are quite effective in providing information about their beliefs and practise to non-Asians through the conscious and systematic use of translators from within the community. It is also my experience that this providing of information is not done for the purpose of conversion, but in order to make their religion understandable and acceptable to mainstream Canadians. The desire for understanding and acceptance is also visible in Asian Buddhist participation in multicultural and multireligious festivals and presentations within the broader community.<sup>14</sup>

Over the next few years I hope to be able to report further findings. My primary objective here is to describe and identify Canadian Buddhist women and their contributions to Canada and Buddhism, and there is still much work to be done. Hopefully, the dialogue between Asian and non-Asian Buddhist women can be furthered through shedding more light on each community and their mutual Buddhist activities.

## Notes

- 1 My thanks to the University of Waterloo and the Canadian Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) for providing me with a travel grant to present this paper.
- 2 “Under the Willow Tree: Pioneer Chinese Women in Canada,” directed by Dora Nipp, National Film Board of Canada, 1997.
- 3 Paul Bramadat, “Preface,” in *Buddhism in Canada*, ed. Bruce Matthews (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Janet McLellan, *Many Petals of the Lotus: Five Asian Buddhist Communities in Toronto* (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 1999).
- 6 I am aware of the problems with the terms “Asian” and “non-Asian.” Within the context of this article, “Asian” refers to those ethnic Asians who were raised either in Asia and then immigrated to Canada or those raised in an Asian community within Canada. “Non-Asian” in this article refers

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to Caucasians born and raised in Europe or North America. Subsequent articles will deal with current theoretical issues regarding terminology.

- 7 Kay Koppedrayner and Mavis L. Fenn, "Buddhist Diversity in Ontario," in Matthews, *Buddhism in Canada*.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 <http://www.buddhismincanada.com>.
- 10 For example, Wendy Cadge and Robert Wuthnow, "Buddhists and Buddhism in the United States: The Scope of Influence," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43:3 (2004).
- 11 The Friends of the Western Buddhist Order was the first, to my knowledge, to adopt this procedure. This group is notable for the creative ways in which it adapts Buddhism to the Western context.
- 12 Paul Numrich, *Old Wisdom in the New World: Americanization in Two Immigrant Theravāda Buddhist Temples* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999).
- 13 Paul Bramadat *Buddhism in Canada*, p. xiii.
- 14 The term "multiculturalism," what it entails, and whether or not it is a valuable public policy will be addressed in future research.

## **Hospice Care from a Buddhist Perspective: A Spiritual Path for Both Patients and Hospice Volunteers**

*Pik Pin Goh*

Kasih Hospice Care Society is one of the first registered hospice organisations in Malaysia to apply Buddhist principles in patient care. Our nine years of experience reaffirm that the Buddha's teachings provide an excellent, comprehensive manual for hospice care, which is holistic care to people with life-threatening illnesses. As our spiritual advisor Lama Zopa Rinpoche told us, "To qualify hospice service as Dharma, one must ensure, at a minimum, that one addresses the issue of mind and better future lives." When one is sick with a terminal illness, one's mind is at its weakest and filled with negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, fear, and frustration. One feels helpless and hopeless. At that time, the Buddha becomes our best doctor, psychiatrist, counsellor, nurse, and companion. Many patients we cared for began their spiritual journey, a search for the meaning of life, at this critical time of death and dying.

### **Spiritual Support through a Universal Approach in Malaysia**

Malaysia is a multiethnic and multicultural society. Kasih Hospice Care Society utilises skilful means to serve this multi-faith community through applying universal principles of love, compassion, altruistic joy, equanimity, generosity, patience, tolerance, trust, understanding, peace, respect and regard for all life, truth, wisdom, and freedom from selfishness, hatred, and delusion. Our volunteers are taught and frequently use the following Dharma teachings in providing spiritual support to patients.

### **Precious Human Rebirth**

The teachings on the precious human rebirth help us to appreciate the value of human existence, with its vast potential and its rarity.<sup>1</sup> People of all faith have the understanding of inner divinity or the pure and good "*bodhi* seed" within. It is very encouraging to be reminded of such great potential when

one is depressed. The sense of hopelessness and helplessness is eliminated. We also encourage patients to recall virtuous actions done by themselves and others, and to rejoice in them. On a few occasions, we helped patients recall these teachings just moments before they took their last breath. It was very encouraging to note the change in their facial expression, which changed from fear and anxiety to peace and calm.

### **Understanding The Four Noble Truths**

By applying the teachings on the Four Noble Truths, patients who resent their misfortune begin to:

1. Acknowledge the first truth, the existence of suffering, and the fact that no one is free from it;
2. Accept the second truth, that one is responsible for one's own suffering, and resolve to eliminate the cause;
3. Realise the third truth, the truth of cessation of suffering, the state of liberation and enlightenment; and
4. Cultivate the path leading to the cessation of suffering, the fourth truth.<sup>2</sup>

We noted that, once patients accept the first and second truths about suffering, they have less sorrow and lamentation and do not blame others. This is particularly obvious among some patients who are dying from HIV/AIDS, as they fully understand the causes of their illness and accept responsibility.

### **The Three Types of Suffering**

Our encounters with patients reaffirm the existence of the three types of suffering patients are constantly facing:

1. Suffering of the physical body. Fortunately, most of the symptoms can be relieved by proper medication and nursing care given by the hospice team.
2. Suffering of change. The patient's mental and physical state are changing all the time, from feeling well, to discomfort, and back

to wellness. We use this fact to encourage our patients to understand that suffering is not permanent.

3. Pervasive suffering. This fact is not easy to share with patients. Our contaminated aggregates and all phenomena in cyclic existence are, by nature, suffering. We skilfully tell patients that this human existence is unsatisfactory and not worth being attached to. In this way, we encourage them to let go of craving for material possessions, relatives, friends, and even the body.<sup>3</sup>

From our experience, we found that people with religion are less fearful of death. They believe that there is a brighter future after death. Some believe they will be with God, while Buddhists belief in a better future rebirth, liberation, and full enlightenment. Sadly, we find that people without any religion have a lot of fear, believing that they will be punished in hell.

### **Death and Impermanence**

Every Kasih Hospice caregiver attends talks on death and impermanence. They learn about the nine-round death meditation: death is certain, the time of death is uncertain, and at the time of death, the only thing that will help us is our Dharma practise and spiritual cultivation.<sup>4</sup> Such an awareness and conviction is very useful for patients and volunteers, since they frequently encounter death and impermanence. When patients ask why they have cancer and are dying, a volunteer can skilfully ask patients in response whether they have ever heard of anyone who did not die, either of sickness or old age. The volunteer can also affirm that eventually everyone dies, and that death is a natural process. Death is not an end, but a stage of life to be experienced.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Universal Law of Cause and Effect (*Karma*)**

Volunteers need to be skilful when applying the universal law of cause and effect. Statements such as, “You got this disease because you have created negative actions” are unwise. For example, it is unwise to tell a cancer patient who has been a butcher or a fisherman that the present illness is the result of the patient’s *karma* of killing in the past. All volunteers are taught the four principles of *karma*: *karma* is definite, *karma* increases, one experiences the results of actions oneself has created, and *karma* does not

disappear. To change one's *karma*, one must purify it. We emphasise that one can still do something to modify the results of one's actions. If one does not create the causes or conditions, and if one applies the appropriate antidotes and practices virtuous actions, negative results will not ripen.

### **Purification**

The most wonderful thing that we share with patients is the practise of the four opponent powers.<sup>6</sup> By doing the purification practise, we reduce patients' fear and uncertainty and give them hope and relief. The four opponent powers are:

1. The power of regret: We advise patients not to have guilt, but to generate a deep sense of regret, and to follow up by applying the second power.
2. The power of reliance or dependence: We encourage patients to rely on the Three Jewels by going for refuge, or to rely on the God or gods of their own religious system.
3. Power of remedy: We share with patients antidotes that can be applied to counter afflictions, such as thoughts of loving kindness as an antidote to hatred. If patients are Buddhists, we recite prayers and *mantras* together.
4. Power of restraint: We emphasise the importance of the fourth opponent power, to vigilantly resolve to refrain from creating negative actions in the future.

We have found that non-Buddhist faiths have similar practices of purification, of cleansing the defilements of negative actions, through reliance on divinities, such as God or gods, and through making a commitment not to repeat the negative action.

### **Cultivating Loving Kindness, Compassion, and Altruistic Joy**

We often tell our patients that, although the body is sick, the mind can be healthy, and one can use pleasant speech and generate good thoughts towards others.<sup>7</sup> One should appreciate the kindness of others and rejoice in the good deeds they have done. We find that many of our patients who are physically weak but clear in mind are able to apply this very well.

In addition to these Dharma teachings, Kasih Hospice Care volunteers are reminded to generate the pure motivation of wishing to free all beings from suffering and the causes of suffering, without any thought of personal gain. We inculcate the *bodhicitta* attitude that takes full responsibility to create the complete causes to free all beings from suffering and liberate them from *samsāra*. At the end of each contact with patients, the volunteers dedicate their virtuous actions to relieving the sufferings of all beings and wishing them to achieve the highest state of happiness, that is, enlightenment.

### **Volunteers' Own Spiritual Development**

Hospice care serves as a platform for volunteers to mobilise the Dharma into a daily spiritual practise. The by-products of this practise are tremendous. By constantly facing and reflecting on death and impermanence, volunteers make Dharma practise a priority in their lives. Through this practise, we hope that all volunteers will live happily, die without regrets, and eventually bring their Dharma practise to fruition. Serving the sick is one of the greatest virtuous actions. Virtuous actions create the merit that is so critically needed to counteract delusions and clear away obscurations and obstacles on our spiritual path.

### **Conclusion**

Spiritual support is an integral part of hospice care. The universal principles of love, compassion, altruistic joy, equanimity, generosity, patience, tolerance, trust, understanding, peace, respect, and regard for all life; freedom from selfishness, hatred, and delusion; and truth and wisdom, belong to no particular religion. One can apply these values skilfully to all, without having to utter any religious terminology. Through one's sincerity and genuine wish to free all beings from suffering, a pure motivation and dedication will go a long way. Through this practise, both patients and hospice volunteers are on the path to higher spiritual attainment.

### **Notes**

- 1 Geshe Lhundub Sopa with David Patt, *Steps on the Path to Enlightenment: A Commentary on Tsongkhapa's Lamrim Chenmo, Volume 1: The Foundation Practices* (Boston: Wisdom Publication, 2004), p. 245.



- 2 Geshe Tashi Tsering, *The Foundation of Buddhist Thought, Part 1: The Four Noble Truths* (London: Jamyang Buddhist Centre, 2001), pp. 5-6.
- 3 Sopa, *Steps On The Path To Enlightenment*, p. 243.
- 4 Karin Walham, *Lam Rim Outlines: Beginners' Meditation Guide* (Kopan Monastery Publication, 1996), p. 14.
- 5 Useful resources include Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992); and Derek Doyle, *The Platform Ticket: Memories and Musings of a Hospice Doctor* (Durham, UK: The Pentad Press, 1999).
- 6 Lama Zopa Rinpoche, *Ultimate Healing: The Power of Compassion* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001), p. 213.
- 7 Lama Zopa Rinpoche, *Making Life Meaningful* (Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive, 2001), pp. 13-28.

## **Women's Buddhist Practise in the U.S.: The 2005 Conference at Smith College**

*Susanne Mrozik*

From April 7 to 10, 2005, a conference on the topic of *Women Practicing Buddhism: American Experiences* took place at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. The conference was sponsored by several local colleges – Amherst College, Hampshire College, Mount Holyoke College, and Smith College – as well as the Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women.<sup>1</sup> The long weekend brought together nearly 1500 people, most of them women, to discuss the nature of American Buddhist women's practise today. Among the diverse group of participants were professional academics, college students, public intellectuals, Dharma teachers, monastics, lay practitioners, social activists, alternative healers, and artists. Many topics were discussed, including "Buddhism and Creativity," "Women Changing Buddhism: Feminist Perspectives," "Engaged Buddhism," "Race, Ethnicity, and Class," and "Women Dharma Teachers." The format of the conference encouraged audience participation. In addition to formal panel presentations, there were numerous workshops on topics such as "Interfaith Identities," "Bringing Dharma to the Law," "Traditional Tibetan Medicine," "Practicing within a Family," "Devotion in Buddhist Practice," "Dance in Praise of Tara," and "Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction." In this essay, I report on some of the key issues raised at the conference, focusing especially on the many facets of American Buddhist women's practise.

American women define Buddhist practise in very different ways. These definitions are not mutually exclusive. Women can and do engage in multiple forms of practise. Nevertheless, it became clear during the course of the conference that American women can have very different practise priorities from each other and that many of us were not fully aware of that fact. For some women, meditation is the core of their practise. Accordingly, there are many Buddhist meditation centres in the U.S., representing most of the world's Buddhist traditions. For other women, however, meditation is less of a priority. For instance, Sharon Suh, a scholar of Korean American Buddhism, emphasised the importance Korean American women place on performing devotional practices, such as bowing, at local temples.

In addition to meditation centres, there are also many different Buddhist traditions represented in the U.S., some dating as far back as the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They serve different ethnic communities, accommodating devotional practices as well as other community needs.

Many women at the conference defined an essential feature of their Buddhist practise as social justice work. The conference thus devoted an entire panel to the topic of “Engaged Buddhism.” Diana Lion, a speaker on this panel, aptly described Engaged Buddhism as the practise of “restoring this world we share to its wholeness.”<sup>2</sup> A key aspect of her own Buddhist practise is working on behalf of those incarcerated in U.S. prisons. Two other speakers on the “Engaged Buddhism” panel, Eve Myonen Marko and Virginia Straus Benson, focus their practise on conflict resolution and world peace. Engaged Buddhists define their practise in a variety of ways including human rights, peace, and environmental activism.

Other conference participants described how they incorporated aspects of Buddhism into professional life, that is, into realms not explicitly associated with religion: psychotherapy practices, the use of mindfulness meditation for chronic pain and illness, and even the practise of law. Finally, some women spoke about the connection in their lives between Buddhist practise and the creative arts. We were fortunate to have the poet Jane Hirshfield and the performance artist Meredith Monk at the conference. They described how their art enables them to experience and express the interconnection of all phenomena.

One of the reasons why American Buddhist women’s practise is so diverse is because American women themselves are diverse. There are Asian, Asian American, and non-Asian women practitioners in the U.S. There are followers of different Buddhist traditions. Whereas some women maintain exclusive allegiance to one tradition, other women practise in more than one tradition. You do not even need to be Buddhist to engage in Buddhist practise. A growing number of Christians and Jews, among others, are incorporating aspects of Buddhist practise such as meditation into their own religious traditions. Along with all these differences, there are also differences of ordination status, education, social and economic class, sexual orientation, and so on.

The diversity of a such a multicultural society poses both challenges and opportunities for Buddhist women. Asian, Asian American, and non-Asian Buddhist women sometimes practise in very different kinds of communities. For instance, some Asian and Asian Americans may prefer a local temple that serves as both the religious and the cultural centre for their particular ethnic community. Non-Asians may prefer a meditation

centre that, although it may have ties to a particular Buddhist culture, is focused primarily on meditation rather than the transmission of a particular Buddhist culture. Ironically, even though the vast majority of Buddhist women in America are Asian and Asian American, most academic and popular writings on American Buddhism focus on non-Asian Buddhist women and their communities. This prompted Sharon Suh to ask an important question at the conference: When we speak about American Buddhist women, whose America are we talking about; which women are we talking about?<sup>3</sup> Karma Lekshe Tsomo urged us “to move out of our comfort zone” and learn more about each other.<sup>4</sup>

The conference also focused attention on the persistent problem of racism in U.S. Buddhist communities, especially in the predominantly non-Asian convert communities, which are dominated by white, middle and upper-middle class women, such as myself. White Buddhists in America like to think of themselves as social and political liberals. Yet we continue to create communities in which women of colour sometimes feel like they do not have an equal voice. The Zen teacher Hilda Ryumon Gutiérrez Baldoquin reminded us that an important feature of American Buddhist practise is using Dharma to heal the wounds of racism. She spoke powerfully about racism, saying: “If anyone of us here – and not just folks of colour – walks into a Dharma community that is predominantly white and doesn’t say, ‘How come?’ then we’re not awake.”<sup>5</sup>

There is great diversity among American Buddhist women, but there is also a great deal of common ground. Conference participants talked about their shared experiences with sexism. Many women are especially concerned with the problem of sexual predation in our Buddhist communities, citing instances of male Buddhist teachers having sexual relations with their female students. Participants also emphasised the need for female Dharma teachers. Although from an ultimate perspective there is neither male nor female, many American women still find it easier at a conventional level to relate to female Dharma teachers. This raises an important point: we need greater support for nuns in America. Since Buddhism is relatively new to America, many American Buddhists, especially non-Asian American Buddhists, do not always fully appreciate the value of monastics. Many do not recognise that monastics are a precious gift. Nuns are our *kalyanamitras* (spiritual friends). They visibly embody the Dharma and thus serve as visual reminders to refocus our energy on Dharma. Finally, several conference participants focused attention on the challenges of teaching Dharma to children. For Asian

Americans, this includes the additional challenge of transmitting key cultural values as well as languages to their children.

The overall mood of the conference was one of confidence; confidence in our ability as Buddhist women to transform ourselves and our communities for the better. The most inspirational aspect of the conference is precisely what I find to be most inspirational about the Sakyadhita International conferences on Buddhist women, namely, coming together with other Buddhist women. There is something so powerful about coming into physical proximity with other women who share a commitment to self-transformation in the service of the transformation of others. We become *kalyāṇamitras* for each other, bringing out the very best in ourselves. And when women bring out the best in each other, they become a powerful force for positive change in the world.

### Notes

- 1 The lead organiser of the conference was Peter N. Gregory of the Religion Department at Smith College. The conference steering committee was comprised by other local college faculty as well as local Dharma teachers and practitioners: Mario D'Amato, Maria Heim, Margi Gregory, Catherine Anraku Hondorp, and Susanne Mrozik.
- 2 "Engaged Buddhism," a conversation with Diana Lion, Eve Marko, and Virginia Strauss, moderated by Hilda Ryumon Gutiérrez Baldoquín.
- 3 "Women Changing Buddhism: Feminist Perspectives," a conversation with bell hooks, Karma Lekshe Tsomo, and Sharon Suh, moderated by Susanne Mrozik.
- 4 Karma Lekshe Tsomo, "The International Buddhist Women's Movement."
- 5 "Race, Ethnicity, and Class," a conversation with Hilda Ryumon Gutiérrez Baldoquín, Sharon Suh, and Arinna Weisman, moderated by Carolyn Jacobs.

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**BHIKṢUNĪ VINAYA AND FULL  
ORDINATION FOR WOMEN**



## **The Gender Issue in Contemporary Taiwan Buddhism**

*Yu-Chen Li*

In Taiwan, more than 75 percent of the Buddhist clergy ordained after 1953 are women. The visibility and social leadership of nuns in Taiwan stands in stark contrast to the low profile of nuns in Buddhist texts. Recent changes in the proportion of monastic women has caused certain tensions in Taiwanese Buddhist circles, however. Since the 1990s, Bhikṣuṇī Chao Hwei has been promoting gender equality for Buddhist nuns. In 2002, she began a movement to abolish the Eight Special Rules for nuns. This paper will introduce this movement, and analyse the strategy and discourse introduced by Chao Hwei.

### **The Historical Background of Taiwanese Nuns' Ordination**

In January 1953, Taiwanese monks and nuns gathered at the Great Immortal Monastery (Daxian Si) in Tainan to receive ordination under the supervision of the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China (hereafter, BAROC) for the first time. With this, the BAROC initiated a national ordination system and began to restructure the Chinese monastic lineage after a half century Japanese rule (1895-1945). The registration system imposed by the Japanese colonial government had excluded most Taiwanese women from receiving ordination, by requiring a degree from a Japanese Buddhist college, which was an extraordinary financial burden for most Taiwanese. The new ordination system thus introduced greater opportunities for Taiwanese women by allowing them to enter the Buddhist order. Since the 1953 ordination, the number of fully ordained Buddhist nuns (*bhikṣuṇī*) has increased to an unprecedented level; more than 75 percent of the Buddhist clergy ordained after 1953 are female. Meanwhile, the educational profile of Buddhist nuns has also dramatically improved in the last two decades. More than one-third of the Buddhist nuns in Taiwan are college educated, which has resulted in their new designation as the “scholarly nuns.”

In addition to institutionalising annual ordinations, BAROC also initiated a system of monastic education based on scriptures that has helped



promote the social status and self-esteem of Buddhist nuns. A critical factor in the ordination of women is the procedure termed dual ordination. According to the Buddhist monastic discipline (Vinaya), the monastic community (*Saṅgha*) should initiate female members in a dual ordination process. To confer dual ordination requires ten or twelve qualified *bhikṣuṇīs* who have not committed any Vinaya transgressions over a ten-year period. These qualified *bhikṣuṇīs* ordain novice nuns and then present them to monks who represent the *Saṅgha* and request they accept them. Whenever a Buddhist community discontinues dual ordination, nuns lose access to full monastic membership, as well as to advanced monastic education and financial support. In short, dual ordination not only grants full monastic membership for women, but also guarantees their autonomy and the continuity of the community of Buddhist nuns.

Although Bhikṣu Baisheng (1903-1989), the organiser of the annual ordinations, agreed with Taiwanese nuns to institute this “reform” of dual ordination, BAROC did not conduct a dual ordination until 1970. Before that time, Bhikṣu Baisheng taught Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya at Taiwanese ordination ceremonies for almost twenty years. He also trained and appointed his most learned nun disciples to serve as ordination ritual instructors and supervisors to oversee the candidates during their training. This was a very practical arrangement, since three-quarters of the Taiwanese ordination candidates were women and the discipline for the *Saṅgha* strictly follows gender segregation, especially during the ordination process. In order to promote better training and education for nuns, in 1956 Baisheng also requested Bhikṣuṇī Foying from Hong Kong to prepare an annotated version of the Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya. For six years, Foying devoted herself to this work, which became the textbook used for *bhikṣuṇī* ordinations in Taiwan for ten years. By 1970, BAROC no longer had any excuse to delay holding a dual ordination.<sup>1</sup>

The lifting of martial law in Taiwan in 1987 ended BAROC’s dominance over the national ordination system, but dual ordination has continued to function as a significant indicator of internationalisation and orthodoxy in Taiwanese monastic circles. For instance, Foguangshan Monastery has conducted several international dual ordinations to distinguish its mission from that of the Theravādin Buddhist tradition, which lacks full ordination for women. Taiwanese Buddhists enthusiastically sponsor these international events as a means of accruing merit. However, this trend toward internationalisation evokes the spectre of increasing secularisation and lapses in Buddhist monastic orthodoxy. To compensate for these perceived lapses, since the 1990s several new

Buddhist organisations, such as Saṅgha and Focang, have begun to promote close adherence to monastic discipline, including correct procedures for dual ordination. These organisations are so seriously concerned about the legitimacy of dual ordination that they have even begun to require nuns to observe the Eight Special Rules (*attha gurudharma*), rules that not only require women to receive the dual ordination, but also subordinate nuns to monks.

The content of the eight *gurudharmas* and subsequent penalties are stipulated differently in each Buddhist school. However, seven of these *gurudharmas* are formulated similarly in the Mahāyāna Buddhist schools: (1) a *bhikṣuṇī*, even if she is a hundred years old, should rise and pay respect to a *bhikṣu*, even if he is newly ordained; (2) during the rainy season retreat, a *bhikṣuṇī* may not dwell in a place where there is no monk; (3) *bhikṣuṇīs* must request the *bhikṣus* to instruct them in the monastic precepts and related rituals every half-month; (4) a prospective *bhikṣuṇī* should receive the full ordination (*upasampadā*) before both the *bhikṣu* and *bhikṣuṇī* assemblies after a two-year training period; (5) a *bhikṣuṇī* who commits a serious transgression must perform the *manatta* and whatever sanction is imposed before an assembly of both *bhikṣuṇīs* and *bhikṣus*; (6) at the end of the rainy season retreat, nuns must observe the confession of faults (*pravāraṇā*) before an assembly of both *bhikṣuṇīs* and *bhikṣus*; and (7) *bhikṣuṇīs* are prohibited from mentioning the faults of *bhikṣus*.<sup>2</sup>

The shift in emphasis from dual ordination to the eight *gurudharmas* has created tensions in Taiwanese Buddhist circles, even as public discussion of the issue has been hushed. Both monastics and laypeople consider this to be an internal Saṅgha concern, that is, a monastic matter that excludes the participation of the laity. It was Bhikṣuṇī Chao Hwei who began to place the issue of the eight *gurudharmas* before the public.

### **A Controversial Heroine: Bhikṣuṇī Chao Hwei (1957-)**

Bhikṣuṇī Chao Hwei has become one of the most famous and influential religious leaders in Taiwan, due to her continuous struggle for human rights and gender equality. Since the 1980s, she successfully mobilised Buddhists to voice their views on right livelihood by organising a public protest movement and by establishing Buddhist lobby groups for social reform. For example, the Buddhist Association for Protecting Lives has organised protests and initiated legal proceedings to abolish the death penalty and to prohibit horse racing, cock fighting, and animal circuses in Taiwan. She has attracted the public spotlight, not only because she is an eloquent speaker

and prolific writer, but also because she is the first monastic figure to publicly challenge issues that have traditionally been taboo, such as sexual harassment in the Saṅgha, and submit them to legal procedures.

In the early stages of her social movement, Bhikṣuṇī Chao Hwei aimed to advance the social image of *bhikṣuṇīs*. In 1989, she sued the Department of Drama of the National Performing Arts College, whose annual drama production, “Longing for Profane Love,” depicted the story of a young Buddhist who escaped from a nunnery to engage in love affairs. The producers of several TV programmes that described love between monks and nuns also received protests and made public apologies. After continuous protests, the Taiwanese media finally curtailed its deprecating portrayals of Buddhist nuns. Instead of using the term *bhikṣuṇī*, journalists used to call Buddhist nuns *nigu*, a Chinese term that literally means “nun auntie,” but negatively connotes an old woman who engages in dishonourable business. Chao Hwei defended the term *bhikṣuṇī* as the appropriate form of address for a Buddhist nun, one that accurately describes the social identity of Buddhist renunciant women.

The male-dominated monastic community recognises the influential leadership of Chao Hwei, but in 1990 suggested that she conduct a ten-year retreat to concentrate on religious cultivation as a more modest pursuit. Chao Hwei subsequently resigned from her work at BAROC and began to retreat from public activities. Since then, she has devoted herself to an academic career, teaching Buddhist ethics at various universities and establishing Hongshi (Great Vows) Institute of Buddhist Education for Buddhist Women. Unlike most Buddhist institutions and colleges, Hongshi does not require students to leave their own nunneries to be full-time students. Any nun who is unable or unwilling to retreat from her own monastic duties for a period of several years is still welcome to enroll at Hongshi and take courses one at a time. Students in this programme spend at least one-third of their time doing independent research with individual instructors, while one-third of their time is spent in intensive month-long courses, a curriculum well-suited to the general schedule of monastic activities. Most importantly, Hongshi is not a private monastic order, but an academic institution open to all nuns. Students and teachers follow Buddhist principles in organising their administration board and the institute cooperates with various nunneries to hold meditation training programmes during the summer retreat season. Because most students also have responsibilities at their own monasteries while participating in these educational programmes, Hongshi tends to offer practical courses tailored to their needs. Courses such as temple administration and meditation

counselling enable graduates to find teaching positions in their own Buddhist institutes. In this way, Chao Hwei is gradually making her ideal of modern *bhikṣuṇī* education come true.

Both the institutional format and educational principles of Hongshi are the result of Chao Hwei's personal experience in her early monastic life. As an outstanding student at the National Normal University, Chao Hwei attracted considerable attention when she entered the Buddhist order in 1978. Moreover, she was probably the first Buddhist nun to teach Chinese literature at a junior high school. In 1982, however, she left her master's monastery for reasons related to her father's death in 1980. This was definitely a difficult decision for her, because in monastic circles such a step is generally viewed as cutting off, and perhaps betraying, the master-disciple relationship.

Born as the second daughter of a poor soldier, Chao Hwei spent her childhood with two sisters at a military orphanage in exchange for free education. Although a teacher's salary was quite attractive from the perspective of Chao Hwei's parents, who were ill and unable to pay their medical bills, they never complained about their daughter's decision to give all her salary to her nunnery. As a Buddhist nun, Chao Hwei observed the monastic precept to hold no personal money. She was shocked when she learned that her father had died because he could not afford medical treatment and recognised that she had been unable to care for her mother and younger sister, both of whom were seriously ill and depressed. Remembering her family's generous financial and spiritual support for her education, Chao Hwei was deeply tortured by guilt when she realised that she had failed to financially support her family. She thus began to doubt the meaning of the monastic regulations and aspired to pursue higher Buddhist education, two needs that were ignored by her order. After taking care of her hospitalised sister for 45 days, Chao Hwei finally confronted the totalitarian and hierarchical style of her monastic community and left to be with her sick mother and sister. Fortunately, Bhikṣuṇī Shin Chun, the abbess of Xinglong Temple in Kaohsiung, generously offered Chao Hwei a temporary refuge, accommodations for her family, and a more flexible monastic schedule that allowed her to study until she found a teaching job at Fuyan Buddhist Institute in 1984.

Xinglong Temple is a relatively traditional Taiwanese nunnery. Most of its members are ageing nuns with minimal education. In those days, the nuns maintained the temple financially by selling vegetarian food they made themselves and offering ritual services. Participation in ritual services was not required, but nuns who participated in the nunnery's ritual services

received financial incentives at the end of each month. Sick nuns received a share of the donations, and the abbess also allowed qualified nuns to help other nunneries and keep the donations they received. This temple also observes the traditional custom of allowing old laywomen to live in the temple and donate money in lieu of monastic duties.<sup>3</sup> Chao Hwei's two-year stay at Xinglong Nunnery not only changed her understanding about what it meant to be a nun, but also inspired her to promote the status of nuns. I believe that Chao Hwei's practical and humane approach to monastic reform, which distinguishes her from most young scholarly monks, was influenced by her experience of sisterhood at Xinglong Temple.

### **The Debate on the Eight Special Rules for Nuns in 1992**

In October 1992, Chao Hwei and a writer named Channi initiated a controversial debate on whether contemporary Buddhist nuns should strictly observe the eight *gurudharmas*. Channi published an article called "The Understanding and Practise of the Eight Special Rules" in *Saṅgha Magazine*.<sup>4</sup> Chao Hwei responded to Channi in the next issue with "A Discussion of Gender Ethics between Monks and Nuns." Taking a fundamentalist approach, Channi claimed to revive the eight *gurudharmas* in order to confine nuns' activities to isolated asceticism, requesting nuns to be unconditionally subordinate to every monk and receive instruction without questioning. Chao Hwei accused Channi of belittling nuns and suspected that Channi was the pen name of a certain young monk who felt threatened by nuns. To a certain degree, the revival of the eight *gurudharmas* reflected a perceived crisis in Taiwanese Buddhist circles over the greatly increasing population of nuns and their empowerment.

In her article, Channi identified herself as a nun of the Enlightening Light Convent, a nunnery under the guidance of the famous Vinaya monk Guanghai (1924-1996). As one of the most influential monks to revive the strict practise of Vinaya in contemporary Taiwan, Guanghai set such high standards of Vinaya discipline that he claimed no qualified *bhikṣus* existed in China after the Song Dynasty (960-1279). He called himself a *śrāmanera*, even though, like a *bhikṣu*, he had established his own monastic lineage. Channi cited Guanghai's criticism of contemporary Taiwanese nuns as being ignorant of the eight *gurudharmas*.

Channi repeatedly scolded Taiwanese nuns for forgetting that they had the 84 physical and mental deficiencies of a woman, including the inclination to seduce monks and precipitate the decline of the Dharma.

Specifically, Channi urged those arrogant nuns with doctoral degrees to watch their manners toward young monks with lower educational backgrounds and poor social skills. She cited the belief that once a male novice became an *arhat*, he would be capable of raising Mt. Sumeru (the centre of the Buddhist universe) with just one little finger and shake the whole world. In contrast, Channi warned, a *bhikṣuṇī arhat* would be incapable of raising a needle by her spiritual power.<sup>5</sup> Channi did not explain women's allegedly inferior spirituality, but emphasised that being born in a female body was the result of sexual desire and potentially damaging to the celibacy of monks. Therefore, Channi declared the practise of the eight *gurudharmas* to be the first priority of a nun's religious duty, and begged nuns not to waste their time with other forms of practise, such as socially engaged activism or self-cultivation.<sup>6</sup> In short, Channi urged Taiwanese nuns to remember that disobeying the eight *gurudharmas* was a transgression and destructive to monastic ethics.

Chao Hwei viewed Channi as an apologist for the male-dominant ecclesiastical hierarchy. She disagreed with Channi's depiction of women's commitment to the Dharma as being simply gatekeepers of monks' celibacy. Moreover, because Channi's interpretation of the eight *gurudharmas* was infused with patriarchal bias, Chao Hwei urged Channi to develop greater self-esteem. She also cast doubts on why younger monks and younger monk teachers of Vinaya specifically emphasised the eight *gurudharmas* and the 84 physical and mental deficiencies of women, a subject that is rarely mentioned by senior monks. As a scholar, nun, Buddhist writer, and social worker, Chao Hwei also pointed out that Taiwanese nuns had promoted Buddhism and won social recognition due to their educational qualifications and charitable activities. She asserted that a Saṅgha that forced scholar nuns to be subservient to junior monks, solely based on gender differences, simply increased the monks' arrogance and would be of no help to the Dharma.

Chao Hwei blamed Channi for distorting the egalitarian Buddhist teaching by sanctioning gender differences in the ecclesiastic hierarchy based on the eight *gurudharmas*. She cited the research of the scholar monk Yinshun to prove that the eight *gurudharmas* were a later development attributed to the Buddha. Even when the Saṅgha later began to observe the eight *gurudharmas*, it did so as a social convention during an ancient cultural period to protect the nuns, not to humiliate them by holding them responsible for monks' sexual desire.

The response of *Saṅgha Magazine* is noteworthy. The main editor, Bhikṣu Fazang, refused to carry Chao Hwei's response to Channi, claiming

that her article was too long. After Chao Hwei shortened the article, they advised her not to damage the reputation of Buddhism by publishing this material. *Saṅgha Magazine* continued refusing to publish her article until Chao Hwei threatened to legal recourse under the publishing law. Under these conditions, *Saṅgha Magazine* reopened the discussion of Channi's article in the next issue and made a public statement that they wished to end the discussion. In this statement, *Saṅgha Magazine* insisted that it took an objective position, but came to the interesting conclusion that some people are unable to understand the true meaning of the eight *gurudharmas*, due to their own (bad) *karma*, and that the great miraculous merits of *all* the Buddha's teachings were beyond the imagination of people who possessed such shallow and conventional views.<sup>7</sup> Chao Hwei later published her response to Channi's article and the *Saṅgha Magazine* editorial, in which she claims that self-esteem among Buddhist nuns is necessary for harmony in the Saṅgha.<sup>8</sup>

I tend to agree with Chao Hwei's apprehension concerning *Saṅgha Magazine's* response. There exists a serious tension between young monks and nuns, precipitated by the predominance of nuns in the monastic population and by the high educational standards of Taiwanese nuns. Though protected by the ideology of male-superiority, religiously and socially, monks have been a minority in Taiwanese Buddhist circles since World War II. In the future, the number of monks is certain to decrease. In a society where ancestral worship continues and families produce less than two children on average, the society is reluctant to allow sons, especially only sons, to enter the Buddhist order.

As more women than men take robes, fewer and fewer monks will be able to find monastic affiliations, since the Vinaya prohibits nuns from taking monk disciples. In other words, it is illegal for young monks to inherit nunneries. By contrast, monks can initiate nuns and designate them as their inheritors. Senior monks are few in number and ageing. Most fled mainland China after 1945, well before the education reform in 1968, and do not speak Taiwanese. It is an open secret in Buddhist circles that these monks have relied on their female disciples to administer their monasteries and religious enterprises.

Furthermore, it is difficult to keep monk disciples in their home monasteries for long. They either prefer solitary cultivation, refuse trivial tasks, study under different teachers outside their own monasteries, drop out to fulfil military service, or are eager to pursue an independent religious career and thereby establish their own Dharma lineage. Nun disciples are usually more loyal and capable than monk disciples in taking care of ageing



members of the monastic community. They are also adept at maintaining strong relationships between their monasteries and their local communities. Nevertheless, many old monks ignore the contributions of their nun disciples and hand over the position of abbot to young monks.

It was very difficult to evaluate the impact of the 1992 debate between Channi and Chao Hwei, mainly because *Saṅgha Magazine* quickly closed down the debate. Later, the magazine became restricted to monks and nuns only, purposely excluding the laity from writing and readership. Therefore, there was no way for laypeople to follow the discussion that ensued from the exchange. Chao Hwei subsequently became more assertive in her stand on equal relationships between monks and nuns and vigorously pursued research on Buddhist monastic discipline, promoting a more liberal approach toward the monastic regulations.<sup>9</sup> She explained that, as long as the Saṅgha follows Buddhist principles, such as universal egalitarianism, flexibility in the regulations should be allowed. Because social conditions change considerably over time, Chao Hwei concludes that it is more important to observe the principles of the monastic code in a practical way than to adhere to the monastic regulations literally.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Eight *Gurudharmas* and Dual Ordination**

To a great extent, the 1992 debate on the eight *gurudharmas* was a by-product of the dual ordination debate. The Taiwanese ordination system has offered more opportunity for Buddhist women to take the ordination than in previous generations. The success of BAROC in post-war Taiwan has depended heavily on its representation of a pure and correct Chinese Buddhism. It seems that BAROC aimed to eliminate the influence of Japanese married clergy in Taiwan, but it was the education related to ordination and the summer retreats established by BAROC that motivated many Taiwanese Buddhists, especially women, to step up to the ordination platform. The emphasis on monastic education in the BAROC ordination system cultivated a generation of conservatives such as Fazang, Channi, and Guanhua, who defined their religious practise strictly by the texts and were intolerant of any adjustments to tradition. The larger number of nuns in the monastic population and their active social engagement is unfortunately viewed by some as incompatible with ancient Indian Buddhist texts.

In their first contact with Taiwanese Buddhism in the 1950s, Chinese monks already noticed the tremendous piety of Taiwanese Buddhist women and their strong commitment to ordination. Ironically, these Chinese monks



did not feel that it was necessary to perform the dual ordination for Taiwanese nuns, because they were confident that Mahāyāna Buddhism was superior to Theravāda Buddhism. Dual ordination was the product of early Buddhist schools, a tradition seemingly superceded by the Mahāyāna emphasis on *bodhisattva* ordination. Most importantly, the senior monks are the heirs and representatives of a Chinese Buddhist tradition that sees the eight *gurudharmas* as part and parcel of dual ordination. As the competition over the ordination system emerged in the 1990s, ironically the incorporation of the eight *gurudharmas* has become a way to legitimise dual ordination. Especially, dual ordination is equated with modernisation as a way of recruiting more and more educated women. Hence, the more legitimate dual ordination becomes, the more likely the eight *gurudharmas* are to attract attention. In this way, there exists a contradictory relationship between dual ordination and the eight *gurudharmas*; the former maintains the autonomy of the Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha at the same time that the latter confines nuns to a subordinate religious status.

If one examines the eight *gurudharmas* literally, this set of rules guarantees the existence and empowerment of Buddhist nuns institutionally by giving nuns the right to administrate women's ordination, transgressions, retreats, and education. Of course, the eight *gurudharmas* endow monks with a higher status than nuns, because it was monks who initiated and initially supervised the monastic membership of women. But nuns have institutional access and relatively full membership. This is the primary point for women's participation in the clerical hierarchy. Chao Hwei fights for nuns to be addressed by their legitimate designation (*bhikṣuṇī*), an indication of the emergence of a strong professional identity among Taiwanese nuns in the last two decades. The point I wish to make here is that dual ordination is the crucial determinant in maintaining that strong identity, even though it exposes the historical interpretation of the eight *gurudharmas* that sparked the 1992 debate. Ironically, the debate over the *gurudharmas* has become a code both for ordained women's legitimacy and their subjugated status within the Saṅgha. This institutional subjugation is both disempowering and degrading, especially when viewed from within the contemporary cultural context; hence, it is being challenged. How can Buddhism be culturally relevant if it requires the subordination of monastic women? The issue raises further questions about how Buddhism reflects cultural differences over time, questions that contribute to Buddhism's own cultural evolution and may bring lost meaning to the Saṅgha itself.

## Notes

- 1 Foying, *An Annotated Edition of the Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa of the Dharmaguptaka School* (Nantou: Jitao Iushi yongjiu Puli Xiangguang Jingshe, 1986), pp. 1-2. Baisheng pointed out that Foying made a great contribution to Buddhism through this book. The book has been reprinted as a gift for the candidates of annual ordination in Taiwan for more than 20 years.
- 2 See Yinshun, *The Sacred Buddhist Canon Collected in the Early Days* (Taipei: Zhenwen, 1988), pp. 402-403.
- 3 When I visited Xinglong Temple in 1998, I observed an elderly laywoman who chose to spend her last days at the nunnery. This woman was the relative of a resident nun and her daughter-in-law worked voluntarily at the nunnery to help take care of her. The agreement was that the nunnery would take care of the woman's basic medical care and funeral service.
- 4 *Saṅgha Magazine* 2:1 (1992).
- 5 Channi, "The Understanding and Practice of the Eight Great Rules," *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- 7 "A Statement of our Position," *Saṅgha Magazine* 3:1(1993): 71.
- 8 Chao Hwei, *Descending into the World for Passion and Righteousness* (Taipei: Fajie, 1992), pp. 1-7.
- 9 In 1999, Chao Hwei published a book titled *A Modern Interpretation of Vinaya Learning* and several articles that analyse and critique the chauvinism of the Buddhist order. These works won her acclaim among feminists.
- 10 See Chao Hwei, *A Modern Interpretation of Vinaya Learning*, p. 54.

## Visible and Invisible Obstacles Facing the Bhikkhunī Movement in Thailand

*Kulavir Prapapornpipat*

Women have played a significant role in the practise and spread of Buddhism since the Buddha's time in the sixth century BCE. When Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, stepmother of the Buddha, asked for ordination as a *bhikkhunī*, or fully ordained nun, she initiated the Buddhist monastic order for women. Her request led the Buddha to establish the *bhikkhunī* order for women just five years after he established the *bhikkhu* order for men. Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī's request was radical in a time where women were not supposed to develop their own spirituality, but were supposed to support their husband's spirituality by performing rituals according to Brahmin ideology. The *bhikkhunī* order immediately became popular with women, both young and old, and many of them attained realisation at different levels. Stories of enlightened nuns appear in the *Therīgāthā* (Verses of Elder Nuns) in the Tipitaka.

Although the *bhikkhunī* ordination spread to many countries, especially in Asia, surprisingly it never reached Thailand, despite the fact that Thailand is the country with the highest percentage of Buddhists in the world. This absence of *bhikkhunī* ordination is currently being challenged by the women's movement that originated in Western countries. Today, Thailand has only 20 *bhikkhunīs* (fully ordained nuns) and *sāmaṇerīs* (novice nuns), whereas Sri Lanka, which also practices Theravāda Buddhism, has several hundred *bhikkhunīs* and novices. Especially since the ordination of Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, a prominent, female Thai professor ordained as a *sāmaṇerī* in 2001 and a *bhikkhunī* in 2003, the *bhikkhunī* ordination has become a point of dispute in Thai Buddhism. While there has been support for the establishment of the *bhikkhunī* order from many Thai Buddhist scholars, many conservative Thai Buddhists have voiced strong protests against the movement. At the beginning of the protest against Dr. Chatsumarn's ordination, the Thai Saṅgha kept silent, then declared that they cannot recognise the ordination.

In this paper, I explore the obstacles that face the *bhikkhunī* movement in Thailand. How do these obstacles manifest and how do they affect Buddhist women? I find that many of the obstacles can be categorised into two main types: visible and invisible. The paper concludes with suggestions for strategies to lead the *bhikkhunī* movement forward.

## Visible Obstacles

The first visible obstacle to the *bhikkhunī* movement in Thailand is the structure of Thai Buddhist institutions. Unlike in Sri Lanka, Buddhist institutions in Thailand all belong to one body, which has been continuously ruled by the Supreme Patriarch and his ministers, namely, the Saṅgha Supreme Council, under the National Bureau of Buddhism. Unity and consensus are the strong points of this administrative structure. However, this structure has also become a serious obstacle for spiritual development, as it does not allow junior monks to express their different ideas and viewpoints. For instance, concerning the *bhikkhunī* issue, there are many monks who support women who wish to become a *bhikkhunī*, but they cannot openly express their opinions on the matter, lest they be expelled from the temple by order of the Saṅgha Supreme Council. In addition, the Saṅgha Supreme Council has the power to withhold monks' passports if monks act against the will of the Supreme Council.

The second visible obstacle is the Saṅgha Act of 1928 CE that prohibits Thai monks from ordaining Thai women as *sāmaṇerī*, *sikkhamānā*, and *bhikkhunī*.<sup>1</sup> This Saṅgha Act has been translated from Thai into English as follows:

### ANNOUNCEMENT

#### No Monks or Novice can Ordain Women as *Pabbajita*\*

According to the Buddha's dispensation, women who want to be *sāmaṇerī* must be ordained by *bhikkhunīs*. The Buddha allowed *bhikkhunīs* who have been ordained for more than 12 years to be a *pavattini*, which is an *upajjhaya* (a spiritual teacher). He did not allow *bhikkhus* to be *upajjhaya* [for *bhikkhunīs*]. Since the *bhikkhunī* lineage was extinguished long ago and there is no *bhikkhunī* to preserve *sāmaṇerī* ordination, therefore there is no *sāmaṇerī* to continue the lineage. All of them are extinct. A person who gives *sāmaṇerī* ordination is establishing that which the Buddha did not establish and removing what the Buddha established. He is an enemy of the religion and a bad model.

For this reason, monks and novices of any sect are prohibited from ordaining women as *bhikkhunī*, *sikkhamānā*, or *sāmaṇerī* from now on.

Announced on June 18, 1928  
Krom Luang Shinnavorn Siriwat

\*As it is used here, the term *pabbajita* is intended to include *bhikkhunī*, *sikkhamānā*, and *sāmaṇerī*.

This Act was promulgated after Mr. Narin Pasin, a progressive politician, allowed his two daughters, along with other women, to become ordained as *sāmaṇerīs* in 1927. Since he was viewed as a rebellious figure by the Thai State at that time, his movements were closely followed by the Buddhist hierarchy, including his work for the *bhikkhunī* movement. Consequently, these women were physically disrobed and put into jail for a certain period of time. In 1928, the Supreme Saṅgha launched this Act, which is now a serious obstacle for the spiritual development of Thai Buddhist women. This Act not only defeats the Buddha's purpose in establishing the *bhikkhunī* order, but it is also against the Thai constitution, which guarantees religious freedom for both men and women in Thailand.

For the above reasons, it is almost impossible for Thai women to receive ordination as a *sāmaṇerī*, *sikkhamānā*, or *bhikkhunī* in Thailand. What they can do is travel to other Buddhist countries to be ordained. Unless there is financial support from the family or society, however, it is very difficult for poor Thai women to ordain abroad, due to the many expenses involved. Due to these financial limitations, many Thai women have remained in the status of a laywoman or a traditional nun, known as *mae chee*. Since the Saṅgha Supreme Council has never recognised the *mae chee* as ordained people, their status remains ambiguous. The Ministry of Transport does not recognise them as ordained, so they do not receive any State support earmarked for the ordained, such as the free or discounted travel fares monks receive. At the same time, the Ministry of Interior considers them to be ordained, so they do not have the right to vote. This double standard has marginalised *mae chees* in Thai society.

### Invisible Obstacles

The invisible obstacles to the *bhikkhunī* movement in Thailand are less formal and more abstract, but play an equally significant role in obstructing the spiritual development of Buddhist women in Thai society. The first invisible obstacle is the closed-mindedness of conservative Thai Buddhists. One of the reasons conservatives cite for why *bhikkhunīs* are not needed is that Thailand has never had *bhikkhunīs* throughout its history. Not only does this reason reflect a lack of comprehension about the importance of the *bhikkhunī* order, but it also reveals a closed-minded mentality. Unlike Sri Lanka, where *bhikkhunīs* were once an established segment of society, the *bhikkhunī* order never entered Thailand, at least according to present historical evidence. Therefore, it is understandable that most Thai Buddhists perceive the idea of *bhikkhunīs* to be rather novel. Few Thai Buddhists realise that the *bhikkhunī* order was established by the Buddha or that many

*bhikkhunīs* existed during the Buddha's time. This does not mean that Thai Buddhists should not consider this new idea, however, since many new ideas have been well received in Thai society, such as democracy and modernisation.

The second invisible obstacle is sectarian bias. Many Thai Buddhists believe that Thai Theravāda Buddhism is the only genuine form of Buddhism and that other schools are not original. They cannot comprehend why Mahāyāna monks wear trousers, do not shave their eyebrows, and eat in the evening. These matters of appearance and behaviour have been perceived as a lack of strict discipline. As a result, many Thai Buddhists have a somewhat negative attitude toward other schools of Buddhism.

This attitude also affects the way the *bhikkhunī* issue is perceived. Buddhist women in the Thai Theravāda tradition who become ordained in the Mahāyāna tradition are considered exotic and, thus, not a part of Thai Buddhism. Although currently there are some Thai women who have been ordained in Sri Lanka, which follows the Theravāda tradition just like Thailand, these women have not been accepted by Thai society, since this Theravāda *bhikkhunī* lineage was restored by way of the Mahāyāna tradition.

Another key invisible obstacle for the *bhikkhunī* movement in Thailand is gender bias. There are some gender-biased beliefs in Thai Buddhism that negatively affect the spiritual development of Buddhist women. First, it is believed that women cannot attain enlightenment, a belief propagated by monks in the Dhammakaya sect. For this reason, women have to create much merit, make a wish to be reborn as a man, and only then will they be able to achieve liberation. Second, women are believed to be polluted and inferior beings. This message can be found in some Pali commentaries, but not in the Tipiṭaka. Third, to be born as a woman is viewed as a punishment for bad *karma* created in past lives, especially for sexual misconduct. With these beliefs, Thai Buddhist women have been placed outside the religious realm and have never been included in decision-making in Thai Buddhism. These gender-biased beliefs are evident in the legal definition of the Thai Saṅgha, which includes only male members, namely, *bhikkhus* and *sāmaṇeras*.

Moreover, there is a double standard regarding gender and attitudes toward ordination in Thai society. When a man wants to ordain, the public agrees and encourages him. But when a woman wants to ordain, the public questions and discourages her. Women's ordination is considered to be an escape from life's problems, whereas men's ordination is considered to be a wish for purity and liberation. Not only have these gender-biased beliefs and attitudes oppressed Thai women, but they pose subtle yet serious obstacles for Thai Buddhist women's spirituality as well.

## **Conclusion and Suggestions**

I find it hypocritical that the Thai Saṅgha declared at the World Buddhist Summit Conference in Bangkok December 2005 that Thailand will be the world centre of Buddhism, when half the population of Thai Buddhists, namely women, are still neglected. Unless there is a well-established *bhikkhunī* order in Thailand, the Saṅgha declaration remains a mission impossible, because the four groups of Buddhists, both men and women, share equal responsibility for Buddhism.

All the obstacles mentioned above reflect the hierarchy and patriarchy in Thai Buddhism. Both visible and invisible obstacles together have been barring Buddhist women from spiritual development in Thai Buddhism. Therefore, the visible obstacle – the power monopoly evident in the structure of Thai Buddhism – should be reviewed and adjusted. The non-Buddhist and unconstitutional Saṅgha Act of 1928 should be amended or cancelled. At the same time, all invisible obstacles must be eliminated. The closed-minded, sectarian, gender-biased beliefs and the double standard towards women should be reviewed, reconstructed, and corrected. To tackle these issues will take a policy that integrates education, social action, and public policy reform. Last, but not least, Buddhist women need to organise themselves to empower and support each other.

## **Note**

- 1 This announcement appeared in the *Statement of the Saṅgha*, vol.16, p. 157.

## Generation to Generation: Transmitting the Bhikṣuṇī Lineage in the Tibetan Tradition

*Jampa Tsedroen*

For hundreds of years in Asia, Buddhism was passed from generation to generation. Now, various traditions of Buddhism are being transmitted from Asia to the West. At the same time, Western ideas are influencing Buddhism in Asia. Tensions result when old traditions are questioned. It becomes important to distinguish the essence of Buddhism, and what is cultural or sociological embellishment, without losing the purity of the various Dharma traditions in modern, fast-moving times.

Many Western women are asking whether Buddhism is suitable for women at all, because in the West they cannot find many female teachers with equal religious titles and positions. For example, there are still not many Tibetan *bhikṣuṇīs*. Since there is no Tibetan Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha, like some Western female followers of Tibetan Buddhism during the last 25 years, a few Tibetan novice nuns have taken full ordination (Skt. *upasampadā*) in Hong Kong. Others, mainly Western and one Bhutanese novice nun, took full ordination in the Korean, Taiwanese, or Vietnamese Buddhist traditions. And although Tibetan novice nuns are undergoing Buddhist studies comparable to their male counterparts since the late 1980s, they have not attained the monastic academic titles of a *geshe-ma* or *khen-mo* yet.

During the 1<sup>st</sup> Conference on Tibetan Buddhism in Europe in 2005, H. H. the Dalai Lama donated CHF 50,000.00 as a pilot fund to revive the *bhikṣuṇī* vow in Tibetan Buddhism. He suggested that Western nuns should take the lead by exploring ways to make this happen, in consultation with Buddhist leaders in Asian countries.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, a Committee of Western Nuns, composed of *bhikṣuṇīs* of the Tibetan tradition, was established and met in March 2006 in the U.S. to prepare a paper addressing the ordination issue. This paper was presented during a conference of Tibetan Vinaya masters in Dharamsala from May 22 to 24, 2006. The Tibetan government is pushing their Department of Religion and Culture to come to a conclusion on the matter of *bhikṣuṇī* ordination soon, after the more than 20 years of research they have conducted. The results



were presented during an International Symposium on Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya and Ordination Lineages with representatives of the various Buddhist traditions in Hamburg in July 2007.

Before I make some suggestions on how to revive the *bhikṣuṇī* vow in Tibetan Buddhism, let me briefly explain the theory of three types of vows in Tibetan Buddhism and why there are Tibetan “nuns,” but no Tibetan Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha. The crux of the matter of reviving the *bhikṣuṇī* vow is related to the Tibetan understanding of the authenticity of lineages of the three types of vows, especially the Prātimokṣa vow.

### The Theory of Three Types of Vows in Tibetan Buddhism

There are three important types of vows (Tib. *sdom pa*; Skt. *saṃvara*) in Tibetan Buddhism that each person usually takes: (1) Prātimokṣa vows, i.e., vows of individual liberation; (2) *bodhisattva* vows; and (3) tantric or *mantra* vows. Within the three higher trainings of ethics, concentration, and wisdom, these three types of vows belong to the training of ethics (*śīlaśikṣā*).<sup>2</sup> When Tibetans first came into contact with Indian Buddhism, they received these three types of vows. Shortly thereafter, the question of whether the vows were always correctly transmitted became a topic of debate.<sup>3</sup> Here I will mainly deal with one of the eight types of Prātimokṣa vows, namely, the vow of a *bhikṣuṇī* – the only type of Prātimokṣa vow that was (together with the preliminary vow of a *śikṣamānā*) not transmitted to Tibet. The *bhikṣuṇī* vow is not taken from a single master, like the lay, *bodhisattva*, or *mantra* vows, but from two Saṅghas – the Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha and the Bhikṣu Saṅgha – while the *śikṣamānā* vow is taken from a Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha.

### Tibetan Nuns Without a Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha

One may wonder how there can be Tibetan nuns without having a Tibetan Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha. From a Vinaya perspective, the Tibetan nuns are not fully ordained nuns (*bhikṣuṇīs*), but are novice nuns (Tib. *dge tshul ma*; Skt. *śrāmaṇerikā*). They are ordained by Tibetan *bhikṣus*, instead of by *bhikṣuṇīs* as prescribed in the Vinaya; thus they belong neither to a Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha nor to the Bhikṣu Saṅgha.

Tibetan novice nuns are first mentioned in the *Blue Annals* during the later spread of the doctrine to Tibet in the eleventh/twelfth century.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the history of the earlier spread, from the late eighth to early

ninth century, we have no accounts of novice nuns in Tibet, let alone of *bhikṣuṇīs*, although there were many *bhikṣuṇīs* in India up to the late 11<sup>th</sup> to early 12<sup>th</sup> century, even at Nālandā.<sup>5</sup> We do not know which Vinaya tradition these *bhikṣuṇīs* followed.

Tibetans practise the Vinaya of the Mūlasarvāstivāda tradition, which was spread mainly in northern India, but also in Nepal. The Bengali master Śāntarakṣita introduced it to Tibet in the eighth century. He lived in Nepal, where many monks went for Vinaya studies up to the eleventh century. As in India, the *bhikṣuṇī* order was almost extinct in Nepal by that time. One late document mentions a nun in Nepal in 1069.<sup>6</sup>

Surprisingly, although the *bhikṣuṇī* vow was not transmitted to Tibet, there are accounts dating from the early 14<sup>th</sup> century to the early 16<sup>th</sup> century that mention *bhikṣuṇīs* in Tibet. For example, *bhikṣuṇīs* are mentioned in a biography related to rGyal mtshan dpal bzang (1310-1391),<sup>7</sup> in the *Collected Works of Red mda' pa gZhon nu blo gros* (1348/9-1412) and, especially, in connection with the famous Sa skya master Śākya mchog ldan (1428-1507), who functioned as abbot (Tib. *mkhan po*; Skt. *upādhyāya*) for the ordination of the famous *bhikṣuṇī* of Gyama, an ordination that was performed by *bhikṣus* only. The great Sa skya scholar Go rams pa bSod nams seng ge (1429-1489) criticised this ordination. Others claimed that it must have been valid, since Śākya mchog ldan was a great Vinaya expert. However, all mention of Tibetan *bhikṣuṇīs* disappears by the time of the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup>

### The Authenticity of Prātimokṣa Vow Lineages

The validity of ordinations depends mainly on the authenticity of the Prātimokṣa vow lineages. If we want to revive the *bhikṣuṇī* vow in Tibetan Buddhism, we are confronted with legalistic details. During Buddha Śākyamuni's lifetime, numerous prohibitions, prescripts, special permissions, and supplements were made, as recorded in the Vinaya. Nowadays, there are various renditions, living traditions, and interpretations of the Vinaya. Traditionally, complete Vinaya teachings are only handed down by *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs*, because theory and practise have to go hand-in-hand.

## Records of Lineages in Tibetan Buddhism

The Tibetans developed a unique system of recording lineages (Tib. *brgyud pa*; Skt. *pārampara*). There are various types of lineages in Tibetan Buddhism, for example, Vinaya ordination lineages, *mantra* lineages, lineages of *bodhisattva* practises, and so on. Tibetan Vinaya scholars consider it very important that the lineage of succession of the abbots or abbesses who conduct the full ordination (Skt. *upasampadā*) be uninterrupted to prove the authentic origin of the respective *bhikṣu* or *bhikṣuṇī* vows. The lineage must have been transmitted from generation to generation, from one master to another, by conferring ordination from master to disciple. In case a lineage is broken, it must be shown that the lineage that is newly adopted reaches back to the Buddha himself.

The records of vows, teachings, and initiations that have been received are called *gSan yig* or *Thob yig*. These records constitute a special genre of Tibetan literature. They consist of endless lists of names of lineage masters (Tib. *brgyud pa'i bla ma*; Skt. *pārampara guru*) in chronological order. In the title of each record, the name of the lineage is given, for example, “Prātimokṣa vow lineage.” Through a *gSan yig*, famous *lamas* attempted to prove that all the teachings (Tib. *bshad pa*) and vows (Tib. *sdom pa*) they passed on had been properly received from earlier lineage masters. One does not need to be appointed as a lineage master. If a person has received a certain transmission and passes it on to disciples, that person becomes a lineage master. This is considered to be a great responsibility, and therefore many *lamas* request their masters to perform such duties. *gSan yigs* are found in the collected works (Tib. *gSung 'bum*) of each *lama*. Every lineage ends with the name of one's own master.

Tibetans expect the *bhikṣuṇī* lineage to start with Buddha Śākyamuni or the first nun he ordained, Mahāprajāpatī. Tibetan *bhikṣu* lineages start with Buddha Śākyamuni or Śāriputra. With regard to the Indian masters, these records jump over several centuries. Most important is the name of the master who ordained the first Tibetan and the name of that master's disciple. The lineages do not contain the names of all masters in each generation; if they did, there would be at least three masters mentioned for each hundred years. These records are not kept for historical reasons; they are kept to verify the authentic origins of the lineage, to recollect the kindness of one's lineage masters, and to enable one to take the vow with confidence.

## The Various Tibetan *Bhikṣu* Lineages

In Tibet, as in Theravāda countries, various Vinaya ordination lineages existed. For example, H. H. the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lamas<sup>9</sup> are said to have been ordained in a lineage that was transmitted by the great Kashmiri pandit Śākyaśrībhadrā (1140s-1225). Another lineage, one that reaches back to Śākyaśrībhadrā, is that of rJe Tsong kha pa Blo bzang grags pa (1357-1419),<sup>10</sup> the founder of the Gelug tradition. These are two different branches.<sup>11</sup> The first Tibetan *bhikṣu* in rJe Tsong kha pa's lineage is gTsang pa rDo rje dpal, and the first master mentioned in the lineage of the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama is mKhan po Byang chub dpal. Each of the two lineages again splits into two, creating four Saṅgha communities, the so-called four Jo stan assemblies (Tib. *jo stan tshogs pa bzhi*).<sup>12</sup> One biography of rJe Tsong kha pa<sup>13</sup> says that he was ordained by the great Jo stan abbot, mKhan po bKa' bzhi pa Tshul khriṃs rin chen.<sup>14</sup>

There is also a division of the lineage into three: Upper, Middle, and Lower Vinaya Lineages. "Upper" refers to upper mNga' ris in western Tibet. This lineage was transmitted by the Indian pandit Dharmapāla and his main disciples at the time of Lha Bla ma Ye shes 'od (11<sup>th</sup> cent.), but this lineage apparently no longer exists.<sup>15</sup> "Middle" refers to the regions in-between dBus and gTsang. This lineage is also called "the middle lineage from Kashmir," since it was transmitted to Tibet by the great Kashmiri scholar Śākyaśrībhadrā to Sa skya Pandita Kun dga' rgyal mtshan (1182-1251)<sup>16</sup> and to gTsang pa rDo rje dpal and mKhan po rDo rje dpal.<sup>17</sup> "Lower" refers to the regions of A mdo and Khams "down" in Eastern Tibet.

When King Glang dar ma persecuted the Buddhist teachings in the ninth century, three Tibetan monks went to Dan thig in A mdo and conducted the *upasampadā* of Bla chen dGongs pa rab gsal<sup>18</sup> together with two Chinese monks (*hva san*), Kevan and Gyivan.<sup>19</sup> Gradually this lineage spread back to central Tibet, dBus, and gTsang. It had originally reached Tibet through Śāntarakṣita who died about 788. He was one of the abbots of the famous monastic university Nālandā and the founding abbot of the first Tibetan monastery, bSam yas. He ordained the first seven monks in Tibet according to the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya. According to an illustration published by the contemporary Nyingma lama H.H. Drubwang Pema Norbu Rinpoche (b. 1932), Śāntarakṣita seems to have been ordained in this lineage. The 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lamas were thought to be holders of this lineage, too, because one of their lineage ancestors, Pan chen Blo bzang Chos rgyan (1570-1662) received ordination in this lineage from

Dam chos yar 'phel (b. 16<sup>th</sup> cent), a great scholar of bKra shis lhun po Monastery, in addition to the lineage of Śākyaś Śrībhadrā, in order to strengthen his ordination. A recent publication shows that this is not the case and that the Tibetan records were mistaken. H.H. the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama is the holder of only one lineage, the lineage of Śāntarakṣita, which only survives due to the kindness of two Chinese monks.<sup>20</sup>

Although various lineages exist in Tibetan Buddhism, unlike common practise in Theravāda, re-ordination is not common when changing monasteries. Kieffer-Pülz reports that guest monk delegations from Myanmar, Thailand, and Sri Lanka to other countries are often asked to receive ordination anew – a legal act of so-called strengthening (Pāli *dalhikamma*; Skt. *dr̥ḍhakarma*) – to ensure the validity of their ordinations and enable them to take part in legal acts together with the monks of the host country.<sup>21</sup>

Tibetan monks, regardless which lineage they hold, gather for rites such as confession (Tib. *gso sbyong*; Skt. *poṣadha*), rainy season retreat (Tib. *dbyar gnas*; Skt. *varṣa*), and so on, without reordaining, because they all belong to the same Vinaya school, Mūlasarvāstivāda.

### The Validity of Ordinations

Another important criterion for reviving the *bhikṣuṇī* vow in Tibetan Buddhism is observing the proper procedure for conducting the ordination rite. There are certain requirements that need to be fulfilled from the perspective of Tibetan Vinaya. For example, the candidates need to be of a certain minimum age and have correct, virtuous motivation. The monks and nuns performing the ordination must have certain qualifications, too, such as a minimum of seniority in the order, knowledge, and experience. Even during the lifetime of the historical Buddha, a number of faults naturally occurred during ordinations, for example, the candidate fell asleep during the ritual or it was later discovered that the *upasampadā* abbot had committed a major transgression (*pārājika*) and therefore had not been a pure *bhikṣu*. Despite that, the Blessed One considered the ordinations valid. In general, if an ordination ceremony has been concluded by announcing its date and time, it is legally valid. If it later becomes known that the procedure was faulty in some way, the error is not considered the fault of the person who was ordained, but of the ordination masters. I have never heard of an ordination being declared invalid in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. In any case, it is considered a duty to perform ordinations as correctly as possible.

What is the main cause for the arising of the *bhikṣuṇī* vow? According to Tibetan commentators, the most important cause is the virtuous mind of renunciation. Likewise, it is important to have the wish to take the vow and the conviction that it has been obtained. Furthermore, it is important not to take the vow on one's own through imagination; instead, the precepts should be received in the presence of a human Saṅgha that performs the legal act (*karma*). According to the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya, a legal act in a *bhikṣuṇī upasampadā* is similar to a legal act in a *bhikṣu upasampadā*, in that the motion is put forward three times and is followed in the fourth instance by the decision (Tib. *gsol ba dang bzhi kyi las*; Skt. *jñāpti-caturtha-karma*; Pāli *ñatti-catuttha-kamma*). But, unlike the *bhikṣu* ordination, which is conducted only once before a Bhikṣu Saṅgha, the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination procedure is conducted before two Saṅghas at the same time. According to the Pāli Vinaya, by contrast, this act needs to be performed twice: once in front of a Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha and again, on the same day, in front of a Bhikṣu Saṅgha. Therefore, in Pāli, the formal ordination of a nun is called *aṭṭhavācika upasampadā* (eight pronouncements *upasampadā*), i.e., two instances of four proclamations, one by the Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha and the other by the Bhikṣu Saṅgha.

### Reviving the Bhikṣuṇī Vow in the Tibetan Tradition

Tibetan monk scholars see two possible ways of ordaining *bhikṣuṇīs* in agreement with the Vinaya tradition of Tibet: (1) an ordination of *bhikṣuṇīs* by a Saṅgha of *bhikṣus* only, and (2) a dual ordination, that is, an ordination by two Saṅghas: a Bhikṣu Saṅgha and a Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha. Some Vinaya scholars favour an ordination by a Saṅgha of *bhikṣus* only, because they want to make sure that the nuns get the ordination lineage of their own Vinaya tradition and thus feel assured that the lineage is pure and unbroken. Many *śrāmaṇerikās* would like to receive the *bhikṣuṇī* vows from H.H. the Dalai Lama, either following the *bhikṣu* ordination rite (rite for males: Tib. *pha chog*) or the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination rite (rite for females: Tib. *ma chog*). If the ordination were performed by *bhikṣus* only (i.e., following the rite for females, but contrary to instructions, without *bhikṣuṇīs*), technically speaking, H.H. the Dalai Lama would need to function as the *upasampadā* abbess (Tib. *snyen par rdzogs pa'i khan mo*; Skt. *upādhyāyikā*), as in the above-mentioned case of Śākya mchog ldan (1428-1507). He would also need to give the *śikṣamānā* ordination and the *brahmacāryopasthāna* (Tib. *tshangs spyod nyer gnas*), which are usually given by *bhikṣuṇīs* only. It should be noted that, although Shakya mchog

Idan (1428-1507) was a great Vinaya scholar, he was later criticised for ordaining nuns as *bhikṣuṇīs*.

There is also some discussion about whether the Tibetan Mūlasarvāstivāda *bhikṣuṇī* rite, if conducted by two Saṅghas, is to be lead by an abbess or abbot. No abbot is explicitly mentioned in the rite; there is only mention of an abbess and a *bhikṣu* who functions as the master of legal acts (Tib. *las kyi slob dpon*; Skt. *karma ācārya*). Some feel that the rite is to be lead by an abbot, while others think it is to be lead by the abbess.<sup>22</sup> Since an *upasampadā* abbot (Tib. *snyen par rdzogs pa'i mkhan po*; Skt. *upādhyāya*) is not mentioned in the Tibetan Mūlasarvāstivāda *bhikṣuṇī* ordination rite, it may be led by the abbess; the nun to be ordained must mention her ordination master by name.

The question is how the rite should be performed if followers of more than one Vinaya school are involved, for example, Tibetan *bhikṣus* and Chinese *bhikṣuṇīs*. Since there were no different Vinaya schools during Buddha's lifetime and all Vinaya schools today can be traced back to the Buddha, it should be no problem to agree that, although the nuns ordained may have a different Vinaya ordination lineage than the monks of their traditions, they may still practise the same Vinaya tradition as the monks, if this were considered more convenient. In the Vinaya Pīṭaka, there is no prohibition against followers of various traditions performing legal acts together.

H. H. the Dalai Lama thinks that a discussion about these issues and an agreement on an international level is needed, and that this discussion should include leading *bhikṣuṇī* masters. He seems to think that the *bhikṣuṇī* masters from other traditions should have a say on how the ordination should be performed correctly in the Tibetan tradition. In this way, their knowledge and experience, based on that of former generations, would be taken into account. The Dalai Lama kindly gave his full support and agreed to participate in an international symposium held in Hamburg, Germany, from July 18 to 20, 2007. He hoped that the symposium would inspire Buddhist women in their dedication to religious life and help them gain social recognition. Leading Buddhist monks, nuns, and academics specialising in Vinaya were invited to speak at the conference.

### **Eliminating Doubts with Regard to the Living *Bhikṣuṇī* Lineages**

Although it is not possible to go into detail, due to space limitations, I would like to mention one more point of discussion and some doubts that remain. Some Tibetan Vinaya scholars seem to be confused about the fact



that nowadays *bhikṣuṇīs* are sometimes ordained by *bhikṣus* only and sometimes by both Saṅghas. They suppose that there must be two lineages: one lineage of ordination by *bhikṣus* only and one lineage of dual ordination. In fact, there is only one lineage. That lineage started in 357 CE when the Chinese *bhikṣuṇī* Ching Chien (Jing-jian) was ordained by *bhikṣus* only. Since there were no *bhikṣuṇīs* in China at that time, this kind of ordination was considered valid, similar to the ordination of the followers of Mahāprajāpatī during the lifetime of the Buddha.

Later, this *bhikṣuṇī* lineage was strengthened through a dual ordination ceremony conducted in 433/434 CE by *bhikṣuṇīs* from Sri Lanka, together with Chinese *bhikṣus*. The ordination was headed by the Sinhalese *bhikkhūṇī* Tessara (Skt. Devasara; Chin. T'ieh-sa-lo<sup>23</sup>) as the *upasampadā* abbeß and the Indian *bhikkhu* Saṅghavarman, who acted as the *upasampadā* abbot. The ordination took place in Nanlin Monastery in China and the name of the first Chinese *bhikṣuṇī* who was ordained by both Saṅghas was named Hui-kuo (Hui-guo). Altogether, 300 women were ordained by the two Saṅghas.

The fact that this *bhikṣuṇī* lineage is still alive is proved by the fact that Chinese *bhikṣuṇīs* never disappeared from Mainland China and tens of thousands of *bhikṣuṇīs* still exist today. In contrast to the Bhikṣu Vinaya ordination lineage, the Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya ordination lineage consists not only of *bhikṣuṇīs*, but also of *bhikṣus*. Throughout history, the *bhikṣus* have always had the final say on how to perform the full ordination of nuns correctly in specific circumstances.

## Conclusion

From a Tibetan Buddhist perspective, the *bhikṣuṇī* lineage could be adopted by relying on other traditions. Just as the *bhikṣuṇī* lineage has been revived in Sri Lanka, now Tibetan Vinaya scholars are considering the revival of a Tibetan Mūlasarvāstivāda *bhikṣuṇī* lineage, too, whether an ordination by Tibetan *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs* of the Dharmagupta tradition, or an ordination by Tibetan *bhikṣus* only.

I personally suggest an ordination by a Saṅgha of ten Tibetan *bhikṣus* and twelve Dharmagupta *bhikṣuṇīs*. We do not know which lineage Bhikṣuṇī Devasara followed. There are no accounts of Dharmaguptakas in Ceylon. According to Skilling, we only have accounts of *bhikkhūṇīs* of the Mahāvihāra and the Sāgalika schools at that time.<sup>24</sup> This means that, during the first dual ordination held in China, it was agreed that the nuns would henceforth follow the same tradition as the monks in China, that is,



the Dharmagupta tradition, a lineage that flourished from the first century onward, especially in northwest India.

All *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs* are followers of the one Vinaya tradition of Buddha Śākyamuni. Over the course of centuries, this lineage split into various branches and developed different renditions of the Vinaya Piṭaka. All lineages today are of one origin and of one nature, and therefore pure and unbroken. This does not mean that it is not worthwhile to keep different lineages alive or that lineages cannot be broken. Historically, this has happened from time to time in various countries. *Bhikṣu* lineages have been broken and revived with the support of other *bhikṣu* lineages. Similarly, it should be no problem to revive the *bhikṣuṇī* lineage where it no longer exists. As long as *Bhikṣu* and *Bhikṣuṇī* Saṅghas do exist somewhere in the world, regardless of tradition, the Vinaya taught by the Buddha is still alive. Most important than the lineage is renunciation.

## Notes

- 1 Karma Lekshe Tsomo, “Breakthroughs and Challenges on the Bhiksuni Ordination Issue” *Sakyadhita* 15:1 (2006), p. 6.
- 2 Dalai Lama, *Das Auge einer neuen Achtsamkeit* (München: Goldmann-Verlag 1987), pp. 61-72.
- 3 Jan-Ulrich Sobisch, *Three-Vow Theories in Tibetan Buddhism* (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 2002).
- 4 George N. Roerich: *The Blue Annals* (New Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass Pub., 1996), pp. 915-920.
- 5 Peter Skilling, “A Note on the History of the Bhikkhunī-saṅgha (II): The Order of Nuns after the Parinirvana,” *W.F.B. Review* 30:4 (Oct.-Dec. 1993) and 31:1 (Jan.-March 1994): 29-49.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- 7 ‘Ba’ ra ba rGyal mtshan dpal bzang (1310-1391), ‘Ba’ ra ba’i mam thar mgur ‘bum (Microfilms available at The Nepalese-German Manuscript Cataloguing Project). My thanks go to Bhiksuni Jampa Choekyi for drawing my attention to this source.
- 8 Acarya Tashi Tiering and Philippa Russell, “Account of The Buddhist Ordination of Women,” Chö-Yang 1.1 (1986): 29 (Dharamsala: Department of Religion & Culture). Further details, which are not considered here, can be found in Acarya dGe bshes Thub bstan byang chub, *Bod du dge slong mar bsgrub pa’i dpyad gzhi rab gsal me long* (Dharamsala: Bod gzhung chos rig las khung, 2000).
- 9 Thub bstan rgya mtsho, Dalai Lama XIII, *rGyal kun spyi gzugs yongs ‘dzin chos bzhin du spyod pa du ma’i zhal snga nas dam pa’i chos kyi dbang khrid lung sogs mdo sngags zab rgyas bdud rtsi’i rgyun khungs ldan byin rlabs kyi tshan kha ma nyams pa’i bgo skal ji snyed thob pa’i rim brgyud (gSan yig)* vol. ni. 212 ff. in vol. 5 of the 7 vol. Lha-sa New Zhol edition of the collected works, 4a7-4b7.
- 10 Blo bzang grags pa’i dpal, *rJe rin po che blo bzang grags pa’i dpal gyi gsan yig*, 27 ff. in vol. ka of the 18 vol. New Zhol Par-khang edition of the collected works of Tsong-kha-pa, 27b6-28b6.
- 11 Dung dkar Blo bzang ‘phrin las / Dar mdo bKra shis dbang ‘dus, *Bod rig gnas dang lo rgyus kyi re’u mig ngo mtshar kun snang* (Province Sichuan: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang (Nationalities Publishing House), 1997) pp. 143-44, table 11.
- 12 The term “jo stan” is found in the data bank of the TBRC only once: P3853 Jo stan zas gtsang (b. 12<sup>th</sup> cent.). Sometimes also referred to as “jo (g)dan,” cf. Jackson, “Two Biographies,” p. 21, n11. Van der Kuijp, Leonard W. J., “The Monastery of Gsang-phu ne’u-thog and Its Abbatial Succession from ca. 1073 to 1250,” *Berliner Indologische Studien* 3 (1987):109: “Dbus was divided into four

- administrative-cum-vinaya districts (sde)."
- 13 Ngor chen dKon mchog lhun grub (1497-1557), *A History of Buddhism, Being the Text of Dam pa'i chos kyi byung tshul legs par bshad pa bstan pa rgya mtshor 'jug pa'i gru chen zhes bya ba rtsom 'phro kha skong bcas* (reproduced from a rare xylographic print from the 1705 Sde-ge blocks from the library of Bumkiok Athing) (New Delhi: Ngawang Topgay, 1973), p. 338.7.
- 14 Cf. Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center Code P8805: mKhan chen Tshul khirms rin chen (b. 14th cent.).
- 15 Jan-Ulrich Sobisch, *Three-Vow Theories in Tibetan Buddhism*, p. 396, n870: the 'Upper Vinaya Lineag' (stod 'dul) was brought to Tibet by the Indian master Dharmapāla, but it no longer exists.
- 16 David P. Jackson, *The Entrance Gate for the Wise*, vol. 1 (Wien: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien 1987), pp. 26, 27, 30.
- 17 According to Tulku Thondub, after the original Upper lineage was extinguished, the Middle lineage was also sometimes called the Upper lineage. Jan-Ulrich Sobisch, *Three-Vow Theories in Tibetan Buddhism*, p. 396, n. 870. This needs further investigation.
- 18 Dung dkar Blo bzang 'phrin las / Dar mdo bKra shis dbang 'dus, *Bod rig gnas dang lo rgyus kyi re'u mig ngo mtshar kun snang*, pp. 138/9, table 7. TBRC Code P1523 puts him between 952/53-1035. Cf. E. GeneSmith, *Among Tibetan Texts* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001), pp. 149/150, 308 n484: "There are two possibilities for the dates of Dgongs pa rab gsal: 832-912 and 892-975. There are chronological inconsistencies with established dates created by both pairs. I prefer the second set."
- 19 Cf. Craig E. Watson, "The Introduction of the Second Propagation of Buddhism in Tibet According to R. A. Stein's edition of the *sBa-bzhed*," *Tibet Journal* 4 (1980): 22: "Two monks were brought from China, ha-shang and gyim-phag."
- 20 Geshe Beri Jigme Wangyal, *The Golden Reliquary of the World: a Biography of the Successive Abbots and Lamas through whom His Holiness the 14 Dalai Lama's Bhikṣu Lineage was Transmitted* (Dharamsala: Tibetan Department of Religion and Culture, 2006).
- 21 Petra Kieffer-Pülz, "Die Wiedereinrichtung des Nonnenordens in der Theravāda-Tradition," *Buddhismus in Geschichte und Gegenwart* Weiterbildendes Studium, vol. 11 (Hamburg: Erneuerungsbewegungen AWW Universität Hamburg, 2006), pp. 29-41.
- 22 Recently a leading Tibetan scholar opined that, if the ordination is conducted by *bhikṣus* only, the nuns would obtain the lineage of the abbot, whereas if it is conducted by two Saṅghas, a Bhikṣu Saṅgha and a Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha, the nuns would obtain the lineage of the abbess.
- 23 Cissell, Kathryn Ann Adelsperger, "The The Pi-ch'iu-ni chuan: Biographies of Famous Chinese Nuns from 317-356 C.E.," Diss. University of Wisconsin, 1972, p. 66.
- 24 Skilling, "A Note on the History of the Bhikkhūṇī-saṅgha," p. 34.

## Buddhist Monasticism in a Consumer Society

*Tenzin Palmo*

The topic of Buddhist monasticism and consumerism is huge and very important. Here I can only touch briefly on a few aspects, without dealing with anything in depth. However I hope that even these few words can spark some debate and constructive discussion.

First of all, I would like to say that, of course, there are many masters of all Buddhist traditions who are totally committed to spreading the Dharma to all those with interest. They teach both theory and practise and often encourage their followers to engage in activities for the benefit of society in general. These masters, both male and female, both monastic and lay, exemplify the Dharma life well-lived and are an inspiration for us all. However, this talk is dealing with some of the problems of the Saṅgha in modern times and therefore I apologise for seeming critical and negative.

A while ago, a friend was telling me about her father's recent death. She had called around to various Buddhist temples to arrange the funeral ceremonies. In every temple, she was told the list of price rates, depending on how many monks would be chanting, for how long, and so on. It was like contacting a business firm. Nobody offered condolences on her recent bereavement. No one asked, "Is there any way that we can help you?" The monasteries happily charge money for their services, but do not often offer consolation or advice. She was so disheartened by the lack of kindness that she almost lost faith in the Dharma altogether and considered changing her faith.

Meanwhile, in various Buddhist countries, educated laywomen have raised the question of the relevance of the monastic Saṅgha in modern times. Traditionally the monasteries were often the schoolrooms where young boys could receive an education. Additionally, some monks and nuns were skilled in herbal medicines and charms, so they were the trusted doctors for their supporters. They also served as counsellors in times of trouble, so their relationships with the laypeople were very close and reciprocal.

The Saṅgha was set up by the Lord Buddha as a way of life to bring spiritual benefit to the monastics, but also to be a shining example for the often harassed lay supporters engulfed in worldly concerns, showing that

a life of simplicity and contentment is possible, and is conducive to happiness and peace. The monastic Saṅgha members are supposed to exemplify the life of wisdom and compassion set forth by the Buddha. In particular, they are to be living examples of the Dharma life well lived.

We should remember that the Saṅgha is the third object of refuge. After his enlightenment in Bodhgaya, the Buddha journeyed to Sarnath to find his erstwhile companions. After converting, they were ordained and became the first members of the Saṅgha. And throughout Buddhist history, in all countries of Asia where the Dharma has taken root, the Saṅgha has played a crucial role in preserving and handing down the precious teachings. Almost all the great scholars, meditation masters, and lineage holders have been monks. When the great monastic universities of Nālandā and Vikramashila were destroyed in the twelfth century and most of the monks were killed, Buddhism in India effectively died out.

Although the Saṅgha has continued to flourish in other parts of Asia, nowadays certain members of the Buddhist temples in these countries are seen misappropriating funds offered out of devotion by their lay supporters. Some higher-level monks openly spend these donations on fancy cars and other luxuries. They live a lifestyle of self-indulgent pleasure that is out of reach for most of their devotees! In one city, we saw a street given over entirely to shops selling Buddhist artifacts and there a monk was having himself measured for a robe in front of a full-length mirror with all the fastidiousness of a businessman selecting an Armani suit! The Buddha and his followers often wore robes sewn together from castoff clothing found on rubbish heaps. So nowadays people are asking, how are the monks in any way superior to us in their lifestyle? Why should we honour and support them when some are not even trying to lead a life of humility and renunciation?

Another challenge to be faced is the growing pointlessness or inaccessibility of the Dharma, which is still often taught in an archaic language and manner that has little relevance to the present-day lives of the audience. Many of the traditional *sūtras* are directed to the much slower lifestyle of bygone ages. They are also intended for monastics and seem to have little advice to offer in the modern market place. So younger Western-educated people usually regard Buddhism as old-fashioned, boring, and totally alien to their own lives and aspirations. Clearly the problem here is not the Dharma, which is timeless, but the presentation of the Dharma, which has become sadly outdated.

There is also the question of temples becoming increasing large and elaborate, seeming to celebrate the glory of wealth and ostentation rather

than true Buddhist values. Senior monks are judged by the extent of their property and the size of their following. However, the majority of the devotees are older women. Those members of the younger generation who are obsessed by modern consumer values and are looking for higher ideals, often see only the usual materialistic values mirrored back, even in Dharma circles.

Another complaint I have heard is that nowadays some of the senior monks have become arrogant and look down on the laypeople. Many of the laity are very sincere in their Dharma commitments and both study and meditate with conviction. However, it seems that some meditation masters do not take the efforts of the laypeople seriously. They regard the role of the laypeople to be only as donors and supporters for the temples. Therefore, the laypeople dare not approach these high monks with their meditation questions and need for guidance.

In other words, the modern monastic Saṅgha is often seen as proud and unapproachable. The laypeople think, “I support them, but what do they really do for me?” Often, for the educated, simply making merit is nowadays not considered a sufficient reason to keep financing a group of people who appear to make no contribution to society. There have also been an increasing number of scandals within the Saṅgha that cause the faithful to lose their trust.

Meanwhile, in many countries of Asia, the rise of Christianity is a wake-up call for Buddhists. At least within the Protestant denominations, the laypeople are involved at the heart of things and there is an emphasis on communal participation and social responsibility. Although there are now many Buddhist groups that are involved in social work, still many Buddhists ask what more can be done to involve the Saṅgha in helping society on all levels.

In all this, what can nuns contribute to resolve these problems? How can nuns help to bridge the gap between the Saṅgha and the laypeople? What role can the modern nun play in reviving an interest and conviction in the Dharma among the young and disaffected?

First, I think that, on the whole, nuns are more approachable. People are usually less intimidated in the presence of a woman. So nuns are ideal for the role of counsellor and teacher. Nowadays, at least in the Mahāyāna countries, the modern nun is well-educated and confident. Gradually in other Buddhist communities, such as in Sri Lanka and among nuns in the Tibetan tradition, the opportunity for education and training is on the increase.

Women often have a strong social conscience and I feel that, once the nuns have the means to advance through education and increased self-confidence, they can make a significant contribution to society. Indeed, in countries like Taiwan and Korea, the nuns are already at the forefront of social activities. Nuns who are experienced in meditation and studies can move into roles as teachers, presenting the Dharma in an accessible way and connecting with present-day audiences. On the whole, nuns are less likely to be arrogant, sensually over-indulgent, or involved in scandals. Women are usually considered both intuitive and practical, and it is these aspects of the Dharma that need to be emphasised for the present younger generation who are so lost in false values, seeking happiness on paths that lead straight to suffering.

We need fresh approaches in presenting the Dharma for the modern world, where materialistic values run directly opposite to those recommended by the Buddha, even though he himself was brought up in circumstances of luxury and power. The poisons of the mind are saturating our society and many people are desperate for relief and antidotes. The Dharma, with its clear message of contentment, kindness, peace, and insight, can definitely help us to overcome our mental afflictions. The monastic Saṅgha members are the trained doctors and nurses who can administer this medicine with skilful and compassionate knowledge.

May the Saṅgha's true role, as an example of renunciation, simplicity, joy, and wisdom, shine out to lighten the darkness of false values surrounding us in this day and age.



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**INNOVATIVE INSTITUTIONS  
FOR BUDDHIST WOMEN**





## Starting a Tibetan Study Centre for Nuns in South India

Tenzin Yangdon

Buddhism began over 2500 years ago when the historical Buddha, Siddhārtha Gautama, sat under the *bodhi* tree in Bodhgaya and achieved true enlightenment. Many years later, in the eighth century, Buddhism was brought to Tibet and began to flourish there in its many aspects until the 1950s, when the Chinese People's Liberation Army invaded Tibet and began a programme of violent ethnic cleansing, which continues until today. Most monasteries and nunneries were totally destroyed. Those that have been restored are generally small. Religious studies and ritual practices are controlled by the Chinese government. Because of this, many nuns have fled Tibet and come to India seeking religious freedom.

To the best of my knowledge, nuns in Tibet were interested in studying Dharma, but nunneries and *lamas* prepared to teach nuns were rare. Many nuns had no experience of living in a nuns' community. Most Tibetan nuns, even those living in nunneries, did not do philosophical studies of logic and debate. Most were engaged in ritual and meditation practices to purify their minds and create positive potential.

Following His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama's advice, debate on Buddhist philosophy has been incorporated into the curriculum of nunneries in the Tibetan exile community. In addition to Buddhist philosophy and five central Buddhist treatises (*Commentary on the Path*, *Prajñāpāramitā*, *Madhyamika*, *Abhidharma*, and *Vinaya*), nuns in exile have the opportunity to study Tibetan grammar, poetry, English, history, and literature.

The first nunnery to be established in exile was Gaden Choeling in Dharamsala. The nuns there started classes in Buddhist philosophy in 1987. The six major nunneries where the Gelugpa tradition of Buddhism is studied are Gaden Choeling, Jamyang Chöling, and Dolma Ling in Dharamsala; Khachoe Gakyi Ling and Thukche Choeling in Nepal; and Jangchub Choeling Nunnery in Mundgod (South India). The two largest nunneries where the Nyingma tradition of Buddhism is studied are Namdroling in Bylakuppe (South India) and Shugseb in Dharamsala. The two largest nunneries where the Kagyu tradition of Buddhism is studied are

Mahāyāna Buddhist Nunnery (Tilokpur) near Dharamsala and Pangaon Retreat in Manali. There are also two nunneries at Rajpur near Dehradun where nuns study the Śākya tradition of Buddhism.

Jangchub Choeling Nunnery was founded in 1987. In 1989, the first class of Buddhist philosophy began, a course that takes 17 or 18 years to complete. These days, we have 20 classes in progress. During the 18-year course of study, the nuns at our nunnery have the opportunity to study the philosophical texts and debate their meaning. Previously only monks were engaged in these philosophical studies. These advancements in nuns' education have occurred due to His Holiness the Dalai Lama's instructions for the benefit of the current generation of nuns.

Today there are 165 nuns living at Jangchub Choeling Nunnery. The 36 *śrāmaṇerika* precepts are observed by all the nuns. A typical day at the nunnery begins with morning prayers at 5:30 AM that usually last for an hour. From 9 AM to 11 AM, classes in the scriptures and debates are held simultaneously. In philosophy classes, we first start with *Collective Topics*, an elementary class in logic that lasts for three years. In the third year, we also learn about the mind and mental factors (*Lorig*). In the fourth year, we study advanced logic and reasoning (*Tarig*). In the fifth year, we begin the study of valid cognition (*Prāmana*) and hold debates on this text during the winter debate tournament every year. The following five years, we study the *Perfection of Wisdom* (*Prajñāpāramitā*). Then we concentrate on Je Tsongkhapa's *Essence of Eloquence* for another year. After that, we study Middle Way philosophy (*Madhyamika*) for three years. The next three years, we learn Abhidharma (*Treasure of Knowledge*). In the final year, we study monastic discipline (*Vinaya*). So far, we are only studying the *śrāmaṇerika* precepts, since there is no *bhikṣuṇī* lineage in the Tibetan tradition. Altogether, we study for a total of 18 years. To evaluate how much we have learned during the year, an annual examination is conducted every summer in June. Two students from our monastery will finish the curriculum next year and will be eligible to take the exams for the monastic academic degree of *geshe* for the first time in the history of Tibetan Buddhism.

Since January 2005, Western science has been added to the curriculum as part of the Science Meets Dharma Project. The science class, conducted by Swiss Resource instructors, is held from 11 AM to 1 PM. In addition, the nuns study Je Tsongkhapa's *Graduated Path to Enlightenment* (*Lamrim*) from 3 PM to 4 PM. They also attend classes in Tibetan grammar and handwriting, logic, philosophical debate, and English. The nuns do a kind of analytical meditation as they practise debate.

Since 1995, nuns from Jangchub Choeling Nunnery have been participating in the grand Winter Debate Tournament (Jamyang Kunchoe) held by rotation at different nunneries. The Tibetan Nuns Project takes care of the travel costs as well as food for 20 nuns and one teacher from each nunnery. The more nuns participate in the debates, the more they can learn from each other. It is therefore our sincere wish to strengthen this educational exchange with other nunneries to be able to acquire more knowledge and experience. The nuns feel that their practise of the five great treatises that are studied in the course of the *geshe* studies programme are a contribution toward helping ensure a peaceful world.

At the moment at Jangchub Choeling, two nuns have reached the study of Vinaya and are in their final year. There are eight nuns in the final class of Abhidharma. The majority of the nuns are studying the *Perfection of Wisdom* right now. The nunnery has eight teachers from Ganden and Drepung Monasteries, located nearby. Three senior nuns teach Tibetan grammar and English to the young nuns, while others teach philosophy. Once a month, our abbot, Geshe Kelsang Namgyal, a monk from Ganden Jangtse Monastery, gives us advice on the rules of our nunnery and the 36 *śrāmaṇerika* precepts.

Once they have finished their studies, most of the nuns at Jangchub Choeling intend to help teach new novice nuns. Others are looking forward to going back to their native places to provide spiritual guidance and help benefit people in their spiritual practise. Some of the nuns prefer to go into retreat. Many women from different parts of the world have expressed a need for more Buddhist nuns to help spread the Buddhist teachings in the West. They feel that women may be more comfortable asking personal questions and seeking spiritual guidance from nuns rather than monks. The nuns who are studying at Jangchub Choeling hope to be able to help fulfil the needs of women in the near future.

Nuns regard it as a big step forward that the youngest Jangchub Choeling nuns are attending classes at the Central School for Tibetans in Mundgod, where they are receiving a good general education. Thanks to the Science Meets Dharma Project initiated by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, our nunnery is the only location where nuns who wish to do so can study Western science. These nuns may play an important role in bridging the gap between laypeople and monastics, as well as between Dharma and science in the future.

## Buddhist Women at Wat Paknam Temple in Bangkok

*Amphai Tansomboon*

The Thai Buddhist nuns called *mae chee* are very different from the *bhikkhunīs* who exist in Sri Lanka, Korea, and Taiwan, in terms of disciplinary rules, practices, and ordination procedures. According to the rules and regulations established by the Buddha for the ordination of *bhikkhunīs*, a woman who wishes to be ordained must receive ordination first from the *bhikkhunī* order, then from the *bhikkhu* order, and observes several hundred precepts.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, a *mae chee* receives ordination from a *bhikkhu* and observes only eight precepts.<sup>2</sup> It is a new challenge to study the Thai Buddhist nuns and their place in Thai Buddhist society. It is important to learn about the roles of *mae chees* in order to support them appropriately.

Both *mae chees* and laywomen at Wat Paknam have played significant and inspiring roles in Thai society. Through training in meditation with Phra Mongkolthepmuni, the late abbot of Wat Paknam Temple in Bangkok, *mae chees* became meditation masters with the capacity to help people around the world to overcome suffering. As *mae chees* and laywomen became skilled in meditation, they assisted Phra Mongkolthepmuni in spreading the Dhamma and also in tending to the practical needs and realities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, between World Wars I and II. They continue to make significant contributions up to the present day.

Many extraordinary *mae chees* from Wat Paknam contributed a great deal to society. Mae chee Jan Kohn-nok-yoong, who was trained by Phra Mongkolthepmuni, is recognised as the founder of Wat Phradhammakaya. Mae chee Warnchai Chukorn set up a meditation centre at Rajchaburi Province where she successfully teaches Dhamma to children and trains them in ethical behaviour. Others include Mae chee Yanee, who initially set up the Thai Nuns' Institute, and Mae chee Rampha, who has carried on the work of the Thai Nuns' Institute in the position of president until today. Mae chee Ananda of Wat Paknam helps people resolve the various problems in their lives and is presently active in establishing a permanent place for the Thai Nun's Institute in Bangkok. Ajarn Tritha Niemkham is the president of Phra Mongkolthepmuni Wat Paknam Alumni Association

and actively supports all Wat Paknam's activities and communities. Khun Jintana Osodh has taught Dhamma to people in the community, first as a *mae chee* and later as a laywomen.

### ***Mae chees' Place in History***

In the Buddha's time, Queen Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī was the first woman to become a fully ordained *bhikkhunī*. *Bhikkhunīs* had an equal opportunity to attain enlightenment and had important roles in spreading the Dhamma, just as the *bhikkhus* did. After the death of the Buddha, the *bhikkhunī* order flourished for many centuries before it died out in India. The *bhikkhunī* lineage was introduced to Sri Lanka by Sanghamitta, the daughter of Emperor Aśoka, during the reign of King Devanampiyatissa (236-276 BCE).<sup>3</sup> After the *bhikkhunī* order was established, it survived in Sri Lanka for centuries.

In 429 CE, a group of *bhikkhunīs* from Sri Lanka went to China and spread the *bhikkhunī* order there. There have been fully ordained Buddhist nuns in many countries, such as Sri Lanka, Taiwan, and Korea, but the order never spread to Thailand. Instead, Buddhist nuns in Thailand are known as *mae chees* and are recognised by the Thai Bhikkhu Saṅgha as the fourth sector of the Saṅgha. A few years ago, Bhikkhunī Dhammananda made efforts to establish a full-fledged *bhikkhunī* order in Thailand. She was ordained as a *bhikkhunī* in Sri Lanka. Thus far, however, the Thai Bhikkhu Saṅgha has not fully accepted her role in Theravāda Buddhism.

The Thai *mae chees* are very different from the *bhikkhunīs* who exist in Sri Lanka, Korea, and Taiwan in terms of ordination procedures and the Vinaya rules they observe. Initially, the Buddha established rules and regulations by which *bhikkhunīs* received ordination first from the *bhikkhunī* order and thereafter from the *bhikkhu* order. The ordination of *mae chees* is much simpler. *Mae chees* are ordained by making a commitment to observe eight Vinaya rules. In the Theravāda tradition in Thailand, a *bhikkhu* observes 227 Vinaya rules. A *mae chee* observes eight rules, whereas a *bhikkhunī* observes 311 rules. This is what distinguishes a *mae chee* from a *bhikkhunī*. The *bhikkhunīs* that exist in Southeast Asia are generally regarded as belonging to the Mahāyāna tradition.

A *mae chee* is a laywoman who decides to spend her life as a renunciant, enters a monastery, and is ordained by a *bhikkhu* by taking a vow to observe eight precepts.<sup>4</sup> The term *mae chee* is derived from *tha chee*, meaning a woman who wears white clothes.<sup>5</sup> The term *chee* denotes a woman who is ordained as a female renunciant and leaves lay life behind,

has little concern about society outside the monastery, wears white clothes, shaves her hair, eats two meals a day like the monks, and chants in the temple. The *mae chees*' objective is to take the Three Jewels as their refuge, learn the Dhamma, practise meditation to gain tranquillity, concentrate on purifying their minds to become free from defilements, and cultivate merit in order to reach the ultimate goal of *nibbāna*. Some senior *bhikkhus* imply that the term *mae chee* means one who conquers the defilements of her own mind. Since a *mae chee* is a female renunciant, she is respected as a "mother *chee*," *mae* meaning "mother." Whether or not a woman has previously been married, all are called *mae chee*. About half of the *mae chees* are over 50 years old, about 40 percent are between 30 and 50 years old, and about ten percent are between 15 and 29. *Mae chees* are happy and content with their simple life, humbly observing only eight precepts very strictly.

In Thai history, evidence from two tablets of engraved marble inscribed in an ancient language shows that *mae chees* existed in Thailand in 279 BCE (264 Buddhist era). *Mae chees* existed at just about the same time as Thai *bhikkhus*, when Sona Thera and Punamuni Thera came to Suwanbhumī, which is present-day Nakhon Pathom Province. In the chronicles of the Sukothai period, we find many references to *mae chees*. Later, during the Ayodhya period, women suffered greatly after losing their fathers, husbands, children, and other close relatives in wars. For this reason, many women turned to monastic life and sought serenity as a *mae chee*.

### Dhamma at Wat Paknam

There have been many *mae chees* who have contributed greatly to Thai society, just as *bhikkhus* do, though often behind the scenes. In contrast to women at other temples, the Buddhist women at Wat Paknam have opportunities equal to the monks and novices to obtain higher education, practise meditation, and contribute to society. Most *mae chees* at Wat Paknam are ordained with strong faith at an early age and remain nuns until they die. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Phra Mongkoltepmuni (Sodh Candasaro) was appointed the abbot of Wat Paknam. Serving as abbot from 1916 to 1959 (BE 2459-2502), he was the first meditation master in Bangkok of that era who was capable of teaching both Dhamma and meditation. He was very famous for spreading Buddhādhamma in Thailand. He spent 43 years teaching meditation to Buddhists – throughout World War I, World War II, and many other important historical incidents in Thailand. His

Dhammakaya meditation method is well-known and has been taught for nearly 90 years, from 1916 (BE 2459) to the present.

Phra Mongkolthepmuni administered the temple economically, due to the scarcity of resources and food during World Wars I and II. However, he never neglected the disciplinary rules of the Saṅgha and he provided education to all – monks, novices, nuns, and laypeople. His vision for developing Wat Paknam was different from that of other temples. He emphasised cultivating the spiritual values of each individual to become a good human being, rather than building luxurious facilities.

His strategy was based on temple development in accordance with four suitable things (*sappāya*). First, he focused on suitable people, training monks, novices, nuns, and lay disciples to have good behaviour (*cariyavatta*) and discipline (Vinaya). Second, he emphasised good hospitality, extending a welcome to all visitors. People who come to the temple should get a good impression, seeing respectful monks, novices, and laypeople with good morality (*sīla*) and hospitality, thereby developing faith in them. Suitable food should be offered to everyone. Third, he emphasised a suitable residence, where everyone has good living conditions. The temple should be clean and tidy, with a peaceful atmosphere. It should provide good surroundings for meditation practise. Fourth, he focused on suitable Dhamma, propagating Dhamma to the people to generate the best possible merit. Along with morality (*sīla*) and hospitality, the *wat* (temple) should provide people with knowledge. In the evenings, monks, novices, and laypeople should listen to the Dhamma and practise meditation. They should receive appropriate Dhamma teachings, so they can apply them beneficially to their lives. Once people are happy and receive good results from their study of the Dhamma, and it reflects in their lives, they will spread the word to others to come to the temple.

Phra Mongkolthepmuni was so highly respected throughout Thailand that people usually address him as Luang Phor, which mean “father,” as a sign of respect and affection. He helped unite the academic and meditation components of Buddhism, which had been developing on separate tracks. Wat Paknam became well-known as a place that provided knowledge in both scriptural studies and practise. For this reason, more and more monks and nuns became interested in being ordained at his temple. People from all walks of life came to Wat Paknam to obtain higher education in Pāli and Dhamma studies, especially meditation practise. Phra Mongkolthepmuni supported higher education for everyone. Monks, novices, nuns, and laypeople could select their own education programme. Whether they preferred to study Dhamma, Pāli scriptures, or practise meditation, they



could do so, as they wished. Anyone who did not like to study, but preferred to work could help with the administration work. One thing that Phra Mongkolthepmuni did not support was letting time goes by without doing anything useful for the community.

Phra Mongkolthepmuni's main teaching was that one's mind should be purified through cultivating oneself spiritually. A major cause of suffering is the defilements of the mind. Phra Mongkolthepmuni taught Dhammakaya meditation to people to lessen their grief. A person should practise meditation to be able to know, see, and be the Dhammakaya.<sup>6</sup> He proved to people that the Dhammakaya will be one's personal refuge – to support wholesome conduct physically, verbally, and mentally; to elevate spiritual values; and to cure illnesses. He did not just speak words; he proved the practical value of the teachings to people by helping them see it for themselves, just like a scientist runs experiments.<sup>7</sup> He reminded everyone to practise meditation regularly and learn Dhamma in order to let go of sense pleasures, eliminate suffering, achieve serenity, and gain the insight needed to reach *nibbāna*. Everyone should practise continuously and be patient in order to achieve their goal.

Phra Mongkolthepmuni taught the *śamatha-vipassanā* meditation technique as a basis for practising the Buddha's Four Foundations of Mindfulness: contemplating body within body, feelings within feelings, mind within mind, and mind-objects within mind-objects, then concentrating deeper and deeper to reach higher and higher states. The mind becomes refined when it is still.

Phra Mongkolthepmuni's specific motto was "stop." In meditation, he taught "stop still" in order to attain the Dhammakaya.<sup>8</sup> In daily life, he taught his followers to "stop retaliation," to cut the momentum of negative *karma* (*kamma*). He taught: "A *bhikkhu* will neither fight nor run away, just stop and continue doing good deeds." His word "stop" means to stop sustaining and creating innate, subconscious defilements for ourselves. Over time, this technique could eliminate conflicts and major social problems. We must learn to be tolerant of other's temperaments, without fighting back or forcing issues. At the same time, we must maintain our own principles and dignity, not ignoring our principles or allowing others to step on our rights. The key point is to conquer one's own mind by eliminating all defilements, such as anger, hatred, and obscurations. When one acts on the defilements of the mind, one creates bad *karma* for oneself and others.

Phra Mongkolthepmuni's reputation spread worldwide. He taught people to attain the Dhammakaya, which enabled them to visit heaven and

hell for a time, under the guidance of the master, and to see the results of individuals' good and bad *kamma*. By 1954, Wat Paknam had become very famous and popular, and the number of people had increased tremendously to 225 monks, 205 novices, 400 nuns and 50 lay followers.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Mae chees at Wat Paknam***

Buddhist women come to Wat Paknam for different reasons. Some want to be able to see the lives of their parents after death, some want to be able to cure their parents from illness, and some want to dedicate merit to their dead relatives in heaven or hell. Each woman's practise depends on her goal, but all certainly strive to attain the Dhammakaya to achieve a better rebirth.

Life for the early *mae chees* at Wat Paknam was not easy. Everyone in the temple was required to follow the same daily monastic routine and to perform certain duties together, for instance, chanting and listening to teachings. The *mae chees* had the responsibility of preparing two meals a day for the monks and novices. They had to get up very early in the morning, rising at 3 AM for morning chanting at 4 AM. After one hour of chanting and meditation, they had to prepare meals for breakfast and lunch, then clean the kitchen until noon. In their spare time, they attended afternoon Dhamma study classes and practised meditation under Phra Mongkolthepmuni's supervision in the evening. *Mae chees* were allowed to study both Dhamma and Pali. At night, some did meditation and some did homework for their Dhamma classes. They had very little free time for their own personal tasks. Time management was very important for them.

*Mae chees* and laypeople who attained the Dhammakaya were assigned duties in the meditation workshops. Especially during World War II, they were assigned to take turns meditating continuously for 24 hours to help the country and other nations. There were two teams who took on this duty fully, taking turns at four shifts of six hours each, throughout a 24-hour period. Phra Mongkolthepmuni instructed and supervised all the meditation sessions during WW II. After the war was over, the schedule changed to three shifts of four hours each. The night shift was assigned to elderly *mae chees* who were not doing Dhamma study, since the younger *mae chees* attended afternoon Dhamma classes. Those who were not on duty taught Dhamma. *Mae chees* who achieved high levels of attainment were delegated to teach Dhamma in different provinces to help people in need. Those who remained at Wat Paknam had a duty to meditate and help people who were suffering from illness and other problems. Those who attained

the Dhammakaya had a duty to cure people's illnesses through meditation. Everyday, they picked up requests from the sick, who wrote their symptoms on paper.

Many outstanding *mae chees* performed duties assigned by Phra Mongkolthepmuni. Mae chee Thongsuk was good at teaching Dhamma and Mae chee Jan Kohn-nok-yoong was good at meditation. Others included Mae chee Thanom, Mae chee Chaluey, Mae chee Yankee, Mae chee Tritha, Mae chee Thunyanee Sutket, Mae chee Rampha Buakamchay, Mae chee Thaveeporn, Mae chee Wanchai Chukorn, Mae chee Jintana, Mae chee Brahma, and many more. Each had different duties to help Phra Mongkolthepmuni run Wat Paknam.

Mae chee Yanee was one of the first group to achieve attainments in meditation. In 1969, she was a pioneer in setting up the Thai Nuns' Institute and held the position of president. First, she organised a meeting of nuns from all over Thailand to develop unity and adopt standard regulations to follow. Three years later, the Thai Nuns' Institute Foundation was established to support education for all women and children, and many other activities. Mae chee Rampha, who also attained the Dhammakaya, was then appointed the president.

Mae chee Jan Kohn-nok-yoong was one of the *mae chees* who devoted her time to practising meditation diligently until she attained an advanced level of Dhamma. She was eager to learn Phra Mongkolthepmuni's Dhammakaya meditation technique in order to discover where her father had taken rebirth. She did not have to study Dhamma in classes or work in the kitchen. Instead, Phra Mongkolthepmuni often taught her Dhamma through meditation and by asking questions. She was assigned to help society and the nation. After Phra Mongkolthepmuni passed away, Mae chee Jan Kohn-nok-yoong taught the Dhammakaya meditation technique at her residence at Wat Paknam Bhasicharoen. Following in Phra Mongkolthepmuni's footsteps, she taught her disciples to perform good *kamma* and to practise the perfections (*pāramī*), including giving (*dāna*), ethical conduct (*sīla*), and meditation (*samādhi*).

In 1970, Mae chee Jan Kohn-nok-yoong gathered a pioneer group of her disciples to establish a meditation centre known as Wat Phra Dhammakaya. She was the backbone of this temple, appointing her leading disciple Phrarajbhavanavisudh (Dhammajayo) as the abbot.<sup>10</sup> She envisioned a temple with a clean, peaceful atmosphere suitable for meditation practise, where individuals could become really virtuous human beings.<sup>11</sup> Wat Phra Dhammkaya has become a large, well-known temple using modern technology to spread the Dhamma. More than a thousand people gather

there for meditation practise every Sunday and on special religious days. The temple has spread Dhamma all over Thailand and abroad. At present, there is a very popular Dhamma programme called “Dao Dhamma” on Wat Phra Dhammakaya’s DMC Channel. People can tune into this programme and listen to Dhamma talks about the law of *kamma*. This is a good way to teach people to be aware of the results of their actions.

Ajahn Tritha Niemkham became a *mae chee* when she was young. She devoted her time to studying Dhamma up to level three and practising meditation up to the advanced levels. She had to study very hard at night for her Dhamma classes, in addition to meditation. While Phra Mongkolthepmuni was alive, she served in many capacities at Wat Paknam, creating programs that have continued up to the present. She served the temple in many ways and supported all its activities. Because of health problems, she later gave up being a *mae chee*, but remained an active supporter of Wat Paknam in all kinds of charity work for the benefit of the community.

Ajahn Tritha Niemkham was a member of the committee of the Luan Phor Wat Paknam Foundation from its inception in 1981 (BE 2524) and became chair of the Phra Mongkolthepmuni Wat Paknam Alumni Association in 1989 (BE 2532). Her main duty is to help people with all kinds of problems – illness, business, family problems, and charity – as well as to raise funds for needy students. She supports all kinds of Buddhist activities, both in Thailand and abroad. She spreads the Dhammakaya meditation method, promotes Dhamma unity, and conducts merit-making activities without getting involved in politics.<sup>12</sup> This association has organised many activities based on unity and cooperation among disciples. The association conducts merit-making activities at Wat Paknam, but also extends help to other temples in Thailand and abroad.

Ajahn Tritha Niemkham is instrumental in helping people develop faith in Phra Mongkolthepmuni and Wat Paknam, and encourages them to contribute funds for the *kathina* (offering ceremony) and other functions. She was behind the most important construction project at Wat Paknam: a marble Tipitaka engraved with the Pāli scriptures that was built at Buddhamonthon from 1989-1998 (BE 2532-2541). There were in the total of 1,418 pieces (or 709 pairs) of marble slabs engraved with the Tipitaka. Each was 1.1 metres in width and 2 metres in height. The Phramaha Vihāra was built with concrete and iron in Thai architectural style as a place to exhibit the marble Tipitaka. She also had the idea of planting trees in Buddhamonthon National Park. Buddhamonthon presently serves as a Buddhist Conference Centre where Buddhists from all over the world come

to join hands for world peace and extend the life of the Buddhist teachings. Ajahn Tritha Niemsham always offers food to all the monks who come to Buddhamonthon for such activities.

Mae chee Warnjai Chukorn became a *mae chee* when she was young. She studied Dhamma up to the third level and practised meditation at the same time. Phra Mongkolthepmuni trained her in advanced meditation as his assistant (a “conqueror of evil”). She was sent out to teach Dhamma in many places. After Phra Mongkolthepmuni passed away, Mae chee Warnchai Chukorn established a meditation practise centre for *mae chees*, named Samnak Patipatti Dhamma Suan Kaew, at Jombueng, Rajchaburi Province in 1983 (BE 2526). Her objectives in setting up this centre were to provide opportunities for education and meditation practise to women and children. The centre’s most important activity is a spiritual development session called “renunciation practise” (*nekkhamma patipatti*), which is organised on important religious occasions all year round. Further, she established a foundation and uses the interest earned for charitable work to promote Buddhism, aid communities, and support young students who are good in studies but lack of money to continue school. Another successful project of hers was the Buddhist Sunday School established to promote ethics and moral education among the youth. Her objectives are to teach young people to be good children and good citizens. She wants to teach the youth to have good behaviour, moral conduct, and virtue. She teaches them to keep Buddhism in their hearts as their refuge. The important virtues are to be honest, and to have gratitude and devotion.<sup>13</sup> Thousands of students apply to take the Dhamma examinations each year.

Khun Jintana Osodh came to Wat Paknam when she was very young. She diligently worked in the kitchen and practised meditation until Phra Mongkolthepmuni appointed her to be a Dhamma and meditation teacher. Presently, she owns an herbal medicine shop and teaches Dhamma to people in need.

### Continuing Phra Mongkolthepmuni’s Mission

It has been a tradition for Buddhist women at Wat Paknam to follow the discipline and regulations Phra Mongkolthepmuni established. Everyone has to perform some duty, whether it is working in the kitchen, meditating, studying Pali or Dhamma, or doing administrative work. Mae chee Thunyanee Sutket is the head *mae chee* who supervises all the *mae chees* and serves as the chief cook in charge of meal preparation for monks and novices.

Over time, many *mae chees* pursued higher education at the university level to improve their knowledge. For example, Mae chee Yupin graduated from Mahidol University and Mae chee Srisalab graduated from Pune University in India. Both of them are now working at Mahapajapati Buddhist College in Nakhonratchasima Province. Mae chee Duangporn was the first *mae chee* at Wat Paknam and the second one in Thailand to obtain grade 9 in Pali, the highest level – an achievement equivalent to the monks. She now teaches at Mahapajapati Buddhist College. I graduated with a B.A. degree from the United States and received a Master's degree in the International Programme in Buddhist Studies at Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University. Now I work as secretary of that programme and do volunteer work for World Vesak Day celebration. Other *mae chees* are pursuing M.A. degrees at Thammasart University and Mahamakut University. Presently, Mae chee Yupa has been elected to lead the *mae chees* of Thonburi District. There she is actively in charge of building a permanent building for the Thai Nuns' Institute, called Ratanaprasart.

Buddhist women at Wat Paknam have trained hard in meditation to assist Phra Mongkoltepmuni and further his mission for the country. With the valuable skills they obtained from him, these *mae chees* have been able to extend their help to people suffering in the competitive, materialistic contemporary world. They play important roles behind the scenes of the Sangha, guiding people to obtain a transcendent level of peace and happiness. They teach people to take the Three Jewels as their refuge, rather than trusting in black magic and holy water. They follow in Phra Mongkoltepmuni's footsteps and practise his teachings, which have proven so valuable for people, especially in Thai society. The central teaching is for Buddhists to use Buddhist concepts to resolve issues skilfully and nonviolently. This is the central duty of the Buddhist women of Wat Paknam. Remarkably, Thai Buddhist women at Wat Paknam Temple have proven that they are definitely not second-rate.

## Notes

- 1 I. B. Horner, trans., *The Book of the Discipline (Cullavagga)* (Pali Text Society: Oxford, 1992), vol. 5, p. 375.
- 2 A *mae chee* undertakes to observe the precepts to abstain from: (1) taking life; (2) taking what is not given; (3) sexual misconduct or unchastity; (4) false speech; (5) intoxicants causing carelessness/heedlessness; (6) untimely eating; (7) dancing, singing, music, and unseemly shows; wearing garlands; and applying unguents and scents; and (8) the use of high and large luxurious couches. P. A. Payutto, *Dictionary of Buddhism* (Bangkok: Suetawan Company, BE 2545 [2002]).
- 3 Wilhelm Geiger, trans., *The Great Chronicle of Ceylon (Mahāvamsa)* (New Delhi: AES Press, 1993), pp. 88-90.

- 4 The eight precepts are to refrain from: (1) taking the life of living creatures, (2) taking what is not given, (3) sexual activity, (4) false speech; (5) intoxicants; (6) untimely food; (7) dancing, singing, entertainment, garlands, perfumes, and cosmetics; and (8) high or luxurious seats or beds.
- 5 Phrarajakavee, "Mae Chee and the Continuation of Buddhism," *Journal of Thai Buddhist Nuns*, May-August, BE 2546.
- 6 Dhammakaya here refers to a supra-mundane body that is pure, uncompounded, and not subject to the three characteristics of *anicca* (change), *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness), and *anatta* (no-self). Phra Ajahn Maha Jayamangalo, *The Heart of Dhammakaya Meditation* (Bangkok: Dhammakaya Buddhist Foundation, 1997), p. 156.
- 7 Niemkham, Ajahn Tritha, *Twice-told Stories about Luang Phor and Wat Paknam* (Bangkok: Charoen Phol Books, 1984), p. 12 .
- 8 Through meditation, the mind becomes pure and fine and eventually is able to attain a high level of *dhamma* called Dhammakaya. At this point, the meditator is able to extract a celestial human body from the coarse human body and travel to hell or heaven.
- 9 Sophon Chuenchum, "The Method of Samadhi and Vipassana Meditation Practice," *Luang Phor Sodh's Bibliography* (Bangkok: A.T.N. Production Co., BE 2544), p. 128.
- 10 Dhammakaya Foundation, *World Peace through Inner Peace* (Bangkok: Dokbia Publishing, BE 2542), p. 18.
- 11 Sujitra Phoolpipat, "The Role of Wat Phra Dhammakaya in the Present Society", M.A.Thesis (Bangkok: Department of Fine Arts, Kerg University, BE 2539), p. 37.
- 12 Niemkham, *Twice-told Stories*, p. 161.
- 13 Interview with Ajahn Mae chee Warncai Chukorn, the meditation master of Suan Kaew Dhamma Practice Center, January 12, 2005.



## Ashram Mata Meditation Centre for Women: A Hermitage for Buddhist Practise

*Tipawan Tipayatuss*

Ashram Mata is a meditation centre in the northeast of Thailand that was established in 1996 for women who wish to develop their minds. The centre is open for *bhikkhunīs*, *samanerīs* (ten-precept nuns), *mae chees* (eight-precept Thai Buddhist nuns), and *upāsikās* (eight-precept laywomen practitioners). Experienced instructors are in residence at the centre to assist guests in their meditation practise.

Ashram Mata is located in Nakornratchasima Province, three hours by bus from Bangkok. The province has 1,700 temples and several hundred meditation centres for monks, but no more than ten meditation centres for women. Nakornratchasima Province is a silk-producing region with the second largest population in Thailand and an interesting history. One of the most famous historical personages, a woman named Khunying Mo, is familiar to Thai people all over the country. Khunying Mo is regarded as a heroine because of her courage and intelligence. More than one hundred years ago, she and her brave female friends fought against the Laotian army and, by employing clever military strategies, succeeded in winning Nakornratchasima Province back from Laos. All Thai men and women respect Khunying Mo's extraordinary achievements and she is considered divine. Millions of Thais visit Nakornratchasima every year to pay their respects before a statue of her located in the centre of the city.

Paktongchai, the district of Nakornratchasima Province where Ashram Mata is located, is famous for handmade Thai silk. In recent years, the sub-district of Puluang has developed into a Dhamma land for women. Up in the mountains, a group of *mae chees* and *upāsikās* have lived and practised at Ashram Mata for more than fifteen years now. Four years after Ashram Mata was established, Mahāpajāpati Therī College, the first Buddhist college for women in Thailand, also moved to this area and is situated nearby.

Ashram Mata is situated in a mountainous area between the foot of a mountain and its summit. The centre is privately owned and has gradually developed into a meditation centre that can accommodate a substantial number of practitioners. The Ashram started with a few buildings and, as it acquired more land over the years, the number of *kuṭīs* (individual



dwellings) has grown. Today, Ashram Mata is divided into four specific areas. Practitioners can choose the area where they would like to stay and practise. The areas differ in accordance with the needs of different practitioners. Vegetarian food is provided for all practitioners.

Area One is the core of Ashram Mata. The first buildings were built here, including the main shrine hall and dining area. Chanting is held daily in the shrine hall. Some of the buildings in this area have electricity. This area is for practitioners who want to learn more about Buddhist theory. In this area, the practitioners may speak and read. Experienced fellow practitioners who live here are available to share their knowledge, answer questions, and discuss various Buddhist topics. Mae chee Dr. Pairor Tipayat, a retired deputy professor from the Faculty of Science at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, is a permanent Dhamma lecturer at Ashram Mata. For eight years, she conducted regular Dhamma talks and meditation retreats at the International Suan Mokh Retreat Centre in Chaiya, Surathane Province. She is an honorary supervisor in the training of professors at Khon Khan University on how to apply Dhamma techniques and integrate ethics in the curriculum. Since 2003, she has been teaching Buddhist philosophy and Buddhist logic at Mahapajapati Theri College. Other experienced practitioners visit periodically to share their knowledge of Dhamma practise.

Area Two is for silent retreat. Both beginners and experienced practitioners can practise in this area. A meditation teacher who has been ordained as a *mae chee* for thirty years lives in this area. She practises insight meditation and helps those practitioners who request her advice and instruction. All practitioners at Ashram Mata follow eight, ten, or more precepts. One or two meals are provided for each practitioner, with the final meal of the day eaten before 12 o'clock noon. Practitioners who stay in Area Two have the option of eating in the dining hall, which may not be completely silent, or collecting their meals at the dining hall and eating alone in their *kutis*.

Area Three is also for silent retreat. This area is similar to Area Two, but here all *kutis* are situated in the forest. An enclosed path for walking meditation is attached to each *kuti*. This provides protection from rain, insects, and heat. This area is more remote than the other areas and includes several open practise shelters with outdoor walking paths. This area is also suitable for *tudong*, or ascetic practises. Practitioners in this area collect their meals by walking to the dining hall on the traditional alms round.

Area Four, Dhamma Savika, was created in 2005. Like Area Three, this forest area is appropriate for combining ascetic practises with the four foundations of mindfulness. The purpose of setting up *kutis* in this area is

to give practitioners an even greater opportunity to practise seriously in the forest. Here practitioners are encouraged to make full use of the forest around them by practising outdoor sitting meditation, doing walking meditation in the forest during the night, and even sleeping in the forest under an umbrella. We have found that even many experienced practitioners are still afraid of staying in the forest alone. Practising in this area may be helpful in overcoming fear and developing courage. Occasionally, the centre organises meditation retreats in the forest in Area Four.

The main practise at the centre is mindfulness with four foundations. Practising the four foundations of mindfulness involves being continually mindful of what happens to the body, feelings, thought, and mental objects. The practise of *satipaṭṭhāna vipassanā bhāvanā* (insight meditation through the sustained application of concentrated mindful attention) is mindfulness of four types: (1) mindfulness of bodily sensations (*kāyānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna*); (2) mindfulness of feelings (*vedanānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna*); (3) mindfulness of conscious events (*cittanupassanā satipaṭṭhāna*); and (4) mindfulness of objects of consciousness (*dhammānupassanā satipaṭṭhāna*).

When paying attention to these objects during meditation, three events occur in succession: (1) the arrival of phenomena; (2) observing or noticing the phenomena that arise; and (3) the ability to see and know derived from this type of mindful observation. Eventually, practitioners are able to realise the three characteristics of all conditioned phenomena: impermanence (*anicca*), unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), and impersonality (*anatta*).

Ashram Mata welcomes women from all cultural backgrounds who seriously wish to practise the four foundations of mindfulness and various ascetic practises. The ashram offers retreat facilities not only for Thai women, but for practitioners from around the world. Together, these Dhamma practitioners strive to end suffering by following in the footsteps of the Buddha.

## Initial Six Years of the First Buddhist College for Nuns and Laywomen in Thailand

*Monica Lindberg Falk and Srisalab Upamai*

Accessing education has been one of the most important issues for the 20,000 or more *mae chees* (eight-precept Buddhist nuns) in Thailand.<sup>1</sup> Since the *mae chees* have been shut out from the formal Buddhist education system in Thailand, their education has been limited by the fact that *mae chees* have generally had to organise education for themselves. They have been primarily dependent on private donations and so religious education for women in Thailand has been largely a private, individual responsibility hampered by a scarcity of facilities and qualified female instructors.

The *mae chees* have long stressed the need for structured systems for religious education. In spite of a lack of education, the *mae chees* have progressed spiritually, but they have not been able to take their rightful places as teachers, administrators, role models, and so on. Lacking a solid educational foundation themselves, they have no footing from which to make contributions to the lay community. Consequently, a number of leading *mae chees* worked hard to establish a college for *mae chees*. In 1999, after years of intensive work and much struggle, the first Buddhist College for *mae chees* and laywomen opened in Thailand.

### The Founding of Mahapajapati Theri Buddhist College

Mahapajapati Theri Buddhist College was founded by a former lawyer, Mae chee Khunying Kanitha Wichiencharoen, in co-operation with the Thai Nuns' Institute (Sathaban Mae Chee Thai). The nuns named the new project Mahapajapati Theri Buddhist College after the first Buddhist *bhikkhunī*. The first seven years of the college's operation was, in all respects, a truly groundbreaking period.

Mae chee Khunying Kanitha died in May 2002 and the founding of Mahapajapati Theri Buddhist College was her final project. Throughout her life, she worked with issues of women's rights. She always stressed the importance of education and it was her long-standing dream to open a college for nuns. Improving the level of education for nuns had also been a concern for the Institute of Thai Mae Chees for decades.

Access to Buddhist as well as secondary and higher education is an important issue for the *mae chees*. Over the years, the Thai Nuns' Institute has been engaged in various training courses and educational programmes, which reflect the Institute's emphasis on giving *mae chees* access to knowledge of both religious and secular subjects. The programmes of the Thai Nuns' Institute have been specifically designed to cater to *mae chees* with little educational background.

Mahapajapati Theri Buddhist College is situated in the northeast of Thailand, in Nakorn Ratchasima Province. At the beginning of 1998, a large piece of land was donated by a family for the specific purpose of building a college for *mae chees*. Over the following months, the Thai Nuns' Institute arranged several meetings to discuss the details of the college. The main question was whether the Institute should accept the donated land in Nakorn Ratchasima or not. Some of the *mae chees* were hesitant about the land's location and were afraid that it would be difficult to establish the college in such a remote area. Finally, the *mae chees* decided to accept the donation and continued working to raise funds to construct buildings.<sup>2</sup> First, they needed to install electricity and water in the remote area, which was without these facilities. The combination of Mae chee Khunying Kanitha's social network, educational background, and social engagement made it possible to establish the college within a reasonable timeframe. Immediately after the Institute of Thai Mae Chees accepted the idea of building the college in Nakorn Ratchasima, Khunying Kanitha began spreading news about the project and raising funds to build it. She arranged for the college to be under the patronage of the Thai Buddhist Supreme Patriarch. Soon after that agreement was reached, the *mae chees* went to meet and pay their respects to him. Mae chee Khunying Kanitha tried to reach out to all *mae chees* throughout the country to inform them about the college and the approaching opportunity for them to study. She wrote letters to every temple and asked the monks to inform the *mae chees* living at their temples. She also asked the monks to support the college. Wherever she went, she brought printed information about the college and invited *mae chees* to participate in meetings, seminars, conferences and other gatherings to help promote the project.

From the beginning, Mae chee Khunying Kanitha tried to interest the government in the issue of education for *mae chees*. She succeeded in getting the Minister of the Department of Religious Affairs named as the advisor of the Mahapajapati Theri Buddhist College Committee. The college is affiliated with Mahamakut Buddhist University, one of the universities for monks. Financially, it would not have been possible to open

a college for *mae chees* without the support of the monks. Mae chee Khunying Kanitha, together with the nuns at the Thai Nuns' Institute, proposed that Mahamakut Buddhist University authorise the new college and the university adopted the proposal in November 1998.

### **The Building Process**

Mae chee Khunying Kanitha wanted the college to begin functioning as soon as possible. In 1998, however, there were no buildings on the land in Nakhorn Ratchasima. Therefore, for the first three years, beginning in May 1999, the college began holding classes on the grounds of the Association for the Promotion of the Status of Women (APSW), a facility founded by Mae chee Khunying Kanitha on the outskirts of Bangkok that housed various enterprises to benefit women. In May 2002, the *mae chees* moved to the new permanent site in Nakorn Rachasima. Antagonism between *mae chees* and monks is rare. Many individual monks appreciate *mae chees'* practise and support them both financially and educationally. Mae chee Khunying Kanitha, like other *mae chees* in leading positions, had good relationship with the monks, which is important for the *mae chees* autonomous existence.

Donations to Mahapajapati Theri Buddhist College have come from many different sources. Besides the donors mentioned above, Mahamakut University for monks has made donations to the college, as have many monks in the area where the college is located. *Mae chees* and laypeople, both in Bangkok and at other places, have also donated generously to support the project. The donations have not only been used to build the main buildings at the college, but have also been vital in helping construct the college's bell tower, lay out the garden, build a wall around the college, put up electricity poles, install electricity, and build the small dwellings (*kutis*) at the college.

### **The Study Programme**

Currently, Mahapajapati Theri College offers a Bachelor of Arts degree in Buddhism and Philosophy. The college administrators plan to expand their educational programme by offering a Bachelor of Arts in Social Work. Mahamakut Monks' University is responsible for the curriculum at Mahapajapati Theri College and the president of the college is a monk from Mahamakut University. Courses are taught both by *mae chees'* who live at

the college and by other teachers who come from Thailand's two universities for monks, Mahamakut Buddhist University and Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University, and from other universities in Bangkok and Nakhorn Ratchasima Province.

### **Activities for Villagers Offered by the College**

Mahapajapati Theri College is a valuable asset not only for the *mae chees*, but also for the neighbouring lay community. The college runs a Sunday school for children who live in nearby villages. The number of children who attend the Sunday school varies between 50 and 100.

The college also runs various short vocational training courses for the villagers. The college wants to help the villagers learn skills that will contribute to the villagers' economic development. The college applied for and has received funds for vocational training programmes from the government and specialists have been invited to lead the courses. The courses have proved worthwhile and about 50 villagers ordinarily attend. Four times a year, the college organises Buddhist camps for children from ten to fifteen years old. The camps usually last three days, from Friday to Sunday, but some are seven days long. More than one hundred children typically participate in these camps. Through games and other playful activities, children learn how to cooperate, how to calm their minds, and how to live a good life. Mahamakut Buddhist University financially supports most of the camps.

### **The Students and their Aspirations**

Buddhist institutions in Thailand play an important role in facilitating education, not only for monks, but also for lay boys and men. Many families cannot afford to send their children for further studies. Many girls leave school after completing their compulsory education, earlier than their brothers. Until recently, compulsory education in Thailand was for six years; this will now be increased to nine years. However, poor families find the cost of children's school books and uniforms difficult to meet. Boys who lack financial support have always had the opportunity to get both secular and religious education through the Buddhist temples, free of charge. Before the introduction of Western education in the 1930s, education in Thailand was administered solely by the monasteries. Education was originally designed to inculcate literacy and thus provide

access to the Buddhist teachings. Since women were denied the right to become part of the Saṅgha, they were deprived of any education. Ordination was not class-specific; it could be temporary and the monastery was equivalent to an open school or university where all men were free to come and go and to acquire education.<sup>3</sup>

Most of the nuns and laywomen who study at Mahapajapati Theri College come from poor farming families and were unable to pursue higher education due to poverty, since there are no educational opportunities for them through the temples. In the first years of the college's existence, the students came mostly from the northeast of Thailand, but now the students come from all regions of Thailand. A few students at the college come from other Asian countries, such as Nepal, Bangladesh, Laos, and Cambodia. The requirements for studying at the college are that the student be female, have finished high school, not have any infectious disease, and be willing to observe the eight Buddhist precepts. There is no age limit for entering the college. All students have scholarships that cover their tuition fees.

The *mae chees* who study at Mahapajapati Theri are provided with free meals and accommodations; lay students pay a small sum for food every month. Both *mae chees* and lay students pay for the electricity they use in their room, but the electricity is not costly, since two or three students share a room and therefore split the cost of the electricity.

Mae chee Wanitaa, who studies at the college, has noted differences between the lay and the ordained students. She stated that the *mae chees* have much in common and are not attracted to the activities of worldly life, as the lay students are. She shares with students the story of the tremendous struggle she had to get an education. She had almost given up hope when a friend told her about the newly opened college. She said this was the only chance for her to study. There are opportunities for *mae chees* to study in Bangkok, but that is far too expensive for most, because it is difficult for *mae chees* to find affordable accommodations there.

### In Conclusion

Mahapajapati Theri College is still dependent on donations, but the leaders of the college are confident that people will continue to offer their support. Living in a remote area can be difficult for teachers, students, and visitors, due to the long distance and time they must spend travelling. On the other hand, living in a quiet place, close to nature is conducive to studies and to Buddhist practise.

By April 2007, 56 *mae chees* and laywomen had completed their studies and graduated from Mahapajapati Theri College with Bachelor of Arts degrees in Buddhism and Philosophy. Typically, there are about 70 students studying at the college. Over the years, more laywomen than *mae chees* have applied to study at the college. There are many *mae chees* throughout the country who still do not know about the college. At the same time, differences in lifestyle between *mae chees* and lay people often make it difficult for *mae chees* to study at secular universities. Sometimes there is a lack of respect for *mae chees*, which makes it more complicated for *mae chees* to attend classes at these universities. For example, the schedule is not adjusted to fit the renunciants' lifestyle of not eating after noon and it is much easier and more convenient to study at a place where everybody lives according to the eight precepts. Moreover, if *mae chees* study together with laypeople, there is a higher risk that they may give up their ordination. Maintaining the order of *mae chees* is another good reason for having a college especially for *mae chees*.

## Notes

- 1 There is no generally agreed upon system for transcribing Thai words using the Roman alphabet. In this book the editor has chosen to transcribe the Thai word for Buddhist nun *mae chee*. In other texts *mae chii* or *mae ji* may be used.
- 2 See Monica Lindberg Falk, *Making Fields of Merit: Buddhist Female Ascetics and Gendered Orders in Thailand* (Copenhagen: Nias Press, 2007/Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007) pp. 194–226.
- 3 Ibid.





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**TRANSLATING THE DHARMA:  
BUDDHISM, MULTICULTURALISM,  
AND LANGUAGE**



### 33

## **You Don't Understand Me: Respectful Listening Skills**

*Malia Dominica Wong*

*There was once a candy maker who made candy  
in the shapes of animals and birds of different colors and sizes.  
When he sold his candy to children,  
they would begin to quarrel with words such as these:  
“My rabbit is better than your tiger...  
My squirrel may be smaller than your elephant, but it is tastier...”  
And the candy maker would laugh at the thought of grown-ups  
who were no less ignorant than the children  
when they thought that one person was better than another.*

~ Anthony de Mello

We are all communicating, all the time. Whether in our temples, our communities, in the workplace, with our families and friends, or even when we are alone, we are always engaging in some form of sending or receiving messages. The itch you feel on the back of your hand is telling you that there's an irritation; the rumbling in your stomach is announcing to you that it wants attention and is waiting to be fed. Silently sitting in a group listening to a Dharma talk or discussion, you may think you are just being quiet, yet silence, as we all know, can be passive or aggressive, letting others know of either our agreement or disagreement. In addition to our body language and speech, what do all have in common? We are all engaged in building friendships, resolving conflicts, handling difficult people, building trust, leading and supervising, guiding and counselling, and liberating others from the miseries of the world. Each of these is an opportunity for growth. There are many different ways each one of them can be approached. All can be handled positively through our cultivation of respectful listening skills.

Here we will explore some of the various avenues to enrich our common understanding.

Malia Dominica Wong

*With the wish to free all beings  
I shall always go for refuge  
to the Buddha, Dharma and Saṅgha,  
until the attainment of full enlightenment.*

*As long as space endures  
and as long as sentient beings remain,  
May I too remain,  
to dispel the miseries of the world.*

For those of us who have taken refuge, to learn more skilful means of understanding and creating harmony with others of different traditions and cultures is a necessity – in our lives and for our practise – in order to *dispel the miseries of the world*. We cannot help but be exposed to people of mannerisms, thoughts, speech, ways of doing things, likes and dislikes, which are different from the knowledge we grew up with from our family background, political and geographical environment, education and monastic training. This is not to say that others are right and we are wrong, or that we are right and others are wrong. But sometimes we may feel uncomfortable and awkward, and sometimes others may feel uncomfortable and awkward. This is natural; it is okay. It is a part of our practise of the Eight-fold Path, Right Understanding, which involves respectful listening skills.

In this century of multiculturalism, due to the effects of widening immigration and communications, it is important to realise that we ourselves also belong to many cultures at once. I am Chinese, but I like to eat Korean *kim chee*, watch Japanese *anime* (cartoons), listen to Indian *bhajans* (songs), wear German Birkenstocks (shoes), and create crisp spinach-cheese *won tons*. I speak Chinese with an English accent, and sometimes I speak English with a Filipino or Hawaiian accent. I'm speaking to you now with the confidence I've gained through American education, and yet, after publicly speaking, I often resort back into the shell of my upbringing as a shy, quiet Chinese. Through using Right Effort to become more aware of different communication styles, issues of time, customs, and values, we may fine-tune our *bodhisattva* intention and help ourselves and others cross the bridges of misunderstanding that add to the *miseries of the world*. Let's begin by looking at the way we listen to ourselves.

## **Listening to Our Body**

Close your eyes for a moment. Sit up straight. Feel your vertebrae come into alignment as they stack themselves up lightly upon each other. Take a deep breath and slowly raise your shoulders up to your ears. Pause. Be mindful of any tension you may feel. Slowly breathe out as you lower your shoulders back into place. Repeat this two more times. Listen to what your shoulders or neck may be saying. For example: "I'm tired." "The bag you're carrying on me is too heavy." "I'm tense." "I need to let go more."

Next, drop your chin to your heart centre. Slowly rotate your head to the left: left ear over left shoulder; back; right ear over right shoulder. Come back to centre.

Repeat this two more times. And then, circle to the right three times – right ear over right shoulder, back, left ear over left shoulder, centre. Listen once again to what your neck may be telling you. "Hello, are you paying attention to me? You're working too hard." "Stress!" "Ouch!" "*Om mani padme hum...*"

Hold your hands out in front of you and rub your palms together. Rub your neck. And, listen to your body say, "Thank you for recognising that I'm here."

Perhaps we've gotten so used to the tightness in our shoulders that we think it's natural. But that lump or knot isn't. How well do we listen to our body and identify correctly what it's saying to us? One day, Shifu (my Chinese Buddhist teacher) told me of an acupuncturist who was coming to the temple and invited me to see him. I just had an asthma-like attack the day before where I could feel my lungs close in and experienced difficulty in breathing. He checked my pulse and said, "Your lungs are okay. It's your spleen that is not. You have a cold stomach, too." I could not understand what those other two organs had to do with my lungs. So I asked him. He responded, "Even your spleen and stomach are not the cause of your lungs tightening, stress is. You have a lot of stress. You need to get rid of the stress."

Ahhh! What I perceived externally via my lungs was not the real problem. How many of us, in like manner, may acknowledge that the tightness in our shoulders isn't from "developing muscles," or working on the computer long hours, but actually from an unresolved issue or problem that we've been carrying around for a long time? It takes at least six months of a lot of stress before the body will begin to physically show weakness. How well do we listen to our body and correctly interpret what we may hear?

When we have a toothache, what kind of facial expression do we make? What if the door just slammed on our fingers? Or, what if someone told us that we just won a free ticket to Hawai‘i?

Each of these expressions can be interpreted in a number of ways. If I, as a perceiver, did not know what was truly going on with you, I could have thought that you disapproved of me (instead of having a toothache); or, that you were angry (rather than in pain from the door slamming on your fingers); or, that you were hyper-tense, or just crazy for keeping on smiling (having won the free ticket to Hawai‘i.) Our perceptions of ourselves and others are often distorted due to our failure to consider important information.

We often mistakenly judge others based on how we view ourselves or upon our own experience. We are influenced by what is most obvious, even though the most obvious factor isn't necessarily the only cause of something. We also cling to first impressions, even if they are wrong. We tend to assume that others are like us – think like us, act like us, and feel about people and events the same as we do. We also tend to favour negative impressions over positive ones.

By applying certain meditation techniques to listen to our bodies and increase awareness of how and why we perceive things as such, or make certain assumptions, we can eliminate a number of hurtful misinterpretations. Buddhist scriptures tell us that during an intensive meditation retreat, a yogi should follow certain guidelines. First, one acts like a blind person even though one may possess complete sight. The way to do this is to lower the eyelids to keep the mind from scattering. Second, one acts like a deaf person, not reflecting, commenting upon, or judging the sounds one may hear. Third, one puts away all knowledge, even though one may have a great deal of learning. A *yogi* or *yoginī* should act like an ignorant person who does not know much. Fourth, one acts like a hospital patient, frail and sick, by slowing down and moving very mindfully.

By practising these four guidelines in daily life, we may come to the point of hearing what others are actually saying and meaning, rather than what we have been pre-conditioned to respond to, which may not be all their truth. Sayadaw U Pandita reminds us, “In each moment, try to be mindful and present with whatever is arising, in order to penetrate deeply into the object.”

## **Listening to Others' Body Language**

There are some useful exercises for understanding voice inflection and body language. With a partner or in a small group, people take turns reading certain statements on a sheet of paper, as if they really meant it. Their partners practise observing the rising and falling tones in the voice and noticing any accompanying body language.

If we look at an iceberg, we only see the tip of it. Observing the externals of language, facial expressions, bodily movements, attire, and visible preferences is like the tip of the iceberg. However, underneath the surface of the water lies the bulk of the iceberg from which these visible expressions manifest. What lies beneath the surface are the perceptions, attitudes, and values of our countries, families, education, and religious influences.

Listening to others also involves understanding the gestures used in various cultures. Reading through the following gestures, see which ones you resonate with or find in your own country. Accept that other gestures may make you feel uneasy. It's not that some right and some are wrong, it's just that they are from different parts of the world. If you had been born there, you might be following the same patterns.

### **China**

- Chinese are enthusiastic applauders. Group clapping is a common way of greeting. When welcomed in this way, it is customary to return the applause or say "thank you."
- Personal space is not necessarily valued. Chinese often stand much closer together than Westerners.
- It is culturally acceptable to push and shove in stores or when boarding public buses or trains. There is no need to apologise.
- To call someone, face your palm downward and move your fingers in a scratching motion. Other ways of doing this may be considered rude, as if calling an animal.
- Use your whole hand for pointing.
- Avoid using your feet to push or touch objects.

### **Japan**

- In Japan, it is important to remember two things: 1) style, or the way things are done, is just as important as what is being done;



and 2) observe your Japanese hosts carefully and follow their example.

- The act of bowing is the traditional greeting. 1) The person of lower rank bows first and lowest; 2) The lower the bow and the longer you maintain it, is evidence of your respect and sincerity; 3) When you are with someone who is your equal, adding a bow one shows a slight degree of respect; 4) When you are unsure of the other persons status, it is better to bow not quite as low; 5) The proper way to bow is about 15 degrees, sliding your hands down to the knees or at the sides, keeping the back erect, keeping the eyes lowered.
- A gentle Western handshake can be used for greeting.
- The Japanese are orderly people. Lining up and taking turns are generally respected, except in crowded train and subway stations where the huge volume of people causes touching and pushing.
- A simple smile can mean, or hide, a lot of things: happiness, confusion, apology, or sadness.
- Cover your mouth when laughing or yawning.
- A wave of the hand back and forth in front of one's own face (palm outward), may mean "I don't know," "I don't understand," or "I'm not worthy."

### **Korea**

- When walking in public, stay to the left side of the walkway and stairway.
- It is generally considered impolite to enter a room without knocking first. However, Koreans may not wait for you to open the door, knocking and then entering.

### **Philippines**

- Shaking hands is the common way for men and women to greet each other.
- Filipinos may also greet one another by quickly lifting their eyebrows.
- Generally speaking, Filipinos are a touch-oriented society.

- Instead of using the hand to point to an object, it's common to shift the eyes toward it or to purse the lips and point with the mouth.

### **Taiwan**

- The elderly are held in high respect. One way of showing respect is to cover your left fist with your right hand or place the palms together and raise both hands to your heart. Other ways include opening doors for them, rising when they enter a room, and speaking to them first.
- Loud behaviour is not a sign of good manners in Taiwan, except in some restaurants.

### **Malaysia**

- Bow slightly to elderly people you encounter.
- Keep your hands out of your pockets when in public.
- When exiting a room, say "Excuse me," and bow slightly.
- Never touch or pat the head of a child, as it is believed to be the "seat of the soul."
- Toss the head from side to side to signal "yes."
- To point at an object, extend your right hand with your thumb extended and fingers folded under.
- Use a salute to beckon a taxi.
- When answering a decision-making question, Malaysians may often quickly answer "yes," even if that's not what is meant. This is to avoid "losing face" while a way of replying "no" is sought.
- It is common for people to ask questions about your weight, income, status, etc.

### **The United States: How Others View Americans**

- To some Asians, Americans appear direct and impulsive; to Latin Americans, Americans seem a little reserved.
- Sense of Space: Generally, Americans are not touch-oriented. In normal social situations, they stand about 30 inches apart from one another, their personal "comfort zone."

- Individualism: In some cultures, American individual freedom and self-confidence are admired; in others, they are disturbing.
- Dress: Many cultures dress more carefully and conservatively. American casualness and fashion is sometimes associated with looseness in morality.
- Teacher-Student Relationships: In many cultures, the teacher is a highly respected, firm, disciplinary figure. Students are to keep quiet, and obey. In the United States, where freedom of expression and individual thinking are encouraged, visitors are occasionally shocked to see what they consider disrespectful attitudes toward teachers.
- Pace of Life: The American emphasis on punctuality and efficiency is often distressing to people from Africa, Asia, and Latin Countries.

### **Other Cultural Differences**

- Direct Eye Contact: To many Asians, Puerto Ricans, West Indians, African Americans, and Native Americans, this may be considered to be rude, disrespectful, or intimidating. For Europeans and Americans, making eye contact shows that people are interested in you, and paying attention.
- The O.K. Sign: In France, it means “zero.” In Japan, it means “money or coins.” In Brazil, Germany, and the former U.S.S.R., it is not a nice gesture.
- Crazy Sign: In Argentina, it means you have a telephone call.

Now, if we look at the aforementioned very closely, and we try to listen with our ears and eyes, we can see clearly where a lack of exposure to or education in the mannerisms of the world’s multicultural diversity can unintentionally cause deep rifts between people. “*You don’t understand me.*” “*I don’t know why you don’t like me.*” “*You are being rude.*” It is not easy to be sensitive to every living being, but that is what our cultivation practises are about. There is always so much more to learn.

## **The Art of Empathetic Listening**

As we have seen, communicating across cultures takes great sensitivity and awareness. However, the benefits of growing in self- and other-awareness, building trust and respect, reducing tensions, allowing for collaborative problem solving, and learning other ways of dealing with situations are goals we should all aspire to.

In a *Family Circus* cartoon strip, a little girl looks up at her father, who is reading the newspaper, and says: “Daddy, you have to listen to me with your eyes as well as your ears.” Here, we shall look at the art of empathetic listening as a way to listen deeper with our eyes and ears.

According to *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, empathy is “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another.” The *act* of listening is less important than the skill or art of *how* we listen.

When we practise listening to ourselves, we see how important it is to “hear like a yogi.” We can apply these same meditation guidelines to increase our empathetic listening skills.

- Act like a blind person, even though you possess complete sight, to keep the mind from scattering. When others are communicating, drop everything actively listen. Help the other along through using positive non-verbals (e.g., nodding head, eye contact, etc.).
- Act like a deaf person, not reflecting, commenting upon, nor judging the sounds you may hear. Be in the moment. Notice your own reactions; come back to what is being heard. Practise non-judgement.
- Put away all knowledge, even though you may have a great deal of learning. Do not try to compare what is being offered with what you already know or have experienced. Be receptive to learn more.
- Act like a hospital patient, frail and sick, by slowing down and moving very mindfully. Put yourself in the other person's shoes. Be a sounding board for them. Be patient; be grateful.

This is what the art of empathetic listening is about; it is what the liberation teachings of the Buddha touch upon. When we listen well, we help others to grow. We let them know that they are important. If someone's behaviour

confuses us, we can hold the person in trust, and ask for clarification later. In this way, we can help the person toward clearer self-expression and increase our multicultural awareness.

It may take many lifetimes to know all of the practises, verbal and nonverbal signals, gestures, and emblems of all world cultures. But once we make the Right Effort to study, practise, and try to understand, we can see how, like a lotus unfolding, how beautifully multi-dimensional they are. As Sayadaw U Pandita of Burma once said: “We do not practise meditation to gain admiration from anyone. Rather, we practise to contribute to peace in the world.”

### *The Mettā Sutta*

This is what should be done  
By those who are skilled in goodness,  
And who know the path of peace:  
Let them be able and upright,  
Straightforward and gentle in speech.  
Humble and not conceited,  
Contented and easily satisfied.  
Unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways,  
Peaceful and calm, and wise and skilful,  
Not proud and demanding in nature.  
Let them not do the slightest thing  
That the wise would later reprove.  
Wishing: in gladness and in safety,  
May all beings be at ease.

Whatever living beings there may be,  
Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,  
The great or the mighty, medium, short, or small,  
The seen and the unseen,  
Those living near and far away,  
Those born and to-be-born  
May all beings be at ease!

Let none deceive another,  
Or despise any being in any state.  
Let none through anger or ill-will  
Wish harm upon another.

Even as a mother protects with her life  
Her child, her only child,  
So with a boundless heart  
Should one cherish all living beings,  
Radiating kindness over the entire world,  
Spreading upward to the skies,  
And downward to the depths,  
Outward and unbounded,  
Freed from hatred and ill-will.  
Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down,  
Free from drowsiness,  
One should sustain this recollection.

This is said to be the sublime abiding.  
By not holding to fixed views,  
The pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision,  
Being freed from all sense desires,  
Is not born again into the world.

## The Name of the Nun: Towards the Use of Inclusive Language and True Equality in the Buddhist Community

*Christie Yu-Ling Chang*

I would like to start my paper by sharing two incidents, both from my personal experience. The first incident took place in Hawai'i, where I studied and became closely associated with a Buddhist monastery for the first time in my life. There were only two resident nuns while I was there and I had always thought that this monastery was for nuns only. One day, one of the nuns told me that her *shi-xiong* ("Dharma brother") would be coming back soon. I was a bit surprised and almost concluded in my own mind that I had been mistaken in thinking that this monastery was for nuns only. Even when I finally met this "Dharma brother" of the nun, who was so obviously a nun, too, I was not quite sure whether my eyes were confusing me. What I did not realise back then was that it has been a tradition in Chinese monasteries for nuns to address each other as Dharma brothers, not sisters. This is because the nuns are now considered *da zhangfu*, literally meaning "big/grand man/husband" in Chinese.

The other incident happened in Taiwan. As the resident director for a study abroad programme for American college students in Taiwan, part of my responsibilities is to lead field trips and visits to various sites in Taiwan, including Buddhist temples and organisations. One time, we visited Tzu-Chi (Ciji)<sup>1</sup> Foundation, the largest and best known Buddhist charity organisation in Taiwan, where we were shown a documentary of the founder, Ven. Cheng-Yen (Zhengyan).<sup>2</sup> The documentary was done in Chinese, but it included English subtitles. As soon as the documentary started, however, I found several students starting to turn their heads to me. The students looked puzzled whenever the pronoun "he" appeared in the documentary to refer to Ven. Cheng-Yen, because they remembered I had told them earlier that Tzu-Chi was established by a Buddhist nun. Finally, at the end of the documentary, one of the students raised her hand and posed this question about the use of the pronoun "he." We were then informed that Ven. Cheng-Yen was referred to as "he" because a Chinese nun was rendered gender-neutral.

This incident raised questions about the term *da zhangfu*, which literally means “big husband.” The students, though still looking puzzled, did not pursue the matter further. Some of them probably could not care less, yet a few of them still looked rather uncertain. To be honest, I would not be surprised at all if my American students were not convinced. As a native speaker of Mandarin Chinese and a trained linguist, I myself am not convinced by such a statement either.

### **Problems with the Term *Da zhangfu***

If *da zhangfu* is different from *zhangfu* and could be gender-neutral, we should be able to find linguistic evidence to prove that *da* in Chinese could mean something like “beyond,” so that *da* could really change the original gender reference of *zhangfu*. However, if you look up the word *da* in a Chinese dictionary, you will see that is never the case. As an adjective or modifier, *da* basically means big, huge, or grand; for example, the Chinese word for “house” is *fangzi* and a big house is *da fangzi*. When the word is used to refer to a person, *da* means “senior” or someone in a higher position or rank, so *dajie* is literally a compound of “big” and “sister,” meaning “elder sister.” *Da laoban* (literally, “big” plus “boss”) refers to a boss of high rank. Therefore, we see that the adjective *da* never changes the attribute of the noun it modifies.

Even in more abstract cases or more metaphorical usages such as *daren* (big + person), referring to a grown-up or a government official in ancient Chinese society, we see that *da ren* still refers to a person, just with a higher position. *Da* does not change the internal attribute or essence of a noun, much less the sex or gender of the person it modifies. To give another example, we know that in the past, when men were still allowed to have more than one wife in ancient Chinese feudal society, the first wife was referred to as *da laopuo* (“big wife”), but again, “*da*” does not make the modified wife gender-neutral. In contemporary Chinese usage, we find that a “male chauvinist” is translated as a *da nanren* (big + man) and a female chauvinist is translated into a *da nuren* (big + woman). A *da nanren* is still a man and a *da nuren* is still a woman.

Therefore, to use *da zhangfu* to refer to all Saṅgha members in Chinese is similar to using the so-called generic words “he” or “man” to refer to all human beings, which is rather exclusionary of women, and therefore problematic from a feminist perspective. To refer to female Saṅgha members using male terminology is therefore confusing to anyone outside the Chinese Buddhist community, especially to those from the West. It



further raises questions about routinely associating greatness with being male.

### **Problems with *Shixiong* (Dharma Brother) and the English Pronoun “He”**

We can imagine how shocked Western feminists are when they learn that the Chinese nuns address each other as “Dharma brother” and that the English pronoun “he” is used to refer to a Chinese Buddhist nun in translation in order to emphasise that nuns are gender-neutral. For the past few decades, feminists in the West, including scholars, educators, researchers, and so forth, have been trying their best to humanise the English language.<sup>3</sup> They see English as a rather sexist language, particularly in the now-outdated use of “he” and “man” – so-called generic terms – to refer to all human beings. An activist, Varda One, even used the term “Manglish” to expose the gender bias that is embedded in English.<sup>4</sup> Alternatives to such generic masculine nouns and pronouns have been proposed to replace all these gender-biased usages in English, especially in daily expressions and titles. Examples include the emergence of words such as “chair” or “chairperson” instead of “chairman,” Ms. instead of Miss or Mrs., and “he or she” or the plural form “they” instead of simply using “he” for all human beings, which is currently replacing previous well-accepted norms.

In the world of religion, there have been rewritings of sacred liturgy, feminist readings of the Bible, and feminist theologies, in which God is no longer seen or understood as “he.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, Western feminists definitely have a very difficult time understanding why Chinese nuns address each other as Dharma brothers and Chinese Buddhists choose the sexist pronoun “he” to refer to a nun, when Western feminists have fought so hard to get rid of this sexist pronoun and especially when Buddhism is said to be a religion in which all beings are equal.

### **Proper Ways of Naming Buddhist Nuns**

What are the terms for Buddhist nuns? Are there proper ways and improper ways to address Buddhist nuns? Does it matter how Buddhist nuns are addressed? In May 2003, three Buddhist associations in Taiwan filed complaints against a TV commercial made by a food company, in which the term *nigu* was used to refer to Buddhist nuns. The Chinese Buddhist Bhikṣuṇī Association, one of the three protesting organisations, explained

in their complaint letter to the company that *nigu* was not a proper term for Buddhist nuns. In the word *nigu*, the feminine suffix *-ni* from Sanskrit was added to the Chinese word *gu*, which refers to senior unmarried lay females, called “auntie,” which has nothing to do with the Sangha. The Bhikṣuṇī Association’s letter also explained that the correct term to be used is *bīquni*, the transliteration of the Sanskrit term *bhikṣuṇī* in Mandarin Chinese. The letter also stated that the association would ask all their followers to boycott all the vegetarian products produced by this company if the food company did not immediately take this TV commercial off the air.

Another protest against the use of the term *nigu* took place two years later. On October 27, 2005, Bhikṣuṇī Chao Hwei held a press conference in Taiwan’s Legislature Yuan.<sup>6</sup> Two other nuns raised two huge posters that read, “I am not called *nigu*. Call me *bhikṣuṇī*,” and “I am not called *nigu*. Call me *nishi*.” Here, the term *nishi* is considered more respectful, because “*shi*” denotes a teacher. When challenged by the media as to why Buddhist nuns should be addressed as teachers, when the media is not really studying with the nuns, Bhikṣuṇī Chao Hwei powerfully argued that, if Christian ministers are called “*mushi*” in Chinese, it should be equally acceptable to address Buddhist nuns as “*nishi*.” Bhikṣuṇī Chao Hwei also pointed out that she did a quick search on the yahoo.com search engine the night before the press conference and confirmed that the term “*nigu*” is indeed always associated with negative connotations or even sexual scandals. This negative association explains why most Taiwanese nuns I know prefer to be addressed simply as *shifu* (teacher) or *fashi* (“Dharma teacher”), terms that convey no gender differentiation.<sup>7</sup>

What different terms are used to name and address Buddhist nuns in other languages and cultures? Do they also carry negative connotations like the Chinese term *nigu*? Are these names inclusive and respectful? Nuns are called *mae chee* in Thailand, *sunim* in Korea, *ani* or *chö-la* in the Tibetan tradition, *ayalay* or *tilashin* in Burma, *donchee* in Cambodia, *co* in Vietnam, and so forth. But what do these names for Buddhist nuns mean literally? For example, I was told that *ani* actually means “auntie” in Tibetan, and could be used to address any senior laywoman or even a housemaid sometimes. *Co* in Vietnamese actually means simply sister or the pronoun “she,” while the other more respectful term, *Thay*, which means teacher, is usually reserved for monks only. So what are the implications? As Buddhist women, should we reconsider the use of these names?

## **Names, Mindful Speech, and Inclusive Language**

Before we answer the question posed above, let us reconsider what is in a name. The world-famous writer Shakespeare suggests that the name of the rose should not change the essence or fragrance of the rose. In reality, however, we know that language (including names, titles, and labelling) is never neutral. Language is powerful and political. Names and titles are especially so. They carry the attitude that a society holds towards a certain group of people. The power structure of a society can also be easily revealed through a study of who has the power to name and what the names given to a specific group of people are. For example, in ancient Chinese society, the fact that women had no names corresponds to women's very low or lack of status in that patriarchal feudal society. In early Taiwanese society, too, where labour was important and male decedents were more valued because they carried on the family lineage, women received unbelievably undesirable names. For example, my grandmother's name literally meant "salt" or "salty" (that is, distasteful). Some other popular names for women include *zhaodi*, literally, "to bring or wave in brothers," and *zu*, literally meaning "enough." Some women were given names that denote "dislike" or even "hate." From this, we can infer the status of Taiwanese women in the old days. We can only imagine how women bearing such names must have felt to be called by such derogatory names throughout their lives, continually reminding them of their worthlessness and influencing how they saw themselves.

Some Buddhists may think that, as Buddhists, we should not worry about names, but simply focus on our practise. Nevertheless, if we agree that it is mindfulness that Buddhists practise, and if we agree that speech is also something that we should be mindful about in our daily lives, we should never trivialise the consequences of naming, or naming *karma*, if you will. Moreover, as the world outside the Buddhist community is becoming familiar with the concept of inclusive language, Buddhists should not excuse themselves from becoming more inclusive in terms of language use. But what do we mean by inclusive language?

### **The Concept of Inclusive Language**

A quick internet search turns up pages of links that explain what inclusive language means, why it matters, how it works, and all the do's and don'ts for the use of inclusive language. One easy online definition of inclusive language is language that assumes that women and men are fully equivalent

participants in human society. In other words, inclusive language is not biased in a way that perpetuates the tacit assumption that men are the standard form of human being. We also find writing guidelines for students in various university writing centres, such as: “Inclusive language is any language that does not stereotype or demean men or women. When your professor requires inclusive language, you need merely avoid noninclusive language, sometimes called “sexist language” A Google search for this term immediately links to a page on “Do’s and Don’ts of Inclusive Language.”<sup>8</sup> These inclusive language guidelines are also being incorporated into various versions of the Bible.

The concept and implementation of inclusive language are not without debate or controversy, of course, but, for Buddhists, I believe there is no conflict in incorporating this concept into our daily practise. The concept of inclusive language can help increase our mindfulness in our daily language use. There is absolutely nothing wrong with using this concept to help ensure that our personal language use is inclusive and that our ways of addressing each other are respectful. As a matter of fact, this concept of inclusive language is very compatible with our daily Dharma practise.

### **Proposal for Inclusive Language as a Tool for True Equality**

Buddhists are very proud that Buddhism is an egalitarian religion in which all beings are viewed as being equal. But how truly equal are we in this human realm? How truly equal are all members in the Buddhist community? How equal are men and women in Buddhist societies? If women are excluded even in the language used among Saṅgha members, and if mindless and disrespectful language for women is still being used in Buddhist circles, then how truly equal are we? We have noted the confusing and demeaning non-inclusive terms of address that are used for Chinese nuns, such as “*dazhangfu*,” “Dharma brother,” the pronoun “he,” and “*nigu*.” If we agree that we Buddhists are to practise mindfulness and if one of our major precepts is to do or speak no harm, it should not be a problem for us to include mindful speech and practise addressing each other with respect. Meanwhile, as the use of inclusive language becomes a global trend and focus of awareness, perhaps it is also time for Buddhists to honestly reflect on the language they use. How are nuns addressed? Are Buddhists using respectful terms to name and address female religious specialists? Let us hope that Buddhist practices, such as the practise of mindfulness, will foster true equality, perhaps by starting from the use of inclusive language.

## Notes

- 1 The name is spelled Ciji in Hanyu *pinyin*, the Romanisation system used in Mainland China, although the official transliteration by the organisation itself is Tzu Chi. In this paper, I am following the official transliteration adopted by the organisation itself for proper names.
- 2 The same name is officially transliterated as “Cheng Yen” by followers in Taiwan.
- 3 Mary Orován, *Humanizing English*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Hackensack, NJ: Art and Copy, 1972).
- 4 “Manglish” is the name of a column by Varda (Durrell) that appears regularly in the periodical *Everywoman* (published in Venice, CA).
- 5 One can simply do a quick search on an internet search engine, using key terms such as “feminist bible” or “sexist language” and one will be led to numerous websites that discuss controversies on the male-only image of God in Christianity and apparently sexist language use in the Bible.
- 6 *Lifayuan* is similar to the U. S. Congress.
- 7 The second morpheme, “*fu*,” in the term “*shifu*” actually means “father” in Chinese.
- 8 E.g., Media Task Force, Honolulu County Committee on the Status of Women, 1998.

## Translating the Dharma and Gender Discrimination: The Blame Should Be On Us

Shobha Rani Dash

A number of Buddhist texts suggest discrimination against women. For one, the Buddha is often criticised for being reluctant to give approval to women to enter the Saṅgha. Even when women were finally able to gain entry into the Saṅgha, they were assigned a subordinate status. When Mahāprajāpatī, the aunt and foster mother of the Buddha, went to ask his permission to become a *bhikṣuṇī*, he is said to have denied her. The claim of gender discrimination is rooted in this denial. Mahāprajāpatī implored him three times and each time the Buddha's reply was the same: “*Alam Gotami(ī) māte rucchi mātug āmassa tathāgatappavedite dhammavinaye agārasmāanagāriya pabbajā' ti.*”<sup>1</sup> This episode has been translated and interpreted variously. English renditions of the Chinese and Japanese texts, along with a few well-known English translations of the Pāli statement mentioned above are given here, in chronological order:

1. The Chinese text *Zhong-ben-qi-jing* (Jpn. *Chūhongikyō*, 207 CE) says: “The Buddha said, ‘Stop, stop, O Gotamī. It is not an easy task for women to enter my Dharma and Vinaya.’”<sup>2</sup>
2. The Chinese *Madhyamāgama* (Chin: *Zhong-a-han-jing*, Jpn: *Chūhongikyō*, 397-398 CE) says: “Stop, stop, O Gotamī. You must not think like this.”<sup>3</sup>
3. The Chinese translation of the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya (Chin: *Si-fen-lü*, Jpn: *Shibunritsu*, 408 CE) says: “Stop, O Gotamī. You must not say like this that women should be allowed to renounce the household and enter the Buddha path.”<sup>4</sup>
4. The Chinese translation of the Mahāśāsaka Vinaya (Chin: *Wu-fen-lü*, Jpn: *Gobunritsu*, 423-424 CE) says: “Stop, stop. You must not say like this.”<sup>5</sup>
5. The Chinese *sūtra Fo-shuo-qu-tan-mi-ji-guo-jing* (Jpn: *Bussetsu kudommi kikakyō*, latter half of the fifth century CE) says: “Stop, O Gotamī. There is no need to do it.”<sup>6</sup>

6. The English translation of the Pāli *Anguttara Nikāya* by the Pāli Text Society (1935) says: “Enough, O Gotamī! Set not your heart upon the going forth of women from the home to the homeless life into the discipline of Dhamma declared by the Tathāgata.”<sup>7</sup>
7. The Japanese translation of the above Pāli statement in the *Vinaya Piṭaka* (1970) says: “Stop, O Gotamī. You must not wish that women should leave the household and become renunciants in the Dharma and Vinaya preached by the Tathāgata.”<sup>8</sup>
8. The English translation of the *Vinaya Piṭaka* (in Pāli) of the Sacred Books of the East series (1975) says: “Enough, O Gotamī! Let it not please thee that women should be allowed to do so.”<sup>9</sup>

The above translations each express a strong refusal. This draws attention to the expression “*alam Gotamī mā te rucci...*” The term *alam* generally communicates a strong negative expression such as “enough” or “stop.” But, according to the Pāli-English Dictionary of the Pāli Text Society, if the term *alam* is used together with a negative and a vocative form, then it gives a very soft meaning of the entire sentence, something like “look out” or “take care.” Examples of this usage are found elsewhere in the Pāli canon.<sup>10</sup>

The *Samantapāsādikā*<sup>11</sup> (the primary Pāli commentary on the *Vinaya Piṭaka*) and the *Manorathapūraṇī*<sup>12</sup> (a commentary on the *Anguttara Nikāya*) explain that the Buddha refused the ordination of Mahāpajāpatī three times because he wanted to convey the importance of his Dhamma and, at the same time, he wanted her to be serious in observing the rules and regulations of the Saṅgha. If he had allowed her entrance immediately, she might have taken it lightly. Among the translations quoted above, perhaps the closest rendering is the *Zhong-ben-qi-jing*: “Stop, stop, O Gotamī. It is not an easy task to enter into my Dharma and Vinaya and to wear the robe. If one wears the robe, one must be pure throughout one’s whole life and must master the Brahma way.” In other words, an accurate rendering of the Buddha’s words portrays him as severe and cautionary toward women, but not discriminatory. He was warning her, not refusing her.

It seems that discriminatory terms for women were pronounced more during the later phase of the Buddhist texts, that is, in the translations and commentaries. For example, in the *Paramatthadīpanī*, the commentary on the *Therīgāthā*, the term *pāda paricārikā* (lit., serving on one’s feet) has been used to mean “wife” in referring to the Śākyan women who followed

Mahāprajāpatī, but in the root text we do not find this term.<sup>13</sup> In the *Papañcasūdanī*, the commentary of the Majjhima Nikāya, Mahāprajāpatī is depicted as having been the wife of the monk Nanda in one of her former lives.<sup>14</sup> Here, too, the term *pāda paricārikā* is used for wife. The Pāli canonical commentaries are full of such examples. This may indicate that, by the time the commentaries were written, wives were relegated to the status of maidservants, as the term implies. The terms *patin* or *bhāriy* could have been used instead, as these terms were already in use during the commentarial period. These examples are clear indications of the social status of women in India and China at the time and reflections of the customs of the society in which Buddhism was located.

### **From the *Lotus Sūtra***

The *Lotus Sūtra* is often quoted because of its reference to the five obstacles that a woman faces that prevent her from becoming a Buddha until and unless her body is transformed into that of a male. In the Sanskrit version of the *Lotus Sūtra*, when the eight-year-old daughter of Sāgara, the dragon king, announces that she has attained enlightenment, the monk Śāriputra expresses doubt. He says that this is not possible, because there has been no example of a woman attaining Buddhahood and, up to that time (*adyāpi*), no woman had achieved the rank of a Brahma, Śakra, great king (*mahārāja*), universal monarch (*cakravartin*), or non-regressive *bodhisattva* (*avaivartika bodhisattva*). Even so, the text shows the daughter of King Sāgara transforming herself into a male body and appearing as an enlightened being.

This portion of the *Lotus Sūtra* is often quoted as an example of gender discrimination in Buddhism. But we must not overlook the fact that this comment is made by the monk Śāriputra, not by the Buddha himself. Further, attention should be paid to the term “*adyāpi*” in Sanskrit which means “still,” “yet,” or “to this day.” Even if no woman had attained these five ranks up to that time, that does not mean that women are incapable of attaining them in the future. Instead of taking Śāriputra’s comment as a denial, the statement may be taken as simply expressing his astonishment. He questions with surprise a wonderful and incredible event that he has never heard of before.

One more important point is to be noticed. I have used here three editions of the Sanskrit text of the *Lotus Sūtra* and in all the editions it is written “five places or ranks” (*pañca sthānāni*). When Dharmarakṣa (Ch. Zhu-fa-hu, Jpn. Jikuhōgo) translated the *Lotus Sūtra* in 268 CE, he followed the Sanskrit interpretation and used the term *wu wei*, which means



five places or ranks. But when the text was translated by Kumarajiva in 406 CE, a very discriminatory expression is introduced. Kumarajiva used the term *wu zhang*, which means five obstructions or obstacles. Kumarajiva's translation includes additional discriminatory comments, also. In reply to the dragon king's daughter, Śāriputra says, "You say that you will soon attain the highest path. This is difficult to believe. Why is this? The female body is polluted; it is not a fit vessel for the Dharma. How can you attain the highest enlightenment?" This part of Śāriputra's comment is neither found in the Sanskrit texts nor in the work of Dharmarakṣa. Kumarajiva's translation was based on a manuscript from Kucha (Qiu-ci), which is unfortunately not extant, making it impossible to determine whether these comments were in the original manuscript or were interpolations introduced later by Kumarajiva or somebody else. One thing is certain, however; as the text travelled from India to Central Asia, it was influenced by local thought at the time, so it is possible that later interpretation and translations reflected gender bias. This is an example of how place and time affect the process of interpretation and translation of Buddhist texts. Although three Chinese translations of the *Lotus Sūtra* are extant, unfortunately Kumarajiva's work is more widely read in most Mahāyāna countries. In Japan, it has added fuel to the flame with respect to gender discrimination.

A further concern is that the five ranks or obstructions are different in the Sanskrit and Chinese versions of the text. In the Chinese version, the five obstructions are the inability to become a great Brahma, a Śakra, a Māra, a sovereign monarch, or a Buddha. The term *mahārāja* in the Sanskrit text is not found in the Chinese text. Conversely, the term "Māra" is not found in the Sanskrit text. If the five obstructions were really important factors for women on the path to enlightenment, they should be the same in all versions of the text.

In Chapter 12 of the Sanskrit version of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the Buddha predicts that the *bhikṣuṇīs* Mahāprajāpatī and Yaśodhara will become *tathāgatas* in future named Sarvasattvapriyadarśana and Raśmiśatasahasraparipūrādhvaja, respectively. Although no conditions are mentioned here, such as the necessity of transforming a female body into a male, the names of the *tathāgatas* the two nuns will become are male. Interestingly, in both the Chinese translations, it is impossible to distinguish whether the names are male or not. It may be that, in Sanskrit, the masculine forms of names are used for grammatical reasons, that is, so they will agree with the term *tathāgata*, which is masculine in gender in Sanskrit. If this is the case, it would be mistaken to conclude that a woman cannot be a *tathāgata* with a female name or in a female form.

Although the *Lotus Sūtra* is the most widely cited, various other texts also mention these five ranks or obstructions. All these texts came into

existence between 207 and 601 CE. Hence, it may be the case that women occupied a lower social status than men and that discrimination towards the women prevailed in society at the time. If so, it is possible that societal attitudes toward women influenced how Buddhist texts were read.

### **Arguements Supporting the Positive Implications of the Buddha's Comment**

Whether the Buddha actually made discriminatory comments about women is a big question mark. There are contradictions here and there in the texts that call their authenticity into question. For example, let us examine the eight special rules according to the Pāli sources. In the Vinaya Piṭaka, the sixth condition says that a woman can become fully ordained only after she completes two years as a probationer. But, in fact, this is not what happened, either in the case of Mahāprajāpatī or in case of the Śākyan women who accompanied her. The Buddha ordained them without asking them to train for two years as probationers. Further, in addition to the Vinaya Piṭaka, this rule is mentioned in the Anguttara Nikāya, but is not found among the eight special rules for nuns mentioned in the *Zhong-a-han-jing* or the *Madhyamāgama*, a Chinese translation of the Nikāyas.

Many other such contradictions can be found in the canonical texts that cast doubt on later translations. Even if we accept provisionally that the Buddha himself hesitated to admit women into the Saṅgha, his hesitation may have been justified on the following grounds:

1. Most probably, the Buddha's prime objection was for Mahāprajāpatī Gotamī, who was the first woman to appear before the Buddha to request permission to become a nun. It can easily be imagined that, as a queen, she had never experienced the hardships of life. For a person from her privileged background, it would have been a very arduous task for her to go from door to door with an alms bowl to gather her daily sustenance. It is possible that the Buddha did not want to see his esteemed mother in such dire circumstances. Alternatively, perhaps he was trying to verify Mahāprajāpatī's determination.
2. This was not an issue that affected Mahāprajāpatī alone. The second time she appeared before the Buddha, she was accompanied by a large group of Śākyan women. Although Mahāprajāpatī seems to have been very sincere and firm in her decision and approach, the rest of the women may not

have been equally stalwart. Their decision to follow Mahāprajāpatī's lead may have been simply a temporary impulse.

3. The Śākya clan was not a very large one and the spectre of large numbers of women opting for the renunciant life was no doubt a matter of concern. If many women decided to become nuns, it might create serious problems not only for the clan, but for the entire social fibre.
4. There are evil-minded individuals in every society and the era of the Buddha was no exception. A famous incident is cited in the texts. Once, when Uppalavanna Therī was living in a forest, she was raped by her cousin Ananda Manaba, who was her lover before she renounced the world. As this example indicates, there was every possibility that the monks might tease or insult the nuns on their way to collect alms. No doubt, the Buddha was much concerned about the safety of the woman renunciants.
5. Not all the monks who joined the Saṅgha were highly realised or liberated from desire. In fact, the texts mention numerous examples of monks who were still vulnerable to the passions. Such monks may easily have been weak to sensual attraction, so the possibility of monks generating lust toward nuns cannot be ruled out. The anticipated result was corruption and disturbances in the Saṅgha.
6. Since the dawn of civilisation, women have played a major role in household life. Perhaps there was also apprehension that women's admission to the Saṅgha would lead to the disintegration of the family life. Moreover, the contributions of the laity to support the Saṅgha, such as the preparation of alms food, could have been hampered simultaneously. Thus, the admission of women to the Saṅgha may have been seen as a great potential stumbling block to the smooth development of the Buddhadharma.
7. The requirement that a *bhikṣuṇī* observe nearly one hundred more Vinaya precepts than a *bhikṣu* is not simply due to gender discrimination, but is related to biological factors that are beyond women's control.
8. What may be viewed as denying opportunities to women can be viewed instead as a way of protecting nuns from possible

transgressions by monks. If the Saṅgha had begun with women, men might have faced the same restrictions when they applied for admission to the order. Women were not the problem; rather, it was a question of members of the opposite sexes constructively growing and functioning together.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Thus, when reading a text, it is easy to construe the subject matter ostensibly. A failure to delve more deeply ultimately leads us into a quagmire, however. The problem does not lie in the scriptures themselves; rather, variant interpretations often grow out of subtle differences in translation. What has come down to us today as gender discrimination may instead be the outcome of misinterpretations that were located in the social limitations of the times and places where the texts were written and in the linguistic demands of conveying the meaning of these texts in different languages as the texts moved from South Asia to East Asia. As usual, it is the bias and ignorance of the mind that creates all the problems.

### **Notes**

- 1 H. Oldenburg, ed., *The Vinaya Piṭaka*, Vol. II (London: Pāli Text Society, 1964), p. 253f; E. Hardy, ed., *The Anguttara Nikāya*, Part-IV (London: Pāli Text Society, 1899), p. 274f.
- 2 *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* (The Taisho Tripitaka), Vol. 4, p.158a.
- 3 *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* (The Taisho Tripitaka), Vol.1, p. 605a.
- 4 *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* (The Taisho Tripitaka), Vol. 22, p. 922c.
- 5 Ibid., p. 185b.
- 6 *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* (The Taisho Tripitaka), Vol.1, p. 856a.
- 7 E. M. Hare, trans., *The Book of the Gradual Sayings*, Vol. IV, (London: Pāli Text Society, 1935), p. 181.
- 8 *The Nandendai-zōkyō*, Vol. 4, “Bikunikendo” (Tokyo: Taishō shinshū daizōkyō kankōkai, 1970), p. 378.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 An example is “*alam Devadatta, mā te rucci samghabhedo, garuko kho Devadatta samghabhedo.*” (The *Vinaya Piṭaka*, Vol. II. p. 198) where it means “look out Devadatta or take care Devadatta that you do not split up the Saṅgha.” (Pāli Text Society’s *Pāli-English Dictionary*, p. 79).
- 11 J. Takakusu and M. Nagai, ed., *The Samantapāsādikā*, Vol. VI (London: Pāli Text Society, 1947), pp. 1290-1291.
- 12 H. Kopp, ed., *The Manorathapūraṇī*, Vol. IV (London: Pāli Text Society, 1979), pp. 132-133.
- 13 William Pruitt, ed., *The Therī gāthā Atthakathā* (Paramatthadīpanī VI) (Oxford: Pāli Text Society, 1998), p. 136.
- 14 I. B. Horner, ed., *The Papañcasūdanī Majjhimanikāyatthakathā*, Parts IV & V (London: Pāli Text Society, 1977), p. 93.

## **The Language of Tibetan Nuns in the Indian Himalayas: Continuities as Change**

*Carol L. Winkelmann*

The home-in-exile of His Holiness the Dalai Lama is in north India, in the foothills of the Himalaya Mountains. In and around Dharamsala there is a constellation of nunneries educating Tibetan girls and women, an historic endeavour involving standards and practices that seek to approximate and, further, innovate on traditional male monastic education. Hence, many people – insiders and outsiders, supporters and critics – are interested in the ways that the social consciousness of the nuns is changing.

As a practitioner and a linguist, I have been going to Dharamsala since 2002 to learn from the nuns. My initial premise has been that the nuns' language is liminal, transitional, and destabilised by cultural, political, and theological uncertainties. Thus, it is semantically fluid and open to relatively rapid change. Contributing to this state of linguistic flux is the fact that many of the younger nuns are from Indian border areas and, because of the diversity of dialects among the new arrivals, English often functions as a language of general exchange. Contributing to a linguistic stasis, however, are several factors including some resistance to cultural imposition and deeply interiorised notions of gender roles. In addition, Buddhist monastic education is generally thought to be straightforward cultural transmission (i.e., rote learning or memorising of canonical texts) in effect, based on language resistant to change. Indeed, this characteristic is cherished by many Tibetans who struggle for the survival of their culture in the diaspora.

My argument, however, has been that the nuns' language does not reflect simple rote learning. Instead, it ranges along new conceptual trajectories. In part, the nuns are responding to a widely perceived need for spiritual revitalisation within the larger monastic community.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, they are influenced by a global politics of gender that seeks to create new forms and meanings in the interest of gender justice.<sup>2</sup> To get at the details, I initially focused on three mechanisms of language change recognised in Western feminist linguistics as universal strategies: linguistic disruption, form-replacement, and alternative discourses (Pauwels 1998). Interestingly, these mechanisms have proven functional in more subtle ways than in

Western contexts. Further, alternative linguistic theory – more aptly descriptive of indigenous or local contexts – critically augments the analysis.

### **Language Change: Western Theories in Non-Western Contexts**

*Linguistic disruption* seeks to expose sexism through direct intervention in the unfolding of discriminatory texts. The goal is to associate negative consequences with the use of language that devalue or denigrate women and girls. In some contexts, this strategy may prove useful. For nuns, however, this is a potentially dangerous strategy. Disruption can lead to conflict, and religious vows, cultural codes, and gender regulations mitigate against open conflict.<sup>3</sup> Consequently teachers, leaders, or other interlocutors wielding sexist language are generally insulated from public confrontation.

For the nuns, stories often provide more subtle means to dislodge sexist language. If a story is meant to derail an ongoing stream of sexist talk, it functions as polite disruption – otherwise, stories are a form of alternative discourse. The story of the Buddha's aunt, who convinces the Buddha, through the mediation of Ānanda, to allow women into the Saṅgha, is an example of polite disruption, which I have repeatedly heard used to disrupt popular beliefs or institutional positions that question whether, for example, the nuns should be allowed to be fully ordained or to become *geshes*.

In more interesting indirect rhetorical moves, however, Tibetan nuns have used Western nuns as surrogates to disrupt sexist ideologies. For example, one Western nun who holds misogynist notions of Tibetan nuns as inferior is a target of their derision. In targeting her, they can displace their feelings and indirectly criticise the more significant target: males who view women as less capable scholars or practitioners. It is an indirect way to disrupt without directly criticising the monks – a forbidden speech act with karmic penalties.<sup>4</sup>

A second mechanism of language change recognised in Western feminist linguistics is *form replacement*. Its goal is to create language in which women and men are treated symmetrically by replacing sexist forms with non-sexist forms. In the West, this practise is most often associated with corrective pronoun use, such as using she/he instead of he, and with replacing gender-marked lexical items, such as mankind with humankind and so forth. English translations of commentaries or ritual prayers do contain forms we would consider sexist. For example, the devotee – male or female – is described as the “son” of Mañjuśrī, a wisdom Buddha, in prayers heralding the deity's compassion as a father.<sup>5</sup> The nuns maintain, however, that in Tibetan recitations the forms are gender neutral. Mañjuśrī

is the parent to the child. This is not always the case,<sup>6</sup> surely, but this is the nuns' perception and, in fact, it is supported by anthropological linguists (e.g., M.J. Hartman) who argue that English does impose gender-exclusive forms on some languages that have more gender neutral syntactic and semantic forms. Buddhist women do create prayers to deities, including female deities, such as Tārā, that circumvent some of the form replacement issues. At the same time, the canon does have narratives that describe women as sexual temptresses or that seek to cut male sexual desire for women by minutely describing dead, decaying female bodies. Female practitioners replace such expositions by switching out female bodies for male bodies. In deity *yoga*, form replacement takes on embodied meanings as the female practitioner imagines herself into the guise of a male deity and the male practitioner into the guise of a female deity.

Finally, however, the nuns studying under the tutelage of male *geshes* may not simply replace language formations at will. Examinations include writing out the canonical texts word for word. Memory lapse, however motivated, may mean failure to pass into new grades or standards. Students who question may risk negative attention or censure.

The third strategy that linguists accept as a universal means of language change is the creation of completely new language to express women's perspective; that is, *alternative discourses*. The speaker does not replace or disrupt in an effort to reform; she revolutionises by offering a new vision. In my view, this strategy may be most accessible for the nuns.

The obvious way to wield alternative discourse is to tell new stories and the nuns do tell stories of great women teachers or *yoginīs*, like Yeshe Tsogyal, the eighth-century consort of Padmasambhava. Likewise, White Tārā is much beloved deity. At the same time, the nuns revere contemporaries such as Khandro Rinpoche and Karma Lekshe Tsomo. Such female role models figure into alternative stories that function as counterweights to the massive historical record about great male practitioners. By telling these stories, the nuns transmit new visions of strong female leadership. Language venues such as Sakyadhita are obvious and powerful forums, of course, for the creation and distribution of alternative discourses for Buddhist women. There are obvious print media instances such as journals, newsletters, and books, which do not seek to *disrupt* or *replace* as much as to promulgate new, innovative conceptualisations of gender friendly Buddhism.

To sum up thus far: theoretically, Western feminist notions of language universals have some, though limited usefulness for the language of the nuns. In a most general sense, there are two variants of gender-related religious language in circulation in Dharamsala. One variant is the traditional language grounded in canonical text which undergirds gender

discrimination. The second variant resists the older variant through contestation or invention of a new sociolect. The nuns are using, to varying degrees and in different language situations, the second variant. They are shifting away from traditional forms. Yet, unlike in Western circles, the forms are not unmitigated. William Labov's concept of *gender paradox* may apply in this situation. Labov's idea is that women conform more closely than men to sociological forms that are prescribed but they conform less when they are not prescribed. I do not research male monastics and cannot make comparative claims. However, the nuns do not typically engage in direct unmitigated disruption or replacement in prescribed situations where social sanctions or negative karmic consequences may be levelled, that is, in public mixed gender conversations. They use mitigated forms of disruption or replacement. Yet they will engage in alternative discourses when social sanction does not seem certain to follow, that is, in same-sex conversations or in conversations with sympathetic others.

One Western formulation does seem to hold true: women seem to use higher frequencies of innovative forms in changes from below, that is, ones that are neither legislated by or used against perceived authority.<sup>7</sup> Of course, some nuns are not motivated to language change. And most are simply not in a position to publicly contest the traditional variant. Thus, each variant, the traditional and the new variant, has its own trajectory. In select or gender-segregated conversations, some nuns sometimes use the second variant. Further, the process is skewed towards innovative speakers, namely more educated middle-aged nuns who aspire to *geshe* degrees and/or full ordination. Other nuns, older and younger, for whom less is at stake or for whom the stakes may appear too high, may be less motivated to action for social change.<sup>8</sup>

Variability, of course, is necessary, but not sufficient, for change. Language change derives from multiple causation, both internal and external factors, that is, options and triggers. Indeed, there are many factors mitigating against language change. Culturally speaking, many Asians tend to avoid standing out and, of course, innovation means standing out. There is also a dearth of other prospects for linguistic mixing, such as would be provided by regular or extensive access to media, travel, and so forth. Another significant factor is a distaste or fear of wholesale borrowing or imposition of Western ideas, including feminism. In short, categories derived from Western rationalism or science would seem to be at least sometimes untranslatable or incommensurable to non-Western contexts.

Hence, I am currently investigating nuns' language through the lens of the Asian cultural theorist Ashis Nandy. Nandy emphasises, "...the primacy that should be given to the political consciousness of those who have been forced to develop categories to understand their own suffering and who



reject the pseudo-indigenization of modern theories of oppression.”<sup>9</sup> Nandy studies the slippage between modernism and traditional knowledge structures. In multicultural Dharmasala, such slippage seems inevitable and ultimately meaningful. As suggested earlier, the language of the nuns might be expected to hold traces of both worlds, the modern and the traditional, or in other phraseology, feminist and customary, progressive and conventional, alternative and habitual. A Western analysis, mapped onto the nuns’ language, yields findings not always fully sensitive to the cultural rifts of meaning between the East and the West. What linguistic traces, then, fall outside the categories of *linguistic disruption*, *form-replacement*, or *alternative discourses*?

Nandy posits three types of language that slip through Western objectivist capacity to measure. They are the language of the *self*, the language of *continuity*, and the language of the *spirit*. I suggest that such manoeuvres are occurring in the language of the nuns and discuss the last category, language of continuity.

### The Language of Continuity

In Western ways of thinking, all instances of deviation or alteration are viewed as evidence of change. To apply the concept to Buddhist nuns in north India: when the nuns tell stories of great women saints in Tibetan religious history, such as Yeshe Tsogyal,<sup>10</sup> the stories can appear to Western eyes as evidence of progressive meaning-making: women are reclaiming their history. Asian history spans millennia, however, and according to Nandy, alterations or deviations are not necessarily indices of change. Nandy posits a language of continuity, a semantics that assumes that all change flows out of deeper continuities. Every change, however enormous, is only a special case of continuity. In Asian ways of thinking, each change is another form of the unchanging.

Macro-level examples of this phenomenon in Buddhist discourse are easily available. The Buddha’s first teaching to disciples, and the subsequent foundation for Buddhist belief, concerns the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths about existence are these: life is suffering, suffering is causal, there is a way to end suffering, and the Buddha discovered it. Buddhists view human-made suffering, *dukkha*, as impelled by ego. In a world marked by gender discrimination and in the light of the Four Noble Truths, Tibetan nuns offer an interesting version of consequences. That is, the suffering caused by male ego to others has consequences. If a man is not compassionate to women, he may be reborn as a female (or as an ant!). So

it is best to maintain behaviour shaped by compassion, not ego. One should treat women respectfully.

The conceptual *disjunction*, to Western feminism, concerns the bifurcation of the sexes, with females traditionally viewed as less valuable than males, now asserting their right to equitable treatment. The *continuity*, to a non-Western standpoint, concerns the laws of *karma*. *Samsāra* (cyclical suffering) is ended and enlightenment is attained when males give up ego and treat women justly. In effect, what may be construed as Tibetan women's resistance toward feminist consciousness may actually be, linguistically cloaked, the language of a theological continuity – here, the laws of *karma*. Subscribing to their own notions of the dynamics of oppression, the nuns retain the validity of their religious beliefs, yet accommodate to the new and changing social situation exemplified by their unprecedented opportunity, at least since the early Saṅgha, to study advanced Dharma in monasteries for women – an opportunity created in large measure, ironically, by the diaspora and the spillage of Western ideas and other resources into their traditional lifestyle.

The nuns' ordinary language<sup>11</sup> evidences other examples of a language of continuity not easily managed within broad Western linguistic categories. In response to a query about female role models or women admired by the nuns, many names are offered. The names cover a spectrum from mythical or quasi-legendary women to contemporary nuns, both Western and non-Western. One nun, however, intriguingly wrote:

The mother who gave birth to Ven Karma Lekshe Tsomo. Who gave all time to Help for others. All woman are Mother of all beings. If there are no woman, then there are no-Body. Womans nature is compassion and Kindness. Woman are very important for every body.

Karma Lekshe Tsomo helped found Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women and is a figure of great devotion to Buddhist nuns. Interestingly, instead of lifting up Karma Lekshe Tsomo herself as the role model, the nun lifts up her mother. In keeping with the Buddhist doctrinal emphasis on Mother as the ideal giver and recipient of compassion, this nun is able to pay homage to Woman in both traditional and progressive paradigms. Sacred scripture and doctrine is upheld; change (such as the great change Karma Lekshe Tsomo represents and inspires in her unflagging work for the education of the nuns) is seen in the context of continuity.

The language of continuity is language that, at a deep or metaphoric level, recognises change as the result of shifting conditions, not absolute

disjunctions or unbridgeable gaps. Thus it does not overtly express change as new phenomena, only as the ongoing shifting nature of phenomena. Using it, the nuns are able to preserve their own agency or subjectivity without either capitulating to Western feminist ideological impositions or engaging the error of egoism by insisting on their own importance in the unfolding struggle to gain equal status for women in the Saṅgha. Such action would accrue negative *karma* and threaten cultural survival; hence, it is not, in unmitigated fashion, desirable.

## Conclusion

The language of continuity reveals a linguistic strategy that, in my ongoing research, will receive more attention, along with other categories derived from postcolonial or developing world theorising. Yet, it is cogent now to ask: Are the two types of analyses, that of a Western feminist linguistics and that of developing world origins represented by Ashis Nandy, irreconcilable? Can the same articulations of the nuns to counter sexism be both the language of social change and of the search for stability or survival in the diaspora? Clearly the answer depends on the position of the one who asks. Surely a desire to make all feminisms, or even language theory, fit one mould or method (that is, Western, rational, universal), however well-intended, risks pre-empting deeper truths and full expression of the lived experience of indigenous or dominated people. Western feminism cannot simply replace the beliefs and values of Tibetan women living in situations of diaspora, cultural imposition, and social and religious patriarchy, in the same way that a gender sensitive speaker might replace an exclusive pronoun for an inclusive one, make up a new story, or disrupt forces larger and more powerful than herself.

Certainly, more inquiry and thoughtfulness is in order. A language of social change does indeed surface in the discourse of the nuns, though often in more subtle ways than the ways typically used by Western women. Hence, these preliminary findings may speak to some observers who believe that change in the social consciousness of the nuns has been slow. Perhaps such observers are viewing the nuns largely through the lenses of the West rather than those of Asia.

An anthropologically sensitive analysis unveils multivalent semiotic layers not readily apparent to Western observers. In my view, the slippage between analyses suggests that the Tibetan nuns in northern India are compelled toward social change as they simultaneously negotiate the imperatives of cultural survival. Or, as Nandy would have it, they enact change as continuity. Surely this is no mean linguistic feat. The nuns'

language reveals that they are agents of change in their own right and in their own time.

## Notes

- 1 “The Sisters of Ladakh” is a video by Ricardo Lobo in which this concept is discussed at some length. The nuns believe they can lead the way through the example of their own good behaviour – their compassion, modern educational practices, and work for justice. Thus they can show others the right path. The nuns take leadership in this task.
- 2 Rhetorical strategies familiar in Western feminist religious discourse, such as non-sexist forms and historical reassessment, surface in the nuns’ language. However, these forms are distinct to the local theologies and politics of a community-in-exile. Some genres, such as *chö* (one of the few Buddhist liturgies or rituals created by a female, Yeshe Tsogyal) conform to tradition; others, such as invocation and interpretation, reconfigure it.
- 3 Indeed Buddhism enjoins all practitioners to practice patience in the face of adversity. In traditional *lojong*, or mind-training practice, there are at least two pith slogans – “Whichever of the two occurs, be patient” and “Be grateful to everyone” – that could be interpreted as directions to avoid confrontation. In fact, any number of slogans can be interpreted as directions to avoid confrontation.
- 4 In my Buddhist philosophy class, nuns silently observed when laypeople questioned the sexism of scripture or teachers. In private, nuns discussed the sexism of some *geshes* and the direct obstacles some *geshes* created to the nuns’ educational success. One widely-circulated anecdote among class participants relates how, when confronted by Westerners about his sexist exegesis, one *geshe* pulled his robe over his head and refused to continue the teachings. One Western translator is known to refuse to translate misogynist passages and thus the *geshe* for whom she translates has been known to skip entire chapters or sections of misogynist scripture, without comment.
- 5 *Daily Recitations* (Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 2001).
- 6 The standpoint of my informants is rhetorically of interest: they believe English is, either intrinsically or by way of translation process, less able to deal with the Buddhist concept of the non-duality of the enlightened Buddha.
- 7 William Labov, “The Intersection of Sex and Social Class in the Course of Linguistic Change,” *Language Variation and Change* 2:205-254. Cited in Terttu Nevalainen and Helena Raumolin-Brunberg, eds., *Historical Sociolinguistics* (New York: Longman, 2003), p. 111.
- 8 I have been told stories of the resistance of older nuns to the new educational practices in the nunneries.
- 9 Ashis Nandy, *Bonfire of Creeds: The Essential Ashis Nandy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 22.
- 10 Yeshe Tsogyal was the eighth-century consort of Padmasambhava, Guru Rinpoche, who brought Buddhism to Tibet. She transmitted many Nyingma teachings herself and is known as a wisdom *ḍākinī* and a meditational deity (known by many names, including: White Tārā, a female Buddha of long life; Vajrayoginī/Vajravārahī, a meditational deity, or *yidam*, who personifies wisdom mind; and Sarasvatī, a female *bodhisattva* of culture, learning, speech, and music. See Judith Simmer-Brown, *Dakini’s Warm Breath* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001), pp. 65-69.
- 11 My interaction with the nuns takes place in English, a *lingua franca* of the nunneries. English is the second, third, or fourth language of many nuns. It is the second official language of India, thus widely studied and used. Nuns from the Indian Himalaya speak a variety of regional dialects and many nuns from Tibet do not speak Hindi. Hindi is the official language of India but, increasingly, gives way to English in multilingual, multiethnic Asia. Many Indians do not even speak Hindi at home. The curriculum of the nunneries includes English and Tibetan, and Hindi is sometimes offered as an extracurricular course of study. I do not edit the nuns’ language here except for occasional ellipses.

## **The Net of Indra: A Writing Workshop on Women's Global Connectedness**

*Sandy Boucher*

Years ago when I heard that some of my feminist friends were planning to attend the first United Nations World Conference on Women in Mexico, I wondered why they would want to go. I was an ardent feminist activist in my own community in the United States, and it had not occurred to me to concern myself with women in other countries, or to think I might learn from them. The same was true of me as I began Buddhist practise. Like most of us who practise in the West, I was focused on learning to sit still and pay attention to my breath, on reading Buddhist texts, and relating to my teacher and the group of meditators who became my community. Of course, I knew that this great spiritual path had been brought to us Westerners from Asia, but I felt little identification with Asian Buddhists or Asian women practitioners in particular.

Then how did I, in 2006, make the decision to do everything in my power to get to Malaysia to attend the Sakyadhita Conference? Why was I filled with such enthusiasm and passionate interest that I took the trouble, with my partner, to organise a fund drive in which 48 of my friends and community members donated the money for my plane fare and expenses?

This question informed my decision to offer a writing workshop in which we would explore each participant's personal connection to the global multicultural Buddhist women's community that was represented and embodied at the conference. I knew we would be taking in a great wealth of information, from every corner of the Buddhist world, and probably by the end of the conference we would be happily overwhelmed with facts, analysis, inspiration, new perspectives. I wanted the workshop to offer an oasis of quiet reflection, a time of slowing down, going inward to reflect, hoping that it might allow us to integrate and deepen our experience.

As Buddhists, some of us are familiar with the concept of Indra's net. Indra, an Indian god, spread his net throughout the universe, and at each juncture of the net was a diamond, or some say a drop of dew. In each drop of dew, or diamond, is reflected every other diamond or drop of dew in the net. Just so, we are all interrelated. We reflect, in our individual awareness, the consciousness, the needs, the frustrations, the insights, joys, and discouragements of all beings across cultures, nationalities, and languages.

Together we are developing a vision of a Buddhist world in which women will be empowered, supported, and encouraged. But as Buddhist women engage in the world, while looking outward to what needs to be done, we must always be looking inward to discover the truth of our deepest experience. So I offered in the workshop an opportunity, a moment of looking in, a time to reflect and to touch the deeper meaning of what we had been sharing.

At the last workshop of the last day of the conference, a small group of women and one man gathered next to the altar in the exhibition hall of Sau Seng Lum Exhibition Centre. Down here the air conditioning was not turned on. Tired from five days of conference events and sweating in the heat, we looked around for some means to cool off. An electric fan stood by a pillar, halfway across the large space. Since it would not come to us, we picked up our chairs and carried them to arrange in a circle before the fan, which a kind volunteer turned on for us. Beginning to cool off in the wind from the spinning blades, we introduced ourselves. One person offered to translate from English to Chinese, but it became clear that translation would not be necessary. Several of the women were Korean and spoke English, one was Canadian, and the Chinese speakers from the Malaysian community also spoke English. We were all lay Buddhists. Several of the women said that they aspired to write about their lives; one woman revealed that she would like to write mystery novels.

We began with a short meditation to connect us with our bodies and our breath, to help us relax into the moment. Then I talked about why we had come together, and pointed to the similarities I had discovered between Buddhist mindfulness practise and the endeavour of writing: "Those of us who meditate know that our practise is an exploration. With great interest, we attend to what's going on in the moment. We observe with accuracy the sensations of the body, the workings of the mind, the come-and-go of the feelings. Writing also requires that we pay attention to our experience. We become the observer. Then we go a step further and attempt to communicate that experience to others, by putting words on paper."

The participants listened, nodding, apparently seeing the parallels. "In meditation," I continued, "we have the intention to be where we are, not where we want to be. To sit with the feelings, the discomfort, the doubt, the self-denigration, the impatience – having the courage to fully welcome all that it is to be a human being. In writing, the challenge is the same. We stay with our uncertainty, our pain and difficult feelings. We don't stop or settle for some easy completion, but have the courage to stay with the material until something emerges and we see how to work with it or bring it to

completion. When we write this way, we are touching our own wisdom, getting a more authentic view of this mind-body process we inhabit.”

After this introduction, it was time to prepare for the writing. I asked each person to put aside her notebook and pen, and close her eyes for a guided meditation. After we had connected again to our bodies and breath, I invited each person to go back in time to the first awakening in her of the awareness that she was part of an international Buddhist community. I asked each to revisit the experience or relationship that helped her realise that she participates in a worldwide community of women and men, many of them from cultures quite different from her own. Perhaps it was an article read, a trip taken, a person met, a project, a dream, or a vision. I invited each participant to go back to that moment when she knew: I am *not* just myself doing my practise and involved in activities in the world – teaching, working for social justice, or whatever we do as Buddhists. I am part of a network of women and men stretching over the world, committed to Dharma practise, reflecting shared values and aspirations. I asked the members of the group to go back to that moment of realisation, find themselves in that place, and to pay attention to the sights, sounds, tastes, smells, the people there, and to experience again the feelings they had at that moment.

When it was time to write, some stayed in the circle, while others went off to work at nearby tables. And as I walked around to visit them and see how they were doing, I found that they had questions. Women are often hesitant about whether we are doing the right thing. On woman asked, “Is this what we were supposed to do?” I glanced at her writing and reassured her, “What you have written is perfect. It is exactly right. Just keep going and write some more.” Another woman looked up from her paper excitedly, fearfully. “Oh, I’m afraid I’ve written the wrong thing,” she said, her eyes pleading. “No,” I told her, “there’s no way you can make a mistake here.” I looked at her material and said this twice, until she returned with enthusiasm to her page. In these workshops, I want to help us support each other, encourage a sincere expression of feelings and ideas, and receive, acknowledge, and honour each woman’s expression.

Another woman stood up to bring me her paper, on which she had written only a few sentences. “I went to sleep,” she explained. “I was so tired and I just slept, and when I woke up I wasn’t critical of myself for falling asleep. Actually I just felt happy.” We smiled at each other. She read me her few sentences and they sounded like a poem. I was glad that, if sleep was what she most needed, she had felt free to surrender to sleep in my workshop, and that she could feel positive about it. “This, too, is perfect,” I told her. “You’ve done just the right thing.”

When it was time to come back to the circle to read aloud what they had written, we all arranged ourselves in our seats with a sense of nervousness and anticipation. I explained that we were not going to critique or analyse what was offered. We were simply going to receive the expression of each participant, bringing our full attention to her words. We were going to listen wholeheartedly to what each had to say about her own experience. As each person finished, I would ring our improvised bell (a glass and a spoon), and we would sit in silence for a short while, absorbing what had been shared. Then the next woman would read her piece.

But when it came time to read, the demons of insecurity arose again. "I'm embarrassed to read this," admitted the first woman. "I think it's not what we were supposed to write." "No, no," I countered, "there can be no right or wrong in this. We just want to hear your thoughts and feelings." Everyone in the circle joined with me, nodding, encouraging: "Yes, please read." Finally, the woman read a piece about how she had seen the leaflet for the Sakyadhita conference, had made her decision to come, and driven from out of town. She also shared some of what she had gained from the conference. When she had finished, she looked relieved and happy. We all nodded in appreciation. I rang the bell and we observed a few moments of silence. Then the second woman began to express her hesitancy. "I shouldn't read this. It's not very good." We assured her that we wanted to hear what she had written. "No good or bad here," I reminded her. "What you have written is just right." Then she read, about her thoughts on the conference and her hopes for it. When she finished, we all acknowledged her sharing and she seemed pleased, as if now she would view what she had written as a valuable contribution.

In this way, we went around the circle. The woman who had slept declined to read her "poem," but described her experience. The Canadian woman read her piece about hearing a talk by Helen Caldicott, the international anti-nuclear activist, and feeling her own responsibility for the future of our world. That moment, she said, had been like the falling away of one personality and the awakening of another. The man told us that, although he rarely cries, earlier that day his eyes had flooded with tears as he sat in the dining hall talking with another participant and found himself able to share at a deep level. As he talked, the Taiwanese woman, the only one who had not read yet, began to cry. She looked at us helplessly through her tears. "It's good to cry," someone told her. "It's okay, let it come." Struggling to control her voice, she read about the first Sakyadhita conference she had attended some years ago. She described how, at the first morning ceremony, she found her heart opening in a way that changed her life, for later she became a major organiser for subsequent conferences.



After everyone had spoken and been heard, I rang the bell and we sat in silence, our bodies relaxed, looking around the circle at each face appreciatively. Now we were a circle, not of strangers, but of friends. In our final meditation, we held the voices of each of the participants, accepting this open communication as a precious gift.

Although this workshop of laypeople did not deal with specific issues, it had shed light on the necessity for women's voices to be heard in world Buddhism. Like so much else at the conference, the workshop had empowered each of us. Despite the past programming that caused us to silence our own voices and denigrate the value of our communications, we had helped each other break through and speak out. In this, perhaps the content of our writing had not been as important as the act of speaking itself, and of being fully heard and honoured. I hoped that, working together, we had not only given ourselves permission to identify and articulate our truth, but gained an inkling that we can support and be supported by a community as vast and responsive as a net of diamonds strewn across the sky – the net of Indra that symbolises our interrelatedness and unity.











9th Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, June 17-21, 2006













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