


6-2017

Contemporary Buddhist Women: Contemplation, Cultural Exchange & Social Action: Sakyadhita 15th International Conference on Buddhist Women

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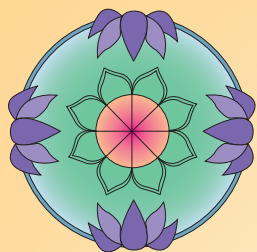
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Sakyadhita

15th International Conference
on Buddhist Women



“Contemporary Buddhist Women:
Contemplation, Cultural Exchange & Social Action”

The University of Hong Kong
June 22 to 28, 2017

Contemporary Buddhist Women
Contemplation, Cultural Exchange,
& Social Action

Edited by
Karma Lekshe Tsomo

PUBLISHED BY

Sakyadhita

Hong Kong

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CONTENTS

PREFACE	ix
 BUDDHIST WOMEN ACROSS CULTURES	
Women in the Buddhist Traditions of Manang <i>Chandra Kala Ghimire</i>	1
Feminism and the Everyday Lives of Nuns and Monks in Kinnaur <i>Linda LaMacchia</i>	7
Violence Against Indigenous Women in the Chittagong Hill Tracts: Women's Situation Within and Outside Their Communities <i>Parboti Roy</i>	12
Himalayan Feminism <i>Sonam Choden</i>	18
Nuns in the Khmer Theravāda Tradition in Vietnam's Mekong Delta <i>Thi Hong Cuc Nguyen and Thi Bich Ly Le</i>	23
 BUDDHIST WOMEN OF HONG KONG	
The Perfection of Filial Piety in Buddhism: A Study of Lady Clara Ho's Social Welfare Activities in Hong Kong <i>Kwong-Chuen (Kenneth) Ching</i>	29
A Frugal and Generous Life: Bhiksuni Chi Cheung's Commitment to Popular Education <i>Kam Kong Lam</i>	35
The Work of Bhikkhuni Yin Yeung <i>Chuan Deng Shi</i>	41
Breaking the Boundary: The Transformation of Buddhist Nuns in Contemporary Hong Kong <i>Fa Ren Sik</i>	45

MINDFULNESS ACROSS CULTURES

- Candrottarā*, Beyond the Moon: How Translation Moves Words
into Contemplative Practice 50
Annie Bien
- A Comparative Study of Korean Seon and Chinese Chan Women Masters:
Myori Beophui and Qiyuan Xinggang 55
Youngsuk Jun
- Writing about the Self: Female Non-Buddhists' Accounts of their Vipassana
Meditation Retreat Experiences 59
Brooke Schedneck
- Chinese Women Practicing Transnational Meditation in Contemporary China 63
Ngar-sze Lau
- The Interface Between Buddhism and Western Meditation-Based Secular Interventions 68
Teresa I. (Teri) Sivilli

BUILDING HEALTHY FAMILIES & COMMUNITIES

- Several Mothers in Buddhist Biographical Literature: A Textual Study 72
Yuande Shih
- The Enlightened Female: Buddhism, Women and Being a Mother 77
Meg Adam
- “Women Who Know about That”: Midwives and Wise Women in Buddhist Literature 83
Robert Kritzer
- Religious Dietary Laws, Buddhist Ethics, and Food Business: Studying Religious
Food Codes and Running a Traditional Temple Food Restaurant in Korea 87
Hyun-Jin Kim
- From Well-known Businesswoman to Vietnamese Vajrayana Buddhist Nun 92
Thich Nu Nhu Nguyet

BUDDHISM & SOCIAL ACTION

Social Change, Breath by Breath <i>Shelley Anderson</i>	97
Buddhism Engagement of the Deaf Community in Contemporary Society: Two Case Studies <i>Janet Mei Hing Tam</i>	102
Empowering the Dreams of the Poor through Transdisciplinary Cooperation <i>Zizhou Shi</i>	109
Bhikkhuni Ordination and Digital Activism <i>Anna Halafoff and Emma Tomalin</i>	114

THE FUTURE OF BUDDHIST EDUCATION

Teaching Dhamma to Children <i>Bhikkhuni Lieu Phap</i>	121
The History of Buddhist Education (<i>Pariyatti</i>) for Buddhist Nuns in Myanmar <i>Ma Vipula</i>	131
Korean Bhikkhunis' Vinaya Education and the Role of the Diamond Vinaya Center <i>Jeokyeon Sunim</i>	134
Bridging Scholarship and Dharma at Sakyadhita <i>Sasson</i> <i>Amy Langenberg and Vanessa</i>	137
Women's Empowerment and Sustainable Development through STEM Education for Buddhist Nuns <i>Kat LaFever</i>	142

FEMALE IMAGES OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Buddhist Tantric Theology? The Genealogy and Soteriology of Tara <i>Bee Scherer</i>	149
A Contemporary Emanation of Green Tara <i>Holly Gayley</i>	155
<i>Dakinis</i> as Consorts in Sacred Art <i>Lyudmila Klasanova</i>	160
Becoming Vajra Yogini: Buddhist Women's Self Esteem Without Self <i>Pema Khandro</i>	165

GENDER EQUALITY: ONLY A DREAM? OR, ARE BUDDHISTS REALLY EQUAL?

Buddhist Feminism and Crosscultural Cognitive Dissonance <i>Brianna Kathryn Morseth</i>	172
Gender Equality in the Buddha's Sangha: A Diversion of Practice from Theory <i>Reena Tuladhar</i>	177
Buddhist Concepts of Gender Equality from the Viewpoint of Male/Female Childbirth in Vietnamese Society <i>Tong Thi Quynh Huong</i>	183
Buddhism, Equality, and Feminism: Embodied Practices <i>Suat Yen Lai</i>	187

MONASTIC LIFE IN THE MODERN WORLD

- Learning Monastic Discipline and the Communal Life of Myanmar *Thilashin* 194
Hiroko Kawanami
- Contemporary Thai Buddhist Nuns: Monastic Discipline and Social Action 199
Monica Lindberg Falk
- Monastic Life in the Modern World: Female Monasticism and the Disciplined
Life of Buddhist Nuns in Sri Lanka 204
Nirmala S. Salgado
- The Origin and Lives of Buddhist Nuns Northeastern India 208
Genden Lhamu

RELIGIOUS STATUS OF WOMEN BUDDHIST PRACTITIONERS

- Educating Theravada Laity about *Bhikkhunis*: Diverse and Innovative Methods 212
Ellen Posman
- From “Vegetarian Women” to “Female Volunteers” to “Dharma Aunties”:
The Institutionalization of Buddhist Women’s Affiliation with Monastic Sangha 216
Yu-Chen Li
- Buddhist Woman as Agent of Change: The Story of Bhikkhuni Pu Hui 222
Wei-yi Cheng
- Demonstrating the Existence of Fully Ordained Nuns 227
Darcie Price-Wallace
- The Lives of the Twenty-four *Jo mos* of the Buddhist Tradition: Identity
and Religious Status 238
Carla Gianotti

WESTERN BUDDHIST WOMEN: TRADITION & INTERPRETATION

- Western Women in Maroon Robes: The Evolution of a Distinct Western
Female *Sangha* in the Buddhist Tradition 245
Lozang Tseten
- Expanding Enlightened Awareness: Women in the Transmission and Indigenization
of Buddhism in Brazil 252
Karma Lekshe Tsomo
- The Challenge To Really Becoming “Daughters of the Buddha” 257
Yeshe Bodhicitta
- Following Old Trails, Breaking New Ground: Establishing the First Buddhist
Nunnery in Germany 262
Thubten Choedroen, Namgyal Chökyi, and Yeshe Metog

STEREOTYPES, REGULATIONS, AND OBSTACLES

- Ordinary Women: Laywomen in Two Tang-Dynasty Buddhist Encyclopedias 269
Elizabeth Kenney
- Spreading the Dharma is a Double-Edged Sword: Buddhist Women Messengers
and Storytellers in the Himalayas 273
Alyson Prude
- The *Gurudharma* Rules for Buddhist Nuns in Contemporary Mainland China 277
Tzu-Lung (Melody) Chiu
- The Next Obstacles for Buddhist-Feminist Scholar-Practitioners:
Rita Gross’ Self-Identities and Legacies 283
Hsiao-Lan Hu

CONTRIBUTORS 289

PREFACE

The 15th Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women in Hong Kong celebrates thirty years of Sakyadhita' pioneering work to benefit Buddhist women everywhere. In 1987, the founding of Sakyadhita was a landmark in Buddhist history and a starting point for great changes for women in the diverse Buddhist traditions around the world. From that time on, women from around the globe have come together, uniting our wisdom, compassion, and talents, to create new pathways for women to fulfill their dreams, our dreams. These Sakyadhita gatherings represent a new era for women in Buddhism, for they create a forum for shining light on the achievements of Buddhist women and energetically developing our potential to help relieve the sufferings of the world.

The theme of the 15th Sakyadhita Conference in Hong Kong, "Contemporary Buddhist Women: Contemplation, Cultural Exchange & Social Action," highlights our diversity and also the many choices that Buddhist women have today. Among us, there are many different ways that we may focus our energies, such as meditation practice, active social engagement, studies, teaching, parenting, artistic expression, and a range of other options. The beauty of Buddhist women is that we come from different countries and cultures, with different interests and diverse approaches to Buddhism, yet together we represent enormous power for good in the world. We are fortunate to be able to decide for ourselves what paths we wish to take, depending on our cultural backgrounds and personal interests. With pure intentions, we can transform ourselves and make great contributions to the transformation of society.

The 15th Sakyadhita Conference in Hong Kong set the stage for a fruitful exchange of ideas and experiences. The wide variety of perspectives presented offer glimpses of the history, values, and hopes Buddhist women share. The theme of cultural exchange encourages women to form alliances with women around the globe, to bridge youth culture and traditional culture, and to creatively convey Buddhist concepts in the visual arts, performing arts, literature, martial arts, and other forms of expression. The theme of contemplation gives us a chance to explore the benefits of meditation together and contemplate our responsibilities as Buddhist women. The theme of social action allows us to envision a kinder, more compassionate, more enlightened world and strengthen our resolve to actualize that vision.

Human life is precious and fleeting. By awakening fully to each and every moment in a spirit of compassion and collaboration, Buddhist women undoubtedly have the power to transform the world. Sakyadhita is deeply grateful to the many people who offer their time, energy, and resources to make this goal possible. We deeply appreciate the contributors to this collection, the dedicated editorial assistance of Meg Adam, Margaret Coberly, Annie McGhee, Rebecca Paxton, Rosalie Plofchan, and the outstanding work of our translation teams from Hong Kong, Korea, and Vietnam, all of whom served selflessly to share the wisdom of these remarkable women.

Women in the Tibetan Buddhist Traditions of Manang

Chandra Kala Ghimire

Manang is a remote Himalayan district of Nepal that shares a border with Tibet, now part of China, in the north. Because of its geographic proximity, this district has a special socio-cultural and religious relationship with Tibet. Buddhism was first introduced to Manang from Tibet. Women in Nepal and Manang have been active from the beginning in helping to nurture, preserve, and promote it. We can cite the names of many female Buddhists in Manang's history and since the 1970s, with Buddhism at risk in Manang, women have worked to revive their endangered Buddhist culture and have, to a great extent, been successful.

This paper is an exploration of women's efforts at cultural preservation, based on extensive field research conducted in distant villages in the district of Manang. The paper has also used available secondary academic resources.

Geographic Proximity and Cultural Relationships between Tibet and Manang

The trans-Himalayan region of Manang is situated in the Gandaki zone of the Western Development Region of Nepal, bordered by Tibet in the north. From a socio-cultural and ecological point of view, the thirteen Village Development Committees (VDC) of Manang can be divided into three clusters: Gyasumdo, Nar-Phoo, and Nyeshang Valley. Historically, the people of Manang have been trans-Himalayan traders.¹ They brought salt and wool from Tibet and traded them for grains from the southern belt of the Annapurna Himalayan ranges. A few decades back, the government of Nepal granted the region privileged trade status.²

The Nyeshangpas, the people of the Nyeshang Valley that leads to the district of Manang, are related to Tibetans socially, culturally, economically, and politically.³ In Tibetan, Nyeshangpa means "people from Shang," a place in Tibet.⁴ On this basis, it may be assumed that the ancestors of the Nyeshangpas were nomads, similar to those who still live on the Tibetan plateau, and migrated from Shang to Nyeshang for hunting, food, and seeking pasture lands for their yaks. Harka Gurung, a renowned geographer of Nepal, states that the people of Nyeshang migrated from Tengar in Tibet and named their village Tengar in memory of their ancestral homeland.⁵ M. T. Cooke mentions that the present Nyeshangpas are the progeny of soldiers who accompanied Lama Lha Lung Belgyi Dorje from Tibet.⁶ Geographically, the area is located in the "rain-shadow," at a high altitude with a cold climate and rocky soil, which are the common characters of Manang and adjoining areas in Tibet.

Buddhism entered Manang from Tibet during different periods of history. Padmasambhava (eighth century), Lama Lha Lung Belgyi Dorje (seventeenth century), and the saintly Milarepa (1040–1123) are credited with disseminating Tibetan Buddhism in Manang. Milarepa came from Tibet and converted a local hunter named Khyire Gompo Dorje to Buddhism.⁷ Ne Cave in Ngawal and Milarepa Cave in Braga are two of the most sacred sites in Manang. The tenth Gyalwa Karmapa, Choying Dorje (1604–1674), sent Lama Khedu Karma Lopsang to strengthen Buddhism in Manang, where he constructed four major monasteries (*gonpas*): Tare, Pocho, Braga, and Tashi Lha Khang. Due to the influence of these esteemed personalities, most of the people in Manang follow the Karma Kagyu tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.

Women in Tibetan Buddhism

Women comprise two of the four assemblies of the Buddhist community.⁸ If attachment and aversion to gender identities are left behind, Buddhism lends strength to feminism because it provides grounds for women's liberation.⁹ For example, based on the Mahāyāna theory of Buddha nature, Buddhists of the Tibetan tradition respect all sentient beings as having the potential to become Buddhas in the future.

Buddhism has an assimilationist tendency. When Buddhism moves into new areas, it incorporates ideas and practices from pre-Buddhist faiths, without changing its core philosophical and ethical values.¹⁰ Consequently, its outer appearance begins to diverge from its original form until it is gradually considered a new type of Buddhism. When Buddhism first came into contact with Bön, the pre-Buddhist religion of Tibet, at the time of Shantarakshita, Padmasambhava, and Kamalasila (eighth and ninth centuries), it absorbed certain aspects of shamanistic practices.¹¹ Tibetans practice the Vajrayāna school of Buddhism, using *mantras*, *tantras*, *mandalas*, *dharanis*, *sadhanas*, and rituals as tools in tantric practices. It preserves the four classes of *tantra* – action (*kriya*), performance (*carya*), *yoga*, and *anuttarayoga* – as methods for transforming mental defilements into various types of wisdom, culminating in enlightenment.¹²

The Socio-religious and Economic Position of Women in Manang

The Himalayan region has been home to various ethnic groups with different cultures, religions, and social structures. The common denominators for mountain women are the hardships of their lives, which are due to the high-altitude hilly terrain, the low yield of agricultural production, low economic status, lack of modern facilities, and gender-based discrimination.¹³ Manangba women suffer from all of these challenges, but traditionally social life begins only from the age of sixteen, when one becomes a member of the *phee* (youth association). Phee Appā,¹⁴ the local guardian of youth, enrolls and instructs young people in how to assist their elders at all social and cultural events. Senior members of the *phee* teach the younger members to obey social rules, take on responsibilities, and preserve folk culture. The social roles and responsibilities of a woman change after marriage. She becomes a member of *Āṅgumī*, a traditional group of married women. The group cleans the villages, assists at rituals and festivals, and establishes good social relations with the monastic community. Some *Āṅgumī*, using their own resources, have constructed Buddhist monuments such as *chortens* (*stupas*), *mani* walls, entrance gates, walls of prayer wheels (*māṅdāṅg*), and community centers. They prepare food and drink at festivals and community religious gatherings. They perform pilgrimages together, visit *lamas*, *jomos* (nuns), and sick persons, and enjoy visiting with villagers who have returned from abroad. The *Āṅgumī* of Manang Village runs a drinking-water refilling station as a source of income and also runs a child-care centre.

These days, most people in Manang leave their villages in winter to escape the cold. Many of the men go to engage in trade, while disabled women, the elderly, and children either remain in the village or go elsewhere for awhile. In such situations, women take charge of the household responsibilities, including religion. Manang has an unusual cultural perspective on the rights of women, including property rights and cultural rights.

In comparison to other ethnic groups in the Himalayas, Manangba women have strong property rights. Parents offers their daughters a portion of their property, so few young women begin married life without resources. Women enjoy equal rights to run businesses, purchase and sell fixed assets, and have access to natural resources. In spite of this, although women participate freely, economic activities in the family and community are lead by male figures.

Religious Rights

Women in Manang not only enjoy religious freedom, but are active in preserving social, religious, and cultural traditions. They do this by working with different groups and committees to organize religious events. The *nanti* is one such traditional committee that organizes religious activities. To be a member of the *nanti* is socially prestigious. Manangbas do not pass this religious right to outsiders but accord it to a married daughter and her husband. Both laywomen and female monastics participate actively in the *nyungne* fasting ritual, *mani* recitations, Vajra Guru *mantra* recitations, and other religious practices. Theoretically, there is no gender bias in officiating at domestic rituals; in practice, however, nuns are invited only if the family cannot find monks to officiate.

Phopā

A *phopā* is a kind of family gathering in Manang. After the marriage of a son, the family invites close family members and the *phobey* (clan). The invitees contribute goods to the new couple, such as stoves, carpets, furniture, televisions, and so forth, along with some seed money to start a new business. This culture enables women to initiate their own independent economic life.

Festivals and rituals begin in the kitchen which is headed by women. They prepare offerings of food and drinks. Women welcome and feed the invitees. In Yar-tong area, women are encouraged to participate in horseback riding and sometimes ride pillion.

Important Buddhist Women in Manang

A number of Nepalese women have been key figures in the promotion of Buddhism in Tibet and Nepal. Among them, Princess Bhrikuti, who married to the Tibetan king Srong btsan Gampo, is credited with formally disseminating Buddhism in Tibet during the seventh century.¹⁵ She is regarded as a national hero in Nepal and as Green Tara in Tibet. Another notable figure is Puspa (*Me tog*), a nun and *yogini* who visited Tibet in the middle of the 12th century. She was renowned for performing miracles in Tibet.¹⁶ Similarly, Orgyan Chokyi (1675-1729), a nun from Dolpo, was a famous nun in Tibetan Buddhism¹⁷ and is regarded as Tara in Dolpo. Women from Dolpo and Mustang may be considered the spiritual descendents of Lhay Methog, the daughter of King Yeshe O.¹⁸

Jomo Pema, a daughter of the fourth Ghale king and mother of the fifth king in Ngawal, Manang, was a nun who inspired her son Tenzing Khyaba to become a Buddhist and encourage the people of Manang to do likewise. Thus, the Ghale clan in Manang respects Jomo Pema as their mother.¹⁹

Among the nuns currently living in Manang, Jomo Tsomo (56 yrs) was born in Tibet. She flew with her father to Sikkim, then came to Braga, and migrated again to Kathmandu. Later, she moved to Manang and is now living at Thrangu Tara, a Karma Kagyu nunnery in Kathmandu that has more than 300 nuns.²⁰ In Kathmandu, most of the nuns from Manang live at Thrangu Tara and Hasantar Nunneries. Thrangu Tara is well known for having a *shedra* (an institute for Buddhist studies).

Rituals and Festivals in Manang

Women in Manang begin their spiritual practices before dawn. As daily practices, they offer the Seven-limb Puja; circumambulate sacred monuments such as *chorten*, *gonpas*, and *mani* walls; make prostrations; spin prayer wheels, and recite *mantras*. In addition, they periodically engage in *nyungne*

practice and participate in *mani* recitations,²¹ Vajra Guru²² *mantra* recitations, perform *mani-kulpa*,²³ and so on. Nuns participate in *Yum* and *Kagyur* recitationa. Laity women participate in festivals such as *Losar* (New Year's festival), *Yar-tong* (the horse riding and racing festival), *Mitha* (the archery festival), *Aakukure* (a youth festival that commemorates the Tibetan culture of their ancestors), *Torkya* (a tantric festival that expels evil spirits from the village), and *Choey Kora* (an agriculture related festival in which the youth circumambulate the entire farmland carrying sacred texts on their backs and playing religious musical instruments).

Ángumī-ney, a festival for mothers, is a period of special religious practices for married women in Nyeshang. It is celebrated on different dates during June or July by the women of different villages. Some common activities of the event are pilgrimages, visits to *gonpas*, offerings to temples, recitation of *manis*, worship of deities, and receiving *wangs*. Religious activities are performed by invited *lamas* and nuns. For example, Mante, the women's (lit., mother's) association of Manang Village, celebrates *Ángumī-ney* for three to five days in Milarepa's cave. On the last day, a key religious event is organized to select a religious friend (Tibetan: *choey gtogs*) for each participant and visitor at the festival.

Buddhism in Manang since the 1970s

The decade of the 1970s was a turning point in the lives of people in Manang. Since then, considerable numbers of Nyeshangbas have migrated to cities such as Kathmandu, Pokhara, Chitwan, and abroad. Thus, traditional cultural practices have been greatly interrupted in the villages. Residences have been ruined by the elements and farmlands have changed into lawns. The *gonpas*, previously centres for cultural preservation, have largely become empty of religious activities. Realizing that cultural heritage is central to one's own identity, Manangbas (mainly Nyeshangbas) who have migrated to Kathmandu have established a number of institutions to revive their culture and traditions in the villages as well as in Kathmandu and beyond. There are now more than a dozen such organizations in Kathmandu. In the course of reviving their endangered religious culture, both in Manang and in the cities where they now live, women's active participation and contributions are highly visible.

Conclusions

The residents of the Himalayan district of Manang are preserving an ancient form of Tibetan Buddhism. Some middle daughters who have become nuns and laywomen work together to protect and preserve the cultural heritage of the area. After migrating to population centers, especially during the 1970s, they became aware of a cultural vacuum, which inspired them to revive their Buddhist traditions, both in their birthplace and in the place where they have migrated. Because the men of the area are involved in different economic activities, womenfolk have been the axis of a revival of Tibetan Buddhist praxis in a post-modern context, reviving their origins and stirring a cultural renaissance in the places where they currently reside.

NOTES

¹ Clint Rogers, *Secrets of Manang: The Study Behind the Phenomenal Rise of Nepal's Famed Business Community* (Kathmandu: Mandala Publication, 2004), 27.

² Ibid.

- ³ Chandra Kala Ghimire, “*Buddhism in Nyeshang Valley: Modern and Post-Modern Context*,” Doctoral dissertation, Lumbini Buddhist University, 2015, 34.
- ⁴ Liesal Massersmidt and Tsering Dolma Gurung, *Stories and Customs of Manang as Told by the Lama and Elders of Manang* (Kathmandu: Mera Publication, 2004), 54.
- ⁵ Harka Gurung, *Vignets of Nepal* (Kathmandu: Sajha Prakashan, 1980), 225.
- ⁶ Merit Tode Cook, “The People of Nyeshang: Identity and Change in Nepal-Tibet Borderland,” PhD dissertation, University of Berkeley, 1985, 47.
- ⁷ Dor Bahadur Bista, “Nepali in Tibet.” *Contribution to Nepalese Studies*, CNAS 7:1(1980): 1–19.
- ⁸ The Four-fold Assembly consists of *bhiksus*, *bhiksunis*, *upāsakas*, and *upāsikās*.
- ⁹ Oliver Abeynake, “Reappraisal of the Position of Women in Buddhism,” *Journal of the Centre for Buddhist Studies* (Sri Lanka) 1(2003): 1–17.
- ¹⁰ Rahun Sankrityana, *Bauddha Sanskriti* (Calcutta: Paramananda Poddar, Aadhunik Pustak Bhavan, 1952), 5.
- ¹¹ R. Moacanin, *The Essence of Jung’s Psychology and Tibetan Buddhism: Western and Eastern Path to the Heart* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003).
- ¹² Trangru Rinpoche (trans. Peter Robert), *5 Buddhas and Eight Consciousnesses* (The Nammo Buddha Seminar, 1998), 1–32.
- ¹³ www.wedo.org/wp-content/uploads/nepalcasestudy.pdf
- ¹⁴ The local guardian of youth is *Phen Appa*, *phen* meaning youth and *appa* meaning father in the local dialect. *Phen Appa* is a leader, guide, and instructor for the youth of the village. He is selected by the Mitheva Committee, on the advice of the youth.
- ¹⁵ L. Austine Waddell, *Tibetan Buddhism With its Mystic Cults, Symbolism and Mythology* (Varanasi: Pilgrims Publication, 2004), 20–21
- ¹⁶ Basanta Prasad Rijal, “Historical and Cultural Study of the Exodus of Tibetan Buddhism to the Kathmandu Valley,” Doctoral dissertation, Tribhuvan University, 2009, 41.
- ¹⁷ Kurtis R. Schaeffer, *Himalayan Hermitess The Life of A Tibetan Buddhist Nun* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 4.
- ¹⁸ David Snellgrove, *Himalayan Pilgrimage: A Study of Tibetan Religion by a Traveler Through Western Nepal* (Bostan: Shambhala Publications, 1989), 70–163
- ¹⁹ Liesal Massersmidt and Tsering Dolma Gurung, *Stories and Customs of Manang as Told by the Lama and Elders of Manang* (Kathmandu: Mera Publications, 2004).

²⁰ Personal interview with Jomo Tsomo, August 15, 2012.

²¹ The *mani-mantra* is the six-syllable *mantra* of Avalokitesvara: *Om mani padme hum*.

²² Vajra Guru is the name of Padmasambhava, whose *mantra* is *Om vajra guru pema siddhi hum*.

²³ *Mani kulpa* is the recitation of the *mani mantra* in the name of the deceased.

Feminism and the Everyday Lives of Nuns and Monks in Kinnaur

Linda LaMacchia

This is a story of feminism and the everyday lives of Buddhist nuns and monks in Kinnaur. As such, it has an author (me), characters (Buddhist nuns and monks), a place (Kinnaur in Himalayan northwest India), a cultural context (of Buddhism, indigenous Hinduism, and changing local traditions), and a long history (going back to ancient Sanskrit literature, where Kanauras appear as demigods). Like a folk song, this narrative has its texture, text, and context; that is, its actual language as a conference presentation, its translatable meaning, and its place and manner of performance.¹ Moreover, many more narratives underlie this one: those linking me to Kinnaur, those revealed by the nuns' and monks' interviews, and even the historical narratives of the abstract ideological concept of feminism.

This present story begins in 2015, when an educated Himalayan nun in a nunnery in India said to me, "We are not feminists." She did not explain what she meant. Using as sources two of the interviews I recorded in 2015 with nuns and a monk from different villages in central Kinnaur, this paper attempts to interpret her statement in the context of monks' and nuns' daily lives. In the interviews, I asked the monk and nun to give examples of nuns and monks who had helped them in their villages and of nuns and monks whom they had helped. I argue that their stories demonstrate a cooperative and not a competitive relationship between monks and nuns. Part 1 looks at scholarly debate about Buddhist feminism. Part 2 summarizes the interview narratives. Part 3 compares and contrasts the monk's and nun's examples.

But first, in order to explore the relevance of feminism to the everyday lives of Buddhist nuns and monks, it is necessary to give some background about Kinnaur, the place where I did my Ph.D. research starting in 1995 – research mainly focused on nuns' life stories and oral traditions. Kinnaur is a Himalayan district of Himachal Pradesh, India, on the Tibet border, and before the Chinese occupied Tibet it was one of the crossroads for coming and going between Tibet and India. It has a long history of Buddhism, going back at least to the time when Buddhism was introduced to Tibet from India and very likely before that. Many Kinnauri nuns and monks have joined the monasteries built in north and south India and Nepal since the Dalai Lama left Tibet in 1959, including those in Dharmasala, where I first met Kinnauri nuns. Many, perhaps most, young nuns and monks live and study outside Kinnaur, but regularly return to their villages. High lamas often give teachings in Kinnaur. Hindi has now replaced Homskadt, an oral language, as the lingua franca in Kinnaur, partly because more schools have been built now and classes are taught in Hindi there. This is just one sign of traditions being lost.

What is Feminism?

My own pragmatic definition comes from an American and secular context. I would call myself a feminist in the sense of supporting equal rights for women, social, economic, political – such as equal access to education and job opportunities, equal pay, and the right to vote and run for office. Belittling images of women and violence toward women are wrong. Women are not lower or lesser than men. But I am not an activist, and so those who define feminists as activists in a movement might not consider me a feminist.

In that simple and general sense of feminism, I expected the Himalayan nuns I knew in India to be feminists, because they were strong women who had decided not to marry but to become nuns, often despite family opposition. So I was surprised when one of the nuns said to me at lunch one day, "We are not feminists, especially given the recent changes in Tibetan Buddhism allowing nuns to do what only monks had done before: to study philosophy, debate, and earn the *geshe* degree. Maybe the other nuns didn't agree with her? Or maybe she meant they're not activists. Another story: Recently, at a meditation center in Virginia, I asked the teacher, Khandro Rinpoche, a Tibetan nun, if she was a feminist. She stood in front of me and said, "Look at me. Am I a feminist?" I answered, "Yes, you are." She said, "Then I am." Later, a senior student explained what she meant: that she would not "posit" herself one way or the other. Maybe the nuns did not want to "posit" themselves as feminists either.

Maybe their thinking is broader than worrying about social status and hierarchical seating arrangements. Another possibility is that they do not want to take full ordination, an issue supported and much written about in recent years by Buddhist feminists. Lobsang Dechen (2010) disagrees with some of their interpretations: “It is a commonly held view that Tibetan nuns are not interested in receiving bhiksuni ordination; they seem to be very content with the way things are.” But, she says, “this is a misconception...,” and “our interest in receiving bhiksuni ordination is not driven by a concern for our status as women but by a wish to work most effectively toward liberation from cyclic existence for the benefit of all beings.”²

Definitions of feminism are more complicated and diverse than I expected when I began this paper. For example, Rosalind Delmar wrote that “there are radical feminists, socialist feminists, Marxist feminists, lesbian separatists, women of color...”³ Men can be feminists, and “not all those supportive of women’s demands are feminists.” She asked if there is an “unconscious feminism”: can social reformers be classified as feminists because of their activities and not because of a shared “social analysis or critical spirit”? Rita Gross (1996) defines feminism in two parts: first as “academic method” and secondly as “social vision.” About the first, she writes: “Feminism as scholarly method is critical of the androcentric mindset.” In studying religion, she advocates that “we need an androgynous ... or bisexual model of humanity.” Instead of writing “the Egyptians allow women to...,” we would write, “in Egyptian society, men do X and women do Y.” Too many studies of religion do not include women, she says, or do so only briefly, seeming to assume what men do and think is the “norm.” So, and I agree, we must also study what women think and do. About the second aspect, she writes, “Feminism as social vision is critical of patriarchal culture.” But gender equality is not the answer. What is “far more important than equality [is] *freedom from gender roles*.”⁴ This is because gender roles themselves still put men and women into two large and separate categories – resulting in a simplistic dualism.

There is also plenty of disagreement among scholars of women and Buddhism. For example, Nirmala Salgado “questions the relevance of liberal and feminist theories in relation to narratives about Buddhist nuns.” She thinks Western scholars’ arguments ignore local, particular situations in non-Western cultural settings. About Rita Gross’s work, she writes: “Gross, by conflating textual ideals with social lives, has ignored family and kin networks ... intrinsic to the social engagement present in the everyday lives of contemporary practitioners.”⁵ Similarly, Wei-Yi Cheng writes, “Western feminist works do not necessarily speak to my experience as an Asian Buddhist woman.”⁶ But Janet Gyatso points out that in the debate over full ordination, the source of “efforts to revive the female order” was not Western or feminism; rather, these efforts were initiated by “various progressive Asian monks and nuns over the last century.”⁷

Other categories are the first, second, and third wave feminists. The first wave began with women who persevered in obtaining women’s right to vote in the U.S. in 1920. In the U.S., the second wave, in the 1960s and 1970s, focused on social activism. The third wave, characterized by Shelley Budgeon as “fundamentally challenging the [gender] dualism associated with Western thought,” began in the 1980s and has continued to grow and evolve to the present time. She says – and this sounds like Salgado’s approach, too – “the starting point for third wave feminist critique is the specificity of women’s experience.”⁸ In her review of Salgado’s book, Karma Lekshe Tsomo refutes Salgado’s third wave accusations: “Salgado correctly observes that nuns variously ‘challenge, ignore, or bypass apparent structures of male domination,’ but unequal monastic power structures are not simply appearances; they affect the nuns’ lives in very tangible ways, beginning with how they get their food.” An anonymous reader suggests the following useful interpretation of this comment: “Tsomo seems to be speaking specifically about Buddhist nuns and also saying that the institutional subordination of women needs to be questioned in terms of the power of one people over another equation. This applies not just to the gender equation, but to the proclivity to subjugate human beings based on race, religion, gender, and other factors, which is a global human rights concern.” To Salgado’s (and others’) critique that Western concepts do not translate well on the ground, Tsomo retorts: “Questioning the social and institutional structures that enforce the nuns’ overt and internal subordination to the monks may be both wise and ethical, regardless of what passport one holds.”⁹

Interviews

My provisional interpretation of the nuns' saying, "We are not feminists" was that nuns have a cooperative relationship with monks and do not want to engage in potential conflict with them. So in the interviews I asked the monk and nun to give examples of monks and nuns (and others) who had helped them and whom they had helped. This is what they told me.

Wangchuk Dorje is a Kinnauri monk, reincarnate lama, and scholar from Jangi, a village in central Kinnaur. I have known him since 1996, when he was teaching at the Central University of Tibetan Studies (CUTS) in Sarnath and later teaching also at the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies (CIBS) in Ladakh. We spoke in English in his office in Sarnath in 2015 in a recorded interview.

His first example, the nun who had helped him the most, was his aunt (his father's sister). She did this by encouraging him to practice Dharma. She served as a guide during his ngondro retreat when he was eleven years old. She gave him financial help when he joined a monastery and later when he became a university student; she created an atmosphere of Dharma in the household by chanting mantras; and she was a fair judge during any disputes. Eight older laywomen also helped him. They had been his own disciples in his previous life, he said. They pushed him to study hard, so that he could come back to his village and teach them what he had learned. Their high expectations encouraged him very much, he said, and they still now invite him every year and enthusiastically attend his teachings. Examples of nuns he had helped were four nuns from Ladakh. In Ladakh he had lectured at the Ladakh Nuns' Association nunnery. When its director asked him how to improve education at the nunnery, he suggested she send some nuns who knew Tibetan and English to study at CUTS in Sarnath. When four nuns arrived in 2015 he helped them prepare for their entrance exam. Later, he planned to tutor them and review their classroom studies with them.

Sonam Dekyi is an ordained nun (*getsulma*) from Ribba, a village in central Kinnaur, who has been part of Jamyang Chöling Monastery in Dharamsala since about 1990. There and at the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics she has studied Tibetan grammar, English, philosophy, debate, and the major Buddhist texts in the standard curriculum. In recent years, Sonam Dekyi joined SARA college (outside Dharamsala) for training in how to teach Buddhism in Hindi. She has already begun to teach Buddhism to laywomen and nuns in her village during her annual two-month winter leave from the monastery. When we first met in 1995, we spoke through a Tibetan translator. Now she knows English well and in a recorded interview in 2015 we spoke in English.

The person who helped her most, she said, was her uncle, Kachen Kalden Dorje, a monk who had studied for many years in Tibet. He was her first teacher, taught her to read and memorize Tibetan texts, and was the one who encouraged her most to become a nun (which she did at age 15). Her elder brother, a monk, has also encouraged her and has been kind and generous to her, she said. Other examples are her first philosophy teachers at Jamyang Chöling and the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics: Geshe Nubcho, Geshe Gyatso, and Lobsang Dawa. Notably, she expressed gratitude to her fellow nuns at Jamyang Chöling for helping each other with class work: "And after [the lectures] we discussed with each other, [with] our friends ... like debating. We discussed [the lecture topics and debated them] with each other." The people she herself has helped were the nine or ten village nuns and laywomen she taught. So far, she has not taught the young monks; they have not been there when she was in the village teaching, because they were at their monasteries in south India. She commented on monk-nun cooperation. In Ribba, she said, nuns and monks help each other. Before the nunnery was built, they did *pujas* (rituals) together more. Even now, when a high *lama* is invited to the village, nuns and monks help each other to set up and run the event. This is partly because there are so few nuns and monks in the village. Of the 30 nuns and 50 monks from Ribba, most are living outside Kinnaur. Nuns and monks have their own quarters on their family property, sometimes far up the mountain, and therefore during a special event, those monks or nuns in charge of setting up the event have to sleep at the place where the event is being held. And so, both a few monks and a few nuns might sleep at the same nunnery or monastery for a few nights.

Comparing the Nun's and Monk's Responses

All Wangchuk Dorje's examples were of women. In his childhood the person who had helped him most was his aunt, a nun. Similarly, Sonam Dekyi's lama-uncle helped her the most in childhood and influenced her decision to become a nun. Both of them received both Dharma help and material help (sweets and money). As a *tulku*, Wangchuk Dorje's example of being encouraged by disciples from his previous life is unique. Both he and Sonam Dekyi teach laywomen in their villages every year and their examples of nun-monk cooperation are similar. Having a Ph.D. allows Wangchuk Dorje to help in particular ways; Sonam Dekyi's training and experience in monastic life do, too. Sonam Dekyi has dealt with the broader community in Dharamsala on her monastery's behalf and Wangchuk Dorje holds administrative positions at the universities where he has taught.

Conclusion

From the interviews, I conclude that the nuns are feminists in the sense of positive changes for women but not in the sense of conflict, whether or not they use the term. This was a preliminary study, and more questions need to be asked. I will end with a quote from Lama Yeshe: "We are burdened [with] limiting concepts: 'Men are like this; women are like this.... This is why we have conflict within ourselves and with one another... [but] every man and woman contains both male and female energy. In fact, each one of us is a union of all universal energy.'"¹⁰ He is speaking ideologically, about ultimate truth. But in our everyday conventional world, everyone – both women and men – need time, resources, and knowledge to follow the path to enlightenment. The story is not over yet.¹¹

NOTES

¹ Alan Dundes, *Interpreting Folklore* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 20–32.

² Lobsang Dechen, "Buddhist Women's Role in the Sangha," *Dignity and Discipline: Reviving Full Ordination for Buddhist Nuns*, ed. Thea Mohr & Jampa Tsedroen (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2010), 208–209.

³ Rosalind Delmar, "What is Feminism?" *What is Feminism?* ed. Juliet Mitchell & Ann Oakley (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 9, 12, 13.

⁴ Rita Gross, *Feminism and Religion: An Introduction* (Boston: Beacon, 1996), 16–28.

⁵ Nirmala Salgado, *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice: in Search of the Female Renunciant* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 5, 29.

⁶ Wei-Yi Cheng, *Buddhist Nuns in Taiwan and Sri Lanka: a Critique of the Feminist Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 2.

⁷ Janet Gyatso, "Female Ordination in Buddhism: Looking into a Crystal Ball, Making a Future," *Dignity and Discipline: Reviving Full Ordination for Buddhist Nuns*, ed. Thea Mohr and Jampa Tsedroen (Boston: Wisdom, 2010), 1.

⁸ Shelley Budgeon, *Third Wave Feminism and the Politics of Gender in Late Modernity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 4.

⁹ Karma Lekshe Tsomo's review of *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice: In Search of the Female Renunciant* by Nirmala Salgado, *Journal of Global Buddhism* 16(2015): 1–7.

¹⁰ Lama Thupten Yeshe, *Introduction to Tantra: The Transformation of Desire*, ed. Jonathan Landaw (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2014), 4.

¹¹ For more on Kinnauri nuns, see Linda LaMacchia, *Songs and Lives of the Jomo (Nuns) of Kinnaur, Northwest India: Women's Religious Expression in Tibetan Buddhism* (Delhi: Sri Satguru, 2008); Linda LaMacchia, "Buddhist Women Masters of Kinnaur: Gurus, Disciples, Modern Curriculum, and Traditional Songs," video, 2013, <http://youtu.be/8x8oW4fvBLs>; Linda LaMacchia, "Basic Buddhism in Songs: Contemporary Nuns' Oral Traditions in Kinnaur," *Buddhism at the Grassroots* (Delhi: Sakyadhita, 2013). sakyadhita.org/docs/resources/newsletters/22-1-2013.pdf; Linda LaMacchia, "Buddhist Women Masters of Kinnaur: Why Don't Nuns Sing about Nuns?" *International Journal of Dharma Studies* (2016) DOI: 10.1186/s40613-016-0029-5.

Violence Against Indigenous Women in the Chittagong Hill Tracts: Women's Situation in the Inter and Intra-community Prospect

Parboti Roy

Indigenous peoples in Bangladesh face multifaceted discrimination and deprivation, and women are the most vulnerable among them. Indigenous women confront discrimination, not only due to their gender but also due to their lower socio-economic and ethno-religious status. In recent years, violence against indigenous women has become a serious human rights concern. This paper focuses on gender-based violence against indigenous women in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and attempts to analyse the situation of women from an indigenous feminist perspective. The study uses secondary resources and interviews conducted with two indigenous women activities and two lawyers to explore the human rights situation of women in relation to gender-based violence on both the inter- and intra-community levels.

The CHT has undergone a number of geopolitical changes in the name of development that have adversely affected the human rights of indigenous women socio-culturally and economically, but also their gender status. National development plans, policies, and strategies overlook the concerns of indigenous women. Patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity, women's unequal access to resources, ethnic conflicts, militarisation, and land grabs in which the lands of indigenous peoples are forcefully seized by the non-indigenous peoples from the plains, with the support of the state, has led to violence against indigenous women. This paper offers recommendations to ensure indigenous women's access to justice in order to address gender-based violence.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts in Context

Bangladesh is a country with a diverse population with regard to religion, ethnicity, gender, and geographical location. The majority people of the people in Bangladesh are Muslim and only 0.6 percent of the population is Buddhist. Among the Buddhists, several different indigenous communities are Buddhist, most of whom live in the southeastern part of Bangladesh known as Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT).

The CHT consists of three districts, namely, Rangmati, Bandarban, and Khagrachari. The CHT has undergone multifaceted changes in the name of development, beginning from the British colonial period up to the current socio-economic setting where the local people have felt the impact of development socially and economically. Indigenous populations have been especially affected, because although indigenous peoples comprise 49 percent of the total CHT population, their populations are declining day by day as a direct result of development. Even after Bangladesh gained independence, the rights of indigenous peoples were not adequately established, one of the major hindrances being that the constitution does not recognise indigenous peoples' rights and identities. Indigenous people in Bangladesh confront multiple challenges, deprivation, discrimination, and marginalisation, and women are the most vulnerable among them, not only due to their gender identity but also their marginal ethno-religious and socio-economic status.

After the independence of Bangladesh, the CHT experienced militarisation at the hands of the Bangladesh army and insurgencies that began in the late 1970s and continued to prevailed in the region for almost twenty years, up to 1996. During the insurgency period, the state sponsored a settler transmigration program into the CHT from the plains and implemented development policies that were discriminatory toward indigenous peoples. Successive governments supported forced land grabs that resulted in the internal displacement and eviction of indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands. These policies resulted in widespread political violence¹ and violence against indigenous women.

In 1997, the government and the indigenous leaders of CHT insurgency movement signed an accord known as the Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord. This agreement, known as the "Peace Accord," was intended to end militarisation and ethnic conflict. However, the key points of the Accord are yet to be implemented, namely, the demilitarisation of CHT, rehabilitation of internally displaced peoples,

rehabilitation of the settlers, resolution of land disputes, and devolution, meaning the investiture of power and functioning to local councils.

During the insurgency and post-insurgency period, indigenous women and girls were subjected to different forms of violence. The aim of the paper is to analyse indigenous women's situation in the context of the gender-based violence that occurs in both the inter- and intra-community settings in the contemporary context, taking an indigenous feminist approach. The study focuses on violence against indigenous women and the implications of intricate intersections between gender, ethnicity, class, and socio-political. The paper discusses the theoretical framework of the study and the location of indigenous women in the national policy mechanisms, and analyses both the factors that result in violence against women and women's responses and proposed methods to address violence.

Listening to the Voices of the Unheard

Considering the absence of primary data available for this study, my paper adopts an indigenous feminist approach to understand gender-based violence against indigenous women. Indigenous feminism is based on the tenets of decolonisation, self-determination, and resistance to discrimination and oppression. It calls for a new knowledge paradigm to dismantle the oppression confronted by women in indigenous communities and on the broader societal level.² Indigenous feminism implies indigenous perspectives that express the viewpoints of native people to highlight women's agency and resistance against oppression. In addition, it challenges the Western knowledge paradigm that produces knowledge based on the experiences of observers based in different locations and histories, as a form of resistance against such knowledge domination.³ The majority feminist scholars on CHT indigenous women belong to non-indigenous backgrounds⁴ and, in the absence of indigenous voices and indigenous perspectives, tend to overlook the subjective experience of indigenous women. As an indigenous Chakma woman, I was inspired to explore the concerns about gender-based violence in indigenous communities in the CHT. While acknowledging the limitations of not being able to adequately represent the perspectives of women in all thirteen indigenous communities, I attempt to make known the factors that result in violence against indigenous women. As background, I review the existing national development policies related to indigenous women and data gathered from interviews with two indigenous Chakma women activists and two indigenous Chakma women lawyers in Rangamati.

Indigenous Women's Location in the National Development Mechanisms

After gaining independence in 1971, successive governments have undertaken a number of development initiatives to address women's empowerment and to provide equal rights to all citizens irrespective of gender, race, religion, and ethnicity, as stipulated in the constitution. The government started to promote gender equality and overcome barriers to women's empowerment in the 7th Five Year Plan for 2015-16 and 2019-20. This plan addressed the special needs of ethnic women and girls, including access to education and health care benefits and enhanced productivity of indigenous women in agriculture and social forestry programs. At the same time, the government's 7th Five Year Plan for 2016 addresses the urgent concerns of insecurity and violence against indigenous women and girls.⁵ To address violence against women, the government established one-stop crisis centres in the three hill districts to support victims of violence. The Constitution of Bangladesh (article 27, article 28) ensures non-discrimination on the ground of age, sex, class, race, religion, or place of birth, and gender equality in the public domain, with equal treatment for all citizens equally before law.

Despite all the commitments made by the state in the Constitution, the indigenous peoples in Bangladesh are not recognised as indigenous; instead, they are designated as "small ethnic groups" or "tribes, minor races, ethnic sects, and communities." Although several government policies and strategic plans address indigenous women's issues, there is a lack of contextual concern for women's distinctive needs and concerns. Moreover, although the National Women's Development Policy (NWDP) of 2011 calls for development measures to promote indigenous women, the policy does not specify what development interventions will be undertaken to address indigenous women's education, needs,

concerns, and security. The Bangladesh Ministry of Women's and Children's Affairs mentions the intention to address the problems of ethnic women in accordance to the NWDP, but does not state how it will solve the problems of indigenous women in the country. Indigenous women rights activists admit that the government did not even consult indigenous women in formulating or amending the NWDP in 2011.⁶ Thus, it seems that, despite significant government initiatives for women's empowerment, indigenous women continue to face numerous forms of discrimination.

Gender Based Violence Within and Beyond Indigenous Communities

Like mainstream Bengali society, the thirteen indigenous communities are based on a patriarchal ideology in which women have lower status than men. In addition, in all communities except the Marma, indigenous women are deprived to property rights. The traditional administrative structure is also dominated by men. Women are less visible at the local, community, and national levels of politics and decision-making structures. It has been argued by mainstream feminists that indigenous communities are more egalitarian than in Bengali society⁷ and that gender-based violence is not common in indigenous communities. However, due to the forces of globalisation and the imposition of the neo-liberal economic ideology and agenda, violence against indigenous women has increased.⁸ Furthermore, the force of globalisation imposes indigenous women to be displaced from their ancestral land and traditional mode of livelihoods and migration to urban areas make them more vulnerable to different forms of violence.

Many indigenous women, especially in the younger age groups, work in the Export Processing Zones for alternative employment, where they confront violence by men. The patriarchal nature of indigenous communities also results in gender-based violence.

As is well known, gender-based violence is one of the precarious forms of human rights violation and women constitute the majority of victims. However, due to the multifaceted forces of globalisation, a crisis of masculinity is associated with socio-political and economic changes in the CHT region, both among indigenous and non-indigenous men and the fast flow of communication and technology results in different forms of gender-based violence. The majority of perpetrators of violence against indigenous women and girls are from non-indigenous backgrounds, but in recent years, violence among indigenous men against indigenous women has escalated in recent years.

It is notable that indigenous women face physical, sexual, and psychological violence, both within their communities and in state-led masculine attitudes and treatment. One of the most common phases of structural violence against indigenous women was evident during the insurgency period and militarisation of the CHT. The CHT has experienced militarisation since independence and still faces it. As a result, a huge number of indigenous women and girls became victims of physical and sexual violence perpetrated by the Bangladesh army during the 1980s and 1990s. The case of Kalpana Chakma, the organising secretary of the Hill Women's Federation who was abducted by the army in 1996, is still not resolved, though a law suit was filed by her family members. The reluctance of the state to exact justice in Kalpana's case indicates the prevailing culture of impunity. It is worth noting that there are no examples of indigenous guerrilla fighters raping non-indigenous women.

It may be argued that the forces of globalisation, technological advancement, and the amalgamation of indigenous and non-indigenous Bengali culture has led to intra-level gender-based violence toward women. It is clear from these discussions that despite multiple initiatives undertaken by the government, indigenous women and girls fall victim to different forms of physical, sexual, and psychological violence, which are increasing day by day. Moreover, few local, national and international NGOs, or indigenous women's organisations and networks undertake initiatives to provide legal support to the victims. Despite all the preventative measures in place, indigenous women continue to confront different forms of violence in their lives.

A reported 85 indigenous women and girls were victims of different forms of physical and sexual violence in 2015. Of these, 44 victims were from the CHT and the rest were from from the plains. Within the first six months of 2016, 24 indigenous women and girls were victims of physical and sexual violence in Bangladesh. Between 2007 to 2015, a total of 466 indigenous women and girls fell

victim to physical and sexual violence.⁹ These increased incidence of violence perpetrated on indigenous women in recent years indicate their vulnerable situation. The vulnerability of indigenous women is not only due to their gendered location within the broader society, but also due to their lower economic, political, and ethno-religious status in the country. It may seem that the incidence of violence perpetrated on indigenous women is insignificant compared to national statistics; for example, out of a total number of 846 incidents of rape that occurred in Bangladesh in 2015,¹⁰ whereas 45 indigenous women and girls were victims of similar kinds of violence.¹¹ Yet it is worth mentioning that incidents of violence perpetrated on indigenous women cannot be ignored, because the indigenous population in Bangladesh is only two percent of the entire population, half of them are women.

Furthermore, the Kapaeeng Foundation *Human Rights Report* for 2015 states that 78 percent of the perpetrators were non-indigenous, while 15 percent were indigenous perpetrators and 1 percent were law enforcement agency and security personnel. In 2015, the identity of the remaining 4 percent of perpetrators was unknown. It appears that indigenous women and girls, both in urban and rural areas, are not free from heinous acts of sexual and physical violence committed by both indigenous and non-indigenous men. Moreover, among indigenous women and girls, even infants, schoolgirls, housewives, college students, persons with disabilities, pregnant women, and working women were vulnerable to different forms of violence, both in the public and private spheres. It can be argued that the increased levels of violence committed by non-indigenous individuals or Bengalis are a consequence of illegal settlement of the CHT by Bengalis, which therefore heightens the vulnerability and insecurity of indigenous women. Violence perpetrated on indigenous women and girls by Bengali men is an indication of hegemonic masculine values that suppress the voices of minority women.¹² It is noteworthy that indigenous women, whether living in urban, rural, or semi-urban areas fall victim to different forms of gender-based violence. Thus, because indigenous women living urban areas also experience gender-based violence, it becomes necessary to explore the intersections between gender, violence, and class in both urban and rural areas. Even though cases of violence against women are filed with the police, no adequate action is taken by the administrative authorities and there is no example where justice prevailed in the end. Moreover, medical practitioners are not cooperative toward the survivors of sexual violence and their families.¹³ Due to the fact that justice is not served in the majority of occasions, many cases go unreported. The perpetrators often threaten the victim's family and enjoy impunity, due to the rampant corruption that persists throughout the entire justice system.

Gender violence also occurs in indigenous communities and one of the most common forms is domestic violence. Interviews with two indigenous Chakma woman activists in my study reveal that, especially among the poor and middle-class families, the issue of domestic violence is not disclosed in public, in order to maintain the honour and status of the family. No substantial quantitative data is available on domestic violence, which points up the need for further research on domestic violence in the CHT. Within the indigenous societies of the CHT, traditional customs and laws are followed to resolve family disputes such as domestic violence and, in most cases, these do not ensure full justice for women. Moreover, disputes and cases of rape in rural areas are typically negotiated by traditional leaders and local political leaders, the victims and survivors of violence are most often compelled to be content with local arbitration.¹⁴ The women activists and lawyers I interviewed, however, were of the opinion that traditional leaders among the Chakmas are resolving cases of domestic violence in a more gender sensitive manner nowadays. It is relevant that the indigenous Chakma people in the CHT are followers of Buddhism and one of the key philosophical tenets of Buddhism is non-violence (*ahimsa*). Buddhism has had a great influence among several indigenous communities in the CHT, especially due to the initiatives promoted by the late Chakma queen Kalindi Rani. At the same time, however, the patriarchal nature of these societies and hegemonic masculine attributes among men serve as instigating factors that perpetuate domestic violence toward women.

Challenges of Indigenous Women

Because indigenous women have lower political and socio-economic status in the family, as mentioned earlier, they face numerous challenges in getting access to justice. These include a persistent

culture of impunity, a lack of awareness about preserving the evidence of rape, permissive attitudes toward domestic violence, a prolonged and ineffectual justice system, lack of cooperation from local administrators and police, lack of financial support to continue legal cases entailing violence, and men's attitudes towards women as objects. Because the entire justice system in Bangladesh is corrupt, women in general face difficulties gaining access to justice, and especially so when the case relates to gender-based violence. Indigenous women and girls confront more discrimination in this regard, due to their ethnic background, language barriers, reticence to communicate with police and administrative authorities, lack of awareness about how to file cases, preserving evidence of rape or gang rape, and fear of being stigmatised and rejected by society. Interviews with indigenous women activists and lawyers reveal that, in cases of violence committed by indigenous men against women at the rural level, the community tends to resolve the matter by mutual consent between the victim and her family, sometimes by killing the miscreant without informing the administrative authorities. This indicates the patriarchal mindset of men who wish to conceal the incident, both from broader society and from the administrative authorities. The rationale is to teach a lesson to people in the community people that committing such crimes against women and girls in the community does not show any courage, while also protecting the community's prestige by not informing the police. Despite these social and cultural barriers, more indigenous women activists are coming forward to work for ensuring women's rights, particularly access to justice in cases of gender-based violence. It is imperative that the indigenous women's movement be encouraged, since it has a long way to go to ensure indigenous women's human rights and to combat all forms of violence.

Common Concerns

In conclusion, this paper has established that violence against indigenous women occurs both in the inter- and intra-community levels. It has analysed the factors that lead to gender-based violence toward indigenous women in the CHT from an indigenous feminist perspective by emphasising the need to study gender-based violence from the subjective location of the researcher as an indigenous woman. The CHT has undergone a number of geo-political and economic changes related to the forces of globalisation that have adversely affected indigenous women and one manifestation is gendered violence. This study conducted interviews with indigenous women activists and indigenous women lawyers to explore the current situation of gendered violence and the challenges women face. National policy measures do not adequately address indigenous women issues and concerns. A majority of the perpetrators of violence against indigenous women from 2007 to the middle of 2016 were from non-indigenous backgrounds. It is a matter of great concern that women from all age groups and socio-economic classes in indigenous societies do not receive justice in most cases of violence perpetrated against them. Domestic violence is a matter of continuing concern in indigenous societies. Although most indigenous peoples in the CHT practice Buddhism, they do not always apply it on a practical level in their daily lives. Incidences of domestic violence and rape are evidence of this. In most instances, disputes at the community level are handled by concealing the case from the authorities in the name of maintaining the honour and reputation of the community. It is clear that impunity persists, regardless of whether violence against women and girls occurs at the inter- or intra-community level. Despite these challenges, indigenous women activists are coming forward to raise their voices against all forms of violence perpetrated toward women in their respective indigenous communities.

NOTES

1. B. D'Costa, *Marginalisation and Impunity: Violence against Women and Girls in the Chittagong Hill Tracts* (Dhaka: Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission, IWGI, and Bangladesh Indigenous Women's Network, 2014), 9–10.
2. Fay Blaney, cited in Shari M. Huhndorf and Cheryl Suzzack cited in Shari M. Huhndorf and Cheryl Suzzack, "Indigenous Feminism: Theorizing the Issues," *Indigenous Women and Feminism:*

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Feminism in the Himalayas

Sonam Choden

Traditional Tibetan Buddhist society has placed the significance of education for nuns at the bottom of its priorities. However, if nuns are to achieve a status parallel to that of monks, education is crucial. There are very few centres in India that cater to the needs of higher education for nuns. One such residential institution near Dharamsala, Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery, is headed by Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo. The nunnery has reached many milestones in terms of achieving higher education for the nuns. This is a staggering transformation. According to Buddhist theologian and author Rita Gross, Buddhism has enormous potential to aid in gender deconstruction, if we employ the philosophy taught by the Buddha. However, Tibetan Buddhism still gives men many advantages over women, however. For example, I do not remember receiving blessings from a female Buddhist teacher until I recently met Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo recently. Currently, the majority of writings on nuns and Tibetan Buddhist women are authored by western writers. More women from ethnically Buddhist communities should record their struggles caused by invisible patriarchy.

The Saga of Nuns in Tibetan Buddhism

The resolution to generate merit by undertaking righteous actions is a unique element of Tibetan Buddhism. Cultivating spiritual awareness is a principal motive for dedicating one's life to Buddhism. Dharma, for the sake of benefitting the world and oneself, is integrally linked with the practice of celibacy, and yearning to study Buddhism in a more profound way serves as a major motivating force. Based on their spiritual commitment, nuns dedicate their entire lives to Dharma practice. In a close-knit community, faith also plays a tremendous role. In addition, it is imperative to understand the socio-economic conditions of the nuns. Nuns choose a monastic life for themselves for many reasons, such as lacking formal education at school and sometimes hoping to escape arranged marriages. Sometimes a death or an ill-fated incident in the family triggers their decision. In a world where women are considered to be docile and submissive beings, the quest for gaining merit is often a reason nuns give in to the oppressive structures of monastic authority. Misogyny is so deeply rooted that the nuns are made to believe that their life as a woman is due to their negative *karma* in past lives. The feeling of inferiority is normalised to such an extent, I was told, that nuns feel they must sit behind the monks, for fear of being ridiculed.

Why Are There Fewer Female Buddhist Teachers?

The gender gap is huge and the trend toward women's subordination is universal and not just limited to nuns. According to a recent statement released by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), considering the current rate of progress, it will take 70 years to bridge the gender gap. Nuns are not exempt. It baffles me to see the small number of female Buddhist teachers, but this is a very stark reality in the Tibetan Buddhist community. The concentration of nuns in Sikkim is visibly very low. Some move out of the state to pursue further studies in Buddhism. Tremendous importance needs to be given to education for nuns, so that more nuns can qualify as teachers. According to one well-known monk, understanding the context and the era during which the Buddha was born is crucial. The environment was extremely discriminatory and did not favour women. Since society at that time considered women to be inferior, they were deprived of education. In those days, only men had the privilege of receiving education. Women were relegated to a secondary position. This is how the cycle

of rebirth has worked. If women had received opportunities to educate themselves, then there would have been many female incarnate lamas by now. This makes me question the concept of gender. As Rita Gross observed, “Buddhists do not believe in the existence of a permanent, abiding self; their attitudes and actions nevertheless indicate that they do believe in the real existence of gender.”¹ This statement requires explanation.

There are numerous examples to illustrate discriminatory attitudes towards nuns and women in general. The perception of women as being much more sex-obsessed than men is still evident in the greater number of restrictions imposed upon women, as if women need more rules to controlling their sexuality than men do. Yet this preconception about women’s uncontrollable sexuality does not match social realities; in fact, the opposite seems to be more likely. However, gender discrimination seems inescapable. The social and cultural construction of gender and sexuality have relegated women to a subordinate position. Likewise, women in nunneries are treated as second-class institutions.

The Question of Superiority

The order of nuns in Buddhism began with Buddha ordaining his aunt, Mahaprajapati, after several requests. Yet Tibetan Buddhist society is yet to sanction the *bhikkhuni sangha*. In terms of social status, monks are considered to be on a higher ground because male bodies are given an edge and considered superior. While talking to some high monks, I got a sense that female sexuality is regarded as profoundly impure.

Women have been portrayed in both a positive and negative light in Buddhist texts. The strong reproductive demands, menstruation, and childbirth that women experience are seen to be extremely difficult situations and the only rational inference is that these sufferings are due to unwholesome choices made in past lives. Consequently, I have been offered compassionate advice to pray for a male rebirth. This was a crushing experience, especially coming from someone close to me. There is a rampant belief that the life of a woman is a waste and that one lives the life of a woman due to negative karma accumulated in the past. The illusion that women are inferior is created by age-old patriarchal norms that unfortunately still exist today. Sadly, women internalize these feelings of inferiority.

However, the Tibetan spiritual leader His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama has been very supportive in advocating equality between monks and nuns. Higher levels of studies have been introduced in the monasteries and nuns are now able to get doctorates in Buddhist philosophy. At present, all the higher incarnate monks in the monasteries are male. Hopefully this will change as more nuns get higher levels of knowledge in Buddhist philosophy and are able to teach monks as well as nuns and laypeople. Rinpoches are highly knowledgeable and compassionate beings. Surely women are also able to achieve those qualities.

Enlightenment for All?

The way to enlightenment propagated by the Buddha was equal for all living creatures. Yet, in Buddhist texts women have been represented both in positive and negative lights. There have been a number of great female Buddhist teachers and yogic practitioners, such as *togdemas*. **Mahāprajāpatī** Gautami is a familiar name while reading about women in Buddhism. In Buddhist mythology, Māra (also known as the lord of death) sent his daughters to seduce the aspiring Buddha as he sat in meditation. Such portrayals of women consigns them to a lower position while delegating men to a comparatively higher ground.

Among positive portrayals, the story of Tārā delivers a very strong message about equality.

Ordinarily, tributes are paid to women who earn merit through hardships, but then women are encouraged to switch to a male body at the time of enlightenment. The *bodhisattva* Tārā, however, possessed all the qualities of wisdom and compassion she needed to quickly reach the state of Buddhahood, traditionally considered accessible only to males. She was a princess named Wisdom Moon and a devout Dharma practitioner who excelled in meditation practice. As she neared the attainment of enlightenment for the benefit of all beings, a monk approached her and mentioned how sad it was to see a woman trying to attain enlightenment. He said she would have to be born as a monk to achieve the state of *nirvāna*. The *bodhisattva* Tārā immediately vowed to be born as a woman and attain enlightenment in a female body. Hence, Tārā was successful in attaining the prestige and power that was previously given only to her male counterparts, without dismissing or overpowering them. Today Tārā, saviouress of universal compassion, is one of the most popular female deities in Tibetan Buddhism.

Rita Gross has written:

One of my much desired stories for exemplifying many of the points that need to be made when considering Buddhism and gender are found in a seventeenth-century Tibetan textual evidences describes how Tara, one of the favourite Tibetan female deities came into being. Just like all the glorious beings in Buddhist mythological legends, she was a human being once, engaged in the same meditation practices we do. After years of practice, she finally attained enlightenment. The monks around her suggested that she could (and should) now take on a male rebirth. Instead of doing so, she told them, “In this life, there is no such difference as ‘male’ and ‘female’...and therefore, clinging to ideas of ‘male’ and ‘female’ is quite insignificant. Weak-minded worldly beings are always illusioned by this.” She then vowed to take female form continuously through her long career as an advanced Bodhisattva, what some would call a female Buddha.²

This story depicts all the issues. It shows how Tārā claims the labels “male” and “female” to be worthless. The labels are acknowledged to be worthless by a woman who achieves enlightenment in female form, even when the monks ask her to take a male form.

Buddhism has all the metaphysical tools required to enunciate gender equality, yet historically it has often been ineffective to do so. Rita. M. Gross’s *Buddhism after Patriarchy* has drawn attention to how views about women’s inferiority are made to appear natural. Nuns and monks are expected to provide spiritual services to the people, yet there is a disparity in the kinds of services they extend. Nuns carry out the menial labour while monks traditionally serve as scholastic masters for the community. Monks are financially more stable than nuns and earn greater social capital through the rituals they perform. Nuns are rarely invited to perform ritual ceremonies. Even if they are invited, unlike monks, they are expected to return to their nunneries and show up for more rituals the next day.

The conditions of the nuns are bound to remain stagnant if they are shoved into silence again, since things have been running quite smoothly for centuries. The system has remained unchallenged and the invisible effects of patriarchy are rarely acknowledged. Most of the nuns do not even question the age-old conventions and they love and continue to respect the monks.

When the Buddha gave his approval for the first women to be allowed into his community, women joined the community across lines of caste and class. The *bhikkhuni* community grew from there. During the first millenium, the *bhikkhuni* order flourished in India and elsewhere. Up to today, handfuls of nuns have traveled to Hong Kong, Korean, and Taiwan to receive the ordination. His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama has been a catalyst of change in bringing about much-needed awareness about the

bhikkhuni ordination in the Tibetan tradition, but he has also stressed that the decision cannot be made by one person; the matter has to be agreed upon by the whole Tibetan monastic community in exile.

I stress the importance of introducing the *bhikkhuni* ordination primarily because one should complete one's *vinaya* education in order to gain a *geshe* degree and Tibetan nuns are not given access to the *vinaya* texts. The nuns' ability to make an impact in society is directly related to the standard of education they receive. In countries where nuns have good Buddhist education, they have been able to practice with greater freedom and have become more skilled in helping society. The lack of higher ordination has had an impact on nuns in Tibetan society. Tibetan monks were able to study philosophy for many years and achieve the title of *geshe*, but nuns did not have that freedom.

Fortunately, the situation is now changing for the better. These days most of the nunneries, if not all, some have introduced education programs similar to what the monks have. The contributions and advancement of nuns in Tibetan society is very important, especially when practicing Dharma helps propagate gender equality and similar opportunities for both women and men to fully develop their potential. If Buddhism does not fully value women, then people will view Buddhism as irrelevant to contemporary society.

The Buddha taught equality for all sentient beings, but Buddhist institutions often fail to provide equal opportunities for nuns to practice and get ordained. When discussing the position of nuns and laywomen in Vajrayana Buddhism, we must not allow our attention to drift from men's responsibilities. More gender training needs to be provided for men as well as women. In the process, men may discover that treating women more fairly will not only be acceptable but also beneficial for them. The process of increasing gender awareness in society may be slow and may even stagnate sometimes, but there are many reasons to forge ahead, to improve attitudes toward women, both monastic and lay. With greater awareness about gender equity, Buddhist women can become leaders on the path of valuing all human beings equally.

Being a Nun

We cannot view nuns as rejecting society. They are simply enrolled in an alternate social system. After a nun joins a nunnery, she is expected to take up the responsibilities of ritual practice. This responsibility rotates among the nuns according to seniority. The nuns are required to create sculptures out of butter, prepare offering cakes, and procure the materials required for the ritual event. Every day, the nuns go to the prayer hall to arrange the butter lamps, clean them, fill them, clean the bowls, make offerings of water, and so on. The procedures are almost the same in all the nunneries I have visited. The most important position in the nunnery is the head nun. Every senior nun gets an opportunity to hold this position after completing the duties of the other positions in the nunnery. The head nun keeps track of everything, including disciplinary matters. In many nunneries, she functions as the central decision maker in absence of the senior monk, who mostly travels to raise funds for the nunnery.

This research has been conducted over a number of years, keeping a feminist framework in mind. Because the specific historical context and geographical location of the subjects have been taken into account, I regard my approach as Himalayan feminism. With this research, I aim to contribute one more perspective in advocating for the equal treatment of women.

NOTES

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NUNS IN THE KHMER THERAVĀDA TRADITION IN VIETNAM'S MEKONG DELTA

Thi Hong Cuc Nguyen and Thi Bich Ly Le

Theravāda Buddhism was introduced long ago to Vietnam, especially in the Mekong Delta region. This Buddhist tradition is found in a number of other Southeast Asian countries, too, such as Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Bangladesh. Most of the Khmer people living in the Mekong Delta region follow the Theravāda school of Buddhism and local traditions are strongly influenced by Theravāda Buddhist culture.

In this paper, we present an introduction to the philosophy and perspectives of Khmer Buddhist women and their experiences of learning and practicing Theravāda Buddhism. We will focus our discussion on the roles and status of nuns in festivals and some of the prohibitions that guide monastic life for women in Khmer Theravāda Buddhist society.

Theravāda Buddhism in the Mekong Delta

Religion plays an important role in human beings' social development. Theravāda Buddhism has had a major impact on the religious beliefs and spiritual life of the Khmer people who live in the Mekong Delta area of Vietnam. The pagodas and monks are involved in many events in the lives of Khmer people, from communal festivals to the specific needs of each village, family, or even individuals. Khmer people respect the monks, who have great prestige.

Like other Buddhist traditions, the rules of Theravada do not permit Buddhists to slaughter animals, steal, or talk nonsense. These rules are guidelines that stipulate proper behavior for Buddhists and help them make decisions about what they can do and what they cannot do. Step by step, these guidelines create a moral foundation for the lives of Khmer Theravada Buddhists. Khmer people are raised with Buddhism from the time they are a baby, so they are familiar with the tenets of the tradition from a very early age. As a result, Khmer adults observe right conduct, based on the principles they learned when they were very young. For this reason, Khmer Buddhists tend to be friendly, humble, and affable. Elders in the community are especially familiar with Khmer Theravada traditions and tenets, which they learned when they were young. In turn, they pass these customs and values on to their children and grandchildren.

Geography of the Mekong Delta

The Mekong Delta is the region of southwestern Vietnam where the Mekong River empties into the sea through a network of tributaries. The Mekong Delta is a large region of 40,000 square kilometers, formed from the silt of the Mekong River system. The Mekong Delta has a canal system that is good for river traffic. The ecological environment of the Mekong Delta is influenced by these physiographic conditions. The region is agriculturally rich and has a diverse population of farmers, including the Viet, Hoa (Chinese Vietnamese), Cham, Khmer, and others. In the 12th century, Khmer farmers very quickly occupied large areas with sandy soil that were previously uncultivated. Like the ancient ethnic peoples of the region, they lived together and maintained their own culture in the Mekong Delta, especially around Tra Vinh, Vinh Long, the coastal areas of Soc Trang, and the border areas of Chau Doc up to Rach Gia Province. Although the physiographic conditions differed, the Khmer people have preserved their social structure and special cultural traditions.

Khmer Theravada Buddhism in the Mekong Delta

The Theravada form of Buddhism was introduced to Vietnam by Indian missionaries from Sri Lanka and Myanmar passing through from Cambodia to the Mekong Delta area. These itinerant teachers attracted many people, including the Khmer, who welcomed them. Buddhism became the main religion of the Khmer and developed its own style, which became known as Khmer Theravada.¹ Since that time, Buddhism has had a deep impact on the customs and way of life of the Khmer people.

Buddhist religious practices play an important role in Khmer community life. In Khmer villages, pagodas are built where Buddhists can gather to hold festivals and preserve their customs. Khmer pagodas are not only places for community activities, but are also places where the Khmer's children are educated, especially in Buddhist values. Almost all boys and girls go to the pagodas to study together and learn the Buddhist precepts. It is easy to understand why the Khmer feel close to the pagodas from the time they are young.

There is a special Khmer tradition that all boys must enter the pagodas and become monks to repay the kindness of their parents. They learn the Buddhist precepts, good manners, moral philosophy, and other lessons at the same time. This is compulsory for all young Khmer boys. They may stay at the temple for some days, weeks, months, years, or forever, as they like.

There are no fully ordained nuns in the Khmer Theravada tradition, but there are women who observe eight precepts, either periodically or longterm.² Women who observe the discipline of the precepts longterm are called *yeay chi*. According to the Buddha, both nuns and monks are equally capable of traveling the path to liberation and achieving the enlightenment of a Buddha.

Women in Khmer Theravada Buddhism in the Mekong Delta

In the Khmer tradition, women go to the temples to study the usual school subjects and can also study Buddhist prayers, books, and traditional rituals. The temples generally invite monks to direct the activities of the temple. Elderly women take part in the rituals and often recite Buddhist prayers along with the monks. Women often read Buddhist texts, because they have good voices. They chant in Pāli and in Khmer language, called Samôt. Laywomen and nuns play important roles at the temples by joining in the rituals, even when there is no presiding monk, although officially only males have permission to do so.

The Pure Land tradition is a form of Buddhist practice that is still popular in Khmer Buddhist areas of Vietnam.³ Although this method is suitable for both men and women, the majority of practitioners are old women who want to accumulate merit. They devote themselves to the Pure Land path of practice by renouncing the distractions of worldly affairs. However, how much time they can devote to their practice depends on their family circumstances. Some of them live a religious life at home, while others go to the temple. They may build a small cottage at the temple, where they continue to study Buddhism, observe the discipline, recite prayers, and help around the temple. Those who stay at temples practice Buddhism quietly and perform ritual ceremonies at certain times of the year. They need to make arrangement for their own needs or seek help from their families. After learning Buddhism from some time, they may cut their hair, shave their eyebrows, wear black or white clothes, and go for refuge in the Three Jewels. They may choose one of three levels of discipline: (1) five precepts (no killing, no stealing, no harmful language, no sexual misbehavior, and no use of intoxicants); (2) eight precepts for a day, which entails taking just one meal a day, before noontime); or (3) the ten precepts.

The *yeay chi* need to inform the *sangha* when they commit transgressions of the discipline. They

perform rituals of repentance four times a month, on the full moon, new moon, and quarter moon days of the lunar month. Laywomen may also invite members of the *sangha* to their homes to perform rituals for purifying transgressions. According to the seriousness of the *yeay chi*'s offence, the *sangha* may decide on a light or heavy punishment. A light punishment for a small offense might be to read Buddhist prayer books and make a promise not to repeat the offense. A heavy punishment might require a *yeay chi* to observe the 348 *bhikkhuni* precepts for nuns.

The Roles of *Yeay Chi* at Temples and Family Rituals

Every year, Khmer people conduct many traditional rituals that have Theravāda characteristics, such as the New Year festival (Bun Chol Chnam Thmay), paying respect to the ancestors (Bun Sene Đōnta), worshipping the moon (Bun Okombok), the *kathina* festival (Bun Kathan), and so on. Khmer folklore rituals are also organized in Theravāda style at the pagodas. During this time, Buddhist women take turns cooking food for the monks. They assemble in many small groups (*wén*) to clean, prepare food, and decorate the temples. Each group represents four or five families. At night, after they finish their tasks, the women take part in reading Buddhist prayer books with monastics and elders (*achar*).⁴ All the families tend to be proud of having *yeay chi* in their families. Of all the people who gather, the *yeay chi* are best at reading Buddhist prayer books, understanding ethics, and keeping good discipline. They act as mirrors for the behavior of all the members of each family. During traditional festivals, members of each family make offerings to the *sangha* and request certain rituals, blessings, and contemplations (“quiet time”). The *yeay chi* facilitate these interactions, connecting all members of the family and guiding them to help preserve these traditional cultural activities.

Taboos for Women in Khmer Theravada Buddhism

According to the Buddhist monastic rules, Buddhist women are prohibited from certain activities. First, they are not allowed to touch monks, either their clothes or their bodies. According to tradition, women and men are not supposed to touch each other. This applied especially to monks and nuns, who have renounced family life and observe precepts (*sila*), the rules of conduct that are the foundation of the Buddhist way of life.

Second, women are not allowed to sit next to monks who are teaching Dharma, so the monks' attention will not become distracted. Third, women are not allowed to sit in a closed room when talking to a monk to avoid any misbehavior. Fourth, women should wear modest clothing when visiting a temple, out of respect. Fifth, women should not be allowed to wear hats, shoes, or slippers out of respect for the Buddha, to maintain the purity and solemn atmosphere of the temple.

Conclusion

According to the Khmer view, entering the religious life and becoming a Buddhist monk does not mean that one has become a Buddha, because one keeps one's personality and individual identity. All those who follow the Buddhist philosophical system try to cultivate the path to *nirvāna* by practicing *sila*, the code of conduct set forth by the Buddha, which is not merely a set of prohibitions. Following the Buddhist path also means practicing *dāna*, or giving without any limits, and *sati*, meaning attentiveness or mindfulness, focusing the mind closely on a given object. For this reason, the *yeay chi* follow the 348 precepts for nuns. Women in the Khmer Theravāda tradition focus on cultivating virtue, having a pleasant personality, and maintaining good moral conduct. They wish to bring blessings and

virtues to their children, their grandchildren, and to society at large. The role of Khmer laywomen and nuns is to preserve and spread Khmer cultural values. They contribute to stability in society and social activities for Khmer community development.

NOTES

1. Thich Phuoc Tien, *Theravada: From Traditional to Modern* (Hanoi: Vietnam National University, 2014).
2. Pham Thi Phuong Hanh, *Khmer Culture: The Beauty in Cultural Identity in Vietnam*, (Hanoi: National Publishing House, 2012), 112.
3. Le Huong, *The Mien of Vietnam* (Saigon: Khai Tri Publisher, 1969), 148.
4. *Achar* refers to intellectuals or elder monks who lead the community in rituals. Because women observe a limited number of precepts, these *achar* are usually male.

Perfection of Filial Piety in Buddhism: A Study of Lady Clara's Social Welfare Activities in Hong Kong

Kwong Chuen (Kenneth) Ching

Lady Clara's social welfare activities to benefit Buddhism and society during the 1920s and 1930s in Hong Kong are well known. Her early contributions included providing Buddhist education for nuns and laywomen, and general education for the poor. Later, she established Tung Lin Kok Yuen as a permanent institution for propagating Buddhism.¹

The strict application of traditional academic disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and anthropology to explain religious behavior tends to reduce research findings to collective behaviors and to neglect individuals' search for meaning in the religious context.² Some theorists using liberal feminist methodologies have also been critiqued by other scholars for neglecting to study individuals' everyday lives³ and for not being aware of the diversity, richness, and values of Buddhists of different cultures.⁴ Although local scholars have conducted several studies on Lady Clara's life, these have taken a more historical approach.⁵ This research project fills a gap by studying Lady Clara's social welfare activities from a Buddhist perspective.

This paper adopts a Buddhist studies approach to gender, based on historical texts that record the life of Lady Clara. It begins by drawing on scholarly studies of the Buddha's teachings about filial piety at different stages of Buddhist development. Within this framework, the paper then examines the social welfare activities of Lady Clara during different periods of her life: prior to the 1920s, the 1920s, and the 1930s. The paper concludes with an analysis of Lady Clara's vision and her view of women's roles and abilities in relation to Buddhism teachings on filial piety. It also investigates Lady Clara's claims about the importance of Buddhism for transforming the world and the important roles women play in the family, society, and country.

Buddhist Ethics and Filial Piety

In the study of Buddhist ethics, it is important to approach questions of ethics from within the Buddhist worldview,⁶ according to which everything operates within the framework of dependent arising, and the rebirth of individuals operates within a theory of morality of *karma* (actions) and conditioned effects.⁷ One's liberation is not determined by following moral instructions imposed by a supreme deity nor is it confined to a certain social class or norms.⁸

Although scholars previously agreed that, although both monastics and laity practiced filial piety in early Buddhism,⁹ there was no clear record of this teaching in the *sutras*. More recently, Guang Xing concluded that filial piety is mentioned in many early Buddhist texts and is one factor involved in actions and consequences.¹⁰ Filial piety was an aspect of Indian Buddhist ethics;¹¹ both monastics and laypeople were taught to support their parents in this life¹² and to pay reverence to deceased ancestors.¹³ Filial piety in early Buddhism was understood as: a way to express gratitude to one's parents, a central virtue, and a major pillar of the social order.¹⁴

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the concept of filial piety was universalized to cover all sentient beings because one's parents in previous lifetimes might have been reborn as any one of them.¹⁵ Filial piety is viewed in a general way as one's duty towards four groups in society: parents; all sentient beings; the Triple Gem, including the Buddhist clergy; and the king.¹⁶ This thinking may underlie the *bodhisattva* vow to save all sentient beings, since all sentient beings have been our parents in the past.¹⁷

In Chinese Buddhism, in response to challenges from Confucian and Daoists, eminent Buddhist monks quoted many Buddhist texts that teach filial piety: to serve one's parents, serve the ruler, and cultivate good character.¹⁸ Various dharma services adopted certain sutras in Chinese offering rituals have been a tradition, one example is the Ullambana Sūtra, teaches offering to deceased mother and ghosts.¹⁹ Subsequently, filial piety was recognized to be a teaching in Chinese Buddhism and it was rooted from early Buddhism (Ch'en 1968).

Lady Clara and Her Buddhist Life

In the autobiographical notes published in her *Mingshan youji* (Travelogue of Famous Mountain) in 1934, Lady Clara wrote that disasters were the result of a deterioration in people's character and that the failure of materialist Western thinking to prevent the outbreak of war in Europe exposed its weaknesses. At such a time, "people begin looking to Asian cultures to provide solutions, and to the Buddhist teachings, foremost among them."²⁰

Now the world is a mess. Dangers are everywhere. Another world war is about to erupt. There is no way to save the world except Buddhism.... We must promote public education.... and run schools to teach Buddhism.

Once I thought that, as human beings, we are all equal and virtuous. I feel pity that children are not educated because of poverty.... It would be wonderful if I could offer education to the destitute, to give them some basic knowledge of Buddhism, so that they can be good sons and daughters, good citizens, and good people to make the world a better place, and to display human beings' innate goodness....

.... Women are mothers of nations, they must be well educated in order to run good families. A good society is made up of good families. It is not correct that only males are offered education. For the sake of a good society and a good nation, we should promote public education for girls as well....²¹

Lady Clara came to the conclusion that Buddhism was a solution to the world's problems, especially in a time of wars all over the world. She understood the core Buddhist teaching to be the cultivation of human beings' innate goodness. As a woman living in lay society, she also thought that Buddhism regarded everyone as having equal potential. Regardless of gender, race, or class, she believed that everyone deserved an equal chance to receive an education and had the ability to build a good family, a good society, and a good nation.

Lady Clara's Life before 1920s: Filial Piety to Parents, Family, Monks, and Country

Lady Clara was born in 1875 and brought up in a Buddhist-Confucian family. Her Buddhist life developed under the influence of Confucian values, Taoist rituals, and the typical practices of Chinese folk religions. As early as her teens, she demonstrated filial piety toward her parents. Not only did she manage to save her unfortunate mother from committing self-suicide, but in accordance with Chinese custom she also went into deep mourning for three years when her father died in 1891.²² After she married Sir Robert Ho in 1895, at the age of 19, Lady Clara accompanied her husband in staying with her dying mother-in-law.²³ She observed filial piety not only toward her parents, but also toward her husband's mother. Nevertheless, in her early days, it may be argued that this filial piety was purely Confucianism or perhaps coupled with Buddhism.

In her mid-30s, Lady Clara started to learn more about the Buddhist teachings from Buddhist monks such as Taixu.²⁴ More importantly, after making her first pilgrimage to China in 1916, she became devoted to the Buddhist way of life. Not only did she become knowledgeable in Buddhism, but she also became a Buddhist laywoman by going for refuge in the Triple Gem at Mt. Putuo.²⁵ On the doctrinal side, she appreciated the profound teachings of important Mahāyāna texts, such as the *Heart Sūtra* and *Diamond Sūtra*, that she received at Lu Shan. In addition, she received teachings on the indigenous Chinese Buddhist schools, for example, on meditation from the Chan school at Jin Shan and on the teaching on principle and phenomena (*li-shi*) from the Huayan school at Zhulinsi. On the practice side, she was inspired by the compassion and great vows made by various *bodhisattvas*, such as Guanyin at Mt Putuo, Ksitigarbha at Mt. Jiuhua, Manjusri at Mt. Wutai. She also participated in Chinese Buddhist services such as the Ullambana ritual offering.

Gradually, Lady Clara came to understand the profundity of the Buddhist teachings and the importance of promoting Buddhist education for the clergy. Hence, she founded Buddhist seminaries in Hong Kong and China. To a greater and greater extent, as China was facing changes and challenges, she believed that Buddhism was the way to correct the social and moral decadence of Chinese society and its people. As a practice of Buddhist self-discipline, she moved beyond observing a vegetarian diet occasionally to becoming completely vegetarian after her mother passed away. She even stopped offering meat for ancestor worship, as was the practice in Chinese Buddhism.²⁶ From her mid-30s to mid-40s, Lady Clara began her lay Buddhist life and gained a comprehensive understanding of Buddhism. It may be argued that she perfected her filial piety towards her parents and family in a Mahāyāna way, and extended it also toward monks and animals.

Lady Clara's Life During 1920's: Filial Piety to Others Beings

In 1922, in her mid 40s, Lady Clara received the five precepts as a devoted lay Buddhist under Master Ruo in Hong Kong.²⁷ She became more proactive in her religious practice and paid more attention to educational and charitable projects for others. Lady Clara had already begun showing support for women at different levels. She encouraged her young female servants to study, because she believed in the importance of women being able to read and write.²⁸ Also, she participated in the anti-foot-binding campaign, the Society for the Protection of Cruelty against Animals, St. John Ambulance Brigade, and the annual Agricultural Show. It is evident that she was concerned about women and animals, due to her great compassion.²⁹

After another pilgrimage to China in 1925, Lady Clara visited monasteries in China to engage in Water and Land rituals that included prayers and offerings of food for the dead, including her deceased parents, ancestors, and family members, and for ghosts and spirits of all sides and at all levels. Out of great compassionate, she also began to organize these rituals in Hong Kong to benefit sentient beings, including the dead and the hungry ghosts, and financed them together with her friends. She also opened them up so that the public could participate.³⁰ Due to the encouraging response from the public, Lady Clara also decided to institute public education on Buddhism.³¹

In her mid-40s to mid-50s, as evidenced by her taking the Five Precepts and her understanding of filial piety as implemented in Chinese Buddhist services, it may be said that Lady Clara perfected her filial piety toward friends who had died and those who had lost family members. In this Mahāyāna Buddhist interpretation, she expanded the scope of filial piety and universalised it to include not only one's parents in this life but in all previous lives.

Lady Clara's Life in the 1930s: Filial Piety to the Society

As the 1930s dawned, Lady Clara established Tung Lin Kok Yuen and her efforts to benefit society became more visible.³² In the early 1930s, she established two free schools for poor women in Hong Kong and Macau. In terms of gender, she did not differentiate between men and women in regard to their ability to receive an education and make contributions. She was described as an exceptionally benevolent laywoman who devoted her life to the country (China), Chinese Buddhism, social welfare, and charity work in the local community (Hong Kong). She demonstrated that there could be a harmonious relationship between Buddhism and Confucianism in contributing to society.³³ In her late 50's, Lady Clara's efforts to establish educational institutions demonstrated the expansion of her filial piety in the Buddhist interpretation to society and even to the country.

Conclusion

Through this account of her efforts to respect her parents and contribute to family and society at different stages of her Buddhist life, it is clear that, after becoming a Buddhist lay follower in her mid-30s, Lady Clara demonstrated her filial piety in the practice of Buddhism to her family and step-by-step to society. Moreover, she treated everyone equally, whether they were family, clergy, the public, and also

animals and the deceased. On gender issues, she clearly encouraged equal opportunities for women to learn and to take up the roles that would contribute to society and the nation.

Lady Clara had a deep understanding of Buddhism, gained through her own efforts to learn Buddhism from Chinese masters. She claimed that Buddhism was the only teaching that could help build a safer world by cultivating human virtues in Buddhist way. Certainly, she understood that Buddhism is neither a religion of blind belief nor a purely materialistic approach to life, but a religion that teaches followers how to cultivate compassion and wisdom and how to eliminate the three poisons: greed, hatred and delusion within each individual.

Viewed from a broader perspective, this paper has certain limitations. First, the study is based on only part of the available sources, particularly the records of Lady Clara and her daughter, Irene Cheng, and some other scholarly works. More sources need to be included. Second, the paper is focused specifically on Lady Clara's Buddhist life and her thinking on certain aspects of Buddhism, such as the *bodhisattva* path. Third, the topic has been approached from the single discipline of Buddhist Studies. There is still scope for an interdisciplinary study, such as between Buddhism and the economics of charitable giving, for example, or on Buddhist moral education or international perspective on world peace.

NOTES

¹ Betty Lai-kuen Wong, "Tung Lin Kok Yuen: Buddhist Reform in Pre-war Hong Kong," M.Phil. Thesis, University of Hong Kong, 2000, 2.

² Sociologists tend to explain phenomena based on the structure of the society, psychologists tend to explain phenomena based on mental or biological activities, anthropology tend to use human nature. Douglas Davis, "Cultural Intensification: A Theory for Religion," *Religion and the Individual: Belief, Practice, Identity*, ed. Abby Day (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), 8; and Peter Collins, "Accommodating the Individual and the Social: The Religious and the Secular: Modelling the Parameters of Discourse in 'Religious' Contexts," *Ibid.*, 143.

³ Nirmala S. Salgado, *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice: In Search of the Female Renunciant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 8–11.

⁴ Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Review of *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice: In Search of the Female Renunciant* by Nirmala S. Salgado, *Journal of Global Buddhism* 16(2015) 5.

⁵ Wong, "Tung Lin Kok Yuen"; and Siu Lun Wong and Wan Tai Zheng, *The Footprint on Shan Kwong Road: 80-Year Tung Ling Kok Yuen* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2016).

⁶ Charles Goodman, "Consequentialism, Agent-Neutrality, and Mahāyāna Ethics," *Philosophy East and West* 58:1(2008) 17; and Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 49–51.

⁷ Y. Karunadasa, *Early Buddhist Teachings: The Middle Position in Theory and Practice* (Hong Kong: Centre of Buddhist Studies, The University of Hong Kong, 2015), 18, 87.

⁸ In the Buddhist worldview, the doctrine of *kamma* underlies the advocacy and justification for living a moral life, the doctrine of *kiriyavādā* (theory of consequences) recognizes the efficacy of moral acts, and the doctrine *vīriyavādā* (theory of effort) recognizes the necessity and desirability of human effort in the practice of the moral life. *Ibid.*, 79–81.

⁹ For example, Hajime Nakamura, *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples: India, China, Tibet and Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1964); Kenneth K. S. Ch'en, "Filial Piety in Chinese

Buddhism,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 28(1968) 81– 97; John Strong, “Filial Piety and Buddhism: The Indian Antecedents to a ‘Chinese’ Problem,” *Traditions in Contact and Change*, ed. Peter Slater and Donald Wiebe (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1983), 171–86; and Gregory Schopen, “Filial Piety and the Monks in The Practices of Indian Buddhism: A Question of Sincization Viewed from the Other Side,” *T’ong Pao* 70(1984) 110–26.

¹⁰ Guang Xing, “Filial Piety in Early Buddhism,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 12(2005) 82–106; and Guang Xing, “Early Buddhist and Confucian Concepts of Filial Piety: A Comparative Study,” *Universal Gate Buddhist Journal* 45(2008) 169–210.

¹¹ Nakamura, *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples*, 268–69; and Jan Yunhua, “The Role of Filial Piety in Chinese Buddhism,” *Buddhist Ethics and Modern Society*, ed. Charles Wei-hsun Fu and Sandra A. Wawrytko (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1994), 35.

¹² Strong, “Filial Piety and Buddhism,” 173–77.

¹³ See Schopen, “Filial Piety and the Monks,” 124–26. According to Guang Xing, Nakamura and Jan claim that filial piety was a minor virtue in Buddhist ethics in India, but they seems to have missed a reference in the *Dhānañjāni Sutta* from the Pāli Majjhima Nikāya in which the Buddha explains the relationship between filial piety and the law of *karma* (Guang Xing, “Filial Piety in Early Buddhism,” 82– 84). Also, Strong’s claim on Buddhists practicing filial piety was only a compromise with Brahmanicai ethic and only at popular level based on the Matuposaka Sutta had missed a reference to other sutras, such as Kataññu Sutta, Itivuttaka and other passages in the Anguttaranikāya (Pali), which recorded the Buddha’s teaching of filial piety to support parents’ living and worship deceased parents’ as god or teachers (ibid, 85-86). Moreover, Schopen’s claim on practicing of filial piety was not definitely recorded in early texts was also missed referencing to the other sutras as mentioned in the case of Nakamura and Strong (ibid, 93-94).

¹⁴ Guang Xing, “Filial Piety and the Monks,” 84–86.

¹⁵ In the Samyuttanikāya, the Buddha says to his disciples: “Bhikkhus, it is not easy to find a being who has not formerly been your mother . . . your father . . . your sister . . . your son . . . your daughter. How is this? Incalculable is the beginning, Bhikkhus, of this faring on. The earliest point is not revealed of the running on, the faring on of beings cloaked in ignorance, tied to craving. S. II, 189-90. (Ibid, 95.)

¹⁶ According to the Mahāyāna *Mūlajāta Hṛdayabhūmi Dhyāna Sūtra* (Great Vehicle Sutra of Contemplation of the Mind Ground in the Buddha’s Life), four debts are listed and fully explained, to (1) parents, (2) sentient beings, (3) kings, and (4) the Triple Gem.

¹⁷ Guang Xing, “Filial Piety and the Monks,” 94.

¹⁸ Soon after the spread of Buddhism to China during the later Han Dynasty, filial piety became a point of contention. Buddhism was challenged by Confucians and later by Daoists for not conforming to Chinese traditions. In *The Classic of Filial Piety*, Confucius says: “Now filial piety is the root of (all) virtue, and (the stem) out of which grows (all moral) teaching... Our bodies – every hair and every bit of skin – are received from our parents, and we must not presume to injure or wound them. This is the beginning of filial piety. When we have established our character by the practice of the (filial) course, so as to make our name famous in future ages and thereby glorify our parents, this is the end of filial piety. It commences with the service of parents; it proceeds to the service of the ruler; it is completed by the establishment of character.” Ibid., 9–10.

¹⁹ According to Guang Xing, *sūtras* on filial piety teach the virtue of repaying the kindness of one's parents, and the precepts taught in the *Brahma Net Sūtra* are effectively a practice of filial piety.

²⁰ Translated from Lady Clara's *Mingshan Youji*, 107–108.

²¹ Wong, "Tung Lin Kok Yuen," 110.

²² Cheng, *Clara Ho Tung*, 7–9. Lady Clara's mother was severely criticized by her mother-in-law for not being a suitable mate to her father.

²³ *Ibid.*, 7–15.

²⁴ Wong, "Tung Lin Kok Yuen," 67.

²⁵ Jingrong He Zhang [Lady Clara], *Ming shan you ji: 1875–1938* (Xianggang: Dong Lian Jue Yuan, 1934), 96.

²⁶ When her mother passed away in 1912, Lady Clara gave up eating meat and fish entirely. Cheng, *Clara Ho Tung*, 98.

²⁷ Siu Lun Wong and Wan Tai Zheng, *The Footprint on Shan Kwong Road: 80-Year Tung Ling Kok Yuen* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 2016), 33.

²⁸ Wong, "Tung Lin Kok Yuen," 109.

²⁹ Not killing animals is related to the Buddhist view on rebirth and the wish to be born in one of the higher realms. Cheng, *Clara Ho Tung*, 98.

³⁰ Wong, "Tung Lin Kok Yuen," 95

³¹ Chung-hui Tsui, "Humanistic Buddhism in Hong Kong in Early Republic China: Based on a Case Study of Tung Lin Kok Yun," *Rained in China Benefiting Asia: The Development of Humanistic Buddhism in East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Chien-huang Chen (Hong Kong: Centre for the Study of Humanistic Buddhism, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2016), 602.

³² Wong, "Tung Lin Kok Yuen," 100–102.

³³ *Ibid.*, 103–104.

A Frugal and Generous Life: Bhiksuni Chi Cheung's Commitment to Education for Children

Kam Kong Lam

After the Second World War ended, Bhiksuni Chi Cheung saw that there were many children on the street who were starving and not in school, so she made a determination to open up an ancestral shrine and establish Tai Kwong Free School. Thus, with three classrooms, began her career in the education sector. After Hong Kong became a British colony, she was the first *bbiksuni* to directly participate in the founding of universal education. However, due to a lack of resources and her junior social status, process was very difficult. Despite the difficulties, with her compassion and great resolve, Bhiksuni Chi Cheung successfully overcame all challenges and made free education for children possible. In 1978, she was awarded recognition as a member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth II. This was the first time that a member of the Buddhist monastic community (*sangha*) had been honoured in this way and it set a glorious precedent in the annals of Buddhist development.¹

Bhiksuni Chi Cheung (1911–1999) was born into a very rich family. Her birth name was Kwok Man-chung and she had a younger brother and a younger sister. Her parents were businesspeople engaged in trade with Vietnam. She graduated from Canton Public Provincial Guangzhou Women's Normal School when she was 17 years old. She then was admitted to Sun Yat-sen University for the study of philosophy. Bhiksuni Chi Cheung was very active and dynamic. Once when she travelled to Hong Kong with the eight other classmates during the summer, she met Bhiksu Siu Hong and was initiated into the Buddhist teachings. Years later, she decided to take the tonsure and became a monastic at Ling Wan Monastery in Hong Kong. She then ordained at Qixia Monastery in Nanjing. After that, she travelled to different *viharas* and temples in Mainland China to learn about Buddhism from various well-known *bbiksus* and Buddhists. She studied the *Surangama Sutra* intensively at the Bodhi Buddhist Society in Hong Kong for three years.² She also studied other Buddhist texts and gave Dharma lectures in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Nanjing, Zhongshan, and other places. She founded Tai Kwong Yuen Nunnery in Tai Po in the New Territories of Hong Kong in the early 1930s.³

Buddhist Self-cultivation

Bhiksuni Chi Cheung was a conscientious Buddhist practitioner. Her life was nurtured by two eminent monks: Bhiksu Hoi Yan, her Dharma teacher, and Bhiksu Taixu. She trained with Bhiksu Hoi Yan for a long time and also benefitted from the revolutionary ideas advocated by Bhiksu Taixu. The teachings she received from these two teachers helped her cultivate her character as a frugal person who invested generously in grassroots education.

Bhiksuni Chi Cheung spent most of her time learning the *Surangama Sutra* from Bhiksu Hoi Yan and was praised by him as the “Little Master of Surangama.” Bhiksu Hoi Yan observed her for a long time and found that her character was kind and gracious, so he named her Chi Cheung, meaning kind and gracious.⁴ She said, “From now on, I will call myself Chi Cheung to express my gratitude to my respected teacher, in memory of him and his expectations, and also to remind myself of my vows.”⁵

When the renowned Bhiksu Taixu visited Hong Kong, he gave Dharma teachings on such topics as “Reflections on Hong Kong Buddhism” and “*The Sutra of Maitreya's Ascension*.”⁶ Bhiksuni Chi Cheung was greatly influenced and deeply inspired by his idea of Buddhism for Human Life (*renjian fojiao*). A Buddhist hymn written by Bhiksu Taixu says, “The Buddha we look up to and take refuge in perfected his character. By perfecting our own humanity, we attain Buddhahood.”⁷ This summarizes the main idea of Buddhism for Human Life. The idea encouraged Bhiksuni Chi Cheung to propagate Buddhism in the world. Even when she became old, she still took delight in talking about the Dharma lectures she attended that were given by Bhiksu Taixu at Lee Gardens⁸ in Causeway Bay, Hong Kong Island, in November 1935.

Establishing a Free Primary School with Few Resources

When World War II ended in mid-August 1945, various industries needed to be rebuilt from ruins. Bhiksuni Chi Cheung wrote, “Our motherland has been destroyed. We need to rebuild from the ruins. Various industries are recovering and the Hong Kong government is also urgently restoring the education system. But the students in rural areas are not taken care of. Concerned about the many neglected children in rural areas, with the mercy and compassion of the Buddha, I have tried my very best to arrange resources to establish a school. I opened up an ancestral shrine to serve as classrooms and used the last money I had to buy some second-hand desks and chairs to start a temporary school.... Under these difficult circumstances, a free school has been founded especially for overaged, unschooled children.”⁹ Because the purpose of the school was to help uneducated, underprivileged children and to propagate Buddhism, there was no charge for the students who were admitted. The school provided free stationary supplies for the students and some children also received free lunches. Due to a lack of economic resources, the teachers were all volunteers. Tai Kwong Yuen Nunnery provided free meals and accommodations, but the teachers received no salary

At the same time, Bhiksuni Chi Cheung started adopting orphans and destitute children from poor families and housing them at Tai Kwong Yuen Nunnery. She adopted ten more children between 1945 and 1950, and these children are now adults. Some of them have passed away, but the rest still feel a deep sense of gratitude for all she did for them.

In 1968, the Deputy Secretary for Education, Mr. Lo Ka Lai, delivered a speech at the graduation ceremony of Buddhist Tai Kwong Middle School. He spoke of how impressed he was by Bhiksuni Chi Cheung’s efficiency and capability in developing the schools. He said, “Buddhist Tai Kwong Middle School received subsidies from the government beginning in 1947 and developed a complete curriculum. One special thing is that the annual school fees of HKD 20 were paid by Tai Kwong Yuen Nunnery.”¹⁰ Even after the primary school began to receive government aid in 1947, students were still required to pay HKD 2 monthly and that was a burden to poor families. Mr. Lo expressed his deep appreciation to Bhiksuni Chi Cheung for her Buddhist compassion in offering free education. This was only possible because the nunnery paid the monthly HKD 2 school fees for students.

One may ask where the HKD 2 came from. The money was mainly raised by farming the rural land owned by Tai Kwong Yuen Nunnery. First, the monastics grew papayas, lemons, and oranges, and so on. Next, they gathered honey in order to raise more funds for education. However, keeping bees requires many flowers, so the monastics gave up planting papayas, lemons, and oranges, and started growing longan trees instead. There are still some longan trees in the nunnery now. These agricultural products were sold and the money was just enough for running the school.¹¹ For 30 years, until the government announced a new policy of free education, the school went through difficult times and was supported by the fruits of the nuns’ labor.

Founding a Secondary School with Bare Hands

The history of educational reform in Hong Kong since the late 1950s is summed up in the 1965 White Paper titled “Education Policy.” This document claims that the Hong Kong government only planned to subsidize secondary education for 15 to 20 percent of primary school graduates.¹² This shows that the number of seats in secondary schools was very limited. The situation for primary school students in rural areas was even worse.

As early as 1958, Bhiksuni Chi Cheung thought, “The number of students is growing and all the students are able to pass the primary school exam and get admitted to a public secondary school. That is very comforting, but I feel sorry for them at the same time. These students did very well to pass the exam and get a chance to go to secondary school, but because they come from underprivileged families, their parents cannot afford to support their further studies. Shouldn’t we, who are responsible for nurturing the next generation, feel regret when we see students excluded from secondary education and unable to develop their potential further?”¹³

Bhiksuni Chi Cheung wanted to extend Tai Kwong Yuen's free Buddhist education program from primary to secondary. She said, "All our school committee members started this program with the intention of educating children, cultivating Buddhist talent, and building the strength of students who received six years of Buddhist schooling, so that they could avoid negative social influences. Extending the primary education program to provide secondary education demands our immediate attention."¹⁴

From 1959, with compassion and strong resolve, Bhiksuni Chi Cheung turned all her disappointment into energy to start planning a secondary education program. The process of establishing a secondary school was full of challenges, since it required approval from many government agencies and the procedures were very complicated. She was just an ordinary nun with little social status, but with compassion and merit, she courageously went from Taipo to Hong Kong Central to meet with lawyers, architects, and all the many people involved. When the Secretary for Education first spoke to her, he impolitely said, "What? You are just a nun! How will you manage to build a secondary school? You'd better go back to the temple and chant!"¹⁵ Her determination was very strong, however, and she persisted in planning the secondary school. In the end, her wishes finally came true.

Bhiksuni Chi Cheung reflected on this period, saying, "Things did not go smoothly at the beginning when we were trying to establish the secondary school. We had to overcome many difficulties and it took lots of time to complete the project. I had to shamelessly ask donors for funds for the school. Once, I was almost knocked down by a tram because I was so tired, travelling alone to and from Taipo and Hong Kong Island to the Department of Education office to get the school going."¹⁶

In 1958, Bhiksuni Chi Cheung began applying to register Tai Kwong Yuen Nunnery as a non-profit organization and initiated a fundraising campaign to build the school. Construction on Phase 1 of the project was completed in August 1962. The building had only two storeys, with four classrooms on the ground floor and an auditorium on the second floor. To keep up with a huge increase in the number of students, Phase 2 was undertaken over the next five years, expanding the school with an additional 20 classrooms, a physics laboratory, a chemistry laboratory, and a library. Fortunately, with the help of other *bhiksunis* and students who appreciated and supported Bhiksuni Chi Cheung's dream, the campus was completed in March 1967. In that year, the school provided education for about 800 students. With increased enrollments, the nunnery could not afford to pay all the expenses of the school as it had before. Eventually, the middle school was approved as a private school in 1969 and began to be subsidized, which improved the quality of both the administration and the students.¹⁷ The middle school became an entirely sponsored school in 1975.

In the spring of 1971, Bhiksuni Chi Cheung opened a kindergarten in Kwai Chung, another district far from Tai Po. The kindergarten was not only an education center, but also provided Buddhist education to the children in the surrounding area. In 1980, Bhiksuni Chi Cheung and the School Management Committee initiated construction on Phase 3 of the main campus, an undertaking that included six special classrooms for different subjects. The project was completed in September 1986.

From 1945 onward, Bhiksuni Chi Cheung devoted her life to education in Hong Kong. Due to her dedicated efforts, from small beginnings in 1959, she was able to convert Tai Kwong Buddhist Middle School into a recognised secondary school. She did not receive a single penny for all her hard work. She explained that it was her vow and her principle to serve the school without any expectation of reward.¹⁸ Therefore, until she retired in 1997, she continually refused the Department of Education's offer of a salary.¹⁹

Reminiscences of the Students and Their Gratitude

On the eighth day of the fourth lunar month, when Mahāyana Buddhists commemorate the birthday of the Buddha, Bhiksuni Chi Cheung's former students regularly return to their old school campus at Tai Kwong Yuen Nunnery. As they celebrate the Buddha's birthday, they reminisce about their school life and the teachings they received from her. From among many significant stories, I have selected the reminiscences of four students to give an idea of the great influence she had on her students, both individually and collectively.

Mr. Ng is a retired business man. He finished his primary and secondary education with the

support of Bhiksuni Chi Cheung. He used to be a car dealer and has been involved in many social service activities. When his business began to prosper, he made a decision to donate one-tenth of his income to charity. He said that these donations were to express his gratitude to this kind *bhiksuni*.²⁰

Mr. Tang comes from a remote peasant family. He is very grateful to Bhiksuni Chi Cheung, whose assistance enabled him to finish his secondary school education. In earlier times in Hong Kong, as the youngest child in a poor family with eight brothers and sisters, normally he would not have had a chance to go to school. Today, Mr. Tang is the chairperson of two holding companies: one is in the retail industry and the other is a Chinese medicine firm. He set up a scholarship fund to encourage teenagers to study more and explore the world. His passion not only benefits local students, but also immigrant students in Hong Kong, including students from rural China.²¹

Professor Yuen graduated from Tai Kwong Buddhist High School in 1970. He comes from a family of petty traders or hawkers. He helped his family each day after school and spent most of his time in the street selling groceries. Currently, Dr. Yuen is a professor in the Department of Instructional Technology at the University of Southern Mississippi in the United States. He is very thankful to Bhiksuni Chi Cheung for educating him and serving as a model for him with her indomitable spirit, which enabled him to come this far in life.²²

Dr. Cheng is an anesthesiologist who graduated from Tai Kwong Buddhist High School in 1975. He comes from a family of eight and his parents worked as labourers at Tai Po Fish Market. He recalls that his life as a student might have ended if he had not gotten admitted to Tai Kwong Middle School and his life would have been completely different. In 1984, he graduated from medical school at National Taiwan University. Later in 2002–2002, he won one of two spots at Harvard University's Brigham and Women's Hospital as an Anesthesiology Clinical Research Fellow. As a middle-school student, he could never have dreamed that a child from a small fishing village could enter the top university in the United States. When he was almost abandoned by society, he could have hardly expected to achieve this elite status.²³

Conclusion

In her later years, Bhiksuni Chi Cheung maintained her concern for the development of education and paid special attention to educating children in impoverished rural areas of Mainland China. Coinciding with the more open policies adopted by China in the mid-90s, in 1998 she initiated education projects in northern Guangdong Province, sponsoring a secondary school by donating 3.08 million RMB and two primary schools by donating 20 thousand RMB respectively. At the request of the local government, the schools were named Chi Cheung Hope Secondary School and Chi Cheung Hope Primary Schools 1 and 2. She encouraged older students in these schools to do their best to establish more schools in the area. After Bhiksuni Chi Cheung passed away in 1999, her disciples and former students set up a Buddhist charitable foundation named Buddhist Tai Kwong Yuen Foundation to carry on her spirit and her mission of educating society.²⁴

Bhiksuni Chi Cheung was a simple, unpretentious nun. Her compassion and social concern spurred her to devote her life to bring education to poor children as a *bodhisattva* practice. She worked humbly, maintaining a low-profile and undergoing many hardships to provide an opportunity for hundreds of children to receive an education. She offered them hope for their future and allowed them to live with dignity. At the same time, she planted the spirit of Buddhism in the children's hearts and they spread that spirit widely when they grew up. Bhiksuni Chi Cheung lives in the hearts of her students and will be respected with gratitude by them forever.

NOTES

¹ Wing Six Ko, "The Origin and Development of Hong Kong Buddhism," *Dharmalakshana Institute Buddhist Journal* 3(1992) 21.

² Chi Cheung Sik, "Mourning My Respected Teacher," *Hong Kong Buddhism* 216(2000) 22.

- ³ *Commemoration Publication for the New Mileage of Buddhist Tai Kwong Middle School* (Hong Kong: Buddhist Tai Kwong Yuen Foundation, 2011), 8.
- ⁴ *Commemoration Publication for the 10th Anniversary of Buddhist Tai Kwong Yuen Foundation Limited* (Hong Kong: Tai Kwong Yuen, 2011), 8.
- ⁵ Sik, “Mourning My Respected Teacher,” 23.
- ⁶ Bhiksuni Chi Chueng’s adopted daughter, Ms. Cheung, shared this memory with me in Tai Kwong Yuen, September 10, 2016. For the content of Bhiksu Taixu’s lectures, see Jiao-zhou Deng, *The History of Buddhism in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Chung Hwa Book Co., 2015), 71.
- ⁷ Fo Guang Shan International Translation Center, trans., *Complete Works of Master Taixu* <http://www.hsilai.org/tc/365/1231.php>. Accessed May 9, 2017.
- ⁸ Lee Garden was a villa located at Jardine’s Hill, built by a rich businessman named Hysan Lee. His wife offered space there for Dharma lectures and Dharma services. The villa was demolished in the last century. Jiao-zhou Deng, *The History of Buddhism in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Chung Hwa Book Co., 2015), 63.
- ⁹ Chi Cheung Sik, *Commemoration Publication for the 14th Anniversary of Tai Kwong Free School* (Hong Kong: Tai Kwong Free School, 1959), 33.
- ¹⁰ Ka Lai Lo, *Commemoration Publication for the 10th Anniversary of Buddhist Tai Kwong Middle School* (Hong Kong: Tai Kwong Free School, 1968), 40.
- ¹¹ Ting Chiu Foo, “A Brief History of Buddhist Tai Kwong Yuen,” *Commemoration Publication for the 2nd Anniversary of the Nirvana of Bhiksu Tai Kwong* (Hong Kong, Qian Hua Lian She, 1999), 32.
- ¹² Hong Kong Government, *1965 White Paper ‘Education Policy’* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Government, 1965), 4.
- ¹³ Sik, *Commemoration Publication for the 14th Anniversary*, 34.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵ Interview with Ms. Wong, her adopted daughter, in Tai Kwong Yuen, September 14, 2016.
- ¹⁶ *Commemoration Publication for the New Mileage*, 39.
- ¹⁷ Lo, *Commemoration Publication for the 10th Anniversary*, 40.
- ¹⁸ Sik, *Commemoration Publication for the 14th Anniversary*, 34.
- ¹⁹ Interview with Ms. Wong, her adopted daughter, in Tai Kwong Yuen, September 14, 2016.
- ²⁰ *Commemoration Publication for the New Mileage*, 112–14.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 126–28.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 144–45.

²³ Ibid., 148–49.

²⁴ *Commemoration Publication for the 10th Anniversary*, 63–64.

The Work of Bhikkhuni Yin Yeung

Chuan Deng Shi

Bhikkhuni Yin Yeung (1958–2015) was born in Kaiping, Guangzhou Province. Bhikkhuni Yin Yeung was a practicing monastic, poet, writer, painter, calligrapher, and an accomplished orator. She was most popular for being a “professional patient” and the self-proclaimed “landlord of a dilapidated house.” She was a renowned spiritual teacher of great understanding actively concerned about living beings.

Before the Going Forth

Throughout her life, Bhikkhuni Yin Yeung experienced the vicissitudes of life from a young age. She was continually separated from her family, as her parents migrated from Guangzhou to Macau and later to Hong Kong in search of a better life. She was the fifth daughter among ten siblings, grew up mature in her thinking, filial, and helpful with family affairs. She spent her teenage years in Macau, graduated with distinction, and became a teacher at her alma mater, Pooi To School. She was loved by her teachers and respected by her colleagues and students.

In the 1980s, she wrote a column in the Macau Daily News using the pen name Ling Chu-feng and published prose and poems in Hong Kong literary publications. In May 1989, she collaborated with poets such as Yi Ling and Tao Li to establish the May Poem League and published its first collection, *May Poem Companions*, at the end of 1989. She received high praise for her poems “Passing through the Night,” “July 14th,” and “Dance of Ink.” Bhikkhuni Yin Yeung also studied painting and made a career as a painter, which is how she met her former husband. Her seven-year marriage ended due to the involvement of a third person, who was her close friend.

Sickness

Bhikkhuni Yin Yeung was sick on and off from the time she was thirteen years old, suffering from many different illnesses and unaccountable accidents, big and small. She had epilepsy, strokes, liver cancer, and lung cancer. Prior to being a Buddhist, she was aware of her doomed fate and was helpless to do anything about it, her days overshadowed by anxiety. One could say that her life was full of trauma. However, through all her lifelong endeavors and her experience with life and death, she became a role model for how to practice the Buddha’s teachings amidst adversity and changes.

Having been on the brink of death many times, Bhikkhuni Yin Yeung was able to lead the way for people from all walks of life who were suffering various hardships and came to her for advice. She shared her thoughts in several books, two of which are especially worth mentioning. Because she had experienced so much sickness herself and had met so many people with similar challenges, she wrote *Cure Your Illness with Smile and Ease*. The book describes her insights into both mental and bodily pain, the fundamental meaning of suffering, and the way to overcome it. In the preface of her book she wrote, “In my throes of illness most of my life, I have learned acceptance and fortitude to endure pain and adversity with courage and the will to live. Tomorrow is another day, and I will face up to what the future journey holds.” Another book, *Farewell Very Well*, was nominated for the Book of the Year 2014 in the non-literary and good living category at the Hong Kong Golden Book Awards, and she won the gold medal award in the My Favorite Author category. The book contains twenty end-of-life-care stories, revealing her wisdom, compassion, and ability to turn grief into joy, fear into courage, remorse into relief, and confusion into clarity.

The Going Forth and the Great Vow

Bhikkhuni Yin Yeung was ordained under Bhikkhu Sheng Yi in 1992 at Hong Kong Po Lam Monastery and received full ordination at Long Chang Temple in Jiangsu Province the same year. From the teachings of the Buddha, she understood that all the ups and downs of life can be explained by the

law of cause and effect. Therefore, we can cease complaining.

In 1994, Bhikkhuni Yin Yeung was appointed to help establish the Po Lam Buddhist Association in Vancouver, Canada, which was established to expound the Dharma in the West. During a near-death experience, she vowed to Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva that, if she survived, she would dedicate her life to serving sentient beings. This vow was the basis for her future unremitting efforts to care for people. In 2005, she initiated the establishment of the Compassionate Centre for Health in Vancouver to help care for sick and dying patients.

In 2008, Bhikkhuni Yin Yeung started giving talks in Hong Kong. After that, she frequently travelled to the United States, Canada, Malaysia, China, Macau, and Hong Kong. In all, she delivered well over fifty talks. Her talks were lively, with many humorous and inspiring stories. Her responses to the audiences' questions were always sharp and to the point. For these reasons, her teachings were greatly appreciated by her audiences, who included young and old. In 2009, she began writing a column for *Buddhist Compassion Magazine*. These published articles were later compiled into a series of books. She also shared her life experiences on the radio in Hong Kong and on Buddhistdoor Global.

In 2009, Bhikkhuni Yin Yeung also established the Centre for Spiritual Progress to Great Awakening (SPGA) in Hong Kong. Soon thereafter, she launched a program of spiritual care services in hospitals and homes for the aged in Hong Kong. In 2011, SPGA established a Buddhist Chaplaincy Unit in Queen Mary Hospital, equivalent to the pastoral care and chaplaincy programs found in Western hospitals. Led by Buddhist chaplains and a team of "spiritual envoys," it pioneered the Buddhist chaplaincy movement that now extends to ten hospitals.

Bhikkhuni Yin Yeung loved Chinese culture and literature. She excelled in calligraphy and Chinese classical painting, and was an accomplished poet. She held three exhibitions of her paintings and calligraphy, and two exhibitions of Buddhist arts and crafts. She donated the proceedings from these exhibitions to many worthy projects: the redevelopment of Po Lam Monastery, an endowment at Hong Kong Nang Yan College of Higher Education, earthquake relief in Nepal, and an orphanage in Sichuan Province in China.

Bhikkhuni Yin Yeung's Role in Creating Social Cohesion

Bhikkhuni Yin Yeung exemplified unconditional love and compassion in promoting unity in society and in the *sangha* community. On many occasions, she called upon different Buddhist groups to co-organize meditation programs and public gatherings for chanting scriptures in an effort to enhance unity and harmony. For example, after the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake, also known as the Wenchuan Earthquake, she entreated ten Buddhist monasteries in Vancouver to come together and collectively organize the Water Repentance Service to pray for the well-being of the deceased and wounded. Nearly two hundred Buddhists took part in that event. In the same year, as the abbess of Ta Kioh Buddhist Temple in San Francisco, she brought Buddhists together for a Dharma event (*fabui*) known as The Emperor Liang's Penitence Assembly and donated all the money raised to fund school reconstruction following the Sichuan Earthquake.

In May 2010, Bhikkhuni Yin Yeung accepted an invitation from the St. James Settlement to help create a telephone reminder service that functions to remind elderly people to take their medications in accordance with their doctor's prescription. Her aim was to encourage the SPGA volunteers to work with different religious groups and organizations. In August 2011, SPGA collaborated with the Hong Kong Buddhist Society for the Blind on a project in which our volunteers and the visually impaired together visited the homes of elderly citizens who live alone. This project continues today.

In October 2014, when Hong Kong was experiencing a period of constant political turmoil, she led SPGA to work with *Buddhist Compassion Magazine* to hold a Water Repentance Service that brought together 3,000 people to pray for peace and harmony in society. Since then, the service has become an annual event. Organized by SPGA, the occasion brings more than 1,000 participants together to chant, as a way to contemplate and repent for one's own and others' unwholesome actions of body, speech, and mind.

In October 2015, Bhikkhuni Yin Yeung led SPGA in working on a collaborative project with four other Buddhist groups – *Buddhist Compassion Magazine*, Subong Monastery, Tergar Monastery (Hong Kong), and Plum Village (Hong Kong) – that brought together 1,000 people for a group meditation. Bringing together monasteries that belong to different lineages and traditions was intended to educate people and encourage them to embrace the diversity of views, traditions, and so on. Similar events are now held annually. In 2017, the event is expected to draw 4,500 devotees. With this initiative, we are explicitly promoting meditation. The core theme is to instill compassion and kindness to create a more harmonious society.

In our *sangha* community, which consists of nine *bhikkhunis*, Bhikkhuni Yin Yeung was always a leader who inspired monastics and laypeople to cooperate with each other in total peace and harmony. When her health was good enough to be more active, she cooked all sorts of vegetarian meals, taught at Dharma assemblies, grew vegetables, and helped maintain the monastery. She insisted that the *bhikkhunis* rotate their various duties each month, so that all are versatile and able to take on different roles. Briefings to organize activities and meetings to review the preparations were held before and after each event. Her leadership inspired the team and she was well-loved by all.

A Program That Rewrites Your Life

In her writing, painting, lectures, and most importantly her demeanor in coping with illness, Bhikkhuni Yin Yeung demonstrated how to heal suffering with profound perseverance, dignity, and wisdom. She was devoted to helping the general public, specifically the middle-aged group, to develop a positive attitude and improve the quality of their lives. Every year, she responded to more than 500 varied requests for help and counselling. The requests included chaplaincy care for the sick and terminally ill patients in hospitals.

In 2010, she created a series of life education programs to meet the needs of the public. The programs run for one, three, or five days. One-day programs are tailored to address a specific issue, such as marriage, emotions, old age, illness, or relationships, including parent-child relationships. The “Beacon in the Dark” program is designed to help Buddhists learn the central ideas and etiquette of becoming competent Buddhist disciples. These programs, on themes such as “To Live Better” and “Free Life, New Mind,” help disciples understand and integrate the three trainings of Buddhism: discipline, meditation, and wisdom. Advanced programs are organized around topics such as “Faith, Vow, and Right Action” as well as “Right Thought.” Besides lectures, the programs include films, activities, and sharing sessions addressing the program theme. From 2010 to 2016, a total of 6,634 people attended these programs.

Due to Bhikkhuni Yin Yeung’s life experience and insights, she was able to manage personalities of all sorts and articulate Buddhist principles in skillful ways. As a result, people were able to repent and let go of the past. The practices she taught enabled people to restore broken relationships and saved people on the verge of collapse, helping them find a way out of their confusion. The reflections of some of the students are revealing.

1. Before the camp, my life was hopelessly at a dead end. After the course, I was as if spiritually reborn and full of hope and courage to carry on my life journey.
2. I find no words to describe my feelings, besides being very grateful and blissful. Seeing those who have suffered, I cannot help but cry and send my blessings in silence. I promised to do more volunteer service to make a difference to people and myself.
3. Bhikkhuni Yin Yeung used profound examples and easy-to-understand stories to teach us that by forgiving others, we are forgiven. I learned to let go of my attachment and think outside the box.
4. This is an excellent and practical course with multi-dimensional and realistic contents. I

learned to take responsibility and to focus on goals to achieve. Hong Kong needs more such courses to motivate people, so that this beautiful place is more harmonious, with better quality of life.

5. I could feel the camaraderie among us, and feel especially grateful for the enlightening teachings of Bhikkhuni Yin Yeung, her exemplary conduct, and valuable explanations.

In addition to these educational programs, Bhikkhuni Yin Yeung successfully set up a vegetarian restaurant in a program called Enhancing Self-Reliance Through District Partnership. Her aim was not only to advocate for healthy vegetarian food, but also to create jobs for cancer patients, emotionally disturbed patients in recovery, divorcees, and single parents.

Conclusion

For a period of six or seven years, from 2009 to 2015, Bhikkhuni Yin Yeung returned to Hong Kong. Among her disciples were two monastics and nearly 580 lay practitioners. Most of them became volunteers with SPGA. They responded to her call: "Love is beyond borders. Together, we overcome hardships." Wherever she went, she responded to people's needs in a variety of different ways, especially working in hospitals, homes for the elderly, and mental rehabilitation facilities.

Bhikkhuni Yin Yeung never stopped giving. Even as she was nearing the end of her life, she took the lead in advocating that Buddhists donate their physical remains to benefit others. She bequeathed her own body to Hong Kong Chinese University for medical research, specifically anatomical examination, for the purpose of teaching and research. In this tangible way, up to the end, she demonstrated her selfless compassion.

Breaking the Boundary: the Transformation of Buddhist Nuns of Hong Kong in the Contemporary Period

Fa Ren Sik

Owing to the influence of the development of Humanistic Buddhism (*renjian fojiao*), monastic Buddhists in the Chinese tradition in Hong Kong are classified into two main streams: the ritual monastics (*jing chan seng*) and the scholar monastics (*xue wen seng*). This paper will discuss the transformation of the Buddhist nuns in these two main streams in Hong Kong in the contemporary period, investigating how the roles of nuns have changed with regard to performing rituals and teaching Buddhism.

Historically, most Buddhist rituals could only be performed and presided over by male monastics, while nuns, regarded as inferior, could only be participants. This situation is now beginning to change in Hong Kong, due to the scarcity of monks in Hong Kong, and as a greater number of nuns are becoming involved in organizing the important rituals and assisting the ritual masters during ritual performances. Gender boundaries are beginning to wear away, because of the presence of female monastic members on the liturgical team.

At the beginning of the 1990s, during funeral ceremonies in Hong Kong, Buddhist rituals called Guangdong Yankou, which had been popular for several decades, began to decline.¹ Since 2014, the number of male ritual specialists (monks) performing the Guangdong Yankou has decreased to less than ten. As a result, the Guangdong Yankou is in a continuous process of transformation and a new development is the increasing involvement of a greater number of nuns, who perform the ritual with the cooperation of monks. This situation is similar for the performance of the Shuilu Fahui ritual in Hong Kong as well.²

Due to these new developments, nuns in Hong Kong are no longer in a passive, subordinate position. They now play leading roles in organizing the rituals and exercise the power to choose who to invite to preside over and perform the rituals. This change in the nuns' religious roles can be perceived as a reflection of shifts in social relationships, power negotiations and gender roles.

Historically, Buddhist nuns could only be students of the monks. This situation is now changing in Hong Kong. More nuns are being trained to teach both monastics and lay Buddhists, and some monks are taught by nuns as well. In Hong Kong Buddhism, teaching Dharma is no longer monopolized by monks.

Monastic Buddhists from Mainland China

The emergence of modern monks in Hong Kong can be traced to conditions in the Republic of China in the early twentieth century. Since the Opium War between China and Britain in 1842 and the signing of the Treaty of Peking in 1860, Hong Kong Island and the Kowloon Peninsula were ceded to the United Kingdom as colonies, which, in turn, led to Hong Kong's presence in mainland China. The political turmoil and social changes of a hundred years settled into a relatively stable political and social environment during the period between the 1910s and 1950s. A significant number of Chinese people moved to Hong Kong from different parts of Mainland China, particularly from Guangdong Province. A large number of immigrants, including monastic and lay Buddhists, formed the foundation for the flourishing development of Buddhism in Hong Kong. They belonged to three main factions: two schools of Tiantai, one from the northern part of China and one from Guangdong, and the Humanistic Buddhism of reform-minded Bhiksu Taixu.

The Influence of Humanistic Buddhism

During the early 20th century, Bhikkhu Taixu was the first to employ the concept of Buddhism for Human Life (*rensheng fojiao*). He also used the term Buddhism for the Human World (*renjian fojiao*), popularly known as Humanistic Buddhism. In Taixu's opinion, the decline of Chinese Buddhism during late imperial China was mostly due to an overemphasis on funerary and other rites devoted to

transferring merit for the benefit of the deceased. It was in 1933, during a public talk, that he explained the meaning of Humanistic Buddhism. He stated that Buddhism did not teach people to leave the human realm to become ghosts and deities. Buddhism also did not teach that everyone should become ordained and live a monastic life. Buddhism could contribute to improving society and the world. He therefore devised the term *rensheng fojiao* to remind people that, as living human beings (*rensheng*), they are in the best position to cultivate the merit and wisdom necessary to attain enlightenment. Buddhists should devote their energies to maximizing this opportunity, both for themselves and others.³

Taixu and his disciples regarded the overemphasis on ritual performances as the main obstacle for the development of Chinese Buddhism in the modern period. They advised that this problem be addressed by eliminating ritual practices or by performing the rituals for charitable purposes. This ideological influence spread to Hong Kong in the 1940s and 1950s. From that time on, monastic Buddhists began to be classified into two main streams: ritualist monastics (*jing chan seng*) and scholarly monastics (*xue wen seng*). Even though the ritualist monastics played an important role by providing financial support to the Buddhist community, they were nevertheless treated as “workers” and regarded as inferior to the scholarly monastics. Most Chinese Buddhists today pay more respect to scholarly monastics than to ritualist monastics.

In the Buddhist *sangha* in contemporary Hong Kong, the shortage of newly ordained monks has been a lingering concern, particularly among the local Guangdong Buddhist lineages. The data provided by Po Lin Monastery (Table 1), the only Buddhist organization offering ordination rites in Hong Kong, which they do every three years, reveals that very few monks have been ordained in recent years. Only 14, 27, and 16 local males participated in Po Lin Monastery’s ordination ceremonies in 2002, 2005, and 2014, respectively. Of this limited number of new monks, only a few showed an interest in learning liturgical rituals; the majority preferred the intellectual and meditative domains of study and practice. This tendency reflects the two categories of monastics, ritualist and scholarly, described above. The preference for scholarly monastics seems to be shaped by the scientific mindset of the Chinese Buddhist *sangha* in Hong Kong, reinforced by the intellectual impact of Humanistic Buddhism. A critical attitude toward liturgical rituals has continued until today, and has led to an excessive belittling of liturgical monastics. Due to the influence of Humanistic Buddhism, with its more “this-worldly” approach to Buddhist thought, the differentiation between scholastic and liturgical monastics continues to prevail in the Hong Kong Chinese *sangha*. Scholastic monastics tend to focus on the study and promotion of Buddhist doctrines, philosophy, and meditative techniques, which the younger generation of Buddhists deem to be more noble ways of learning and practicing Buddhism.

Table 1 **Number of Hong Kong Citizens Ordained at Po Lin Monastery**

<i>Year</i>	<i>Ordained monastics</i>	<i>HKSAR</i>	<i>Other Regions (e.g Mainland China, Singapore, Malaysia, etc.)</i>	<i>Total</i>
2014	male	16	119	135
	female	39	91	130
2005	male	27	243	270
	female	21	136	157
2002	male	14	149	163
	female	49	86	135

Source: Po Lin Monastery of Hong Kong

The Performance of Shuilu Fahui and the Changing Roles of Nuns

Because of a shortage of ritual specialists for the performance of Shuilu Fahui, all the monasteries organizing this ritual in Hong Kong today need to invite monks from Mainland China to perform the ritual. When monks are invited from the Mainland to perform the Shuilu Fahui, the abbot or abbess and the local monks or nuns are not responsible for the chanting. Instead, they are the hosts and organizers of the event at their temples or monasteries. Local monks or nuns are responsible for making decisions about when the ritual will be held and which group of Mainland masters will be invited to perform the ritual. When local monastics invite monks from Mainland China, they are responsible for communicating with their monasteries, arranging the ritual program, and organizing the logistics. Before the Shuilu Fahui begins, the local hosts make a speech before the congregation expressing their gratitude to the ritual masters. At the conclusion of the ritual, they again address the congregation to acknowledge the sponsors whose donations have supported the ritual performance.

According to my informants during interviews conducted with some nuns and abbesses during the Shuilu Fahui, local nuns who usually assist the ritual masters during the performance, are responsible for organizing the volunteers and allotting to them the various tasks that need to be done, including decorating the altars and preparing the offering materials. During the ritual, they act as stewards, assuming the responsibility for allocating positions to participants at both the inner and outer altars, helping them line up before entering the ritual spaces, and so forth. The nuns also look after the Mainland masters: preparing their accommodations, providing their daily requisites, ensuring that they have drinking water during the rituals, and the like. From the perspective of the division of labour, although nuns do not formally participate in the Shuilu Fahui, they have begun to serve as the assistants and organizers of the ritual. They now share a greater responsibility – perhaps a larger burden – for the ritual performance.

Guangdong Yankou

The Four Great Continents Yuqie Yankou (*sida buzhou yuqie yankou*) is a distinctive and magnificent ritual performance that is distinctive to the Guangdong Buddhist tradition. It is probably the grandest among all performative forms of the Yuqie Yankou. This ritual form originally emerged in Guangdong, in southern China, and was transmitted to Hong Kong in the early 20th century. It has been continuously practiced and is only preserved by the Chinese *sangha* in Hong Kong, since the tradition became extinct in Guangdong during the Cultural Revolution.

The Four Great Continents ritual has been continuously performed in Hong Kong, yet there has been a striking transformation in its ritual form due to a shortage of Guangdong ritual specialists. In the past 30 years, the passing away of professional liturgical monastics of the Guangdong lineages has hindered the continuation of traditional ritual performances, particularly the Guangdong Yuqie Yankou, including the unique Four Great Continents strand. The inadequate number of Guangdong ritual specialists has necessitated a transformation of its ritual form in order to preserve the tradition.

The monastic *sangha* of the Guangdong tradition in Hong Kong has faced a continuing shortage of new successors since the early 1990s. The scarcity of new recruits is shared by many other Dharma centres of the Guangdong tradition. Among the limited number of new local novices, only a few wish to acquire ritual and liturgical performance skills, due to the influences of secularism, scientism, and Humanistic Buddhism in the Buddhist community. As a result, ritual masters need to work hard to find disciples who are interested in mastering Buddhist ritual practices. There are clearly not enough local monks to support a grand Buddhist ceremony. This problem was clearly manifest when the Four Great Continents was held in 2015. At that time, there were only eight local ritual specialists left, four of whom have since retired. The four masters who remain in service officiate as presiding masters at the Four Great Continents during the annual Ching Ming ceremony.

Given the shortage of presiding masters to oversee large ritual events in Hong Kong, in order to form a team with an adequate number of qualified experts and to preserve the Four Great Continents tradition, local ritual specialists adopt strategies that alter the ritual form in a way that merges the Four

Great Continents with the provincial Yankou. Furthermore, monastics participating in the rituals are a mix of monks from Guangdong and other lineages, including both female and male monastics. This hybrid form of the Four Great Continents is best exemplified by the Dharma Ceremony of Four Great Continents Yukie Yankou Benefitting All Sentient Beings that was performed at Tsz Shan Monastery on February 17, 2014.

During that period, Tsang Chit (1974–), the abbot of Tsz Shan Monastery, was one of the few remaining experts on the Guangdong Yankou and Four Great Continents rituals. Although he was aware of the scarcity of experts and other ritualist monks from the Guangdong tradition to join the chanting, this highly respected monk acknowledged and acclaimed the power of the Four Great Continents. To overcome the limitation of smaller numbers, the ceremony borrowed the form of the Four Great Continents but employed provincial monks versed in the provincial chanting style in order to reinvent or forge a new form that could sustain the Four Great Continents ritual. Conscious that this was an innovation that deviated from tradition, the abbot and ritual specialist Tsang Chit justified this new form of the Four Great Continents by saying, “This time the rite is not necessarily Guangdong style... There is no differentiation between south and north.”

Moreover, in order to increase the number of participating ritual specialists, the ceremony broke through the gender boundary by employing female monastics in the event. This was a rare phenomenon in Chinese Buddhist rituals. Previously, most Buddhist rituals were performed separately by male and female monastics, in compliance with the norms of the Buddhist precepts. Although the inclusion of female monastics was unprecedented, all the nuns who participated in the ceremony were from the Guangdong tradition and all were professionals who specialize in liturgical performances and music accompaniments. The nuns were disciples of the abbot Tsang Chit and had frequently assisted him in liturgical performances. At this ritual event, the authority to define the ritual form was clearly in the hands of the ritual elites who had mastered the techniques and had expertise in the Yankou traditions of Guangdong and its provincial versions. These ritual specialists deliberately borrowed the form of the Four Great Continents and combined it with mainstream provincial versions in order to preserve the essential form and practice of the Four Great Continents to the greatest extent possible.

Increasing Numbers: Nuns Teaching in Hong Kong

Historically, Buddhist nuns could only be students of the monks. This situation is now changing in Hong Kong. A greater number of nuns are being trained to teach and give Dharma talks in both the monastic and lay Buddhist communities. Some also teach monks. Today, teaching Buddhism is no longer monopolized by monks in Hong Kong.

Since 1950, because of the limited numbers of monastic Buddhists and the influence of Humanistic Buddhism, a greater number of Buddhist nuns have joined the camp of scholarly monastics. Some outstanding nuns have also been trained by their masters to give public lectures and Dharma talks. These outstanding nuns include Bhiksuni Minsheng, Bhiksuni Manzhu, and Bhiksuni Foying (Table 2).

Table 2 **Buddhist Nuns of Teaching Buddhism in Hong Kong**

1951-1993	Bhiksuni Minsheng	Offered many public lectures and taught many different <i>sutras</i> every year from 1951 to 1995, including <i>Lengyan Sutra</i> , <i>Lotus Sutra</i> , and <i>Diamond Sutra</i> . ⁴
1961-2005	Bhiksuni Manzhu	Offered many public lectures and taught many different <i>sutras</i> every year from 1961, including <i>Lengyan Sutra</i> and <i>Sutra of Prajna</i> . ⁵
1967 Autumn	Bhiksuni Foying	Taught the <i>Sutra of Amita Buddha</i> on the invitation of Zhenming JingYuen. ⁶

Implications for the Future

Nowadays, a larger number of Buddhist nuns are actively involved in teaching Buddhism and giving Dharma talks. In addition to offering public lectures, teaching Buddhist studies, and expaining *sutras*, they also promote Buddhism through various channels, including the Internet, radio, and lectures at universities. Nuns are no longer relegated to a passive, subordinate position; now they play leading roles in organizing ritual events and teaching Buddhism. These significant changes in the nuns' roles reflect shifts in social relationships, negotiations within extant power structures, and changes in gender roles within Buddhist institutions.

NOTES

¹ On the Yankou ritual, see Xing Shen Chen, *Universal Liberation to the Hungry Ghosts: Yuqie Yankou Food-bestowal (Puji Youming: Yuqie Yankou Shishi)* (Taiwan: Taiwan Shufang Chuban Youxian Gongsi, 2012); Yeow Lye Hun, *Feeding Ghosts: A Study of the Yuqie Yankou Rite*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 2003; Yeow Lye Hun, "Yuqie Yankou in the Ming-Qing," *Esoteric Buddhism and the Tantras in East Asia*, ed. Charles D. Orzech, Henrik H. Sørensen, and Richard K. Payne (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2011); Charles D. Orzech, "Saving the Burning-Mouth Hungry Ghost," *Religions of China in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1996), 278–83; Charles D. Orzech, "Fang Yankou and Pudu: Translation, Metaphor, and Religious Identity," *Daoist Identity: History, Lineage, and Ritual*, ed. Livia Kohn and Harold D. Roth (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 2002), 213–34; and Fa Ren Sik, "Guangdong Yankou in Hong Kong: The Development of Buddhist Rituals under the Impact from Humanistic Buddhism and Western Culture," Paper presented at the International Symposium of Buddhist Philosophy and Culture in East Asia, National Taiwan University, Taipei, 2014.

² The Shuilu Fahui is an extensive ritual, requiring seven days and nights to complete, that aims to save all sentient beings from suffering in various realms of existence. Altogether, the ritual requires between 80 and 100 monks to perform all the ritual elements. Chan, Yiu Kwan. 2008. *Popular Buddhist Ritual in Contemporary Hong Kong: Shuilu Fahui, a Buddhist Rite for Saving All Sentient Beings of Water and Land*, Religious Studies, Lancaster University, UK.

³ Don Pittman, *Toward A Modern Chinese Buddhism: Taixu's Reforms* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), 169–81.

⁴ <http://baike.baidu.com/view/4463768.htm>

⁵ <http://www.zenheart.hk/viewthread.php?tid=43749>;
<http://www.alumni.cuhk.edu.hk/magazine/200706/htm/p04-05.htm>

⁶ <http://hk.plm.org.cn/gnews/2006729/20067296143.html>

When I learned the alphabet, I could not wait to be able to read. I longed to express what existed in my head. Through the prism of words, I would share thoughts. In eighth grade I wrote, “I want a formed mind.” By “formed,” I meant articulate, clear. My best friend at school always seemed to know how to say what she thought. Our teachers would smile. Both of my parents knew many languages. My father said that my thoughts would clarify as I grew up. I was not certain. Surely there was more to knowing than waiting. I watched my mother, tongue-tied and dissatisfied in English, but eloquent when reciting and explaining Chinese poetry. She kept volumes of diaries, half written in Chinese and half in English, eventually all in English. My mother’s diary was her contemplative practice, her meditation. I started to write, too. Maybe by making friends with words, I could make friends with others, and most of all with myself.

Later, I began to study Buddhism. I was drawn to the Tibetan language and the translation of Tibetan Buddhism into English. My teacher, Khyongla Rato Rinpoche, was delighted. He has a way with words, using very few that are easy to remember. He said to me, “Concentrate on the text. Don’t get distracted. The text will tell you everything you need to know.” These three sentences have guided me as a contemplative practice.

This is a study of a Mahāyāna *sūtra* titled, *The Prophecy of the Girl Candrottārā*, which explores the story of a girl’s enlightenment.¹ It illustrates what Khyongla Rinpoche said to me when embarking upon a translation: “The text reads you.” Every time we read a text, passages that may not have made sense the first time have the potential to deepen our understanding. The text help explore how the mind reads, listens to, and translates ideas in relation to our level of concentration, the degree of nondistractedness, and how much we allow the text to tell us – potentially, everything we need to know.

It is easy to read without a clean slate of mind. I can have an agenda, even without meaning to: Will this be good? Will this keep me awake? Who wrote this? Do I agree with it or not? If this teaching was spoken by the Buddha, I had better get something good from it. I hope I understand it. What does this say about my contemplative practice, if I can get so busy in my head trying to read something?

This scripture, *The Prophecy of the Girl Candrottārā*, was probably written in the third or fourth century CE. It was translated into Chinese in 591 by Chih-te, and into Tibetan in the ninth century by the Indian scholar Jinamitra. Fragments also exist in Sanskrit. A scripture about Candrottārā’s father Vimalakīrti, *The Sūtra of the Teaching of Vimalakīrti (Vimalakīrtinirdeśa)* was also composed around the third or fourth century. Some scholars surmise that the *sūtra* about Vimalakīrti was composed at a later date, having gained a hint from the present work. Others have concluded that it is a sequel because Candrottārā is the daughter. However for me, neither of these statements enhances my understanding of the teaching on the contemplative level; that provided in the *sūtra* itself. Some historical background puts into perspective how the story unfolds.

The *sūtra* opens with the standard setting of an environment – the city of Vaiśālī, on the upper level of a house in a forest grove – and the characters: the Buddha is living in the forest with his followers, including *bodhisattvas*, *arhats*, and monastics. In the city lives a couple, their newborn daughter, and the citizens. The text begins, “This is what I heard. At one time, the Bhagavān [the Buddha] was living . . .” Knowing the template does not mean we should dismiss the opening sequence. This description sets up the nature of the discourse to come, introducing an extraordinary birth:

Immediately after the girl was newly born, the home was pervaded everywhere by great light and the great earth also trembled. Outside the vestibule door, the gutters at the top of the house dripped with clarified butter and sesame oil. The weak, homeless, hungry, and suffering poor, and anyone whatsoever, were filled with bliss.

Do we accept the story as a descriptive fantasy and disbelieve the events narrated, assuming the tale to be an allegory and therefore not realistic? Do we suspend our expectations as we read? Is it useful to

compare what seems realistic and what seems fantastical against each other? Or do I let go of all those considerations and just read? My approach is to read and translate by sensing the sound of language aloud. I let the words set my motivation and then accept the world I have entered. Candrottārā doesn't cry at birth. Her hands are in prayer position and she speaks in verse:

By doing evil deeds in this life, there will not be
a beautiful rebirth in an immaculate body.
By doing evil deeds in this life, enjoyments
and riches at home will also not arise. . . .

She explains the purpose of her current rebirth:

. . . I heard the words: “The Buddha
acts without confusion for the sake of liberating beings.
Having produced compassion because of love for the world,
the Buddha adorns the world for the sake of mendicants.”

Hearing those words in space, then I saw
the Buddha adorned with the supreme marks.
Producing an unwavering mind for the sake of enlightenment,
my body leapt from that house.

By abiding in space, I uttered these words.
For eons I will put in effort as numerous as the atoms of a body of water.
I will never give up until I achieve enlightenment.
May I become a buddha, the supreme of the the two-legged ones.

With a shower of flowers, the citizens of the city celebrate. Stunned by her beauty, the men of Vaiśālī want to marry her. They threaten to kill Vimalakīrtī if they cannot. They terrify him. Should I note a dissonance with the portrayal of Vimalakīrtī as brave and brilliant in the previous *sūtra* about him? Is the dissonance of any consequence? Unafraid, Candrottārā remains calm:

Just as I have love for my father and mother,
likewise, I do continuously for all transmigrators.
Father, whoever loves like that for those in the world,
that one can never be harmed by others.

Candrottārā comforts her parents on the psychological level, explaining *karma*; on the practical level, she reassures them that she will choose a husband in a week's time. First, she must visit the Buddha. She embarks on her mission. Śhāriputra and Mahākāśāpa intercept her, wanting to know her intentions. Candrottārā remains undaunted:

Reverend Śāradvatīputra, [it is] about these words you have spoken, [233a] ‘After a long time you will become purified perfectly into enlightenment, which is unexcelled and completely perfected.’

Candrottārā explains enlightenment in terms of the law of dependent arising and emptiness:

Reverend Śāradvatīputra, as for the enlightenment that is unexcelled and completely perfected, it is without birth, without cessation; it is without annihilation, without permanence; it is not one meaning, not different meanings; it is without coming, it is without going; it is without expression, without arising; because it is without its own nature, sir. With regard to that, the one

who should become purified perfectly into enlightenment is also someone who is without objectification.

She discusses the realization of emptiness:

Enlightenment is without dualistic character; thus enlightenment is without duality, on account of being free from duality.

She speaks so confidently that Śāriputra concludes she must meet the Buddha. In his presence, other *bodhisattvas* question her views. She replies fearlessly and with confidence. When the *bodhisattva* Amoghadarśhin asks:

Girl, since the body of a woman is not able to become perfectly purified into the enlightenment that is unexcelled and completely perfected, why would you not change your female body?

Candrottarā states that sexual identity ultimately has no relevance for attaining enlightenment:

Son of noble family, all phenomena exist through the characteristic of emptiness; regarding emptiness, it is nonreversing and unchanging.

Śāriputra says to the Buddha:

O Bhagavān, it is like this: this sister is a great leader. She has put on great armor like this, purity together with speaking correctly, not even acting fearfully. She does not act meanly; the confidence of this girl is marvelous.

The Buddha listens and is delighted. As the reader, I am delighted, too. Candrottarā remains calm even when the other *bodhisattvas* address her as “Girl.” Each question, beginning with the way they address her, sounds dismissive to me. I want to soften the tone and translate them as much more generous-hearted and polite, perhaps allowing them to say, “Young lady.” The word used as the term of address in Tibetan is *bu mo*, which can be translated as “daughter,” “lass,” “maiden” – the equivalent of *kanyā* in Sanskrit, which can also be translated as “girl,” “daughter,” “virgin.” But as I read and begin to translate, I return to the word “Girl,” because the male followers seem unconvinced. Eventually, though, the steadiness and clarity in her replies win them over.

The Buddha prophesies her future enlightenment:

Having made those offerings for many ten millions of eons,
and having thoroughly matured many ten millions of sentient beings
in eighty thousand ten millions of eons,
will come one called “the Victorious One, Candrottarā.”

Elated, Candrottarā transforms into a young man to continue her enlightened activities in the world. Should I feel shocked or disgusted at her sudden change of sex, even after she has shown that her intelligence surpasses any dismissive assumptions about her female form?

This leads to another question: Why should I interpret this transformation as a pejorative about gender and the value of appearing in female form? Then again, is it not true that life in India was and still is more difficult for a woman than a man? If Candrottarā wanted to continue her enlightened activities, would it not be much harder for her to accomplish if she had to choose a suitor?

Immediately after ascending, the girl transformed her female body into an accomplished male body; the great ground in the world even quaked. A rain of flowers also showered down, and

the varieties of 100,000 cymbals of gods and humans played as well. All the world was pervaded by great light.

Candrottārā replies to my questions:

Previously I was one who had become a woman by nature;
now I am without that nature, composite, empty, insubstantial.

This subsequent entity is also empty and momentary,
a nonthing, immovable, composite, insubstantial;
it has become free from conceptualization and ideation;
it would become conceptualized, moreover, like a bird in the sky.

. . . The source of happiness arising is bestowing happiness to everyone.

At the conclusion of the *sūtra*, Candrottārā takes ordination from the Buddha. The Buddha tells Candrottārā to ask for her parents' permission to take the vows. Her parents state that their child has already been given permission; they have witnessed the magical display. For me, this is a powerful moment. The parents do not suddenly hesitate due to their daughter's change of gender.

As the academic Diana Paul states, "Rejection of marriage in society at that time was nearly impossible unless she entered the religious order of nuns."²² The female body was considered unfortunate, because it was physically weaker. But historically, when the Buddha was alive, as the scholar Alan Sponberg notes, "some of Gautama's most prominent patrons were women, indicating both that there were a significant number of women of independent means during this period and that their support was instrumental in fostering the early community."²³ The young man that Candrottārā has become is an excellent teacher:

When he explained the sections of the Dharma, the eye of the Dharma that is stainless and free from defilements completely freed and liberated seven billion gods and humans.

Five hundred monks' minds were completely liberated from contaminations without further clinging. Two hundred nuns who had not previously generated bodhicitta and twenty thousand living beings also generated unexcelled, perfect, complete bodhicitta.

The story concludes with all beings rejoicing in the Buddha's words.

How does the mind of enlightenment cross the gender boundary, even considering that by virtue of being human, our physical bodies must have a gender? I have only examined these questions based on this one scripture – one that presents a positive view of an enlightened being who is beautiful, intelligent, and well-spoken, one who never loses her patience, which is why she is beautiful. Based on her enlightened qualities, she possesses the major and minor marks of the Buddha. Even Śāriputra commends her forbearance. Although there are clear examples in Mahāyana Buddhist literature of women being depicted negatively, presumably to encourage male monastics to practice celibacy, there are also examples of *sūtras* that illustrate how anyone, regardless of gender, has the potential to attain enlightenment.

Buddhism has arrived in the West, and women in the United States are generally treated with more equality and thoughtfulness than the traditional way in which I was raised: to be quiet, submissive, and deferential to men. When reading and translating, I do get distracted by contradictions between traditional and contemporary views. But if these contradictions distract me from what the text is conveying – in this case, how Candrottārā attains enlightenment – then that is a good opportunity for contemplation. Diana Paul shares this insight:

In Hindu literature sexual transformation symbolized the transition between cycles of sexuality (feminine image) and asceticism (masculine image). In Buddhist literature the theme of sexual transformation serves a somewhat different function. In a similar way to the Hindu motif of sexual change as a transition from sexuality to asceticism, the Buddhist motif suggests a transition from sensuality to meditation.⁴

The Buddha's central teaching was that every sentient being has the potential for enlightenment and explains the path to this attainment. The story of Candrottarā illustrates this teaching. She persuaded everyone she met to this truth. While working on this translation, I found that the model of Candrottarā imbued me with confidence; her words and her reasoning were strengthening to me.

For me, Candrottarā reveals that warmhearted, intelligent, and respectful behavior toward others benefits everyone. This is relevant in a time when society is beginning to acknowledge those who are transgender. It is poignant that Candrottarā's parents are kind in witnessing and accepting their child's transformation, convinced that she will benefit others. Candrottarā's story is classic yet modern, and very relevant now. We often respond to primary emotions like happiness, sadness, fear, joy, love, and anger, with secondary emotions like jealousy, guilt, and shame, creating binary storylines of goodness and badness. Candrottarā story shows us another possibility: how to bring kindness and wisdom into our hearts.

NOTES

¹ *'Phags pa bu mo zla mchog lung bstan pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo*. Degé Kangyur Toh. 191, vol. 61 (*mdo sde tsa*), folios 224b5-243b5.

² Diana Paul, *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in the Mahāyāna Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 193.

³ Alan Sponberg, "Attitudes Toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism." In *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, ed. Jose Cabezón (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 4.

⁴ Paul, *Women in Buddhism*, p. 175.

A Comparative Study of Korean Seon and Chinese Chan Women Masters: Myori Beophui and Qiyuan Xinggang

Yongsuk Jun

This paper will compare two women who became Seon¹ masters: Qiyuan Xinggang (1597–1654), a Chinese nun who lived from the late Ming to early Qing Dynasty period, and Myori Beophui (1887–1975), a Korean nun who lived during the late Joseon Dynasty and up to the mid-20th century. Though they both suffered great hardships during these turbulent eras, they were able to achieve enlightenment.

The paper explores the following topics. First, how did they achieve enlightenment? Second, after achieving enlightenment, how did they organize and lead their communities of nuns? Third, how did their styles of organization differ from those of the monks? Fourth, how did the two masters differ in their management methods? Finally, although these nuns lived in an age different from our own, what can we learn from them in the creation of Seon (Chan) meditation communities for women?

Qiyuan Xinggang

Qiyuan Xinggang was born in 1597 in Jiaying Zhejiang Province in China, an area that was renowned as a center of Chan Buddhism. Details of her life and practice can be found in the *Fushiqiyuan chanshi yulu* in the Jiaying Canon.² We can also find her poetry in the collections of famous literary figures who lived during the Qing Dynasty. In addition, vague information about her monasteries can be discerned from the local records of the time. However, since most of those monasteries have disappeared over the years, the stories of elderly villagers are the only source of information that remain.³

Xinggang was born as the only daughter of a mighty clan, and therefore she had access to an education. She was the descendent of Huyuan (993–1059), a famous theorist and teacher who lived during the Northern Song Dynasty and had settled down in Jiaying. His family flourished there and eventually owned huge tracts of fertile land and produced many excellent government officials.

Xinggang, however, experienced a terrible misfortune when her husband died shortly after their marriage. Although his death caused her deep anguish, she did not attempt suicide and served her parents-in-law with devotion. According to the *Xingzhuang* in the *Fushiqiyuan chanshi yulu (Yulu)*, she was only 18 years old when she married. She lived with her parents-in-law until she was 23 years old, then returned to her own family. Her parents arranged to have a nun's hermitage rebuilt as a guardian temple after their death. They built a small house for their daughter behind the nun's hermitage, because Xinggang wanted to live near one. Although Xinggang did not officially become a nun at that time, her daily life was in all respects similar to a nun's. According to Confucian tradition, she had a duty to serve her parents-in-law until their death, but in her case she managed to leave them, so one could say that she was a special exception.

When she was 31 years old, her father died. The year after her father's death, she traveled a long way to meet the great Seon master Miyun Yuanwu (1566–1642). At the time, this master stayed in a Seon Buddhist monastery at Mount Jinsu, at least a dozen kilometers from where Xinggang lived. When she met him, she asked, "How do you achieve peace of mind?" Miyun Yuanwu tried to show her by hitting her suddenly, but she did not achieve enlightenment. Three years after her father's death, her mother also died. After that, Xinggang decided to finally carry out her dream of joining the *sangha*. Because her parents-in-law were still alive, she still felt some obligation to support them, and as a result

she decided to give them some land.

At the age of 35, she became Miyun Yuanwu's student. Because she had already had some mystical experience through her training with *huaton*, she asked her teacher, "How do I fill my heart with light as brilliant as the sun?" But Miyun Yuanwu ignored her question and asked, "Have you attained enlightenment?" to which she replied, "Not yet." Then Miyun Yuanwu beat her and chased her out.

Huaton practice is a typical practice method in Zen Buddhism. *Huaton* is a mysterious question with unknown answers, generally given by a Zen master. If one concentrates on *huaton* for a long time, one can easily gain enlightenment. Miyun Yuanwu was a very famous Zen master. If a student did not answer correctly, he struck the student with his staff, which could be a great shock. This method is representative of the methods used to help students achieve enlightenment, beginning in the Tang Dynasty in China.

After awhile, Xinggang left Mount Jinsu and went to Haining, but she was still not enlightened, so she had no choice but to find another teacher. Although she trained hard for a year, she failed yet again to attain enlightenment, so the teacher told her to return to Mount Jinsu. By then, Shiche Tongcheng (1593–1638) had succeeded Miyun Yuanwu as chief monk of the temple. Another year passed, but still she failed to reach liberation, so Shiche Tongcheng warned her, "This is your final notice. If you fail to attain enlightenment this time, I will not allow you to meet me anymore."

After that, she made it a matter of life or death to achieve enlightenment. She did not stop practicing, even when she began to vomit blood. Only after she happened to hear a conversation between two teachers did she have her first awakening. However, her teacher Shiche Tongcheng felt that she had still not fully attained enlightenment, so he had her practice more. After three transformative experiences, she was finally acknowledged as a master.

After her enlightenment, Shiche Tongcheng unexpectedly invited Xinggang to give a Dharma talk. The audience was displeased at the idea of having to listen to a woman, but she gave such a wonderful talk that they could not help admiring her. Not long after, she returned to her family hermitage and stayed there for nine years. When her teacher Shiche Tongcheng was dying, he called her to his deathbed and designated her as his only female heir, the other two being men. After his funeral, she once again returned home with some students and lived in seclusion until devotees from a nearby temple asked her to become the head of their temple. At their request, she organized a great Buddhist *bhikkhuni sangha* called Fushi Chanyuan (Crouching Lion Chan School). Over time, she gained great fame and was especially popular among the pious upper classes. Even the scholar-officials, who were otherwise misogynistic, respected her. As she approached her death, she designated one of her students, Yigong Chaoke, to succeed her as head of the Fushi Chanyuan. She ordered another student to build a *tayuan*, a pagoda that preserves the relics of a monastic. According to the *Yulu*, the *bhikkhuni sangha* she established lasted for at least two generations after her death.

Myori Pophui

Myori Pophui was born in 1887 in a small district in the countryside near Kongju, South Korea. Her parents were poor and her father passed away when she was just three years old. In order to survive, her grandmother persuaded her mother to send Pophui to a temple. The grandmother carried Pophui on her back all the way up to Tonghak-sa Temple on Mount Kyeryong. Since Pophui's mother did not want to send her daughter to a temple all by herself, she also became ordained as a nun. About a year later, somebody told Pophui's mother that her presence at the temple was not good for her daughter, the nuns, or herself. Eventually, her mother moved to another monastery, called Kap-sa, on the other side of Mount Kyeryong. Pophui believed that if she was a good girl who obeyed her elders,

the head nun would allow her to meet her mother again. Unfortunately, when she was eight years old, she heard that her mother had passed away.

When she was 13 years old, Pophui became ordained as a nun. When she was 23 years old, she studied Buddhist scriptures under the guidance of Kobong Kyonguk (1890–1961). One day, Kyonguk told Pophui about the great Seon master Mangong (1871–1946). Mangong was not only Kyonguk's own Seon teacher, but he had played a major role in restoring the Korean Seon Buddhist tradition. After learning that Mangong mostly taught at Mount Deoksung in Chungnam Province, Pophui set off to meet him. Since the roads were in poor condition at the time, her journey took three days by foot.

Under Mangong's guidance, Pophui made great progress. Then, one day, an epidemic of smallpox broke out in a nearby village. Because she was always so concentrated on her practice, she was unable to recognize the symptoms and became infected herself. After this information spread to the public, people were reluctant to go to a retreat with her, so she went into the forest and continued practicing alone, all the while enduring both illness and hardship. Finally, she attained enlightenment, whereupon Mangong gave her new Dharma name, Myori, along with a poem celebrating her achievement.

Mangong advised her not to give Dharma talks, since it might arouse the jealousy of others around her, so Pophui refrained from giving any. Despite this, everybody saw that she would lead the revival of the Seon tradition in South Korea. As a result, many nuns wanted to become her student, and even highly respected *bhikkhus* and Seon masters respected her. Over time, she was recognized as one of the greatest Seon masters in South Korea.⁴ She was first made the head of Gyeonseongam Hermitage at Sudeoksa Temple, then other temples, such as Bodeoksa, Seunggasa, Hwaromsa, and Gucheungam, and others.

Comparing Community Management Methods

After achieving enlightenment, how did these two women organize and lead communities of religious women? How did their organizations differ from the male communities? How did Xinggang and Beophui differ in their management methods?

Even though Xinggang had already taken a public role at the request of her teacher, she believed that the vast majority of the people were chauvinistic and decided to retreat to her parent's memorial hermitage for nine years, along with a few select students. History would prove her right. After her enlightenment, it took her nine years to set up her own *sangha*, which did not last very long after her death.

From the outset, Beophui never tried to create a new community, because her teachers had warned her against it. Though she rarely ever wandered away from her hermitage, whenever new students came to her, she gladly accepted them. Over time, she was seen by the monks as a valuable teacher who could take in nuns, which they could not. This allowed her to maintain a good relationship with the monks' community.

Xinggang frequently used Chan dialogue like *kungan* (*koan*) and poetry to educate others, a teaching method that was typical of male Chan masters. Her Dharma talks were known for their uncanny depth and power, earning her the respect of many nuns and laypeople. In addition, she sought to establish her legacy, so she had a Tayuan built after her death and ordered an heir to make a collection of her quotations, like male Chan masters of the time.

By contrast, Beophui never gave any Dharma talks, nor did she use methods like *kungan* or poetry. Instead, she liked to make her students perform physical labor and charitable works, such as distributing alms or heating rooms. As a consequence, her students doubted her abilities and sometimes

felt abused. For Dharma talks, she invited male Seon masters to teach her students and sometimes she allowed her students travel to the hermitages of male Seon masters.

Although Beophui did not teach directly through words, she taught by example. For instance, one night a thief broke into her room and threatened her with a knife. Even though the situation was dangerous, Beophui maintained her composure without the slightest hint of fear. The thief was deeply moved and returned to his home after preparing firewood for the winter for the nuns. She also handled the death of both her favorite disciple and herself with serene composure. Thus, most eminent Seon masters who visited her were impressed. After meeting Beophui, one male Seon master said to her students, “One such as your teacher is great and comes only once every two centuries. Respect her as you would the Buddha. You have a Buddha living amongst you. You must practice hard while you can!”

Beophui was singled out for honors by others. For instance, she managed to establish the Kyonsong-am meditation center. This was the first institutionalized Seon meditation center for *bhiksunis* at the time and it was large enough to accommodate 150 people. In addition, during her funeral, Mangong’s heir Byeokcho (1899–1986) said, “Only for the funeral of Beophui shall I allow you to use this palanquin, which was used at the funeral of Mangong. Even at my own funeral, it should not be used.” Other than these few pieces of information, however, little is known about Beophui, because she and her students did not leave behind many records.

Concluding Remarks

The Chinese and Korean *bhiksunis* Qiyuan Xinggong and Myori Beophui both made significant contributions to Buddhism. Even in the face of male chauvinism and other unfavorable conditions, Beophui and Xinggong still managed to become leaders of Seon practice centers and produced outstanding practitioners who continued their legacies.

Xinggong used her family background and connections among noblewomen to establish a *bhiksuni sangha*. Though her educational methods were largely the same as that of monks, in general, she held an uncompromising position on male intervention. Thus, eventually her community did not continue for long. By contrast, Beophui compromised with male Seon masters so that they came to her aid. However, she did not advertise her abilities or concern herself with posterity, so after her death, she was almost forgotten.

NOTES

¹ In Korean, the practice of meditation (Sanskrit: *dhyāna*) is known as Soen; in Chinese, Chan; and in Japanese, Zen.

² CBETA, vol. 28 , No. B210. <http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/J28nB210>

³ Meiwen Su, *Qiyoutanhua* (Seven *Udumbara*) (Taipei: Quanfo wenhua shiye youxian Press, 2014), 313–14.

⁴ Eunsu Cho, “From Anonymity to Self-Reinvention: Korean Buddhist Nuns in the Twentieth Century,” in *Bridging Worlds: Buddhist Women's Voices Across Generations*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Taipei: Yuan Chuan Press, 2004), 125–30.

Writing about the Self: Female Non-Buddhists' Accounts of their *Vipassana* Meditation Retreat Experiences

Brooke Schedneck

Female non-Buddhists have been writing detailed descriptions of their personal experiences in *vipassana* meditation retreats since the 1960s. These memoirists relate to the world their experiences of the retreat process and self-transformations. Early memoirists, who wrote their accounts in the 1960s and 1970s, traveled to Asia in order to learn and practice *vipassana* meditation. In this presentation, I consider two female memoirists: Marie Byles (1900–1979) and Jane Hamilton-Merritt (1937–present). Marie Byles' *Journey into Burmese Silence*, chronicles her time in a number of Burmese meditation centers in the early 1960s. Byles is well-regarded in her native Australia as a feminist, lawyer, journalist, and conservationist. Jane Hamilton-Merritt's *A Meditator's Diary: A Western Woman's Unique Experiences in Thailand Monasteries*, published in 1976, is the first memoir to discuss a lay foreigner's experience of learning meditation in Thailand. In the book she discusses in detail her meditation experiences and her challenges in finding instructions and opportunities to practice in the mid-1970s. Hamilton-Merritt, an American, is most well-known as a journalist, writer, and human rights advocate, who has twice been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

This presentation will address the following questions: How have female non-Buddhists accessed the *vipassana* meditation retreat? What were their challenges and difficulties? Despite these female meditators' mostly positive results of the retreat and many benefits they describe, they experience challenges related to their female gender. In this presentation, what I am most concerned with is their reactions to these challenges. As foreign non-Buddhist women entering into a meditation retreat and monastic setting for the first time, they could have a variety of responses to perceived gender inequalities. We will see that Marie Byles and Jane Hamilton-Merritt have contrasting views on their experiences as female meditators ranging from shock and dismay to acceptance and understanding. Even with these opposed views, both authors agree that meditation and the Buddhist teachings carry universal ideas that can be appreciated despite any challenges they face as female, non-Buddhist, foreign meditators in Asia.

For Marie Byles, gender equality and roles for women are important issues with which she grapples during her retreats and visits to Burmese pagodas. She is disappointed when observing the nuns at Mohnyin Pagoda who cook and clean for the monks and novices. She lists the rules for these nuns: they cannot sit alone or speak alone with a monk or man, they must not approach any monk when they go to the monastery to fill the water pots, they must not stay long in the presence of a monk, they must avoid questioning and seeking explanations about the Dhamma.¹ In her narration, Byles is constantly attuned to the differences between monks and nuns noting that monks receive more donations and have far better living conditions.² She is surprised that the nuns did not feel aggrieved at their situation.³ Byles describes her views vividly when she writes of *vipassana* meditation centers:

... not the best of places for you when you had a mother who used to walk in suffragette processions and when you yourself pioneered the path for women in the legal profession and helped to inaugurate legislation giving equal rights of guardianship to mothers! On the other hand, the very object of meditation is to rise above the pairs of opposites – the congenial and uncongenial, the pleasant and the unpleasant.⁴

She tries to reconcile her conflicting emotions by reminding herself that gender is not important during meditation and the inequalities women face are not connected to the highest ideals of Buddhism. She

writes: “The Buddha had not despised women. But what did it all matter? In meditation everyone became merged in those waves of ceaseless change. In meditation one knew of oneself that there was neither clean nor unclean.”⁵

Through reminding herself of the universal nature of Buddhist teachings, she thinks that she has ended her attachment to views and opinions but she continues to struggle with the difference between the highest ideals of Buddhism and her observations of discrimination against women in Burma. She concludes that because of her Australian upbringing, she could not, in the end, understand Burmese Buddhism in its entirety. She writes:

All this monk-worship and nun servility would be merely a source of amusement to the tourist. Western men probably wouldn't notice. But when you are a woman meditator and a member of the servile community, you notice it very much indeed. And when you have been trained to abhor sex and class superiorities the abhorrence upsets your equilibrium and causes pain.⁶

She decides to send loving-kindness to the monks who are worshiped as gods and who treat nuns as servants. Her conclusion demonstrates that Burmese Buddhism does not rise to the level of gender equality, which would allow her to embrace it more fully and see the religion in its entirety as universal.

However, in the final pages of the memoir, the universal nature of meditation and the Buddha's teachings trumps these issues of gender. She quotes the words of her teacher: “... he asserted that it was not necessary for Australians to become Buddhists nor even understand the basic principles of Buddhism . . . there is only one Dhamma, one Law which holds all.”⁷ She finds her teacher and his words moving. She writes of his center: “... even to know such centres exist may be an inspiration to those few in the West who are genuinely seeking to find the pearl of great price and are prepared to pay the cost demanded for it.”⁸ She sees Buddhism as a universal religion that reveals parts of human nature despite the gendered practices she observes in the Burmese setting.

Jane Hamilton-Merritt observes a less fraught relationship between Buddhism and gender, seeming to accept gender separation as a matter of course, relating facts to her audience rather than her reactions. She writes: “Since women cannot become monks, one of the most important ways for women to gather merit is through their sons when they join the community of monks, the ‘Sangha.’”⁹ When meeting a *mae chii*, she describes matter-of-factly to her readers that the lineage of fully ordained nuns has died out. She narrates that today the role of the *mae chii* is assisting the temple with cooking, tending to flowers and lay people. She writes as an aside: “I later learned that there is an effort in Thailand to elevate the status of the nun.”¹⁰ Hamilton-Merritt does not offer her opinion as a Western woman, only accepting that this is the way of life in Thailand, not something to be regretted or changed.

She feels unfortunate but not discriminated against when she encounters difficulties in finding a Buddhist monastery that would accept her, a foreign woman, as a resident. Although she received kind responses and was told she could visit meditation temples, the question of living there was met with the response that there were “no facilities for women.”¹¹ She does not blame Thai Buddhists but accepts their system, writing:

I was trying to enter a way of life that demanded seclusion and meditation and was primarily open to men. Monks are not only celibate, but they must not touch a woman. They may speak to a woman, but only if another person is present. So it is easier not to have women living in *wat* [temple] compounds, particularly *farang* women. I did not want to do something stupid or break a rule which would cause a monk to go through a complicated purification ceremony.¹²

This acceptance of the temple space as primarily male leads to anxiety over any interaction with monks. She is nervous meeting the abbot of a temple where she meditates reminding herself not to touch him and maintain respectful behavior. But when she enters the abbot's room she questions herself: "'What was I doing here? This was a man's world. Foreign women had no place in a Buddhist *wat* [temple].'"¹³ She is not resentful of this fact, but it does cause her much self-doubt and fear. When she introduces herself to the abbot, she writes, "He seemed not to hear . . . Sweat trickled down my body from fear and heat, but mostly from fear."¹⁴ Hamilton-Merritt is concerned about her dress and appearance when talking to the abbot. "I thought of my dress, which was probably too short because I could see one of my knees showing as I knelt. I was embarrassed."¹⁵ When the abbot calls to her to come inside the *vihara* [main temple hall] she fears that women are not allowed. But he wants her to help decorate for the Buddhist holiday saying: "You put this cloth around our Bodhi tree. Men make things not pretty; women make them pretty."¹⁶ Her narration reveals constant anxiety and worry of offending Thai monks and Thai Buddhism as a whole. She clearly has much respect for this tradition and merely seeks to blend in with the community while practicing meditation.

Although she remains worried about her presence in the temple space, meditation remains a source of pleasure and transformation, rising beyond gender. She writes, "I was amazed that I had found the strength inside me to reach such depths in myself. It had not been easy, yet I knew what had happened to me could happen to anyone who made the effort."¹⁷ She is grateful and appreciative for the experience, remarking on the welcoming nature of Buddhism. Besides meditation, the Buddha's teachings also feel welcoming to her. She is comforted by the Buddha's teachings that place a value on experience over faith. She writes: "The Buddha did not demand from his followers a blind faith in his teachings. Instead, he taught that everyone must explore these teachings for him or her self so that the individual might come personally to see and to know the truth How different is this Buddhist idea from those religions that decree that faith alone will bring understanding!"¹⁸ Faith and belief here are positioned as particular and not open to all while a rational exploration of the truth is inclusive enough to be constructed as universal. This is what Jane Hamilton-Merritt wants to show her audience – how Buddhism is different from the more familiar theistic traditions. She says that Buddhism is a path to follow, and the Buddha was a great teacher, but a person nonetheless. She feels freedom knowing this – knowing that she is not being judged by a god-figure.¹⁹ Through her month-long meditation retreat she experiences what she believes to be a universal teaching and practice.

In conclusion, I will connect this investigation of gendered reactions in the meditation retreat with the idea of meditation and the Buddha's teachings as universal. Universal discourses claim to understand all of humanity in all times and places. These claims, however, meet conflict and debate because they are set within particular cultures, beliefs, and cosmologies. For both of these authors meditation is beyond gender and, for the most part, makes up for the fear and discrimination they feel as female foreign meditators in Asia. Marie Byles sees meditation as a universal practice that can benefit anyone but finds that it is unfortunately couched within a set of constraints on the monastic life for women in Burma. Jane Hamilton-Merritt does not feel pity for herself or other women in her retreat experience. She accepts that Buddhism is part of a culture she does not understand and is much more concerned with offending anyone than gender inequality. These two examples of non-Buddhist female participation in meditation retreats in Asia allow us to see how meditation becomes positioned as universal, as beyond gender. However, even in meditation, one is still embodied. So what is the best way to respond to gendered practices in the retreat format as a non-Buddhist foreigner? Should one, as Marie Byles, feel outraged and upset at the way women are treated or should one, as Jane Hamilton-Merritt, accept that this is a different culture that cannot be fully appreciated or understood by non-Buddhist Westerners? And secondly, how can we best reconcile the universal ideals in Buddhist meditation and

teachings with gender inequality and discrimination “on the ground” that reveal the particular nature of the religion?

NOTES

¹ Marie Byles, *Journey into Burmese Silence* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1962), 110.

² *Ibid.*, 83.

³ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁹ Jane Hamilton-Merrit, *A Meditator's Diary: A Western Woman's Unique Experiences in Thailand Temples* (New York: Harper Row, 1976), 17.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹² *Ibid.*, 28.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

Chinese Women Practicing Transnational Meditation in Contemporary China

Ngar-sze Lau

Since the Open Policy went into effect in the 1980s in China, Buddhism has been revived progressively with many historical monasteries being reconstructed with funds raised from overseas.¹ For example, Bailing Chan Monastery, a famous Chan monastery in the lineage of Chan Master Zhaozhou, was reconstructed by Jinghui, a disciple of the recent great Chan master Xuyun (1840-1959). Foyuan, an attendant of Xuyun, who received the Yunmen lineage, rebuilt the Yunmen Dajue Chan Monastery in Guangdong Province and revived the traditional Chan retreat there.² Over the same period, a few martial arts films featuring Shaolin *gongfu* initiated “Chan fever” (*chanxuere*), arousing popular interest not only in Buddhist tourism, but also in Chan meditation practices.³ Regular seven-day Chan retreats (*chanqi*) have been organized at a few historical Chan monasteries by the disciples of recent eminent Chan monks such as Xuyun and Laigu. Traditional practices in Chan monasteries generally have been revived, including regular morning chanting (*zaoke*) and evening chanting (*wanke*) at the main shrine hall, and silent meals (*quotan*) at the dining hall (*zaitang*). Monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen may all join together to practice these rituals.

However, up to now *bhiksunis* (fully ordained nuns) and laywomen have been restricted from entering official Chan halls for practicing Chan in nearly all Chinese Buddhist monasteries in mainland China.⁴ Opportunities for women’s spiritual development through Chan meditation practices in the contemporary Chinese Buddhist context have been neglected. However, in the past decade, an increasing number of nuns and laywomen have begun practicing transnational meditation in the Burmese and Thai traditions. Based on my ethnographic research in mainland China since 2014, this paper explores how the recent popularity of transnational meditation practices may have changed the paradigm of involvement in meditation practices by women. I argue that Chinese nuns and laywomen in contemporary China have gained courage and confidence in their spiritual development through practicing transnational meditation in the Theravāda tradition. Here I will examine various perspectives about spiritual achievement found in Mahāyāna and Theravada texts.

Achieving Enlightenment as a Woman in the Mahāyāna and Theravāda Traditions

In the Mahāyāna texts and practices of Chinese Buddhism, there are contradictory perspectives about the spiritual development and potential achievements of women. In the many Chan texts with *koans* and stories, the well-known eminent Chan masters since the Tang Dynasty have been monks. For example, the first patriarch Damo and the other five patriarchs were men. Yet some prominent Chan nuns in ancient and medieval China are recorded in the *Records of the Transmission of the Lamp* (*Chuandenglu*), a hagiographical collection. For example, Moshan Liaoran is an example of a prominent Chan master during the Tang Dynasty and Lady Tang, a disciple of Dahui during the Sung Dynasty, is an example of a dedicated practitioner.⁵ It seems that equality between men and women with regard to final attainment is emphasized in Chan texts, based on the principle of sudden enlightenment.

However, a few popular Mahāyāna texts in the Chinese Buddhist context state that it is impossible for a woman to become a Buddha in this life. In order to become a Buddha, a woman must vow to become a man in her next life. For example, in the *Lotus Sutra*, after explaining to Sariputra that the body of a woman is too dirty to become a Buddha, the dragon girl immediately demonstrates transforming her body into that of a man and then into a Buddha with the thirty-two physical characteristics of an enlightened being.⁶ According to hundreds of Indian Buddhist texts, these thirty-two unusual characteristics are the result of the spiritual attainment of Buddhahood by males only.⁷

Females have no chance to develop these characteristics except by taking rebirth in a male body. Both Indian and Chinese Buddhist texts take it as a given that women's bodies are inferior to those of men. The *Blood Bowl Sutra* (*Xuepengjing*), a Buddhist *sutra* created in China that condemns women to hell for the sin of menstruation, may further devalue women's potential for spiritual achievement in Mahāyāna Chinese Buddhism.⁸

In the Theravāda tradition, the *bhikkhuni* lineage was lost, so nuns have lower social positions in countries such as Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma.⁹ However, nuns and women can learn and practice meditation on an equal footing with monks and laymen.¹⁰ Some nuns even become popular meditation teachers. Indeed, in the Pāli texts, the potential for final spiritual achievement – the attainment of *nibbana* – is the same for men and women. In the Pāli scriptures, women are described as temptresses, mothers, and lay followers,¹¹ but there were also women renunciants during the Buddha's time who were spiritual teachers to laymen.¹² The verses of many fully liberated women are recorded in the *Therīgāthā*.

In the contemporary context, with Buddhist modernization in Asian Buddhist countries and the lay meditation movement, some female meditation teachers in the Theravāda tradition have been introduced to the world by western *yogis* who learned meditation from them in Asia. For example, Ajahn Naeb, a female lay meditation teacher in Thailand, and her teachings are introduced in *Living Buddhist Masters* by Jack Kornfield, a first-generation lay meditation teacher in the West.¹³ Dipa Ma, a Bengali lay teacher, housewife, and grandmother, was invited to teach meditation at the Insight Meditation Centre, established by the first generation of lay meditation teachers in the United States. In the past two decades, these female meditation teachers and their teachings have been introduced to Chinese societies such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China.

Women Learning Transnational Meditation in Mainland China

Books on Theravāda Buddhist meditation and were translated and published in Chinese before the introduction of these mediation practices in Taiwan and mainland China.¹⁴ Many Taiwan *bhikkunis* not only learn meditation from Theravāda Buddhist teachers, but are also involved in translating books and organising meditation retreats with these teachers. For example, the nuns of Luminary Nunnery have translated and published a series of books by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, a famous Thai teacher.¹⁵ As another example, since the turn of the century, Bhikkhuni Zhaohui organized several meditation retreats for nuns and laywomen in Taiwan, inviting Pa Auk Sayadaw, a Burmese *samatha* meditation teacher, and also Sayalay Dipankara, his female disciple, to teach.¹⁶

Since 2000, various Theravadin meditation traditions from Burma and Thailand have spread to mainland China, with influences from Taiwan and Hong Kong. The first *vipassana* meditation retreat was organized at Bailing Chan Monastery in 2001. Gradually, an increasing number of ten-day *vipassana* or *satipattana* meditation retreats have been held in Chinese Buddhist monasteries, so that Chinese nuns and laywomen have had the chance to learn and practice transnational meditation. For example, during my fieldwork, I learned that in late February 2016, a ten-day retreat took place at Yun Shan Monastery, of Chan heritage, in Jiangxi Province in southern China.¹⁷ U Tejaniya Sayadaw from Yangon was invited to lead this retreat at a multi-purpose hall at the monastery, rather than in the official Chan hall.¹⁸ Of the sixty participants who attended the retreat, six were *bhikkhunis* and about forty were laywomen. The participants came from different parts of China and from diverse backgrounds, and included psychotherapists, civil servants, school teachers, and students.

In traditional Chinese Buddhist communities, women have lower status than men and it is believed that a woman is not able to become a Buddha in this very life. However, surprisingly, most of

my informants who joined this retreat shared with me that the male/female distinction is not relevant to one's ability to practice meditation and achieve final liberation. For instance, Yaolan, a psychotherapist, told me, "There are indeed physical differences among men and women. Yet when wisdom arises, there is no difference between them." Mr. Xiang, an engineer, explained that, "In the teachings of the Buddha, it is confirmed that women can attain full liberation, just as men can, and become *arabants*." Bonnie pointed out the case of Dipa Ma to demonstrate that women can be successful in spiritual achievement. Maggie, who had stayed in Sri Lanka and Burma and ordained as a nun for a short time, shared with me, "The Buddha has mentioned that men and women can become *arabants*. I believe what the Buddha has said. Moreover, from my spiritual experiences and observation, I believe that the practice is the same [for men and women]. Certainly the Buddha also mentioned that only a male can become a Buddha. Hence, ... there is a difference with regard to becoming a Buddha, yet no difference about becoming an *arabant*."

Helen, the translator and organizer of this retreat, has been promoting insight meditation in Hong Kong and mainland China for over five years. She told me that meditation retreats led by female meditation teachers such as Sayalay Dipankara and Sayalay Susila from Malaysia were attractive to both male and female students in mainland China. In mainland China, some Chinese nuns and laywomen have started teaching meditation in the past few years. Among the six *bhikkhunis* who participated in the retreat mentioned earlier, three had visited meditation centres in Burma to learn meditation. One *bhikkhuni*, who is the abbess of a nunnery, told me that she will reconstruct the nunnery. She plans to construct a new three-level building, with one level dedicated to a Chan hall for practicing traditional Mahāyāna Chan and one level dedicated to a meditation hall for practicing meditation from the Theravāda tradition. The widespread popularity of transnational meditation seems to have had an impact on some traditional Mahāyāna Chan monasteries, such as Yunshan Monastery and Yunman Dajue Chan Monastery, both of which have recently begun to allow nuns and laywomen to practice Chan in a "public hall" (*gonggongchanton*).

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have examined the situation of Chinese women practicing meditation in contemporary China. From the Mahāyāna texts, women are shown to be capable of attaining enlightenment, just as men are, through Chan practice. Yet due to the complexity of perspectives on gender in the Chinese Buddhist context, such as the belief that only men can attain Buddhahood, Chinese nuns and laywomen have no access to the official Chan halls of most monasteries in mainland China for learning Chan. However, in the Theravāda tradition, as recorded in Pāli scriptures, women are able to attain *nibbana*. Female meditation practitioners and teachers are common in Burma and Thailand. The current lay meditation movement in Taiwan and China has given Chinese women opportunities to learn transnational meditation and also Chan. Recently, some traditional Mahāyāna Chan monasteries have established public halls (*gonggongchanton*) that allow nuns and laywomen to practice Chan. Overall, I have argued and provided evidence that the transnational meditation movement in mainland China has had a significant impact on gender equality for Chinese women practicing meditation.

NOTES

¹ Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank, "The Globalization of Chinese Buddhism: Clergy and Devotee Networks in the Twentieth Century," *International Journal of Asian Studies* 2(2005)

217–37.

² Raoul Birnbaum, “Buddhist China at the Century’s Turn,” *The China Quarterly* 174(2003) 442. It is well known that Master Foyuan suffered physical harm from being exploited for labour work during the Cultural Revolution.

³ As Zhe Ji comments, Buddhism has been popularized, but also commercialized in the recent “Chan fever.” Zhe Ji, “Buddhism in the Reform Era: a Secularized Revival?” *Religion in Contemporary China* ed. Adam Chau (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011).

⁴ Gaomin Monastery at Yangzhou is the only exception. Master Delin (1914–2015), a disciple of Laiguo, not only reconstructed the monastery with a special octagon-shaped Chan hall in the 1990s, but also allowed nuns and laywomen to practice Chan in the hall with monks and men. I attended ten-day retreats at Gaomin Monastery three times between 2006 and 2007. Most traditional Chan halls are rectangular in shape.

⁵ See Bernard Faure, *the Power of Denial: Buddhism, Purity, and Gender* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), 127–34. The lives of nuns with profound meditation experience in ancient China are recorded in Pao-ch’ang Shih (trans. Kathryn Ann Tsai), *Lives of the Nuns: Biographies of Chinese Buddhist Nuns from the Fourth to Sixth Centuries: A Translation of the Pi-ch’iu-ni chuan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994); and Beata Grant, *Daughters of Emptiness: Poems of Chinese Buddhist Nuns* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2003).

⁶ Note that the Dragon Girl becomes a man in the *Lotus Sutra*, T09n0262_004: 0035b26-0035c19. http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/T09n0262_004. Accessed August 29, 2016.

⁷ See John Powers, *A Bull of a Man: Images of Masculinity, Sex, and the Body in Indian Buddhism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); and my interview with John Powers <https://www.buddhistdoor.net/features/rethinking-buddhist-practices-and-the-buddhas-bodily-featuresan-interview-with-john-powers>

⁸ See the *Blood Bowl Sutra*, X01n0023_001. http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/zh-cn/X01n0023_001. Accessed August 29, 2016.

⁹ Nuns in these countries normally receive only eight or ten precepts, while fully ordained *bhiksunis* receive over three hundred precepts.

¹⁰ Karma Lekshe Tsomo, “An Introduction,” *Buddhist Women Across Cultures: Realizations*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000).

¹¹ For example, in the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, the Buddha suggested to Ananda that monks should avoid seeing women and talking to women, and if they could not avoid talking to the, remain aware during the conversation. Elizabeth J. Harris, “The Female in Buddhism,” *Buddhist Women Across Cultures: Realizations*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), 51.

¹² Dhammadina taught her former husband. The meditative achievements and teaching capabilities of thirteen nuns are recorded. *Ibid.*, 58.

¹³ See Chapter 8 of Jack Kornfield, *Living Buddhist Masters* (Santa Cruz, CA: Unity Press, 1977).

¹⁴ For example, *Our Real Refuge*, the collected Dhamma talks of the Thai meditation teacher Ajahn Chah, was translated into Chinese in 1992 by an American disciple. Over 50,000 copies of the book were printed in Taiwan. Ziyang, “Analysis of Theravāda Buddhist Non-commercial Publications,” *Buddhist Library Journal* 50(2009) 15–21, and 51(2010) 6–20.

¹⁵ On Luminary Nunnery, see Chün-fang Yü, *Passing the Light: The Incense Light Community and Buddhist Nuns in Contemporary Taiwan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2013). Regarding the translation work by the nuns of Luminary Nunnery, see Ziyang, “Analysis of Theravāda Buddhist Non-commercial Publications,” *Buddhist Library Journal* 50(2009) 15–21, and 51(2010) 6–20.

¹⁶ I attended a retreat led by Pa Auk Sayadaw organized by Bhikkhuni Zhaohui in 2001.

¹⁷ In this paper, the name of the monastery and the names of interviewees were amended to protect their identities.

¹⁸ *Sayadaw* means royal teacher in Burmese. More details about U Tejaniya, see “About Sayadaw U Tejaniya,” Sayadaw U Tejaniya. <http://ashintejaniya.org/about>. Accessed August 29, 2016.

The Interface between Buddhism and Western Meditation-Based Secular Interventions

Teresa I. Sivilli

One afternoon at the 2015 Sakyadhita conference in Yogyakarta, we convened various focus groups. I proposed a group to discuss the secular meditation-based interventions that are increasingly being used in the West in clinical healthcare settings as primary or adjunct treatments for psychological disorders and for physical ailments that have a mind/body component. Recently, these interventions have also been introduced in United States military and corporate settings. The members of our focus group have stayed in intermittent contact since the conference and have agreed that we want to continue the conversation at the conference in 2017. This paper is intended to provide a basis for that conversation.

In this paper, I will present the most well-researched and significant of these intervention programs. I will also discuss, but not resolve, some of the ethical issues that have arisen around these interventions, and some of the challenges of translating Buddhist practice for non-Buddhist audiences.

The interventions can be grouped into two categories: mindfulness-based interventions and compassion-based interventions. I will start with the mindfulness interventions, because they were the first to be developed; but first, we need discuss the use of the term “mindfulness.” In Buddhist practice, mindfulness is defined as “a mental faculty that allows us to notice when our attention has wavered from the object of meditation.” Secular mindfulness-based interventions use a specific definition, developed by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn for the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program: to pay attention fully, with non-judgmental awareness, to the present moment. This definition denotes a practice, rather than a mental factor. Mindfulness in secular usage translates more to the practices of “resting the mind in its natural state” or “open monitoring” or “mindfulness of sensations, emotions, and thoughts.” It is important to keep these distinctions in mind as we proceed.

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, commonly known by its acronym MBSR, is the oldest of the programs and provided many elements to the interventions that came after. The program was developed in 1970 by Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, where he founded the Stress Reduction Clinic. This clinic has now become the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society. Kabat-Zinn studied with Buddhist teachers, including Thich Nhat Hanh and Seung Sahn, and at the Insight Meditation Society. He also studied yoga.

Originally developed to treat stress, MBSR was quickly tested for other conditions, first, for chronic pain and psoriasis. The list of conditions for which it has now been demonstrated to be effective includes anxiety, asthma, chronic pain, eating disturbances, and heart disease. The Center for Mindfulness emphasizes that MBSR is a complementary treatment, and is not intended to replace traditional medical and psychological treatments.

When we hear about the benefits of mindfulness or meditation in the news media, it is a good bet that they are referring to MBSR. More than 1,000 teachers have been trained, and it is widely available in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and other countries. Some health insurance companies now cover the cost of the course if it is given by a certified teacher.

Kabat-Zinn incorporated elements from several traditions, including: a body scan exercise, which is done lying down, based on *vipassana* meditation; walking meditation from the Zen tradition; traditional seated meditation on the breath; and yoga from India. The program lasts for eight weeks, meeting once per week for two hours, and incorporates a one-day silent retreat in week six. Daily homework is assigned. The program also incorporates psychosocial education on the physiological and psychological effects of stress, and how our thoughts affect the body’s stress system.

The next intervention to be developed was Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, developed by Mark Williams, John Teasdale, Zindel Segal, and Kabat-Zinn in the early 1990s to treat recurrent

depression. The motivating idea was to see whether it was possible to treat patients with chronic depressive episodes when they were well, by providing them with tools that would enable them to understand the factors that caused mood changes, thereby interrupting the process and preventing another episode of depression. Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) combines mindfulness techniques from MBSR with Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT), an evidence-based therapeutic treatment developed by Aaron Beck. Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy challenges ingrained patterns of thinking and behavior, thus leading to changes in the way the patient feels. Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy teaches participants to be aware of their thoughts and emotions around difficult events, to bring automatic patterns of mental activity into awareness, to stay centered in the sensations they are experiencing, to allow thoughts to “self-liberate,” and to relate differently to their difficult emotional experiences, approaching them with curiosity and compassion, rather than berating themselves for the way they are feeling. This, too, is an eight-week program, with weekly meetings and homework exercises. Extensive research has demonstrated that MBCT is as effective, or more effective, than psychotropic medications to prevent an individual from relapsing after an episode of depression.

The next intervention to be developed was Dialectical Behavioral Treatment (DBT), created at the University of Washington by Marsha Linehan, a clinical researcher who is also a Zen master. She set out to design a psychological treatment program for individuals diagnosed with borderline personality disorder (BPD), which is the most frequent personality disorder encountered by clinicians, and also the most difficult to treat. Individuals with this disorder exhibit behaviors that make it difficult for them to function as an independent individual and complicates their interactions with others. In addition, individuals with this diagnosis frequently attempt, and often complete, suicide or self-mutilation. Positive treatment outcomes were rare before DBT was developed. It is noteworthy that 75 percent of the people diagnosed with BPD are women, and 85 percent of the people who are diagnosed with the disorder have a history of sexual trauma in their childhood.

In developing DBT, Linehan worked closely with Kabat-Zinn, and mindfulness exercises are the backbone of the treatment program. The protocol is skills-based, and focuses on learning to be more effective in the situations that the patient is encountering at the present moment. The training is presented in four modules: Mindfulness Skills, Interpersonal Effectiveness Skills, Distress Tolerance, and Emotion Regulation Skills. The Mindfulness module is repeated at the beginning of each of the three others. Skills training groups meet for up to 2 ½ hours per week, and the entire course requires six months to complete. Homework is assigned at every session. Besides being the only effective treatment for borderline personality disorder, DBT has also been shown to be an effective treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and for eating disorders. In a very brave and moving essay in the *New York Times* several years ago, Linehan, who is a well-known and respected therapist and researcher, revealed that she herself lives with borderline personality disorder.

Next, let us turn to the compassion-based interventions. The first was developed and tested at Emory University in 2005 by Geshe Lobsang Tenzin Negi. I was a member of the team that worked with Geshe-la on the development and research of Cognitive Based Compassion Training (CBCT), and I am a certified instructor in the program.

CBCT is derived from the Tibetan Buddhist *lojong*, or mind training, tradition, which leads the practitioner through a series of logical steps that culminate in generating compassion for others. In a secular setting, there are two problems with using the Seven-Point Mind Training, which is the basis of CBCT, namely, we cannot refer to the Buddha or to rebirth, which are crucial components of the logical steps that lead a person to compassion. We decided to omit references to the Buddha. Instead of using the concept of rebirth and the concomitant idea that all sentient beings have been our mothers as a means to generate gratitude and appreciation, Geshe-la drew from Shantideva’s analysis of sentient

beings' interdependence with one another.

CBCT® (Cognitively- Based Compassion Training) began as an eight-week program, for the simple reason that MBSR is an eight-week program. It is now taught in various formats, ranging from a two-weekend intensive to a 10-week course. CBCT® is a secularized version of Tibetan Buddhist *lojong* training, designed to cultivate compassion through a series of progressive, analytical meditations. The research that established its efficacy was conducted in the Department of Psychiatry at Emory University by a team that was interested in the interactions between the body's stress and immune systems in depression. At first, we were looking at this training as a treatment for depression. It did not work. Now we know that meditation alone is not an appropriate intervention for someone experiencing an episode of depression, because people who are depressed find it difficult to meditate. Instead, they ruminate.

From the research that has been done on CBCT, we found that it has significant positive effects on the immune system and the stress system in the body, meaning that the participants had a healthier stress response. The more they meditated, the stronger the effect was. This was followed by a study with foster children in the Atlanta area, which demonstrated that the participants who meditated had lower levels of inflammation in their bodies – and inflammation is an underlying cause of a number of chronic health problems. Ongoing research is examining the effects of CBCT on school children, cancer survivors, and parents of autistic children, and medical students, nurses, and veterans with PTSD. It is also examining whether the practice increases workplace civility.

The last program I will mention is Compassion Cultivation Training (CCT), developed at Stanford University by Geshe Thupten Jinpa and a team of psychologists. Not much research has been published so far on this intervention. It, too, draws on the Tibetan *lojong* tradition, but it adds a number of affective dyadic exercises drawn from social psychology. CCT also explicitly includes *tonglen* (“sending and taking”) practice, whereas *tonglen* is only taught in CBCT to specific audiences, when it is deemed appropriate.

One issue that has arisen for the compassion protocols, which we have discussed extensively in the CBCT program, is how to translate the concepts of refuge and guru devotion, which are at the heart of Buddhist meditation practice and the guiding force *to* practice. For those practicing in Buddhist traditions, the refuge field and recalling the guru provides a warm feeling tone as the basis for practice, and eventually, just reciting the words, “I go for refuge to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha” evokes that state of mind. This does not apply when we are teaching in a secular setting, where we very specifically do not want the students to become attached to a specific teacher, but rather to adopt and internalize the practices themselves.

How, then, do we motivate people to practice, without a guru and without explicit refuge? Many programs, including MBSR, do this by providing research evidence to demonstrate the efficacy of the program. Some programs, such as CBCT, go further in emulating refuge practice by starting out the sessions with a nurturing moment, asking the student to recall a person or place when they felt calm, secure, and cared for.

This method works for some people, but not for others. When I was teaching in Belize last summer, the level of literacy was so low that the students did not understand the meaning of the word “nurture.” In addition, as we looked around the room at faces hardened and worn from the stresses of their lives, we realized that they may have little experiential knowledge of nurturing. Rather than asking them to recall a moment when they felt loved and cared for, as we worked on concentration on the breath over several sessions, we introduced the concept that one's own breath is a place of safety and refuge that one can always turn to. In my prison work, where the inmates come from varied faith traditions, we encourage them to visualize Jesus, Krishna, or another appropriate figure from their own

tradition.

Note that all of the interventions I have outlined here use elements of various Buddhist (and non-Buddhist) traditions. Let us look at what has been left out. First, none of the interventions specifically includes a discussion of ethics or any aspect of the Eight-Fold Path. Second, the mindfulness-based interventions leave out the *brahmaviharas*, or Four Immeasurables (equanimity, joy, loving-kindness, and compassion). This has given rise to an ongoing discussion in the West about the appropriateness of teaching selected practices from Buddhism without the larger framework that is central to Buddhist practice, especially because H. H. the Dalai Lama himself has publicly acknowledged that these programs are teaching Buddhism.

In recent years, proponents of the various mindfulness-based programs, including Kabat-Zinn himself, have attempted to make the case that compassion is implicit in the practices and a natural outgrowth of them. The compassion-based programs argue that ethical behavior will naturally arise when the student's perspective shifts from an inappropriate focus on the self to a more realistic and balanced perspective that encompasses our interconnectedness with others. This debate has been ongoing for years.

The practices in and of themselves are value neutral. Increasingly, MBSR and other mindfulness training programs are being used in the United States not just in healthcare settings, but also in corporations and in the U.S. military. The provision of this training in these settings can be questionable. Is MBSR helping active duty soldiers with the stress of war? Or is it honing the attention of a sharpshooter, making him or her more effective at killing people? Does a corporation offer a program because it is truly interested in the well-being of its employees, or because it is hoping to reduce healthcare costs? These are not mutually exclusive scenarios, of course, but some question whether organizations are offering these trainings to employees in lieu of developing a more humane work environment.

In the West, a subtle and insidious message is sometimes directed at those known to practice meditation: once you have been trained in meditation, any problem you have with your environment or with another person is due to your own inappropriate reaction to the situation. To take an example, if someone says something offensive to me, for instance, a remark about my abilities as a woman, and I object to it, the problem is not that the person has made a sexist remark. The problem is my reaction to the behavior. When this attitude is applied to larger systems, the results can be devastating. We know that secular meditation practices have significant effects on mental and physical health, and on resilience – but the objective is to help people improve their mental and physical well-being, not to prepare them to endure additional stress and dysfunction without complaining about it. Injustice must be challenged.

I have covered a lot of ground here and hope that the programs and the interconnected communities working with them are clear. It is important to know that the program administrators and many of the researchers in these programs are practitioners of one of the Buddhist traditions. The general tone of the work is collaborative, not competitive. I would like to add one caveat: All of the reputable secular meditation programs have extensive training programs and stringent criteria for their teachers, including personal practice. Except for DBT, they require that the teaching candidate have completed several meditation retreats. They also require ongoing training to maintain teaching credentials. There are many people who have had basic meditation instruction and who have read a few books who present themselves as meditation teachers. If you are interested in any of these programs, be sure to check the credentials of the teacher.

Several Mothers in Buddhist Biographical Literature: A Textual Study

Yuande Shib

Buddhist biographical literature can be traced back to the early canonical fragments in the *Mahāvagga* and *Mahāvastu*. The more mature biographical literature only appeared around the second century CE. The *Buddhacarita* (Acts of the Buddha), composed by Aśvaghoṣa in Sanskrit, is the best representation. Although the *Mahāvagga* sheds some fragmentary light on the lives of some chief disciples, these accounts function simply to supplement the great life of the Buddha. Later, some Chinese monks developed biographical literature about eminent monks and nuns; for example, Huijiao's (497–554) *Biographies of the Eminent Monks* (*Gao-Seng-Zhuan*) and Baochang's *Bi-Qiu-Ni-Zhuan* (Biographies of Nuns). But, so far, there are no biographical works specifically composed about the mothers of those sagely monks or nuns. Even the two mothers of the Buddha himself never received the biographical accounts they deserved. Sadly, although some Buddhist mothers appeared in their sagely sons' biographies, they were primarily treated as devices to deliver their saintly sons to this human realm. These mothers include *Māyā*, the biological mother of the Buddha. Now, as the Buddhist teachings are enthusiastically applied by more and more modern women to their experience of motherhood, those often-ignored Buddhist mothers deserve greater attention and respect.

Based on biographical accounts found in the canonical texts, I intend to draw out clearer images of several Buddhist mothers. Among these, the Buddha's two mothers *Māyā* and *Prājapāti Gautamī*, and *Sāriputra*'s mother *Rūpasārī*, and *Kumārajīva*'s mother *Jīva* receive epithetical accounts. In my conclusion, I argue that mothers are more than devices for the birth and growth of a son, and that their love supports their sons' spiritual practice. Since the love of a mother is praised in Buddhism, then surely we should support spirituality of mothers.

The Buddha's Two Mothers in His Biographies

The life of the Buddha provides the background to his teaching.¹ His biological mother *Māyā* and foster mother (and maternal aunt) *Prājapāti Gautamī* are significant components in this background, playing unique roles in the birth and upbringing of the *bodhisattva* *Siddhārtha Gautama*, the Buddha-to-be. His mother *Māyā* (Sanskrit for “illusion”) was the daughter of the *Śākya* *Añjana* and *Yasodharā*.² *Dandapani* and *Suppabuddha* were her brothers and *Gautamī* was her young sister. There are no reliable accounts of *Māyā*'s early life. However, in Aśvaghoṣa's words, *Māyā* was as pretty as a lotus and as steadfast as the Earth.³ Later, *Māyā* and her sister *Gautamī* together were married to *Śuddhodana* in their youth, but it was not until *Māyā* was between forty and fifty years old that Prince *Siddhārtha* was born.⁴ A bit surprisingly, the Nepalese poetic biography reports that Queen *Māyā*'s sister *Gautamī* was also unable to give birth to a son. Although the two sister queens were faithful, dutiful, and devoted to him, King *Śuddhodana* even considered a third marriage in order to bear a son who could carry on his rich and prosperous kingdom.⁵ On the advice of some brahmins, the two sisters even conducted an arduous month-long fast to remove fat from their wombs.⁶

Māyā's pregnancy with the *bodhisattva* *Siddhārtha* began with a miraculous dream in which a white elephant entered her body magically and painlessly.⁷ This story is well known and agreed upon in the biographical accounts. Before conception, the *bodhisattva* was reportedly in *Tusita* heaven preparing for his rebirth, finally choosing *Kapilavastu* as his birthplace, King *Śuddhodana* as his father, and *Māyā* as his mother.⁸ The *Mahāvastu* offers reasons for why the *bodhisattva* chose this couple as his parents: *Śuddhodana* was worthy to be his father due to his high caste and righteous governance; *Māyā* fulfilled all the prerequisites to be his mother due to her good birth, pure body, tender passion, and short life – a remaining lifespan of only seven nights and ten months.⁹ Sadly, *Māyā*'s died after surgery to deliver the breech baby from her side rather than from her womb. Her demise after the seventh night was probably the result of an infection.¹⁰ However, the *bodhisattva*'s birth had already been predicted, so *Siddhārtha* was sure to be born, despite the obstacles. However, as the *Mahāvastu* explains in the *bodhisattva*'s own words, it would not have been fitting for a woman who gave birth to “a peerless one”

to afterward indulge in sexual pleasures.¹¹ Thus, Māyā's short life was already fixed, in order to ensure the purity of her saintly son. Although humans are biologically reproduced through sexual intercourse, it was seen as something impure.¹² This probably why most biographical accounts avoid the possibility that Māyā's pregnancy was a result of sexual activity.¹³ Aśvaghoṣa was an exception. Although he accepts the legend of Māyā's conception through her dream of a white elephant, he also states that the noble pregnancy was a result of sexual intercourse between Māyā and King Suddhodana. In his poem, Aśvaghoṣa wrote:

That ruler of men, sporting with his queen, enjoyed, as it were, Vaishravana's sovereign might;
free from sin, then, she produced the fruit of her womb, as knowledge does, when united with
trance.¹⁴

This story exists alongside the majority Buddhist sentiment that accords supermundane status to the Māyā's noble pregnancy and the prince's noble birth.¹⁵

Māyā's pregnancy reportedly brought the queen and the Śākya clan¹⁶ incomparable joy. It said that the queen purified herself by following the five precepts: refraining from killing living beings, taking what is not given, unchastity, false speech, and indulgence in intoxicants.¹⁷ The *Mahāvastu* records that during her pregnancy, Māyā felt comfortable whether she was moving, standing, sitting, or lying down, and became invulnerable to all kinds of dangers and diseases.¹⁸ Aśvaghoṣa records that Māyā was pure and free from delusion, sorrow, and fatigue during her ten-month pregnancy.¹⁹ The *Lalitavistara* draws a detailed map of this noble pregnancy, which was characterized by many miracles.²⁰

Just like all other Buddhas-to-be, Māyā delivered the baby *bodhisattva* into the world after a pregnancy of ten months, longer than a normal birth.²¹ With the permission of her husband,²² Māyā decided to give birth at her parents' place. The *Mahāvastu* says that Māyā's in-laws prepared Lumbini Grove for her arrival.²³ Aśvaghoṣa describes this grove as being full of trees of every kind, including the *sāl* tree.²⁴ All sources mention that Māyā was attracted by the beauty of this natural woodland.²⁵ All these accounts further agree that *bodhisattva* was born from Māyā's right side (or, oddly, her armpit²⁶) rather than the birth canal.²⁷

The sources differ, however, regarding the types of miracles that occurred at the noble birth. The *Mahāvastu* reports that Māyā gave birth while standing, while clinging to the branch of a *sāl* tree and that the baby *bodhisattva* immediately took seven steps after his birth.²⁸ Aśvaghoṣa records that Māyā gave birth painlessly while lying down and that the baby *bodhisattva* immediately took seven steps and loudly proclaimed that this would be his last birth.²⁹ The Nepalese poet Chittadhar Hridaya describes few miracles, but mentions that Māyā gave birth without harm while standing³⁰ and that she joyfully breastfed her "jewel-like" son.³¹ Besides Māyā's own great happiness at being a new mother, Aśvaghoṣa also carefully observed her motherly worries and anxieties about the future. After she saw the supernormal powers of her beloved son, whom she and her husband had been anticipating for decades,³² Māyā apparently expressed her motherly nature. If delivering the *bodhisattva* into this world was really her only mission, up to this point, Māyā successfully completed her mission. If the prediction her son made while he was still a *deva* in Tusita Heaven was to be fulfilled,³³ the only thing left was for Māyā was to die, to preserve her son's purity. All the texts offer her is rebirth as a god in Tāvātimsa (Infinite Happiness) Heaven, where her son would later teach her Abhidharma to repay her kindness.³⁴ After this, Māyā rarely receives any attention from the biographers.³⁵ The *jātakas*³⁶ recount several of Māyā's previous lives in which was the mother of the *bodhisattva*.

After Māyā's predicted demise, the task of raising the baby *bodhisattva* reportedly fell immediately upon Gautamī, Māyā's younger sister, who was the other queen of King Suddhodana.³⁷ Unsurprisingly, the impressive accounts of Gautamī are not so much concerned with how she raised the baby *bodhisattva* as with her strong determination to develop spiritually by becoming the first *bhiksuni* in Buddhist history.³⁸ Nevertheless, there is some mention that Gautamī gave her wholehearted love, care, and concern to nurse the baby *bodhisattva* as her own child.³⁹ A Pāli *vinaya* text records:

... and, Lord, the Gotami, Pajāpatī the Great, was of great service: she was the Lord's aunt, foster-mother, nurse, giver of milk, for when the Lord's mother passed away she suckled him ...⁴⁰

Aśvagoshā also reports that Gautamī brought up the *bodhisattva* with love and fondness.⁴¹ One *jātaka* tale likewise describes Gautamī's unconditional love for the *bodhisattva*.⁴² Gautamī not only proved her strong resolve to seek the highest spiritual goal by becoming the first and unsurpassed example of that attainment for all future womenfolk,⁴³ but also perfected herself as a virtuous and devoted mother to the *bodhisattva*.

NOTES

¹ A. K. Warder, *Indian Buddhism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2004), 43.

² G. P. Malasekera, *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names*, vol. II (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2007), 608, n2.

³ Patrick Olivelle, *Upanisads* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3.

⁴ Malasekera, *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names*, p. 609.

⁵ Todd T. Lewis and Subarnaman Tuladhar, *Sugata Saurabha: An Epic Poem from Nepal on the Life of the Buddha by Chittadhar Hridaya* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 39.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁷ According to the Nepali account, the elephant had six tusks. *Ibid.*, 44.

⁸ J. J. Jones, trans., *The Mahāvastu*, vol. II, Sacred Books of the Buddhists (London: Luzac & Company, 1952), 3.

⁹ *Ibid.* The *Lalitavistara* and *Pu-Yao-Jing* (T 3, no. 186) concur.

¹⁰ I thank Dr. Dion Peoples for this perspective, based on his presentation of the facts of Gotama's birth from the textual sources. In these sources, the baby not born vaginally, but feet first, from his mother's side. This could only have been possible surgically and Māyā died from the complications.

¹¹ Jones, *Mahāvastu*, 3.

¹² Dion Peoples reminded me of this valid point.

¹³ Jones, *Mahāvastu*, 8. It is said that a *bodhisattva* enters the womb of a mother who is outstanding, observes fasts, is joyful, and does not engage in sexual intercourse.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ As Dion Peoples reminds us, the translators of Buddhist texts were often Christians who select terminology or inflected their translations with the ideology of their own tradition.

¹⁶ Lewis, *Sugata Saurabha*, 46.

¹⁷ Henry Clarke Warren, *Buddhism in Translation* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), 38–48.

- ¹⁸ Jones, *Mahāvastu*, 13.
- ¹⁹ Olivelle, *Upanisads*, 3.
- ²⁰ T 3, No. 186.
- ²¹ Jones, *Mahāvastu*, 16. Dion Peoples reminded me that the actual duration of human gestation is around 39 weeks.
- ²² Ibid; also refers to T 3, No. 186.
- ²³ Jones, *Mahāvastu*, 16-17.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 16; Lewis, *Sugata Saurabha*, 49.
- ²⁵ Lewis, *Sugata Saurabha*, 47.
- ²⁶ Olivelle, *Upanisads*, 5.
- ²⁷ Lewis, *Sugata Saurabha*, 51; Jones, *Mahāvastu*, 18; Olivelle, *Upanisads*, 5.
- ²⁸ Jones, *Mahāvastu*, 18-20.
- ²⁹ Olivelle, *Upanisads*, 5–6.
- ³⁰ Lewis, *Sugata Saurabha*, 50–51.
- ³¹ Ibid., 51, 52.
- ³² Olivelle, *Upanisads*, 11.
- ³³ Refer to Note 38.
- ³⁴ Nayanonika Thera and Hellmuth Hecker (ed. Bhikkhu Bodhi), *Great Disciples of the Buddha* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2003), 45.
- ³⁵ Lewis, *Sugata Saurabha*, 68–70 records widespread mourning at Māyā’s death.
- ³⁶ Kurudhamma-Jātaka (Cowell, 2004, vol. I, 260); Katthahari-Jātaka (Cowell, 2004, vol. I, p.28); Kosambī-Jātaka (Cowell, 2004, vol. II, 291); Alīnacitta-Jātaka (Cowell, 2004, vol. I, 17); Khandahāla-Jātaka (Cowell, 2004, vol. VI, 80); Dasaratha-Jātaka (Cowell, 2004, vol. IV, 82); Bandhanāgāra-Jātaka (Cowell, 2004, vol. II, 98); and Māti-posaka Jātaka (Cowell, 2004, vol. IV, 61).
- ³⁷ Lewis, *Sugata Saurabha*, 70; Yuande Shih, *A Comparative and Critical Study of Mahāprājapātī Sutra* (Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2015), 12, Note 39.
- ³⁸ Yuande, *A Comparative and Critical Study*, 10–13.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 12.
- ⁴⁰ I. B. Horner, *The Book of the Discipline: Vinaya-Pitaka*, vol. IV, Cullavagga (London: Luzac & Co., 1963), 353. Chinese versions of *vinaya* texts, such as T 24, No. 1478, report that the Buddha

accepted Gautamī's going forth when he heard Ānanda speak of his indebtedness to her.

⁴¹ Olivelle, *Upanisads*, 42.

⁴² Jātaka 358: The Queen Candā (a previous life of Gautamī) grieved to death over the massacre of her beloved son Prince Dhammapāla (a previous life of Siddārtha).

⁴³ Yuande, *A Comparative and Critical Study*, 68–71.

The Enlightened Female: Buddhism, Women, and Being a Mother

Meg Adam

In all societies, particularly in the West, there has been a rethinking of the position rendered to women. This reappraisal has included a consideration of the position of women in religious traditions. At this juncture, it is opportune to extend the notion of the place of women in Buddhism to the position of mothers in Buddhism.¹ The position of mothers and families in Buddhism is currently under researched. Jessica Starling has described recent research activity in this area as having brought long overdue scholarly appreciation to the centrality of family relationships in Buddhism.²

This PhD research project examines how Buddhism constructs gender representation and female roles; how these roles are challenged, dismissed, or supported; and how Buddhism can influence or enhance the experience of the mother and, importantly, the experience of the child(ren) from the mother's perspective. In seeking to understand the roles of Buddhist women and the influence of Buddhism on being a mother, this research explores the application of Buddhist philosophy, teachings, and practices to mothering. This project traces the intricate symbolic meanings attached to the role of motherhood in Buddhism, such as the representation of the feminine principle of wisdom as being the mother of Buddhahood, up to the practical aspects of mothering in a modern Buddhist context.³

Throughout the history of Buddhist communities, images of the feminine have played a central role in Buddhist thought and practice. Surely such images of women as mothers, wives, and objects of desire have had a significant impact on the lives of Buddhist women.⁴ Many write that Buddhism was regarded as patriarchal because Buddhist principles defined a women's body as being of inferior status in pursuing enlightenment.⁵ To be born a woman was viewed as negative karma.⁶ Others believe that the attitude of the Buddha toward the roles of women could be considered an enlightened one, even when judged by the standards of the modern age, particularly given the social matrix in which Buddhism arose, where women were accorded an inferior position. How can this be reconciled with Buddhism's reputation as a philosophy and religion of equality and liberation, and the current growth and attraction of women to Buddhism?

Natalie Grummer notes that the connection between the female body, giving birth, and thus *samsāra*, and its oft-noted capacity to arouse desire in men rendered it unfit for the highest attainments.⁷

Despite instances of the denigration of women, there has always been an idealisation of motherhood in Indian thought and a glorification of the feminine concept.⁸ Kate Blackstone states that wives did not command the same kind of respect in Buddhist literature as mothers.⁹ Indian Buddhists believed that women were by nature more deeply involved with worldly existence than men because of female fertility. Motherhood was therefore generally considered a wise and compassionate form of femininity, but mothers with their unconditional love for their children, involving strong karmic bonds, were regarded as the least capable of attaining salvation.¹⁰ Mothers also frequently figured in narrative literature as ultimate embodiments of attachment and the grief it brings.¹¹

Blackstone has detailed the concept that women were not pure, "for impurity resides within them; they lack physical, social and psychological containment, for their bodies ooze and they maintain close personal ties with family and they can never assume a position of superiority either with the sangha or as representatives of the sangha before the laity."¹² Blackstone went on to write that "Opposition to the household life is inherent in the concept of renunciation. Symbols of householder life (money, kinship ties, business, and concerns) are obviously antithetical to the path of a renouncer, and are used as such in the texts."¹³ The death of the Buddha's own mother one week after his birth might be taken to signify not only the samsaric taint of giving birth, but also the great power of the bond between mother and child, one that had to be broken if the Buddha was to be able to renounce all worldly

attachments.¹⁴

There is some belief that the rise of the Mahāyāna improved the status of women in Buddhism, as it was thought that the Mahāyāna entertained a more positive attitude toward women.¹⁵ However, this is disputed in some contemporary research. For example, the work of Bhikkhu Analayo documents evidence of a decline in regard to women over time.¹⁶ Despite this, Mahāyāna sources often mention the infinite debt to one's mother. The depth of a mother's love for her children has been described as the basis for the use of the figure of the mother as the paradigm of selfless compassion embodied in Buddhas and *bodhisattvas*. This is featured in the earliest literature, including the *Metta Sutta*. In the *bodhisattva* vows of the Mahāyāna, the *bodhisattva* is exhorted to be like a mother to all beings, and the Buddha himself is frequently described in motherly terms.

Many would say therefore that motherhood is the greatest opportunity for women to practice the spiritual path. It follows that, if the essence of Tibetan Buddhism is selfless compassion for others, then motherhood and the relationship between mother and child are among the purest manifestations of this principle. The wisdom of emptiness is associated with the mother, and the model of the mother's compassion is followed for generating the highest compassion for all sentient beings. Female deities and messengers are meditated upon for reaching the culmination of spiritual practice.¹⁷ Natalie Gummer writes that in Tibetan Buddhism "the notion of the compassionate, loving mother is surely also at work in the characterisation of certain prominent female bodhisattvas, such as Prajnaparamita (the mother of all Buddha's) and Tara (embodiment of compassionate action)."¹⁸

The love and joy that many mothers (and fathers) experience at the birth of a child and during the child's development can result in an opening up of the self to the spiritual side of humanity as well as an overwhelming and all-encompassing love for someone besides oneself.¹⁹ Mothering also requires women to constantly assess, confront, and reflect upon personal and societal mores or values.²⁰ These endeavours may cause mothers to alter their views on their lives and goals, and change their views of themselves and their relationships. In her book *Buddha Mom*, Jacqueline Kramer writes that the women around her were growing by leaps and bounds when they became mothers and gained first-hand exposure to selfless service, unconditional love, and letting go.²¹ As such, many believe that the Buddha's teachings are shining examples for modern mothers and that mothers are natural vessels for spiritual growth.

Historically, however, mothers were seldom taken seriously as candidates for awakening, no matter how useful Buddhist wisdom and practices were in daily mothering. Kramer believes that the main reason mothers are so underrepresented in Buddhist language, stories, and practices is that Buddhism developed and has largely been understood through a monastic lens. She believes that Buddhist centres still operate on a monastic model that includes long periods of retreat and the need for a controlled environment. Obviously, this may not be easy for someone with a baby or small child. Whereas the monastic preference is for quiet, prescribed routines, home life with children is often noisy, messy and unpredictable.²²

However, Kramer believes that mothers have certain advantages over monastics, namely, "Mothers have a PICC line into the heart of unconditional love so they need very little practice to realise the Bodhisattva vow of love for all beings. Their lives are steeped in selfless service and they are challenged to let go of attachments amidst the heat of the strongest attachment of mother to child."²³ Similarly, Franz Metcalf and Vanessa Sasson write that "Attempting to sever worldly attachments is certainly a key Buddhist goal, but is not necessarily the practice around which all Buddhists organise their lives. Family ties have surely always bound Buddhist communities together, regardless of how impermanent those families might be or how easily such ties can lead to dukkha. Placing the spotlight on family life brings these ties and practices into focus."²⁴

My research integrates feminist theory, social anthropology, and an analysis of a body of Buddhist materials. Beginning with the cultural, political and religious background to contemporary Buddhist mothering. The purpose of the research is to explore the application of Buddhist philosophy, teachings and practices to mothering. The aim is to listen to, interpret, and report women's stories of their transitions to Buddhism and motherhood, and to motherhood within Buddhism. By doing so, it contributes to current knowledge on, and debate about, modern Western women's lives and Buddhism. I interviewed more than twenty women who were mothers and in some instances also grandmothers. All considered themselves Buddhist, all were Western women who had adopted Buddhism and had not been brought up in a Buddhist family, and some were Western Tibetan Buddhist nuns.

My research was conducted through a narrative and thematic analysis underpinned by a feminist methodology. Narrative Inquiry and Mindful Inquiry are utilized as the methodological tools for reviewing the women's stories and in assisting thematic analysis. Valerie Malhotra Bentz and Jeremy Shapiro describe Mindful Inquiry in social research as combining "the Buddhist concept of mindfulness with phenomenology, critical theory and hermeneutics in a process that puts the enquirer at the centre."²⁵ Mindful Inquiry is based on thirteen philosophical assumptions. The first of these assumptions is the importance of mindfulness, being present in the moment, throughout the process of inquiry. As such, Mindful Inquiry helps develop both reflexivity and voice in the research.

When interviewing each of the women in this study, several guiding questions were used. However, the interviews were semi-structured, allowing both speaker and listener to follow the path of the women's stories. A starting point was asking participants whether they considered Buddhism to be a religion, a philosophy, both, or something other. While many scholars consider Buddhism to be a religion, it is undoubtedly different from other religions in that there is no single God who creates and then determines the fate of those who believe.²⁶ Therefore, Alice Katie Terrell writes, "Buddhism is believed to be best understood as a philosophy rather than a religious system because it does not embrace a god."²⁷

This sentiment aligns well with what the majority of the participants expressed. They largely identified Buddhism as a philosophy or "science of the mind" as opposed to a religion. One area for examination is whether this viewpoint is advantageous or disadvantageous in teaching children about the benefits of a Buddhist way of life? Helen Waterhouse believes that, "Religions, Buddhism included, have their own internal explanations for processes that operate when children are socialised into the religious viewpoint of their parents and other close associates. Such explanations may be based on theological positions or on specific cosmological and/or soteriological viewpoints."²⁸

While participants did not feel that Buddhism was a religion, they did feel that implanting some Buddhist "seeds" or beliefs in their children's mind, thoughts, and actions is important and that it is preferable for children to have an opportunity to learn about the philosophy of Buddhism as an integral part of growing up. Likewise, they felt that children's familiarity with the symbols of Buddhism and a knowledge of what the symbols represent were part of the cultural capital mothers wanted to give them. The intent was for children to learn about Buddhism in ways that will have a lasting impact on the way they think and relate to the world, even if they do not fully embrace Buddhist ideas on their own accord. Lama Zopa Rinpoche asserts that, "Since as Buddhist parents you can do so much to help your children, it would be a great pity, extremely sad, and very strange if you did not teach your children what you have faith in and what you have found to be beneficial for your own life."²⁹

Religious or spiritual practice, including Buddhist practice, can be a cohesive factor in a family or it can be the opposite. It can be particularly challenging for families in which one parent practices or believes and the other does not to find a balanced role for religious or spiritual practice in the family.³⁰ While this was the case for the majority of the participants, expressions of distress about this tension

were not strongly voiced in the interviews. In some cases, Buddhism was not a topic for discussion between partners, but to a large degree, the relationships were based on understanding and an acceptance of differences.

In the interviews, it became clear that the way in which Western women practice Buddhism may be different from the way Asian Buddhists practice. Western mothers who have adopted Buddhism often have jobs as well as families and therefore may not have time to focus on the more time-consuming disciplines of study and practice. These activities present different challenges to lay and ordained women practitioners. Traditionally in Asia, most practice was done by men; the women who practiced seriously were almost always nuns, and childless.³¹

Another issue that was explored was the roles of women and mothers in Buddhist institutions. Historically in Asian countries, for example, women have been excluded from many institutions, such as monasteries and shrines.³² This is still often the case. More recent, Metcalf and Sasson have noted that the relationship between religious authority and family ties is potentially one of competition. This tension was expressed by several of the participants in the study, who referred to the struggle faced by Buddhist women who have babies or small children. Some recounted a period of exclusion from Western Buddhist centres and teachings, when their small children or babies were not always welcomed by Western Buddhist groups. In some instances, the exclusion was explicit; the centres made it abundantly clear that babies and small children were not to attend regular teachings or sessions. Some centres had set up family-orientated groups, such as Dharma clubs or mothers' groups, to compensate for this exclusion.

Another issue that was raised was the absence of multi-faith instruction in the Australian school system; particularly Queensland, where a large portion of the research was centred. The state schools offer religious education, but it is predominantly or sometimes exclusively Christian, often implemented by Christian organisations. In addition, the private school system largely consists of schools funded by Christian organisations. As a result, school-age children are not exposed to a broad range of religions and do not gain an understanding or appreciation of differences and similarities among them. Most considered access to multi-religious education necessary for nurturing understanding, respect, and non-judgmental attitudes in children.

Another dimension of the research was transgenerational, concerned with the transmission of Buddhist beliefs and practices to the younger generation. Since mothers are a significant proportion of the population, Buddhist institutes and teachings need to be made more accessible to them. The core Buddhist teachings are very relevant for mothers who are bringing up the next generation of Buddhist practitioners. Mothers are just as capable of reaching enlightenment as anyone else and deserve more attention and support on the path. Kramer asserts that Buddhism cannot become firmly established in a culture until it is firmly established in the home lives of families.

Rita Gross writes that the "attempt to combine child rearing with the demands of intensive practice and study is a major Buddhist experiment. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it remains to be seen how well that experiment will proceed and whether it will persist from generation to generation."³³ Indeed, some Buddhist commentators claim that providing models for the more equitable participation of women is the special karmic task of Western Buddhism. This continuing research effort is a step in the direction of addressing this karmic task of promoting equitable participation. It highlights the importance of women and mothers as central in Buddhist thought and seeks to expand on enlightened views of their roles.

NOTES

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“Women who Know about Those Things”: Midwives and Wise Women in Buddhist Literature

Robert Kritzer

In Buddhist texts, certain women are characterized as “wise.” In this paper, I discuss the wisdom of two types of these wise women: midwives and women who are looking forward to pregnancy. First, I look at a Buddhist scripture in which midwives remove a dead fetus from the mother. Classical non-Buddhist Indian medical texts describe the role and character of midwives, and I summarize the medical material in relationship to this *sūtra*. Next, I examine midwives in two Buddhist stories. Finally, I discuss a group of Buddhist stories that feature another kind of wise female whose special knowledge is about pregnancy.

I first became interested in midwives in Buddhist literature when I was editing and translating *Garbhāvākṛāntisūtra* (*Sūtra on Entry into the Womb, Rūtāi jīng*). This scripture describes the process of conception, gestation, and birth. I will not talk about the complicated textual history of this scriptural text, except to say that the versions I mention in this paper are all associated with the Mūlasarvāstivāda tradition.

In the account of the thirty-eighth week of gestation, the Tibetan translation of the *sūtra* states that sometimes the fetus gets turned upside down inside the womb and dies there. It continues, “Then, women who are skilled in that (sort of thing), or those who are skilled at caring for children, anoint their hand with butter or pleasantly warm oil and ointment of well-ground *s’ālmali* (*shemoli, mùmian*) or something else. They fasten to their hand a fine blade, exceedingly sharp like a razor. And they insert that hand (into the womb).”¹ Elsewhere in the text, the same account is repeated several times, with the women being described as “women who know about those (things).”² The corresponding phrase in the Chinese translation of the *sūtra* are *zhībui nüren*, “wise women,” and *shànjiě nüren*, “women who understand well.”

These skillful or knowledgeable women seem to have been midwives. The Sanskrit and Chinese terms for “midwife” vary considerably from text to text, and the words are often ambiguous. For example, in Monier-Williams’ Sanskrit Dictionary, we find that the word *dhātrī* can mean midwife, nurse, or mother,³ while *v ddhayuvati* can refer to a midwife or a procuress,⁴ that is to say, a woman who provides men with prostitutes.

As I mentioned above, the phrase used in the Chinese translation of *Garbhāvākṛāntisūtra* is *zhībui nüren*, “wise women.” Similar phrases that appear in different texts and different contexts include: *minghui nü*, “women with clear wisdom”; *cong hui nü*, “wise women”; and *fan zhībui nüren*, “worldly wise women.” The Tibetan translations, which I will not discuss in detail here, similarly include the ideas of wisdom and/or skills.

The wisdom and skills possessed by these wise women are related in one way or another to conception and childbirth. In this paper, I look at midwives and other wise women in several stories from *vinaya* texts and *Avadānas*. But first, I summarize what some of the classical Indian medical texts say about midwives.

Carakasambhitā mentions the need for old women who have had many children and are friendly, well-mannered, affectionate, and so on.⁵ When the mother begins to go into labor, these women encourage her with soothing words.⁶ A little further on, when the women are portrayed as advising the mother when to push or not to push, the text again emphasizes these qualities. Women continue to encourage the mother, help remove the placenta if necessary, and participate in rituals for the protection of the infant.⁷

Other medical texts also mention women who help in childbirth. *Suśrutāsambhitā* states that four women who are old, beyond reproach, skilled in birthing, and with short nails should take care of the mother.⁸ As in *Carakasambhitā*, these women instruct and encourage the mother during childbirth. Another example is found in *Kāśyāpasambhitā*, which refers to women who are old, skillful, well cleaned, and well spoken.⁹

These texts seem more concerned with the midwives' character than with any technical knowledge the women may possess. Their most important qualifications are their advanced age, their kindness, and their experience. Martha Selby observes that *Carakasambhitā* and *Suśrutasambhitā* "midwives are not only helpers but also "expert friends and advisors during the experience of labour and birth."¹⁰ Below we will see how this compares with the knowledge of women described in Buddhist texts.

Outside of *Garbhāvakraṅtīsūtra*, one of the very few references to midwives in Buddhist literature is found in the Mūlasarvāstivāda *vinaya*, in a story about the Buddha's birth. There, the midwife is actually the god Indra in the disguise of an old woman. In this version, Indra observes Māyā when, in her birth pains, she grabs a tree in preparation for giving birth. Indra thinks it will be embarrassing for her to give birth in front of all her attendants. He causes rain and wind, which drive away the attendants. He then turns himself into an old woman and receives the infant *bodhisattva* into his hands.¹¹

In another version of this story, in *Buddhacarita*, there is no mention of Indra or midwives present at the birth of the Buddha, only thousands of delighted women. Later in the story, however, when the Buddha's parents start wondering what will become of their extraordinary son, the text mentions some other women. These old women were alarmed, so they prayed to the gods for good fortune."¹² This verse is not extant in Sanskrit. The Tibetan term here, *bud med ryan mo rnams*, simply means "old women," like the Chinese *chángsù zhū murén*. The fact that these women are described as old and are on the scene fairly soon after the birth, suggests that they might indeed be midwives. As we have seen, performing rituals for the sake of the infant is one of the midwives' roles according to *Carakasambhitā*.

Another story in which a midwife is associated with prayers (in this case, prayers for the long life of a child) is found in *Divyāvadāna*. In *Cūdāpakṣvadāna*, a midwife (*vrddhavyvati*) instructs a girl to take a boy to a crossroads and ask *tīrthyas* (*wàidào*), monks, and the Buddha to bless the child with long life. All of the boy's parents' previous children have died. But this boy, having been presented to these various religious figures, receives a blessing from each, and is thus able to live a long life.¹³ In this case, the midwife does not herself pray, but she is the one who knows what to do. As we shall soon see, however, other Buddhist stories discount the efficacy of prayer, at least regarding conception.

Besides the special knowledge that midwives have concerning childbirth, another type of knowledge is mentioned frequently in *vinaya* texts and Avadānas. In these stories, a childless rich man desires to have a child, and he prays to various deities, great and small, but to no avail. For example, in the story of Śreṣṭhin, a sonless householder appeals to the gods for help. However, the reader is told that prayer is ineffective. Only the presence of three conditions results in the birth of a child: "Both the mother and the father are aroused and have coupled; the mother, being healthy, is fertile; and a *gandharva* is standing by."¹⁴ Amy Langenberg characterizes a similar passage from the Kusīda chapter of *Avadānaśataka* as an example of "quasi-naturalistic explanations of conception."¹⁵

A little later in the story of Kusīda, five special qualities of "wise women" are mentioned. Here, we are no longer talking about midwives. Similar passages are found elsewhere in *Avadānaśataka* and the Mūlasarvāstivāda *vinaya*.¹⁶ The Kusīda chapter lists these five special qualities: (1) The wise woman knows when the man is aroused and when he is not. (2) She knows the proper time and her fertile period. (3) She knows when her womb has been entered. (4) She knows on whose account the embryo enters. (5) She knows if it is a boy or a girl.¹⁷ In these stories, the list of qualities is frequently followed by the statement that if the embryo is on the right side, it will be a boy, if on the left, a girl. Then the woman announces to her husband that she is pregnant.

Other textual traditions have different versions of the list. In the story of a rich man from Vāsava, the Sarvāstivāda *vinaya* specifies four special things that women with sharp faculties know: whether the man has desire; whether he does not have desire; when she is pregnant; and by whom she is pregnant.¹⁸ In three stories in the Dharmaguptaka *vinaya*, women in general are said to have three types of knowledge: of when they are pregnant; of the person by whom they are pregnant; and of the man's desire for them.¹⁹ Yet another *sūtra*, *Zhangzhèzǐ àonao sānbù jīng*, mentions five things that wise women should know, but the list is somewhat different from the Mūlasarvāstivāda list: the man's intention; whether the man is paying attention or not (*niānbùniān*); the cause of the pregnancy; the sex of the child; and whether the child will be good or bad.²⁰

The description of the removal of the dead fetus in *Garbhāvākṛāntisūtra* is unique in Indian Buddhist literature in providing an account of the actual work of a midwife. The procedure described in the *sūtra* corresponds quite closely with the medical texts, especially *Suśrutasaṃhitā*.²¹ The skill or knowledge of these women is clearly medical here. The same medical instrument and medicinal ointment are mentioned in the *sūtra* and in the medical texts. Interestingly, in the medical literature, it is not the midwife but a doctor, presumably male, who performs the operation.

The midwives who appear in the medical texts, as I have mentioned, do not provide technical procedures. Rather, they offer their experience, both as older women and specifically as mothers themselves, providing something that the doctors cannot. I have not found words like “wise,” “knowledgeable,” or “intelligent” used to describe these women. This supports Selby’s contention that the medical texts do not explicitly recognize the importance of “female knowledge.”

Similarly, the handful of other Buddhist references to midwives that I have found describe them not as technically wise but as sensitive and concerned. Indra’s desire to spare Māyā the embarrassment of giving birth in public is empathetic. Although he uses his supernatural force to dismiss the crowd, it is in the form of a presumably kind old woman that he stands by Māyā as she begins to give birth. The prayers of the old women in *Buddhacarita* and the intercession of the midwife in *Cūdāpakṣvadāna* are additional examples of what we might call spiritual rather than medical care.

What ties all these examples of wise women together is that their wisdom or knowledge is specifically concerned with reproduction. To the modern reader, the detailed medical knowledge of the midwife in *Garbhāvākṛāntisūtra*, which is like an obstetrical textbook, is very different from the almost instinctual “knowledge” that a pregnant woman is said to have about her own reproductive status, her partner’s state of arousal, and the sex of her future child. However, if we read through *Garbhāvākṛāntisūtra*, we can see that it, too, mentions some of the things about which the women in the stories above possess knowledge, even though they are not midwives, namely: the three conditions for conception; the duration of the woman’s period of fertility, which is connected to her psychological state; the entrance of the intermediate being into the womb; and the varying positions of boys and girls. Finally, in week thirty-eight, we see the “women skilled in that sort of thing” expertly removing a dead fetus.

The *sūtra* does not end with that scene. In a following section, the birth of a live fetus is described. Immediately following birth, the infant is said to have been received by someone’s hands or received into a cloth and splashed with pleasantly warm water. This person must be none other than the midwife.

NOTES

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⁷ Ibid., 477–81.

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¹⁵ Amy Paris Langenberg, “Pregnant Words: South Asian Buddhist Tales of Fertility and Child Protection,” *History of Religions* 52:4(2013) 364.

¹⁶ In an article on *Avadānaśataka*, Alice Collett examines in detail differing versions of this formula about wise women: “List-based Formulae in the *Avadānaśataka*,” *Buddhist Studies Review* 23:2(2006) 168–74.

¹⁷ P. L. Vaidya, ed., *Avadāna-Śataka*, *Buddhist Sanskrit Texts* 19 (Darbhanga: The Mithila Institute of Post-Graduate Studies and Research in Sanskrit Learning, 1958), 7.24–27.

¹⁸ *Sarvāstivāda vinaya* T1435.178a26-28.

¹⁹ *Dharmaguptaka vinaya* T1428.782b16-18, 911a12-13, 950b20-22.

²⁰ *Zhangzhezi aonao sanchu jing* T525.800a13-15.

²¹ Robert Kritzer, “Childbirth and the Mother’s Body in the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* and Related Texts,” *Indo tetsugaku bukkyō shisō ron shū: Mikogami Eshō kyōju shōju kinen ronshū* (Kyoto: Nagatabunshodō, 2004), 1092–93.

Religious Dietary Laws, Buddhist Ethics, and Food Business: Studying Religious Food Codes and Running a Traditional Temple Food Restaurant in Korea

Hyun-Jin Kim

My story begins with the fact that I was born a woman and a Buddhist, and explains why I ended up studying Buddhist ethics and running a business, specifically, a restaurant serving temple food. A brief answer to the question is that it was not my choice; my mother is a Buddhist and I happened to be born a woman. This first answer leads to the second. I wanted to learn more and that is why I decided to pay attention to the codes of religious food, both academically and in business.

I think it is very important to understand the contingency of our various identities in life, including history and culture. Embracing our identities as aspects of who we are and as contingent rather than absolute – including our gender, sexual orientation, religion, nationality, and so on – we are able to find space to acknowledge and respect our own multiple identities and also embrace and respect the identities of others, as they are. I became interested in Korean temple food because I was born in Korea as the daughter of a devout Buddhist mother, but that is not the whole story. I grew up with Korean culture and have gone through all sorts of twists and turns. At the same time, Korean society has experienced rapid economic and cultural changes. Korea has become an accomplished democratic society that has undergone many phases of development. As a Buddhist woman, I realize that everything is interdependent. We are all connected with each other. Therefore, there is something beyond the contingencies; that is, living beings are all here together and do what we do because somehow we are interdependent.

One personal reason that I decided to study the codes of religious food and dietary ethics is because of chickens – lots and lots of chickens. The chicken industry is one of the most rapidly growing businesses in Korea. Everybody loves chicken, and most prefer to eat younger chickens. As a result, hundreds of millions of 45-day-old chicks are produced and almost the same number of chicks are ground to death immediately. However, even that reality did not awaken me. One time, I attempted to go on a very severe diet, eating only chicken breasts. Eventually, I lost about 60 pounds, accompanied by side effects. Dark circles appeared around my eyes. My skin suffered from xeroderma and severe itching. One of my doctors diagnosed that these side effects were caused by antibiotics and growth-accelerating hormones, which I had never used. I visited some chicken farms to see what was happening there and found out how the chickens were forced to grow rapidly in a brutal environment and killed while they were very, very young. I realized that everything is really connected. I decided to change my lifestyle, my food, and my interests from dancing and singing to Buddhist ethics and food studies. This paper is a brief report about what I have learned since I realized that young chickens are really connected with my life.

Buddhist Dietary Codes in East Asia

In the beginning, the Buddhist *sangha* did not have strict dietary codes, because the early Buddhist monks and nuns earned their food by begging or going for alms offered by local laypeople. There were rules, for example, rules that prohibited them from going to the same house for several days in a row. Monks were also required to seek alms at seven consecutive houses, without skipping any house once they started. Since the monastics lived by seeking alms, they had no choice about what to eat. The Buddha himself followed these rules strictly and, in fact, died from food poisoning. Early Buddhist *sanghas* developed some food regulations for practical reasons, such as bad odors after eating pungent vegetables. At the time when Mahayana Buddhism arose, some *sangha* communities chose to

live in remote forests to concentrate on their meditation and studies. They built a kitchen for cooking, and the realization that killing animals to survive is a serious violation of *ahimsa* (nonviolence) convinced them to consider a vegetarian diet. However, in those traditions that observe the regulations related to going for alms, as is still prevalent in the Theravada Buddhist traditions, it was not possible to select the types of food one eats.

When Buddhism was imported to China, where the culture and weather were totally different, it was practically impossible for the Chinese Buddhist monks and nuns to follow the regulations related to going for alms. Besides, many early Buddhist *sanghas* in China were supported by kings or royal families and were in competition with Daoist clerics to maintain credibility with their patrons. The Daoist clerics also prohibited five vegetables – scallion, garlic, chives, wild chive, and onion – for various reasons; for one, they believed that those vegetables would obstruct their way to becoming semi-divine beings.¹ In the midst of the conflicts, Buddhist communities adhered to the vegetarian regulations of the Chinese version of the *Lankavatara Sutra*, one of the basic scriptures for the Chan school. Chapter 9 deals with the necessity of a vegetarian diet. Once the vegetarian diet was accepted, the restriction to avoid eating five pungent vegetables became inevitable. The five pungent vegetables prohibited the *Lankavatara Sutra* were essentially the same as those avoided by the Daoists.

The Chan Buddhist *sanghas* especially tried to become independent of royal support by engaging in self-supporting agriculture, living a humble way of life, and practicing meditation. This helps explain how Chan Buddhism survived the harsh persecutions meted out by the anti-Buddhist emperors. A great Chan master named Huáihai (720–814 CE) who lived on Mt. Baizhang established the elaborately developed regulations for Chan Buddhist *sanghas*, including rules and role allocations in the temple, and a way of life and meditation practice firmly based on the principle of farming and meditation side by side. He declared, “A day of no working is a day of no eating!” He stood by this principle until the last days of his life. This principle of farming and meditation together became a core standard for Chan *sanghas* when the Chan Schools of Nine Mountains were founded during the Silla Dynasty in Korea in the ninth and tenth centuries.

Korean Buddhist Foods: Syncretic and Unique

From the time the Chan Buddhist schools were founded, the Korean Buddhist *sanghas* developed in two different ways: one in the remote mountains and the other in the cities. This dichotomy characterizes the two unique, seemingly contradictory features of Korean Buddhist cultures. During the Koryo dynasty (918–1392 CE), Buddhism enjoyed the privileges of being the state religion, supported by the royalty and the ordinary people. Buddhist monks had official ranks and political powers corresponding to government officials of the same rank. They gradually became like secular political groups, equipped with monk militaries and profane ways of life. When the Mongolian empire invaded Koryo, the whole society, including Buddhist communities in the cities, were strongly influenced by the culture of nomadic Mongols. To the contrary, the Chan Buddhist schools in the remote mountains kept their humble lifestyle, continued their meditation practices, and periodically became stimuli for religious reform movements in urban Buddhist communities. The Chan Buddhist temples in the mountains were able to survive when the newly established Confucian kingdom of the Chosun Dynasty (1392–1910) staged fierce attacks against corrupted forms of Buddhism and destroyed or took over more than two-thirds of Buddhist temple properties. Many of the city temples were seized by the Confucian literati and renovated to serve as Confucian shrines and schools.

The Buddhist temples that survived mostly belonged to the Chan schools that had maintained their temple lifestyle in remote mountain areas. Their food was inevitably humble and local, guided by

vegetarian principles and without the five pungent vegetables. However, many temples near the cities had to serve the religious needs of the people. Women who were alienated by Confucian rituals and power politics tended to be followers and supporters of Buddhism. The evidence of women's contributions to Buddhist temple food remain in the rituals and foods offered during the celebration of the Buddha's Sermon on Vulture Peak Mountain and on other occasions. Especially queens, concubines, and women of noble families continued to be major supporters of the Buddhist temples. When the king died or the court ladies retired, the concubines and the court ladies left the court to spend the rest of their lives in the temples. Bongeunsa Temple in Kangnam, which was then a one-day walk from the royal court, was a typical temple under the patronage of royal families. The names of many women from noble families and the court can be found in the list of patrons who supported Buddha paintings and temple construction.

These two streams of the Korean Buddhist culture characterize the dietary codes of Korean Buddhism today. The typical meal includes rice, soup, a few side dishes, and an entrée that varies according to the season and region. A practice known as *balwoo gongyang* is a sort of encapsulation of the Korean Chan Buddhist traditions that developed in the mountains and are still maintained in the three meals served at Chan temples. In brief, practitioners go to meals carrying their own wooden bowls (*balwoo*) wrapped in a cloth. During meals, they place the four bowls on the cloth, are served humble food, eat mindfully without talking, clean the bowls with a small piece of food, wash them with water, and drink up what remains. They then wrap the bowls in the cloth and put them on a shelf in the closet. After washing the bowls, the final cleansing water in the bucket must be as clean as it was before. The food is vegetarian, local, and simple. There is no special table setting except for the cloth and the four bowls. Eating is itself a meditation practice.

The meals in the monastery are prepared from foods grown by the monastics themselves and then seasoned and preserved. Many specialized ingredients in local temples were developed and inherited over the centuries. On the other hand, many sumptuous foods are served to the Buddhas on the altar or for special occasions. These foods definitely reflect the fancy, sumptuous dishes of the leading noble and royal families, but they are slightly modified according to vegetarian principles and the restrictions on the five pungent vegetables. For example, the platter of nine delicacies (*gyjeolpan*) and the brass chafing dishes (*shinseollo*) were typical foods for feasts at the royal courts or special occasions for the nobles. Now they are included as entries in the list of temple foods.

It is interesting to note that the five items included in the pungent vegetables are a bit vague and have sometimes changed, because in the beginning the early Chan Buddhists could not figure out the names of some vegetables in the Sanskrit canon. Later, they tried to match the restricted vegetables with the vegetables indigenous to China, but one or two of the vegetables remained uncertain to the end. *Heunggeo* (Latin: *asafoetida*) is one example. The name *heunggeo* came from the name *bingu* in the Sanskrit texts, which was transliterated in Chinese as *xingju* and is now known as Chinese squill (Latin: *scilla scilloides*). The Korean Buddhist communities thought that they had figured out four of the five vegetables – scallion, garlic, chives, wild chives – but did not know what *heunggeo* was. Therefore, only four vegetables were restricted in practice, with the fifth acknowledged only in name. At the end of the 19th century, when onions were first introduced to Korea, they were named the fifth pungent vegetable. The very notion of the five pungent vegetables, which are fundamental in the monastic codes, has also changed.

Korean temple food is unique in the way its inherited traditions have been integrated into contemporary cultures, based on the basic principles of Chan Buddhism in East Asia. Even today, this unique food culture continues to evolve and develop variations through syncretic integration. Now is

the time to think about this distinctive food culture and what steps need to be taken to develop this unique tradition of temple food further.

Buddhist Woman in Cultural Formation

The traditions of Korean temple food developed and were preserved by laywomen who contributed their financial support and cooking experience and by Buddhist nuns who preserved and transmitted these traditions through the generations. Today, Korean temple food is being further developed by women devoted to continuing these traditions to future generations. We are now witnessing various new approaches. Some people tend to think that temple food is anything prepared by Buddhist nuns, so many forms of “fusion” food are now being created. Others try to “upgrade” temple food with excessive decorations in order to attract customers in the market. Temple food has become a fad in the current consumer culture of Korea. In my view, temple food and its spirit can be upgraded only when it becomes fused into the everyday lives of ordinary people.

My self-imposed challenge lies in the question of how to build bridges between the tradition and the trend – bridges from monastic culture in the remote mountains to the lives of contemporary city folk. Korean temple food will continue to be a syncretic integration of traditional Korean food culture, including the temple foods, ingredients, and dishes of the leading families, royal court foods, and new foods from foreign cultures. Some traditional foods literally take years to make, so that they become better seasoned. For example, soy bean sauce takes between one and a dozen years to make; therefore, it is practically impossible for modern people to make these foods at home. The methods of preparation have therefore been somewhat modified and adapted to the way of life in the 21st century. But if we lose the spirit and the wisdom imbedded in these food traditions, the whole point of preserving the temple food tradition will be at stake.

We therefore come back to the questions: What is temple food and what are the most important ingredients in temple food? I suggest that we consider a few key words, such as life, symbiosis, contingency, and interconnectedness. Life is the most important. Temple food must be vegetarian. There have been some debates in Korea about the consumption of meat by monastics, based on the three exceptions or allowances for eating meat in the texts, which basically mean not eating meat killed intentionally for one’s own consumption. Some monks and laypeople argue that commercially produced meats meet the criteria, so the consumption of meat does not violate the dietary codes. They ignore the fact that the commercial production of meat of all kinds entails a much more brutal process than the traditional ways animals were killed. They also ignore the fact that we all are much more closely connected to each other as compared to earlier generations. Respect for life must be foremost.

This leads to the second point, which is symbiosis, meaning that we live on this planet together with other living beings, including animals, plants, and micro-organisms. I think that temple food should not be an extremist food code. It needs to be flexible and open to other possibilities, but needs to keep in mind that all living things must live together. Human beings and animals consume micro-organisms or support the consumption of micro-organisms. Our bodies are composed of about 37 trillion cells and we each have about 40 trillion micro-organisms living together in our bodies, so, in fact, our bodies have more symbiotic friends than cells. Without these organisms, our bodies will not work. We are very closely connected and dependent upon each other.

The third point is contingency. Just as I happened to be born in Korea as a daughter of a Buddhist mother, others were born in different places at different times. The traditions I inherited come from Korean Buddhist culture, including the prohibition against the five pungent vegetables. It is my duty, I think, to keep these traditions, but also to find new interpretations and new ways to integrate

these traditions with modern nutritional science and culture. One modification I am considering is to allow using five pungent vegetables that have been cooked or fermented. This way, we can make the most of the five vegetables in terms of nutrition, while avoiding the problems of odor for community life and of digestion in consuming raw pungent vegetables. These adaptations of the vegetarian diet are related to the dietary customs of local foods and slow foods. The earth (the environment) and the body are interrelated with each other, and my body and mind are also interrelated. Temple food in Korea will become different in Indonesia or other places, a fact that is in keeping with the very spirit of Buddhist dietary laws. The food prepared in each place should be compatible with the local environment. In that way, temple food will become more rich and diverse, in accordance with the Dharma that is spoken to varied audiences in more places.

Conclusion

I am studying the religious dietary codes and running a temple food restaurant in Kangnam, making a bridge between the lifestyle between the remote temples in the mountains and the Kangnam style of cooking. As a Korean Buddhist woman, I like to think locally in order to build a renewed culture of respect for life. Whatever we do, I think we should think locally and act locally, not forgetting that we are all very closely connected and interdependent. However much good we are doing, we must not force others do the same. Others will take their own steps in their own time. Women give birth to life and also nurture it. Nature and nurture are not separate in women's lives.

The name of my Korean temple food restaurant is Maji. The word refers to the ritual food served on the Buddha altar. When we serve temple food, we not only serve very healthy, delicious food, but serve it as the culmination of a long lineage of food traditions together with the heritage of wisdom that is imbedded in temple food. The interrelatedness of food, life, and Dharma wisdom is powerfully relevant in today's world.

From a Successful Businesswoman to a Vietnamese Vajrayāna Buddhist Nun

Thich Nu Nhu Nguyet

This paper documents the path of a successful businesswoman in Vietnam named Huynh Long Ngoc Diep who became a Vajrayāna Buddhist nun with the Dharma name Duc Tam (Virtuous Heart). Ngoc Diep was born in 1971 in a poor and crowded family in the Cu Chi (Steel) suburb of Ho Chi Minh City.¹ Due to her difficult family circumstances, she did not really have a childhood. Poverty forced her to work very hard from early childhood. She could not enjoy her youth either, because she had to work even harder to support her family. Because she was small and pretty, few people realized the difficulties she had to cope with from an early age. She was a strong girl, however, with a passion for learning and a strong determination to get out of poverty. A gifted student, she took every possible opportunity to learn more.

To make ends meet, Ngoc Diep started doing business, beginning small and making it very big. In time, she became a very successful businesswoman, attaining positions as the president of the Ngoc Viet Joint Stock Company and director of Huynh Long Company. She also worked hard to expand the Buddhadharma in society. She opened a chain of Viet Chay Restaurants at various Buddhist temples to encourage people to eat vegetarian food. She also established Mani Buddhist Communication Company, Ngoc Viet Travel Company for Buddhist Pilgrims, Phap Hoa Supermarket (selling everything related to Buddhism), and Phap Phuc Lam Hien Garment Factory (specializing in Buddhist clothing). In addition, she organized “Quality of Life” to spread Buddhist knowledge, “Songs of Love” to enrich Buddhist music, and other programs.

In this paper, I attempt to answer several questions: Why did Ngoc Diep decide to leave behind fame, position, and material well-being and take up the life of a nun? Why did she choose to follow the path of Vajrayāna, a difficult path in the context of Vietnamese Buddhist society, where nearly 90 percent of Buddhists follow the Mahāyāna path and Vajrayāna is not well understood? Is it because of her meeting with the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet? What obstacles does she face in her spiritual life? Has she continued to be involved in doing business activities since becoming a nun? What has she gained by being ordained as a Vajrayāna nun? The life trajectory of a businesswoman who becomes a nun deserves our attention. Based both on written documents and firsthand narratives, this paper documents the story of a woman whose primary motivation is to help others and whose many contributions to the material and spiritual well-being of Buddhists and society in general are widely recognized.²

Realizing Her Dreams

After graduating from high school, Ngoc Diep was not able to go to college, because she had to help her parents raise her four younger sisters and brothers. She never gave up her determination to continue learning, however. Despite her very busy work schedule, she took time to study, especially English. After she acquired a good working knowledge of English, she decided to go to Ho Chi Minh City to make money and realize her dream of going to the university. She accumulated valuable experience doing all kinds of work, as a tutor, secretary, salesperson, and whatever she could get. At the time, she did not think of becoming a businesswoman. Her dream was to become a teacher.

Yet somehow, taking the business route seems to have been pre-destined. After working at various jobs, she got a job in a glass bottle manufacturing company. After acquiring some experience, she decided to open a fabric shop. Later, she became an agent for the glass bottle company. From her experience in the glass bottle business, she realized that there was a need for lids for the glass bottles. After this, she became involved in food packaging and industrial machinery. In 1996, Huynh Long

Company was born, marking a milestone on her path to becoming a successful businesswoman.

Huynh Long Company grew day by day. Ngoc Diep's dream of pulling herself and her family out of poverty came true. She then expanded her dream to getting her hometown out of poverty. She thought that setting up a factory would help create jobs for many people, so she decided to open a workshop in Cu Chi to produce hats. The workshop eventually generated jobs for hundreds of workers.

Ngoc Diep's determination to escape poverty helped her expand her small company into larger ventures. Starting as a petty trader, she became a very successful businesswoman holding important positions, but despite her rapid success, she remained very humble. She always thought, "I have been given heaven-sent opportunities, so sharing is normal... My duty is to help others."³ In doing business, she was always supportive of her subordinates. She carefully guided her staff to correct their mistakes. If employees made the same mistake a second time, she considered the mistake her own, since she did not do enough to prevent its recurrence. With her kind and helpful attitude, she gained both the respect of her employees and their loyalty to the company.

Being a Buddhist Businesswoman

Ngoc Diep was a "Buddhist-oriented" businesswoman. Impressed by the life of the Buddha – a wealthy prince who renounced everything to follow the path of enlightenment and benefit all sentient beings – she started to study Buddhism and took refuge in the Three Jewels, officially became a Buddhist. She had accomplished a lot as a Buddhist businesswoman. Her first venture was opening a chain of vegetarian restaurants in 2007 to encourage vegetarianism. Another chain of vegetarian restaurants followed: Mandala Vegetarian Restaurant and Varja Vegetarian Restaurant. She used the profits from these restaurants to facilitate Dharma teachings and charity work. Every two weeks at Mandala Vegetarian Restaurant, she hosted a program called "Quality of Life," inviting monks and nuns to share Buddhist teachings and speak to young entrepreneurs and intellectuals about the spiritual life. She hosted the Buddhist music program "Love Melody" at Viet Chay Restaurant twice a month, which has had a major transformative impact on Buddhist music. Even before becoming a Buddhist nun, she was imbued with the *bodhisattva* spirit. She hoped to bring Buddhism to everybody, so that they could benefit from Buddhist practice as much as she had.

The Path to Becoming a Vajrayana Buddhist Nun

In 2002, Ngoc Diep became a Buddhist disciple of the respected monk Thich Tri Quang, whose lectures deeply impressed her. Thanks to that good connection, she had many good opportunities to do charity work and to read Buddhist books. A book by the respected monk Thich Thanh Tu, *Buddhism for Beginners*, helped enlighten her about what is unreal, temporary, and real.

From the time she began to learn and practice Buddhism, Ngoc Diep's life changed significantly. She no longer paid much attention to the superficial aspects of being a businesswoman. She led a simple life, ate vegetarian food, stayed calm, and remembered to live for others. She gradually let go of her assets, transferring ownership of three companies to her sisters. Increasingly, she wanted spend more time on Dharma and less on worldly things. She emphasized the importance of striking a balance between the spiritual and material aspects of life.

Living the life of a Buddhist-oriented businesswoman helped Ngoc Diep see more deeply into the Buddhist way of life. She forged close connections with the monastic community and came to understand the value of compassion coupled with wisdom. Through Dharma practice, her outlook changed and she began to see all her past contributions to Buddhism as smaller than a grain of sand.

Her intention to become a Buddhist nun grew stronger day by day. She wanted to become a Buddhist nun so that she could devote herself entirely to the Dharma. As she learned more, she wanted to give up everything to pursue the spiritual life, so she could help others. She believed that if she became a nun, she could lead more people on the Dharma path.

It is noteworthy that Ngoc Diep chose to follow the Vajrayāna tradition, a courageous undertaking in the context of Buddhist society in Vietnam where the Vajrayāna tradition is not officially recognized.⁴ She says, “The choice of the Vajrayana lineage reflects dependent arising. It is the result of meeting Vajrayāna teachers and attending a Vajrayāna ceremony that made a direct impact on my consciousness.” She wears the gray robes worn by the majority of Vietnamese nuns instead of the maroon robes of the Vajrayāna tradition. She emphasizes inner realization over external appearances: “I follow Indian Buddhism but I am a Vietnamese. The most important thing is to realize Buddhahood, which is internal.” She was impressed by the famous response of the Dalai Lama to the question: What surprises you most about humanity?

Man... because he sacrifices his health in order to make money. Then he sacrifices money to recuperate his health. And then he is so anxious about the future that he does not enjoy the present. The result is that he does not live in the present or the future; he lives as if he is never going to die, and then dies having never really lived...

She began to study about the Dalai Lama and the Vajrayāna tradition, which opened up a new world for her. Vajrayāna ceremonies and *mantras* constantly appeared to her mind. She longed to meet the Dalai Lama and finally had a chance to meet him in Dharamsala, India, in 2010. When she met him, she asked: “Sir, can I be ordained?” The Dalai Lama answered, “Very well. Very good. You will be a special nun.” From that time on, she felt a strong urge to renounce everything and take up monastic life. When she returned to Vietnam, she began packing up her business to prepare for ordination.

On the morning of July 26, 2013, her ordination ceremony was held at Quan Am Nunnery in Ho Chi Minh City, attended by numerous nuns as well as her relatives and friends. Officially becoming a Buddhist nun marked a turning point in her life. She became a disciple of Bhikkhuni Thich Nu Hue Duc, the abbot of Quan Am Nunnery, and receive her Dharma name: Duc Tam (Virtuous Heart).

In the four years that have passed since then, three things have become clear. First, she has felt a sense of peace and well-being, and can handle situations that used to be very challenging. Second, things she considered major now seem minor. Third, though she used to think that she was excellent, she began to see how much more there is to learn. She has also had many spiritual experiences that cannot be expressed in words.

The transition from being a wealthy businesswoman to being a simple nun has not been without challenges. At times, she feels tired, since the basic training for nuns is very difficult. She has to do many prostrations, which sometimes seem too strenuous for her small body. With the “steel” willpower of a Cu Chi woman, however, she has overcome all difficulties and has held fast to the path of cultivation, with the motivation of making important contributions to Buddhism.

One of Bhikkhuni Duc Tam’s significant contributions is the opening of Tinh Hoa (Purification) Centre, a place for storing Buddhist artifacts. Currently, many Buddhist publications, old Buddhist statues, and paintings are being discarded in unsanctified places, causing a blight on the urban landscape. Many temples have become places for Buddhist followers to keep “spiritual waste.” Many temples in big cities do not have enough space for the storage of these old things. Therefore, it became urgent to construct a dignified place to store old Buddhist materials. Bhikkhuni Duc Tam came up with the idea of establishing a purification centre to collect old Buddhist scriptures and paintings in the Buddhist

spirit. On December 12, 2012, she opened Tinh Hoa Centre to receive and collect old and damaged Buddhist publications and paintings. The area of collection now extends beyond Ho Chi Minh City to neighbouring provinces. A new headquarters for the centre was inaugurated on August 28, 2016. Located in Cu Chi District of Ho Chi Minh City, it has plenty of space for storing, sorting, and processing Buddhist materials.

Assessing the Achievements

As a businesswoman, Huynh Long Ngoc Diep was known to many Buddhist monks and nuns in Ho Chi Minh City. As a Buddhist nun, Bhikkhuni Duc Tam has maintained those relationships, expanding her activities to develop Tinh Hoa Centre, and she is widely admired. Duong Hoang Loc, a lecturer at Ho Chi Minh City University of Social Sciences and Humanities, says, “She is a beautiful representation of the personality and lifestyle of Vietnamese Buddhists – a faithful devotee who is a strong advocate of spreading the Dharma. After being ordained at Quan Am Nunnery, this young nun has continued to strive on the path of cultivation, following Vajrayāna way.... It can be said that Bhikkhuni Duc Tam is a great example of the virtue of detachment, striving to seek liberation, and taking refuge in the marvelous Buddhist teachings.” Professor Tran Hong Lien, Vice-Director of Vietnam Buddhist Studies Centre, says further, “Huynh Long Ngoc Diep was successful in the business world because she was able to use two fundamental elements of Buddhism, compassion and wisdom, in her economic activities. From these solid accomplishments, she became a nun so that she could have better conditions to study at the Buddhist University, propagate Dharma more effectively, and benefit sentient beings.”

A businesswoman named Cao Thi Ngoc Hong reflects, “Living in the midst of material comforts, people often get caught up in the race to make more money and gain more fame. Their needs are never satisfied. However, Bhikkhuni Duc Tam felt great joy and peace when she renounced material comforts and turned to the light of Dharma. She has inherited a treasure that is far more valuable: achieving true peace and joy in every present moment. She wishes to teach Dharma and bring enlightenment to more people, following in the footsteps of the Tathagata. For people afflicted by attachment, Bhikkhuni Duc Tam’s renunciation is greatly appreciated and admired. The pure serenity that is generated dazzles like a glorious golden lotus in the midst of the black mud of life.”

Conclusion

Many unexpected things happen in life. Bhikkhuni Duc Tam’s ordination was very surprising to her family and friends. It was hard for anyone to believe that such a talented and successful businesswoman would give up everything to live the frugal life of a Buddhist nun. Indeed, Bhikkhuni Duc Tam embodies the noble values of Buddhism, pursuing the spiritual life. She learned to balance the material and spiritual aspects of life and worked her way out of poverty, not only for oneself, but to help the less fortunate. As her life demonstrates, enlightenment is not just for oneself, but for bringing the light of Dharma to others. By “letting go,” one becomes enriched.

NOTES

¹ Cu Chi District of Ho Chi Minh City is the hometown of numerous brave heroes and heroines in Vietnam’s national liberation struggle; hence it is known as “the land of steel.”

² This paper is based on interviews with Bhikkhuni Duc Tam and with scholars and businesspeople in Ho Chi Minh City.

³ Interview with Huynh Long Ngoc Diep.

⁴ Currently, three Buddhist lineages are officially recognized by the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha: Mahāyana, Theravāda, and Mendicant Buddhism.

Social Change, Breath by Breath

Shelley Anderson

*Breathing in, I go back
To the island within myself.
There are beautiful trees within the island.
There are clear streams of water, there are birds,
Sunshine, fresh air.
Breathing out, I feel safe.
I enjoy going back to my island.*

This is a song from Plum Village, a Buddhist practice centre and monastery in southern France established by the Vietnamese Zen teachers Thich Nhat Hanh and Sister Chan Khong in 1982. It is now home to over 200 resident nuns and monks.¹ Plum Village is also the spiritual home of the Order of Interbeing (Tiep Hien in Vietnamese), an on-going experiment in engaged Buddhism.

Beginnings

The Order of Interbeing (OI) began in February 1966 when Thich Nhat Hanh ordained six lay followers. The six young people, three women and three men, were all leaders in the School of Youth for Social Work (SYSS), then a new training program for Vietnamese youth who wanted to work for rural development and social change. The OI was organized explicitly “to bring Buddhism directly into the arena of social concerns when the war in Vietnam was escalating.”² At the core of the Order were 14 Precepts that Order members vowed to study, practice, and observe.

From its beginning the Order was conceived as a space for both lay practitioners and monastics. The six original ordained members were given the choice of living as monastics or as lay people. The three women chose to live celibate lives but not to cut their hair. The three men decided to marry and live as lay practitioners.

The 14 Wonderful Precepts are a reworking of precepts for monks and nuns and specifically of the *bodhisattva* precepts. Thich Nhat Hanh felt that these 14 precepts encapsulated the Buddhist teachings for modern times. Buddhist practitioners will immediately recognize the precepts concerning right view, right speech, and right livelihood, and the emphasis on generosity and right conduct. There were, however, some very specific refinements.

The first and second precepts encouraged nonattachment to one’s own, inevitably limited, views. The third precept, for example, looked at freedom of thought, and encouraged compassionate dialogue as a way to help others renounce fanaticism and narrowness. The fourth precept reminded practitioners to be aware that suffering exists and to find ways to be with those who are suffering. The fifth precept encouraged simple living as an antidote to suffering, while the sixth looked at ways to deal with anger. The practitioner vowed not to lose themselves in dispersion, but to live mindfully, in the seventh precept. The eighth precept contained the vow to “not utter words that can create discord and cause the community to break,” while the ninth precept, on truthful and loving speech, stated that Order members should “have the courage to speak out about situations of injustice, even when doing so may threaten your own safety.”³ The tenth precept, on protecting the *sangha*, read: “Do not use the Buddhist community for personal gain or profit, or transform your community into a political party. A religious

community, however, should take a clear stand against oppression and injustice and should strive to change the situation without engaging in partisan conflicts.”⁴

The eleventh precept espoused right livelihood, while the twelfth stated: “Do not kill. Do not let others kill. Find whatever means possible to protect life and to prevent war.” The thirteenth precept encouraged generosity while the last precept dealt with right conduct.

Members made two commitments upon joining the Order. First, they committed themselves to practicing at least 60 days of mindfulness a year. This amounts to about one day a week. Second, they agreed to practice with a community of friends. In her autobiography one of the original ordained members, Cao Ngoc Phuong, (now Sister Chan Khong of Plum Village), writes about the importance of both of these commitments to her work for social change. The weekly day of mindfulness with other OI members helped her to relax and to refresh herself:

I would always come laden down with worries about urgent responsibilities, but after a short while I could slowly calm myself and stop even the most anxious thoughts After three hours of dwelling steadily in each mindful act and releasing all my worries, I began to feel renewed, and we six members of the Order gathered to recite the precepts and chant the Heart Sutra together. Then we shared tea and our experiences of the past week, ate dinner silently together and practiced sitting meditation before bed.⁵

These Vietnamese activists found a middle way. They were developing their own community of support. They learned how to stop and remind themselves of the joy that exists on this embattled planet alongside the suffering. They were taking care of themselves and each other. They were learning how to recharge their batteries, to gain fresh insights, and to cultivate the compassion that led them in the first place to social change. They were creating peace in the one war zone they had the most control over: inside their own minds.

A Personal Story

I joined the Order of Interbeing (OI) as a laywoman in 1994. I was working for an international peace organization and was conducting peace-building trainings for women in situations of violent conflict. The OI encapsulated many of my values: it was international, it espoused women’s quality, and it promoted active nonviolence in the face of social issues like armed conflict and violence against women.

The activists I met frequently faced social ridicule or prison for their social change work. They often attributed their survival and their ability to continue in the work to two things: a close-knit support system of family and/or community members; and their spiritual practice, usually either Christianity or Islam. However, I also met some bitter, angry, or burnt out activists who were deeply traumatized by violence, who drank or smoked too much, and who had no resources or help to deal with their suffering. Many women were isolated from their communities, constantly busy with the next emergency, exhausted by countless demands and too much responsibility, and suffering from burn out and/or clinical depression.⁶

These women made me question. How can you deal with the inevitable, frustratingly slow pace of social change? How can you deal with the anger at injustice and not direct that anger at yourself or the people around you? How do make sure your actions are grounded in compassion, not in ego or hate? How can you find the time to practice self-compassion and renew yourself when there is so much urgent work to be done? Experiments like the Order of Interbeing try to address such questions.

The Order Now

Last year, 2016, OI celebrated its 50th birthday in Plum Village. There are now over 4,200 members. OI continues to include both lay and monastic practitioners. The community is international, with Order members in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas. The original 14 precepts are now called the 14 Mindfulness Trainings.⁷ While the core precepts remain the same, the Mindfulness Trainings have been rewritten several times by Thich Nhat Hanh in cooperation with Order members. Members continue to commit themselves to at least 60 days of mindfulness a year, to build and practice within a community of friends, and to regularly recite the Mindfulness Trainings.

The weekly day of mindfulness is designed by practitioners themselves. A day of mindfulness will usually incorporate practices followed at Plum Village. These practices include meditation, mindful walking, Total Relaxation (a body scan), eating vegan meals in mindfulness and silence, listening to a Dharma talk, and sharing Dharma afterwards. The practices look deceptively simple, but are designed to infuse mindfulness in all aspects of daily life.

Love for Mother Earth

Some OI members have established an Earth Holders Sangha. This is a group of activists who are committed to building sustainable communities and *sanghas*, and engaging in right action to protect the environment locally, nationally, and internationally. Members of this group organize days of mindfulness using conference calls and Skype. A day of mindfulness for Earth Holders might begin with a guided meditation on keeping fossil fuels in the ground, then a short Dharma sharing that looks at the question: “Which of our Plum Village practices help us transform our suffering, engage our compassion, and walk the middle path, as we do our best to nurture and preserve our precious planet?”

Other OI members are involved in humanitarian work in Vietnam, spearheaded by Sister Chan Khong. Sister Chan Khong was one of the original six OI members. She went into exile with Thich Nhat Hanh and has been a life-long activist. The Vietnam project includes support for orphanages, schools, and clinics in rural areas, and supplies emergency relief after natural disasters. Many nuns in Plum Village also fundraise for these projects by producing and selling cards, calligraphy, candles, and candies.

Trained as a biologist, Sister Chan Khong also works to raise awareness about environmental degradation inside Vietnam and around the world. Climate change, in particular, is a major issue for OI members. The 5 Contemplations, recited before each meal, have been rewritten to include a vow to help reduce the impact of climate change. Delegations of monastics from Plum Village have participated in the Vatican’s multi-faith initiative to end modern-day slavery and in the 2015 United Nations conference on climate change in Paris.

Liberia

Last year, 2016, two nuns and two monks went to Liberia from Plum Village. They were invited by the Liberian peace organization called the Peace Hut Alliance for Conflict Transformation (PHACT). For several years, Liberian peace activists working with PHACT had participated in retreats at Plum Village, learning mindfulness practices to transform both their own and their country’s suffering. PHACT leader Annie Nushann has turned part of her home into a meditation centre and is teaching community women how to use mindfulness in their own peace work. Another PHACT activist, the former military leader Christian Bethelson, is teaching ex-combatants and former child soldiers how to

use mindfulness to heal Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and to pursue reconciliation. “With the practice of mindfulness, you can see them preaching peace and living peace,” he says. Lay OI members are fundraising to help PHACT built traditional peace huts for reconciliation across the country.

Wake Up

Younger OI members are involved in an international movement called Wake Up, whose slogan is “One Buddha is not enough.” They organize meditation classes at universities, discuss issues such as racism and white privilege, and hold meditation flash mobs in train stations. They deepen their practice through retreats, both in their own countries and at Plum Village, such as the Wake Up Earth retreat (2016) that addressed the question: “In the current climate crisis and context of wars, how can we balance our deep wish to engage in actions to help the world, with our own personal spiritual journey? How can we find an alternative, healthier, sane, and compassionate lifestyle?”

The international Wake Up Schools movement involves OI members who are students, teachers, educators and school administrators. With the slogan “Happy teachers will change the world,” retreats and days of mindfulness are organized. A training program has been instituted to help education professionals develop their own mindfulness practice and integrate this into school curricula.

Conclusion

There are a number of lessons to be learned from the OI experiment. The Order is clear about its Buddhist roots, but is not evangelical. Members share the practical training in mindfulness with people of any religion and of no religion. The emphasis is not on conversion, but on cultivating a daily practice that will help individuals develop their own inner capacity for peace and wisdom. This non-sectarian approach is an advantage in secular countries and among secular activists, who often reject organized religion as automatically oppressive. The Order also helps activists heal and refresh themselves and their communities in situations where religion is perceived as a factor in conflict, as in Israel and the Occupied Territories.

Another effective aspect of the Order is the emphasis on community building. OI members are expected to build and practice with a group of like-minded people. For an activist, building a community of support often means the difference between staying engaged in a healthy way and dropping out. Community-building skills have been identified as a strong point of women peace activists. The Order, by its very nature, offers a sense of community. As a community, it helps to break the isolation and ostracism that many activists experience. This community identity gives a sense of shared values, understanding, and vital feedback to activists. It provides practical support and encouragement when obstacles arise, such as the threat of imprisonment or a sense of despair. It provides guidelines and explicit practices for dealing with arguments and hones the community-building skills that activists need to promote collective movements for change.

The Order also promotes self-compassion. This is an especially important issue for women and girls whose patriarchal upbringing teaches them to give their time and energy to others, but not to themselves. Practices such as meditation and total relaxation help activists to stop and not get swept up in emotions like anger, fear, or hatred, or in the exciting momentum of a campaign. The practice of 60 days of mindfulness per year is especially important, because it gives activists time for renewal and reflection. Periodic reciting of the 14 Mindfulness Trainings reminds activists of the importance of keeping an open mind, listening deeply, and practicing truthful, loving speech and right action.

There are two unaddressed issues, however, that may need attention within the OI. There is

nothing explicit within the Order about the empowerment of women and girls.⁸ Nor is there any policy, training, or analysis about gender. Such empowerment is often needed in order to counter patriarchal training. There are currently many female role models within the monastic community: activists such as Sister Chan Khong and Sister An Nghiem, teachers such as Sister Jina, and scholars such as Sister Chan Duc (Sister Annabel), but there is no explicit endorsement of female leadership. Some conservative monks and nuns mistrust female leadership or see no reason to encourage women to develop themselves and their skills.

Last, it remains to be seen how far the OI will go in its activism. Will it emphasize humanitarian issues to relieve suffering, but without addressing the underlying institutional causes of suffering? Or will it help develop analyses and strategies to confront the status quo and the institutions and systems that lead to the suffering of humans and animals on the planet? The latter, I believe, would support engaged Buddhists from all traditions in their social change work. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, “Buddhism means to be awake – mindful of what is happening in one’s body, feelings, mind and in the world. If you are awake, you cannot do otherwise than act compassionately to help relieve the suffering you see around you. So Buddhism must be engaged in the world. If it is not engaged, it is not Buddhism.”

NOTES

¹ There are now eight more such practice centres/monasteries around the world, including the Asian Institute of Applied Buddhism in Hong Kong. www.pvfhk.org.

² Chan Khong (Cao Ngoc Phuong), *Learning True Love: How I Learned & Practiced Social Change in Vietnam*. 1993, Parallax Press, Berkeley, 79.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 80.

⁵ Ibid., 81.

⁶ According to the World Health Organisation, women are the largest single group of people affected by Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, primarily because of sexual violence. Unipolar depression is twice as common in women as in men. www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/genderwomen.

⁷ The British researcher and writer Cynthia Cockburn has developed the concept of women’s social courage and social intelligence: “a very special kind of intelligence and courage: The courage to cross the lines drawn between us – which are also lines drawn inside our own heads. And the intelligence to do it safely and productively.” *From Where We Stand: War, Women's Activism and Feminist Analysis*, Zed Books, London, 2007.

⁸ For an example of engaged Buddhism working explicitly at the intersection of Buddhism, social change, and feminism, see the International Women’s Partnership for Peace and Justice (IWP) at www.womenforpeaceandjustice.org. The IWP is crowdfunding to build a retreat centre for women in Chiang Dao, Thailand.

Buddhism and the Deaf Community in Contemporary Taiwan

Janet Mei Hing Tam

Chinese Buddhism of the Mahayāna tradition is the dominant tradition in contemporary Taiwan where following the *bodhisattva* path and a commitment to save all beings comprise the first of the four *bodhisattva* vows.¹ While *bodhisattvas* have the intention to save all beings, do all beings in society have the opportunity to access the Dharma? It is not difficult to spot communities that have yet to find their way or have to overcome numerous barriers to learn about Buddhism. Persons with disabilities (PWDs) appear to be one of the most overlooked communities, despite the fact that disability has a long recorded history.²

Disability studies only started to grow during the 1980s in Western academia. According to M. Miles, there has been “a growing interest in the study of world religions, inter-faith activities and cross-cultural comparisons,” yet disability in Asian religions has generated very little published material.³ Although Buddhism is not entirely out of reach for PWDs, they may have to overcome various barriers to participate in different aspects of daily living, including attending religious activities.⁴ As a Buddhist and an advocate of equal rights and opportunities for participation for PWDs in all disciplines in society, I am interested to know about PWDs’ involvement in Buddhism. This is indeed a very broad, though infrequently explored topic that can be addressed from different perspectives, such as textual analysis, doctrinal studies, Buddhist ethics, qualitative surveys on the value of Buddhism for PWDs, and so forth. This paper focuses on Buddhism engagement in the deaf community⁵ in current Taiwan society through case studies of two female Buddhists.⁶ Through their stories, I hope to shed light on their participation, the challenges involved and solutions, and suggestions regarding the engagement of the deaf community in Buddhism.

Disability and the Deaf Community in Taiwan

Disability is a complex, ever-evolving concept that is difficult to define. Throughout history, different models of disability reflect how disability was interpreted. Swain and French indicate that “understanding and definitions of impairment and disability have varied in different societies and at different times. No universal global definition of disability is possible.”⁷ Nonetheless, different disability models do shape how different cultures perceive disability and often affect government policy.

In Taiwan, according to government statistics,⁸ there were 1,155,650 PWDs (4.92 percent of Taiwan’s population) in 2015, among whom 122,906 were persons with Hearing Mechanism Disability.⁹ However, these figures only represent those who have officially registered¹⁰ with the Government for a Disability Card. The Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of China (Taiwan) estimates that the number of persons with hearing impairment actually could be around 2.5 million. Disability Card holders are eligible for welfare services provided by the government, such as medical services, education, home care, employment, and an accessible living environment, none of which are particularly related to religion.

Two Case Studies

My research began with a search through the internet and the library, and asking around among teachers and friends (monastic and non-monastic) to identify Buddhists in the deaf community and organizations that offer services to support the deaf to participate in Buddhist activities. Only a few references were available in the library, but I found a few articles and a six-minute documentary video

from the website of Tzu Chi, one of Taiwan's major Buddhist organizations.¹¹ Through personnel at Tzu Chi's Da Ai Television, I was able to contact Shu Li-Ching, a Tzu Chi volunteer who was among the first to invite the deaf community to Tzu Chi's activities. A sign interpreter friend connected me with C. H. (an alias) who is a Buddhist and deaf. Interviews were arranged with Shu Li-Ching and C. H. Their stories and experiences are summarized here. The two case studies provide valuable references from different perspectives.

The Journey of C. H.: Deaf Community Participation

When C. H. first went to Pu Xian Buddhist Temple in the 1990s, there was already a group of deaf devotees at the temple, suggesting that the deaf community has participated in Buddhist activities for at least 30 years in contemporary Taiwan. At the temples studied here, deaf people participate in Buddhist activities in inclusive settings together with the hearing community. Accommodations in the activity settings, such as seating arrangements (for example, a sign interpretation zone), programme logistics (a pre-event reception, hearing volunteers to assist deaf participants, adaptation of the rituals, sign interpretation, and so on) are arranged. These temples have shown great support to facilitate deaf participation.

Having access is only the first step to participation. It is the experience of participation that sustains it. Apart from being welcomed or having the company of fellow deaf friends, informants described some kind of fruitful experience from the engagement, whether it was personal or spiritual growth or new skills, that helped sustain their participation. When there is a will to participate, there seem to be ways to overcome external barriers. Other than Dharma services, different activities such as reading clubs, Buddhist classes, and tea ceremony cater to different tastes and interests, as do different platforms for learning about the Dharma.

C. H. is a 48-year-old woman who lost her hearing when she was nine months old due to illness. All of her family members are hearing. She started her spiritual journey by going to an I-Kuan Tao temple with her parents in the 1990s. That did not last very long, as C. H. did not feel connected with I-Kuan Tao. Around the same time, C. H. was introduced to a Buddhist temple called Pu Xian Temple¹² by some deaf friends. There was already a group of deaf devotees at Pu Xian Temple when C. H. joined, sometimes as many as a few dozen for major events. A long-time deaf devotee, Mr. You, was responsible for sharing the Buddha's teaching with deaf devotees, sometimes with the help of other Dharma brothers and sisters at the temple. C. H. spent one or two years at Pu Xian Temple, but left after some time, together with a number of deaf devotees.

C. H. discussed among her friends how they could continue their Buddhist practice. They were soon introduced to Ling Jiou Mountain by friends. When C. H. first went to Ling Jiou Mountain, there was only one deaf devotee: a woman in her 80s who had also attended Pu Xian Temple before. Gradually, the community of deaf devotees grew. People came and went, and regular devotees were usually not more than ten. Sometimes new people joined but few stayed. The original interpreter was one of the deaf devotees drawn from Pu Xian Temple. As she was getting very busy, she asked her sign language student (hearing) to help. This student became very devoted and is now the regular interpreter.

At a Dharma activity or function, hearing and deaf participants sit in the same hall. There is no designated "Sign Language Zone" arranged by the temple, but deaf devotees generally cluster together as much as possible when they arrive. If they can sit in the front of the hall, the sign interpreter stands next to the speaker. If the deaf devotees sit at the back of the hall, the interpreter stands in front of the first row of deaf devotees, facing them, so that the devotees can see the interpretation.

During *sutra* recitations, deaf devotees read and recite by themselves in silence. Hearing devotees

sit among them, usually three to four deaf devotees around one hearing devotee. The hearing devotee points to the text in the chanting book as they recite the *sutra*, word by word, so that everyone, including the deaf devotees, can keep the same pace. C. H.'s relates that, as she gets more experienced, she can "feel" the chanting. For rituals that involve movement, the deaf devotees have their own corner where they follow the directions of the interpreter. Again, instead of reciting aloud, they recite in silence. Apart from Dharma functions, Ling Jiou Mountain also organizes classes for deaf devotees and provides relevant information to them, so that they can continue to learn and accumulate Buddhist knowledge.

C. H. felt that differences in sign language proficiency among deaf devotees is one of the difficulties. In fact, some deaf devotees may not know much sign language at all. Other challenges come from the language itself. The lack of signs for Buddhist vocabulary means that the devotees and sign interpreters have to invent them. However, sign language, being a visually based language, is not very adept at representing abstract Buddhist concepts, so the task has not been easy. Even when signs are adopted, much time is needed to explain their meanings. C. H. also felt that everyone's ability to understand and comprehend Buddhist ideas is different; some pick up the ideas faster than others. Generally speaking, she thought that stories are usually easier for people to understand. Also, as one accumulates experience and knowledge, it become easier to understand Buddhist concepts. According to C. H., Buddhist TV programmes nowadays all provide captions and have become useful sources for learning and enhancing one's capacity to understand Buddhist teachings. Taking herself as an example, in the beginning she was only able to understand partially. But slowly, as she applied what she had learned in daily practice, she could understand Buddhism better. She feels that she is now quite a changed person because of Buddhism.

Prior to my meeting with C. H., I apologized for not being able to use Taiwanese Sign Language and discussed how we could communicate, including the possibility of arranging a sign interpreter. In the end, we decided not to arrange a sign interpreter, but rather to communicate through writing. The interview questions were sent to C. H. in advance, so she could prepare her answers. As it turned out, the interview process was a combination of writing, Taiwanese and Hong Kong Signs, facial expressions, and gestures. In order to ensure information accuracy, the interview notes were sent to C. H. for verification after the interview.

I was curious to know how the arrangement of sign interpreters works in Taiwan, since it has always been quite difficult in Hong Kong. According to C. H., deaf persons with a Disability Card can go to their district deaf association to apply for sign interpretation services. There are two queues: one is for "regular business," such as medical consultations and legal meetings, and interpreters are efficiently arranged. Arrangements for "leisure" activities usually take a long time, so volunteers are often assigned to provide interpretation. It can be difficult to arrange interpreters for ongoing activities such as temple visits.

The Journey of Li Ching Shu: Learning to Sign

Li Ching Shu is a volunteer and a devotee at Tzu Chi Compassionate Relief. She regularly goes to Tzu Chi's Jing Si branch temple in Wan Hua District as a volunteer. She first started learning to sign through Tzu Chi's sign language activities, such as sign language songs. She soon noticed that the signs used in songs were different from those used in daily conversations in the deaf community. With an interest to learn the language, she enrolled in a three-year sign language course at the Taipei School for the Hearing Impaired, a course commissioned by the Ministry of Education.

The introduction of sign language in Tzu Chi's programmes has its roots in the 1980s when Bhiksuni Cheng Yen, the founder of Tzu Chi, visited the deaf community and noticed communication

barriers. Since then, volunteers at Tzu Chi are all encouraged to learn sign language and sign language is often incorporated into Tzu Chi's activities.

About five years ago, during a year-end celebration activity, Li Ching invited some deaf friends to the temple for an event that was conducted with sign language interpretation. Since then, the deaf community is regularly invited to Tzu Chi's activities, such as year-end celebrations, the bathing of the Buddha, Auspicious Month activities, environmental protection events, cultural performances, and so forth. The number of participants varies, but usually some deaf people attend. The maximum number is a few dozen people.

A reading club conducted in sign language gathers every Tuesday evening at the initiative of Mr. Sun, a long-time devotee and sign language teacher who is deaf. He frequently assists in sign language-related activities organized by Tzu Chi, such as explaining Buddhist *sutras* and teachings to the deaf, researching Buddhist terms, and investigating how such terms and concepts can be presented in sign language. Apart from reading Buddhist texts, the reading club also reads Bhiksuni Cheng Yen's *Jing Si Aphorisms*. Deaf participants are also taught Buddhist etiquette, so that they will be aware of appropriate conduct when they attend Dharma events.

Deaf participants are invited to come early, before events start. Tzu Chi volunteers greet the deaf participants with tea and snacks. A brief introduction to the programme and a rundown of events are given before participants go into the auditorium. Participants, both hearing and deaf, are seated in the same auditorium. A small area is reserved for the deaf community at a location where hearing-impaired participants can see the sign interpreter clearly. The sign interpreter signs in Taiwanese Sign Language and usually stands next to the speaker or emcee. For *sutra* recitations, everyone in the auditorium views the text projected on a screen. Volunteers indicate the lines of the text to the deaf participants.

Encouragement to participate in Buddhist events usually comes through referrals and invitations from friends. Social media and electronic communications platforms such as Facebook are very helpful in spreading the message among the deaf community. Personal testimonials by deaf friends have been found to be an effective means for successfully inviting deaf participants, who usually enjoy the activities very much.

Language is a major challenge. Participants have different sign language and Chinese language proficiencies. Some of them are users of Taiwanese Sign Language,¹³ while others use Manually Coded Chinese.¹⁴ Some participants do better than others with lip reading and speaking. Some are more accustomed to reading texts and may have a better understanding of written materials. All these factors contribute to a rather complex situation in terms of communications with and among deaf participants. Hence, apart from sign interpretation during events, pre-event briefings by volunteers and regular meetings, such the reading club, are good platforms for communication and allow deaf participants time to clarify ideas, thus enhancing their understanding.

Buddhist vocabulary in Taiwanese Sign Language is greatly underdeveloped. Li Ching often needs to discuss the program with the sign interpreter in advance to clarify how certain terms can be signed. Li Ching also seeks suggestions from Mr. Sun and other deaf participants about preferred signs.

Buddhist readings are difficult for most people to understand, whether they are hearing or deaf. It has been found that stories not only engage people more easily, but also make it easier for participants to understand, which enhances their motivation to learn. Key points and deeper levels of meaning can then be unpacked, with more detailed explanations. The reading club is also a platform for explaining Buddhist teachings in greater detail.

Supporting the Deaf Community

When asked about methods to support the inclusion of deaf participants, Li Ching mentioned the following points:

1. Respect. Li Ching immediately mentioned this point. She stressed that the only difference between a deaf person and a hearing person is the ability to hear. A deaf person is not abnormal. He or she should be treated courteously. Deaf culture and differences between the deaf and hearing should be respected.

2. Attention to detail. Tzu Chi programmes are planned with great attention to detail in order to serve the deaf community, including reception, hospitality, and seating arrangements. Participants can feel and appreciate these efforts.

3. Sowing seeds proactively. In addition to making good acquaintances, Tzu Chi volunteers also proactively sow Dharma seeds among the deaf participants. For example, they give deaf participants small gifts such as Buddhist books and encourage them to read “even a little,” according to their capacity, although some participants find the teachings difficult to understand in the beginning.

4. Partnerships with the deaf community. Forming partnerships with deaf leaders entails inviting them to take responsibility for tasks such as making contacts, designing Buddhist signs, sharing, and teaching. This not only cultivates a sense of belonging among the partners involved, but deaf participants find it easier to communicate with these deaf partners and therefore feel more connected.

5. Activities related to daily life. Environmental protection¹⁵ is an example of how the teachings are closely linked with daily life activities. These activities include carrying one’s own eating utensils, explaining global warming, and vegetarianism (the idea even one vegetarian meal benefits the world), to inspire compassion in an easy-to-understand way.

6. Rewarding experiences. It is important for participants to find Dharma activities rewarding. For example, activities like tea ceremony and Buddhist teachings help participants feel that they have learned something new. One participant, who was fond of proverbs and treasured the opportunity to learn, kept a handwritten record of proverbs he learned

7. Endorsement by the deaf community. There are no walk-in deaf participants as yet. Deaf participants join the activities because of friends’ invitations and, most importantly, because of the very positive comments they hear from others.

Challenges and Solutions

Language is a common and complicated challenge mentioned by both interviewees. The lack of adequate Buddhist vocabulary in Taiwanese Sign Language means that appropriate signs need to be developed. Sign language is a highly visual language. Representing Buddhist terms that are often abstract or foreign to deaf culture is not an easy task. The varied language capacities among deaf participants make the issue even more complex. At the moment, temple volunteers, sign interpreters, and the deaf community are working together to develop adequate vocabulary to convey the Buddhist teachings. Hopefully, before too long a more consistent set of sign language vocabulary will be available in Taiwanese Sign Language that will benefit more deaf people.

The availability of sign interpreters did not seem to be a problem for our interviewees. In the long run, however, more sign interpreters will inevitably be needed. Hence, as has been the case in Christian churches in Taiwan, a consistent set of sign language vocabulary will be crucial to meet growing needs in the future.^{16 17}

Tzu Chi’s strategy of establishing partnerships with the deaf community and engaging deaf

leaders as partners has been an effective initiative, establishing good public relations and trust with members of the deaf community. If services to the deaf are to be expanded, in addition to forming individual relationships within the deaf community, other non-profit organizations that serve the deaf need to be engaged as partners to extend the network. The preparation of human resources, such as sign interpreters, especially those familiar with the Buddhist signs that are being developed, and volunteers who are competent and confident to work with disabilities, will be an important step in paving the way for further development.

Conclusion

The two women whom we interviewed have shown tremendous diligence in their respective circumstances. Their stories contribute in important ways to the discourse about striving towards equal participation in Buddhism. Equal opportunities for participation, both for oneself and others, will move Buddhist practitioners closer to fulfilling the *bodhisattva* vow to save all beings from suffering. At the same time, greater participation helps cultivate exchanges between deaf and hearing cultures. Living as we do in an increasingly diverse and inclusive era in the 21st century, I hope to see broader engagement with and exchanges among persons with different abilities, both in Buddhism and in other aspects of society, to ensure basic human rights for everyone.

NOTES

¹ Different variations of the line “Beings are numberless; I vow to save them (Chin: *Zhong sheng wubian shi yuan du*)” appear in many Mahayana Buddhist texts, such as *Dasheng bensheng xindi guan jing*. When describing beings born into the family of *bodhisattvas*, the *Mahāprajñā-pāramitā Upadeśa (Da zhidu lun)* also describes the *bodhisattva* vow: “Starting from today onward, I will not follow any bad thought (*akuśalacitta*); I wish only to save all beings and to attain supreme complete enlightenment (*anuttarasamyaksa bodhi*). E. Lamotte, *Le Traite de la Grande Vertu de Sagesse* (a translation of the *Mahāprajñā-pāramitā Upadeśa*), vol. 4 (Institut Orientaliste: Louvain-la-Neuve, 1976). The text has been translated into English from French by Gelongma Karma Migme Chödrön, *The Treatise on the Great Virtue of Wisdom of Nāgārjuna*, vol. 4 (2001), 1576. Available online in the 84000 Reading Room.

² Gary L. Albrecht, ed., “Chronology,” *Encyclopedia of Disability* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2006). As early as 1,500 BCE in Egypt, *The Ebers Papyrus*, a medical textbook, devotes an entire chapter to eye diseases. It also shows that deafness was well understood and that clinical knowledge had developed.

³ M. Miles, “Disability in an Eastern Religious Context: Historical Perspectives,” *Disability and Society*, 10:1(1995): 49–50.

⁴ Barriers for each individual PWD vary, but the World Health Organization (WHO) has listed the following general barriers encountered by PWDs: inadequate policies and standards, negative attitudes, inadequate services, problems with service delivery, inadequate funding, lack of accessibility, lack of consultation and involvement, and lack of data and evidence. Alana Officer and Aleksandra Posarac, eds., *World Report on Disability 2011* (Geneva: World Health Organization and World Bank, 2011), 262.

⁵ The term “deaf community” is a general term that refers to the community of people who are deaf and hard of hearing, whether the condition is either congenital and adventitious, including those who are regarded as having a Hearing Mechanism Disability, a term used by the Taiwan Ministry of Health and Welfare.

⁶ I would like to take this opportunity to thank my two interviewees, C. H. and Li-Ching Shu, for their generosity in sharing their stories with me, and to those who assisted in connecting me with C. H. and Li-Ching. This report would never have been possible without them. I would also like to thank my teacher, Dr. Wei-Yi Cheng, for her encouragement and support in my study of Buddhist engagement among persons with disabilities, though it is a less traveled path. Coincidentally, all of them are women.

⁷ Gary L. Albrecht, ed., “Models,” *Encyclopedia of Disability*, vol. 3 (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2006, 1101.

⁸ Ministry of Health and Welfare. “Population of PWDs, According to County and Age.” http://www.mohw.gov.tw/cht/DOS/Statistic.aspx?f_list_no=312&fod_list_no=4198. Accessed June 7, 2016.

⁹ Individuals with a Hearing Mechanism Disability represent .52 percent of the entire population of Taiwan and 10.64 percent of the population of PWDs. Ibid.

¹⁰ The deaf community is underrepresented in Taiwan because the number of “officially registered” Disability Card holders may not reflect the actual figures. For example, people who have lost their hearing because of aging may be reluctant to apply for a Disability Card.

¹¹ <http://www.tzuchi.org>.

¹² C. H. was not sure about the exact name of the temple, since it is a memory from a long time ago.

¹³ Taiwanese Sign Language is the language used in the deaf community in Taiwan. It is commonly used among deaf students who study in deaf schools, deaf adults, and hearing adults who learn sign language.

¹⁴ Manually Coded Chinese is the main medium used for teaching in schools for the deaf. Its syntax is different from Taiwanese Sign Language and is based on the syntax of standard Chinese.

¹⁵ Environmental protection is one of the core concerns of Tzu Chu in its mission to inspire compassion.

¹⁶ According to Wu Xin-Cang, the earliest Christian propagation to the deaf community was in 1952 by missionaries of the Taiwan Baptist Theological Seminary. Taiwan Church News Network, 2015.

¹⁷ According to an article in the United Daily News (“The First Sign Language Dictionary of the Bible Has Been Published”), the first sign language dictionary of the Bible in Taiwan was published in September 2015.

Empowering the Rural and the Poor through Transdisciplinary Collaboration

Zizhuo Shi

As Bodhi Bhikkhu says, “We live at a time when a multitude of crises – economic, social, and environmental – threatens the future of human civilization. This critical situation places a demand on the great religions and spiritual traditions to draw out from their heritage the moral and spiritual principles that can help us avert calamity.” However, it is insufficient simply to repeat time-honored formulations. We have to forge a new understanding of the spiritual path. More importantly, “while classical presentations of the spiritual path emphasize the need to transcend the world of defilement, sin, and suffering, what we need today is a new moral vision that gives precedence to world engagement and transformation.”¹ This means that we need to apply the wisdom and love inherent in Buddhism to create a world that works better for everyone. It is in line with this engaged philosophy that our Luminary Research Institute (LRI), a Buddhist female community, has launched a project to empower the rural and the poor with a new method of transdisciplinary research and collaboration.

Empowering the Rural and the Poor

The Buddhist principle underlying our project is that the world is characterized by interrelatedness and interconnection, although it is empty in its very nature. Based on the compassionate caring toward all the sentient beings that Buddhism shows us, LRI applies a transdisciplinary, transcultural, and transreligious approach to tackle some of the difficult challenges that we are facing now.² We aim to nurture and develop the core values of human capacity and education, such as compassionate caring, wisdom, mindful social justice, and world peace, and pay special attention to cultivating these good qualities among youth and grassroot groups. We hoped that they will apply these good qualities in their workplaces, innovations, and leadership. In other words, our goal is to solve some difficult social problems by means of transdisciplinary collaboration in order to bring about the collective well-being of the world.

The use of this new method started from an international symposium on transdisciplinary collaboration that we held on June 15 to 16, 2014. We invited scholars and experts from various fields, such as psychology, art, engineering, technology, and social sciences, to discuss one of the most noticeable social problems in Taiwan: the gap between poor rural areas and wealthy urban areas.

After the symposium, we signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with five institutes. They all agreed to work together to tackle social problems in Taiwan, such as the digital divide, the gap between the rural poor and wealthy urbanites, the frustration of youth who cannot find jobs due to globalization, and the like. The first project we selected was a public elementary school named Meihua, located about one hour’s drive from Taipei. The reason we chose this school was that, at that time, Meihua Elementary School was facing closure by the government due to a decreasing number of students – less than the officially required 60. More seriously, the Meihua community had several social problems that many locals considered unsolvable; for example, most of the youths were moving out to work in the cities, leaving many houses empty and rice fields unfarmed. Furthermore, those youths who stay in the community lack confidence and feel no hope for the future. They become very moody and some feel frustrated to the extent of taking drugs. Another problem is new immigrant mothers from southeast Asia who are married to Taiwanese men. They do not speak Chinese and are not familiar with Taiwanese culture. As a result, they have difficulty communicating with their families and neighbors. Both they and their children feel isolated. For all these reasons, Meihua Elementary School and its community are at risk of falling apart.

Art for Community Building

The nuns of LRI initiated efforts to transform Meihua Elementary School and its surrounding community. The project includes three stages, and the final goal is to empower the youths and the community residents to improve their financial situation and transform their community. At the first stage, we aim to transform the negative mindsets of the teachers and students of Meihua and to nurture the students' potential, to nurture their self-confidence, curiosity, creativity, ability to explore new knowledge, and interactions with others. To fulfill this goal, we opened two classes for students, including an art class for developing students' potential and a mindful tutoring class.

The art class focused on a two-hour art class each week for grades one to six and the annual creation of a large public artwork. In the art classes, we provided a theme for students' weekly artwork. We taught them various artistic skills and chose themes related to their lives and community, to build their confidence. For instance, there were classes on painting Meihua and telling the story of Daxi, their local district. The purpose was to transform the negative image they had of their community and replace it with a sense with confidence, honor, and identity.

Students were asked to draw a picture that showed their lives in Meihua. While students were drawing, or having a hard time drawing, our volunteers encourage them and facilitated as they described their lives in pictures. We skillfully reminded them that nothing is too small or too bad to draw. Everything they felt was important or impressive was valuable. Many touching stories of students' daily life in their family and community emerged, vividly portrayed in the students' paintings. Their paintings and stories gave us a chance to know more about the students, their families, and the Meihua community and the students started to open their hearts to us, helping build relationships of trust between the students and us. Another activity for the art class is the annual creativity of a public artwork collectively.

Three huge art projects – a three-story-tall mural with a tree of life full of spinning tops and flowers, a large gyro (236 cm tall and 628 cm round), and a sky-like ground work decorated with four huge colourful animals symbolizing the guardians of the universe – were designed by the world-renowned barefoot artist Lily Yeh, based on students' paintings or artwork. Each project took around two months to complete. The artwork incorporated the valuable cultural heritage of the Meihua community and the school. Historically, the Meihua community was one of the earliest sites of development in Taiwan and many stories about the natural environment are an integral part of its history.

Many teachers and volunteers from the community are invited to participate in these art projects, and while creating them, many wonderful stories emerge. After the projects were completed, exhibitions were held. All the local officers, students' parents, family numbers, friends, and the local media are invited to attend. Everyone involved in these meaningful art projects – especially school teachers, students, volunteers, parents, and the artist – feel moved and inspired. In the process of creating art and telling their stories, the teachers, students, and people in the community who are involved gradually change their view of Meihua and a new and positive image of Meihua community is generated. Many students' hearts, which may have been hurt before, become healed. They find new potential means of expressing themselves, such as through painting and storytelling, and develop better social skills and self-confidence.

Mindful Tutoring

The second project we initiated was a mindful tutoring program for students. The classes included mindfulness meditation, academic tutoring, problem solving, and compassion practice. Classes

are held every Thursday afternoon for students in grades one to four and every Friday afternoon for grades five and six. At the beginning of class, we practise a mindful meditation game, such as mindful listening, mindful breathing, mindful eating, or mindful walking for five to seven minutes. Then, we help students with their homework and let them ask questions if they like. Before the end of class, we practise compassion meditation by inviting students to express their gratitude toward teachers, family members, friends, volunteers, and others, as they wish. Although the classes only meet once a week, they help the teachers and play an important role in helping students improve their studies and social interactions.

The practice of meditation on compassion helps transform the tension between teacher and students, and improves students' attitudes toward school and teachers. Most teachers are under pressure to follow a strict curriculum and ignore whether students are keeping up or not. Many become impatient with students who are slow learners. Some teachers perceive these students to be problematic or label them mentally ill. In response, these students may become rebellious. After our tutoring classes, many teachers say that students become more polite and respectful towards teachers and classmates. The mindful tutoring class facilitates volunteer-teacher relationships and helps identify some of the students' problems, which may be difficult for teachers to solve. These problems include ADHD, anti-social and violent behavior, and special needs, such as intellectual deficiencies. Our findings show that these problems may be caused by insufficient cultural stimulation in the family, especially families with immigrant mothers or single parents. Teachers who use this new approach with their students find that learning abilities improve.

A year after implementation, the art classes earned three awards for the school. Two of them were awards for excellence in teaching innovation; the other was for excellence in artistic projects in the school environment. These three awards were unprecedented at the school. All the teachers and students therefore felt encouraged and gained confidence to take on new challenges.

The second stage of our project started on July 15, 2016. The goals of the first stage were to build confidence, community identity, and a positive mindset among teachers and students at Meihua Elementary School, and people in the surrounding community. The goal of the second stage is to transform the community and gradually improve the local economy. The plan is to develop the potential of the residents, especially the youth, and help them gain the expertise they need to make a living, whether in Meihua or elsewhere. The hope is that some youths will return to live in the community, with a job, so that they can make a living for their families.

We also seek to identify a unique feature for Meihua community and help the people develop it. The evolving plan for community development will be tailored to the local potential, such as preserving the natural environment, creating a valuable history, and recovering products known in the early history of Taiwan. We interviewed elders who knew the local history well, made a film to document the ancient trade routes that played an important role in the early history of Taiwan, and re-prepared traditional foods that had been passed down by their ancestors. Our goal is to facilitate projects through which the people of Meihua can discover their historical honor and gradually build a community characterized by art, a beautiful natural environment and a recovery of Taiwan's early history. In the long term, we hope to make the Meihua community into an educational park where visitors can not only see art projects, walking along the ancient paths people took a hundred year ago, but also study the early history of Taiwan. So far, the project has met with success and some college students have shown interest.

In the second stage, two more classes were arranged for young people and other members of community. The first one is a tutoring class to help the young people with their studies. The second is a professional skills class, to learn filmmaking, cooking, art, and handicrafts. These classes are for

everyone, including youths, new immigrant mothers, community volunteers, and people from neighboring communities. All these classes and projects are carried out by volunteers from LRI and organized by *bhikkunis* from the Luminary Buddhist community. Sometimes, we also invite scholars, businessmen, and high-tech and professional experts from various disciplines to join us and offer their advice. LRI serves as a coordinator, fundraiser, activity organizer, and implementation manager. Usually a *bhikkuni* such as myself and a group of Buddhist volunteers come to work at Meihua Elementary School and in the community. The majority of the volunteers are female. Their warm care, mindful practice, and patience have been major contributions to the success of the project.

Critical Factors for Success

Many factors have contributed to the success of our project. Here I will present just four of them. First, we comprehensively researched the Meihua community before we began our work at Meihua Elementary School and the Meihua community. This included library research, investigation, and interviews with local people and government officers. Through reading, we learned about the history of the Meihua community, the natural environment of Meihua and its neighboring communities, and the key problem that led to the decline of the community. We then identified unique features and hidden treasures that had been overlooked by people in the community. With this background in mind, we developed the project in progressive stages. Identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the school and the community was very important, because it helped convince the principal and the community residents to work with us. When they realized the good points we had identified, they knew we respected their culture and traditions, and had not come to destroy or change their lives. Moreover, it convinced the school and the community that the project was not beyond their reach, because they had certain strengths and potentials.

The second important factor in the success of the project was collaboration with various scholars, volunteers, and experts. At both stages, we relied heavily on transdisciplinary teamwork. In stage one, the barefoot artist Professor Lily Yeh played a key role in inspiring and guiding us to teach art to develop the students' potential. Her reputation and experience as an internationally known artist who creates public art to transform people helped elevate the spirits of the principal, teachers, and students, and also helped catch the eye of the local media. In the second stage, Professors Xu Wenzhong, Zhang Jiping, and Hu Zheishen brought students to help. They contributed valuable human resources and skills for working with people in the community. Director Peng Qiyuan contributed his skills to make a documentary, which helped us save money and time. Most importantly, the art teacher Lou Yude designed a very popular and inspiring pedagogy to help students develop their potential for artwork.

Third, a team of at least three people, including a *bhikkuni* coordinator/manager who has a caring heart, persistence, clear vision, and good communication skills, is needed for the project to be successful. In the beginning, our project encountered many hardships, including a lack of financial support, ridicule, teachers' distrust, and non-cooperation. Even the principal shied away and asked us to reduce the scale of the project when we saw three-stories of scaffolding going up to create the mural of life with a tree decorated with spinning tops and flowers. The artist replied by saying that if the size of the artwork was reduced, then the project would be cancelled. Clearly, the team's persistence plays a decisive role in whether the project will be successful.

Fourth, the project was successful due to support, both psychological and financial, from our *sangha*. So far, we did not spend too much money on this project, but some support was needed for materials, meals, transportation, tutoring, and other expenses. The school and community could not

afford to pay for them.

Conclusion

A transdisciplinary approach is a new, yet widely accepted way to solve complex social problems. This approach requires more time and attention than traditional approaches to identify problems and organize team members for projects. At the same time, this approach brings far greater human and material resources to the project. As a result, the complex problem becomes easier to solve. Overall, a transdisciplinary approach is both powerful and rewarding.

NOTES

1. Bhikkhu Bodhi, "Moral Vision as the Foundation for Global Well-Being," *Transformation, Innovation and Lighting up Lives*, Proceedings of the 2014 International Symposium for Transdisciplinarity on Individual and Social Transformation, ed. Luminary Research Institute (Taipei: Gaya Foundation, 2014).

2. Raymond Yeh, "Foreword." Ibid.

Gender discrepancies supported by religious traditions continue to have negative effects on women's well-being. Such gender disparities persist in Buddhist societies and institutions and are linked to cultural and religious beliefs and practices that assign a lower status to women. As a result, in some Buddhist traditions, in Asian as well as Western settings, nuns cannot ordain to the same level as monks. Further, most Buddhist archetypes of enlightenment remain male and men hold positions of power and privilege within the majority of Buddhist organizations. Since the 1980s the global Buddhist women's network, Sakyadhita (International Association of Buddhist Women), has campaigned for gender equity and full ordination for women as *bhikkhunis*.

This paper will focus on recent controversy surrounding the British-born Theravāda monk, Ajahn Brahmavamsa Mahathera, the abbot of Bodhinyana Monastery in Western Australia (WA) and his advocacy for equal rights for women within Buddhism. In 2009, Ajahn Brahm helped ordain four *bhikkhunis* in WA, as a result of which Bodhinyana Monastery was excommunicated from Wat Pah Pong Monastery. In 2014, Ajahn Brahm's planned speech on Gender Equality at the United Nations Day of Vesak (UNDV) convention in Vietnam was withdrawn by the UNDV's International Committee. Both events generated significant online activity on the blog of Bhante Sujato, an Australian monk, and online petitions supporting the *bhikkhunis* and Ajahn Brahm. This paper argues that Buddhist women and men, nuns, monks, and laypeople, including scholars, are uniting globally to create "third spaces" to campaign for gender equality in Buddhism, drawing on both traditional Buddhist principles and modern digital activism to further their aims.

Introduction

As we, and other scholars, have argued previously, gender disparities persist in Buddhist societies and institutions linked to cultural and religious beliefs and practices that allocate a lower status to women. They do so in several ways, namely by stating that female rebirth is a result of bad *karma* due to negative acts in previous lives; making nuns follow more rules than monks after ordination; and not allowing, in some traditions, women to be ordained to the same level as monks. In addition, most Buddhist archetypes of enlightenment remain male, and men hold far more positions of power and privilege within the majority of Buddhist organizations than women. This all has an adverse impact on women's social status and opportunities in Buddhist societies and communities.¹

While gender equality is frequently cited as a central feature of "modern Buddhism,"² these issues persist in contemporary societies in both the global North and South, and are currently being addressed by the global Buddhist women's social movement, led by Sakyadhita ("Daughters of the Buddha") International Association of Buddhist Women. Founded in 1987, Sakyadhita has now held 14 international conferences bringing together Buddhist women and scholars from across the globe, and has supported a campaign to revive full ordination for women and to improve nuns' education and living conditions. Moreover, much debate and activism in this area is now conducted digitally through websites, blogs, Facebook pages, and Twitter accounts, both by members of Sakyadhita and newer organizations such as the Alliance for Bhikkhunis, and the Yogini Project.³

We have documented the digital activism of the Buddhist women's movement in a previous article titled, "Cyber Sisters: Buddhist Women's Online Activism and Practice," which drew on digital religion research and theory. The Internet has revolutionized modes of religious communication, opening up new opportunities for practice and allowing traditional authority structures to be challenged.

However, it also abounds with “misinformation” and “religious bigotry.”⁴ Some scholars have drawn attention to the ways in which the Internet offers a “third space” where traditional authority structures can be challenged in ways that might not be possible in the offline environment. The idea of “digital religion” as a “third space” has been developed by Stewart M. Hoover and Nabil Echchaibi,⁵ and while they did not mention Buddhist social movements specifically, we applied their insights to the Buddhist women’s social movement’s use of digital technology to advance gender equality.

Hoover and Echchaibi explain how “third places” or “third spaces” “describe something alternative to other, prior, or dominant domains” that can enable social action:⁶

... We think of digital spaces as important performative sites of enunciation where formal and unitary structures of religious knowledge and practice become the object of both revision and transformation. As such, the digital with its own communication logic, stylistic features, and convergent properties *can* become a significant site of disruption and invention... we believe the digital hosts and mediates critical articulations of liminality, translation, and negotiation of cultural meaning... Third space arguably unsettles the singularity of dominant power narratives and opens up new avenues of identification and enunciation.⁷

We argue that this type of unsettling, disruptive, and critical reflexivity has been applied by the Buddhism women’s social movement in its online and offline activities to challenge dominant patriarchal power structures, and to create more equitable ones in their place. Moreover, this is not an entirely modern development, given that critical reflexivity is also a central principle of traditional and modern Buddhism. “Cyber sisters” have created offline and online third spaces to foreground the equality and power of women in Buddhism by posting and blogging images, narratives and texts related to historical and contemporary *yoginis* and *dakinis*, which question and usurp dominant patriarchal narratives within Buddhism. This is a form of activism, and also spiritual practice, consistent with aspirations of fulfilling the responsibilities of a yogini and *dakini*, to spread wisdom throughout the world to assist all beings to become enlightened, and free from suffering and oppression.⁸

Bhikkhuni Ordination in the Thai Forest Tradition in Australia

A recent further example of the ways in which “third-space” digital activism has been employed to advance gender equality in contemporary Buddhism, has been the controversy surrounding *bhikkhuni* ordination in the Thai Forest Tradition in Australia. This has taken place particularly around two notable recent events, which generated significant online activity: Firstly, a full female ordination ceremony conducted in Western Australia, in October 2009, by a senior monk and abbot in the Thai Forest tradition Ajahn Brahmavamsa Mahathera (Ajahn Brahm); and secondly, a paper Ajahn Brahm was to deliver on gender equality and women’s ordination in Buddhism at the United Nations Day of Vesak Conference in Vietnam in 2014. On these occasions, Dharma brothers united with cyber sisters to advocate on their behalf. This again is not new, given that one of Buddha’s disciples Ananda played a central role in advancing gender equity, together with Buddha’s stepmother, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, at the time of the Buddha.

Ajahn Brahm is one of the most prominent Buddhist teachers in Australia and internationally. He is extremely popular in both Asian and Western societies, and is known and revered for his wisdom, and his accessible and entertaining style of teaching and writing. Ajahn Brahm was born into and grew up in a poor family in London. He was gifted intellectually, and won several scholarships to secondary schools and to Cambridge University to study Theoretical Physics. He first discovered Buddhism as at

the age of 16, when he was awarded a book voucher prize for his achievements in mathematics, and purchased several books on Asian religions and psychology instead. At Cambridge, he joined the Buddhist Society in 1969, where he began to attend Buddhist teachings and to practice meditation, which he took to naturally and which “blew his mind.” Impressed by the peaceful and joyful demeanor of Thai monks that he met in London, he travelled to Thailand and took temporary ordination in the Thai Theravada tradition at the age of 23 and has remained a monk ever since.⁹

Ajahn Brahm studied with the highly respected Thai Forest Tradition leader Ajahn Chah for nine years, before Ajahn Chah sent him to establish a Thai Forest Monastery in Western Australia. The Bodhinyana Monastery, named after Ajahn Chah, was founded in 1983, in Serpentine near Perth, by Ajahn Jagaro, then an Australian Italian monk, and Ajahn Brahm. Ajahn Brahm has been the monastery’s abbot since the early 1990s.¹⁰ Ajahn Brahm’s first priority as abbot was to create a nun’s monastery, to advance gender equity in Theravada Buddhism, and the community soon acquired land to do so near Gidgegannup, close to Perth.¹¹

Ajahn Vāyāmā was the first nun who lived at the Dhammasara Monastery, in tough conditions before any buildings were erected. She was a student of Ayyā Khemā, a prominent German Theravadin nun and teacher, who had lived and taught in Australia for some time. Ayyā Khemā was perhaps the first Western Theravadin *bhikkhuni* ordained in the 1980s, with many more ordinations occurring in the Sri Lankan Theravadin tradition in the 1990s. Thai scholar and nun Chatsumarn Kabalsingh, now Bhikkhuni Dhammanandā, was ordained in Sri Lanka in 2003; her mother, Bhikkhuni Ta Tao, received full ordination in Taiwan in 1971.¹² Many Thai nuns have followed in their footsteps. However Ajahn Vāyāmā, Bhante Sujato and Ajahn Brahm were the earliest advocates for *bhikkhuni* ordination within the Ajahn Chah Thai Forest Tradition in the early 2000s.¹³

When asked what motivated Ajahn Brahm to address gender equity in Buddhism, he replied: “Compassion. Wisdom. We always say, ‘May all beings be happy and well.’ Okay, [but] there’s a big group of beings over there who are not being treated fairly.” He also recounted how there were many inspiring women, including female teachers who taught monks, at the time of the Buddha, and that Ajahn Brahm’s scholastic training enabled him to find support for gender equality and *bhikkhuni* ordination in the Buddhist texts. He added that while many people simply talk about advancing gender equality and full female ordination in Buddhism: “I do things. So you don’t just talk about it, you make it happen... there’s no reason why not... once I know it’s possible and it’s there, the next thing to do is to do it.” He also stated that the main obstacles to Thai monk’s support for *bhikkhuni* ordination was “fear,” and particularly a “fear of getting into trouble and bucking the system,” and “denial” indicating that many of them were “out of touch.”

Ajahn Brahm also noted that the earliest form of democracy was the Buddhist *Sangha*, where there was never supposed to be any hierarchy, “let alone patriarchy”, and each monastery and community was meant to be autonomous. Accordingly, decisions must be made with the consent of the entire community. He described how four nuns from the Dhammasara nun’s community, including Venerables Vāyāmā and Nirodhā, requested to become *bhikkunnis* in 2009. A former Sydney socialite, Nirodhā *Bhikkhuni* is another prominent figure in Australian Buddhism, who originally purchased the land for what would become the Santi Forest Monastery in New South Wales, before she became a nun. The Bodhinyana *Sangha* and lay community discussed the proposal in detail and all agreed that the nun’s request be granted, so it was a *sangha* decision, not Ajahn Brahm’s decision alone, to perform the *bhikkhuni* ordination on the October 22, 2009.¹⁴

A detailed account of the events of that day, and those leading up to and immediately following it, were recorded by Bhante Sujato on his widely read Sujato’s blog on October 31.¹⁵ Bhante Sujato was born and grew up in Perth, and played in the well-known band Martha’s Vineyard in the 1980s. He left

the music scene and travelled to Thailand in the early 1990s and, similar to Ajahn Brahm, his profound meditation experiences led him to ordain as a monk in 1994. He returned to Perth and to Bodhinyana Monastery in 1997 for three years. He spent the next three years in isolated retreats in Malaysia and Thailand. In 2003, he became the Abbott of Santi Forest Monastery in New South Wales and lived there until he returned to Bodhinyana in 2012. He has long been a strong advocate for gender equality and is a highly respected figure in Australian Buddhism.¹⁶

On November 7, 2016, Ajahn Brahm also posted on Sujato's blog to explain why he had been excommunicated, as the Bodhinyana Buddhist Monastery had been removed as a branch monastery of Wat Pah Pong, Ajahn Chah's main monastery, following a meeting held there on the 1st November 2016, to which Ajahn Brahm was summoned.¹⁷ The Bodhinyana and Dhammasara communities, and the authorities that were critical of the WA *bbikkhuni* ordination used the internet to clarify their positions following these events. This resulted in an international uprising in the form of an online petition in support of the *bbikkhunis* and Ajahn Brahm.¹⁸

A further event involving Ajahn Brahm has given rise to another online petition more recently, also centred on the issue of countering gender inequality in Buddhism.¹⁹ Ajahn Brahm was due to give a paper on "Theravada Buddhism and MDG 3: Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women in Theravada Buddhism," at the United Nations Day of Vesak, Buddhism and the UN Millennium Goals Conference in Vietnam on May 7-11, 2014. However, just 36 hours before the event he was banned from presenting (although the paper had been previously authorized by the conference organizers). The paper was concerned with aligning debates about gender equality and women's ordination in Buddhism to the UN Millennium Development Goal 3, to Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women.²⁰

Once again, the news of the ban spread rapidly throughout the internet and Ajahn Brahm's paper was consequently seen and read by so many more people than the conference attendees. An online petition was also mounted on AVAAZ, a global digital activism platform, to enable Ajahn Brahm to deliver his paper at the next UNDV Conference, which gathered over 5000 signatories, although this did not transpire. It was, however, published by *Tricycle*, a popular U.S.-based Buddhist magazine, with wide international readership both in print and online.²¹

Ajahn Brahm and Bhante Sujato also participated in the 14th Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women held in Yogyakarta from June 23 to 30, 2015, soon after which Ajahn Brahm stated:

The momentum is huge, it's unstoppable... you realize the female *sangha* has arrived, and if anyone saw that, they'd say trying to fight this, or trying to keep your head in the sand... you're wasting your time... there's huge momentum... it was really impressive to see how many people that were there, and what can be done...

Most recently, on September 4, 2016, another *bbikkhuni* ordination, for Ayya Vajirā, Ayya Dhammavatī, and Ayya Santacārī, was held in the Big Cave at Santi Thai Forest Monastery. Nirodhā *Bhikkhuni* was present at the ceremony. The ordination was confirmed when the *bbikkhunis* visited Ajahn Brahm and the monks at Bodhinyana monastery on September 22, 2016. News of this event was also shared and celebrated online, with Santi's (2016) website including many photographs and the following description: "Theravada Bhikkhuni Upasampada is very rare and to have this ceremony in the sacred environment of such a beautiful cave was so unique and awe inspiring. Everyone felt touched deep in their hearts by such a breath taking experience."²²

Conclusion

Buddhist women and men, nuns, monks and lay people including scholars, are most certainly uniting in Australia and globally to campaign for gender equality in Buddhism, drawing on both traditional Buddhist principles and contemporary digital activism to further their aims. The case study provided above also demonstrates that despite opposition, these Buddhist social actors are succeeding, and the huge momentum gathered by the Buddhist women's movement in the 21st century is with no doubt being significantly aided by the creation of digital "third spaces," such as Sujato's blog, the Santi website, and online petitions mounted by the movement's members and supporters to advance their cause.

NOTES

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⁷ Ibid, 13–15.

⁸ Emma Tomalin, et al. "Cyber Sisters"; Michaela Hass, ed., *Dakini Power: Extraordinary Women Shaping the Transmission of Buddhism in the West* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2013), 1–5; and Judith Simmer-Brown, *Dakini's Warm Breath* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2001).

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Teaching Dharma to Children (in Vietnam)

Bhikkhuni Lien Pháp

Vietnam is proud to have the largest number of *bhikkhunis* and nuns of all the Buddhist countries. The majority of these *bhikkhunis* renounce the world at a very tender age with a firm determination to be lifelong monastics. People may wonder how young girls can make such a brave decision to leave all worldly pleasures behind to enter religious life. Do these girls understand the meaning and purpose of monastic life? They certainly do, because they have received Buddhist education even before they go to school, through their parents, grandparents, and the traditional Buddhist way of life in their families, especially Dharma classes.

In Vietnam, children learn Buddhism through many channels, but the most popular are Buddhist Family and Buddhist Summer Retreats. In this paper, I will introduce these two models of teaching Dharma to children in Vietnam.

Buddhist Family of Vietnam

Buddhist Family of Vietnam is a Buddhist educational organization under the direction of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha that was founded in the 1940s by Dr. Tam Minh Le Dinh Tham, a physician and devoted lay Buddhist. At the beginning of the 21st century, Buddhist Family had more than 150,000 leaders and members in Vietnam and overseas. The two purposes of this organization are: (1) to train young adults, teenagers, and children to become true Buddhists; and (2) to contribute to social development in the spirit of Buddhism. The organization expresses its objectives as follows:

The Vietnamese Buddhist Youth Association strives to produce individuals with three basic yet exceptional qualities/virtues: compassion, wisdom, and courage. Such individuals use compassion as their propelling force, wisdom as their guiding light, and courage as a leading step toward reaching their goals. These people love others as they love themselves. They are forgiving and capable of distinguishing right from wrong.¹

Buddhist Family is a special organization, because everyone, regardless of age, gender, profession, social position, or educational level, can become a member. Once people join, they serve and help others to the best of their capacity with the skills they have, and treat one another with love, tolerance, and understanding, like brothers and sisters of the same family. For this reason, the organization is called Buddhist Family.

Buddhist Family members are divided into three age groups, with males and females in different groups:

- Orioles² (Oanh Vūu) (from 7 to 12 years old) are divided into four levels: Open Eyes, Soft Wings, Strong Legs, and Flying out;
- Teenagers (from 13 to 17 years old) are divided into four levels: Inclined to the Good, Elementary Good, Intermediate Good, and Rightly Good;
- Young adults (age 18 and above) are divided into two levels: Harmony and Honesty; and
- Leaders are divided into four levels: Persistent, Patient, Concentrated, and Powerful. In order to become a leader at these levels, mature and longstanding members must participate in long-term training courses for leaders conducted at training camps: Deer Park, Asoka, Hsuen-Trang, and Van Hanh.

Educational programs are designed to constantly foster love and compassion in members. For example, the Three Regulations provide guidelines for daily practice for the youngest members of the association, who range in age from 5 to 12:

- I always remember and think of the Buddha;
- I respect and love my parents, and live in harmony with my brothers and sisters; and
- I love human beings and animals.

In weekly Dharma recitation services, children are guided to read these Three Regulations aloud in front of the Buddha. All the Dharma lessons, stories, youth activities, and games aim to cultivate the children's love and compassion for the Buddha, family, and sentient beings. In this way, the Buddhist value of loving kindness is gradually shaped and constantly nurtured. This lays the foundation for the children's mental and spiritual development, and helps prepare them for the association's training programs for teenagers and adults.

For teenagers and adults, there are the Five Regulations that are read aloud every Sunday afternoon when all the members meet and are considered to be the principles of living:

- Buddhists take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, and observe the five precepts.
- Buddhists extend compassion and respect for life.
- Buddhists cultivate wisdom and respect the truth.
- Buddhists purify themselves physically and mentally, in word and deed; and
- Buddhists live in harmony and are courageous on the path.

The Buddhist Family curriculum has four disciplines: Buddhism, youth activities, social activities, and the arts. The contents of each discipline are as follows:

Buddhism: This is the main discipline of Buddhist Family. Little by little, day by day, the members all learn the following subjects:

- The history of Gotama Buddha.
- Reflecting on the qualities of the Buddha and paying homage to the Buddha.
- The Three Jewels (the objects of refuge).
- Why Buddhists go to the temple.
- Maintaining a vegetarian diet.
- How to set up a Buddhist altar.
- How to confess one's transgressions.
- The five precepts; The four noble truths.
- The law of cause and effect.
- The law of karma and rebirth.
- The law of dependent arising.
- The six harmonies.
- The six perfections.
- The four elements of popularity.
- The four great debts.
- The four foundations of mindfulness.

- The four right efforts.
- The eightfold noble path.
- The Buddhist view of life and the world.
- The Buddhist councils.
- The significance of the Buddhist flag.
- The history of Vietnamese Buddhism.
- The establishment, mission, activities, and achievements of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha.
- Buddhism and social issues, such as ethics, economics, culture, and environment.
- Buddhism and science.
- Buddhist psychology.
- Buddhist education.
- How to “invite” the bell and wooden gong.
- How to “invite” the prajna bell and drum.
- How to conduct Buddhist ceremonies.
- How to observe the eight uposatha precepts.
- Jataka stories; and
- Important Mahayana sutras, such as the Heart Sutra, Diamond Sutra, and Lotus Sutra.

Youth Activities. These activities include:

- Basic knots that everyone should know.
- Morse code and semaphore.
- Deciphering messages and codes.
- How to lead games.
- Making tents.
- Curing common diseases with herbal medicine.
- Gymnastics and qigong; and
- First aid/emergency response.

Social activities. The social skills to be learned include:

- How to make friends.
- How to be a good host.
- How to be a good guest.
- How to give directions.
- Common road signs.
- Skills to escape and rescue.
- Environment protection.
- How to organize a conference.
- How to prevent drug use, gambling, HIV/AIDS, etc.
- Buddhist ethics in one’s profession; and
- Marriage and a happy family life.

The Arts. The artistic skills learned include:

- Origami.
- Making lanterns.
- Photography.
- Floral design.

- Embroidery.
- Food art.
- Buddhist proverbs and folklore.
- Composing and performing Buddhist songs; and
- How to reuse, recycle, and repurpose.

The leaders of Buddhist Family are educators who may or may not have received teacher training. Some of the leaders do not have a strong professional or academic background and are not serious scholars or philosophers, but with a love for children, understanding, and faith in the Three Jewels, they succeed in educating children to live in the true spirit of Buddhism. With a sense of responsibility, they care for other members, such as their siblings and close friends.

Buddhist Family imparts to its members the practical teachings needed to improve their minds and transform themselves into good sons, daughters, and students, and to gradually develop the qualities of a true Buddhist.

Buddhist Family education is based on the psychology of each age group and appropriate educational methods. Buddhist topics become very relevant, easy to understand, and easy to practice. Instead of turning children into blind believers without understanding, Buddhist Family facilitates members' capacity to develop their thinking and relate what they learn about Buddhism to the realities of life in the family and in society. Through their educational activities, Buddhist Family has contributed greatly to bringing Buddhism into ordinary life.

Buddhist Summer Retreats

Buddhist Family is an organization of lay Buddhists and its programs last for years. In addition, it organizes Buddhist Summer Retreats (BSR), which are intensive courses from seven days to one month long, conducted at monasteries by monks and nuns. The purpose of a BSR is to provide favorable conditions and a conducive practice environment for young Buddhists, the offspring of lay Buddhists and people who are sympathetic to Buddhism, based on Buddhist principles: "Not to do evil; to perform good; to purify one's mind." A principle for this process is: "Learn to know. Know to adjust one's behavior (in thought, speech, and action) from evil to good (not to cause harm to oneself or others, but to benefit) in order to improve oneself and help others."³

A BSR is also an opportunity for Buddhist monastics and lecturers who want to utilize their professional knowledge to help the younger generation, and at the same time improve their experience and educational methodology. The objectives of a BSR are:

- For course participants: To enhance self-awareness, learn the Dharma, engage in group activities, develop good character, and seriously practice how to observe the course regulations and daily schedule.
- For instructors and volunteers: To be an active volunteer who is devoted to the younger generation; committed to keeping promises, taking responsibilities seriously, cooperating in joint efforts and assigned tasks; and being willing to share life and work experiences with each other and with the younger participants.

The content of a BSR includes:

1. **Knowledge of Buddhism:** The course aims to equip the younger generation with fundamental Buddhist knowledge to advance on the spiritual path and to apply in real life. With this knowledge,

young people can transform their mindset and perspective on life in positive ways, and take action to benefit all people. The organizers of the course select and provide training in different subjects, depending on the circumstances. Three core subjects are compulsory in all courses:

- a. **History of the Buddha:** This segment conveys general information about the three stages of the Buddha's life: before birth, before enlightenment, and after enlightenment. The aim is to instill faith in the Buddha, to practice the Buddha's virtues, and to take the Buddha as a model in life and study.
- b. **Dharma:** This segment conveys the basic teachings of the Buddha in modern language. It synthesizes the teachings according to three major topics: the students' roles and duties to their families, to society, and to their own life.
- c. **Buddhist etiquette:** This segment aims to nurture goodness, and therefore teaches basic Buddhist etiquette and traditional Buddhist customs. This is the first step for cultivating dignity and spiritual beauty in a new generation of Buddhist followers. Students learn to join their palms together, make prostrations, pay respect to monastics and elders, offer alms, and other aspects of polite manners in everyday life.

2. **Daily Buddhist practice.** During the course, participants learn to chant, recite the names of the Buddhas, and meditate. In addition, they are encouraged to enhance their sense of responsibility for others, sharing and helping one another in their work, learning, charitable activities, practice of generosity, hospitality, respect, and humility.

3. **Life skills:** The course also prepares members of the younger generation to embark on the road of life with constructive and beneficial skills. These skills are included in the curriculum to help participants live a harmonious and dynamic life after the course. This segment of the course offers participants an opportunity to get together, enjoy healthy and useful activities, gain knowledge, and actively develop good habits and creativity.

4. **Monitoring, testing, rewards, and discipline:** Monitoring and testing are necessary to get feedback from both facilitators and participants about the quality of teaching and learning. Rewards and discipline are measures to improve the quality of education and training in the course.

Normally, the children are not familiar with monasteries. They are "lured" by their parents to attend summer retreats with promises of, for example, a smart phone or an electric bicycle. Initially, they may be reluctant to go to the temple to attend the retreat. But once they join the course, they find it useful and interesting. Often, they change completely. When they return home, their parents are very surprised and happy to see the changes in their children and call the retreat organizers to thank them.

The changes in the children after attending a summer retreat are the basis of trust that encourages parents to send their children to attend future retreats. The children themselves recommend the retreats to their relatives and friends. Therefore, the number of students increases year by year. Those who participate in the summer retreats share their thoughts and experiences on social networking sites like Facebook, so more people get to know about the retreats and sign up. Consequently, the number of students who register for the programs increases continuously.

At Hoang Phap Temple, the first summer retreat in 2005 opened with more than 300 young people. The second retreat in 2006 had 700, the third in 2007 had 1,600, and the fourth in 2008 had more than 3,100. By 2009, the number of attendees exceeded 7,000. One reason the summer retreat appeals to youngsters is that it is free. Children are happy to know that they can attend the summer retreat just by registering. Under the good care of the teachers, they can learn a lot, have fun, relax, and relieve the stress of studying hard. Tuyet Anh, a 20-year-old female student from Ho Chi Minh City who attended the summer retreat at Hoang Phap Temple in 2011 and again in 2013 said,

When I came to hear lecturers on the Buddha's teachings, I received lectures on life. I learned time management, how to sit, how to speak, and even how to eat. Coming to the temple, I learned how to eat bananas using a spoon to break them into small pieces. Listening to the teachers, I learned many useful things. After taking part in a summer retreat, I feel very comfortable, peaceful, gentle, and temperate, not hot or grumpy like before.⁴

When young people take part in the summer retreats, they also learn about filial piety. Most of them are moved to tears when they listen to their teachers, reflect on themselves, and feel regret for misdeeds toward their parents. Duc Cuong, a 20-year-old male student from Ho Chi Minh City who participated in the summer retreat at Hoang Phap Temple in 2014, recalls:

When I returned home at the end of the retreat, I did menial tasks like cleaning the house, sweeping the garden, washing clothes, cooking rice, and massaging my mother. Formerly I did not do this, because I thought that taking care of myself was tiring enough. All the while, my mother washed clothes for the whole family, but she did not say anything. Now that I could understand her feelings, I felt remorse, pain, and sadness.

Within a week of coming to the summer retreat, the young people make significant changes, both in their thinking and awareness, and in their behavior and daily life activities. With its spirit of loving kindness, compassion, altruism, and equanimity, Buddhism has become a spiritual support for young people in today's changing social context.

The two models of Buddhist education for children in Vietnam described here have many benefits. Thanks to these activities, most Vietnamese today are imbued with the Buddha's Dharma from a young age. Up to today, Buddhism is still the most popular religion in Vietnam, making important contributions to maintain the ethical and cultural values of the nation. The summer retreat is symbolic of engaged Buddhism, contributing to the development of society and the alleviation of human suffering.

NOTES

¹ <http://thuviengdpt.info/kim-chi-nam/tai-lieu-lap-quy/muc-dich-gdpt/>

² The oriole is a pious bird. The Buddha was an oriole in a former birth. It is said that the oriole lived in the Himalayas and its parents were blind. Because its parents were not able to find food, the oriole always looked for fresh, ripe fruits to offer to its parents. Children are called orioles to remind them that they should be filial children toward their parents.

³ "Summer Cultivation Retreat At Huyen Khong Pagoda: A Model of Buddhist Education for Youth Today," presentation by Bhikkhu Dhammavamsa, ATBU Conference in Indonesia, 2016.

⁴ Dư ợng Thi Tuyen, *Magazine of Buddhist Studies* 3(2015).

The History of Buddhist Education (Pariyatti) for Buddhist Nuns in Myanmar

Ma Vipula

In Myanmar, the subjects in the Buddhist canon are taught in accordance with the national curriculum set by the Department of Religious Affairs of the Government of Myanmar. The standard of monastic education for Buddhist nuns has improved a great deal in the last century. The main focus of their education is the Buddhist scriptures and Pāli language; no vocational subjects are taught at nunnery schools in Myanmar. In 1901, the government allowed both nuns and laypeople to sit for the scriptural examinations conducted by the state, called Pathamapyan. When the first nun passed the advanced level of the Pathamagyi with flying colors in 1915, it gave the nuns a huge boost.¹ Many others followed. Almost all of the nuns who successfully passed the Pathamapyan exams in the early part of the last century were from the nunnery schools that are scattered around the Sagaing Hills. Since then, *pariyatti*, which means scriptural learning, has been a great motivation for nuns and an increasing number of young women have joined nunnery schools in order to learn the Buddhist scriptures.

The Curriculum for Scriptural Studies.

Today, Buddhist nuns (and laypeople) can study and sit for state examinations according to the level of their learning. The curriculum for these examinations is the same for both monks and nuns. The five levels of the curriculum are:

1. Beginners' level (Mula-dan);
2. Elementary level (Pathamange-dan);
3. Intermediate level (Pathamalat-dan);
4. Advanced level (Pathamagyi-dan); and
5. Dhammacariya, which is a level designed to train Dhamma teachers.

The texts used for studies at the nunnery schools vary at each level, for instance, at the Advanced level (Pathamagyi-dan):

1. Scriptural Studies
 - a. Dhammapada Pāli and Atthakathā. It should be noted that these texts are only for nuns and laypeople, not for monks and novices who learn Vinaya texts, instead.
 - b. Jātaka Pāli and Atthakathā
2. Pāli Grammar
 - a. Kaccāyana Grammar, written by Bhikkhu Kaccāyana, a Sri Lankan monk.
 - b. Rūpasiddhi, written by Bhikkhu Buddhappiya, a Sri Lankan monk.
 - c. Thaddagyi Poke-sit, an analytical grammar written by Sayadaw Khin Gyi Pyaw, a Myanmar monk.
 - d. Alankā, a books that teaches the aesthetic aspects of a language, written by Bhikkhu Saṃgharakkhita, a Sri Lankan monk.
 - e. Abhidhannappadīpikā, a Pāli dictionary written by Bhikkhu Moggalāna, a Sri Lankan monk.
 - f. Chandodaya, a book that explains the rules of poetic writings, written by Bhikkhu Saṃgharakkhita, a Sri Lankan monk.
3. Abhidhamma
 - a. Abhidhammattha-sangaha, written by Bhikkhu Anuruddha, a Sri Lankan monk.
 - b. Abhidhammattha-vibhāvinī, written by Bhikkhu Sumangalasāmi, also known as

- Abhidhamma-sangahatīkā.
- c. Yamaka Pāli and its analytical explanations.
 - d. Pa hāna Pāli and its analytical explanations.
 - e. Dhātukathā Pāli and its analytical explanations.

Monastic Education and Method of Teaching

Monastic education for nuns normally starts at about the age of 13 or 14. The best period for learning is before the age of 25, due to the amount of memorization required. Unlike male novices, most nuns do not have much scriptural knowledge when they join a nunnery. A nun who wants to receive a proper scriptural education first needs to find and be accepted by a *pariyatti* nunnery school, and there are very few nunnery schools in the countryside compared to the large number of monasteries where boys can study the scriptures. This creates a situation in which nuns have less chance to learn the scriptures compared to male novices. Consequently, women tend to start their monastic education much later than novices.

Once admitted to a nunnery school, a nun first has to learn the rules and regulations for living in a monastic community. She also needs to learn to chant the basic prayers and *paritta* recitations. After settling into monastic life, she then joins the classes and starts to learn Pāli grammar and basic Abhidhamma.

Various methods are used to teach particular subjects and every Dhamma teacher uses the specific method that she learned in her lineage. Among them, I will present the methods used in our nunnery school to teach Pāli grammar and Abhidhamma. The texts recommended for studying Pāli language and for passing the Pathamabyan examinations are Kaccāyana Grammar and Rūpasiddhi. These texts explain the structure and usage of Pāli words, and provide the basis for Pāli comprehension in reading the texts. The knowledge in these texts helps students understand the essential features of Pāli words. Numerous books have been written to help students learn these texts, including word-to-word translations and the grammar rules described in Myanmar poetic verses. Students need to learn these verses in order to remember the grammatical rules and to become skilled in translating Pāli sentences into Myanmar language and vice versa. Once students acquire a reasonably solid knowledge of the structure of the Pāli language, students proceed to memorize the Abhidhan (dictionaries) and San so that they can compose their own Pāli writings, both in prose and in verse. After a few years of thorough practice and study, monastic students will have acquired enough skill to read the Pāli literature.

The scholastic emphasis in Myanmar Buddhism focuses strongly on the study of Abhidhamma and its twelfth-century Pāli commentary, the *Abhidhammattha-sangaha*, in both the original Pāli and the Myanmar translations. Students start by learning the basic catechetical classifications and work themselves progressively upwards. However, it is not possible to make good progress unless they have a good foundation in the Abhidhammattha-sangaha. Therefore, students learn the Abhidhammattha-sangaha by heart, and also analyse it by memory in the evenings. They spend much of the daytime memorising scriptural passages, chanting verses, and reciting the parts of the mind and body listed in the texts. However, it is probably after the advanced level of Pathamagyī that they start to reflect on the deeper meanings of concepts in the scriptures and come to appreciate the knowledge base that they have already built. When students are able to analyse Abhidhamma well, they are ready to learn more advanced texts such as Mātikā and Dhātukathā, followed by the study of Yamaka and Patthāna. The entire text of Yamaka is taught, but only the chapter on Kusala Tika in Pa hāna is to learned, because it is almost impossible to study the entire Pa hāna at this level. Previously, it was the

tradition to teach Abhidhamma texts (Mātikā, Dhātukathā, Yamaka, and Pa hāna) at night. Both teachers and students learned Abhidhamma by heart and had lessons in the dim light after dark. After analysing a certain section, students would recite it in Pāli from memory. Since these lessons used to be conducted at night, they are still called *nya-wa* or “night time lessons.” This tradition still exists, but teachers today also teach Abhidhamma during the day. We are proud to be in a country that has inherited a Buddhist tradition in which Abhidhamma is studied seriously. All the most highly recommended texts used in Myanmar today refer to the Abhidhamma in some way.

Study at the Dhammacariya Level

Dhammacariya was introduced as a degree-granting scheme in 1937 and the government began conducting the Dhammacariya examinations in 1942. Daw Hemayi from Thameikdaw Gyaung Nunnery School in Sagaing became the first nun to pass the Dhammacariya exam. She was 40 years old at the time. To obtain a Dhammacariya degree, the student has to pass examinations in all three texts: Pārājika, Sīlakkhandha, and A hasālinī. Due to the large amount of material a student has to study, she may take the exam on one of the three required texts per year or she may take the exams on all three in the same year. Only 25 percent of the students who take the Dhammacariya exam pass it; the others must retake the exam the following year.

Once a student passes the Dhammacariya exam, she is awarded the Sāsanadhaja Sri Pavara Dhammacariya title by the Government of Myanmar. A student nun is allowed to continue her studies after she completes the Dhammacariya and may take the Nikaya exams for subsequent degrees. Only a few nuns continue to take for exams after the Dhammacariya, however, because most of them are exhausted at that point. In addition, the degree allows them to teach the Dhamma officially or even to start a new nunnery school.

Although the number of nun teachers and scholars in Myanmar has increased greatly in the last century,² the top Buddhist scholars in the country are still monks. Nun students especially at the advanced level of study, still have to find monk teachers who are willing to teach and prepare them for the Dhammacariya exams under conditions that avoid any violation of the *vinaya*.

Future Possibilities for Myanmar Nuns

After independence, owing to the efforts of Bhikkhu Vicittasarabhivajsa, known as the Tipitakadhara Sayadaw, national Buddhist universities were established in Yangon and Mandalay, but they did not accept nuns as students. In 1998, International Theravāda Buddhist Missionary University was established by the government as part of a state policy to train monastic students to become international Buddhist missionaries. All lectures at the university are conducted in English, and subjects such as canonical texts, translation, Buddhist culture, meditation, and missionary work are taught in the syllabus. The university admits both monk and nun students who have passed the Dhammacariya exam or have a university degree. Laywomen with university degree may also attend the university, but some run into problems because they do not know Pāli well, whereas nuns who do not know English well face problems in classes conducted in English. That said, it is encouraging to see many nuns winning educational awards. In recent years, some of them have been employed by the government to work as full-time lecturers.

More and more Myanmar nuns also study abroad these days. In doing so, they gain valuable experience, receive a modern education, and also learn methods of disseminating the Dhamma. Nun teachers in Myanmar generally do not encourage their students to go abroad to study, however, unless

they already have a strong foundation in the study of the Pitaka.

In recent years, the Alakāra examination, organised and conducted by private non-profit Buddhist organisations, have become popular among junior monastics, both monks and nuns, under the age of 28 years. First organised in Mandalay, there are presently fourteen towns and cities where the Alakāra examinations are held. Although nuns did not participate in the early years, currently they take the Alakāra examinations in Yangon, Thaton, and Pakokku. So far, twenty nuns have received the Alakāra title by passing the exams. The system and methods used in these examinations help monastic students gain language skills, learn faster, and delve more deeply into the original Pāli texts. Those who hold an Alakāra degree tend to pass the state Pathamabyan exam with distinction and many have been successful in the Dhammacariya examination as well. For these reasons, this examination has been attracting more and more young students.

It seems to me that the educational status of nuns has been improving continuously over the last few decades and I can think of several reasons for this. First, educated women seem to be becoming more attracted to the Buddha *sāsana* and more women are joining the order of nuns in Myanmar. There are also sympathetic monk teachers who take responsibility to educate the nuns and help them become Dhamma teachers. The older generation of nun teachers has worked hard trying to improve the educational level of nuns for many decades, and due to their hard work, the general situation for Myanmar nuns is improving. Thanks to social media and wider media coverage, more and more laypeople have started to notice the importance of nuns' education in the promotion of the *sāsana* and today nunneries receive more financial support than ever from lay donors.

An active network among the nunneries and nun teachers has also been important, so that they can work together and exchange teaching methods in order to promote education for Myanmar nuns. There are many types of Buddhist nuns in Myanmar and while some are doing well, there are also those who have difficulty in attracting donors and maintaining a satisfactory standard of living in the monastery. When that is the case, these nuns do not have much time for learning and need greater support. There are also nuns who have a modern education, but do not have a traditional Pāli education. And there are others who have received a traditional Pāli education, but no modern education. It would be good if nuns received both types of knowledge. Nuns who have completed a certain level of education and received a degree should be placed in suitable positions, so that they can work for the *sāsana*. Nuns' education needs continuous support from monks and laypeople. If all of these conditions are fulfilled, Buddhism will contribute further to the peace and welfare of society in Myanmar.

NOTES

1. This nun, Ma Khemasari, was affiliated with two nunnery schools in Sagaing: Khemethaka Gyaung and Thameikdaw Gyaung. Her dual affiliation may have been due to the fact that institutional affiliations for nuns was not regulated in the early twentieth century. An elderly nun at Khemethaka Gyaung told me that Ma Khemasari lived at one nunnery and registered for the Pathamabyan at the other, where her nun teacher resided. Ma Khemasari placed first in the Pathamagyī exam and was awarded a gold medal and a stipend.

2. The four nun authors who are most prominent in the education of Myanmar nuns today are: (1) Daw Dhammacārī, the adoptive mother of Mingon Sayadaw and author of *Saccavādī*; (2) Daw Kummārī of Aye Myo Nunnery, author of *Nibbānagavesanī*; (3) Daw Vijjesī, author of *Analytical Dhammapada* and *Analytical Sangaha*; and (4) Daw Kusalavatī, author of *Theragāthā Atthakathā Nissaya*.

Bhikkhus and *bhikkhunis*, as members of the *sangha* (monastic community), are considered to be noble teachers and spiritual guides. How can they enlighten people and be respected by society? In answer to this question, the Buddha stressed the moral authority of the monastic order. The *Vinaya in Four Parts*¹ sets forth the rules of discipline for maintaining this authority. Just before he was about to pass into final *nirvāna*, the Buddha told his disciples to take the Dhamma and the *vinaya* as their teacher. In this sense, it is precept education that helps the *sangha* to develop the noble-mindedness that is required to practice Buddhism in society.

With this point in mind, this study focuses on the role of Geumgang Monastic Graduate School of Vinaya at Bongnyeong Temple (hereinafter referred to as Geumgang Yoolwon) in fostering precept education and maintaining the status of Korean *bhikkhunis*. The study has two phases. First, it sheds light on the framework of precept education for *bhikkhunis* that was forged by Bhikkhuni Myo-um (1931–2011), who established the Geumgang Monastic Graduate School of Vinaya (Geumgang Yoolwon). Second, the study looks at how Geumgang Yoolwon's education program applies modern methods of training that help students prepare for changing times. The study is intended to help validate the status of the *sangha* and nurture a *sangha* that acts in accordance with Buddhist monastic discipline – a *sangha* composed of *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* who are classic examples of *jigye-yool* (abandoning offenses) and *jakji-yool* (actively maintaining the rules of discipline).

Geumgang Yoolwon's Education System

Geumgang Yoolwon was established due to the aspiration of the great Bhikkhu Jawoon (1911–1992), who restored the institution of dual ordination for *bhikkhunis*, and the commitment of Bhikkhuni Myo-um to disseminating the precepts. On June 5, 2008, the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism enacted the Yoolwon Ordinance. This ordinance has been praised as a turning point in *vinaya* studies, which had been neglected due to a lack of sufficient institutions that offered *vinaya* education for the *sangha*, focusing instead on other practices. At this juncture, greater emphasis began to be placed on extensive *vinaya* research and, consequently, Geumgang Yoolwon gained greater importance.

In accordance with the Yoolwon Ordinance, Geumgang Yoolwon offers two programs. The first program offers a specialized curriculum that correspond to a Master's program at a graduate school. In this program, Buddhist nuns need to complete the study of the 348 *bhikkhuni* precepts and the Khandhaka of the *Vinaya in Four Parts*. They are also expected to apply the Khandhaka and the monastic regulations (*jakbeop*) contained in the *Vinaya in Four Parts*, that is, to observe the ritual acts of the *sangha* (*karman*).

The specialized curriculum takes two years to complete. During the first semester of the first year, the nuns undertake comparative research on the Vinaya Pitaka, focused on the study the Suttavibhanga, and the study of ethics, focused on the ceremonies for receiving precepts, including going for refuge, receiving the five basic precepts of a layperson, and the novice precepts for monks and nuns. During the second semester, they continue their comparative research on the Vinaya Pitaka, focused on the Khandhaka, and study the Mahāyāna Buddhist precepts, including the *bodhisattva* ordination ceremony.

During the first semester of the second year, the nuns study the *Brahmajāla Sutra* and the *sutras* that explain the Mahayana precepts. They continue their study Buddhist ethics, focused on the ceremony for receiving the *bodhisattva* precepts, the confession ceremony, and repentance. During the second semester, they study the ancient rules of Seon monasteries and the new rules of Seon monasteries formulated by the Jogye Order, with an option to study the charter and code of an order. Students also begin writing their thesis and study translation.

The second program consists of research courses, in which students gain an overall understanding of the Vinaya Pitaka and discuss modern ethical issues from the perspective of the Vinaya

Pitaka. Geumgang Yoolwon also provides courses related to monastic regulations (*jakbeop*) that are necessary for *bhikkhuni* leaders living and assuming leadership roles today. In this second program, which corresponds to a doctoral program, nuns undertake a thorough study of the Vinaya Pitaka, writings related to the precepts at the time of the early Buddhist community, and Abhidharma.

After being recognized as a monastic graduate school of *vinaya*, Geumgang Yoolwon's training courses grafted modern education methods into the curriculum to help the monastic community prepare for changing times. These reforms laid the foundation for specialized, practical training courses at monastic graduate schools. At the same time, they heightened public interest in finding solutions to diverse contemporary issues in the Vinaya Pitaka and encouraged enthusiasm for a systematic approach to studies.

Applying the Spirit of the Precepts

The monastic regulations are based on the Khandhaka,² one subject in Geumgang Yoolwon's education programs. The monastic regulations are integrated into the curriculum in several ways. First, Geumgang Yoolwon offers a special class on *sugheuisik*, the ordination ceremony, and *haenghaseubui*, which means understanding, learning, and practicing the protocols of the ceremony, designed for nuns who will become spiritual guides in the future. Every half month since it opened, Geumgang Yoolwon has regularly held the *uposatha*, a ceremony in which the *bhikkhunis* declare their purity. The ceremony reconfirms that the nuns share the same views on maintaining the precepts purely. The nuns are provided with conducive circumstances for maintaining their status as member of the *sangha* and carrying out the practices that will lead to the attainment of enlightenment.

Second, Geumgang Yoolwon provides re-education programs for nuns from across the nation to establish the spirit of precepts. These precept training programs on "the relationship between precepts and practice for enlightenment" have been held since 2013 and have helped create a positive attitude toward the precepts. Geumgang Yoolwon has taken on the role of planning and instituting specialized, systematic education programs in the Vinaya Pitaka for *bhikkhunis* from all parts of the country.

Third, recognizing the importance of having a fixed place to implement the restrictions entailed in the daily life of a nun, Geumgang Yoolwon established a Dhamma Hall of Great Peace and Light (Gyeolge Jakbeop) on May 18, 2014, in the presence of a *sangha* gathering. Establishing the *sangha* in accordance with Buddhist rites and regulations begins with conferring the full precepts by erecting a *sima* (*gyeolge*) of stone. Erecting a *sima* reinforces the concept of *sangha* and sets up the boundary of a sacred space where nuns can practice the Buddhist way.

Erecting this special space has had numerous positive effects: First, just before or after sunset, visitors to the temple may join in paying a homage to the Buddhas and *bodhisattvas*. Second, by drawing a boundary around this sacred space, the resident *sangha* can devote itself to practicing the Buddhist way in an environment that is conducive for protecting the Three Jewels. Thus, the nuns at Geumgang Yoolwon willingly keep the *bhikkhuni* precepts in mind.

Conclusion

By looking into the history of Geumgang Yoolwon, we have shed light on the role of precept education in Korea today. First, by establishing and developing Geumgang Yoolwon as a monastic training center for *bhikkhunis*, Bhikkhuni Myo-um opened a new chapter in precept education that was a milestone in modern Korean Buddhism. The center provides a conducive environment in which monastics can check their progress on the path to attaining enlightenment and reaffirm their monastic identity through precept education. Second, ever since Geumgang Yoolwon opened, it has provided a framework for elevating the status of the *bhikkhuni sangha*, with precept education focused on professionalism and practicality. By studying the Vinaya Pitaka diligently, the nuns have established the *sangha's* status as described in the Vinaya Pitaka and they are very proud of it. Through the rites of *uposatha*, the bi-monthly recitation of the monastic precepts, and *pravāraṇa*, the rite marking the end of

the rains retreat, the nuns reconsider the goals of the community that they all wish to achieve. Providing advanced precept education sets an example of *sangha* discipline that is in accordance with the monastic regulations and sets a high standard of behavior that ensures the status and continued integrity of the *bhikkhuni sangha*.

NOTES

¹ Korean: *Jaejeongsibyool*. The *Vinaya in Four Parts* explains the monastic regulations of the Dharmagupta school of *vinaya*, and is the standard text guiding monastic life in the Buddhist societies of East Asia: China, Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam.

² Khandhaka, the second book of the Vinaya Pitaka in Pāli, consists of the Mahavagga and the Chullavagga.

Bridging Scholarship and Dharma at Sakyadhita

Amy Langenberg and Vanessa R. Sasson

Vanessa: Sakyadhita is a courageous idea. It creates a space for Buddhist women to talk, negotiate, and challenge. It shines a light on injustice and it supports the commitment women are making all over the world to live Buddhist lives. Sakyadhita is also a courageous idea because it invites scholars to participate in its project. It is not an academic forum, but it *is* a forum in which academics interact with practitioners in a space of rigorous inquiry, sharing ideas, and developing possibilities together. As feminist scholars of Buddhism, it is our honor to be part of this dialogue. Our experiences with Sakyadhita have been inspirational, challenging, and have changed how we view our work.

We have, however, been debating a question that we would like to explore dialogically at this conference. Over the years, we have both wondered whether the bridge between scholars and practitioners is really being crossed at Sakyadhita. It can be a difficult divide and the bridge that spans it seems fragile and even risky at times. In this session, we would like to open a discussion with the Sakyadhita community about the role scholarship plays in this venue. What types of scholarship are present or should be present here at Sakyadhita? What does the Sakyadhita community want from professional academic scholars? Where does the distinctive discourse of the secular academy fit into the larger conversation that is Sakyadhita? We will offer some of our thoughts on these questions and then open the floor to what we hope will be a vibrant exchange.

Amy: The content of academic discourse can be quite different from that of Dharma discourse. Vanessa and I are both rooted in the intellectual traditions of the Western academy. As scholars in the humanities, we have been trained to value detailed research into particular socio-historical realities, close textual analysis, and the critical examination of culturally transmitted thought and symbol traditions (including and especially our own) over and above other intellectual values, such as the seeking of a transcendent truth or the affirmation through argumentation of any one spiritual path or doctrine.

Not all disciplines engage the theoretical and methodological frameworks just described. For instance, in the context of secular universities today, scientific disciplines often claim to discover something akin to transcendent truths that are true for all people everywhere. Analytic philosophy also seeks to make universal truth claims. The humanistic emphasis on considering the sociological, political, and historical context of truth claims, the critical examination of discourse, and the empathetic engagement with cultural difference, are not central to the sciences or to many philosophy departments. While not very well actualized, the integration of the disciplines is, however, *in theory*, a guiding principle of liberal education in American colleges and universities. That means that natural scientists ought to consider humanistic perspectives on knowledge and humanists ought to engage the principles of investigation and logical inference enshrined in the scientific method when producing new knowledge.

Liberal education in general, and the academic study of religion in particular, certainly suffers from many blind spots and inadequacies. European universities emerged out of the Church and remained deeply connected to Christianity throughout their history, so that scholarship in the field of religious studies for a long time unabashedly affirmed a Christian perspective. This led to misinformed and often racist interpretations of other religions, peoples, and cultures as a result. Western scholarship has often touted the superiority of Christianity over other forms of religion, and although these views are no longer openly accepted in most academic contexts, other forms of arrogance and other superiority claims have inevitably taken their place. Two such claims might be the view that the Western academy has a monopoly on critical thinking or that educational contexts that don't sufficiently resemble the Western academy are not valid. It also must be acknowledged that scholars in the Western academic tradition sometimes publish poorly researched, derivative work that rehearses and so keeps alive the mistaken or biased views of past (or current) scholarship.

Good academic scholarship attempts to be as objective and critically-minded as possible, and what we want to especially highlight here is that, at its best, academic scholarship is not a disinterested enterprise, nor is it undertaken solely for the purpose of professional excellence or intellectual clarity or professional survival. We believe scholarship in the academic tradition can be a political, even a

spiritual, act, because it takes established ideas and questions them, no matter where the answers might lead. We hold that efforts at academic critical inquiry, fuelled by altruistic intentions in its best moments, should not shy away from difficult or controversial questions. This freedom from the necessity to uphold the values of any particular social institution or political system is what is known in the Western academy as “academic freedom.” The tenure system is meant to protect academic freedom. The liberal arts do not thrive hidden away in an elite ivory tower (which seems to be increasingly under threat in any case). Scholarship in the liberal tradition is, or ought to be, a contributing force in the development of our collective life and our collective future. In their shared commitment to freedom of thought, the discourse of scholarship and the discourse of Dharma are similar.

In the Western academic field of Buddhist studies, many participants have pursued the goals of Dharma and scholarship simultaneously. Robert Thurman, my doctoral advisor at Columbia University, one of the early pioneers of Buddhist Studies in the United States, and incidentally one of the first Americans to be ordained as a monk in the Tibetan tradition (though he since disrobed), was always quite unabashed in his prioritization of goals: Buddhadharma comes first, the preservation of Tibetan culture comes second, academia comes third. The late Rita Gross, a pioneer of academic Buddhist feminism, was a fierce practitioner of Vajrayana Buddhism and often brought her practice into her scholarship in explicit ways. She was what I would describe as (and as she claimed herself) a Buddhist feminist theologian. That is to say, she was more interested in actualizing her feminism as a Buddhist than in mapping and critically exploring the tradition from the perspective of historical scholarship. Many of the next generations of Buddhist studies scholars in the Western academy have sought to intellectually uncouple Dharma and academic scholarship, to clearly articulate the difference between being a scholar of Buddhism and being a Buddhist. Many see this as a sign that the field has matured, intellectually. This does not mean, of course, that scholar-practitioners no longer participate in the field. Examples of scholar-practitioners who have been important and respected contributors to the academic field of Buddhist studies include Anne Klein, Carola Roloff, José Cabezón, John Powers, Bhikkhu Analayo, and Karma Lekshe Tsomo. The upcoming generation of liberally trained and educated scholars also includes scholar-practitioners such as Rongdao Lai.

An increased scrutiny of the differences between the discourse of Dharma and the discourse of Buddhist Studies in the context of the academy also has something to do with an intensifying professionalism and ever more competitive atmosphere in the academy. State legislatures are slashing funding to public education in the U.S. Private liberal arts colleges are fighting to keep their doors open. Humanities programs are shrinking and losing funding. At some institutions, such as the University of California, Berkeley, religious studies departments have been disbanded. In this pressurized environment, it is essential that scholars of Buddhism housed in religious studies departments, area studies programs, and history programs be centered in and highly conversant with the liberal arts traditions of the Western academy, not just the intellectual traditions of Buddhism. They must be able to articulate their own relevance to their colleagues, their deans, and their students. In today’s academy, scholars of Buddhism whose intellectual perspectives are limited to Buddhist perspectives may not be successful on the job market or tenure process. Some, especially those who have not yet earned tenure, may feel it best to conceal any religious commitments they may hold, even in casual workplace conversations, lest the objectivity and rigor of their scholarship and teaching come under suspicion.

What does this have to do with the particular context of Sakyadhita and its focus on the history and status of women in Buddhism? Because of the values and political dynamics of the Western academy just sketched, scholars of Buddhist Studies are often focused on goals that are distinct from and sometimes even in tension with what we understand to be the core intellectual and moral goals of Buddhist women’s scholarship and practice. For instance, while scholars of Buddhism interested in questions of gender may employ a feminist methodology and engage broad scholarly conversations about gender and religion, as Susanne Mrozik describes in her 2009 *Religion Compass* article on the ordination issue, some female monastics reject feminism as inauthentically Buddhist.¹ Other ideas being critically explored in academic scholarship about Buddhism may also be challenging to the self-understanding or intellectual commitments of some Buddhist women.

Let me take as an example the paper I gave at the 2011 Sakyadhita in Bangkok. The paper was

entitled “A Comparison of Menstrual and Birth Impurity in Brahminical Dharma Texts and Buddhist Vinaya.” In it, I made the argument that while it has been common for practitioners and scholars of Buddhism to attribute ideas of female impurity found in Indian Buddhist texts to the influence of purity-obsessed Brahmin tradition, if one compares Brahmin and Buddhist discussions of female purity from the classical period, it turns out that this attribution is not supportable. Early Brahminical legal texts: (1) attribute female impurity to the god Indra’s wrongdoing, not to the sins of women; (2) deal with female menstrual and birth impurity as temporary and washable; and (3) often declare women to be inherently pure. In Buddhist contexts, on the other hand, the impurity of women is presented as: (1) a symptom of women’s past moral errors; (2) the source of human impurity in general; and (3) a lifelong state. It seems likely, I argued, that these more severe Buddhist views of female impurity travelled the opposite direction from what is usually imagined to be the case, migrating *into* Brahminical literature *from* Buddhist sources.

Although I gave no thought to audience reception beforehand, as it turns out, the content of my paper was not really well received by some of the Buddhist women gathered that summer at Mae Chi Sansanee’s incredibly beautiful and pristine urban hermitage in Bangkok. I received some challenging questions from the floor during the question-and-answer period. Then, walking through the gathering afterwards, I overheard one lay practitioner exclaim, with what I took to be an affronted tone, “How could she argue that?!” I can see that it might be better for women in Buddhist institutions and Buddhist practice traditions if views about the polluting nature of female embodiment are not held to be intrinsic to core Buddhist teachings or if it can be argued that Buddhists who subscribed to them had interpreted Buddhism mistakenly. This is, in fact, the standard position in most academic scholarship on the topic. I, however, argued the opposite. I still believe my argument about ideas of female impurity in Indian Buddhism to be valid and have since published them.² The underlying feminist ethic I hold to in arguing this point is that one is in a more powerful and empowered position if one has access to more information. Of course, it goes without saying that my interpretation of a particular set of classical Indian Buddhist texts dating to a particular historical period may be either irrelevant to the Buddhism that many Buddhist women know, study, and practice, fundamentally flawed, or both.

I can also think of a number of examples of academic scholars producing rigorous work that is useful in direct ways for both promoting the equality of Buddhist women and supporting the Buddhist practice of women. To take just one example, a 2014 paper by Alice Collett and Bhikkhu Analayo, published in the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, analyzes the Pāli word *bhikkhave*, which appears in many canonical texts taken to record the Buddha’s sermons to his disciples.³ The authors cite the rules of Pāli grammar and adduce textual examples to argue that this term, which is the plural masculine vocative form of the word *bhikkhu* and has typically been understood to mean “O monks,” ought rather to be understood gender inclusively to mean “O monks *and* nuns.” From this new reading of the word *bhikkhave* one can infer, of course, that nuns were present and also received the Buddha’s instructions.

In sum, the discourse of academic scholarship in the West can both encourage and irritate Buddhist scholars and practitioners. Some of the core values and basic methodologies of Buddhist thought and the Western traditions of liberal scholarship are quite similar. Still, while many academic students of Buddhism are simultaneously devoted practitioners and highly accomplished professional scholars, the liberal academy’s intellectual and moral center of gravity is not the Dharma but a robust Western tradition of scholarly inquiry and critical thinking. Professional pressures on the professoriate have the potential to further distance scholarly discourse from Dharma discourse.

Vanessa: It is essential at this point to properly acknowledge Buddhism’s own robust traditions of scholasticism in order to dispel any impression we may give that the Western academy owns scholarship. We do not need to remind you that in almost every Asian Buddhist culture – premodern India, China, Tibet, and Thailand, to name a few – monastic training has included, as a central component, study and debate. Buddhism is a highly literate tradition with a vast and sophisticated textual corpus existing in multiple languages. Buddhists have researched and synthesized and interpreted and composed texts, debating one another and examining critical questions since early in the history of Buddhism, and Buddhists continue to do so today. Increasingly, Buddhist women are finding opportunities to participate in this long tradition of Buddhist scholasticism. We believe Buddhist

education shares some things in common with liberal education in the West. We also suspect, however, that there are differences traceable to the history, cultural backgrounds, and bedrock values of Buddhist institutions. We hope these differing assumptions about the nature of inquiry may be articulated during the question-and-answer time. In short, what we see is a commitment in both academic and Buddhist scholastic institutions to intellectual inquiry.

A difference between the academic and Buddhist contexts, however, is that while Buddhist students and teachers are (ideally) dedicating their intellectual inquiry to end suffering and overcome ego, academics rarely articulate their objectives in such terms. Interpersonally, professional scholars can be difficult, with egos that are fueled by academic competition and patriarchal expectations. Being a woman in the academy can be especially challenging. Although the academy no longer overtly resembles the proverbial “old boys’ club,” with many women tenured at first-rate colleges and universities or occupying important administrative positions, there are still a lot of subtle gender dynamics to contend with. These include administrators privileging male faculty in small ways while distrusting female faculty, female faculty with families being viewed as problematic while male colleagues enjoy an enhanced status when their children are born, women taking on more service work than their male colleagues but receiving no reward, male colleagues talking over women at meetings (man-spacing!), women receiving lower teaching evaluations from students on the basis of gender, and women’s research being marginalized or ignored because its subject matter is related to gender. Women in the academy might develop a rough edge, push themselves to the front of situations, form reservoirs of resentment, find themselves falling into a certain instinctive distrust of situations, or make arguments using sharper tones and harsher vocabulary than required. Women face obstacles as women in the still patriarchal environment of the Academy. Perhaps this dialogue between academic scholars and practitioners could include an awareness of these experiences.

We make these points not to invoke pity. On the contrary, we remain deeply aware of our privilege as scholar-teachers who are securely employed. A recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* found that only 17 percent of American college faculty members are employed with tenure; that 35 percent of part-time faculty live at or below the poverty line; and that 25 percent are forced to use food stamps and other kinds of social assistance.⁴ The very fact that Amy and I are employed and able to come to this conference is a sign of our abundant privilege. But the privilege goes further: we have access to libraries, teachers, colleagues, and internet in ways that scholars in other parts of the world might not be able to enjoy. We have so much, and some of it was *not* earned. Some of our privilege is the product of where and when we were born, and the kind of access we had before we even began.

Obviously, fighting patriarchy for a seat in the establishment is not just an academic problem. The very reason Sakyadhita exists is to give voice to women in Buddhist institutions and help them fight for access where access is denied. One of the reasons I am so eager to come to these meetings is because, not only do I have the opportunity to meet all of you, but I also learn more about what life is like for Buddhist women in ways that books will never teach me. I have heard stories from so many of you over the years about the challenges and obstacles women face as they try to get their own seats at the table and receive ordination where ordination is withheld. The hierarchies of Buddhist institutional life necessarily affect those who try to negotiate them.

So what happens when you place all of us together? What happens when scholars and religious leaders interact? I have spent a significant amount of time mediating interfaith dialogue over the years, often at very high levels, and I have noticed a pattern: on the first day, no one knows where to locate authority. Religious leaders are used to identifying with one kind of authoritative status, and academics are used to identifying with another. I remember once watching religious leaders introduce themselves to a group, with each one claiming they offered more free meals each week than the next. And then the academics jumped in, citing their titles in agonizing detail. It was comical to watch everyone pushing for center stage. Eventually, however, the titles and body counts do disappear and then the real work of dialogue begins.

When we raise this question of the relationship between scholars and practitioners at Sakyadhita, the issue of competing authority claims might be part of the conversation. Amy and I are in relatively

modest positions in the hierarchy of the academy since we both work at small colleges, so we claim no extraordinary authority for ourselves. Still, most academic scholars, no matter how humble, do tend to assert and defend the privilege of their hard-earned terminal degrees.

As we explore these questions, I want to go back to the source of what I think scholarship ultimately aims for. The academy does not consist only in the race for credentials and the sometimes necessary activity of posturing and competing, even if it is convenient to read the institution that way. For Amy and me, and many other scholars we are privileged to share this field with, the academy is an institution that seeks to support, develop, and encourage critical thinking about the world and the human community. Within the academy, the holy of holies is not academic convention but the classroom. It is in the classroom that we find these critical thinking skills more than anywhere else.

The classroom is, in our view, a sacred space of hospitality and generosity, where teachers attempt to engage their students in the hopes of helping them to become critical thinkers in their own right. One of my own professors was particularly effective in this regard. Professor Barry Levy was not a scholar of Buddhism, but of Rabbinic Judaism. He was an Orthodox Rabbi who wore a *kippah* (a religious head-covering) and kept the strict rules of the Sabbath every week. He was the one who taught me that the academic life is worth living and that it can be noble, because it is about learning, understanding, asking questions, and being open to answers. He taught me how to develop intellectual flexibility, how to see the limits in my own thinking, and how to attempt to transcend them. He also showed me what academic freedom looks like in action. He had a very strict boundary around his own religious practice as an Orthodox rabbi, but when it came to intellectual inquiry, I never met a better wrestler. He did not impose his thinking on mine or try to steer me in his direction. What he taught me was *how* to learn, how to stretch my mind and roam. He was, and still is, to me, the best that the academic life produces. He is what I aspire to be: someone dedicated to inquiry, critical thinking, and hospitality in the classroom. When engaged with on this level, it seems to me that the academic life and the Buddhist life have much in common. Or at least, much to talk about.

We opened this paper with a question about what the role of scholarship can or should be here at Sakyadhita, and how best to bridge scholarly and Dharma endeavors. We don't know if there is answer to the question, but we think it is worth asking, in part to articulate the issues and dialogue with each other. Perhaps the ones best suited to lead us in this discussion would be those in the audience who seem to travel both roads at once – scholar-practitioners like Karma Lekshe Tsomo, who have managed to bridge Buddhist and academic pursuits with grace and dignity.

NOTES

¹ Susanne Mrozik, "A Robed Revolution: The Contemporary Buddhist Nun's (*Bhikṣu*) Movement," *Religion Compass* 3:3(2009) 360–78.

² Amy Paris Langenberg, "Buddhist Blood Taboo: Mary Douglas, Female Impurity, and Classical Indian Buddhism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 84:1(2016) 157–91.

³ Alice Collett and Bhikkhu Anālayo, "*Bhikkhave* and *Bhikkhu* as Gender-inclusive Terminology in Early Buddhist Texts," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 21(2014) 760–97.

⁴ Kevin Birmingham, "The Great Shame of Our Profession: How the Humanities Survive on Exploitation," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 12, 2017.

Women's Empowerment and Sustainable Development Through STEM Education for Buddhist Nuns

Kat LaFever

In the summer of 2014, while conducting fieldwork at a Buddhist abbey in Kathmandu, Nepal, I became very sick twice with water-borne illnesses. I found out the hard way about the limits of Kathmandu's water treatment facilities. Access to clean water is an international or global issue, yet for me it was quite an "inner" experience, including the stark realization that nearly one million people live in Nepal's largest city without potable water, a situation exacerbated by the devastating earthquakes of 2015. The Kathmandu Valley is home to thousands of Buddhist nuns, who are key stakeholders in clean water, which involves one of our deepest religious concerns, caring for the environment. The lines between the sacred and the profane often overlap for those whose sacred vows include easing the suffering of sentient beings and non-harming the natural environment.

Buddhist nuns have taken sacred vows in part to uphold what the Dalai Lama calls secular ethics, or human values – realizing that life is precious, living in an honest and genuine way, and being in this world in ways that best support others. Leaders in sustainable development and infrastructure should possess these values. This study maintains that Buddhist nuns – equipped with human values, coupled with knowledge of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics, or the STEM fields – would be among the best possible agents of change in addressing clean water issues and other sustainable development needs worldwide. While STEM programs and initiatives are increasingly endorsed in a range of global educational contexts, this presentation focuses on supporting STEM teaching and learning initiatives among Buddhist nuns in the Himalayan region. It advocates tertiary education for Buddhist nuns, as well as P-12 STEM educational programs and curricula designed collaboratively by the nuns, to address the educational and infrastructural needs of women and girls in their monastic and local communities. This study investigates the perspectives of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama (referred to henceforth as the Dalai Lama) regarding monastic science education as well as current STEM-related educational programs available to Buddhist nuns. In light of the stark realities of global warming and climate change, as well as gender inequalities and the exploitation of the environment for the benefit of relatively few, if empowered with STEM education, what agency could Buddhist nuns advance through their humanitarian work?

Efforts by many countries, international governmental organizations, and nonprofit or non-governmental agencies working on behalf of women and girls worldwide are often guided by three core concepts: gender equality, gender equity, and women's empowerment. First, gender equality is "a human right as well as the rights, responsibilities, and opportunities that do not depend on whether an individual is born male or female."¹ Buddhists understand gender equality because the *Lotus Sutra* teaches that all living things have an inherent Buddha nature and are capable of achieving enlightenment or Buddhahood. Although gender may be regarded as irrelevant to the Dharma, understood as neither female nor male, Rita M. Gross prompts us to consider Dharma as equitably male and female.² On the importance of equality, the Dalai Lama states, "all Buddhist nuns have a unique role to play in the evolution of Buddhism where the universal principle of the equality of all human beings takes precedence."³ Further, Karma Lekshe Tsomo reminds us that gender equality requires "equal access to education, ordination, political representation, and resources."⁴ Vivian Onano, a youth activist and member of the U.N. Women Global Civil Society Advisory Group, in her address to the United Nations General Assembly on May 29, 2015, explains:

Achieving gender equality is more than 50–50 representation; it is also about recognizing and respecting women’s rights as human rights, treating women with dignity, offering them equal opportunities to participate fully in the socioeconomic and political development of their individual countries ... without access to education, it is impossible to make gender equality a reality.⁵

Second, gender equity corresponds to policies that ensure gender parity, so that compared to men, women receive an equal amount of resources, programs, and decision-making opportunities. Gender equity and equality are increasingly part of a new global ethic,⁶ yet two recent studies sponsored by the United Nations indicate chronic and persistent gender inequities in education. For example, the UN publication, *The World’s Women 2015 – At a Glance*⁷ finds that while women in many countries have surpassed men in postsecondary education enrollment, they are starkly underrepresented in graduation rates in the STEM fields.

In 2015, the Korean Women’s Development Institute (KWDI) provided a report, *A Complex Formula: Girls and Women in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics in Asia*, to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).⁸ The report finds that women are poorly represented in STEM fields and occupations in most if not all of the seven Asian countries, including Nepal, analyzed in the study.⁹ It finds that “early and targeted intervention through education can greatly facilitate girls’ and women’s increased participation in STEM fields.”¹⁰ Women with interests and proclivities in STEM fields confront explicit and implicit obstacles – including cultural norms and inequitable funding and resources that discourage women from pursuing study in STEM fields – that they would not face as monks or as nuns engaged in other studies. This study asserts that nuns should have equitable educational resources and opportunities at all levels of education in the STEM fields. Buddhist nuns should not be denied or discouraged from educational and decision making opportunities. As Tsomo states, “If Buddhist monastic institutions are to continue in the modern world, they must be based on gender equity.”¹¹

Finally, women’s empowerment corresponds to those women who help to “achieve internationally agreed goals for development and sustainability, and improve the quality of life for women, men, families and communities.”¹² Based on the *Guidelines on Women’s Empowerment for the U.N. Resident Coordinator System*,¹³ there are five components of women’s empowerment. They include empowering women by cultivating our sense of self-worth, our right to access to opportunities and resources, our right to have and determine choices for ourselves, our right to have power and control over our own lives, and our ability to effect social change and create a more just world. Empowerment, like gender equality and equity, can lead to an equitable reconfiguration of the systems and institutions that govern our lives,¹⁴ reflecting the kind of egalitarian and gender-inclusive world that many of us aspire to see.¹⁵

This presentation focuses on STEM education that prepares Buddhist nuns for leadership roles in *infrastructure* and sustainable development. Fulmer defines infrastructure as, “The physical components of interrelated systems providing commodities and services essential to enable, sustain, or enhance societal living conditions.”¹⁶ Sustainable development is “Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”¹⁷ Sustainable development includes quality of life and economic improvements through various forms of agricultural, commercial, industrial, and financial development. Sustainable development projects improve infrastructure – including electricity, communications, transportation, water, and sanitation.¹⁸ They address social and humanitarian concerns, such as housing, health, education, cultural heritage, and human rights. Currently, the greatest global sustainable development challenges include natural disaster

resiliency, energy consumption, water management, sanitation, climate change, poverty, and social exclusion.

The Dalai Lama has held a longstanding personal interest in science. Recognizing the dominance of science and technology in the modern world, he stated, “My plea is that we bring our spirituality...to bear upon...science and the directions of technology in human society. In essence, science and spirituality, though differing in their approaches, share the same end, which is the betterment of humanity.”¹⁹ The Dalai Lama regards science and religion as aspects of one reality and as sources of knowledge and well-being that disclose much about inner or human values. Science and Buddhism rely on empirical methods of critical investigation and unbiased findings derived from inference, observed reality, rational analysis, experimental repeatability, and verification.²⁰ Even the Buddha asked his followers not to blindly accept his words but to test for themselves to learn and use in their own way. In fact, the Dalai Lama famously asserted, “If science proves some belief of Buddhism wrong, then Buddhism will have to change.”²¹ The Dalai Lama believes that scientists, like monastics, have a “special responsibility, a moral responsibility” to serve the interests of humanity in the best possible ways,²² and he recognizes that religion and science can work in tandem to best serve humanity.²³

Recognizing the virtues of modern education as well as the potential of Buddhism and science to illuminate each other, the Dalai Lama has clearly conveyed his support of science education in Buddhist monastic institutions. He has provided a “vision and directive for the exiled Tibetan community in India [and the Buddhist monastic community worldwide] to engage science, and to initiate science trainings that would eventually support new learning at the frontiers of science and Buddhism.”²⁴ During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, he has forged unprecedented disciplinary and ideological common ground between Buddhism and science, Eastern and Western thought, and tradition and modernity. No other spiritual leader has advanced such a value or progressive view of science education. There is no evidence in the core teachings of Buddhism or the Dalai Lama that restricts women from studying in secular or STEM-related fields.²⁵ Moreover, there is no evidence that secular education has been detrimental to the mission of the monastic order. Indications are that the future of the sangha, if not the Tibetan people, requires leadership that actively supports advancing science education and building on the successes instituted by the Dalai Lama.

Among the five STEM-related programs that could inform the development of STEM educational programs that this study endorses, there are significant pedagogical and curricular distinctions. The surveyed programs include the Social Work and Research Centre (SWRC), often referred to as the Barefoot College; “Science Meets Dharma” (SmD); the Emory-Tibet Science Initiative (ETSI); Science for Monks; and learning opportunities offered by the Jamyang Foundation. Among the differences, some programs are teacher- or student-directed. Some feature hybrid course delivery (such as in-person and online teaching and learning). The value of experiential, immersive cross-cultural educational learning is underscored in programs involving Western instructors teaching in Buddhist institutions in Asia, or students and teachers visiting each other’s respective institutions. Some programs appear to have been designed primarily, if not exclusively, by Western science educators. Others are autonomous science education programs designed and taught by monastics. The duration of the programs vary, ranging from several days to years. Interestingly, the SWRC program is perhaps the most *unorthodox* as a non-sectarian program that adamantly rejects Western university-educated teachers and teaching strategies.²⁶ Yet, it is a significant model, considering it engages women in leadership roles in sustainable development and has received the Dalai Lama’s unequivocal endorsement. Further, statistical evidence indicates that SWRC achieved measurable success in empowering women and implementing transformative social change in Asia and Africa. Of these five programs, this study finds the SmD and ETSI models the most applicable as models for developing the Progressive programs for Buddhist nuns

in STEM fields.²⁷

From this preliminary analysis of existing STEM-related programs, five key findings emerge: (1) Although Buddhist nuns are gaining greater access to education and are earning advanced degrees, STEM education is widely unavailable; (2) STEM education needs sufficient resources for sustained programs and continual program development (e.g., not an occasional “one-off” workshop or guest speaker); (3) STEM programs should be designed by and for Buddhist nuns, key stakeholders in highly-contextualized settings; (4) Single-sex STEM education programs taught and attended exclusively by women are endorsed; and (5) The STEM programs will likely be located, at least initially, in existing schools in the largest nunneries. This study endorses developing and implementing STEM curriculum through the active and ongoing participation of all constituents, including teachers and students. Ongoing and sustainable interdisciplinary STEM programs that resist standardized “one-size-fits-all” approaches, as well as flexible and highly contextualized experiential STEM learning and teaching that accommodate the evolving needs of individual students, are encouraged.

STEM education can do much to strengthen the communities and curriculum of Buddhist monastic schools and demarginalize²⁸ Buddhist nuns as major catalysts of sociocultural change. Such education and technical expertise can produce tangible benefits, namely empowering women with the knowledge and experience to lead in sustainable development and infrastructure projects as well as increasing the participation of women in the public sphere and critical decision-making positions in local and global communities. The Dalai Lama ardently supports secular education in the monastic curriculum, and nothing in core Buddhist teachings prohibits Buddhist nuns from studying STEM education. If, as the Dalai Lama suggests, positive action requires a positive vision, supporting STEM educational opportunities for Buddhist nuns is “a wise investment of energy and resources which will pay great dividends to the society at large.”²⁹ Education will be an increasingly powerful ally of Buddhist nuns in the twenty-first century. Supporting STEM educational initiatives for Buddhist nuns, as well as cultivating nuns as humanitarian leaders practicing in the context of sustainable development projects, is a wise utilization of moral and ethical women, an untapped resource who can do much to transform the Himalayan Region and by extension the world.

It is the “twenty-first century nun” who will write the future. She seems to have taken to heart the Dalai Lama’s advice, “If you remain isolated, you will disappear.”³⁰ She increasingly merges vocational and secular life,³¹ admirably representing the *sangha*, and integrating her practice into local and global communities. She takes up questions and issues that have not been central in earlier times and thinks about them in Buddhist ways.³² She performs religious functions that for centuries have been the exclusive domain of monks. She revalorizes core Buddhist teachings through her own lived experience.³³ In the spirit of the ancient *Therigatha*, she expresses herself in multiple languages through poetry based on her own perspectives and experiences that are feminine and feminist. She rejects cultural stigmas and ideas that oppress and discriminate against women, like the notion that only men can achieve enlightenment. She counters the constraints of negative stereotypes and culturally-ingrained female passivity in cultures where women have traditionally been powerless, invisible, and voiceless. She reminds us that core Buddhist principles cannot be used to justify patriarchy and male dominance.³⁴ She increasingly supports women’s teaching and learning and is evolving new models of female monastic leadership, confirming Tsomo’s claim, “As nuns have become better educated, they have developed new attitudes towards their roles and their potential.”³⁵ She knows that she has potential and, through her own and collaborative efforts with her monastic brothers and sisters, is flexing newfound muscle, and expanding the breadth and depth of her identity and experience as a Buddhist mendicant. She is enlarging what Buddhism means to women and enriching the full humanity of women.

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Buddhist Tantric Theology? The Genealogy and Soteriology of Tārā

Bee Scherer

Theology within the Judeo-Christian, (neo-)gnostic and (neo-)pagan traditions can be seen as a feminist religious subversion of patriarchy. Theology stresses nurturing, motherhood, and wisdom; identity with creation; the body and the embodied spiritual journey; nature in female form, archetypes, and mythopoëises in aid of liberating women (and men) from patriarchal silencing, power, and oppression. Theological narratives have employed empowering female divine archetypes, including Ishtar, Isis, Gaia, Demeter, Diana, Sophia, and the virgin Mary. I argue that Tārā can provide (and is indeed already providing) such an empowering counter-patriarchal theological frame in contemporary global Buddhist (post-)modernism(s).

The Many Levels of Female Enlightened Embodiment

The Indic and Tibetan Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions approach enlightened female compassion in the form of the “Saviouress” (Tārā).¹ She first appears as an auxiliary figure to Avalokiteśvara,² who remains male gendered in South Asia and the Himalayas. In this paper, I discuss the theology (or better, *theology*)³ of Tārā in the Indic and Tibetan Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions, in particular as presented through praises and meditation texts. By doing so, some light can be shed upon key features of Buddhist Tārā praxis.

The many devotional and meditational enlightened wisdom aspects⁴ or “deities”⁵ of Indic and Tibetan Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhism can be meaningfully described according to the Tantric hermeneutical principles of outer, inner and secret meanings. The outer theological level is exoteric, samsāric, and “karmatic” in orientation; here, the goddess Tārā is the embodiment of female enlightened compassion. She rivals Avalokiteśvara⁶ in popularity in Tibetan Buddhism. Chenresig’s deeply theological conception as embodiment of (the male) *upāya-kausalya* (skilful means) tends to be set off with Tārā’s practical, interventional compassion. While both aspects are seen as liberating from *samsāra* and are also invoked in situations of samsāric perils, Tibetan devotees tend to turn to Tārā more for protection in mundane situations, in particular, the so-called eight great dangers (see below). Many Tibetan monasteries perform daily Tārā liturgies; at the heart of these *pūjās* is the repetition of a famous *stotra*, the *Praise of the Twenty-one forms of Tārā*.⁷ This ritual poem combines trans-samsāric soteriology with all-day apotropaic practice. Another layer is added to the “nirvānic” or “bodhi-oriented” soteriological theology of Tārā by the application of the important Mahāyāna polar gender imagery of wisdom (*prajñā*, female) and *upāya* (“means,” male), which function as complements in Mahāyāna concepts of enlightenment. Viewed from this perspective, Tārā becomes equated with the embodied *prajñā*. Here, the popular compassion deity Tārā is identified and succeeds the personification of the Perfection of Wisdom, Prajñāpāramitā, as the “mother of the Buddhas.” Prajñāpāramitā equates to and personifies the key Mahāyāna philosophical concept of *sūnyatā* (emptiness). The equation of Tārā and Prajñāpāramitā represents a second level of theo/a-logy and practice.

A final, tantric level of Tārā theology is formed by the overlap of the exoteric Tārā with the *dākinī* Vajrayoginī (Vajravārahī), the esoteric (and wrathful) consort of the principle tantric deity (Heruka) in the highest *yogatantra* Cakrasamvara tradition.⁸ In advanced tantric theology the *dākinī* is the soteriologically necessary giver of knowledge, powers and inspiration and embodies a complex fourfold function as firstly expression of emptiness, as the mother of all Buddhas (as does the exoteric Tārā-Prajñāpāramitā); then the mystical consort of the tantric practitioner and his *vidam* (from an androcentric perspective); further the granter of initiation; and finally as goddess of (overcoming) death.⁹ The three levels of interpretation of the female divine as Tārā – Prajñāpāramitā – Vajrayoginī (Ugra-Tāra in Sankhu, Nepal) appear also to be embodied in the Buddhist cult of the living goddess in Nepal (*kumārī*).

Devī/Durgā - Tārā

How, then, can we trace the origin of Tārā in early Medieval South Asia? It is safe to link the development of Tārā as a Buddhist goddess to the increasing popularity of Devī/Durgā cults in early Medieval South Asia. Mallar Gosh has given ample evidence for the conceptual connection of Buddhist Tārā theology to Devī *bhakti* (devotion).¹⁰ While Buddhist texts do not call Tārā a *śakti* (a manifestation of a male supreme god's power) by that very terminology, the earliest theo/allogical interpretations of Tārā testify to this very concept, identifying her with the *karunā* of Avalokiteśvara, his *śakti* in terms of medieval Hindu Devī theology; lotus-holding goddess images of that period are not unambiguously identifiable as either Devī or Tārā; in fact, Tārā's core iconography, her boon-granting gesture (*varadamudrā*) and *utpala* (blue water-lily) inherits Devī's iconography.¹¹ The rise of the Brahmanical pantheon during the Gupta period (4th c. to ca. 550 CE) appears to have led to massive adaptations of Brahmanical *bildprogramme* (iconography as visual theology) to form rival, imitative Mahāyāna pantheons in the aid of the counter-Brahmanical propagation of Buddhism.¹²

Avalokiteśvara's Compassion

There is no firm evidence for the existence of Tārā in Buddhist thought or practice prior the 5th or even 6th century CE, but by the 6th century her cult was established in eastern India as iconographic evidence from Nālandā, among other places, confirms. Tārā appears the earliest in iconography as subsidiary goddess (or maybe “hypostasis”¹³) to the right below Avalokiteśvara together in a triad with Bhrkūtī, for example, in the 6th-century CE Kānherī cave 90.¹⁴ Tārā's name suggests the meaning “star” (as in a guiding star for sailors) and “saviouress”; however, her early connection to Avalokiteśvara in conjunction with Bhrkūtī leads me to postulate a different original association: “star/pupil (of the eye).” Just as Bhrkūtī is the personification of Avalokiteśvara's brow (i.e., his analytical or “frowning” observational gaze), Tārā represents his (compassionate, tearful) “star of the eye.” I would like to corroborate this interpretation by pointing to one of the earliest textual sources for Tārā, the *Mañjusrī-mūla-kalpa* (7th to 8th c. CE), where the goddess is called *Devīmāryāvalokiteśvarakarunā*, Avalokiteśvara's compassion (*karunā*) personified. The identification of Tārā as the female, active (*devī*) compassion of Avalokiteśvara is aetiologically explained in the narratives of Tārā's birth from Avalokiteśvara's tear(s) as mentioned in Buddhaguhya's 8th-century commentary on the *Vairocana-abhisa bodhi-tantra*.¹⁵ In verse 1c, the aforementioned pre-9th-century CE *Praise of the Twenty-One Forms* refers to her with the ambiguous term *vaktrābja*.¹⁶ As rJe dGe 'dun grub pa dpal bzang po (1391–1475) explains,

[Avalokiteśvara] saw that however many migrating beings He removed from samsara, they grew no fewer, and He wept. Tara sprang from the opening filaments of His face — of an utpala (blue lotus) that grew in the water of His tears.¹⁷

Avalokiteśvara's pupil emitted Tārā, the “eye-pupil/star,” becoming the “saviouress.” Tārā's genealogical connection to Avalokiteśvara is abundantly evident in her absorption of Avalokiteśvara's function as the saviour from danger(s), in particular from the Eight Great Dangers:¹⁸ lions, elephants, fire, snakes, robbery, “violent water” (i.e., floods, drowning, shipwreck), prison, and *piśācas* (man-eating demons). In the 7th century CE, in both western and eastern Indian iconography, Avalokiteśvara is depicted as the dispeller of *astamahābhaya*s in the Deccan before Tārā takes over this role.

Transcending the Gender Binary: Princess Ye shes zla ba

While Tārā's origin as the tear-sprung *karunā* of Avalokiteśvara provides a narrative form of *sambhogakāya* theology, on the karmic-samsāric level Tārā is thought to have previously been the princess Ye shes zla ba, “moon of pristine wisdom.” Accumulating countless merit, Ye shes zla ba realised the non-substantiality of sex/gender due to the core Buddhist philosophical teaching of the ultimate absence of an essential, independent self/personhood.¹⁹

Here there is no man, there is no woman,
No self, no person, and no consciousness.
Labelling “male” or “female” has no essence,
But deceives the evil-minded world.²⁰

She consequently vowed:

There are many who desire Enlightenment in a man’s body, but none who work for the benefit of sentient beings in the body of a woman. Therefore, until samsāra is empty, I shall work for the benefit of sentient beings in a woman’s body.²¹

Indeed, in the *Mañjusrī-mūla-kaḥpa*, Tārā is explicitly called “compassion in female embodiment.”²² This point is elaborated in the 53rd chapter (added latter) testifying to key sacred sites of Tārā in the 8th to 9th centuries, as distant as Kalaśa (Kalasan, Java): “The goddess in female embodiment roams the whole world / desiring to help beings with a heart, warm-feeling with compassion.”²³

The radical theological stance on sex equality expressed in Tāranātha’s account is consistent with the layer of Mahāyāna thought that translates “soteriological inclusiveness”²⁴ of women on the Buddhist path into the advocacy of equal acceptance of female *bodhisattva*- and Buddha-hood.²⁵ The theology of Tārā hence incorporates a radical, emancipatory impulse. However, similar to the androcentric, patriarchal context, function and effect, of Guānyīn’s female embodiment in East Asia, this liberating impulse largely appears to have failed to translate into any concrete social emancipation of women. Within patriarchy, the (Jungian) archetypical female – mother, lover, muse, and goddess of death – is apparently only to be revered and exalted as “visionary, spiritual, transcendent, immanent, numinous form” and in the flesh only tolerated as “instrumentalized, subordinated woman.”²⁶

Tantric Tārā

The picture that emerges is that between the 6th and 8th centuries CE, Tārā’s cult gained significant popularity in eastern India as well as in the Deccan, spreading out as far as Indonesia (Nusantara) and Tibet. In this period, important tantric texts emerged that proved formative to Tārā’s theology: the probably 7th-century *Vairocana-abhisa bodhi-tantra*, also referred to as the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*; the probably contemporary *Mañjusrī-mūla-kaḥpa*; and, largely adapted from it, the *Tārā-mūla-kaḥpa*.²⁷

Mahāyoga tantric theology features Tārā as consort of the *dhyāni* Buddha Amoghasiddhi as early as the pre-8th-century *Guhyasamāja Tantra*. Tārā’s rise as Buddhist goddess of compassion is intrinsically linked to (proto-)Vajrayāna theology. Here, Tārā is mentioned as one of the quaternary goddesses in the *vajradhātu-mandala*, representing the wind element.²⁸

Tārā - Prajñāpāramitā

Indeed, by the 9th century CE, Tārā had become the archetypical Buddhist goddess, absorbing other female deities and Buddha forms and including them in her theology as expressions. In particular, Tārā acquired the theology of Prajñāpāramitā (perfection of wisdom) personified as the Mother of the Buddhas in the tradition of the Astāsahasrikā-Prajñāpāramitā-Sūtra (*Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Verses*). Ultimately, the perfection of wisdom is the realisation of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), which makes her “the mother, the progenitrix of the Tathāgatas, Arhats, and Samyaksambuddhas (Completely Fully Awakened Ones).”²⁹ In the *Mañjusrī-mūla-kaḥpa*, Tārā is conceptualised as the mother of enlightened wisdom personified, Mañjughosa; she soon assimilates the appellation “mother of all Buddhas.”

The Many Forms of the Goddess

The Indic Tārā *sādhana*s still extant in collections such as the *Sādhana-mālā* testify to the popularity of the goddess in a wide variety of forms. Sūryagupta formed a tradition of twenty-one Tārās, but a set

of 100 Tārās in a tradition attributed to Candragomin is also referred to in Tibetan sources. The manifold Tārās started to express female enlightened qualities within all five Buddha families and within multiple *mandala* reference frames. Accomplished female practitioners and teachers such as the famous gCod lineage holder Machig Labdron were seen as *nirmānakāyas*, or emanations of Tārā.³⁰ While some forms of Tārā that were popular in India gradually became obscure in Tibet, two forms of Tārā started to eclipse all other forms: (dark) Green Tārā (Śyāmā-) and White Tārā, the Wish-fulfilling Wheel (*cintāmanicakra* or *cittamanicakra*), whose rite is particularly practised in the Sakya and Kagyu schools, specifically for long life.³¹

Conclusions

As Stephan Beyer's foundational monograph indicates, the cult of Tārā is central to contemporary Tibetan Buddhism.³² A large number of traditional followers of Tibetan Buddhism and virtually all monastics know by heart the famous *Praise of the Twenty-one forms of Tārā*, reciting it twice, thrice, and seven times in daily liturgies (*phūjās*), often at breathtaking speed. Yet Tārā's continuing relevance is not restricted to the Tibetan inheritors of Indic Vajrayāna; her rites are also prominently present among the Sanskritic tradition of the Newars in Nepal.³³

In praise and meditation, as female enlightened compassion embodied and as the active compassion (*karunā*) of Avalokiteśvara, Tārā offers succour in all samsāric troubles; dispels outer and inner dangers; and finally, as the mother and matrix of the Buddhas, points to the ultimate experience of *śūnyatā* (emptiness). Within esoteric tantric theology, the goddess overlaps, merges with, or appears as the inspirational female wisdom forms (*yoginīs*, *dākinīs*), instrumental for highest yoga practice. Identifying with the deity at this level pushes the heteropatriarchal, male practitioner beyond the edge of gender binarism and collapses gender dualities into non-dual awareness. On every level of the practitioner's weakening dualistic perception of conventional reality, Tārā provides the female access to "metagendered" non-duality.

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2. Chin: Guānyīn or Guānshìyīn.
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4. Skt: *jñānasattva*; Tib: *ye shes sems dpa*.
5. Skt: *deva*; *i ādevatā*, Tib: *yi dam*.
6. Tib. *spyan ras gzigs* or Chenresig.
7. *Ārya-tārā-namaskāraikavimsati-stotra*.
8. Elizabeth English, *Vajrayoginī. Her Visualization, Rituals, and Forms* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2002), 25.
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12. Gosh, *Development of Buddhist Iconography*, 15–16.

13. David L. Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism: Indian Buddhists and their Tibetan Successors*. (Boston: Shambhala, 2002), 151.

14. *Ibid.*, 23.

15. T. 848. Stephen Hodge, *The Mahā-Vairocana-abbisa bodhi-tantra with Buddhaguhya's Commentary* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 108.

16. Tib: *chu skyes zhal*, “face-water-born,” i.e., tear-born or “facial lotus.” See Martin Willson, *In Praise of Tārā: Songs to the Saviouress* (London: Wisdom Publications, 1996), 123–25.

17. *Ibid.*, 125.

18. Skt: *asta-mahābhaya*, Tib: *'jigs pa chen po bryad*.

19. Skt: *pudgalanairātmya*, Tib: *bdag med gang zag med*.

20. Willson, *In Praise of Tārā*, 34.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Skt: *strīrūpadhārīnī devī karunā*.

23. Burkhard Scherer, “Gender Transformed and Meta-gendered Enlightenment. Reading Buddhist Narratives as Paradigms of Inclusiveness,” *Revista de Estudos da Religião* 6:3(2006) 65–76.

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25. Diana Paul, *Women in Buddhism. Images of the Feminine in Mahāyāna Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 169.s

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27. Susan S. Landesman, “Goddess Tārā. Silence and Secrecy on the Path to Enlightenment,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24:1(2008) 44–59.

28. Chapter 17, v. 52 of *Guhyasamāja*. Francesca Freemantle, “A Critical Study of the Guhyasamāja Tantra,” Doctoral thesis, University of London, 1971, 388.

29. *Esā hi mātā janayitrī tathāgatānām arbatā samyaksa buddhānā*.

30. Serenity Young, *Courtesans and Tantric Consorts: Sexualities in Buddhist Narrative, Iconography, and Ritual* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 157–59.

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A Contemporary Emanation of Green Tārā in Tibet

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Compassion is expressed through numerous miracles in the life story of Khandro Tāre Lhamo (1938–2002), considered by those in her homeland to be an emanation of the female *bodhisattva* Tārā. A tantric master in the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, Tāre Lhamo played a significant role in revitalizing Buddhist teachings and institutions in the region of Golok during the 1980s and 90s, alongside her husband, Namtrul Rinpoche (1944–2011). The newest biography of her, written by Khenpo Rigdzin Dargye, a cleric-scholar from her homeland of Padma County, showcases her compassionate activities early in life during her 20s and 30s, including her spontaneous ability to heal illness, her ritual capacity for extending the life of others, her deeds to ameliorate the suffering of the living and recently deceased, and her visionary talents, including sojourns to other realms and the revelation of “treasures” (*gter ma*). Akin to legends of Guanyin in China which identify her with homegrown female figures, this essay discusses a contemporary manifestation of Green Tārā in eastern Tibet and her compassionate intervention in the lives and deaths of her local community.

While other biographers identify Tāre Lhamo with the female tantric deity Vajravārāhī and the Nyingma progenitor Yeshe Tsogyal,¹ Rigdzin Dargye characterizes her first and foremost as an emanation of Green Tārā. Due to the tantric character of Tibetan Buddhism, it has been more common to associate realized Tibetan women with the *dākinī*, a class of female deity often coupled with a male counterpart, since at least the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as for example with Sönam Paldren and Chökyi Drönma, both identified as emanations of Vajravārāhī.² By characterizing Tāre Lhamo as an emanation of Tārā, Rigdzin Dargye stakes out a place for her activities as a stand-alone heroine, prior to a consort relationship with Namtrul Rinpoche and their extensive teachings and travels together later in life during her 40s and 50s. Indeed, the bulk of this new biography of Tāre Lhamo takes place in her homeland during the years leading up to and including the Cultural Revolution, after the imprisonment and death of her first husband in the late 1950s and before she inaugurated a courtship and correspondence with Namtrul Rinpoche in 1978. During this period, although born the daughter of a prominent religious leader, Apang Terchen (1895–1945), she was consigned to manual labor and lived in a black yak-hair tent as an ordinary nomad alongside other families in her homeland of Markhok in Padma County of Qinghai Province.

This new (and as yet unpublished) biography localizes the *bodhisattva* Tārā to the grasslands of Golok and highlights the personal nature of Tāre Lhamo’s compassionate activities in addressing the needs of Tibetans in her homeland. Its opening lines identifies Tāre Lhamo as the mind emanation of Green Tārā, and for this reason I refer to it as *The Emanation of Green Tārā*.³ Its author Rigdzin Dargye is a member of Tāre Lhamo’s own clan, the Pongyul, and a cleric-scholar from Tsimda Monastery founded by her father, so he had unique access to local knowledge and sources for her early life not found in the official biography published in 1997 by Nyenlung Monastery in Serta County of Sichuan Province.⁴ As the female bodhisattva of compassion, Tārā provides a salient model for Tāre Lhamo’s early life as her deeds center on “the miraculous power to be able to deliver devotees from all forms of physical danger” with Green Tārā specifically connected to protection.⁵ Well-known legends surrounding Tārā emphasize her vow to take female form in all her manifestations,⁶ and perhaps for this reason Tāre Lhamo was named after her.⁷ Whereas Green Tārā is renowned for protecting from the eight kinds of fear (elephants, lions, snakes, bandits, captors, demons, ghosts, fire, and drowning), Tāre Lhamo is presented as mitigating the hazards of nomadic life, such as safeguarding families and livestock from hailstorms, and intervening in the suffering of locals through healings, rituals for the dead, and visionary sojourns to other realms.

The Emanation of Green Tārā is organized thematically around specific aspects of her compassionate activity. The focus remains on her youth, primarily her 20s and 30s, with a handful of episodes from childhood and a short summary of her later life traveling and teaching with Namtrul Rinpoche. There are eleven sections, listed in an outline.⁸ These are:

1. The Manner of Her Birth as Protector of Living Beings Extolled in Faultless Prophecies
2. The Manner of Giving Rise to Conviction among the Faithful by Remembering Past Lives
3. The Manner of Merging Minds [with the Guru] and Relying on Qualified Spiritual Guides
4. The Manner of Gaining Mastery over the Sky Repository of Profound Treasures
5. The Manner in Actuality, Visions and Dreams of Her Encounters with Yidams and Supreme Deities and Her Journeys to Pure and Impure Realms
6. The Manner in which She Supported the Lives of the Unbiased Holders of the Teachings and Cleared Away Obstacles to Their Activities
7. The Manner of Her Engagement in Meditation Practice and Maturation of Myriad Beings through the Dharma
8. The Manner in which She Displayed Outwardly Her Signs of Accomplishment and Accepted Fortunate Ones [as Disciples]
9. The Manner in which She Guided Disciples through Her Unobstructed Clairvoyance
10. The Manner in which She Assisted the Deceased with Omniscient Wisdom
11. The Manner in which She Dissolved Her Physical Form into Dharmadhātu

As the list above indicates, *The Emanation of Green Tārā* elucidates multiple facets of her life with an emphasis on Tāre Lhamo's visionary and miraculous activities in her homeland.⁹ Below I discuss just a few such episodes from Sections 5, 7, 8, and 10 in order to exemplify the range of her deeds on behalf of the living and recently deceased.

There are several passages in which Tāre Lhamo's identification with Tārā comes to the fore. Let me begin with the most dramatic episode in *The Emanation of Green Tārā*, from Section 8, which occurred in the midst of what must have been a struggle session:

During the period of the Cultural Revolution, one day while being beaten, her body struck an iron stove, which was red with the fire's heat. [The Supreme Khandro] maintained compassion at the forefront of her mind, such that great suffering did not affect her. She prayed to the bodhisattva Tārā, reciting the ten-syllable mantra, which came forth as a self-arising image, tinged in green. Someone named Tsaza Oncang from the Pongyul clan witnessed this in person. It was further confirmed by Lama Thöpa and explained that many others encountered [this story].¹⁰

This is a harrowing episode in which Tāre Lhamo invokes Tārā's compassion. Reciting her ten-syllable mantra, *Om Tāre Tuttāre Ture Svāhā*, she calls on Tārā and, as a result, not only is she spared any suffering, a "self-arisen" image of Tārā's mantra miraculously appears on the stove. An oral account of this episode, recounted by an elderly woman living at Tsimda Monastery, extolled Tāre Lhamo's compassion, testifying that she reflected on the far greater suffering of beings in the hell realms and, for that reason, did not have a scar despite being burned.

Rigdzin Dargye further associates Tāre Lhamo with Tārā in an account of her ongoing religious practice during this period, presumably in secret, and her compassionate activities while consigned to the ordinary work of a nomad. In a brief account in Section 7, he refers to her as the "goddess Tāre"

(note the play on her name) in the form of a milkmaid, dung collector, herder, and woodcutter, portraying her in “the mode of being various manifestations of the twenty-one Tārās” and being “no different from Green Tārā as the emanation basis for all of them.”¹¹ Tārā’s manifestation as a herder, etc. is reminiscent of Chinese localizations of Guanyin as a fisherwoman and other female forms, yet placed in the context of the twenty-one Tārās so prominent in Tibetan liturgy.¹² This provides an interpretive framework for Tāre Lhamo’s manifestation during the years leading up to and including the Cultural Revolution. Recall that this was a time when religious practice was forbidden and high-ranking Buddhist masters were imprisoned or consigned to hard labor. As such, *The Emanation of Green Tārā* invokes the beneficent presence of Tārā in Tāre Lhamo’s own person, appearing in the guise of an *ordinary* nomad while engaged in *extraordinary* activities, often miraculous in nature.

What is striking about Rigdzin Dargye’s account is the emphasis on the everyday and the local. Unlike other biographies of Tāre Lhamo, each episode gives the specific location in and around Markhok – not just the general region but the valley and site within the valley – plus the names of other households with whom she was encamped, the specific individual(s) that she helped on the occasion, and the person who narrated the tale. This means that far more ordinary people, especially women, feature in this biography than others which follow the more typical convention of highlighting well-known religious figures, usually male. There are a number of interactions with her mother Damtsik Drolma recorded, both in childhood and in visionary encounters after she died. For example, once when Tāre Lhamo was severely ill and dejected, in a dream her mother appeared in the form of a little bird to console her, stating: “You are not supposed to die. In the future, you will no doubt be of benefit to the teachings and beings.”¹³

In addition, ordinary women and men (as well as their livestock) serve as the benefactors of her myriad interventions in Section 8, such as when a companion Oncang lost her herd of cattle, which returned only after Tāre Lhamo recited prayers; or when Pakyung was spared injury from an attack by a wild yak due to an amulet gifted by Tāre Lhamo; or when the Nordzin, Tharwa, and Pegyal families, encamped together to gather medicinal herbs in the Tsikyī Ridar valley, were protected by Tāre Lhamo from a hailstorm that would have ravaged their tents and livestock.¹⁴ As another localizing element, Rigdzin Dargye emphasizes her visionary interactions with deceased family members in Section 5 – with her father whom she visits in Padmasambhava’s pure land of Zangdok Palri, with her mother and one of her brothers who take their seat on thrones in one of its palaces, and with her only son (after his early death) whom she tenderly embraces in the land of *kebecarṣ* (another type of female tantric deity).¹⁵

The Emanation of Green Tārā also contains vivid accounts of her ritual interventions to help the recently deceased from her local community, especially in Section 10. Tāre Lhamo’s clairvoyance is emphasized in these accounts, such that on several occasions she reveals to her companions that someone has died, well before family members appear to request rituals on their behalf, such as burnt offerings (*gsur*), the transference of consciousness (*pho ba*), and/or dedications and offerings (*bsngo rten*). In one episode, she is shown rescuing two women from hell, who died mysteriously in close proximity with one claiming innocence for her crime, and in another she mitigates the suffering of a disciple who killed a monk, reducing his time subjected to the torments of hell from many long eons to only one or two short ones!

On other occasions, apparitions appear to her to request her aid. For example, once Gyamza, the mother of Ngolo, appeared in a tattered sheep-skin coat wailing at her misfortune. Gyamza told Tāre Lhamo about offerings of several bags of tea and a turquoise jewel, meant for her and other tantric masters, which were never delivered. Once these items were located and given as offerings, it is understood that the woman’s merit and fortune improved as she traversed the intermediate realm (*bar do*) between death and rebirth. Note that identifying the whereabouts of forgotten wealth and

prescribing merit-making rituals to living family members on behalf of the deceased are routinely found in stories of Tibetan revenants or *delogs* (*'das log*). While revenants testify to their death, journey through the various realms of Buddhist cosmology, and return to life in order to share tales from the deceased, Tāre Lhamo did not require the passage through death in order to activate her visionary propensities. Instead, her journeys to alternate realms, both pure and impure, usually occurred during dreams in which she communicated with the deceased, ameliorated their suffering, and brought back news to the living.

Overall, in this new biography, Rigdzin Dargye presents Tāre Lhamo as engaged in compassionate activity to rescue neighboring nomads from calamity, whether in this life or the next, invoking of Green Tārā as a model for her early life. Time and again, her visionary experiences, miracles, and ritual interventions provided solace to her immediate community during the troubled times in which she came of age. The localizing nature of this biography is distinct from others, due to the close affiliation of its author Rigdzin Dargye, who (as mentioned) is part of her own clan and a cleric affiliated with her father's monastery.¹⁶ Given the more typical association of realized Tibetan women with female tantric deities, Tāre Lhamo's identity as an emanation of Green Tārā may reflect a literary strategy on the part of Rigdzin Dargye to craft her as a stand-alone protagonist and highlight her early activities in her homeland. Additionally, it suggests an important local understanding of how Tārā has continued to appear in the midst of calamity and to compassionately intervene in the lives of ordinary Tibetans.

NOTES

¹ There are two other biographies of Tāre Lhamo: *Spiraling Vine of Faith* (*Dad pa'i 'kbri shing*) by Padma Ösal Thaye and *Jewel Lantern of Blessings* (*Byin rlabs nor bu'i gron me*) by Abu Karlo. The former is combined with the biography of Namtrul Rinpoche into a single volume in Pad ma 'od gsal mtha' yas, *Skyabs rje nam sprul rin po che 'jigs med phun tshogs dang mkha' 'gro tā re lha mo mchog gi rnam thar rig 'dzin mkha' 'gro dgyes pa'i mchod sprin* (Chengdu: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1997). The latter is a condensed biography that interweaves their live stories together into a cohesive work in A bu dkar lo, *Gter ston grub pa'i dbang phyug gzhi chen nam sprul dang mkha' 'gro tā re bde chen lha mo zung gi mdzad rnam nyer bsdus byin rlabs nor bu'i gron me* (Xining: Mtsho sngon nang bstan rtsom sgrig khang, 2001). These other identifications are mentioned in Rigdzin Dargye's account, but not threaded through the narrative in the same way as Tāre Lhamo's identification as an emanation of Green Tārā. I make a comparison between these three sources for her life in "Gendered Hagiography in Tibet: Comparing Clerical Representations of the Female Visionary, Khandro Tāre Lhamo" in *Buddhist Feminism(s) and Femininities* edited by Karma Lekshe Tsomo (forthcoming).

² These figures have been studied respectively by Susan Bessenger, *Echoes of Enlightenment: The Life and Legacy of the Tibetan Saint Sonam Peldren* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) and Hildegard Diemberger, *When a Woman Becomes a Religious Dynasty: The Samding Dorje Phagmo of Tibet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

³ I received a copy of this biography from Khenpo Rigdzin Dargye in the summer of 2014. It remains, to my knowledge, an unpublished work. The opening line begins: *rje btsun sgröl ma ljang mo'i thugs keyi rnam sprul*. In citing this work in the notes to follow, I use EGT as an abbreviation.

⁴ This work, *Spiraling Vine of Faith* (mentioned in note 1), and other materials published by Nyenlung, the monastery Tāre Lhamo and Namtrul Rinpoche rebuilt in his homeland, are discussed at length

in my book, *Love Letters from Golok: A Tantric Couple in Modern Tibet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

⁵ Robert Buswell and Donald Lopez, *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014): 895.

⁶ See Stephan Beyer, *The Cult of Tārā: Magic and Ritual in Tibet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973): 64–5.

⁷ Her name means “the goddess Tārā” using the vocative form found in her mantra, *Om Tāre Tuttāre Ture Svāhā*.

⁸ EGT 1.13–24.

⁹ There may be one more act to come, given the Tibetan proclivity for arranging the Buddha’s life into twelve acts, Rigdzin Dargye mentioned that he still hopes to add material about Tāre Lhamo’s rebirth before publishing this work, so there may be another section to complete his account of her life story.

¹⁰ EGT 9.10–14.

¹¹ EGT 8.5-9 and 15-17. The Tibetan reads: *sgrol ma nyer cig po’ang sprul gzhi gcig gis sprul ba sna tshogs yin tshul* and *thams cad sprul gzhi sgrol ma ljang mo gcig las med pa*.

¹² On praises to the twenty-one Tārās, see Martin Wilson, *In Praise of Tārā: Songs to the Savioress* (Boston: Wisdom Publication, 1986).

¹³ The Tibetan reads: *khyod da dung ‘chi mi nyan/ ma ‘ongs par bstan ‘gro’i don ‘grub pa la the tshom med*. This episode from Section 10 in EGT: 21.8–15.

¹⁴ These episodes are from Section 8 in EGT 13.19–25, 10.38–43, and 9.35–41 respectively.

¹⁵ Visions involving family members can be found in EGT: 4.15–5.43. Tāre Lhamo’s only child was conceived during her brief first marriage with Mingyur Dorje (1934–59), the son of her root teacher, Dzongter Kunzang Nyima (1904–58).

¹⁶ Padma Ösal Thaye, the author of her 1997 biography, serves as a cleric-scholar affiliated with Dungkar Gompa in Dartsang and government official, working in the Bureau of the Culture, History, Education and Health at the county seat in Serta. Abu Karlo, the author of their 2001 joint biography, which synthesizes material from Padma Ösal Thaye’s more robust version, is a Buddhist cleric and Tibetan doctor based at the Golok Tibetan Medical Hospital in Tawu, the prefecture capital of Golok.

A *dakini* (Tib: *mkeba'gro ma*), usually translated as “sky goer” or “sky dancer,” is one of the most remarkable manifestations of enlightenment in female form. According to Tibetan Buddhism, every woman is a *dakini* and has the potential to realize the profound wisdom encoded in her nature. Whether she is able to perceive herself as a *dakini* or not, the follower of Tantric path should see her in her divine light. In the highest practice of Vajrayāna, male practitioners rely on women as consorts in order to realize the bliss of awareness that reveals emptiness. The role of the woman is essential for the achievement of the ultimate goal, as stated in the *Chandamaharosana tantra*: “Buddhahood is obtained from bliss, and apart from women there will not be bliss.”¹

One of the Tantric root downfalls is to belittle, deride, ridicule, or consider as inferior a specific woman, women in general, or a female Buddha-figure. When we voice low opinions or contempt directly to a woman, with the intention to deride womanhood, and she understands what we say, we complete this root downfall.² Also, unlike in the Theravāda tradition and the Sūtrayāna stream of Mahāyana, according to Vajrayāna beliefs women have the same potential as men to achieve the ultimate goal. The *Anutara yoga Tantra* states that the man and the woman are Buddhas since the beginning.³

Such statements place the spiritual capacity of a woman on a completely different basis, compared to early Buddhism. Moreover, according to the precious master Padmasambhava, the woman even has a greater potential, set initially in her nature: “Bodies of men and women are equally suited (as temples of the *yidam*), but if a woman has strong aspiration her potential (for existential realisation) is greater.”⁴ This is related primarily to the female inherent sensitivity, receptivity and power of intuition. From the perspective of spiritual realization in Vajrayāna, if a woman has a strong aspiration and karmic prerequisite to overcome the instinctive need for procreation, her capacity for higher awareness is greater than that of a man. But even if she does choose to be a mother, she still has a chance to “use her karmic situation to attain the aim of Buddhahood.” Many contemporary Vajrayāna teachers stand behind such statements, including H. H. the 14th Dalai Lama, who states that women have greater potential, more sensitivity about others’ well-being, and greater compassion than men.⁵ This raises the question of how such philosophical concepts are reflected in the social realities of life for Buddhist women, since in the religious life and particularly in ritual practice, their role remains cloaked in mystery.

The woman as a consort or spiritual partner in Tibetan Buddhist practice has various symbolic names, one of which is *dakini*. She is also called *yogini* (Sanskrit: *yoginī*; Tibetan: *mal 'byor ma*), “seal,” (*mudrā*; *phyag rgya*), “transcendent wisdom” (*prajñā*; *shes rab*), “awareness” (*vidyā*; *rig pa*), “goddess of awareness” (*vidyādevī*; *rigpa'i lha mo*), and “awareness holder” (*vidyādhari*; *rig 'dzin ma*). In the Tibetan tantric tradition, the consort is also called “secret mother” or *sangyum* (*gsang yum*), a term often used for wives of senior teachers or treasure revealers (*gter ston*).

In many cases, the role of the consort is to remove obstacles related to the health, the spiritual practice and Dharma activities of her partner. Traditionally it is believed that consorts are called “secret” not because they are hidden, but because they help to uncover a deep wisdom that is sacred.⁶ As Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche says, “The secret is what creates the sacred.”⁷ Vajrayāna itself is called Secret Mantra Diamond Vehicle (*gsang sngags rdo rje theg pa*) because of the esoteric nature of its teachings. They are secret in the sense that their importance is not available for those who have not received proper instructions. Vajrayāna traditionally consider as secret not because there is something that has to be hidden but to protect the practitioner from confusion that the ego can cause in regard to the spiritual practice. The secret aspect of *sangyum* concerns the esoteric nature of the practices in which she may participate, and also her often hidden or secondary role in society.

In Vajrayāna, the female principle is embodied in four types of women known as the four *mudras* (*phyag rgya bzhi*). In the system of *Yoga Tantra*, they are accepted as tools that “seal” the enlightened body, speech, mind, and qualities of the Buddhist meditational deities and help for the realization of their potential. They are described as “lovers” with whom the yogi must perform an unconditional union. The four *mudras* are *karmamudra* (*las kyi phyag rgya*), *jnanamudra* (*ye shes phyag rgya*), *dharmamudra* (*chos kyi phyag rgya*) and *mahamudra* (*phyag rgya chen po*). *Karmamudra* is a real woman associated with the practice of Tantric union. *Jnanamudra* is an imaginary woman related to the practice of meditation. *Dharmamudra* is connected with the elimination of mental delusions and the realization of wisdom. *Mahamudra* is the female principle, beyond duality, which is the epitome of emptiness. Her essence is described as eternal and indestructible and, like the entire cosmos, it is not characterized by independent existence but with the interdependent arising of all phenomena and the all-encompassing space. In Vajrayana, the necessity to distinguish these female aspects is eliminated in the higher stages of spiritual realization, where the various *mudras* are accepted in their real nature, emptiness. The state in which all forms are perceived as manifestations of emptiness is described as *mahamudra* or “the great symbol.” In Buddhism, the whole world is seen as a symbol that becomes a reality and a vivid image of things as they are.

In regard to their role as consorts, women in Vajrayāna are divided into different categories. One of the popular classifications of spiritual wives is based on the erotic tradition in India and in particular on the texts *Ratirabasya* of Kokkoka (11th or 12th century) and Ananga Ranga of Kalyanamalla (16th century). These erotic manuals, as well as the later *Samvarodaya Tantra*, describe four types of *dakini* in their role as consorts. They have the symbolic names: lotus, picture, conch, and elephant, depending on their female characteristics. These four types of *dakinis* are associated with four of the five wisdom *dakinis* (*ye shes mkha 'gro lnga*), which in turn are associated with the five spiritual wives of Padmasambhava, known in Tibetan Buddhism as five *mudras* (*phyag rgya ma lnga*). According to his biography, he has no less than seventy thousand realized women, five of which are venerated as the physical emanation of Vajravarahi and “have access to his heart.”⁸

The five wives of Padmasambhava, which are some of his closest disciples with whom he practiced in various stages of his life, include two major ones – Mandarava and Yeshe – Tsogyal and three minor ones – Shakya Devi, Kalasidhi, and Tashi Khyidren. They are worshiped as incarnations of *dakinis* in a human form.

Mandarava was the Indian wife of Padmasambhava and was revered as a reincarnation of White Tārā and the body of Vajravarahi. Her life is described in several texts: the *terma* of Orgyen Lingpa from the 14th century, the *terma* of Taksham Samten Lingpa from the 17th century,⁹ and *The Precious Lapis Lazuli Stone* of Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye from the 19th century. Mandarava and Padmasambhava achieved the most important realization of their common practice in Maratika Cave located in Khotang District in Nepal. There, they accomplished the *siddhis* of immortal life (*'chi med tshe'i dngos grub*) by performing the practice of Amitayus, the Buddha of Boundless Life.

Since Mandarava is recognized to be a fully enlightened being, she manifests in three bodies of the Buddha (*trikāya*, *sku gsum*). In her *dharmakaya* (*chos sku*) form, she can be seen as a *dakini* with the typical characteristics – standing naked in a dancing posture, decorated with distinctive ornaments. Her body is white in color, sometimes with a pink hue. In her right hand she holds an arrow (*mda 'dar*), which symbolizes the life force. It is decorated with ribbons of five colors that are associated with the balance of the five elements, and a mirror that reflects the true nature of the mind, or emptiness (*stong pa nyid*). In her left hand, she holds a long-life vase (*bum pa*) and trident (*kha twang ga*), symbolizing the male aspect of her enlightened nature. In her *sambhogakaya* (*longs sku*) form, the Indian princess appears in the character of Mahāyāna goddesses – a sitting posture, colorful dress, rich ornaments, and a crown on her head. The attributes in her hands are the same, except that next to the long-life vase in her left hand the

trident is missing and her arrow has only white ribbons and no mirror. In this hypostasis she can be seen also in union with Padmasambhava. There are also images of the princess in the *nirmanakaya* (*sprul sku*) form, with clothes and jewelry typical of the Tibetan iconographic tradition.

Mandarava manifests herself in different forms not only in the minds of practitioners or in the works of Tibetan artists, but also in time and space, even years and centuries after her death. As a true *bodhisattva*, she continues to be reborn in order to help beings to achieve the freedom of supreme wisdom. As stated in her biography: “My appearances are like space, utterly without coming, going, birth, death, eternalism, or nihilism. Likewise, until this realm of *samsara* is emptied, my miraculous emanations will surpass imagination.”¹⁰

Yeshe Tsogyal was the Tibetan wife of Padmasambhava, who is revered as the incarnation of Green Tārā and the *dakini* Vajravarahi’s speech. She is renowned in the history of Tibet as one of twenty-five closest disciples of the Precious Teacher and the most important woman who has attained the highest spiritual realization. The Tibetan princes specialized in the practice of Vajrakilaya and experienced visions of the deity and gained accomplishment.

As a manifestation of the *dharmakaya*, she may take the form of Samantabhadri or Prajnaparamita. As a manifestation of the *sambhogakaya*, she appears as Vajrayogini, Vajravarahi, Dakini Dhatvishvari, or Tara. She is also inseparable from the special aspect of Vajrayogini called Yumka Dechen Gyalmo and is the central deity in the *nirmanakaya* form in her practice. In the Pure realms, she appears as the goddess of knowledge, Saraswati.

In Tibetan iconography, Yeshe Tsogyal is depicted in the form of the three bodies of the Buddha. As the essence of the *dharmakaya*, she can be seen as a *dakini* with the typical visual characteristics. Most often, she is depicted with a naked white or red body in a standing position. In her right hand she usually holds a curved knife (*tri guḡ*), but sometimes a hand-drum (*da ma ru, mḡa chung*) or *vajra* (*rdo rje*). In her left hand most often she holds a skull cup (*kapala, thod pa*) filled with nectar. In her *sambhogakaya* form, the Tibetan princess can be seen in different positions, with different attributes. The most typical image of her is sitting in a royal posture, wearing a colorful dress, and adorned with jewels and a crown, similar to the Mahāyāna goddesses. In her hands, she holds the *vajra* and *kapala*.

There are also images of Yeshe Tsogyal in various yogic postures. In one of them she is standing with her left foot on a lotus flower, while her right knee is on the ground. In her right hand she holds a curved knife and in the left, a *kapala*. As a *sambhogakaya* aspect of the Buddha, the Tibetan wife of Padmasambhava is often displayed in union with the Precious Teacher. With her right arm, she embraces Guru Rinpoche and with the left hand she holds a *kapala*. Sometimes in this position they touch their lips and the detailed treatment of this element enhances the multi-layered symbolism of their union, which traditionally is perceived as identical to that of the primordial Buddhas Samantabhadra and Samantabhadri. The absolute nature of their union is known as *Kunzang Pema Yab-yum* (*keun bzang padma yab yum*) or “the All-Good Guru-Consort Lotus Born.”¹¹ It refers to the indivisibility of the manifestations, presented by the male principle “guru” or “father” (*yab*) and the emptiness as a direct expression of the fundamental nature of reality, related to the female principle “consort” or “mother” (*yum*).

In Tibetan iconography, there are also images of Yeshe Tsogyal in *nirmanakaya* form. They present the princess with the characteristics of a female figure that, despite the glowing aura around her head and body and her stylized features, indicates the living presence of a human being. She can be seen dressed in traditional Tibetan costumes, holding a *kapala* in her right hand.

Remarkable depictions of the life story of Yeshe Tsogyal can be seen in the murals of Guru Rinpoche temple at Namdroling Monastery in Southern India. In one of them, her *nirmanakaya* form is in a prayer posture, invoking her precious master, who is portrayed in the space above her. In another

mural, she is shown with her followers, holding attributes for bestowing empowerment: a ritual vase in her right hand and a bell (*dril bu*) in the left. Such images of a woman who gives initiation to her disciples filled with devotion are extremely rare throughout Buddhist art. They represent a visual example of the Vajrayāna concept of the equal spiritual potential of men and women. Like Mandarava, Yeshe Tsogyal continues her enlightened activities through her numerous reincarnations, which have appeared until the present day.¹²

Other fascinating female images in the Buddhist sacred art of Tibet are related to the tradition of Indian and Tibetan *mahasiddhas* (*grub thob chen po*). Four of these are women: Manibhadra, Lakshmincara, Mekhala, and Kanakhala. They achieved remarkable realization of different Dharma practices. There are also *yoginis* who appear in the biography of some *mahasiddhas* as their wives and teachers. Some of them remain anonymous in Buddhist history; others appear in the iconography of male figures, sharing their spiritual realization. These include the consorts of Dobmipa, Ghantapa, Babhaha, Carbaripa, Saraha, Tilopa, Naropa, Marpa, Maitripa, and others.

In the Buddhist Tantric tradition, *dakinis* are worshiped as human emanations of wisdom that keep the key to the esoteric knowledge of Vajrayāna and reveal the path to complete freedom. *Dakinis* as consorts play an important role in Tantric Buddhism. They provide essential support for the spiritual realization of male practitioners and also act as respected teachers. According to Vajrayāna doctrine, they participate equally in the religious life, which is not always applied in the social aspect of life. These emanations of primordial wisdom as spiritual companions remain among of the most striking female images in the sacred art of Tibet.

NOTES

¹ *Chandamaharosana tantra* from the Derge edition of the Tibetan canon (sde dge 431, fol. 319a 1–2).

² The root tantric vows are to refrain from fourteen actions which, if committed with the four binding factors (*kun dkeris bzhi*), constitute a root downfall (*sngags keyi rtsa ltung*) and precipitate a loss of the tantric vows.

http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/practice_material/vows/general_tantra/common_root_tantric_pledges.html

³ Keith Dowman, *Sky Dancer: The Secret Life & Songs of the Lady Yeshe Tsogyel* (Ithaca, NY: New York: 1996), 262.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <http://www.inc.com/julie-strickland/quote-of-the-day-dalai-lama-women-make-compassionate-leaders.html>

⁶ Some of the Tibetan Buddhist teachers keep their wives secretly and there is also a term “secret wife in a hidden form” (*gsang yum sbas tshul*).

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Dzongsar-Jamyang-Khyentse/158696727489150>

⁸ Dowman 1996: 265.

⁹ Translated into English in 1998 with the title *The Lives and Liberation of Princess Mandarava*.

¹⁰ Lama Chonam and Sangye Khandro, trans., *The Lives and Liberation of Princess Mandarava: The Indian Consort of Padmasambhava* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2015), 192. In Tibetan history there are several reincarnations of Mandarava: the *yogini* Mirukyi Gyenchen, “Adorned with Human Bone Ornaments” at the time of Marpa (1012–1097); Risulkyi Naljorma during the time of Nyen Lotsawa (11th century); and Drubpey Gyalmo during the time of Rechungpa (1083/4–1161). Chushingi Nyemachen, the spiritual consort of Maitripa (1007–1078?), and Niguma, consort of Naropa from 10th century.

¹¹ Gyalwa Changchub and Namkhai Nyingpo (trans. Padmakara Translation Group), *Lady of the Lotus-Born: The Life and Enlightenment of Yeshe Tsogyal* (Boston and London: Shambhala Publications, 2002), 131.

¹² The most famous among them are Machig Labdron (1055-1145) and Jomo Menmo (1248–1283).

Becoming Vajrayogini: Self-esteem Without Self in Buddhist Narratives

Pema Khandro

The first ever collection of Tibetan language female biographies was published in 2013, at the female monastic college at Larung Gar, Five Sciences Academy in Tibet. It spans fifteen volumes and includes over two hundred stories of Buddhist women from India and Tibet. In the introduction to the work, the editors state,

For without dharma holders, who will have fortitude? The Buddhists who put Dharma into practice... should not hold the view that men are superior and women are inferior. Now and future generations should look up to these great women and embrace them as models. Then, whatever activities they do, whether dharmic or worldly, they will never be discouraged. They will be brave. They will endure. In this state they will accomplish their vows.¹

These editors' stated intention was to present narratives of female adepts in order to overcome one of the great obstacles to the movement to empower Buddhist women – the internalization of misogynistic views. The notion of utilizing narratives to overcome such views relies upon an implicit assumption that positive identity development is possible in a Buddhist framework. The notion often remains implicit due to the challenge posed by translating concepts of identity without contradicting Buddhism's fundamental tenet of no-self. However, there is great potential benefit in explicitly doing so. This paper seeks to document this phenomenon. It begins by outlining the distinctions between Buddhist notions of no-self and psychological identity development. It then suggests evidence from Buddhist women's narratives of distinct modalities of personal identity development. By taking this perspective, the notion of personal identity development in Buddhism is highlighted and the potential for narratives to be understood as instruments of such development is explored.

While the Buddhist doctrine of no-self and the Western paradigms of “self-esteem” are often assumed to be contradictory principles, they refer to two different issues. This is in part due to the ambiguity in the English use of the term “self,” which at times is used to identify an ontological essence, at other times is used as a linguistic signifier for persons, and at other times refers to psychological identity.

The first section of this paper offers examples of these distinct conventions being acknowledged in Buddhist narrative literature. The second section presents examples of personal identity development in both historical and contemporary narratives. These examples point out frameworks for a non-essential but robust identity – self-esteem without self.

Non-Essential Ontological Identity

The primary challenge to a consideration of Buddhist women's self-esteem in narrative is its implications for the doctrine of no-self. Early Buddhist thought distinguished itself within its religious milieu through the doctrine of no-self;² that is to say, all of the components of a person are impermanent.³ From this juxtaposition between the essential self and lack of essential self, early Buddhism drew its power.⁴

No-self theory acknowledges that a person might seem to be a substantial entity, but is not. This is explained according to the concept of aggregates. A self is assumed to exist independently due to an assumption that there is some essence that links together component parts such as heart, head, nervous system, and so on. However, without any component parts, such as a body or mental formations, there

would be no being and no being-ness would remain.

The issue of no-self is an ontological issue. Ontology is a philosophical framework that addresses ultimate questions of being, existence, and reality. On the ultimate level, Buddhism asserts that persons have no essence, that is, they have no fixed, permanent substrata. Thus, ontologically speaking, persons are said to lack an essential “self,” soul, or atman that defines them in a continuous and definite manner.

Personhood

A distinct issue from ontology is personhood. The English term “self” is sometimes used to indicate ontological issues, but at other times it is used as a linguistic signifier to refer to persons. The phenomena of personhood was not denied by no-self theory.

A classic explanation is found in an early Buddhist narrative dating back to the first century. In this story, an explicit distinction is made between negating persons and negating ontological selfhood. This narrative takes place in the *Milindapañha*, the *Questions to King Milinda*. In this narrative, King Milinda attempts to make sense of the no-self doctrine. The monk, Nagāseṇa, explains no-self by likening the person to a chariot. One thinks of a “chariot,” when the term actually refers to a particular assemblage of parts. There is no chariot other than those parts functioning together in a particular relationship to the other parts.⁵ However there is still function, utility, and benefit to identifying the chariot as a chariot. Likewise, a person is merely an assemblage of parts that are temporarily organized together.⁶ Like the chariot, personhood was not denied by the no-self doctrine; the doctrine simply qualifies how it is that persons or chariots exist. On an ultimate level, these phenomena are empty; on the experiential or conventional level, they take place, albeit impermanently.

Persons exist as a consequence of changing conditions. A classic challenge this poses is the appearance of continuity. For example, without the continuity of personhood, how would the Buddha’s teaching on *karma* make sense, such that the person who creates *karma* reaps the fruit of those deeds in the future? The *Milindapañha* illustrates the answer through the example of a flame, which appears to be one continuous flame throughout the night, even though it actually is not.⁷ Similarly, although there is no ontological self-entity that is journeying from infancy to adulthood, there is a sense of being a continuous person because of the succession of one’s previous parts causing subsequent parts to arise. In addition to this sense of continuous personhood is the matter of personal identity.

Personal Identity

Although, ontologically speaking, persons have no essence, personal identity is not denied in Buddhist philosophies. Personal identity is different from ontological identity. The question of ontological identity is “What am I?”⁸ whereas personal identity focuses on the set of meanings one attaches to one’s personhood.⁹ These meanings may be related to social groups, roles, characteristics, and even activities. Personal identity is subject to change and development, of course.

In Buddhist narratives, personal identity includes myriad factors related to which persons make sense of themselves in the context of their world, such as gender identity, philosophical identity, clan, and sectarian identity. Here, we explore instances of women’s personal identity modalities in a number of different Tibetan Buddhist narratives about and by women.

The distinctions between no-self and personal identity have been described above. Examples of personal identity development in Buddhist narratives follow. These examples are found in both historical and contemporary narrative texts.

Participating in Historical Identity

Personal identity in Buddhist narratives draws heavily on historical precedents. This is evidenced in hagiographical literature through the practice of identifying past incarnations of a protagonist. In Tibetan life stories, these past lives may occupy an extensive portion of the life story, preceding conception in the present rebirth. For example, in the stories of Mandarava¹⁰ and Yeshe Tsogyal¹¹ both first identified with descriptions of their past lives before conception and birth. Among these historical identities, both figures are identified as Gangadevi, the compiler of Buddha Shakyamuni's teachings. Another example is Mingyur Paldrön. Her life story begins by recounting her past lives as Nangsa Obum, Machik Labdrön, and Yeshe Tsogyal.¹² The notion that one's life precedes conception expresses two themes. The first is the doctrine of rebirth. The second is the practice of personal identity constructed from past historical models. This practice is parallel to the Tibetan framework of the *tulku*,¹³ another prime example of this practice. However, these types of past life narratives may also be deployed in the case of ordinary practitioners. These instances portray a personal identity construed from the past.

Historical identity practice is also evidenced within narratives as the process through which female adepts come to understand themselves as first-person subjects. Through participation in archetypes of identity derived from past Tibetan heroines, female protagonists make sense of themselves in their present historical contexts. One example arises in response to gendered identity, where women see themselves as inferior based on the internalization of misogynistic notions of the inferior female birth.¹⁴ In one biography, a female adept named Sera Khandro described herself as having an "inferior female body." But this is followed by a visionary encounter. Therein, she is told that her body is not inferior, because she is none other than Yeshe Tsogyal, who was told by Padmasambhava himself that her body was indeed good. In this passage from the life story of Yeshe Tsogyal, Padmasambhava declares that, if it is graced with enlightened intent (Sanskrit: *bodhicitta*), a woman's body is a supreme form.¹⁵ Thus, through historical precedents, Sara Khandro is guided to revise her perceived personal identity from a negative one to a positive one.

In the same narrative, Sera Khandro expresses her sense of gendered inferiority to a *lama*. He encourages her by telling her that in the era of Buddha Kasyapa she was a female adept named Sky Lamp.¹⁶ This example demonstrates an intersection between historical memory and narrative identity. The protagonist is being taught to articulate her own personal identity through re-living archetypes of cultural meaning provided in previous Tibetan narratives.

This process is also found in contemporary narratives by Buddhist women who mention historic narratives that inform their personal identity. In her autobiography, Jan Willis writes about her experience of reading the story of Tibetan Yogi, Milarepa: "And on page after page of this poignant narrative, I see myself reflected..."¹⁷ Both Milarepa and Willis struggle with tendencies to anger, but then become Buddhists, developing compassion instead. In this example, Willis looks to the biography of a male saint to develop her own identity.

In her groundbreaking collection of women's liberation stories in English, Tsultrim Allione describes women's stories as a medium for female readers to articulate their own struggles: "The strength and determination of these women working within a patriarchal system can help us to articulate our own struggles, to see some choices and possibilities that are open to us. We can evaluate the psychology and philosophy of these teachings and their effectiveness for women." In this example, narratives of female protagonists are posited as a support for making sense of Buddhist women's own identity.

Thus, through Buddhist narratives and within them, personal identity is developed through

repetition or participation in models from the past. Prior legends serve as a basis for identity construction because they act as templates. These templates are used to “shape the world into a recognizable and meaningful reality.”¹⁸ This may be a central practice for Buddhists precisely because Buddhist culture is non-individualistic. In a culture where personhood is not individualist, past exemplars provide a set of paradigms through which identity can be articulated in a framework that transcends the present individual.¹⁹ In other words, if non-individualist modalities of personhood are composed of recycled narratives, then the role of narratives becomes central to identity construction. They convey the templates through which personal identities are given meaning.

Sacred Identity

At higher states of development, personal identity is articulated in terms of symbols of ultimate reality. This is apparent when female adepts are described as *buddhas*, *bodhisattvas*, and *dakinis*. For example, early in her narrative, Yeshe Tsogyal’s teacher Padmasambhava addresses her as Samantabhadri, the female buddha of ultimate reality. This occurs in tandem with her initiation into *tantra*.²⁰ Towards the end of her life, Yeshe Tsogyal assumes the identity of Samantabhadri as her own first-person identity narrative. In one of her last teachings, she proclaims, “Your so-called ‘lady,’ wild and fit for any deed, to whom so many things befell is now no more! The wench who could not even keep her man is now the queen of Dharmakaya, Samantabhadri!”²¹ This is not only a matter of personal identity development, but also a narrative framework for equating particular adepts with the three bodies of a *buddha*.²² Likewise, throughout her life story, Tsogyal refers to herself as “I, the woman Tsogyal,” but in her final testament, she identifies herself as, “I, the Buddha Yeshe Tsogyal.”²³ Thus, as her attainments become manifest, she journeys from the identity of an ordinary individual to identifying as a female buddha herself. A reader might assume from a traditional perspective that this is because, ontologically speaking, Yeshe Tsogyal was in fact a *buddha* herself and not an ordinary person. However, ontologically speaking, if Yeshe Tsogyal is characterized by no-self, what takes place is something distinct from ontology. Her identity, that is, the meanings she identifies with, changes throughout her life. This is a key ingredient of personal identity development – a change in meanings in making sense of oneself and one’s world.

A contemporary example of this modality of personal identity practice can be found in a twentieth-century American narrative: Rita Gross’s description of Vajrayogini meditation practice. In this practice, one identifies with Vajrayogini through ritual and contemplative methodologies. Gross describes the effect of this practice:

Here was an authentic lineage of oral transmission introducing me to myself and to the world as the body and mind of Vajrayogini-this incredibly powerful, magnetizing red woman dancing on a corpse, sun, and lotus seat, naked, sixteen, wearing out the samskaric (“habitual intellectual patterns”) of egoistic grasping and fixation as a garland of fifty-one heads, holding in her two hands the hooked-knife and kapala (skullcap) of blood-amrita, (“liquor of deathlessness”) etc. But I have never met anyone else like her and, if I do not forget, she is my body and mind, and the body and mind of the phenomenal world.²⁴

Gross describes her personal identity development in such a way that she comes to see her body and mind as Vajrayogini. In this narrative, personal identity is again articulated in terms of a Buddhist “deity.” This example is an expression of generation-stage meditation practice that has been deployed within the context of a self-reflective essay that narrates her journey into Buddhism.

Names as Transformation of Identity

One of the major conventions in Buddhist narrative to mark identity development is the use of new names and titles. A change of names often occurs with initiations, but it is notable that this also may occur through transformative life events. For example, the narrative of Jomo Menmo initially identifies her with the name given by her parents, Pema Tsokyi. But after receiving visionary initiation by an enlightened female figure, she becomes changed. She speaks about Buddhism constantly and the local people rename her Jomo Menmo, “demon-possessed lady.” She is remembered by this name thereafter.²⁵ The change in name signifies who Menmo is in the aftermath of transformative life events.

A contemporary example is found in the twentieth-century narrative of Diki Tsering, mother of the 14th Dalai Lama. She writes,

I was named Sonam Tsomo. My birth name belongs to another life. Most people know me as Diki Tsering, but I was not born Diki Tsering. Ever since I went to live in Lhasa, I tried to become Diki Tsering, with all the social forms and graces that go with that name. Because of the responsibilities I owed toward my new position in life, I gradually eased out of being Sonam Tsomo, the simple girl with her simple life and the ordinary ambition of being a good housewife and mother. I feel very tender toward the young girl that I have forced myself to forget.²⁶

In this passage, Tsering describes a change in personal identity that is facilitated by her new name. By releasing her former name she expresses acceptance of her new status as the mother of the highest reincarnate lama. The change in her circumstances, which catalyzes a change in her name, signifies a distinct feature in identity development. Significantly, her personal identity is constructed interdependently with others. Buddhist identity development is relational in character.

Other identity practices are featured in Buddhist narratives. For example, clan, family, and sectarian identity are typical practices of personal identity in Tibetan hagiographies. Another interesting paradigm of identity development is contained in prophecies of future lives of protagonists who see themselves not only in historical terms but also in the context of the future unfolding of their lineage and their country. Numerous other themes of personal identity practices warrant attention in future research.

Conclusion: Expanding Narrative Horizons

How could these instances of personal identity development take place without a self on which to base such esteem? The development of personal identity may be an implicit process that is necessary for no-self to be realized. Compulsive reification of a self occurs, in part, due to a lack of understanding the meaning and make-up of personhood and its purpose. In the women’s narratives featured here, psychological identity is developed in a robust, whole, and healthy way. However, the formation of psychological identity is not operating from the assumption of an underlying fixed self. If the basis for personal identity is not the self, what is? In place of an ontological self, other elements become frameworks of meaning for historical figures, narrative templates for personhood, names and titles, and shifting life circumstances. This personal identity is a kind of self-esteem without self, one that is infused with cultural, religious, historical, and personal meanings.

NOTES

¹ In English, the title is, “Garland of White Lotus: The Liberation Stories of Great Female Lives in Tibet.” In Tibetan, it is “*Phags bod kyi skyes chen m dg gi rnm par thar ba pd+m dkar po'i phreng b pod dang po bz'bugs so.*” (Lhasa: Bla rung arya tare'i dpe tshogs rtsom sgrig khang, 2013).

² See a discussion of the no-self concept in Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravada Buddhism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 35.

³ Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, 2007), 18.

⁴ Matthew Kapstein, “Collins, Parfit, and the Problem of Personal Identity in Two Philosophical Traditions,” *Philosophy East and West* 36:3(1986) 294.

⁵ Matthew Kapstein, *Reason's Traces; Identity and Interpretation in Indian and Tibetan Buddhist Thought* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001), 78.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy*, 63.

⁸ See Olson's more elaborate treatment of the conflation and distinction of these concepts of personal identity. Eric T. Olson, "Personal Identity," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/identity-personal/>.

⁹ Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stets, *Identity Theory* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2009).

¹⁰ Samten Lingpa (trans. Lama Chonam and Sangye Khandro), *The Lives and Liberation of Princess Mandarava, The Indian Consort of Padmasambhava* (Wisdom Publications: Boston, 1998), 70.

¹¹ Gyalwa Changchub, Namkhai Nyingpo, and Samten Lingpa (Padmakara Translation Committee, trans.), *Lady of the Lotus Born: The Life and Enlightenment of Yeshe Tsogyal*. (Shambhala: Boston & London, 2002), 5.

¹² Mingyur Paldron (*rje btsun mi 'gyur dpal sgron*) (1699-1769) was the daughter of Terdak Lingpa, a major teacher and treasure revealer of the seventeenth century. After his death, she was also a lineage holder.

¹³ Tib: *sprul sku*.

¹⁴ This notion derives from suggestions in early Buddhist literature that to become fully enlightened one need to be born as a male.

¹⁵ Changchub, et al., *Lady of the Lotus Born*, 91.

¹⁶ Tib: *nam mkha' sgron ma*.

¹⁷ Jan Willis, *Dreaming Me; From Baptist to Buddhist, One Woman's Spiritual Journey* (Riverhead Books: New York, 2001), 165.

¹⁸ Francisca Cho Bantly, "Archetypes of Selves: A Study of the Chinese Mytho-Historical Consciousness," *Myth and Method*, ed. Laurie L. Patton, Wendy Doniger (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1996), 180.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Chungchub, et al., *Lady of the Lotus Born*, 25.

²¹ Ibid., 199.

²² In Taksham Nuden Dorje's biography, Yeshe Tsogyal is the emanation body, Vajrayogini is the enjoyment body, and Samantabhadri is the body of ultimate reality. Ibid., 1.

²³ Ibid., 201.

²⁴ Rita M. Gross, "I Will Never Forget to Visualize That Vajrayoginī Is My Body and Mind," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 3:1(1987) 77–89.

²⁵ Dudjom Rinpoche, Gyurme Dorje and Matthew Kapstein, trans., *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism: Its Fundamentals and History* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1991).

²⁶ Diki Tsering, *Dalai Lama, My Son: A Mother's Story* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 16.

From Ancient East to Modern West: Cognitive Dissonance in Self-Concept within Cross-Cultural Buddhist Feminism

Brianna Kathryn Morseth

On February 14, 2016, tucked away in the Californian mountains of Tecolote Canyon, the Santa Barbara Zen Center held its first priest ordination, bestowed upon Carol Lee Abrahamson. While every effort was made to preserve the traditional forms of the Shukke Tokudo ordination ceremony, what transpired that Valentine's Day undoubtedly differed significantly from Japanese customs of priest ordination, even more so from ordination ceremonies of Chinese and Taiwanese nuns or their Indian Buddhist predecessors. There were some major departures from tradition, including the attire of attendees (for example, Carol's teenage grandsons wore eyeliner, their hair dyed myriad unnatural colors), and some minor departures, such as the use of English translations of the *Heart of Wisdom Sutra* in place of the Sino-Japanese. The need to adapt to the unique circumstances of different places and times is not unique to American Buddhism. Indeed, radical transformations have also occurred between Indian, Chinese, and Japanese ordination customs as well as the status of women in Buddhism. The present analysis will explore the evolution of Buddhist feminism across cultural and temporal contexts from the perspective of cognitive dissonance theory and cultural psychology.

The cultural-psychological background for the development of the first order of Buddhist nuns is an essential consideration for any analysis of Buddhist feminism. At the time of the Buddha, women were commonly relegated to three roles: wife, mother, or prostitute. A virtuous woman was defined in terms of her wifehood, making the position of a nun tenuous. Because of this under-articulated, even paradoxical social position between female virtue and Buddhist asceticism, Buddhist laity found it challenging to understand or accept Buddhist nuns.¹ Further, because nuns renounced their positions, not only as wives but also as mothers, many assumed that society would crumble as women left their familial responsibilities, suggesting that a woman's nature and social position necessitated exclusion from roles outside of the home. The reasons for the Buddha's initial hesitance around women's ordination may thus have less to do with women in and of themselves and more to do with cultural norms and the psychological condition of society. A woman who left behind her husband and children was likely viewed as self-serving and neglectful of her duties, which were overwhelmingly those of a mother and wife, relative to a man whose duties were less socially bound. Nuns' decisions to lead a life of celibacy and religious renunciation inverted the gender-stereotypes of their cultural milieu, as they chose not to center their lives on the needs of their, but instead on pursuing the path to enlightenment.² This detachment from normative social custom, in light of the relationally-oriented mode of most women, made Buddhist nuns a psychological anomaly.

Reconciling the identity of unattached nuns with those of socially obligated mother and wife proved to be a difficult task for the laity. Psychologists have called the state resulting from such efforts "cognitive dissonance," a sense of inner conflict from holding inconsistent views, in contrast to "cognitive consonance," a state in which one's views are consistent.³ Adding to this dissonance is the fact that many women served as prostitutes, having a sexual identity that completely contradicted that of a celibate nun. For instance, take the radical shift in identities undergone by women in the *Therīgāthā*, a collection of poems by early Buddhist nuns. In the case of the nun Vimala, a former prostitute not only became a nun but also attained states of enlightenment, implying spiritual purity, which was bound to upset the status quo. Understandably, laypeople had a difficult time psychologically reconciling the commonplace wifely, motherly, and sexual identities of women with the renunciatory identity of a nun, giving rise to overwhelming cognitive dissonance.

To overcome such cognitive dissonance, people must rationalize or otherwise reconcile their

conflicting views. In the case of culturally ingrained views, one means of reducing dissonance involves adapting one's beliefs. For instance, if a belief system proposes that all people are inherently good, yet youth are observed to act aggressively, then to arrive at greater consonance, people may modify the belief system. In this instance, in order to reconcile these conflicting pieces of knowledge, it may be proposed people only reach inherent goodness upon maturity or by redefining goodness to include youthful aggressiveness.⁴ By re-interpreting contradictory beliefs (e.g., Buddhist teachings suggesting female inferiority alongside cases of women attaining enlightenment), Buddhist women have been able to overcome the cognitive dissonance that arises from the inconsistencies between beliefs held by different cultural (e.g., Asian vs. Western) and temporal (e.g., contemporary vs. traditional) contexts.

One means of reducing cognitive dissonance between contemporary views on the equality of genders and traditional views that women are inferior to men is by examining the additional rules for Buddhist nuns in light of their psychological context. While it may initially seem that ancient and modern inequalities between monks and nuns reflect gender-discrimination, many monastic rules were created with the express purpose to protect rather than restrict the nuns. For instance, the *sanghadisesa* rules for nuns in the Pali Vinaya stipulate that a nun must not travel alone based on previous occurrences of sexual assault inflicted upon solitary nuns. Such rules arose out of very specific incidents, which accounts for the abundant number of them. Women were at increased risk of sexual assault with few resources for material or psychological support, making it necessary to implement safeguards in the form of rules.⁵ While modern views, especially within the feminist movement in the West, would consider the additional rules imposed upon nuns to be sexist, the motivating factors behind what may otherwise superficially seem like arbitrary rules (e.g., not crossing a river alone) were actually quite practical when considered in context. Additionally, nuns were forbidden to hold particular roles, which may initially seem restrictive until considering which roles these were: wife, domestic worker, or anything resembling these positions.⁶ Arguably, these rules were established not as a means of oppression, but of psychological liberation from institutionalized patterns of inequality. In the testimony of the nun Mutta⁷ in the *Therigatha*, becoming a nun provided freedom from the gender delineated roles of housekeeper and wife. The overwhelmingly patriarchal environment, in which women were expected to conform to the social roles of wife and mother, meant that those who became nuns encountered immense resistance from their families.⁸ Yet even in the face of such adversity, thousands renounced the life of householders and became nuns, attesting to the freedom offered by the renunciant path as well as the determination and perseverance of these women.

As a clear testament to the ability to reconcile conflicting views and thus decrease cognitive dissonance around the status of Buddhist women and nuns, take the example offered in the opening paragraph to this paper. While Carol's ordination through the Santa Barbara Zen Center may not perfectly resemble the most ancient of Buddhist women's ordination customs, her ceremony and training reflect some of the adaptations made by Buddhist women across times and places. In conformity with ancient custom, Carol's head was shaved and her preceptor Koan Sensei bestowed the robes and bowls upon her. However, in departure from tradition, yet keeping with Western modernity, several attendees appeared in punk-rock attire and translations of the *Heart Sutra* were recited in a distinctly English-language style. Moreover, the meal that followed the ordination ceremony resembled a contemporary American potluck, with guests each contributing a dish, drinking soda, and eating off of paper plates. With changing cultural and temporal contexts, arguably it is necessary to allow for modifications to standard protocol in the spirit of inclusivity. Carol's was certainly not the first ordination ceremony to do so. Given that in Carol's tradition (i.e., Japanese Soto Zen), monastics of either gender are not required to be celibate or leave their families, the invitation of her children and grandchildren to witness and celebrate her ordination was perfectly acceptable, even encouraged, while

in other cultural and temporal contexts this may not have been the case. This mixture of adaptability and traditionalism is a common theme among American converts seeking to adapt the Buddhist teachings to modern contexts without diluting their essence in an effort to better preserve the tradition in modern times.

Given more recent involvement of Western women in Buddhism, there has been both unavoidable cultural clash and re-emergence of cognitive dissonance with regard to different viewpoints from the contemporary feminist movement and conservative Buddhism, but also numerous avenues for constructive cross-cultural exchange and dialogue. Many modern scholars are increasingly of a “West saves East” mentality, applying similar separations on the basis of race, class, and gender that are often found in American feminism to their critique of Asian Buddhism.⁹ The tendency in recent times has been to advance a moralistic brand of Western feminism critical of traditional Buddhist institutions as “monolithically oppressive to women.”¹⁰ While it is true that Buddhist nuns face significantly more obstacles, even for those rules that do carry obvious connotations of gender inequality, it is still essential to consider the context for their establishment.

For instance, as alluded to earlier, nuns were required to bow at the feet of monks, but monks were not expected to bow at the feet of nuns. From a Western cultural perspective, bowing at someone’s feet may seem to be a sign of inferiority and self-deprecation, states that an individualistic psychology tends to avoid so as to decrease the cognitive dissonance arising from the feminist perspective that women should not have to be submissive to men. Yet in other cultures and time periods, bowing at a person’s feet was not considered demeaning or lacking in dignity, but rather, a demonstration of humility and respect that was highly valued and regarded as a positive indicator of character, regardless of gender.¹¹ Rather than being outright dismissed, these customs need to be reevaluated in order to allow all cultural perspectives a voice in contemporary discussions. By considering the different cultural and psychological contexts for gender inequities, Western and Asian women can engage in more fruitful dialogue around Buddhist feminism.

The conflict between such viewpoints likely arises from psychological differences in Asian and Western cultural values. The tendency in Western culture is to focus on individual goals and the cultivation of a “unique” identity, in contrast to the Asian cultural perception of identity tied to family and community, not to a sense of individual uniqueness.¹² In many non-Western cultures, people view themselves as interdependent members of groups, emphasizing the fundamental relatedness of people.¹³ Research in psychology has shown there is a decreased tendency to view oneself as an independent agent among members of non-Western cultures.¹⁴ This is in contrast to Western cultures, in which individuals seek to maintain their individuality and independence from others by expressing and even exaggerating their uniqueness.¹⁵ In one Western nun and Tibetan Buddhist convert’s view, “A Western woman who cares about what others think about her is not going to become a Buddhist nun. A woman who becomes a Buddhist nun is more likely to be self-sufficient and self-motivated.”¹⁶ She notes that while these qualities may be valuable, they can be carried to an extreme, setting up challenges for highly individualistic women living with others in a monastic community.

Cognitive dissonance theory would suggest that Western women may prefer to maintain their individualistic mindset over conforming to the more collectivist mindset of the culture from which their tradition, monastic or lay, originates. This can be seen as a strategy to decrease dissonance arising from the conflicting views that (1) women must sacrifice their independence to the collective (e.g., the *sangha*) and (2) women must assert their independence to be taken seriously in Western society. Women in other religious traditions have been shown to resolve the incongruent identities they face on the basis of gender/sexuality and faith by altering their religious beliefs.¹⁷ As such, Buddhist women in the West may be less inclined to fully adopt the teaching of *anatta*, that there is no independently existing self, due to

the cultural influences of Western individualism. They may be more conscious of gender-identity than Buddhist women in other cultures. As a Western woman ordaining in an Asian religious tradition, one must seek cognitive consonance by reconciling the identity of one's culture of origin with that of one's religious affiliation, much like Carol has done.

Western Buddhist nuns have the potential to play a critical role in the simultaneous preservation and adaptation of female monasticism in the modern era. These women can serve as cultural bridges between East and West, assisting in the translation from one set of cultural concepts and norms to another and helping Westerners recognize their own cultural preconceptions.¹⁸ In light of the uniquely independent notions of selfhood held by many Western women, Buddhist concepts that are not culturally-bound must be distinguished from their traditional contexts and recalibrated to fit with already constructed Western systems of cultural identity.¹⁹ At the same time, acknowledging and respecting the origins of such concepts, namely that they have inextricable ties to traditional contexts despite being able to transcend them and enter other cultural and temporal contexts, is critical to reconciling cognitive dissonance and promoting fruitful cultural exchange among Buddhist nuns and women in general.

In conclusion, in an increasingly globalized Buddhist paradigm, cross-cultural interaction between nuns and laywomen of various backgrounds is growing. Buddhist women and nuns across cultures have much to learn from each other with regard to cultural differences, adaptations, and reformations of ordination and monastic customs. Their continued dialogue in what amounts to an increasingly feminist context may very well entail abandoning certain practices or observations in favor of a more equal and gender inclusive approach. The Buddha's purported statement that the holy life would last only 500 years is overturned by the very fact that a strong female monastic lineage continues to this day, well over 2,500 years after the initial establishment of the nun's order. Perhaps his statement is a reflection of what *could have* resulted had Buddhism *not* adapted to the multitude of cultural contexts through which it was transmitted over the years. The ability of the Buddhism to flexibly yield to adaptation while nonetheless preserving its underlying traditions is what has kept the nun's lineage (whether full ordination or partial) alive despite the turmoil and criticism it has endured. Ultimately, while traversing diverse cultural contexts, the lineage of Buddhist nuns has not withered, but has been strengthened through effective resolution of cognitive dissonance, cross-cultural exchange, and context-appropriate reformation, maintaining the core essence of determination that the first Buddhist nuns embodied.

NOTES

¹ Alice Collett, *Women in Early Indian Buddhism: Comparative Textual Studies* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013), 86.

² Kathryn R. Blackstone, *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha: Struggle for Liberation in the Therigatha* (Abingdon, Oxon, U.K. and New York: Routledge, 2013), 117

³ Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, vol. 2 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), 1.

⁴ Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, 23

⁵ Karma Lekshe Tsomo, "Is the Bhiksuni Vinaya Sexist?" *Buddhist Women and Social Justice: Ideals, Challenges, and Achievements*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004), 61.

- ⁶ Collett, *Women in Early Indian Buddhism*, 90.
- ⁷ Thanissaro, *Therigatha* 1.11.
- ⁸ Blackstone, *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha*, 48.
- ⁹ Caren I. Ohlson, “Resistance without Borders: An Exploration of Buddhist Nuns across Cultures,” *Buddhist Women Across Cultures: Realizations*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004), 234.
- ¹⁰ Sara Shneiderman, “Appropriate Treasure? Reflections on Women, Buddhism and Cross-cultural Exchange,” *Buddhist Women Across Cultures: Realizations*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), 222.
- ¹¹ Tsomo “Is the Bhiksuni Vinaya Sexist?” 50.
- ¹² Ohlson, “Is the Bhiksuni Vinaya Sexist?” 248.
- ¹³ Hazel R. Markus and Shinobu Kitayama, “Culture and the Self: Implications for Cognition, Emotion, and Motivation,” *Psychological Review* 98:2(1991): 224.
- ¹⁴ Yoshihisa Kashima, et al., “Culture, Gender, and Self: A Perspective from Individualism-Collectivism Research,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 69:5(1995): 925.
- ¹⁵ Markus and Kitayama, “Culture and the Self,” 226.
- ¹⁶ Thubten Chodron, “Western Buddhist Nuns: A New Phenomenon in an Ancient Tradition,” *Women’s Buddhism, Buddhism’s Women: Tradition, Revision, Renewal*, ed. Ellison B Findly (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 82.
- ¹⁷ Kimberly A. Mahaffy, “Cognitive Dissonance and its Resolution: A Study of Lesbian Christians,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 35:4(1996): 392.
- ¹⁸ Chodron, “Western Buddhist Nuns,” 92.
- ¹⁹ Schneiderman, “Appropriate Treasure?” 226–27.

Gender Equality in the Buddha's Sangha: Contradictions between Practice and Theory

Reena Tuladhar

Buddhism is widely known throughout the world as a religion of peace and kindness. Unfortunately, it is less known as a religion of gender equality. Virtually every school of Buddhism seems to have developed a degree of gender bias, despite the best intentions of the Buddha. The Buddha showed great kindness and respect for women. Like a wise parent, the Buddha took care to protect the *bhikkhunis*. But the status of *bhikkhunis* today is far from what the Buddha endorsed. At present, those nuns who are not fully ordained are known as *das sil mata* in Sri Lanka, *thilasin* in Myanmar, *mae chii* in Thailand, *mae khao* in Laos, *siladharas* in the West, *anagarika* in Nepal, and so on. These nuns, who typically observe eight precepts including celibacy, are not granted official endorsement or the educational and financial support offered to *bhikkhus*.

In Nepal, a renaissance of Theravāda Buddhism began in the late 19th century that brought about change in the Buddhist community. Bhikkhu Chandramani, a senior Burmese monk who lived in Kusinagara, is often mentioned as the original philosopher, initiator, and guide of the Theravāda movement in Nepal. The first Nepalese Theravāda monks all became active propagators of Theravāda Buddhism after studying under Bhikkhu Chandramani in Kusinagara. Most Nepalese monks (*bhikkhu*), novices (*samanera*) and nuns (*anagarika*) were ordained by him and he advised them to go to Burma and Sri Lanka for further studies.

This renaissance brought about a new tradition of ordaining women. Although women were ordained with the status of *anagarika* rather than *bhikkhuni*, this was a great revolution for Nepalese women, breaking through the social restrictions of tradition and religion. During that period, the contribution of Chandramani Mahasthavir of Burma (Myanmar) was very important for Nepal. It was under his preceptorship that senior *anagarikas* such as Dharmachari, Dharmashila, and Sushila were ordained.¹ Currently, according to records provided by the Nun's Association of Nepal, there are 154 women in Nepal who live as Theravāda Buddhist nuns. According to the All Nepal Bhikkhu Association, the number of *bhikkhus* is 656, including novices.

At present, nuns have become an integral part of Buddhist society in Nepal. The laity realizes the value and contributions of the nuns. They recognize that nuns in Nepal have contributed enormously to Nepalese society. In accordance with the Buddha's intentions, a strong nuns' order has spread the Buddhadharmā and created a healthier society in Nepal.²

This paper attempts to address the following questions: What is the status of Buddhist nuns in Nepal at present? Is the ordained life fruitful for Buddhist nuns in Nepal? In what ways are the contribution made by Buddhist nuns well recognized by the Buddhist community in Nepal? Part of the information included here is based on secondary sources. In addition, I conducted a survey to collect current data.³ A systematic survey was administered to one hundred Buddhist nuns in Nepal. The method of analysis was qualitative, including some case studies. This analysis is limited to the Theravāda Buddhist tradition in Nepal and does not cover other Buddhist schools.

The Current Status of Nuns in Nepal

After a long journey full of ups and downs, in the midst of a revival of Theravāda Buddhism, nuns are now finding their place in Buddhism in Nepal. The nuns of today do not confine themselves to prayers and domestic chores in the *vihāra*, but are also involved in social and educational activities. They have secular educational qualifications and have obtained higher degrees in Buddhist studies. There are now 17 nuns studying abroad; however, the number of nuns studying aboard is far fewer than

the number of monks and male novices. These 17 are out of a total of 318 monastics who are now abroad for Buddhist studies.⁴

One issue that urgently need attention is healthcare facilities for nuns. At present, there is no institutional set-up for taking care of nuns when they are sick. The responsibility for the treatment of nuns generally falls on their families. In some cases, nuns living at the same *vihāra* help take care of one another. In 2006, the Anagarika Sumana Health Fund was established.⁵ This is the only fund in operation in Nepal that provides healthcare facilities for nuns. The fund has entered into an agreement with the Public Health Concern Trust, Nepal, but the support provided by the fund is inadequate.

In terms of financial support, nuns generally live on the donations (*dāna*) they receive from laypersons at Dhamma activities held in the *vihāra*. In addition, they occasionally go for alms, or *bhikshatan*. The money collected from *bhikshatan* is not used by the nuns themselves personally, but is used for the common benefit of the *sangha* as a whole.⁶ In addition individual nuns may receive money from their natal families to tide them over in times of financial difficulty.

Despite the fact that nuns contribute equally with monks in propogating Buddhism, on many occasions nuns are discriminated against by monks in Nepal. For example, nuns are supposed to refrain from the following actions:

- Ordaining monks.
- Giving five precepts to laypersons.
- Conducting meditation courses without the help of monks.
- Entering the *seemagriha* (*simā* or ordination hall).
- Sitting at the same level as monks.
- Sharing a table at lunch with monks.⁷

Although nuns are gradually beginning to give the five precepts to laypersons, change has been slow.

Currently, there is greater ethnic diversity among the nuns' community in Nepal than before. Especially after the political changes of the 1990s, Theravāda nuns' circles are no longer limited to the Newar community. In recent years, women from other indigenous communities have also begun to enter the nuns' *sangha*. These nuns are making significant contributions in disseminating Buddhism in their respective communities.⁸

Nepal is currently experiencing a rising trend in disrobing, both among nuns and monks. It has been found that youngsters are attracted by the free education opportunities for young novices provided by the *vihāra*, and may not actually be interested in the study of Buddhism. Once these novices achieve their educational goals, they often disrobe and leave the *vihāras*.⁹ The following reasons for disrobing have been suggested by Yuva Anagarika Sahayog Samiti:

- Personal reasons.
- Problems at home.
- Internal problems in the *vihāra*.
- Unfulfilled personal needs.
- Dejection in the ordained life.
- Health problems.¹⁰

Bhikkhuni Ordination

In 1988, Bhikkhuni Dhammawati, a leading personality in the Nepalese nuns' order and holder of the Sasandhaja Dhammachariya and Aggamahasaddhamma Jotika Dhaja titles, which she received from Burma, traveled to Los Angeles, California, to receive full ordination. Along with two of her associates, she was ordained as a *bhikkhuni* at Hsi Lai Temple, a branch of Fo Guang Shan Monastery

in Taiwan. The ordination was performed according to the rites of the Dharmagupta lineage, which was brought to China from Sri Lanka in the fifth century and has survived until the present day without any discontinuity.

However, upon their return to Kathmandu, the senior member of the Nepalese monks' order refused to acknowledge their new status as fully ordained nuns and questioned the validity of their ordination. Although some of the junior monks tend to be more supportive, the senior monks, with only a couple of exceptions, remained categorically opposed to *bbikkhuni* ordination.

Despite the refusal of the monks to accept the nuns' status as *bbikkhunis*, a series of *bbikkhuni* ordinations followed in later years. These groundbreaking events – conferring *bbikkhuni* ordination on Nepalese nuns – provoked considerable criticism from most of the monks, and also from some orthodox nuns and members of the lay community. Some monks and lay Buddhists were supportive of the *bbikkhunis*, whereas others frowned, mocked, and criticized them for having deviated from Theravāda custom. The nuns today call themselves *bbikkhuni*, while most monks still address them as *anagarikas*.

Nuns' Contributions to Buddhism in Nepal

Since the first Nepalese nuns of the Theravāda school received full ordination, they have demonstrated their value and their meaningful role in disseminating Buddhism in Nepal through many important contributions. Among the major activities they have carried out are:

- Propagation of Buddhism at the local level.
- Organizational development.
- Contributions to education in Buddhist studies (*pariyatti*).
- Contributions to secular education, as teachers, administrators, etc..
- Publication of books on Buddhism.
- Participation in social service.
- Organization of pilgrimages to Buddhist shrines.
- Organization of *risini pabaja* (a meaningful coming-of-age ritual) for girls.
- Organization of meditation retreats.
- Construction of *viharas*.
- Development of international relations.

Today, Nepalese nuns not only work on the local levels, but also have close relations with international Buddhist organizations. Some of the most notable international organizations the nuns are associated with at present are: Indian Buddhist Association, Buddhist Light International Association, Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women, and International Bhikkhuni Sangha¹¹

Nuns play a variety of important roles in Nepalese society. At the community level, nowadays nunneries in Nepal have become centers that cater to the Buddhist community by organizing both religious services and social events such as birthday celebrations, *gufa* (a ritual for girls), funerals, and other community rituals. On the day of such ceremonies, the nuns become the cooks, waitresses, and caretakers. These services earn nuns the gratitude and goodwill of the community, as well as donations.

Women, both lay and ordained, have always contributed to Buddhism in Nepal. In fact, it is women who feed the monks. Most of the attendees at events in the *vihāras* are women. All in all, it is women who are the foundation for all the activities that sustain Buddhism.

Nuns' Achievements in the Ordained Life

Despite contributing to Buddhism equally with monks, Nepalese society tends to accept nuns only in supportive and subservient positions. Nuns are considered to be only the assistants of monks, usually cooking and doing the laundry. At cultural or social functions, both monks and nuns are invited to perform rites and rituals. The nuns usually perform these equally with the monks, but when it comes time to offer donations, the nuns usually get less than the amount given to monks.

Nuns clean the Dhamma hall daily for Buddha Puja. This is their duty in all nunneries. If monks and nuns live in the same complex, this duty naturally falls on the nuns. Further, the nuns are expected to spend time cooking, washing, gardening, and cleaning. They are also supposed to serve tea to visiting laypersons as well. In tending to these duties, they lose time for their Dhamma practice or meditation. They are preoccupied with daily chores from morning to night. Young nuns especially are expected to serve water, tea, and food to their seniors. They can hardly manage time to study Dhamma books or meditate, because they are occupied for more than 10 hours a day with various mundane assignments. At times, they feel that they were better off in their domestic life before ordination.¹²

The mindset of some monks is that nuns are in the *vihara* primarily to serve monks. Some monks are of the mentality that they are superior and nuns are meant to be subservient to them. In the field of monastic education, the nuns serve breakfast and lunch to the teacher as well as to the student monks. Under these circumstances, it is hard to believe that their life as a nun is fully fruitful. Some case studies to support this argument are included here.

Case Study 1: A devotee from Alkohiti, Lalitpur, named Astamaya Shakya, was brought to Bhaktapur to be ordained as a *danparami* in 1960 by Ratna Jyoti Bhante, so that she could assist him with logistical matters. Being a nun, followed him wherever he went to live – to Banepa, Dhulikhel, Ilabahi (Lalitpur), and Chapagaun (Lalitpur).¹³ This nun's ordained life seems to have been limited to merely serving a monk.

Case Study 2: A nun told me that her goal in becoming a nun was to meditate, decrease her defilements, and have a chance to teach Dhamma to others. But she could not even manage a minimal amount of time for meditation and studies. "The *vihāra* is not a place to study," she said. "We have to live for other. We have to be ready to go anywhere as per the invitations to the *vihāra*." She said it was difficult to continue her study of Buddhism after becoming a nun. Before leaving the household life, she secured the top score in the *pariyatti* examination, but after becoming a nun, she could not even attend the exam. She says, "There should be a rule for compulsory daily meditation. At least two hours a day should be set aside for studies, which they do not actually have."¹⁴

Case Study 3: One time a monk from Anandakuti Vihar, where Nepalese monks reside, phoned Dharmmakirti Vihara, where only nuns reside. The monk directly ordered the nun who received the call to send some nuns from Dharmakirti to Anandakuti Vihar to cook food for the monks. It happened that the nun who received the call was courageous. She replied directly, saying that the nuns of Dharmakirti Vihar were not obligated to cook for monks and nobody would be assigned for that.¹⁵

Historical events provide background. The All Nepal Bhikkhu Mahasangha was founded in 1951. This was a great achievement in the evolution of Theravāda Buddhism in Nepal, from the perspective of Theravāda monastic organization.¹⁶ At that time, the number of nuns in the Kathmandu Valley was also growing, but they were not organized and there was no particular Buddhist organization

to guide them. As a consequence, the nuns failed to have any meaningful presence during the historic Fourth World Buddhist Conference that was held at Tundikhel on November 15, 1956. This conference was considered a landmark event in Nepalese Buddhist circles, but the nuns were not given any role or responsibility in the programme and remained mere spectators along with laypersons.¹⁷

In such a situation, the tension or internal conflict between nuns and monks can be felt. Interestingly, even after facing discrimination, nuns feel reluctant to raise the issue lest the unity of the small circle of monks and nuns be broken. These days, however, some young nuns have begun to express the opinion that remaining silent encourages the monks to continue their domination.¹⁸

The Problems Nuns Face

The main findings that emerge from the survey and interviews I conducted are:

- It is difficult for nuns to find time for Dhamma studies and practice.
- Nuns have fewer chances for higher education than monks.
- Nuns get fewer opportunities for Buddhist studies abroad than monks.
- Along with their normal chores, nuns are expected to serve monks as well.
- Nuns are taught to respect even younger monks.
- Nuns are discouraged from voicing their opinions, especially by senior monastics.¹⁹

In Nepal, society tends to accept nuns only in supportive and subservient positions. At monasteries with education programs, the nuns serve meals to the teacher and student monks as well as their own breakfast and lunch. In addition, whenever there is a special function or ceremony in the monastery, the nuns are asked to prepare food, while monks are busy in their own studies.

Over 2,560 years ago, the Buddha's original teachings did not appear to discriminate against women. However, the doctrinal equality taught by the Buddha is rarely seen in practice today. There may be a few exceptionally good places for women to practice, but in most cases Buddhist nuns have a difficult time finding support and, all too often, are relegated to the role of kitchen help. No wonder few nuns find ordained life fully satisfactory. It can safely be concluded that ordained life for women in Nepal is not fruitful to the full extent.

NOTES

¹ Baikuntha Prasad Lakaul, *Nepalese Stbavirvd Gukathan Wala* (Kathmandu: Thaku Hisi Press, Nepal Era 1105 [1984]).

² Reena Tuladhar, "The Nuns' Order in Theravāda Buddhism from the Buddha's Period to the Present: A Situational Analysis," Proceedings of the International Buddhist Conference (Kathmandu: Theravada Buddhist Academy and Sitagu International Buddhist Academy, 2014), 216.

³ Survey Questions: A Study on Bhikkhunis in Nepal:

Q.1. Personal Description:

Age, place of residence, number of monastics in this *vihāra*, birthplace, ethnicity, and education (literate/iliterate, primary, school-leaving certificate, or higher).

Q.2 What is the source of your livelihood?

Q.3 Who cares for you when you fall sick?

- Q.4 Do you find that you are treated equally to monks by laypeople?
Q.5. Do you receive contributions from laypeople and society at large?
Q.6 Describe your daily schedule in detail.
Q.7 Are you satisfied with your ordained life? Do you plan to quit or continue?
Q.8 How do you manage your time for Dhamma studies and meditation?
Q.9. What is your experience regarding going forth (*pabbaja*) as a *bhikkhuni*?

⁴ Bhikshu Bodhijnana, ed., *Theravada Buddhist Directory: Nepal* (Kathmandu: Heradevi Shakya, 2014), 59.

⁵ Yuva Anagarika Sahayog Samiti (Young Anagarika's Committee) *Annual Report 2071* (Kathmandu: Nun's Association of Nepal, 2071 BS [Bikram Sambat, Nepalese era, 2014]), 55.

⁶ Based on my survey.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Yuva Anagarika Sahayog Samiti, *Annual Report 2071*, 88.

¹¹ Based on my survey.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Bhikshu Vipassi Dhammaramo, *Bhaktapurko Muni Vihara*, Bhaktapur: Muni Vihara Vyavasthapan Samiti, 2015 BS, 85–98.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Based on my survey.

¹⁶ Lochantara Tuladhar, *Dharmachari Guruma* (Kathmandu: Nirvanamurti Vihara, 2007), 41.

¹⁷ Ibid, 42.

¹⁸ Based on my survey.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Buddhist Concepts of Gender Equality from the Viewpoint of Male/Female Childbirth in Vietnamese Society

Tong Thi Quynh Huong

Under the influence of Confucianism over thousands of years, patriarchal ideology has gradually been ingrained in the minds of many generations of Vietnamese people. Due to the value of a son, it is very important that a woman, being a wife, has to be able to produce a male child for her husband. If a woman for some reason did not give birth to a son, she is considered to be a defective item. This causes disagreements and quarrels between husband and wife, and between the wife and the husband's family, and has led to many tragedies in Vietnamese families.

However, the imperative to have a son is not related to the Buddhist worldview. With the arrival of Buddhism in Vietnam, attitudes toward women gradually changed. Women received more respect and came to be seen as individuals who could contribute to the development of society, not just as property belonging to their husbands. According to Buddhism, the rights and duties of women are not limited to childbirth or parenting. Childbirth and parenting are women's significant contributions to human evolution, and they are integral to other aspects of society

Buddhist Perspectives on Childbirth

Since the arrival of Buddhism and throughout its long history in Vietnam until today, Buddhism has encouraged equality between men and women in society. Women are not only considered useful only for marriage and childbirth; they are also valued for many other important roles. Women have the right to choose between getting married or staying single and it is not socially acceptable to denigrate or disregard them. Women also have the right to become nuns and pursue a spiritual life, and to follow their own path of personal cultivation. Buddhism allows women and men to freely choose their own marriage partners. It respects women's right to divorce, although it does not encourage the practice. Buddhism emphasizes compassion and social harmony, so divorce is an unexpected event, but people have the right to be liberated from the sufferings of an unhappy married life.

The Buddha taught the same doctrines to women and men. Sometimes he even gave special advice to women, to promote their understanding of Dharma. The Buddha also said that the spiritual life he expounded would not be perfect without women religious practitioners. In comparison to some other traditions, the status of women in Buddhism is much better. For example, the Confucian codes lay down detailed rules on how men and women should behave in each other's presence. In early India, Manu went to the furthest extreme of segregating men and women, warning that one should not remain in a lonely palace even with one's own mother and sister. Gender segregation also pervades all aspects of life in Islamic societies.¹ By contrast, the Buddha advocated equality for all sentient beings and thus the birth of both sons and daughters are appreciated.

Buddhist thinking on the equal value of male and female children is mentioned in the Buddha's teachings, including the following well-known story. At one time, when the Buddha was staying in Sàvatthi, King Pasenadi of the kingdom of Kosala came to receive his blessing and sat down beside him. Then someone came to inform the king that his wife, Queen Mallika had given birth to a daughter. When the king heard this news, he was not pleased. Seeing his unhappiness, the Buddha said to him:

O King, in life
There are some women
Who are better than men,

Who are wiser and more virtuous,
Who regard their mothers-in-law as goddesses,
And who are pure in word, thought and deed.
They may one day
Give birth to brave sons
Who would rule a country.
The men of such virtuous wives
Are worthy Masters
To teach Dharma to the whole country.”²

The Buddha recognized and taught that women could become realized and teach the Dharma. At that time, although India was a patriarchal society, there was no mention of discrimination between male and female children in the Buddhist canon. Buddhist monks did not recognize a son’s responsibility to carry on the family lineage when the father passed away, as the *brabmins* did. According to Buddhist thought, a woman is neither part of the husband, nor his property or possession. Buddhism advocates the spiritual liberation of women and her independent social status. Buddhists recognize that motherhood is a natural and typical vocation of women, but that it is not the only choice for women. Even though a woman may not be able to give birth to a child, she may have a motherly nature. Therefore, women who remain single are respected equally with other women.

Buddhism was introduced to Vietnam in the early centuries CE, from India and from China. During the 11th and 14th centuries, Buddhism became the national religion of Vietnam. Therefore, it is clear that Buddhist thought thoroughly penetrated Vietnamese culture for centuries. However, as a result of a history of prolonged Chinese domination, Vietnam has also been heavily influenced by Confucianism for some two thousand years. The blending of Vietnamese culture with Buddhism and Confucianism has created a uniquely Vietnamese perspective on the status of women and the importance of giving birth to sons over daughters.

In the indigenous culture of the Vietnamese people, the roles of women are appreciated, as in Buddhist thought. The Vietnamese people have a saying, “Men build the house, women build the home.” This signifies the important role women play in the creation of happy families, which are the nucleus of a happy society. Women maintain and regulate relationships among the members of the family and between the family and society. They are loved and respected by their children and are “masters of education,” educating their children to become useful citizens who contribute constructively to society. Women are often seen as the soul of the family and society. The history of Vietnam recognizes great women who have contributed to national development and liberation, such as the Trưng Sisters: Trưng Trac and Trưng Nhi.

However, due to Confucian influence, childbirth has come to be seen as Vietnamese women’s highest natural vocation, along with caring for the family and standing behind their man in all respects. Childbirth is naturally a sacred right for every woman, but it has become even more important for Vietnamese women, because they come under pressure to “have a son to inherit the lineage.” Therefore, Vietnamese women are not only pressured to give birth to a child, but a male child at that. This social convention has prevailed in Vietnam for a long time, for several reasons. First, the Vietnamese people attach great importance to their hometown and family. Each family has the responsibility to maintain the longterm survival of its lineage. The obligation to maintain the family lineage belongs to the sons of the family. When a man has a son, he feels proud to have done a good job to maintain his family, which also means paying homage to his ancestors.

Second, for thousands of years, the Vietnamese people have generally lived in extended or joint

families. If a family has a son, it gains one more member when the son gets married; if a family has a daughter, it loses one member when the daughter gets married. As an agricultural culture, the Vietnamese people believe that a crowded family is an expression of abundance and happiness. Moreover, the more children a family create, the more wealth it can make.

Third, many years ago, the status of women in Vietnamese families and society was very low. Therefore, women themselves did not want to give birth to a female child. They feared that when their daughters grew up, they would have to undergo sufferings similar to their mothers. So women believed that it was better to give birth to a son, so the child would have a better life.

Fourth, in the past, due to a lack of scientific knowledge, it was believed that the birth of a male child was completely determined by the mother. Now it has been verified that the sex of the child is actually determined by the father, but in Vietnamese society, if a woman gives birth to a male child, it is believed that she was able to create her own foundation of happiness. It is also believed that if a woman gives birth to a male child, her husband would not think of looking for a son with another woman.

For all these reasons, there is a disparity in gender ratios in Vietnam, which is a cause for concern. According to data collected by the General Statistics Department of Vietnam, the gender ratio for newborns in 2012 was 112.3 boys/100 girls; in 2013, it was 113.8 boys/100 girls; In 2014, it was 112.2 boys/100 girls, and the trend is growing. It is estimated that by 2050, Vietnam will have between 2.3 to 4.3 million men who cannot find women to marry.³ In the long term, this trend will have serious consequences. One consequence is increasing pressure for girls to marry early, causing them to drop out of school early. Another consequence is an increasing demand for prostitutes, leading to sex trafficking.

These problems are rooted in a deep contradiction in the thinking of Vietnamese people. As a Buddhist country, people understand the important roles of women, yet most of them are not able to give up the preconception that it is better to have a son than a daughter, and that it is better to have a son and a daughter rather than have two daughters.

In the world today, the status of women overall has noticeably improved. A number of women have become great world leaders. Accordingly, equality between men and women has improved. Today, sayings such as, “All children are our own children” and “Whether it’s a boy or a girl does not matter,” are typical attitudes expressed in modern, civilized, and democratic societies. This change of attitudes is the result of centuries of struggle for an equitable society in countries around the world. The notion of gender equity was put forward by the Buddha over 2,500 years ago in ancient Indian society, where discriminatory attitudes regarding women prevailed. However, even today, one hears that a woman is “the torch leading the path to hell” and “giving birth to a daughter creates a hindrance and misfortune for the family.” The Buddha’s teachings on equality were progressive and pivotal statements in the evolution of humankind, spurring many social reforms. In a fast-growing country like Vietnam, gender inequality starts before infants are born. However, it is my belief that gender inequality has no place in Buddhism – the religion with the largest number of followers in Vietnam today.

With deep insight, the Buddha saw the value of a person, not in terms of gender, social status, class, or race, but in terms of his or her own old or new *karma*. He saw that gender was not the main obstacle in purifying one’s mind and body. If women have opportunities to practice the Dharma and the discipline in a conducive environment, they will be fully capable of attaining sainthood. As the Buddha assured King Pasenadi, to give birth to a wise and virtuous daughter can be better than giving birth to a son. When daughters grow up, they may do very good work and make their parents proud. In the future, these daughters may also give birth to intelligent and virtuous children who will bring honor to their family and their country.

The teachings of the Buddha rocked the foundations of ancient Indian society. Their echoes have been heard around the world. In some countries even today, however, patriarchal attitudes remain unchanged. Living in a country like Vietnam, profoundly influenced by Buddhist values, people should be well aware of the Buddha's teachings. They have an obligation to make useful contributions to society by educating their children in the spirit of equality, training them to become wise and virtuous. Vietnam also needs to improve its legal framework relating to gender equality, since laws and policies affect people's behaviour.

NOTES

¹ <http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/dewaraja/wheel280.html>.

² http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhism/lifebuddha/2_14bud.htm.
http://www.buddhistvihara.com/newsletters/2003-winter/status_of_women.htm.

³ <http://giadinh.vnexpress.net/tin-tuc/to-am/hon-2-trieu-dan-ong-viet-se-khong-tim-duoc-vo-trong-tuong-lai-3297518.html>.

Buddhism, Equality, and Feminism: Embodied Practices

Suat Yan Lai

Not every Buddhist who supports *bhikkhuni* ordination would identify as a feminist, but there are those who do, both in the Asian and Western contexts. This paper focuses on these individuals in the Thai and Malaysian contexts, because they provide a window to understand the framing of those who support the full ordination of women both using the language of equality and rights *and* as a way of following in the footsteps of the Buddha. The paper argues that debating and framing the question in the language of equality and/or rights reflects that these discourses are not alien to the Asian context; in fact, such a framing is a reflection of Asian countries as modern nation states with their own constitutions that enshrine these ideals. Simultaneously, it challenges the patriarchal framing of the discourse of rights and equality as being inauthentic to Asian cultures or a cultural imposition of Western liberal feminism. The language of rights and equality is particularly familiar to social activists whose advocacy ranges from housing, education, and civil rights to women's rights. In fact, there is an Asian Human Rights Charter, also known as the People's Charter, promulgated in 1998, that addresses the oppressive or discriminatory conditions that still afflict Asian societies in the post-colonial era.¹

Intertwined in discussions about the legitimacy of *bhikkhuni* ordination are contested conceptions of a Buddhist woman's selfhood and spirituality. For example: Is a female birth inferior? Is it excusable for a woman to be subjected to domestic violence? Can a woman attain Buddhahood? Addressing these issues illustrates how religion can be used either to challenge, resist, and transform unjust gender relations or to perpetuate violence against women. Zine's proposal of a critical faith-centered framework is adopted here, because it recognizes the multi-faceted ways in which spirituality can be a site of either resistance or oppression.² Buddhist women's articulations of their spirituality attest to the tradition's transformative potential, embodied in a unique understanding of a gendered spiritual self. Significantly, the first issue to discuss is the debate over whether there is gender equality in Buddhism.

Debates On Signifiers of Gender Equality in Buddhism: Attainment of Enlightenment and *Bhikkhuni* Ordination

Records of women's spiritual attainment in the *Samyutta Nikaya Sutta*³ and *Therīgāthā*⁴ are spiritually affirming for Buddhist women. In fact, scholars have described women's ability to attain *nibbāna* as evidence of men and women having "equal spiritual potential"⁵ and to conclude that there is gender equality in Buddhism because a woman can be enlightened in her own body without transforming to a male body first.⁶ Although Alan Sponberg concurred with other scholars that soteriologically women can reach *nirvāna*, he emphatically underlined that this does not indicate sexual egalitarianism, but rather soteriological inclusiveness.⁷ Significantly, he explained the critical difference in his choice of the term "inclusiveness" rather than equality or equivalence. For him, inclusiveness does not connote sameness, as equality does, and does not signify a lack of hierarchical differentiation, as equivalence does.

Paradoxically, Sponberg failed to note that what he terms soteriological inclusiveness challenges discriminatory ideas and practices with regards to the inferiority of women. While certain sections of the Buddhist community have regarded women as inferior and their bodies as impure and incapable of Buddhahood, clearly the philosophy of emptiness and non-duality dispels unequal, hierarchical, and non-equivalent notions about Buddhist women and related practices. According to Ueki, the *Sūrangama-samādhi-sūtra* (Sutra of Concentration of the Heroic March) explained that if "the differences between

men and women are not essential, they are non-dual (Advaita) and void (Śūnya), then there should be no distinction between men's and women's ability to attain enlightenment."⁸ Furthermore, "in the mind which seeks enlightenment, there is no difference between men and women."⁹ Although Sponberg insists on using the term inclusiveness in a way that does not denote sameness or lack of hierarchical differentiation, the term is used in diversity training in the workplace to signify the intent of a company to address discrimination and ensure that people of different races, genders, ages, and sexual orientations are treated the same, without any hierarchical differentiation.¹⁰

The question of whether there is gender equality in Buddhism finds resonance in the discussion about reviving *bhikkhuni* ordination. Those who support this initiative in Thailand have described the ideal in Buddhist society as one in which women and men are on an equal footing.¹¹ Allowing Buddhist women to be ordained is described as confirmation of the principle of equality held in the past. In Sri Lanka, advocates of *bhikkhuni* ordination have framed the ideal as "the principle of equality which the Buddha gave to woman"¹² The concurrent adoption of the eight *garudhammas* that subordinates the *bhikkhuni sangha* to the *bhikkhu sangha* has been explained as a tactical move to facilitate the acceptance of the female monastic order, given the social conventions at the time.¹³ The Buddha has been described as a feminist by those supportive of *bhikkhuni* ordination.¹⁴ Proponents of *bhikkhuni* ordination have framed it as a heritage or ancient mandate from the Buddha¹⁵ and have provided alternative hermeneutical interpretations of the *vinaya* to support its reestablishment.¹⁶

The Thai Context: Reclaiming the Embodiment of Female Spirituality

Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (Bhikkhuni Dhammananda) grew up in a temple where her mother, Voramai Kabilsingh, had renounced worldly life to become a nun. As a young girl, her Buddhist faith took root as she followed the schedules and activities of the monastery. A feminist Buddhist, she reflects that Buddhism offers a way for self-examination and teaches compassion to deal with her critics, while feminism allows her to merge her personal practice and academic life and be socially engaged.¹⁷

Bhikkhuni Dhammananda articulates her support for *bhikkhuni* ordination by deploying the discourse of rights and equality.¹⁸ While detractors of *bhikkhuni* ordination have criticized the discourse of rights and equality as Western and thus un-Thai, this ignores the fact that various clauses of the Thai Constitution uses the language of equality and rights. The Thai Government is also a signator to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and has engaged with the United Nations in the discourse of equality and rights.¹⁹ Among other statutes, Section 30 of the 1997 and 2007 Thai Constitutions states, "All persons are equal before the law and shall enjoy equal protection under the law. Men and women shall enjoy equal rights."²⁰ Furthermore, the Asian Human Rights Charter, endorsed by some Thai non-governmental organizations, is written in the discourse of rights. Belittling the discourse of rights and equality as an imposition of Western feminism or as un-Thai is a tactic to silent those who support *bhikkhuni* ordination while being conveniently blind to the fact that, as a modern nation state, the Thai Constitution is itself rights-based. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda has also deployed the discourse of duty and responsibility in support of *bhikkhuni* ordination.²¹ In both cases, she situates the matter within the larger framework of following the Buddhist tradition.

Impressed by Bhikkhuni Dhammananda's decision to reclaim Buddhist female spirituality and transform the normative understanding of *sangha* as off-limits to Thai women,²² I carried out ethnographic fieldwork at Songdhammakalyani Monastery near Bangkok for periods of a few weeks to a few months between 2006 and 2014. While I was there, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda demonstrated her knowledge of Buddhist herstory and corrected erroneous understandings of a female birth as inferior

due to *kamma* and pollution of the sacred robe due to menstruation. She also stressed the importance of practice. Mindfulness is embodied as part of everyday practice, as female monastics go on their alms round, during chanting, and so on.²³ The nuns go for alms as a spiritual practice, walking mindfully every step of the way, aware of each movement of the body. They do not walk too fast or absentmindedly step on the person in front of them. They are mindful of not swinging their hands or turning their heads this way and that, like a tourist. As a feminist Buddhist, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda's ultimate path is *nibbāna*.

As Jasmin Zine observes, a critical approach is apt, since “although religion and spirituality can be sites or sources of oppression, they also offer powerful spaces of resistance to injustice and provide avenues for critical contestation and knowledge.”²⁴ This is exemplified by Bhikkhuni Dhammananda and Dhammanataya, a feminist who has become more inclined toward spiritual development as a result of *vipassanā* meditation practice. Dhammanataya, who received temporary ordination at Songdhammakalyani Monastery in December 2010, observes, “I have a good relationship with the Buddha and his teachings, but not with Thai patriarchal Theravāda teachings, beliefs, and practices. Looking at the teachings of the Buddha, I found that it was against all kinds of oppression.”²⁵

Another advocate of *bhikkhuni* ordination is Ouyporn Khuankaew, who works with the Buddhist Education for Social Transformation Program²⁶ and identifies as a Buddhist feminist. Her life story highlights the importance of reclaiming embodied spirituality in everyday life. She grew up in a violent household, where her father, a devout Buddhist, was abusive toward her mother and siblings.²⁷ She observed that the issue of domestic violence was invisible to most people in her rural Buddhist community, including the local abbot, who visited the poor and the sick, but did not step in to protect her family. This personal experience nurtured her affinity and commitment to feminism and non-violence initiatives. Only after acquiring increased feminist awareness was she able to explore what Buddhism has to offer. She recognized that an inaccurate understanding of the Buddhist concept of *kamma* is used to normalize violence against women and to justify it as the result of women's own actions in a past life.²⁸ This Buddhist cultural and religious construct operates when women are not allowed to be ordained as *bhikkhunis* and are told by monks that it is due to their *kamma* of being born a woman.²⁹ Khuankaew and Bhikkhuni Dhammananda's reclaiming of embodied female spirituality is particularly significant, because despite Buddhism's immense impact on people's lives in Thailand, very few feminists are interested in addressing the use of religion as a tool of oppression. The Buddhist doctrine of right understanding has been subverted and used to perpetuate the unjust treatment of women.

The Malaysian Context: Women Can Attain Buddhahood!

In her book, *Cave In The Snow*, Bhikkhuni Tenzin Palmo powerfully illustrates what a woman can do if she sets her heart and mind to it, living alone for 12 years in the Himalayas in her quest for enlightenment. One striking sentence in the book challenges the assumption that Buddhahood can only be attained in the male form: “I have made a vow to attain Enlightenment in the female form – no matter how many lifetimes it takes.”³⁰

The discourse of women's inferiority still persists today among Malaysian Buddhists and is articulated by women themselves. One common assertion is that only a man can attain Buddhahood. If one asserts otherwise or starts to question the statement, several outcomes are possible. Monks may explain that a woman can be an *arahant*, but never a Buddha. The fact that the statement is uttered by a monk lends it credence and authority. One who questions the statement may also be chided for raising the issue. These are clear attempts to silence those who may question authority. Fortunately, the *Kalama*

Sutta encourages Buddhists to question rather than accept blindly what is passed on as tradition, so this text can always be used to explain one's stance. A knowledge of this *sutta* and related works is empowering to women spiritually, providing a counter-narrative to challenge the authoritative patriarchal interpretations as the only legitimate epistemic reading.

Nonetheless, since the 9th Sakyadhiha International Conference on Buddhist Women was held in Kuala Lumpur in 2006, progress has been made. Malaysian monks and monks who are based in Malaysia, such as Bhikkhus Saddhasiri, Anandajoti, Saranankara, and Dr. Dhammapala, have stepped up to support *bhikkhuni* ordination. Malaysian nuns based in Malaysia include Bhikkhuni Sumangala, president of the Ariya Vihara Buddhist Society in Selangor and one of the spiritual advisors of Gotami Vihara, and Bhikkhuni Dhammadinna, also based in Selangor. Women now have more opportunities to intensify their practice. For example, in 2014 in Malaysia, the First Theravada Buddhist Nuns Novitiate Program was organized by the Subang Jaya Buddhist Association in collaboration with Buddhist organizations from other countries.³¹ Altogether 24 participants from Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia, and China had a chance to experience the life of a *samaneri* (ordained novice nun). In describing her experience of this spiritually fulfilling path to inner peace, a participant named Jayanti said, "In this novitiate programme, I learnt to be mindful and graceful in my actions and reminded myself that I was leading a different way of life."³²

More Buddhist organizations have come to the fore to support *bhikkhuni*-related activities. An example is Gotami Vihara, which has as its mission "to provide support to Buddhist female renunciants so that they can actualize their aspirations of walking the Path of Enlightenment as set out by the Buddha." This mission statement acknowledges the difficulties and lack of support that female renunciants face in devoting themselves to the Buddha Sāsana, in comparison to the established structures to support male monastics in the Theravāda Buddhist tradition in Malaysia. It also recognises women's spiritual potential and not just as a "curative" project. Due to relatively favorable economic circumstances, Malaysian Buddhists have contributed generously to Buddhist temples, monasteries, nuns' projects, and for recovery efforts and disaster relief in less affluent Buddhist communities in Sri Lanka, Ladakh, India, Nepal, and Bhutan.

As a pro-tem committee member and current president of Gotami Vihara Society, what drives my support for *bhikkhuni* ordination is my feminist and Buddhist understanding of the Buddha's heritage and Dhamma.³³ I embrace feminism because it speaks to me. While the term may be of Western origin, what it signifies, women speaking out and defending their own interests, is a human trait.³⁴ I disagree with the Chinese Confucianist practice that favors sons over daughters to pass on the family name and that also causes other wide-ranging discrimination against daughters. As a gender specialist, I use the discourse of equality and rights in the courses I teach, both in Malay and English. Similar to Thailand, the ideals of gender equality are enshrined in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia.³⁵ In a globalized world where homogenization, indigenization, and diversity contend in both the economy and culture, it is more and more difficult to differentiate between Asian and Western social values. In the current globalized context, the widespread Buddhist understanding that women can attain liberation is encouraging.

NOTES

¹ "Asian Human Rights Charter," <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/452678304.pdf>. Accessed May 28, 2017.

² Jasmin Zine, “Creating a Critical Faith-Centered Space for Anti-racist Feminism: Reflections of a Muslim Scholar-Activist,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20:2(2004) 185.

³ “Discourses of the Ancient Nuns,” <http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/bl143.html>. Accessed May 28, 2017.

⁴ “Therīgāthā: Verses of the Elder Nuns,” <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/kn/thig/> Accessed May, 28, 2017.

⁵ Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, *Thai Women in Buddhism* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991), 33.

⁶ See Masatoshi Ueki, *Gender Equality in Buddhism* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 94; and Kajiyama quoted in Kabilsingh, *Thai Women in Buddhism*, 27.

⁷ Alan Sponberg, “Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism,” in *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, ed. Jose I. Cabezón (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1992), 8–13.

⁸ Ueki, *Gender Equality in Buddhism*, 70.

⁹ See the chapter, “Receiving the Prediction of a Woman Named Jewel Brocade in the Sāgara-nāgarāja-paripacca,” quoted in *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁰ See for examples “What is Inclusiveness Training,” <http://www.nonprofitinclusiveness.org/what-inclusiveness-training> (accessed May, 28, 2017); “Inclusion and Diversity,” <https://www.accenture.com/ca-en/company-diversity>. Accessed May, 28, 2017; and “Diversity and Inclusion,” <http://www.aperianglobal.com/leaders-diversity-inclusion-5-lessons-top-global-companies>. Accessed May, 28, 2017.

¹¹ Varaporn Chamsanit, “Settling the Debate On *Bhikkhuni* Ordination in Thailand: Why Is It Difficult?” *Out Of the Shadows: Socially Engaged Buddhist Women*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 2006), 302.

¹² Hema Goonatilake, “Women Regaining A Lost Legacy: The Restoration of *Bhikkhuni* Order in Sri Lanka.” *Ibid.*, 43.

¹³ Kabilsingh, *Thai Women in Buddhism*,” 28–29.

¹⁴ Barbara Yen, “Joy and Challenges of Forming Gotami Vihara Society,” Presentation at the First ASEAN Buddhist Conference, Bangkok, September 2016.

¹⁵ Goonatilake, “Women Regaining A Lost Legacy,” 42; Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Revival of Bhikkhuni Ordination in The Theravada Tradition* (Penang: Inward Path, 2009), 15, 21–23; and Suat Yan Lai, “Engendering Buddhism: Female Ordination and Women’s Voices in Thailand,” doctoral thesis, Claremont Graduate University, 2011, 149, 151.

¹⁶ For details of hermeneutics in support of *bhikkhuni* ordination, see Bodhi, “The Revival of Bhikkhuni Ordination.”

- ¹⁷ Rebecca Warner and Holly Gayley, “From Buddhism to Feminism: Case Study on Chatsumarn Kabilsingh,” *Yasodhara* 57 (October-December 1998): 9–10.
- ¹⁸ Lai, “Engendering Buddhism,” 149–50.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 152–4.
- ²⁰ For the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, see: <http://www.asianlii.org/th/legis/const/1997/> (accessed May, 28, 2017); and for Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand 2007, see: <http://www.asianlii.org/th/legis/const/2007/1.html> Accessed May 28, 2017.
- ²¹ Lai, “Engendering Buddhism,” 150–51.
- ²² See for example: Charles F. Keyes, “Mother or Mistress but Never a Monk: Buddhist Notions of Female Gender in Rural Thailand,” *American Ethnologist* 11:2(May 1984) 223–41.
- ²³ Lai, “Engendering Buddhism,” 184–202.
- ²⁴ Zine, “Creating a Critical Faith-Centered Space,” 185.
- ²⁵ Email correspondence with Dhammanataya, June 11, 2011.
- ²⁶ “Buddhist Education for Social Transformation,” <http://womenforpeaceandjustice.org/courses-we-offer/best/> Accessed May 28, 2017.
- ²⁷ Ouyporn Khuankaew, “Buddhism and Domestic Violence,” *A Collation Of Articles on Thai Women and Buddhism*, ed. Virada Somswasdi and Alycia Nicholas (Chiang Mai: Women’s Studies Center, Chiang Mai University, and FORWARD, 2002), 63.
- ²⁸ Maia Duerr, “Can Religion Be A Force of Transformation,” <https://www.opendemocracy.net/transformation/maia-duerr/can-religion-be-force-for-transformation>. Accessed May, 28, 2017.
- ²⁹ Khuankaew, “Buddhism and Domestic Violence,” 65.
- ³⁰ Vicki Mackenzie, *Cave In the Snow* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 1998), 5.
- ³¹ “First Buddhist Nun’s Novitiate Program held at Subang Jaya Buddhist Association,” <http://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=56,12074,0,0,1,0#.WTFIcuuGPIU>. Accessed May, 28, 2017; and “First Buddhist Nun’s Novitiate Program in Theravada Tradition,” <https://snfwrenms.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/a5-bnnp-booklet-24oct-final-print.pdf>. Accessed May, 28, 2017. Subsequently, the second nuns’ novitiate program was organized in 2016 with 33 participants in Malaysia. Nonetheless, according to an informant from Melaka, there may have been another nuns’ novitiate program held before this in the past in Malaysia.

³² Samaneri Sumangala, “Long Live the Buddha Dhamma and Buddha Sāsana,” <https://snfwrenms.wordpress.com/page/3>. Accessed May 28, 2017.

³³ Barbara Yen is another person on the Gotami Vihara Society Executive Committee who identifies as both a Buddhist and feminist.

³⁴ For a more detailed explanation of why feminism was not a Western imposition on the Third World, see Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 1994), 2–3.

³⁵ Art. 8 (1) of the Federal Constitution reads, “All persons are equal before the law and entitled to equal protection of the law.”

There are currently more than 60,000 Buddhist nuns registered with the Department of Religious Affairs of the Ministry in Myanmar called *thilashin* (keepers of the Buddhist precepts). Although they are not fully ordained as *bhikkhuni*, Myanmar *thilashin* live in 3,800 independently administered nunneries and nunnery schools away from the control of the *sangha* or the state. This research project, funded by the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation, has been initiated to examine the communal lives and monastic discipline of non-ordained nuns affiliated with these institutions. For the purpose of the study, I focus on five large nunnery schools in Sagaing, Monywa, Mandalay, and Yangon that each accommodate about 150 to 300 nun residents (teachers and students) in order to understand how those in position of authority (teachers and senior nuns) maintain order and how young students learn monastic discipline.

Although they are not fully ordained, Myanmar *thilashin* adhere to monastic rules and rigid norms passed down in their tradition to maintain the cohesion and longevity of their community. Young students spend many years, sometimes decades, living together to achieve their academic goals and become socialized into a communal way of life. The monastic rules embody their moral ideals and regulate their religious life. In large nunnery schools, in particular, observing these rules is an integral part of their daily training, which is regarded essential for fostering self-discipline and a correct attitude toward other members in the community. However, to date, there are few studies that focus on the detailed legal aspect of their communal life.

Legal Provisions

The legal provisions for a Myanmar nun manifest profound ambiguity since she continues to be bound by the normative secular law in the same manner as a laywoman would be. Thus although a *thilashin* has renounced her family and worldly ties, she continues to be endowed with secular rights and social obligations; and is able to retain her rights to inherit and keep estate property.¹ This may be contrasted to a male's legal status, which changes dramatically when he becomes a monk and thereby comes under the jurisdiction of the *vinaya* regulations that oblige him to renounce all secular rights.

In the absence of the *vinaya*, however, Myanmar nuns in their tradition have followed a code of practice stipulated out of practical necessity in the community and this governs every aspect of their daily life. If we were to list the normative rules they follow, these could add up to more than 227, the number of monastic rules observed by monks, and perhaps nearly the same number as the 311 rules prescribed for *bhikkhunis* in the Pātimokkha. The contents of their current monastic rules cover major ethical concerns such as theft and sexual misconduct, and stipulate minute details that concern matters of personal decorum as well as their daily interactions with monks, other nuns, and laity.

The original *thilashin* code was formulated in the early 20th century in response to specific problems in their community and passed down from teacher to student in their oral tradition. The most important rule book, *Thiláshin Úbadei Kyíngàn* (Rule Procedures for Nuns), was published in 1914. It was written by the nun Daw Konmayi of Eimyo Gyaung Nunnery, who collected the customary practices and daily rules observed by nuns living in the Sagaing Hill region and compiled them systematically. *Thiláshin Úbadei Kyíngàn* was officially endorsed by the Supreme Sangha Council in 1994 and since then has become widely known as *Thiláshin Kyímwut* (Moral Code of Practice for Nuns).

The book provides a legal reference for Myanmar *thilashin*, as nuns look to it to regulate the conduct of new members and junior nuns.² It stipulates the detailed rules for nuns in daily situations

and provides a clear guideline as to their entry qualifications, monastic duties, obligations and duties expected of teachers and responsibilities of students. Details concerning deportment and clothing, manners of food intake, washing, bathing, going out for alms, and acceptable practices within and outside the monastic community are spelled out. Responsibilities for those in a position of authority are stipulated, and practical measures and punishments are listed to deal with various situations when a violation takes place. Traditional values such as obedience, discipline, service, mindfulness, and respectful manners towards senior members are emphasized throughout. A simple lifestyle is ideally aspired to; a nun should eat little, sleep little, talk little, and possess few items. It also stipulates that a nun must have an institutional affiliation, assuming her life to be sedentary, with a monastic address.

Entry Procedure

The first section of *Thilāshin Kyímmut* describes the procedure by which a candidate becomes a nun, but the actual procedure in which a female candidate becomes initiated into the nuns' community has evolved over the last century.³ Today, a potential candidate has to find one nun (rather than two) to act as her preceptor/supervisor to prepare her for the initiation. The initiation ritual is conducted in two parts: the first part is an interrogation of the candidate, normally in private, by senior nuns at the host nunnery and the second part is the initiation ritual itself. A standard set of questions is put to the candidate to evaluate the truthfulness of her motivation. Although some of these questions appear similar to what might have been asked if she were becoming a *bhikkhuni*, the context in which they are put to her is not the same.

The potential candidate is asked whether she is free in status, and whether there are any hidden reasons for her wanting to become a nun to explore whether she has a criminal record, a lover, family problems, or any undisclosed illnesses that may be contagious. A question about financial support is also put to her, since having a benefactor or private funding is essential in sustaining her monastic position. It is interesting that few questions are asked about her religious faith or knowledge about Buddhism, since these are not regarded as priority. What senior nuns are interested in is the candidate's aptitude and true intention; they look for qualities that involve honesty, a calm temperament, and general obedience. If the panel is roundly satisfied, the candidate is accepted informally and undergoes a designated period of probation.

During the probationary stage, she is required to observe the Eight Precepts, including fasting in the afternoon and celibacy. Nowadays, the length of probation is one week for a temporary candidate and one month for a vocational one. Female novices were tested longer until a few decades ago, when temporary initiation started to gain popularity in Myanmar. In some cases, they were tested for two years, the period of time originally stipulated for *sikkhamānā* (female novice), before becoming ordained.⁴ A female novice is initially accepted in her lay status and supervised by several senior nuns. She is not allowed to wear any adornments or makeup, and has to refrain from going out or getting in touch with her family and friends during the duration of probation. She also has to accustom herself to the monastic discipline and engage with many of the allocated chores in the nunnery. If she is hot-tempered, lazy, or inclined to gossip, she is asked to leave at an early stage. The candidate, however young, is ultimately expected to make up her own mind about whether or not she wants to stay and become trained as a vocational nun. Most importantly, the innate disposition that allows her to live contentedly and in harmony with others in a community of nuns is seen in itself as an important quality that marks her as a suitable candidate.

Communal Norms and Restrictions

Every student is allocated a mentor or supervisor in the nunnery. Once the relationship is formed, the student is expected to give complete loyalty to her nun supervisor and cannot defy or go against her wishes. The hierarchy in the nuns' community is made clear in their daily interactions with senior members, decided by the time of one's entry and length of service. This is most evident in the terms of address and honorary pronouns they use to address those who are regarded as senior. If a nun defies the authority of her supervisor, for instance, if she frequently goes out without asking permission or is disrespectful, she will lose the patronage of her mentor and will have to look for another mentor, which obliges her to start from the bottom of the pecking order. On the other hand, the onus is heavy for the supervisor as well; if her student engages in any wrongdoing, sometimes the mentor takes the full blame. Thus, senior nuns are constantly reminded of their obligation to supervise junior nuns and students well, so that they know exactly how to admonish and what to do if students violate the rules. Teachers have to guide and admonish students and students are expected to defer to the authority of senior members in almost every situation. For example, a junior nun is not allowed to squat, stretch her legs, or even lie down in the presence of a nun who is older or senior to her in status.

There are also many detailed restrictions that govern their daily life. For example, a *thilashin* should refrain from expansive gestures, such as laughing too heartily, talking loudly, raising her voice, arguing, gossiping, yawning or sneezing loudly, whistling, running, and taking long strides in walking. A junior member is not allowed to go out on her own, and even if she is, her outings and social interactions are kept to a minimum and always supervised by someone senior. She is prohibited from wearing short sleeves or transparent clothing, since modesty is regarded paramount, and she must hide her wrists and ankles as well as any exposed skin. Her head has to be shaved at least once a week and her nails have to be clipped regularly. She is admonished for being lazy or inconsiderate to others, criticized for chatting or lounging about in public places, for sitting in coffee shops, for not wearing her monastic garments properly, for being vulgar, or showing crude gestures. Many of these rules seem to be about reducing the risk of a *thilashin* appearing disrespectful or inappropriate in public and certain moral principles are imposed that are relevant to the whole community.

However, today, some of the monastic rules are at odds with modernity, either incompatible with the needs of contemporary nunneries or with the current lifestyle of monastic members. There are also new challenges that the traditional monastic rules do not address (for example, the use of smart phones and social media), which are causing many problems in the community. This paper seeks to understand how nunnery schools provide a legal framework to sustain their way of life in modern times and examines other practices that help inform communal cohesion, a cohesion that may also inform ritual practices and religious activities in relation to monks and engagement with the outside world.

Violation and Punishment

Should a *thilashin* commit an offence, the matter is customarily settled by senior nuns, or by a senior monk if it cannot be dealt with by the nuns within the nunnery institution. In the case of a serious dispute, the matter is solved by resorting to the communal jurisprudence of the local monastic community, but rarely reported to the police or local authorities. This implies that, despite the government's efforts to oversee monastic affairs, monks and nuns have followed traditional procedures for conflict resolution by following normative practices in the monastic community and maintaining a degree of autonomy in conducting their affairs. A crime is usually punished or solved within the nunnery; the offender is firstly brought to the notice of her preceptor or the senior nun who acts as her

guarantor, and who takes the matter into her hands. Minor offences, such as petty quarrels, theft, not repaying debts, and personal squabbles, may be common, but these are usually solved within the immediate circle of senior nuns and supervisors.⁵

In the case of a serious offence, the case is discussed by a committee of senior nuns, but the matter is rarely taken beyond the confines of the institution. If the problem persists, it is most likely that the troublemaker will be forced out of the nunnery; that is, she will be asked to disrobe. In most nunneries, an internal system of “checks and controls” is in place, implemented through the web of mutual supervision that aims to deal with possible infringements at an early stage. All new entrants are closely monitored by senior members to minimize problems and unforeseeable events. If any offence comes to light, collective responsibility first requires that the offender’s supervisor be punished on the grounds of duty neglect, and ultimately the responsibility falls on the institutional head: the principal nun. Senior nuns rarely discuss their domestic problems with nuns of other nunneries and junior nuns are told to refrain from gossiping with other nuns. In this way, every measure is taken to curb unnecessary disputes or trouble in the locality, which could become detrimental to the united front of the monastic community.

It is also a widespread practice for Myanmar *thilashin* to have a senior monk (or monks) who acts as *ovādacariya* or private counsel for the nunnery. That monk gives the nuns regular admonition and intervenes in times of internal disputes. Nevertheless, a monk counsel is not imposed, but chosen by nuns themselves. Sometimes this relationship with a monk (and his monastery) is passed down from their nun teachers or predecessors. In this way, nuns endorse the *sangha*’s authority and come under the protection of senior monks who are obliged to oversee their communal affairs. A close relationship is established between all parties involved and such institutional relationships form the crux of local communal infrastructure. Meanwhile, the nuns’ communal code is fastidious about the acceptable mode of conduct in their relationship with monks, wherein a possible situation is simulated and accordingly the correct conduct is stipulated. This reflects an apprehension on the part of senior nuns about their innate vulnerability; therefore, many monastic rules are stipulated to safeguard nuns against compromising their position in relation to monks. Myanmar *thilashin* make extra efforts to minimize damaging consequences in their relationships, due to the realization that women are more heavily penalized when straying from conventional norms. Today, the *Thiláshin Úbadei* is memorized by nun students and its regular recitation is incorporated as part of the curriculum of most nunnery schools, reminding them of the importance of discipline and ethical code of conduct if they wish to sustain themselves in the monastic life.

NOTES

¹ Mya Sein, *Myan-ma Bok-da-ba-tha Taya U Badei* (1962), 319.

² Based on the *Thiláshin Úbadei Kyínkàn*, the revised *Thiláshin Kyínwut bnin Nyunkya-blwa 84* was accepted by the Third State Sangha Council meeting on 22 March 1994. It is distributed by the Department of Religious Affairs and currently stipulates eighty-four detailed instructions for nuns.

³ It is critical that the candidate obtain the consent of a parent or guardian before arriving at the nunnery in order to avoid future problems. However, if both parties disagree, despite her wish, the candidate normally finds someone who else agrees to act as her custodian. The initiative to become a nun in most cases comes from the initiate herself, so as long as she remains resolute, in most cases she succeeds in getting her way. If she is referred by a reputable person known to the senior nuns,

possibly as a lay donor or respected member of the community, the host nunnery's acceptance tends to be more straightforward.

⁴ When the *bbikkhūni sangha* was in existence, it was an essential requirement for a female candidate to undergo two years of probationary training as a *sikkhamānā* before full ordination.

⁵ A nun student is allowed to return home and visit her family at least once a year, but she has to ask permission whenever she leaves the nunnery. The maximum length of stay that is allowed is fifteen days. If there is a special reason, such as illness or parental duty, then she is allowed to extend her stay. Nonetheless, if her stay extends beyond five months, she will need to find a new nun supervisor to take her on and she can only return as a beginner in the nuns' communal pecking order.

Contemporary Thai Buddhist Nuns: Monastic Discipline and Social Engagement

Monica Lindberg Falk

In Thailand, women are active in the Buddhist field, both as supporters of male and female renunciants and as female Buddhist leaders. This paper focuses on the Thai Theravāda Buddhist nuns, *mae chis*, who have existed in Thailand for centuries and form the largest group of Buddhist nuns in Thailand. It is based on anthropological fieldwork carried out during 2014 and 2015 and draws also on material collected in earlier fieldwork. The number of female renunciants in Thailand is unknown, but it is estimated that there are approximately 20,000 *mae chis* and about 100 novices (*samaneris*) and fully ordained *bhikkhunis*. Both *mae chis* and *bhikkhunis* are outside the official (male) *sangha* structure, which has made it possible for female renunciants to create their own space outside the (male) *sangha*'s framework.

I have argued elsewhere that from a somewhat marginalized position in society, groups of *mae chis* have in recent decades gained increased religious authority.¹ Examples of individual *mae chis* who are venerated for their high level of Buddhist development have long existed.² Still, there are disparities in the status of *mae chis* based on educational level, wealth, and social position before ordination. The *mae chis*' educational standard has increased over the years and more *mae chis* today have access to both secular and Buddhist education.³ However, *mae chis* at some of the nunneries I visited in 2015 expressed that there is a shortage of female teachers and especially a lack of female *abhidhamma* teachers.

The *mae chis*' refined practice and upgraded educational level have resulted in a more distinct boundary between the *mae chis* and the laypeople and that has been important for *mae chis*' ordained identity. A clearer boundary has also been important for *mae chis* who are engaged in social activities, since the secular nature of social engagement could undermine the *mae chis*' ordained position. Social activities are very seldom a problem for monks, who have an undisputed monastic position, but are sometimes problematic for *mae chis*, due to their somewhat ambiguous and context-dependent position between the lay and the ordained realms. That ambiguity reveals how crucial the boundary is between Thai Buddhist ascetics and the laity. The boundary is daily confirmed by the interactions between laypeople and monastics on the alms round. Thai monastics are considered "fields of merit" for laypeople and that reciprocal relationship is verified by laypeople sustaining the monastic communities by giving alms, a practice that is meritorious for the alms giver. The monastics provide Buddhist teachings, counselling, and meditation instructions to the laypeople, for example, and Thai temples commonly become a refuge for people in times of crisis.

This paper examines how the *mae chis* form religious cohesion at nunneries. It investigates how the practices and spatial organization of *mae chis* at nunneries separate them from lay life and shape both their religious identity and their religious communities. The paper addresses the rules and regulations that Thai nuns have set up to guide their lives and also deals with activities that involve laypeople, especially *chi phrams*, women who wear white and stay at nunneries temporarily.⁴

Rules at the Nunneries

Mae chis are scattered all over the country. Therefore, in 1969 a national organization of nuns, the Thai Nuns' Institute (*Sathaban Mae Chi Thai*) was established with the purpose of co-ordinating the *mae chis*. The *mae chis*' religious practices were not uniform and there were variations in ordination procedures and regulations pertaining to *mae chis*. A role of the Thai Nuns' Institute was to unite the *mae chis* and form communal cohesion. In 1975, the Thai Nuns' Institute published a *Mae Chi Handbook*, which, among other things, is the *mae chis*' guidebook for righteous living.

Not all *mae chis* are members of the Thai Nuns' Institute, but the handbook that the Institute published is regularly revised and widely circulated and used by *mae chis* throughout the country, including by *mae chis* who are not members of the Thai Nuns' Institute. The handbook is detailed and explains the Thai Nuns' Institute's administrative structure. The ordination procedure is described and the preceptor's and *mae chi* candidate's minimal qualifications are stipulated. Besides the eight-precept observance, the handbook also contains the 75 *sekhaya*, the training rules for monastics that govern every aspect of daily activities and behaviour. These 75 training rules are an additional support and guide to help the ordained to regulate their lives.

Vocations that are explicitly mentioned in the handbook as improper for *mae chis* are, for example, fortune telling, giving massage, performing miracles, becoming possessed, and playing games or lotteries. *Mae chis* are also forbidden to perform a task for another person for payment, to serve or work for laypeople, to engage in any commercial activity, and to collect donations unless they are not for a specific purpose. The mildest penalty for breaking the disciplinary rules is a reminder of the rules by the head *mae chi*; the most severe is to defrock the *mae chi* and revoke her *mae chi* identity card. The handbook states that a committee of *mae chis* should decide on a suitable punishment.

The Creation of Nunneries

The Thai Nuns' Institute has stipulated that a nunnery must house at least three *mae chis* in order to be acknowledged as a nunnery. Thai Buddhist nunneries can be established without any special formalities and the nunneries are not registered with the *sangha*. Some nunneries are built on land owned by the *mae chis* or their families. Laypeople often initiate the foundation of a nunnery by donating land for the specific purpose of establishing a nunnery. The creation of a nunnery is usually managed by one or a group of *mae chis*. Land for the purpose of setting up a nunnery is sometimes donated to the Thai Nuns' Institute, which then appoints *mae chis* to establish and lead the nunnery. There are also many *mae chis* who have chosen to live at hermitages with only a few other *mae chis*. *Mae chis* who live in seclusion commonly focus on intensive meditation practice.

Buddhist temples for monks in Thailand are categorized based on their official status. A *wat* is a temple with an ordination hall and/or a shrine hall. A *thipak* or *samnak song* is an unofficial/unsanctified temple" or monastic centre without an ordination hall. *Samnak/thipak songs* generally consist of a few *kuti*s (monks' or nuns' living quarters; often a small basic one-room house) and a *sala* (a multi-purpose hall). The majority of the *mae chis* live in separate communities within the temples' administrative structure. In accordance with traditional Therāvada practice, the *kuti*s of male and female renunciants are separate from one another.

Nunneries do not have the same privileges as temples. As a result, nunneries have the potential to be ambiguous in ways that monks' temples do not. Nunneries can also easily become lay centers if religious practices are not upheld, because nunneries lack some of the significant consecrated structures that are present at temples, due to which the buildings cannot be transformed into lay structures. It is considered important that *mae chis* live together in order to accomplish the aim of ordained life: moral and spiritual development. According to the *mae chis*' rules, a *mae chi* should not live with laypeople.

The manner in which life is carried out at the nunnery is essential for shaping the nunnery into a religious place. Following the monastic code and upholding the monastic schedule are minimal demands. Daily chanting and Buddhist practice are vital; if morning and evening chants are not maintained, *mae chis* do not consider the place to be suitable for a nuns' community.

Ordained *Mae chis* and Lay *Chi phrams*

Ordination is the first step on the religious path, after which the process of internalizing the monastic code begins. The ritual of ordination and subsequent conduct of monastic life both make a distinction between the lay and religious realms and also generate a hierarchical form of unity in the ordained community. According to the *Mae chi Handbook*, the requirements for ordination as a *mae chi* are: the candidate must be a woman, not be pregnant or caring for a baby, in good health, free from debt, and free from addiction to drugs. Moreover, she must not have a criminal record or be disabled.

It is common for women in Thailand to stay at temples and nunneries for a short period of time and follow the monastic routine with daily chants and meditation. These laywomen dress in white and are called *chi phram*. Both *mae chis* and *chi phrams* adopt the eight Buddhist precepts and some *mae chis* receive ten precepts, the same as the novice monks receive. Women who are initiated as *chi phrams* usually receive the precepts from a *mae chi*. A *mae chi* candidate commonly receives the precepts from monks and *mae chis*, and the ritual is more elaborate than the one for *chi phrams*. The *mae chi* ritual also generally involves the candidate's parents and relatives.⁵ In brief, the eight precepts are: to abstain from killing, stealing, sexual activity, lying, taking intoxicants, eating after noon, avoiding beautification or entertainment, and sleeping on thick mattresses. Moral conduct is said to be the foundation of the practice. *Mae chis* learn morality by studying Buddhist texts, upholding the Buddhist precepts and following the *mae chi* rules.

In contrast to *chi phrams*, the *mae chis* shave their hair and eyebrows. This custom is the strongest marker of leaving the lay world. The *mae chi* rules command that a *mae chi* must shave her hair and eyebrows at least once a month, on the full moon. The distinctive dress that monastics wear is also a definite indicator of their ordained state. The rules give clear instructions about the external appearance of the *mae chi* and the correct manner of wearing the robe. The *chi phram* manner of dress differs from the robe of a *mae chi*. *Mae chis* are allowed to keep their lay name and use them together with the honorific title *mae chi*, whereas *chi phrams* use just their lay name. Some *mae chis* acquire a Buddhist name at their ordination.

An ordained person is one who has been transformed from being a layperson who accumulates merit to a field of merit for laypeople. I have argued that *mae chis* at self-governed nunneries are considered field of merits by lay people,⁶ a boundary that *chi phrams* do not cross. The early morning alms round is central to the Thai monastics' practice and displays the reciprocal relationship between laity and monastics. *Mae chis* at nunneries perform the alms round in the morning. However, not all *mae chis* go for alms. In fact, the majority of *mae chis* who live in monks' temples are not allowed to participate in the alms rounds since that practice is reserved for monks.⁷ *Mae chis* at monks' temples receive food from laypeople who come to the temple and donate directly to the *mae chis*. At some temples, monks give food to the *mae chis*. It is also common for *mae chis* to cook their own food.

Mae chis' Social Engagement

Mae chis' religious performance, their hard work at the nunneries, and their strict monastic behaviour have been positively acknowledged by the lay people. Their skilled practice has also shaped communal cohesion among the *mae chis*. *Mae chis* very often engage with laypeople as teachers, counsellors, advisers, and so forth. Activities are characterized as being suitable for *mae chis* or suitable for lay people. Special chores that are closely associated with the lay realm, such as childcare, are not considered appropriate for *mae chis* because of the risk of attachment.

Meditation is part of the *mae chis*' daily practice and meditation retreats that are open for lay people are commonly organized at nunneries. Meditation is central for developing mindfulness and equanimity, for learning to recognize habitual thought patterns, and for handling emotions. Meditation has been described as a suitable practice for nuns.⁸ In Thailand, there are many examples of both *mae chis* and laywomen who are skilled meditation practitioners and meditation instructors.⁹

Nunneries are open to laywomen. On special occasions, such as the Buddhist weekly holy day (*wan phra*), it is common for women to spend the day at the nunnery and observe the eight Buddhist precepts. Lay women can be initiated as *chi phrams* for only one day, if they so wish. As described above, *chi phrams* wear white, but in contrast to *mae chis* they do not shave their hair and eyebrows.

Some Thai nunneries are experiencing an increasing demand from laywomen who want to become *chi phrams* and practise meditation. With the background of the recent decades' growth of self-governed nunneries and reports of Thai women's growing interest in Buddhist monastic life, I will give an example of the activities of *mae chis* and laywomen at a nunnery in the south of Thailand. This nunnery is not one of the recently established nunneries. It is more than 100 years old and used to be well known for advanced Buddhist studies and meditation practice. The nunnery is located in a city and is easily accessible by local transportation. At the nunnery, laypeople come and go and *mae chis* take turns watching the entrance of the nunnery. At most nunneries I am familiar with, laywomen make an appointment with the nunnery to receive *chi phram* initiation, which is often conducted individually. However, at this nunnery the demand for *chi phram* initiation is so high that the nunnery has begun to organize collective *chi phram* initiations according to a set schedule. Also due to high demand, the nunnery has begun to restrict the length of stay for *chi phrams* at the nunnery; if they want to stay longer than 15 days they are requested to go forth as *mae chis*.

The nunnery has become a refuge for women who desire a better life, or wish to recover from misfortunes and difficulties. The *mae chis* say that they need to assist the women who come to the nunnery and seek their help. Staying at the nunnery requires that women become *chi phrams*, follow the eight Buddhist precepts, and participate in the daily meditation sessions. The support that the *mae chis* provide is based on their Buddhist knowledge.

At the nunnery, the *mae chis* who are most senior in rank teach the newly ordained *mae chis* about the precepts and rules, and more junior *mae chis* are appointed to instruct the *chi phrams*. Having large numbers of laywomen at the nunnery is regarded as difficult, especially when the *chi phrams* find it hard to follow the precepts and the nunnery's rules. The *mae chis* have found it necessary to add some rules about behaviour in order to help the *chi phrams* be mindful and help keep the nunnery a serene place for religious practice. However, the numerous *chi phrams* at the nunnery have created an unbalanced situation and resulted in the *mae chis* spending more and more time organizing and helping out with training the *chi phrams*. This gives the *mae chis* very little time for their own practice, which has led to a decrease in the number of the *mae chis* at the nunnery. The imbalance between the *mae chis*' service to others and their own practice has also become a challenge for communal cohesion at the nunnery.

Laypeople are crucial for sustaining the daily lives of monastics in Thailand. Temples and nunneries are refuges for laypeople in difficult situations and monastics happily assist them. Nunneries in contemporary Thailand provide education, Buddhist training, and help laypeople in many ways. At some nunneries, this type of work becomes the *mae chis*' main activity. A study conducted more than 30 years ago at a large temple in Bangkok compared the amount of time that *mae chis* and monks spent on Buddhist studies and meditation, and found that *mae chis* had only a fraction of the time afforded to monks because the *mae chis* had so many other duties at the temple.¹⁰ At nunneries that are popular with laypeople, there is a risk that *mae chis* may spend most of their time assisting not the monks, but the laity. The *mae chis* need their own space and time to care for their Buddhist community and a lack of balance

could threaten their ascetic lives.

NOTES

¹ Monica Lindberg Falk, *Making Fields of Merit: Buddhist Female Ascetics and Gendered Orders in Thailand* (Copenhagen/Washington: NIAS Press/University of Washington Press, 2007), 247, 254.

² Martin Seeger, “‘Against the Stream’: The Thai Female Buddhist Saint Mae Chi Kaew Singlam (1901–1991),” *South-East Asia Research* 18:3(2010) 586–88; and Martin Seeger, “Reversal of Female Power, Transcendentality, and Gender in Thai Buddhism: The Thai Buddhist Female Saint Khun Mae Bunruean Tongbuntoem (1895–1964),” *Modern Asian Studies* 47:5(2013) 3–4.

³ Falk, *Making Fields of Merit*, 218–23, 249; Steven Collins and Justin McDaniel, “Buddhist ‘Nuns’ (Mae Chi) and the Teaching of Pali in Contemporary Thailand,” *Modern Asian Studies* 44:6 (2010) 1399; Mae Chi Kritsana Raksachom and Martin Seeger, “Mae Chi (Buddhist Nuns): Problems and Opportunities of Access to Higher Education Organized by Thai *Sangha*,” *The Chulalongkorn Journal of Buddhist Studies* 8(2014) 104–105.

⁴ *Chi phram* are named after brahmin devotees who wore white without shaving their heads. Nerida Cook, “The Position of Nuns in Thai Buddhism: Parameters of Religious Recognition,” Master’s thesis, Australian National University, 1981, 44.

⁵ Falk, *Making Fields of Merit*, 81–84, 104–105; and Joanna Cook, *Meditation in Modern Buddhism: Renunciation and Change in Thai Monastic Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 62–63.

⁶ Falk, *Making Fields of Merit*, 167–68.

⁷ See Cook, *Meditation in Modern Buddhism*, 14.

⁸ Nerida Cook, “The Position of Nuns in Thai Buddhism: Parameters of Religious Recognition,” Master’s thesis, Australian National University, 1981, 64; Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, *Thai Women in Buddhism* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1991), 58–59; and Sid Brown, *The Journey of One Buddhist Nun: Even Against the Wind* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), 69.

⁹ See, for example, Tan Acharn Kor Khao-suan-luang, *Looking Inward: Observations on the Art of Meditation* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1991; John Van Esterik, “Women Meditation Teachers in Thailand,” *Women of Southeast Asia*, ed. Penny Van Esterik (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1996), pp. 33–41; Seeger, “‘Against the Stream’”; and Seeger, “Reversal of Female Power.”

¹⁰ Cook, “The Position of Nuns in Thai Buddhism,” 101–106.

Monasticism, Contemplation, and the Disciplined Life of Buddhist Nuns in Sri Lanka

Nirmala S. Salgado

This paper discusses how contemporary Sri Lankan nuns¹ engage in training practices and live disciplined monastic lives in community.² The main research for this paper was conducted in December 2014 and August 2016 when I visited communities of nuns in training including, but not exclusively, larger meditation centers and teaching institutions.³ Whereas nuns in Sri Lanka generally live in small communities comprising three to five nuns at most, the larger communities I visited ranged from about twelve to forty nuns. Those large communities often served as temporary living communities, where the nuns trained for a few months (meditating or studying) before returning to smaller (home) communities. I met with senior monastics and their students, some of whom I have known for over two decades and who are associated with twenty different nunnery-training centers.

The questions I raise and seek to answer concern the maintenance of communal cohesion and the extent to which the disciplinary practices relating to the cultivation of moral dispositions or *sila* are observed among different communities of nuns. I will demonstrate that barring specific practices that are detailed in the *vinaya* and are prescribed for fully ordained monastics (such as the *Patimokkha* and the *Kathina*), nuns in Sri Lanka, whether fully ordained or not, are expected to observe common daily practices that are generally understood as essential to the cultivation of moral dispositions and the communal life of their centers. Those daily practices, together with the acceptance of the authority of a head nun (and/or monk) are seen as integral to the training of all nuns.⁴ It is noteworthy that senior *sil matas* and *bhikkhunis* alike find recourse to similar corrective measures at their respective centers when young nuns neglect their duties or ignore regulations.

Discipline and Contemplative Practices

One may question how nuns who appear to follow only ten training-precepts and do not seem to be bound by the detailed prescriptions of the Pali *vinaya* can lead disciplined monastic lives in large communities. I received different answers to this question. Most *sil matas* indicated that they are expected to live a life that goes well beyond the observance of only ten training-precepts. Some monastics engaged in the training of very young *sil matas* said that even *sil matas* attempt to observe the prescriptions of the *vinaya* text “as much as possible” while omitting those observances that are considered unique to *bhikkhunis*. Others maintained that even though they do not aim to observe all that is in that text, they still have a *vinaya* (form of moral discipline). Affirming the importance of her *vinaya* practice, one *sil mata* said: “As long as there is *vinaya*, the *sasana* (Buddhist dispensation) exists; without *vinaya*, the *sasana* will vanish.”

The notion of nuns following rules (*niti*) was reframed for me by *bhikkhunis* as well as *sil matas*, and in a similar fashion. Some of them balked at the notion of *niti*, a term that is most commonly used for the kind of state legislation that has little to do with the cultivation of *sila*.⁵ According to one nun, “You cannot discipline (*badanna*) young nuns with a list of rules (*niti*); they must remain in constant meditation/contemplation.” Nevertheless, she and others who questioned my use of the term *niti* (as rule) indicated that what was most important was following a daily routine in an appropriate manner. They indicated that the notion of *niti* usually lacked association with moral practices (*sila*) and insisted that following a daily routine was crucial for the cultivation of restraint and discipline.⁶ If a nun neglected the assigned hermitage duties (*vatha vath*), the senior nun(s) would first make inquiries regarding the cause of neglect, which, they maintained, should evoke compassion and understanding rather than occasion the infliction of punishment. Most often, lapses in discipline were the result of sickness, forgetfulness,

or laziness, and were best corrected without the punitive action implied in the implementation of *niti*, or rules.

While the observance of *vatha vath* is fundamental to the daily training of all nuns, whether at training centers or at hermitages (*aramayas*), some centers have strict regulations (*niti*) regarding communications with those outside the nunnery, regulations that have occasionally been violated by junior nuns. The most common (albeit rare) violation I encountered concerned the use of cell phones, which are forbidden at the teaching centers I visited. Nevertheless, in such instances where the regulation is violated, the offending nun, rather than being subjected to strict disciplinary measures, is generally admonished in a private conversation with a senior nun at the training center.

In rare instances – if, for example, the nun persists in non-compliance, she is reported to her ordaining teacher-nun at her home hermitage. If she refuses to heed the advice of her ordaining teacher-nun, she has to leave the training center and return to her home hermitage. Both *bhikkhunis* and *sil matas* maintain that junior nuns, whether aged eight or twenty-eight, are nuns in training, that is, nuns are still in need of moral guidance. The focus on *training* tended to lead nuns to emphasize the importance of regulations not as rules (with an emphasis on punitive procedures), but rather as moral guidelines intended to enhance a total life of renunciation.

When I asked for information about specific rules of training, I was provided with the daily work schedule, a sequenced iteration of activities very similar in the different *sil mata* and *bhikkhuni* centers I visited. The daily schedule, implemented, among other things, to encourage the mental and physical training of nuns, is to be followed without exception. The scheduled activities at most nunneries, whether they be small hermitages or large centers, begins at about 4:30 am and ends at about 10:00 pm. They involve detailed expectations of how nuns are to comport themselves when engaging in all activities, including matters related to personal hygiene, the cleaning and upkeep of the center, meditation, study, partaking of alms and communications with householders, and rest. Many of these activities (*vatha vath*) are conducted in small groups that are supervised by a senior nun. When I discussed the meaning of *vatha vath* with senior monastics, they told me that, for the most part, *vatha vath* refers to any and all activity that contributes to the maintenance and communal cohesion of a center. That includes sweeping, cleaning, preparing an area for offerings, and engaging in other religious rituals at scheduled times – activities that are to be always performed in a mindful manner. Some monastics said that cleaning at an *aramaya* or temple was quite different from cleaning in a household, and one would not be doing *vatha vath* in the latter. They indicated that the practice of *vatha vath* is fundamental to the contemplative life and essential to communal cohesion.

Communal Differences

Nuns at both smaller hermitages and large meditation and teaching institutions engage in practices that correlate with the *habitus*⁷ of their communities. There are four main variables that affect this correlation, namely: (1) whether or not the nuns live in teaching institutions or meditation centers; (2) the degree to which the nuns' centers are connected to state networks of monastics; (3) the extent to which the nuns observe the recommendations of the *vinaya* texts; and (4) whether or not they have received the higher ordination. These variables contribute to shaping the habitus of the nuns' communities. For example, teaching centers, unlike the meditation centers I visited, admit very young renunciants. As a result, the senior nuns at teaching centers implement harsher disciplinary practices than at meditation centers, insisting that stricter corrective measures are necessary for younger people. In addition, communal connections are forged by national and district networks. For instance, *sil matas* who are expected to work closely with the state are asked to ensure that all *sil matas* at their hermitages register

with the state and clearly differentiate themselves from *bhikkhunis*. These *sil matas* are bound by the stipulations set forth by their national committee and in accordance with government regulations. Nevertheless, the identity of *sil matas* vis-à-vis *bhikkhunis* is addressed differently and to different extents by the former, depending partly on how well they know the *vinaya* texts and the extent to which they wish to embrace them.

While the daily routine contributing to communal cohesion among centers of nuns is similar, the idea of who or what constitutes a community is not so easy to delineate. Larger communities of nuns cannot be defined in terms of physical location alone – they interface and overlap with the other monastic communities. The *sil mata* and *bhikkhuni* training centers (also linked to district and national networks of *sil matas* or *bhikkhunis*) are closely connected to the home hermitages of their junior trainee-nuns. Belonging to a communal network means meeting the expectations of all senior nuns within that network. Such expectations include attending district and/or national meetings in which policies and regulations affecting nuns in that particular network are decided, assisting with organizing and participating in local and national Sanghamitta festivities, and (in the case of *bhikkhunis*) observance of *vinaya* prescriptions. If individual nuns fall short of expectations set by the broader network of nuns, the most senior nun(s) of their *bhikkhuni* or *sil mata* national organizations (and other senior nuns within the networks) would remind them of their duties and attempt to ensure that they comply.

Some differences of discipline and habitus among nuns relate to whether or not they belong to *bhikkhuni* training centers. Yet, it is noteworthy that disciplinary practices at the separate training centers where *bhikkhunis* and *sil matas* respectively receive a standard monastic (*pirivena*-like) education, are very similar. Those centers are home to young nuns of about eight years of age and upwards. There are many more young nuns today who are training at such centers than there were three decades ago. The youth of these nuns and the emphasis on study has encouraged the implementation of different types of disciplinary procedures to ensure that student-nuns meet expectations. While those young nuns are still asked to fulfill their daily *vatha vath*, they are also required to complete their homework on time. If and when they do not, they are corrected or scolded harshly, or threatened with a cane. Corporal punishment, which was permitted in public schools in Sri Lanka until a few years ago (it is now punishable by law), is still seen as an appropriate form of discipline among some Sri Lankan families. Senior *sil matas* and *bhikkhunis* with whom I discussed the matter also consider it an acceptable way of disciplining a young nun. However, according to them, corporal punishment is used only when other forms of discipline, such as verbal chastisement or the threat of a cane, fail to work.

As nuns have become more visible in Sri Lanka in the past three decades, and as nunnery centers have become larger and well-known, some parents or guardians have increasingly relied on nunnery centers to raise their daughters. Although most nuns I met welcome and embrace the monastic training, there are some exceptions. Some young nuns (not unlike some young monks) seem to feel more trapped than liberated. I did not learn of such unwilling nuns in my previous research, so I attribute their presence to a change in the new prominence given to centers of Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka, and the respect given to both *sil matas* and *bhikkhunis* throughout the country, which they did not enjoy some decades ago, when nuns were seen as mostly illiterate, impoverished, and with few if any resources for religious training or education.

Conclusion

In this paper I have demonstrated how and why routine daily activities of nuns are fundamental to the cultivation of discipline and the communal cohesion of nunnery centers. I have indicated how certain variables such as the age of trainee-nuns, the connection of nuns' centers with the state, and the

extent to which nuns observe *vinaya* prescriptions affect disciplinary practices. I conclude by emphasizing that, despite some significant differences in how community may be defined and in how discipline is understood and practiced among *bhikkhunis* and *sil matas* in Sri Lanka, senior *bhikkhunis* and *sil matas* alike maintain that the correct observance of daily routines is necessary for cultivating moral dispositions and maintaining communal cohesion at their nunneries.

NOTES

¹ By “nuns,” I refer to all female renunciants who live permanently or temporarily outside the familial household. Nuns include renunciants who are (or are training to be) *bhikkhunis* (higher ordained renunciants), *samaneris* (novice *bhikkhunis* or novice ten training-precept renunciants), and (*dasā*) *sil matas* or (ten) training-precept renunciants.

² Please do not cite, duplicate or distribute in any way, except during the 15th Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women in Hong Kong, June 2017.

³ I am grateful for a (2013-2014) Collaborative Research Grant from the Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Program in Buddhist Studies and a (2016-2017) In-Country Research Grant from the Augustana College Freistat Center for supporting this research.

⁴ Elsewhere I have discussed how the focus on such moral practices becomes what is both essential and empowering for nuns. Nirmala S. Salgado, *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice: In Search of the Female Renunciant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 15, 191–210.

⁵ What nuns conveyed to me was that the daily routine was not intended to be about (in Agamben’s words) “punctilious precepts and ascetic techniques,” but rather constituted a dialectic between rule and life, where communal life itself is “a total and unceasing liturgy....” Giorgio Agamben (trans. Adam Kotsoko), *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), xi–xii.

⁶ Here we are reminded of the concept of “embodied practices,” where the bodily training of monastics is inseparable from religious and mental cultivation. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 76–77.

⁷ I use the notion of “habitus” in terms of what is meant by Pierre Bourdieu in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 72–95.

The Lives of Buddhist Nuns in the Tawang Region of Arunachal Pradesh, Northeastern India

Genden Lhamu

This paper is based on research that I conducted in February and March of 2016 in the Tawang region of Arunachal Pradesh, one of the most remote areas in northeastern India. This research was part of my MPhil program in Buddhist Studies at the University of Delhi. During this time, I investigated daily life activities lives of Buddhist nuns. Scholars consider Arunachal Pradesh a paradise for the study of its indigenous histories and cultures, including the culture of the Monpa people. Located to the north of Assam, east of Bhutan, and south of Tibet, this area was once part of the southern frontier of Tibet. It became part of India in 1914.

I undertook this research project because, as a Buddhist nun born and raised in Tawang, I felt it was important to document the virtually unknown history of nunneries, known as *ani gompas*, in this area. While there are several published works on Buddhist nuns of Himalayan regions such as Ladakh, Sikkim, Nepal, Himachal, Bhutan, and so on, to date, there is no documentation of nuns and nunneries in the Tawang region.

During the course of my research, I documented that there are approximately two hundred novice nuns living in several communities, all belonging to the Gelugpa School. Most of the nuns are under the age of 20, with only a few over the age of 75. I visited the three main nunneries – Brahma Dung-Chung, Gyangong, and my own community of Singsur – and collected data through interviews with more than five nuns from each nunnery. In addition, I documented a hermitage. The nuns expressed themselves freely, explaining their decision to become a nun, their education and teachers, the milestones in their lives, their disappointments, achievements, daily routines, and acts of devotion and service.

Monks and nuns comprise roughly three percent of Tawang's population. They live in five monasteries, four nunneries, and two hermitages. Except for one Nyingma monastery and one Kagyud monastery, all the monasteries, nunneries, and hermitages in Tawang follow the Gelug tradition. Most of the nuns are members of the indigenous Monpa community and come from poor villages to study and practice Buddhist teachings and rituals.

Buddhism was brought to the Tawang region during the eighth century by Guru Padmasambhava and is broadly of the Tibetan Mahayana School. Before the advent of Buddhism in the region, people followed the Bön tradition, which was also the ancient religion of Tibet. With the advent of Buddhism in the region, the people gradually gave up their old religious practices and adopted Buddhism. However, the Monpa never completely gave up these practices; instead they absorbed a number of Bön deities into the Buddhist pantheon as protectors, which they then worshipped in the same way as Buddhist rituals. The indigenous Buddhist communities of Arunachal Pradesh have contributed immensely to the arts and culture of the state, and their social, cultural, and religious practices and monuments are important components of the cultural heritage of Northeast India.

Nunneries in Tawang

Brahma Dungchung Ani Gonpa, also known as Tsungon Thukje Choesling, it is located about 8 km distance from the township of Tawang in the northern part of the region of Tawang. This nunnery is considered one of the oldest *gompas* for nuns in the region. The nunnery was commissioned in 1595 by the monk Geshe Karchen Yeshe Gelek from Tashi Lhunpo Monastery in Tsang, Tibet. Currently this nunnery accomodates 55 nuns. Surrounded by delightful springs and rhododendron trees, the *gonpa* is enveloped by natural beauty on all sides. The residents of this nunnery are generally young; most are under 30 and only a few are over the age of 75.

Gyangong Ani Gonpa is situated atop of lovely hillock about 5 km from Tawang Monastery. It was founded in the 16th century by the Merak Lama Lodre Gyatso, a well known disciple of the 5th Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso, who subsequently gave the nunnery to his elder sister Ani

Chokyi Zangmo to administer. Now, the nunnery is under the supervision of the Tawang Monastery known as Gadan Namgyal Lhatse. The nuns previously received their provisions from this monastery. Currently, there are 60 nuns in this nunnery, ranging in age from 10 to 85.

Singsor Ani Gonpa, my own community, is situated near Lhou Village. It was built in 1960 by H. E. the 12th Tsona Gontse Rinpoche Jetsun Thupten Jampel. The nunnery drew the attention of this lama due to the pitiable living conditions of the three nuns who lived there, lead an austere life in the service of the great ascetic Lama Jangchub Palsang. With a vision to promote Buddhism in the Mon region, Tsona Rinpoche built this nunnery. Toward the end of the 1990s, the structure of the nunnery had become dilapidated and was not adequate even considering the nuns' humble standard of living. He took responsibility for constructing a new assembly hall and made overall improvements to nuns' living environment. At present, there are 55 resident nuns, ranging in age from 11 to 80.

Each of these three nunneries has more than 25 small structures (*shak*) of three rooms each that serve as living quarters for the nuns. Each nun must build the *shak* herself with help from family or relatives. In each *shak* accommodates one nun teacher, or *gergan* (*rgen*), who lives together with two or three apprentice nuns, or *gethruk* (*dge phrug*). When the apprentice nuns have completed their training, they move to a different *shak*, so that they can live with new apprentice nuns and take care of them.

Ngang Gong-ma Ani Gonpa, the smallest nunnery in Tawang, is located 35 km from the district head quarters of Tawang. Presently there are 20 nuns living in six *shak*. The majority of the nuns at this nunnery spend their time doing retreat and live very simply compared to the rest of the nunneries in Tawang. Most of the nuns are between 60 and 80 years old; a few of them are between 30 to 35. When I visited this nunnery and asked about its history, the nuns told me that the community evolved around three *gelong* (*bhikshu*, fully ordained monks) who were great meditation practitioners: Gelong Lekey Phuntso, Gelong Rinchin Tsering, and Gelong Lobsang Gonpa. Some of their nieces and other relatives provided them with food and the monks taught them Buddhadharma and meditation. Consequently, these women became the disciples of those three great *gelong* and gradually establish the nunnery that is now known as Ngang Gong-ma Ani Gonpa. A new assembly hall was built at the nunnery in 1998–99.

There are two hermitages for nuns in Tawang, known as Sharmang and Brakarpo (*drakarpo*). Both are located in very isolated places that can only be access by walking for three hours. Sharmang Hermitage has 11 nuns and Brakarpo has 5 nuns. Most of the nuns are between 60 and 80 years old. The nuns live very simple and humble lives in small huts made of clay and bamboo, practicing full-time in three year meditation retreats. Food and other necessities are brought by their relatives and villagers.

The Decision to Enter Monastic Life

The decision to become a nun is influenced by a number of different circumstances, including unhappiness in married life, disharmony in the family, seeking an alternative way of life, and the numbers of girls in a family. The eldest and only children in a family rarely become nuns or monks in Tawang. According to ancient custom, in a family with three sons, the middle son is sent to the monastery; in a family with two sons, the youngest son is sent. Children who are just six to eight years old rarely make the decision themselves to become a nun or monk, but they gradually adjust to monastic life and most of them made ordination a lifelong commitment. Most of the senior nuns that I interviewed said it was their own wish to become a nun, but several of the younger nuns were sent to the monastery by their parents, due to the number of children in their family. For example, Pema is 11 years old and is the youngest nun in our nunnery (Singsor Ani Gonpa). She is the eldest child of her mother's first husband and she was sent to become a nun by her parents due the number of siblings her stepfather has.

The sufferings of life as a laywoman are part of the reason why some women in Tawang choose to join a nunnery. A nun named Thupten Choenyang from Gyangong Gonpa became a nun after one day of married life. She told me that she always wanted to become a nun when she was a child, but being the eldest girl in the family, there was nothing she could do to avoid marriage. Finally, however, she was somehow able to escape from her husband's house after the wedding. Now she is 63 years old. Lobsang

Wangmo, who became a nun at the age of 30, lost her parents when she was young. She got married, but her husband became a drunkard and used to torture her every single day. Finally, she decided to join a nunnery and now she lives a happy life. She told me that I should be very grateful to the Buddha, because he established the *bhiksuni sangha* for women and therefore my life as a nun is very precious.

I became a nun at the age of nine years old, based on my own wish. I begged my parents for permission to become a nun, but they wanted my elder sister to become a nun. She is now the mother of three children. Finally, after many events, circumstances allowed me to go to a nunnery with my grandaunt. It was the happiest day ever in my life, even though at that time I did not know anything about the life of a nun except for the color of the robes. Now, I must say, I have chosen a good life and have never regretted it even once.

Daily Life Activities

The daily life of nuns includes assembly (*tsogs*), prayers, rituals, offering butter lamps, recitation of texts, memorizing ritual texts, meditating, teaching younger nuns, and preparing the altar. These activities support and help develop one's spiritual progress by purifying negative karma, accumulating merit, and increasing one's knowledge of the precious Buddhadharma. There are also occasions when nuns go to visit local villages for *pujas* in several groups of four or five nuns, usually beginning from 7 am and ending around 4 pm. Such religious activities are valuable as a method of practice that accumulates great merit and is considered to have particular efficacy in removing obstacles for the sponsors of the gatherings as well as all sentient beings.

In addition, most nuns perform the preliminary practices (*sngon dro*), which consist of 100,000 prostrations (*chak bum*), 100,000 recitations of the prayer of going for refuge to the three jewels (*kyab dro bum*), 100,000 mandala offerings (*man dre bum*), and so forth. Some nuns often visit Bodhgaya (*Dorje den*) to do prostrations. During their leisure time, nuns collect firewood for cooking and do other tasks. The nuns cook individually and are responsible for their own personal maintenance and activities. Especially in the months of March and April, nuns are quite busy collecting firewood to store for fuel during the wintertime. Temperatures in Tawang can drop to -48°c (-54°f).

Leadership in the Nunneries

Monks have the highest level of authority in the nunneries, where they serve as abbots. Only lesser positions are filled by the nuns: disciplinarian (*geko*), chanting master (*umtse*), stewards (*nyerpa*), and sacristan (*dkon gnyer*). Nuns take up these duties by turns, rotating according to seniority. Gyanggong Nunnery and Brama Dungchung Nunnery both have an abbot from Tawang Monastery (Gadan Namgyal Lhatse); the abbot at Singosor Nunnery is Gontse Rabgyal from the monastery in Bomdila. Abbots often visit the nunnery and give basic teachings on Buddhadharma and ritual instructions.

Religious Activities and Festivals in Nunneries

The main religious festival of the year is Vesak, the full moon day during *sakadawa*, the fourth month of the Tibetan lunar calendar. The largest ritual of the year is the fasting practice known as *nyungne*. During *sakadawa*, all the nunneries in Tawang organize *nyungne* rituals, which are managed by three nuns known as *nyungne zukpa*. Large numbers of laywomen join in the *nyungne* ritual in Tawang; in fact, nuns and laywomen do more fasting practices than men do. Hundreds of villagers come bearing offerings of grain, butter, rice, and cash to offer to the fasting practitioners.

All Buddhist festivals in Tawang follow the Tibetan lunar calendar. On the fourth day of the sixth month of the Tibetan calendar, a festival known as Drukpa Tseshi honors the occasion when Buddha Shakyamuni first turned the universal wheel of the Dharma. On the 22nd day of the ninth month, Lhabab Düchen commemorates the occasion when the Buddha, at the age of 41, returned to Earth after going to the Heaven of the 33 (*Sumchu so Sum*) to teach Dharma to his kind mother. On the 25th day of the tenth month, followers the Gelugpa school commemorate the death of Je Tsongkapa in

a festival known as Gadan Ngachö.

Education

Before his passing into final liberation (*mahāparinirvāna*) in 2014, H.E. the 13th Tsona Rinpoche, the spiritual leader of the region, made great progress toward the goal of Buddhist cultural preservation by establishing a Buddhist college in Arunachal Pradesh. Known as the Central Institute for Himalayan Cultural Studies (CIHCS), it is attended by local nuns and monks, and Tibetan students from all over India. Graduates are able to continue their education further at comprehensive schools with a focus on Buddhist studies. I graduated from CIHCS and several other nuns are currently pursuing higher secondary education and B.A. degrees there. Some nuns attend government junior high schools in nearby villages. Several younger nuns are pursuing their education in places outside of Tawang, such as Dharamsala in Himachal Pradesh and Mundgod in South India, where they have the opportunity to do advanced Buddhist studies.

Economic Support

Nuns come from many different socio-economic backgrounds, but the majority of nuns are from families in the middle or lower ends of the income spectrum. Although monks and nuns are traditionally supported by their communities, resources are scarce and the nuns do not receive the same support and education that is available to the monks. Instead, nuns have much stronger ties to their communities, because they perform *pujas* in local villages and homes on a regular basis during various life crises, such as illness, birth, and death. They also often assume the traditional roles of women householders by helping out in their families' homes during the harvest season, childbirth, death, and other family events.

The nuns of Brahma Dungchung and my own community were previously very poor. At one time, we depended on going for alms to sustain ourselves. At the age of 13 or 14 years, I went for alms on foot many times, often carrying more than 30 kg of barley and rice for several hours and sometimes all day. Our senior nuns used to tell us that, during earlier times, they did not have enough to eat or enough clothes to wear, but they were happy with whatever they had. Since Gyangong Nunnery is located just below Tawang Monastery, the nuns get provisions from that monastery every month.

Over the last few decades, nuns have stopped going for alms, because the late Chief Minister of Arunachal, Dorjee Khandu, who is from a Tawang Buddhist family, provided Rs 1 crore to each nunnery. That huge amount was deposited in each nunnery's savings account and the annual income from the account is divided each year among the nuns to cover their expenses. Nuns mostly use the money to travel outside of Tawang to get teachings from H.H. the Dalai Lama conducted in monasteries such as Drepung, Gaden, and Sera in South India. In addition, nuns often visit pilgrimage sites such as Bodhgaya and other Buddhist sacred sites around India.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the history of nunneries, motivations for becoming nuns, the nuns' daily lives, their activities for maintaining Tibetan Buddhist tradition in Tawang, their devotion, and their close ties with their local communities. From their religious practices, such as reading and reciting Buddhist texts, memorizing prayers, circumambulation, prostrations, three-year retreats, rituals such as *nyungne*, acts of devotion, memorizing ritual texts, meditating, and service such as teaching younger nuns, it is easy to see that the nuns of Tawang are playing important roles and making major contributions to Buddhism in Arunachal Pradesh.

Educating Theravāda Laity about *Bhikkhunis*: Diverse and Innovative Methods

Ellen Posman

Based on ethnographic observations and interviews in Sri Lanka and Thailand during the 2015-2016 academic year, this paper focuses on the methods used by Theravāda *bhikkhunis* to introduce themselves to the public and educate the laity about *bhikkhunis*. In particular, this paper looks at the ideas and actions of four *bhikkhunis*: Bhikkhunis Vijithananda and Dhammacari in Sri Lanka, and Bhikkhunis Nandayani and Bhikkhuni Dhammananda in Thailand. Each of these four women is the chief nun at a temple, and each has particular ideas and methods for raising awareness about Theravāda *bhikkhunis*. Their methods vary, and it is important to see the range of what is being done, but this paper will especially highlight Bhikkhuni Dhammananda's methods as the most innovative.

In Sri Lanka, *bhikkhunis* are often still confused with *dasa sil matas*, and in Thailand, *bhikkhunis* are sometimes confused not only with *mae chis*, but even with *bhikkhus*, because *bhikkhunis* are so unknown. Despite the years of the order's existence, in both countries there are many laypeople who are still not fully aware of the situation, status, or roles of the *bhikkhunis*, and in neither country are they formally recognized by the government or the monastic hierarchy. While the lack of recognition has led to some social and legal problems for *bhikkhunis*, none of the *bhikkhunis* I have met are trying to raise awareness about their troubles. Rather, they are simply attempting to raise awareness about their existence, their legitimacy, and the differences between them and other orders that are technically lay orders, such as the *dasa sil matas* or the *mae chii*.

The methods advocated by these four nuns to raise awareness are an intricate mix of tradition and innovation. Of the four nuns highlighted, Bhikkhuni Nandayani most exemplifies a traditional approach. The *samaneris*, *sikkhamanas*, and *bhikkhunis* whom she oversees at two sister temples near Chiang Mai, Thailand, follow a very strict interpretation of the *vinaya*. For example, the nuns at her temples eat only one vegetarian meal per day, and they do not wear shoes. Her Dhamma talks revolve around traditional topics and texts, and local laypeople credit her with improving life in the area particularly because of her teachings surrounding intoxicants. She has gained the attention of the laity because of the purity of her practice and the quality of her Dhamma talks, which are often replayed on the radio. Word of mouth has clearly spread about her, and during the short time I was there, a group of disabled people from Southern Thailand had traveled north just to meet her and to hear her teachings. Importantly, her teachings and reputation have reached the ears of local monks as well. Although I did not personally attend the regional *kathina* ceremony in Chiang Mai at a main regional temple, I heard from more than one person that the chief monk in the region took the time at that popular ceremony to commend Bhikkhuni Nandayani and the other *bhikkhunis* of Nirodharam, despite the fact that the central Thai monastic hierarchy does not recognize them. In an interview with Nandayani, she confided plans to write to the *sangharaja* about her community of *bhikkhunis*, inviting the *sangharaja* to consider recognizing their community of *bhikkhunis* specifically because of the purity of their practice. She does not tend to talk to the public about the *bhikkhuni* issue so much as try to lead by example and demand impeccable *vinaya* among the members of her community.

The other three *bhikkhunis* included in this discussion are more explicit in their methods of raising awareness. They too utilize traditional *vinaya* and rituals, including *pindapatha* (alms-rounds), the *vassa* (rain retreat), and the *kathina* ceremony (ceremony to end the rain retreat). Of these, the *kathina* ceremony is most important because it is reserved for members of the *sangha*, (here used as monastics rather than as the fourfold *sangha*). In other words, while *dasa sil matas* and *mae chii* can partake in many of the same practices as *bhikkhunis*, they may not receive new robes at a *kathina* ceremony.

Within these traditions, however, are some innovations. Bhikkhuni Vijithananda, for example,

includes an explanation of the *bbikkhunis* in terms of their existence and status in her addresses to the public during the *kathina* ceremony and at other such ritual occasions. Bhikkhuni Vijithananda and the nuns at the Sakyadhita Center in Panadura, Sri Lanka, also emphasize social service, which demonstrates their worth to the community and brings people to the temple, which introduces them and their situation to the public. Their center hosts weekly meditation instruction for local laypeople, weekly Dhamma school as well as secular supplemental school for children, guest Dhamma talks for the community, and a range of community service classes such as parenting classes and health education classes. They have been active in collecting supplies from the community for flood and disaster relief and have distributed those materials to affected areas. And they serve as counselors for many women in the community. Like Bhikkhuni Nandayani in Thailand, Bhikkhuni Vijithananda in Sri Lanka has earned a saintly reputation among the laypeople in her local community, but in this case, that reputation derives more from social services and positive interactions than from purity of practice. The practices of the *bbikkhunis* at the temple are in line with those of the *bbikkhus* nationwide and are regarded as solid, but they do not follow as strict an interpretation of the *vinaya* as those at Nirodharam in Thailand. When addressed as “*manio*,” the traditional term used by laity for *dasa sil matas*, the *bbikkhunis* use the opportunity to educate the community about their status as *bbikkhunis* and the existence of the order. Through these informal interactions as well as within speeches at more formal ceremonies, Bhikkhuni Vijithananda and the nuns of the Sakyadhita Center are raising awareness about the existence of Therāvada *bbikkhunis*.

Rather than, or perhaps in addition to their purity, practices, or activities, Bhikkhuni Dhammacari and Bhikkhuni Dhammananda emphasize education, and specifically explicit education about the history of and legal arguments for the existence of a Theravāda *bbikkhuni* order. Bhikkhuni Dhammacari, originally from Singapore but practicing in Kirindivella in Sri Lanka, insists that training on this issue is important so that Sri Lankan nuns themselves can explain the order to the laity, rather than relying on foreign scholars. She has taught some courses to new *bbikkhunis* regarding the history and legitimacy of the order, and in interviews she proposed that such a course become a part of standardized training for Sri Lankan *bbikkhunis*. If the order is to gain recognition from the government and monastic hierarchy, she believes that Sri Lankan *bbikkhunis* need to be able to counter arguments made about the legitimacy of the order and explain those aspects of the history and *vinaya* to the public.

Of the *bbikkhunis* highlighted here who are implicitly or explicitly working on ways to raise awareness about the Theravāda *bbikkhuni* issue, the one who is most intentional and wide-ranging is Bhikkhuni Dhammananda of Thailand. One of the early advocates of Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda (then Professor Chatsumarn Kabilsingh) was also the first Thai Theravāda *bbikkhuni*; she ordained as a *samaneri* in 2001 and as a *bbikkhuni* in 2003. Because she had been a prominent professor and TV show host in Thailand, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda was a well-known figure by that time, and because of the serious resistance to *bbikkhuni* ordination on the part of the monastic hierarchy (the *sangharaja*) and the government in Thailand, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda’s ordination was highly controversial and covered by many media outlets. Though it was a harrowing experience for her, she did not shy away from the media attention but rather has since utilized the media as a venue from which to raise awareness about the situation of Theravāda *bbikkhunis* and educate the public about their legitimacy. She has written books and articles on the subject and has appeared on many panels, televised and untelevised, in which she has presented the argument for the legitimacy of Theravāda *bbikkhuni* ordination from a historical and legal (*vinaya*-based) perspective.

Bhikkhuni Dhammananda’s most innovative mode of raising awareness, however, is likely her bi-annual temporary ordination ceremonies. These temporary ordination ceremonies confer *samaneri*

ordination for nine days to groups of laywomen who stay at the temple for a nine-day course of instruction. Having observed one such session in December 2015, there is much about it that is similar to the long-standing practice of temporary ordination in Theravāda Buddhism, yet much that is unique to this program. What is traditional is the training in life as a monastic: the nine days include daily morning and evening chanting, some opportunities for instruction in meditation and meditation practice, alms-rounds, living according to the ten vows of a novice, and instruction on robes, vinaya, ethics, and Dhamma. Also traditional are the motivations of the participants, the most common being merit-making for their parents, but also a chance to try out a more spiritual life. Unlike men, it is in no way expected that women partake in temporary ordination as a sort of rite of passage – most of the participants of this group were surprised when they first found out that it was even possible. However, compared with temporary ordination programs for men, some of the time devoted to traditional monastic pursuits is limited in order to make time for an intensive program of education about the *bhikkhuni* lineage.

Each day includes two periods set aside as class periods, and many of the days include an evening program after evening chanting. The class periods are mainly devoted to two topics, corresponding to two books written by Bhikkhuni Dhammananda. The first topic corresponds to the book *Herstory*, which recounts stories of the thirteen foremost *bhikkhunis* of the Buddha's time.¹ While these serve a traditional purpose of highlighting important Buddhist virtues, they simultaneously reinforce the fact that the *bhikkhuni* lineage is not new and that the Buddha, as well as monks at the time of the Buddha, encouraged *bhikkhuni* ordination and praised specific *bhikkhunis* for their attributes. Notably, additional passages have been added to the traditional chanting sessions that honor those illustrious *bhikkhunis* as well, and a set of thirteen statues of those *bhikkhunis* grace one of the meditation halls in the temple.

The second topic closely follows the one booklet handed out to participants as mandatory reading: *Theravāda Bhikkhuni Lineage*.² (*Herstory* is optional reading) The book covers various issues surrounding the *bhikkhuni* lineage and addresses specific arguments that have been leveled against its legitimacy. It includes the Buddha's intention to establish a fourfold *sangha* before his death, the circumstances and legitimacy of the first *bhikkhuni* ordination, an explanation of the eight *garudhamma* ("heavy rules" for *bhikkhunis*), a history of the ancient Theravada *bhikkhuni* order, the relationship between ancient Theravada and Chinese *bhikkhunis*, famous *bhikkhunis* based in Buddhist texts and later archaeology, the historic disappearance of the Theravada *bhikkhuni* order, and the reemergence of the Theravada *bhikkhuni* order in specific countries. In particular, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda in the book and in lectures to *samaneris*, counters arguments made by the Thai *bhikkhu sangha* about the Buddha's intentions, the history of the Theravada *bhikkhuni* order, the necessity of dual ordination, and the legitimacy of the current Thai *bhikkhunis*. Moreover, most of the evening programs consist of Thai television clips about Theravada *bhikkhunis* in contemporary Thailand. In many of these clips, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda herself and/or one of her associates debates and discusses the legitimacy of the Theravada *bhikkhuni* order with moderators or those opposed to the recognition of the order. Although they are ordained as temporary *samaneris*, the women who participate in this program are educated in some *vinaya*, Dhamma, and meditation, and spend a considerable amount of their time being schooled in the arguments they can present as advocates for a *bhikkhuni* order once they have returned to their lay lives. In fact, the booklet mentioned was published to be handed out to them explicitly for this purpose. After explaining the modern history of the bi-annual temporary ordination programs, the introduction says:

During the 9 days, I focused on giving lectures 4 hours a day to make sure that once they returned to lay life, [the temporary samaneris] can answer questions properly, particularly on the ordination lineage. Yet, many of them called back to say that they could not remember the information exactly. Hence I brought out this booklet to help them understand their own ordination lineage... I trust this booklet will provide you with a proper understanding of the issue.³

Clearly, this temporary ordination ritual and program is designed not only to provide laywomen with an opportunity to make merit, experience monastic life, and develop spiritually, but to create a new population of lay ambassadors for the *bhikkhuni* cause who can raise awareness by educating their peers once they return to lay life.

Historically, this is not the first time that temporary ordinations have been used in innovative ways or for political purposes. Richard Gombrich, writing in 1984 about a new tradition of temporary ordination of monks in Sri Lanka, notes that previously Sri Lanka, unlike Thailand and Burma, did not have a custom of temporary ordination, and that the new proposed program would be unlike those of Thailand and Burma.⁴ Rather than acting as a rite of passage, it was designed to involve more laypeople in Buddhism in a new more secularized context, yet reinforce notions that Buddhist monks remain the appropriate teachers and authorities, countering a rising trend in lay-led meditation centers.⁵ The malleability of rituals and ceremonies can be ideal for fusing new social contexts with traditional modes of practice. Bhikkhuni Santini in Indonesia has also utilized temporary ordination as a way of strengthening the community of Buddhist women in Indonesia as well as raising awareness about Buddhism in a minority-Buddhist country. In fact, it was Bhikkhuni Santini who first gave Bhikkhuni Dhammananda the idea to conduct temporary ordinations for women.

This presentation of diverse methods of raising awareness about Theravada *bhikkhunis* is not intended to be exhaustive, nor is it attempting to present some as morally or functionally better than others. The goal here is to celebrate the diversity of methods being used, share them across cultures, and note each *bhikkhuni*'s ability to understand her own social context as well as authentically utilize her own skills and attributes. With more *bhikkhunis* utilizing more ways to educate the public about the existence and legitimacy of the *bhikkhuni* order, the order will hopefully come to be recognized by the Theravāda establishment sooner rather than later.

NOTES

¹ Dhammananda Bhikkhuni, *Herstory* (Phra Nakorn, Thailand: Thai Tibet Center, 2012).

² Dhammananda Bhikkhuni, *Theravada Bhikkhuni Lineage* (Pamphlet, N.p., 2015).

³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴ Richard Gombrich, "Temporary Ordination in Sri Lanka," *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 7:2(1984) 41–65.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

***Upāsikās* in Post-War Taiwan: Wives of Government Officials and Women Writers from Mainland China**

Yu-Chen Li

As is well known, patriarchal societies commonly ignore women's contributions. This paper deals with a group of Buddhist laywomen from Mainland China who made significant contributions to the development of Buddhism in post-war Taiwan, but have been completely ignored due, on the one hand, to the precarious political situation of Taiwan and, on the other hand, to the elevation of Christian beliefs in the National Women's Association by the First Lady, Soong Mei-ling (1927–57). Nevertheless, these Buddhist laywomen from Mainland China utilized their social and cultural resources to advance Buddhism in Taiwan.

These Buddhist laywomen from Mainland China can be divided to two sub-groups: wives of government officials and women writers. Coming from elite backgrounds, they were well-educated, well-connected, conversant in the official language of the new government in Taiwan, and capable of wielding considerable social and economic power. With their political and economic resources, they were major benefactors to Buddhist monastic orders in Taiwan. With their social and cultural advantages, these women helped promote Buddhism and connected Buddhist communities in different Chinese Buddhist societies. At a time when most women did not have much access to education or socio-economic power, these laywomen's contributions were historically significant. I will introduce each of these sub-groups and discuss how they used their resources to further Buddhism.

Buddhist laywomen from Mainland China left quite an impression on Taiwanese nuns in post-war Taiwan. In fact, even Taiwanese laywomen from wealthy backgrounds were very impressed with their elegance, grace, confidence, and straightforwardness. In my fieldwork, I found that Taiwanese women, both monastic and lay, described the Buddhist laywomen from Mainland China as “graceful” and “having youthful skin.” They attributed the youthful appearance of these women to their privileged position in society, observing, “those women from Mainland China do not need to do hard labor.”¹ The economy in post-war Taiwan was largely agriculture-based, and most Taiwanese women at the time had to participate in farming. Even women from wealthy families of doctors and businessmen were expected to take care of household chores and the family businesses. By contrast, the small number of laywomen who migrated from Mainland China to Taiwan had no farms to take care of. They were either professionals themselves, such as Bangyuan Qi, who was a professor of English,² or were married to high-ranking government officials or military officers. Their social position afforded them the leisure to pursue Buddhist activities.

Wives of Government Officials: Sun-Zhang Qingyang and Zheng-Ke Shufang

The Mainlanders who migrated to Taiwan after the war were mostly men. Only high-ranking government officials and military officers could manage to take their families with them. Those women who got to Taiwan were therefore well-connected elites. The most noteworthy of these were Qingyang Sun-Zhang, the wife of General Liren Sun, who was the chief commander of the Army, and Shufang Zheng-Ke, the wife of Jieming Zheng, who was the director of the Intelligence Bureau. There are no official records of the religious affiliations of the members of the National Women's Association that was chaired by the First Lady Meiling Jiang-Song. However, given the personal beliefs of the First Lady and her conflation of modernization, Westernization, and Christianization, we know that the organization was dominated by Christians.

Sun-Zhang stood out as a Buddhist, and her identity as a Buddhist allowed her to reach where the First Lady could not, due to her association with traditional Chinese culture and people who identified with it. Well-connected with both nuns and other laywomen in Taiwan, she was one of the top fundraisers for the National Women's Association. She also raised funds for the printing of the Tripitaka and for the publication of Buddhist magazines. She wrote articles encouraging women to adopt Buddhist practices, renounce luxuries, and reject the mundane view of bearing as many children

as possible. Once she gave a public talk with Bhiksuni Tianyi, known as “The Number One Bhiksuni,” in which she testified to the efficacy of Bodhisattva Guanyin in curing rare and terminal diseases through water blessed by the Great Compassion *dhāraṇī*.³ Even when her husband General Sun was accused of spying for the Communist Party and arrested, she was dedicated to spreading the Dharma with her resources. She passed away in Taiwan, bequeathing everything she had to various Buddhist communities.

By comparison, Shufang Zheng-Ke was rather low-key. She was born in an upper-class family in Wuhan and received a Western education. She did not suffer footbinding like many other women of her generation; in fact, before the age of 18, she had traveled the world dressed as a man. Her family was Buddhist, having taken refuges under Bhikṣu Baisheng, who was the chair of Buddhist Association of the Republic of China at the time. Her husband Jieming Zheng’s family was Buddhist, too; his in-laws were members of the Thai royal family. Although she was not as publicly Buddhist as Zhang, Ke was a generous benefactor to Buddhist communities. With a few other wives of government officials, she formed a Dharma protectors’ organization, and together they dedicated themselves to supporting monks from China and sponsoring Buddhist activities. She helped Bhikṣu Shengyen re-enter monastic life after his service in the military. In 1971, she was the first to receive the *bodhisattva* precepts at the opening ceremony of Fo Guang Shan (Buddha Light Mountain) in Gaoxiong.

Xiuhe Yang and Shilun (Ye Man) Tian-Liu

Some of the wives of governmental officials were also dedicated practitioners and writers. Yang Xiuhe practiced in the Vajrayāna tradition and Tian-Liu Shilun, who adopted the penname Ye Man, practiced Chan with Nan Huaijin. Both published monographs about Buddhist teachings and practices, and both assumed leadership in bringing Buddhism in Taiwan to the international stage.

Xiuhe Yang was a Malaysian Chinese who went to Xiamen for education at the age of twelve. After living through the Sino-Japanese War and the Chinese Civil War, she migrated to Taiwan with the government of the Nationalist Party. In time, she took up various positions, including director of the Air Force Kindergarten, principal of the Air Force Elementary School in Jiayi, and director of the Counseling Center for Overseas Chinese Students at the Chinese Culture University. In 1960, together with Yali Ouyang, she invited Lama Huazang of the Complete Enlightenment Lineage to teach at Delin Monastery for two months.⁴ In 1968, she became one of only three women on the 78-member organizing committee of the Chinese Lay Buddhist Association (the other two women being Xianglan Wu and Jinhua Lü).⁵ She was also close friends with Dr. Chengji Zhang and Lama Yingguang Qu. At the age of 62, Yang moved to the United States, where she advocated for the licensed practice of acupuncture in Texas. Her status and influence among the overseas Chinese Buddhist community can be assessed from the fact that, in 2012, President Ma Yingjiou wrote calligraphy for her on Mother’s Day, at which point she was 101 years old.⁶

The feat for which Yang was best known was her compilation of the book *Essential Readings of the Tripitaka*. After the Introduction, the book is divided into three parts. Part One on Taking Refuge contains three chapters: Trust in the Buddhadharmā, Recitation of the Buddha’s Name, and Repentance of Misdeeds. Part Two, Cultivating Wholesomeness and Eradicating Unwholesomeness, also contains three chapters. The first chapter uses the same title as Part Two; the other two are Benefitting Oneself and Benefitting Others. Part Three, Causes and Effects, has four chapters: Myriad Things in the Universe, All Sentient Beings, The Buddha, and The Three Jewels of Refuge.” With the intention of covering the basic Buddhist teachings, Yang, with the help of Menglin Huang, selected passages from the *Sūtra of the Infinite Life*, the *Lotus Sūtra*, the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, the *Upāsaka-sīla Sūtra*, the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Śāstra*, the *Daśabhūmika Śāstra*, and so on. *Essential Readings of the Tripitaka* quickly proved to be a useful reference book, with its systematic yet concise selections from the Tripitaka and its user-friendly organization. At a time when Buddhists in Taiwan were just beginning to study the Buddhist canon, the concise *Essential Readings of the Tripitaka* provided a quick introduction. Dr. Zhang Chengji called it “the Buddhist Bible.” When he organized a Vajrayāna group in Hong Kong, he called for his fellow

practitioners to emulate Yang's efforts in compiling selections of *sūtras*.

Ye Man's actual name is Shilun Liu. Her father had a degree in Economics from Beijing University and studied at the University of Chicago. Her husband Baodai Tian was a diplomat who served in Chicago and Saudi Arabia. In 1956, after having traveled with him for 13 years, Ye Man reached Taiwan at age 40 and began to search for the meaning of life. She visited Christian churches for a year and then took a class on the *Sūrangama Sūtra* with Huaijin Nan. After studying with him for 18 months, she assisted Nan in writing the *Sūrangama Sūtra in Vernacular Chinese*. After some more years of travel with her diplomat husband, she went on a week-long meditation retreat in Taiwan in 1964 and gained some profound insights. She began to teach the Dharma on the invitation of Bhikṣunī Ruimiao of Lingjiu Temple. In 1984, she taught the Dharma to a friend who had just lost her son. After that, invitations started to pour in, and she began to give on average 150 Dharma talks per year.⁷ Ye Man was also a prolific writer who published several collections of essays. In *Ye Man on the Amitābha Sūtra*, she explicated the meaning of the sūtra and offered instructions on meditation.⁸

In 1984, the Chinese Lay Buddhist Association sent a delegation to attend the Fourteenth Conference of World Fellowship of Buddhists. Ye Man was nominated to be one of the 12 vice presidents of the Fellowship. However, the delegation from China prodded a Nepalese representative to issue a protest, insisting that Ye Man be replaced by a representative from China because Taiwan was supposed to be a province of China. After that protest failed, the delegation from China further prodded the Nepalese representative to nominate three other persons, including a representative from China, demanding that the number of vice presidents be increased to 15. The Fellowship agreed to the nominations but insisted that the number of vice presidents be kept at 12. They held an election with secret ballots and Ye Man was elected as the only female vice president of the Fellowship and also the chair of the Committee of Collaboration and Solidarity. This is the highest office of the World Fellowship of Buddhists to be ever held by a representative from Taiwan. In analyzing Ye Man's popular win, Zhu Fei, one of the co-founders of the Chinese Lay Buddhists Association, said that Ye Man because of "her fluent English, her mastery of Buddhist teachings, and her extraordinarily graceful deportment and disposition."⁹

Women Writers: *The Bodhi Tree* and Peixian Mo

The Buddhist laywomen who came from Mainland China were mostly from elite backgrounds, with significant social capital, economic resources, and high levels of education. A good number of them were from the first batch of female college graduates in China. They were educated enough to be able to translate news about Buddhism from English and to compile books about the Buddhist canon. Some of them regularly contributed to Buddhist magazines, sharing their experiences with Buddhist teachings and practices. In Issue 37 of the Buddhist magazine *The Bodhi Tree*, in her letter to the editor (Zhu Fei) (December 8, 1955), Peixian Mo proposed the idea of publishing a new journal, to be named *Buddhist Women Monthly*.¹⁰ In the open letter she provided a list of "women leaders in the Dharma," naming the knowledgeable nuns and laywomen active from 1950 to 1960.¹¹ Mo even divided them into four groups necessary for running a journal: (1) editors and writers: Zhang Qingyan, Xie Bingying, Cheng Guangxin, Tian Qianjun, Mo Peixian, etc.; (2) board of directors: Deng Mingxiang (wife of Zhu Fei, the editor of *The Bodhi Tree*), Zhou-Yang Huiqing (wife to Zhou Bangdao, a member of the Board of Directors to *The Bodhi Tree*), etc., (3) art editors: painter Zhu Shan, Yu Wei, Xiao Ying; (4) marketing and sales: women from Buddhist communities such as the Lotus Societies or Buddha-Recitation Societies from Yilan, Gaoxiang, Fengshan, Penghu, and Tainan.

Bhikṣunī Wenzhu from Hong Kong, who often made suggestions regarding nuns' education in *The Bodhi Tree*, made a point to reply to Mo's proposal in Issue 39. Venerable Wenzhu volunteered to be on the team that would facilitate the publication of *Buddhist Women Monthly*, and she suggested that they expand the scope of the journal from "providing guidance to women who would like to enjoy a happy family life and study the Buddhadharma" to "as well as offering help, support, and encouragement to novice nuns who may be struggling with monastic life."¹²

Unfortunately, the *Buddhist Women Monthly* did not take form. However, *The Bodhi Tree* dedicated

a special issue to the proposal. It contained a complete list of contributing women writers at the time as well as introduced their activities. The special issue was a valuable historical record of Buddhist laywomen in post-war Taiwan. From that issue we can gather the following about these women writers.

1. Social backgrounds: The laywomen who regularly contributed to *The Bodhi Tree* were all well-educated: Guangxin went to Fudan University.¹³ Xie Bingying¹⁴ and Tian Qianjun¹⁵ were both college professors at the Normal University. All of these women writers had international experience. For example, Mo Peixian's parents were Malaysian Chinese who migrated to Taiwan. She served as the English translator to *The Bodhi Tree* and taught English at the Jingxiu Nunnery.¹⁶

2. Contents of their writings: Despite their high levels of education, most of these women writers did not engage in critical analyses of Buddhist teachings. They generally assumed a stereotypically "feminine" style that was gentle and "soft." They drew from family life and personal interactions to convey their understanding of Buddhist teachings. In contrast to the prevalent anti-communist literature, these women writers' focus was drawing from the Dharma to maintain a home at a difficult time and to be a good wife and a good mother. On occasion they would reminisce about their lives in China, but their tone was optimistic and they never use such phrases as "the end of time" or "the age of Dharma decline." They mostly bore witness to the applicability of the Dharma to family life by relating how Buddhist teachings enabled them to live simply and pass time wisely.

3. Styles of practice: *The Bodhi Tree* was published by the Lotus Society in Taizhong. However, the women writers did not write much about reciting the Buddha's name, a practice traditionally more associated with laywomen. Nor did their writings promote vegetarianism, another practice traditionally more associated with laywomen. As mentioned above, what they dealt with in their writings was the rational application of the Dharma to house maintenance and social life. *The Bodhi Tree* did contain articles that mentioned the practices of recitation of the Buddha's name and vegetarianism. However, they were mostly penned by laymen who were mourning for their diseased mothers. A practice that stood out from the women writers' articles was their recitation of Bodhisattva Guanyin's name and their reliance on the Great Compassion dhāra ī to cure rare or terminal diseases. Both Sun-Zhang Qingyang and Mo Peixian provided testimonies to the efficacy of Bodhisattva Guanyin's great compassion. Ms. Yang Huiqing similarly testified to the efficacy of a bodhisattva, except that the bodhisattva she wrote about was Dizang (K itigarbha) of Mt. Jiuhua.¹⁷

4. Monastic and lay statuses: There were bhik unīs among the women writers who contributed to *The Bodhi Tree*. However, they were all from Mainland China or overseas Chinese societies. Bhik unī Wenzhu, mentioned above, and novice nun Shuxu were both from the Zhengxin Buddhist Institute in Hong Kong. They did not offer critiques of current events like the monks and laymen, nor did they write about family life and personal interactions like the laywomen. Their concern was nuns' education and the explication of the Dharma. By contrast, the Taiwanese nuns at this time were yet to be able to promote Buddhism through writing. The Taiwanese nuns from elite backgrounds had received Japanese education and were yet to convert their intellectual understanding from Japanese to literary Chinese. Those not from elite backgrounds were generally not educated and certainly not in Buddhism. *The Bodhi Tree* once reported of a Buddhist Studies program at the Jingxiu Nunnery, but that program lasted only one year.¹⁸ Taiwanese nuns' contributions to Buddhist communities at this time were mostly in the establishment of ordination protocols and the transmission of precepts.

5. Influence: *The Bodhi Tree* was a Buddhist magazine widely circulated not just in Taiwan, but in overseas Chinese communities in the U.S., Canada, and southeast Asian countries. The articles contributed by women writers were often so well received that they were later collected to be published as separate pamphlets or even books. As such, these well-educated women writers' works were much more popular than the works by monks and laymen of similar educational backgrounds. That is, by sticking to the stereotypically "feminine" topics such as family life and personal experiences, these women writers produced works that the less educated masses found relatable. Their modern-day efficacy tales were particularly popular, giving forth a sense of hope and gratitude in a time full of political and military turmoil. Moreover, they wrote in such a gentle and optimistic tone that the general public found soothing and uplifting.

Conclusion

Nowadays, Taiwanese Buddhists celebrate the fact that nuns in Taiwan are both numerous and highly qualified, well educated, and dedicated to public education and other forms of social service. There have been a number of studies exploring how Taiwanese nuns achieved the position in Taiwanese society that they now hold, having gained access to both secular education and Buddhist education in the past few decades. Less studied is the time between the devastation of World War II and the advent of public education in Taiwan. This was a time when society was in shambles, families were broken, Chinese cultural traditions were disrupted, and social elites tended to conflate modernization with Westernization and Christianization. Most people were too poorly educated to be able to preserve their own culture, much less revive it. During this time, Buddhist laywomen from Mainland China drew strength and wisdom from the Buddhist teachings to stabilize their families and their broader social circles. At the same time, they utilized their social and economic resources to help preserve the Dharma and sustain Buddhist communities, while promoting Buddhist education through their writings. In other words, the foundation for access to Buddhist education, which was a crucial factor in the ascent of Buddhist nuns in Taiwan, was put in place by this group of elite Buddhist laywomen from Mainland China who did not hesitate to use their positions of privilege to benefit Buddhists and to spread the Dharma.

NOTES

1. Notes from my fieldwork in Jiayi, May 4, 2013.
2. In her memoir *Juliuhe (The Mighty River)* (Taipei: Tianxia, 2009), Bangyuan Qi recounted her experience of migrating from the northeastern province of Liaoning to the southwestern city of Chongqing, and from there to Taiwan as an English professor.
3. *The Bodhi Tree* 6(May 8, 1953) 30.
4. Wang Shouyi, “Tanjiu: Shenmo shi Yuanjuezhong (Examining the Complete Enlightenment Lineage),” *Yuanzhi Tiandi* (The World of Complete Wisdom), http://www.obf.org.tw/article/raa/RAA056_05.aspx. Accessed May 12, 2017.
5. See “Zhonghua Fojiao jushihui choubei jingguo (The Organizing Process of the Chinese Lay Buddhists Association),” *Zhonghua Fojiao jushihui* (Chinese Lay Buddhists Association), http://www.laybuddhists.org/inside_09_in.php?id=15. Accessed May 12, 2017.
6. “Jianzheng jianguo bainian lishu: Xiushidun baisui renre Yang Xiuhe huanqing Muqinjie (Celebrating Mother’s Day with Yang Xiuhe, Who Has Witnessed the 100-Year History of the Founding of the Republic of China),” *Houston eWind*, May 6, 2011. <http://www.houstonewind.com/201105/news-2011050705.html>. Accessed May 12, 2017.
7. About the life and practice of Ye Man, see “Wo xue Fo de xinlu licheng (My Journey as a Buddhist),” recorded by Gu Fenglan, in *Xi Chan sanji* (Collected Notes on My Chan Practice) (Taipei: Laogu Cultural Publishing, 1975), 1-51. See also Jingming, “Ronghua fugue sanjing meng, jiangjiang hongfa bao Fo’en—Fang Ye Man — (Waking Up from the Dream of Glory and Wealth, Disseminating the Dharma to Repay the Buddha’s Kindness—Interview with Ye Man), in *Shan nuren* (Daughters of the Buddha), ed. Song Yazi et al. (Gaoxiong : Buddha Light Publishing, 1993), 2-9.
8. *Ye Man jiang Amituojing* (Ye Man on the Amitābha-sūtra), recorded by Lin Shuyi (Taipei: Yuanshen Publications, 1992).

9. Zhu Fei, “Zhonghua Fojiao jushihui (Chinese Lay Buddhists Association),” *Buddhist Association of the United States Newsletter* 86 (2003), http://www.bauswj.org/baus/newsletter/2003/nl86_chu_bio6.html. Accessed May 12, 2017.
10. Peixian Mo, “Letter to the Editor (Zhu Fei),” *The Bodhi Tree* 37 (December 8, 1955) 37.
11. Ibid.
12. Shi Wenzhu, “Zhi Mo Peixian xiaojie (To Ms. Mo Peixian),” *The Bodhi Tree* 39 (February 8, 1956): 24.
13. Her name was Nian Cheng, and she wrote under her Dharma name, Guangxin. She did not complete her education at Fudan University. She was married to the legislator Jiachang Chu.
14. Bingying Xie was a well-known author. Her *Congjun riji* (Diary of My Military Life) was first published in 1931. By 1955, it had been reprinted 13 times and was translated to English, French, German, and Japanese. Her *Yige nubing de zizhuan* (Autobiography of a Woman Soldier), which portrayed her legendary experience of joining the military to run away from an arranged marriage, was first published in 1936 and was translated to English in 1940 under the title *Girl Rebel*. There is widely circulated version that has Chinese on the one side and English on the other.
15. Tian Qianjun was a graduate from the Department of Chinese Literature of National Dongbei University and studied Buddhism with Li Bingnan.
16. Mo Peixian was the daughter of Mo Zhengxi, who moved from Malaysia to Taiwan. Mo Peixian once worked for Bhiksu Zhuyun at the Lotus Society of Fengshan. She translated many books from English to Chinese, including the famous *Miaozai Guanshiyin* (The Wondrous Avalokiteśvara) (Tainan: Diamond Publishing, 1979). See Ding Min, “Zhuyun fashi de Fojiao jingyan yu Fojiao shiye—1949 nian Dalu lai Tai qingnian senglu ge’an yanjiu —1949 (Venerable Zhuyun’s Buddhist Experience and Buddhist Enterprise: A Case Study of the Young Monk Who Migrated from Mainland China to Taiwan in 1949),” *The Journal of Chinese Buddhist Studies* 12(1999) 275-302.
17. Yang Huiqing, *Dizang pusa xiandai lingganlu: Zhou-Yang Huiqing yu Dizang pusa ji* (Modern Efficacy Tales of Bodhisattva Dizang: Zhou-Yang Huiqing’s Encounter with Bodhisattva Dizang).
18. In Issue 10 (September 8, 1953), *The Bodhi Tree* reported the opening of a Buddhist studies class at Jingxiu Nunnery. In Issue 22 (September 8, 1954), it reported that the program was shut down due to financial difficulties induced by land reform policies at the time.

Buddhist Women as Agents of Change: The Story of Bhikkhuni Pu Hui

Wei-Yi Cheng

Many scholars believe that before the mid-twentieth century, Buddhism in Taiwan took the form of householder practice called the vegetarian sect, or *zhaijiao*.¹ It is often assumed that the arrival of the Chinese monastic *sangha* brought changes in the way Buddhist religiosity in Taiwan was expressed. Fingers are usually pointed at Mainland Chinese monks who migrated to Taiwan after 1949 and are blamed for “erasing” *zhaijiao* practice by establishing a Chinese monastic order in Taiwan. Seldom noticed is the role played by Buddhist women who, in the prevailing scholarly discourse, are generally perceived as passive recipients of change. Their voices are almost never heard in scholarly studies. Therefore this paper intends to bring attention to Buddhist women in Taiwan. Through the method of in-depth interviews, this paper will focus on one Buddhist woman who is the abbess of a temple that was formerly *zhaijiao* but is now for *bhikkhunis*. Through her life story, we get a glimpse of how Buddhist women can be agents of change in their own religiosity.

Bhikkhuni Pu Hui, the subject of discussion in this paper, was one of the recipients of the Outstanding Woman in Buddhism Award in 2016 in Bangkok. She is currently the abbess of a temple called Shenzhai Hall, which is one of the oldest Buddhist temples in Taiwan. Shenzhai Hall was founded in 1754 as a religious place of the Long Hua (Dragon Flower sect of *zhaijiao*). Members of the Long Hua sect are not monastics; they marry, observe the basic five precepts, and maintain a vegetarian diet. Even though they observe Buddhist precepts and chant Buddhist *sutras*, their religious practice also includes non-Buddhist elements. The practice of non-Buddhist elements is a contentious issue in the debate about whether *zhaijiao* can be considered a form of lay Buddhism.

Shenzhai Hall was founded by a businessman named Cai Purong (?- 1827) who migrated from mainland China to Taiwan in the nineteenth century. The temple chronicle states that Cai and his friends founded Shenzhai Hall for the purpose of teaching literacy and passing on religious knowledge. After Cai, the abbotship of Shenzhai Hall passed to members of the Zhang family. During those years, Shenzhai Hall functioned as a householders’ organization – a place where householders gathered to participate in religious rituals and for social purposes.²

Bhikkhuni Dexi

Zhang Yuechu (1903–1968) was the daughter of the fourth abbot of Shenzhai Hall, Zhang Nairong. She grew up in a religious setting and was well educated. She had strong female role models and was known to be “as heroic as any man.” After the death of her father, the management of Shenzhai Hall was taken up by her grandmother and two other *zhaijiao* women. In 1944, when Zhang Yuechu returned to Shenzhai Hall to become the abbess, she found herself in a peculiar situation.³ Bhikkhuni Hon Ren, her grand-disciple, describes this period as “awkward.” Members of the Long Hua sect are permitted to marry. The people who were living in Shenzhai Hall at the time included both men and women, married and celibate.⁴ Zhang Yuechu was not married and seemed to be observing celibacy as a religious practice. Her reasons for practicing as a celibate *zhaijiao* woman are unknown. Being a member of the Long Hua sect, she was permitted to marry yet she remained celibate. It was not until two decades later that she received ordination and became known as Bhikkhuni Dexi. Over the years, she transformed Shenzhai Hall into a *bhikkhuni sangha*.

The communist takeover of Mainland China in 1949 and the arrival of a large number of Mainland Chinese Buddhist monastics signaled changes in the Buddhist scene in Taiwan. Many mainland Buddhist monks were horrified by what they saw in Taiwan’s Buddhist temples: large numbers

of *zhaijiao* women, married clerics, and almost no celibate monastic *sangha* members. They set out to “correct” what they considered to be heretical practices in Taiwan.⁵ It is often assumed that this was the beginning of a process of “Buddhification” that almost eradicated *zhaijiao* and successfully established a monastic *sangha* in Taiwan. However, records show that interactions between *zhaijiao* followers and Mainland monastics were vibrant, even during the Japanese colonial period (1895–1945).⁶ According to Bhikkhunī Pu Hui, even though Zhang Yuechu did not become a *bhikkhuni* until 1957, she invited Buddhist monastics to give public talks at Shenzhai Hall prior to 1949 and continued to do so thereafter.⁷

In 1957, Zhang Yuechu received *bhikkhuni* ordination and became known as Bhikkhunī Dexi. When she passed away in 1968, a writer named Niansheng composed this eulogy:

When World War II ended, Shenzhai Hall faced numerous challenges. In that stormy time, Master [Dexi] upheld justice and turned the tide for the better. This is her first greatness. Despite its relocation, [Shenzhai Hall] thrived and became more prosperous than ever. The merit of [Master Dexi] attracted devotees, but no matter how few donations she received, she gave them to the people. This is her second greatness. Third, she turned a non-profit organization into a *bhikkhuni sangha*. She donated the robes herself and observed the precepts. She became an example to *zhaijiao* groups and brought glory to Buddhism. This is her third greatness.

Fortunately the pioneering legacy of this great nun was passed on to an equally impressive successor.

Bhikkhunī Pu Hui

Bhikkhunī Pu Hui was born as Lin Yuejiao in remote Yilan County in 1937. Both of her parents passed away before she reached the age of eleven, and she and her two younger brothers were raised by their maternal grandparents. She had only minimal formal education and had to work at her maternal grandparents’ small shop after completing only elementary school. The premature death of her parents left young Lin Yuejiao pondering life and suffering. The United States’ military bombing of Taiwan during World War II caused her to further contemplate the fragility of life.

After the war, the Mainland monk Hsing Yun (1927–) arrived in Yilan County to conduct Dharma activities. Bhikkhu Hsing Yun was known for his innovative Dharma teaching methods. In addition to the traditional methods of Dharma teaching, he organized choirs for youth and classes in Chinese literature, all of which proved to be effective methods for attracting young people to Buddhism. Lin Yuejiao’s grandmother was already a Buddhist practitioner and had joined the Amitabha chanting group organized by Bhikkhu Hsing Yun. Her grandmother introduced young Lin Yuejiao to the youth choir. Lin was immediately drawn to the fun of singing and gradually developed an interest in Dharma. She yearned to learn more. She recalls, “When I first joined the choir, I was only doing it for fun. However, due to the teachings given to the choir by Master Hsing Yun, I gradually became interested in Buddha Dharma.”

Back in the bustling city of Taichung, Zhang Yuechu came to the realization that there was no suitable young woman to succeed her, so she sent a *zhaijiao* sister (who later became Bhikkhunī Puyi) to Bhikkhu Hsing Yun to ask for a disciple. Bhikkhunī Pu Hui recalls that when she first came to Shenzhai Hall, it hosted no special religious activities and functioned mostly as a gathering place for political and business elites. She recalls her first meeting with Zhang Yuechu thus:

When I first came to Shenzhai Hall with Master Hsing Yun, I was very much looking forward to it, but at the same time I was very nervous. My first impression of my master [Zhang Yuechu] was one of dignified authority [*weiyuan*]. I could sense the prestige that Shenzhai Hall had in the area.

In 1957, Lin received the tonsure under Zhang Yuechu and thus became her disciple. By that time, Shenzhai Hall was already functioning as a convent, with *zhaijiao* women engaged in religious practices, rather than as a temple run by the Zhang family.

The first post-war full ordination in Taiwan took place in 1953, organized and conducted in accordance with Chinese Buddhist monastic procedures. It has been suggested that there were so few Taiwanese monastics at that time that there were not enough preceptors to hold an ordination. Post-war ordinations were dominated by Mainland monks, who lent their numbers and the prestige they enjoyed.⁸ However, it would be mistaken to assume that no monastic *sangha* or monastic ordinations existed in Taiwan prior to 1953. Bhikkhunī Hui-yan finds that full ordinations were conducted in Taiwan as early as 1919.⁹

Having heard sermons from Mainland monks, Zhang Yuechu grew interested in monasticism, but hesitated because she was already 61 years old. Zhang wanted her young disciple Lin Yuejiao to receive monastic ordination instead. But Lin successfully persuaded Zhang and both women received full ordination in 1964.¹⁰ Thereafter, Zhang Yuechu became Bhikkhunī Dexi and Lin Yuejiao became Bhikkhunī Pu Hui. After Bhikkhunī Dexi passed away in 1968, Bhikkhunī Pu Hui became the abbess of Shenzhai Hall, where she still lives today.

When I asked Bhikkhunī Pu Hui about her reasons for receiving monastic ordination, she simply replied, “To live in a temple is to appear as a monastic.” Now at the grand age of 80, Bhikkhunī Pu Hui is as humble as ever. Even after being awarded the Outstanding Women in Buddhism Award in 2016, she does not brag about her achievements: “I am only doing my best to contribute,” she says. She is known for her contributions to spread the Dharma. Following the lead set by her master, Bhikkhunī Dexi, Bhikkhunī Pu Hui continues to invite eminent Buddhist teachers to deliver sermons at Shenzhai Hall.

Buddhist Achievements

One thing that Bhikkhunī Pu Hui is proud of is the founding of Shen Chai Elementary School.¹¹ In my interview with her, Bhikkhunī Pu Hui gave a very simple reason for the founding of the school: “We had this parcel of land, so I thought we should do something with it.” Shen Chai Elementary School represents another chapter in Shenzhai Hall’s legacy of education. As a private school, Shen Chai Elementary School is able to maneuver more easily than a public school. For example, it gives greater attention to the arts and to English classes than most public schools. Every day, the school also provides three meals (all organic) to the pupils, a benefit to their parents, many of whom work long hours. Even though Shen Chai is a private school, its tuition is lower than most other private schools and it provides scholarships to pupils. Bhikkhunī Pu Hui takes pride in the fact that Shen Chai Elementary School is now a well-functioning school.

As the president of the Chinese Bhiksuni Progressive Society (*Zhonghua biqiuni xiejinhui*), Bhikkhunī Pu Hui actively engages in philanthropic works. Most of her disaster relief work is done in cooperation with others in the Chinese Bhiksuni Progressive Society. In Taiwan, criticism is often leveled against the government for mishandling donation money in times of natural disasters. Perhaps to avoid this kind of criticism, Bhikkhunī Pu Hui insists on personally delivering donations to the

victims in the disaster zone.

Usually, Bhikkhunī Pu Hui gathers information from Non-Government Organizations on the front lines or from the Chinese Bhiksuni Progressive Society. Buddhist nuns in disaster zones may appeal to the Society for help, and the Society decides who is most in need. Despite her advanced age, Bhikkhunī Pu Hui and her disciples travel to disaster zones to deliver relief money to victims. She often enlists the assistance of other Buddhist groups. She cites recent disasters in Taiwan as examples to explain her process of selection:

Local members of the Chinese Bhiksuni Progressive Society inspect the casualties first and then we deliver relief money to each one. During the [2016] Tainan Earthquake, the city authorities did not help any Buddhist temples, so we delivered [the relief money to Buddhist temples], one by one. [The government] never helps Buddhist temples. Whenever there is a Buddhist master in need, like during the [2014] Kaohsiung gas explosion disaster, Chinese Bhiksuni Progressive Society goes to help.

With the limited financial strength she has, Bhikkhunī Pu Hui utilizes her resources to help Dharma sisters and brothers in need.

Apparently, even at the age of eighty, Bhikkhunī Pu Hui shows no sign of slowing down. When I asked what the focus of her activities is now, she stated that she and the Chinese Bhiksuni Progressive Society are now actively lobbying to oppose the Religious Organization Act. She remains as energetic as ever in her charitable efforts to benefit society.

Final Note

In this paper, I have briefly depicted the lives of two remarkable Buddhist nuns who lived through a time of transition and saw many changes in women's religious practice. The first woman, Bhikkhunī Dexi witnessed the transition at her family temple from a hereditary religious establishment to a *zhaijiao* female convent and then to a *bhikkhuni sangha*. The second woman, Bhikkhunī Pu Hui, became her successor and is a well-respected Buddhist nun who actively engages in social welfare work for the benefit of others.

Like many other observers, Lixiang Yao surmises that the introduction of Chinese Buddhist monastic ordination in 1953 was the key reason for the demise of the traditional *zhaijiao* temples in Taiwan.¹² Based on the life stories of Bhikkhunī Dexi and Bhikkhunī Pu Hui, this assessment seems to be reasonable. However, as we have seen, the establishment of a strong *bhikkhuni sangha* in Taiwan was a cooperative effort between *zhaijiao* followers and the male monastic *sangha*.

NOTES

1. Charles Brewer Jones, *Buddhism in Taiwan: Religion and the State, 1660-1990* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), 14–30.
2. Bhikkhuni Hong Ren (Chang Hui-Ching), “Taizhong senzhai tang de fazhan yu zuanxing [,” Master’s thesis, Hsin Chu, Taiwan: Department of Religious Studies, Hsuan Chuang University, 2006, 28–30.
3. Niansheng, “Shenzhaitang Dexi Shangren Shilüe,” *Bodhi Tree* 190(1968) 35.

4. Hong Ren, “*Taizhong Shenzhai Tang*, 34.
5. Jones, *Buddhism in Taiwan*, 112–114.
6. Bhikkhuni Hui-Yan, *Taiwan Fojiaoshi Lunwenji* (Kaohsiung: Chun Hui, 2003).
7. Hong Ren, “*Taizhong Shenzhai Tang*, 59.
8. Jones, *Buddhism in Taiwan*, 150.
9. Hui-Yan, *Taiwan Fojiaoshi Lunwenji*, 255–56.
10. Hong Ren, “*Taizhong Shenzhai Tang*, 65.
11. The official website of Shen Chai Elementary School is <http://www.sces.tc.edu.tw>. Accessed August 26, 2016.
12. Lixiang Yao, “Taiwan Diqu Guangfu Hou Fojiao Bianqian Chutan,” *Fu Jen Studies* (College of Law, 1988), 239.

Exploring the Controversial Issue of Fully Ordained Nuns in Tibetan History

Darcie Price-Wallace

Nuns remain marginalized in and/or excluded from the Tibetan historical canon, affecting the ways in which the cessation of the lineage of fully ordained nuns is shaped and reconfigured. Thus far, the category of *gelongma* (*dge slong ma*; Sanskrit: *bhiksuni*) and its history in Tibet are constructed and reconstructed only in vague pronouncements that tend to diminish the relevance of individual accounts of *gelongmas*. Refutation or acceptance of the existence of *gelongma* ordination in Tibet appears to be generated either through: (1) scholarly interpretative practices that correlate with available evidence at the time of scholarship and/or the assumption that absence means non-existence, or (2) more cynically, as suggested by Serche Lharam Ngagi Wangchuk Rinchen Ngodrup, in spite of direct knowledge, shaping the narrative in a way that occludes such evidence.¹

I will argue that, in contrast to the case of full ordination for monks, literary evidence is nearly silent on the institutionalization of full ordination for nuns. In addition to this lacuna, several examples of individual women who are recorded to have received full ordination complicate the binary of celibate and non-celibate practitioners. While the evidence is inconclusive, these women held roles as both monastics and consorts. I argue that such uncertain accounts also confound the acceptance of their vows. Therefore, it appears that there were *gelongmas*, but their status as such is confused or ignored due their roles, their so-called “unprecedented” ways of ordaining, and the lack of religious institutions for women. Thus, in spite of such evidence, the individual accounts have been either ignored or dismissed, fostering the notion that fully ordained nuns were not present in Tibet. Alternatively, vague statements about the cessation of the lineage of full ordination are put forth without insight into the process of its dissolution. Ultimately, doubts remain about the existence of fully ordained nuns in Tibet, due to varying perceptions of what constitutes proper ordination and transmission of precepts.

Examples of varied interpretations of the history of nuns in Tibet follow. In a 1986 *Chö Yang* article titled “An Account of the Buddhist Ordination of Women,” Acharya Tashi Tsering and Philippa Russell state that, “The great fifth Dalai Lama’s book on the Vinaya, called *Dulwei-le-chok* clearly says that the bhikshuni sangha never existed in Tibet.”² In 2013, H. H. the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, stated that “full ordination was available for women in India, but was never fully established in Tibet.” However, more recently he has stated his belief that during the reign of King Trisong Detsen a female monastic *sangha* was initiated and that possibly the 8th Karmapa, Mikyö Dorje, conferred full ordination vows to nuns.³

During a public talk in 2016 at Northwestern University, when asked about fully ordained nuns in Tibet, Khenpo Karma Jamyang Gyaltzen from Larung Gar Monastery noted that fully ordained nuns’ vows ceased to exist in Tibet.⁴ He did not elaborate on the specifics of when the vows ceased. The various perspectives illustrate the lack of consensus on this issue of the continuity of nuns’ vows in Tibet and whether or not there were *gelongmas*. They also generates further questions regarding how we can contextualize and interpret these statements and understand their aims. Hayden White contends that, “The authority of the historical narrative is the authority of reality itself; the historical account endows this reality with form and thereby makes it desirable by the imposition upon its processes of the formal coherency that only stories possess.”⁵ If we analyze the question through this lens, we become mired in questions of interpretative practices and loops of metahistory. While this work may be necessary, this paper will focus on one recent Tibetan work and his explanation of *gelongmas* in Tibet.⁶

In “*A New Explanation of the Hundred Controversial Issues Regarding Fully Ordained Nuns: All Wish-fulfilling Treasure, the Beryl Collection*,”⁷ the Tibetan monk scholar Rinchen Ngodrup suggests that many great scholars of Tibet previously neither refuted nor accepted that there were fully ordained nuns in

Tibet⁸ and only in recent years has the issue surfaced due to the ordination debate. Prior scholarship has stated that the *gelongma* lineage was never propagated in Tibet. To challenge this assertion, he presents evidence that *gelongmas* existed in Tibet. Further, he advises that to best answer the question regarding continuity of the *gelongma* vows and its impact on the ordination debate, scholars should heed the call to do historical work regarding whether or not there were *gelongmas* in Tibet. Rinchen Ngodrup does not elaborate on the significance between establishing that there were *gelongmas* in Tibet and the current debate. However, I suggest that underlying these histories are new ways of interpreting and contextualizing how the nuns' vows were received, maintained, and practiced. At stake for Rinchen Ngodrup is an analysis of the history of *gelongmas* in Tibet. He notes that doubts arise solely on the basis of a lack of discussion of the *gelongma* precepts.⁹ However, I suggest that these doubts could be countered based on the fact that several texts of the Mulāsarvastivādan *bhiksuni* lineage were translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan. While Rinchen Ngodrup's work sparingly details historical accounts of *gelongmas*, in building upon the earlier work of Acharya Tashi Tsering, his text points us in the direction of references for future work. It should be noted that his text is written under the auspices of the Tibetan Nuns' Project and that he thereby demonstrates his commitment and alignment with the goals of this organization – to provide education and aid for Tibetan nuns living in India and to improve the status of ordained Tibetan women.¹⁰

Through the act of translating Rinchen Ngodrup's text, this paper aims to take up his call for action by identifying these historical sources in hopes of beginning to delve deeper into the issue, while keeping in mind that “one of the things one learns from the study of history is that such study is never innocent, ideologically, or otherwise.”¹¹ Paralleling his agenda, my own study of this history is not innocent, because I hope that as we ask more about *gelongmas* in Tibet, we may uncover evidence as to how the vows were imparted and to what degree the ordination was accepted. Or we may find that conferring the vows of full ordination was less significant than we imagine, and if this was the case, the questions may be understood in the context of different time periods and locations.¹² By examining to whom and when ordinations were conferred, we will be better able to dissect the aims and interests of those involved, and perhaps contextualize the trajectory of the issue and its contentious nature at present.

Accordingly, Rinchen Ngodrup indicates, “Although in modern times, we have not seen a literary tradition of the well-known history of the transmission of the system establishing fully ordained nuns, at the time in Tibet of the previous three ancient Dharma Kings, there was a tradition [of fully ordained nuns] in the prophecy of Liyul in the Tangyur, and in the Tang annals.”¹³ However, he also says that, “One, if we establish fully ordained nuns according to the tradition of the Mulāsarvastivāda, [it is questionable] whether the vows are generated or not. Two, even if the (vows) are generated, it is questionable whether they are impure or a misdeed.”¹⁴ Thus at the center of his work are two aims: to provide data that reflects additional historical accounts of *gelongmas* in Tibet, and to answer questions about the proper conferral of the vows. This latter point leads to questions that Rinchen Ngodrup cannot address, such as what constitutes the vow in the *gelongma* ordination and what and/or whom deems it proper. While Rinchen Ngodrup cannot adequately explain this latter point, he focuses on the historical accounts as an interjection into the narrative that there were no fully ordained nuns. I contend that this demonstrates the lack of a single unified procedure for ordaining nuns rather than a view that requires hierarchy and enforces exclusivity. Unfortunately, the examples he provides in the text are terse and fail to explain the methods by which the nuns were ordained. While details are few, he provides useful information for future work in examining how the *gelongma* vows were conferred.

First, he notes, “Furthermore, during the second dissemination, approximately during the time of Dharma King Drogön Chögyal Phagpa (1235–1280), there are nine historical accounts of

gelongmas.”¹⁵ One of these accounts mentions the daughter of Tsopo of Gungthang, Lhacig Zema, the third wife of Zangsta Sonam Gyalsten (1184–1239), who had two daughters – the great *löponmas* Sonambum and Nyimabum. Sonambum, the elder of the two daughters, ordained and established Jomoling Nunnery. It is well known that *gelongma* vows were given and received there even before she became ordained.¹⁶ Sonambum’s ordination is recorded among others in the autobiography of her brother, Drogön Chögyal Phagpa. Rinchen Ngodrup indicates that the dates of ordination and the ages of the two nuns at the time are unclear.¹⁷ Unfortunately, his project does not clarify these questions, but mentions difficulties related to similar dates and names. Despite these lingering questions related to dates, he emphasizes that there was a history of *gelongmas* in Tibet that was recorded by the Sakya lineage leader, Drogön Chögyal Phagpa.¹⁸

Another example Rinchen Ngodrup cites is the biography (*rnam thar*) of Rigpa Senge that was composed by his disciple Ngölob Sengzang. In this biography, Sengzang recounts that under Rigpa Senge the teachings of the Dharma spread and hundreds of *gelongmas* were ordained, especially in the area of Kham known as Minyag.¹⁹ Rinchen Ngodrup provides accurate citations, including page numbers and titles; however, he does not provide details of the lives of these figures or mention what communities of nuns may have looked like in fourteenth-century Kham.

Rinchen Ngodrup’s next example is from the Sakya scholar Gorampa (*kun mkhyen go rams pa*, 1429–1489), who wrote *Blossoming Lotus: Question and Answers*, in which he describes the *vinaya* holder Namkha Sonam conferring vows to Chuwar Rangchon Bonmo.²⁰ According to Tsering and Russell, Gorampa’s supplement to the *Dom sum rab gye* of Sakya Pandita states, “Some say that nowadays there are some bhikshus in Tibet who give the bhikshuni vow, but it is not right to do so because as a prerequisite for receiving ordination from a bhikshu the woman must first receive the vow of celibacy and full ordination from the bhikshuni sangha. No exception to this rule is stated in the *vinaya* texts.”²¹ Tsering and Russell conclude that it is uncertain which nuns he is referencing. Rinchen Ngodrup’s work gives clearer evidence and mentions the name of the *gelongma* Chuwar Rangchon Bonmo.

Rinchen Ngodrup’s work does not clarify whether he considers Namkha Sonam’s conferral of vows proper or improper, but he does make a point of this with regard to Shakya Chogden’s conferral of ordination vows. He cites the hagiography of the fifteenth-century Sakya figure, Shakya Chogden’s (1428–1507), which states that his mother Shakya Trinma took full *gelongma* vows before Khenpo Sangye and later abandoned them to become a mother.²² Yaroslav Komarovski lists Shakya Chogden’s mother by another name, Shakya Zangmo, noting that she was “an ex-nun from a retreat monastery (*dben dgon*) named Pangkha Chöding (*spang kha chos sdings*) to the south of the monastic university Kyormolung (*skyor mo lung*).”²³ Rinchen Ngodrup cites Shakya Rinchen’s biography of Shakya Chogden, titled *Thub bstan gsal byed* (*Illuminating the Sage’s Teachings*), which highlights that at the age of sixty-two, when he was a *khenpo*, Shakya Chogden, together with the required quorum, ordained Gyema Chodrup Palmo.²⁴ He lists seven different figures who were part of this ordination. As I will demonstrate later, Rinchen Ngodrup questions Shakya Chogden’s ordinations, but he does not specify which ordinations he doubts. This is one of the few texts that includes a comprehensive list of the figures present at a *gelongma* ordination. This account, which is found in the biography of Shakya Chogden composed by Dol Chok,²⁵ is also cited by Tsering and Russell.

Rinchen Ngodrup then turns to a text titled *Illuminating Sun*, published in the series *The Great Nargarjuna’s Ocean Chronology*.²⁶ This text details the Bodong tradition and looks at the figure Shelkar Dzomo, who is described as an ordained nun and a consort of Bodong Chogyal (1376–1451). Here, it appears that Rinchen Ngodrup is using an abbreviated form of the name Bodong Chogle Namgyal. Rinchen Ngodrup’s text is terse, but provides page numbers for future reference.²⁷ He does not indicate a connections between this figure and the Bodong Chogle Namgyal who is also said to have conducted

the full ordination of Chokyi Dronma (Dorje Phagmo) at Porang Palmo Choding.²⁸ It is unclear whether there were two figures by the same name (Bodong Chogle Namgyal) who were ordaining nuns or whether Rinchen Ngodrup is referring to the Bodong Chogle Namgyal who ordained Chokyi Dronma, cited in Diemberger's work.

The accounts of Shelkar Dozomo and Chokyi Dronma, are ambiguous but imply that the two women maintained variable roles, as *gelongmas* and tantric consorts, in a non-exclusive manner. For this reason, their *gelongma* ordinations have been challenged, as we shall see. Diemberger's account of Chokyi Dronma remarks upon her dual role as fully ordained nun and consort, but she ultimately decides that no definitive conclusion can be reached regarding the intense relationships between Chokyi Dronma and her spiritual masters, including Bodong Chogle Namgyal and Thang Tong Gyalpo.²⁹ These two examples seem to indicate alternative models of maintaining monastic vows while also acting as a tantric consort. It is important to examine the ambiguity and tenuous nature of roles for female religious specialists.

For instance, Sarah Jacoby's work on Sera Khandro provides a close analysis of ways in which female religious specialists may occupy variable, often overlapping and/or ambiguous roles that do not clearly delineate householder and monastic.³⁰ For instance, Sera Khandro held an indeterminate status as neither householder nor nun.³¹ Unlike Shelkar Dolzomo or Chokyi Dronma, Sera Khandro never ordained as a nun, yet as a female religious specialist, she struggled to negotiate lifelong tensions between celibate and non-celibate practices. As an example, during Sera Khandro's conversation with her spiritual teacher Gotrul Rinpoche (Gochen Trülku Jidrel Chökyi Lodrö), who had suggested that she engage in consort practices with a monk, she notes, "From one perspective, I have a husband. Moreover, because stealing the vows of a monastic is the cause for a great offence, I certainly will not do that."³²

Through Sera Khandro's conversations, it is clear that in her "milieu it was not unheard of for monks to take consorts in order to increase their longevity or dispel unfavorable prophecies. Her reticence to 'steal the vows of a monk' demonstrates the dilemma that she and others faced between privileging the moral superiority of celibacy or engaging in the efficacious means of sexual practices in order to ensure the monk's (and her own) physical health and long life."³³ Sera Khandro's writings reveal not only the tensions implicit in negotiating her unspecified roles, but also the variability and potential overlap between celibate and non-celibate status. As Jacoby notes, her writings clearly indicate that consort practices were neither inherently misogynist nor gynocentric, but part of her path to liberation.³⁴ It is not difficult to imagine that such tensions were present for *gelongmas* such as Shelkar Dozomo and Chokyi Dronma. I would argue that this tension reverberates in the historical accounts, which either deny the presence of *gelongmas* or challenge the validity of their ordinations. This tension may reflect deeper questions about whether, when, and which women were considered worthy of vows. The importance of the vows for monks is never in question, only the vows for nuns.

Rinchen Ngodrup mitigates such ambiguity by making a link between these nuns and the *dākinī* Dorje Phagmo (Vajravārāhī). Switching to verse, he states, "So it is said, especially, these figures were manifestations of Dorje Phagmo, the mother of all phenomena, the treasure-holder. On the earth, she is a well-renowned nun and by emanating as a tulku, she holds the teachings."³⁵ Classifying these figures as manifestations of the *dākinī* Dorje Phagmo implies a multivalent character and makes it permissible for these figures, as *dākinīs*, to manifest in numerous forms, ranging from playful to wrathful to the full embodiment of wisdom. Thus, their status is ambiguous and elusive.³⁶

Rinchen Ngogrup's final example is Kazhiba Rigpa Senge's biography, written by Dragkar Lobsong Paldan, which is included in the multi-volume *The Great History of the Sakya Lineage*. Kazhiba Rigpa Senge's biography is in the end of the autobiography of Jamyang Changdragpa in the section of

biographies of the five scholars from Minyak. This section refers to a *gelongma* named Tashi Palrab and mentions that Kazhiba Rigpa Senge taught to nearly two hundred *gelongmas* such texts as the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, *vinaya*, and so on.³⁷ This is one of the few examples which suggests an established or extensive community of *gelongmas*. Another example is referenced by Tsering and Russell in an account of the *bhiksuni* Tashi-bel of Minyak Rabgang in a text called *Yonten Rinpoche Gyatso*. According to this account, a *bhiksuni sangha* was established that was large enough to continue to conduct ordinations for new *bhiksunis*.³⁸

Rinchen Ngodrup identifies several examples of *gelongma* ordinations that need to be studied in more detail; however, whether they provide additional references or descriptive elements remains unclear to me at this point. The benefit of these accounts is that they reinforce other narratives about the existence of *gelongmas*. Even though research has been conducted on figures such as Chokyi Dronma, other *gelongmas* remain in the recesses of history. Perhaps one of the most compelling aspects of his work is found in the seventeenth chapter, where we get a glimpse of how the narrative of *gelongmas* in Tibet has been occluded. He makes a strong accusation in this section, stating that four scholars, in spite of their direct knowledge of *gelongmas* in Tibet, make the assertion that the *gelongma* vows were never instituted: the Fifth Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso; Karma Trinley; the non-sectarian Rimey master Kongtrul Yonten Gyatso (1811–1899), and Khenchen Yonten Gyatso.

Rinchen Ngodrup draws attention to the fact that, although these four scholars had direct knowledge of *gelongmas* from historical accounts, they insisted that *gelongma* ordination was not established in Tibet. He does not highlight specific references nor fully examine, contextualize, or elaborate on these scholars' statements, but he brings to the fore many resources and historical accounts that require further evaluation. He states, "In the writings of Khenchen Yonten Gyatso, he says that the *gelongmas* were not established in Tibet and *gelongma* ordination did not prevail in Tibet as it did in India."³⁹ This statement could be interpreted in numerous ways such as: the vow was transmitted differently or that it did not spread to the same extent or both.

Tsering and Russell mention a statement in *Pema Karpo*, a text by Karma Trinley (1456–1539) and comment upon its lack of clarity: "On a practical level there is no bhikshuni vow in Tibet in accordance with the faultless Hinayana tradition, because there are no bhikshunis in Tibet from whom new bhikshunis could receive ordination and it is laid down in Vinaya texts that there should be at least four. However, I feel that the Mahayana bhikshunis did exist."⁴⁰ This seems to corroborate Rinchen Ngodrup's suggestion that Karma Trinley was aware of historical accounts of higher ordination for women, while asserting that *gelongmas* never existed in Tibet. Perhaps such figures acknowledged that nuns had been ordained as *gelongmas*, but did not consider the *gelongma* ordination to be established due to the manner in which the vows were conferred. It could also be that the status of certain *gelongmas* was questioned due to the ambiguity of their dual roles.

Rinchen Ngodrup presents several examples of individual accounts without detailing the number of monks and nuns present at the ordinations. Presumably because these accounts do not describe these ordinations in detail, Rinchen Ngodrup is not specific about the procedures by which the vows were conferred. Consequently, he also questions whether or not the vows were conferred properly. This returns us to the question of what constitutes pure vows and he does not attempt to answer it. The issue does surface when he reconsiders the case of Shakya Chogden, whom he doubts followed proper procedures in ordaining *gelongmas*. Rinchen Ngodrup contends that to rely only on the *bhiksu sangha* in the ordination is faulty. Based on the root texts, if *bhiksus* alone perform the ordination of *gelongmas*, they incur a transgression. It is for this reason – not following the proper mode of ordination – that Rinchen Ngodrup regards the ordinations conducted by Shakya Chogden to be flawed.⁴¹ Thus, while Rinchen Ngodrup gives examples of ordained nuns in Tibet and considers other ways in which nuns are

ordained, at issue in whether or not the vows are transmitted is how the ordination has been conducted. Questions regarding the nature of the vows and the merits of “pure transmission” remain open. These questions are currently at the heart of the debate over *gelongma* ordination and are among the reasons why progress has yet to be made in the Tibetan tradition. At present, only the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, is proceeding with plans to organize an ecumenical dual-sangha ordination.

Alongside concerns about the proper method of conferring the vows are issues about the lack of evidence for the institutionalization of the *gelongma* order, which severely limits the possibility of Tibetan *gelongmas* having further transmitted the vows. Not only are communities of *gelongmas* largely absent from the accounts, but also it is unclear whether or not the *gelongmas* that did exist were affiliated with nunneries. This may simply be due to a lack of records to serve as evidence, but there are few examples of the institutionalization for nuns. For instance, while brief, the *Ngari Gyalrab* contains one of the earliest accounts of a nunnery. In this account, Lhai Metog, the daughter Yeshe Ö, becomes ordained and establishes a monastery: “[Ye shes od’s] daughter lHa’i me tog was also ordained. She built Kre wel dbu sde [and cared for it] as if this temple were her adopted child. Once she established a community of nuns [there], she provided all that was required for its maintenance.”⁴² Vitali suggests that Lhai Metog ordained around 988 CE and that the *Ngari Gyalrab* records one of earliest nunneries in Tibet. Rinchen Zangpo’s biography also notes that his sister became a probationary nun. While this reference requires further exploration, it suggests evidence of fully ordained nuns in Gugé during the tenth to eleventh centuries.⁴³

Two of the Tibetan nuns who reportedly received full ordination are Machig Ongjo (twelfth century) and Chokyi Dronma (fifteenth century), mentioned above.⁴⁴ The use of the term *gelong* in reference to Machig Ongjo in a twelfth-century manuscript indicates that she received full ordination. This manuscript is one of the few extant documents that provides evidence of the existence of full ordination for women during the twelfth century.⁴⁵

Chokyi Dronma was a princess who lived during the fifteenth century in southwestern Tibet. She ordained and renounced her royal status after the death of her daughter.⁴⁶ Her teacher, Bodong Chogle Namgyal, ordained her either as if she were gender neutral or based on his understanding that the presence of *bhiksuniṣ* was not mandatory.⁴⁷ Chokyi Dronma’s non-canonical ordination reflects the flexibility with which some religious leaders conferred ordination. As Diemberger suggests, his conferring of full ordination may imply his overall vision to reestablish Indian Buddhist traditions, including *bhiksuni* ordination and sacred dances. Whether due to Chokyi Dronma royal status or Bodong Chogle Namgyal’s re-envisioning of Buddhism in Tibet, the account states that Chokyi Dronma was ordained. Nevertheless, she lived a non-monastic life, because running a nunnery was fraught with practical difficulties.⁴⁸

Jetsun Lochen Rinpoche (1865–1951) is another figure whose autobiography implies allegiance to both the tantric and monastic paths. Jetsun Lochen Rinpoche also encountered difficulties while managing Shugsep nunnery.⁴⁹ Unlike Chokyi Drönma, she was ordained as a novice, not as a *gelongma*.

These examples, along with those cited by Rinchen Ngodrup, raise questions about whether the *gelongma* vows were “pure” or conferred in the proper way. While this question merits further exploration, what seems clear in the narratives, from examples such as Dhammadinnā and Dorje Pagmo, is that ordination practices were variable.⁵⁰ The questions that currently frame interpretations of the historical accounts concern the validity or purity of the vows, whether the vows were deficient, and whether the rites used to confer them were pure actions (*nes med*) or misdeeds (*nes bya*). What is also clear in these accounts is that nuns remained on the periphery of institutionalized process of monasticism. Therefore, the nuns’ individual histories (and those of their *sanghas*) remained largely untold. This affects the ways in which the notion of the *bhiksuni sangha* has been represented up to the

present day. More cynically, it indicates the ways in which women were not identified as full-fledged religious professionals, perhaps for the personal or political benefit of others. Again, perhaps women religious professionals were apolitical in the sense that they were generally not included in the broader socio-political scheme of things, thereby rendering their historicity untold.

However, there are examples that complicate this pessimistic vantage point. For instance, in the *vinaya* commentary of Mikyö Dorje, the Eighth Karmapa, in the chapter titled *The Commentary on the Scriptures of the Prātimokṣa Vows: The Mine of Jewels*, there are debates from several textual sources about the vows and rituals for nuns.⁵¹ Mikyö Dorje notes that arguments cannot be based solely on a lack of literature. His argument centers on the smaller number of texts written about monks as compared to nuns. Although later literary references to the rituals for fully ordaining nuns are considerably fewer, the earliest *vinaya* texts regarding full ordination pertain to both monks and nuns.⁵²

Mikyö Dorje's argument offers two interesting notions: first, the notion of a shared textual tradition; and second, that the relative lack of literary references does not necessarily indicate an absence of fully ordained nuns – only a silence. What is obvious is that the presence of women in Buddhist literature is often sparse and this has influenced the ways in which questions about whether fully ordained nuns existed in Tibet has been approached. Yet, as Gyatso has noted, it is unclear where the narrative that full ordination never existed for Tibetan Buddhist nuns arises.⁵³ Written works, such as those of Mikyö Dorje and Rinchen Ngodrup, provide glimpses into other possibilities.

Rinchen Ngodrup provides glimpses of *gelongmas* in history, allowing scholars the possibility of contextualizing these brief references in their future work. Perhaps it will be possible to clarify when and how these *gelongma* vows were propagated and when the vows discontinued or the record becomes quiet. Although his textual evidence only scratches the surface, hopefully his work will serve as a springboard for exploring full ordinations in Tibet more closely. Doing so may shed light on considering how ordinations were conducted and whether they were always conducted according to doctrinal ideals. As Karma Leskshe Tsomo notes, “Even a revisionist view ruffles feathers among the orthodox, yet a reevaluation of the texts is essential if women in Buddhism are to meaningfully apply and actualize the teachings the texts contain.”⁵⁴ While speculative, perhaps a reconsideration of texts will also demonstrate that ordinations were performed in more varied and innovative ways than previously accounted for. Certainly, Chokyi Dronma's ordination is one example of this.

On the one hand, Rinchen Ngodrup's work challenges the repeated narrative that there were no fully ordained nuns in Tibet. On the other hand, the existence of *gelongmas* and the validity of their ordinations remain contested, since no records describe an ordination conferred with the required quorum of ten monks and twelve nuns. This fact is considered crucial and central by some in the ordination discussions at present. Future analysis of the *gelongma* vows and how crucial the required quorum is. Numerous power relations are at play in the determination of which methods of conferring the vows are pure or impure. If these questions cannot be answered due to a lack of evidence, perhaps attention can then turn to what looms in front of us: acceptance and recognition of alternative modes of conferring the vows. Whether fully ordained or not, cultivating respect for nuns and other female religious professionals who desire to study, practice, and teach the Dharma will ensure that they are equally accountable for perpetuating its growth.

NOTES

¹ Serche Lharam Ngagi Wangchuk Rinchen Ngodrup, *dGe slong ma'i gnad brya pa sngon med legs par bsbad pa'i gter dgos 'dod kun 'byung bad'urya'i phung po zhes bya ba bzugs so* (A New Explanation of the Hundred Controversial Issues Regarding Fully Ordained Nuns: All Wish-fulfilling Treasure, the

Beryl Collection), (Sidhpur District, Kangra, HP: Tibetan Nuns Project, 2007), 45. I am grateful to Karma Ngodrup of the University of Chicago for directing me to this text during our class and for his patience with my work on Karmapa Mikyö Dorje's text. Thanks to Acharya Sangye Tendar Naga of the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives for guiding me through my initial translation and for Sarah Jacoby and Norbu Samphel of Northwestern University for continuing to help me refine my work.

² Acharya Tashi Tsering and Philippa Russell, "An Account of the Buddhist Ordination of Women," *Chö-yang* 1:1(1986): 29.

³ 17th Gyalwang Karmapa, "Gyalwang Karmapa's Teaching during the 1st Arya Kshema Nuns' Gathering – Why Bhikshuni Ordination is Important," January 21–24, 2014. <http://kagyuoffice.org/gyalwang-karmapas-teaching-during-the-1st-arya-kshema-nuns-gathering-why-bhikshuni-ordination-is-important/> Accessed April 24, 2016.

⁴ Khenpo Karma Jamyang Gyaltzen, "Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet: A View from Larung Gar, The Largest Buddhist Institute in the World." Public talk, Northwestern University, April 7, 2016.

⁵ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 20.

⁶ There are several other sources that may depict *bhiksuni* ordinations in Tibet from the eleventh to at least the sixteenth centuries. For instance, Yeshe Ö's daughter Lhai Metog is mentioned in Kim Gutschow, *Being a Buddhist Nun: The Struggle for Enlightenment in the Himalayas*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 95; and in Roberto Vitali, *The Kingdoms of Gu.ge pu.brang: According to the mNga'ris. Rgyal.rabs by Gu.ge mkhan.chen Ngag.dbang.grags pa* (Dharamshala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1997), 114. For Machig Ongjo, see Tsultrim Allione, *Women of Wisdom* (London: Routledge, 1984), 295–98; and Dan Martin. "The Woman Illusion? Research in to the Lives of Spiritually Accomplished Women Leaders of the 11th and 12th Centuries," *Women in Tibet*, ed. Janet Gyatso and Hanna Havnevik (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 49–82. For Dorje Phagmo Chokyi Dronma, see Charles Bell's account from 1928, *The People of Tibet* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1994), 136–40; and Hildegard Diemberger, *When a Woman Becomes a Religious Dynasty: The Samding Dorje Phagmo of Tibet* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁷ *dGe slong ma'i gnad brgya pa sngon med legs par bshad pa'i gter dgos 'dod kun 'byung bad'urya'i phung po zhes bya ba bzugs so.*

⁸ Rinchen Ngodrup, *dGe slong ma'i gnad brgya pa*, 44. Here he notes that, to understand the details of this contested issue, both sides of the argument are presented in the work of Acharya dge bshes Thub bstan byang chub (alias Géshe Tashi Tsering), *Bod du dge slong mar bsgrubs pa'i dpyad gzhi rab gsal med long* (New Delhi, Indraprastha Press, 2000.)

⁹ Rinchen Ngodrup, *dGe slong ma'i gnad brgya pa*, 14–15, 45.

¹⁰ Tibetan Nuns Project. <https://tnp.org>. Accessed December 23, 2016.

¹¹ White, *The Content of the Form*, 82.

¹² This does not diminish the significance of the substantial entity (*rdzas*) of the vow (*sdom pa*), which is imperceptible form, and its transmission. My intention is to question how this imperceptible form is conferred and deemed proper (*nes med*), that is, not a deficient action or misdeed (*nes bya*).

¹³ Rinchen Ngodrup, *dGe slong ma'i gnad brgya pa*, 37.

¹⁴ Ibid., 36–37.

¹⁵ Ibid., 39.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 40.

¹⁸ “In a text called *Zam-ling Tsal-Wei Melong* which was compiled in 1934 by Tasang Peljor Sangpo there are some records of ordinations of bhikshunis in Tibet and China. It says that during the thirteenth century Chögyal Phagpa ordained a total of 4,425 bhikshus, bhikshunis, and novice monks and novice nuns in Nepal, China, and Minyak.” Tsering and Russell, “An Account of the Buddhist Ordination,” 29.

¹⁹ Rinchen Ngodrup, *dGe slong ma'i gnad brgya pa*, 41.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Tsering and Russell, “An Account of the Buddhist Ordination,” 29.

²² Rinchen Ngodrup, *dGe slong ma'i gnad brgya pa*, 41–42. Diemberger notes that Bodong Chogle Namkgyal ordained Shakya Chogden’s mother and another female disciple, providing accounts of two *bhiksus* who may have conferred the ordination. Diemberger, *When a Woman Becomes a Religious Dynasty*, 133.

²³ Yaroslav Komaravski, *Visions of Unity: The Golden Pandita Shakya Chokden’s New Interpretation of Yogacara and Madyamaka*. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011), 25.

²⁴ Rinchen Ngodrup, *dGe slong ma'i gnad brgya pa*, 42.

²⁵ Tsering and Russell, “An Account of the Buddhist Ordination,” 29.

²⁶ Tibetan: *mang thos klu sgrub rgya mtsbo'i bstan rtsis*.

²⁷ Rinchen Ngodrup, *dGe slong ma'i gnad brgya pa*, 42–43.

²⁸ Diemberger, *When a Woman Becomes a Religious Dynasty*, 133; and Cyrus Stearns, *King of the Empty Plain: The Tibetan Iron Bridge Builder Tangtong Gyalpo* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications), 554 (n837).

²⁹ Stearns, *King of the Empty Plain*, 4.

³⁰ Sarah H. Jacoby, “To Be or Not to Be Celibate: Morality and Consort Practices According to the Treasure Revealer Se ra mkha’ ‘gro’s. (1892-1940) Auto/biographical Writings,” *Buddhism Beyond the Monastery: Tantric Practices and Their Performers in Tibetan and the Himalayas*, ed. Sarah Jacoby and Antonio Terrone (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 37–71.

³¹ Jacoby, “To Be or Not to Be Celibate,” 47.

³² *Ibid.*, 63.

³³ *Ibid.*, 64.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

³⁵ Rinchen Ngodrup, *dGe slong ma’i gnad brgya pa*, 42–43. I am grateful for Sarah Jacoby’s assistance with this translation, February 24, 2017.

³⁶ Janice D. Willis, “*Dākinī*: Some Comments on Its Nature and Meaning,” *Feminine Ground: Essays on Women and Tibet*, ed. Janice D. Willis (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1989), 72–73.

³⁷ Ngodrup, *dGe slong ma’i gnad brgya pa*, 43.

³⁸ Tsering and Russell, “An Account of the Buddhist Ordination,” 29.

³⁹ Ngodrup, *dGe slong ma’i gnad brgya pa*, 45.

⁴⁰ Tsering and Russell, “An Account of the Buddhist Ordination,” 29.

⁴¹ Rinchen Ngodrup, *dGe slong ma’i gnad brgya pa*, 46–47.

⁴² Vitali, *The Kingdoms of Gu.ge pu.brang*, 114.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 236, 274.

⁴⁴ For biographical accounts of Machig Ongjo, see Allione, *Women of Wisdom*; and Martin, “The Woman Illusion? Research in to the Lives of Spiritually Accomplished Women Leaders of the 11th and 12th Centuries,” *Women in Tibet*, ed. Janet Gyatso and Hanna Havnevik (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 59–82. For an account of Dorje Phagmo, see Diemberger, *When a Woman Becomes a Religious Dynasty*.

⁴⁵ Martin, “The Woman Illusion?” 67.

⁴⁶ Diemberger, *When a Woman Becomes a Religious Dynasty*, 133.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁴⁹ Hanna Havnevik, *The Life of Jetsun Lochen Rinpoche (1865–1951) As Told in Her Autobiography: Volume 1*, Dissertation, University of Oslo, 1990, 80–81.

⁵⁰ Alice Collett, *Lives of Early Buddhist Nuns: Biographies as History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 18–25. Dhammadinnā is said to have been ordained by a messenger of the Buddha in the Chinese *vinaya* accounts and by the nun Upalavannā in the Tibetan Mūlasrāvāstivāda *vinaya*. In both accounts, she is ordained by these means so that she will not be raped or forced to marry.

⁵¹ Karmapa Mikyö Dorje, *The Compendium of Elegant Sayings of the Kagyu School: The Glorious Unequaled Savior of All Sentient Beings, Stainless Respository of Vinaya Studies*, vol. 10 (Chinghai Province, Blue Lake Nationalities Press, 2002), 1–123.

⁵² Kar ma pa mi bskyod rdo rje, “Since there is more text pertaining to the ritual for *bhiksunis* than for *bhiksus*, although earlier there were more commentaries on the ritual for *bhiksus*, there were also sections specific to *bhiksunis* in the root [*vinaya*] *sutra*, and also many rituals that are shared in common.” *Ibid.*, 462, lines 9-11.

⁵³ Martin, “The Woman Illusion?” 72.

⁵⁴ Karma Lekshe Tsomo, “Mahāprajāpatī’s Legacy: The Buddhist Women’s Movement,” *Buddhist Women Across Cultures: Realizations* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), 7.

The Lives of the Twenty-four Jo mo-s of the Tibetan Tradition: Identity and Religious Status

Carla Gianotti

As a tibetologist and a Buddhist practitioner dedicated to personal spiritual research, I deal with those feminine figures – earthly, divine, or archetypal – of the Buddhist Indo-Tibetan tradition who are recognized as a source of inspiration on the Buddhist spiritual path of contemporary women (and men). In the course of my work, I came across an interesting Tibetan text titled *The Tradition of Pha dam pa Sangyas*, which contains the hagiographies¹ of twenty-four Tibetan ascetic women of the twelfth century.² These life stories are particularly inspiring and should be regarded, as reported in the Tibetan text, as a “message for future generations.”³ These twenty-four ascetic women are called *jomos* (Tib: *jo mo* “venerable women” or “nuns”) and were disciples of the great Indian *yogin* Pha Dam pa Sangs rgyas (d. 1117). All except one is supposed to have reached final enlightenment.

Before turning to the life stories of these *jomos*, it is important to be aware that in researching the identities of women ascetics and Dharma teachers in Tibetan Buddhism during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, we are faced with two main obstacles: the undervaluation of their roles and the uncertainty of their designations. The undervaluation or understatement of the roles of women Dharma teachers in the Buddhism of Tibet applies to both their numbers and to their religious status. An emblematic case, only recently discovered, is the identification in one person of two authoritative master *yoginis* who shared the identical name of Ma gcig, or “Unique Mother,” an epithet that was not so uncommon for *yoginis* in Tibet during that period. The two women lived during more or less during the same chronological period, but belonged to two different schools: Ma gcig Lab sgron (1055–1154 or 1055–1149) and Ma gcig Zha ma (1062–1149).⁴

The second problem is the uncertain designations of women practitioners, women ascetics, and women Dharma teachers during this period. It is difficult to translate the religious or spiritual terminology used to refer to them, for example, *ma jo*, *jomo*, *btsun ma*, *ma jo smyon ma*, and other terms. In the English translation of the *Blue Annals*, for example, the Tibetan names of *majo*, *jomo*, and *btsun ma* are often translated using the generic term “nun,” whereas *jomo*, when referring to the twenty-four *jomos*, is translated as “lady.” The term *majo* may be a contraction of *ma gcig jo mo* or *ma jo mo*, honorific titles used to refer to a status more elevated than that of a simple nun, i.e., a nun teacher or abbess, but *majo* is also attested as a synonym of *jomo* and *rje btsun ma*, or “venerable.” Moreover, the terms *ma jo*, *jomo* and *btsun ma* even if they may refer to women adepts who are nuns, nevertheless do not imply the religious status of a celibate nun. In the same way, *ma jo smyon ma*, another term used to refer to women ascetics of this period, raises problems regarding the religious status of the women to which it refers. If the term *smyon ma*, “madwoman” indicates a religious choice beyond or outside any prescribed code of religious rules, how is it possible to combine such a designation with that of a *majo*, who is said to be a nun teacher? Moreover, there is no corresponding masculine form of the word *ma jo smyon ma*.

Roughly speaking, the two main designation we come across referring to an ascetic woman in the Tibetan tradition of this period are *smyon ma*, “madwoman” (a religious transgressive choice) and of *jo mo* or *ma jo* (which covers many different roles, all female in gender). Thus the religious and spiritual experience of asceticism of women that emerges in the texts is problematic in two ways. The first image is somewhat lacking in visibility; for example, in considering the generic experiences of a woman, a woman ascetic is first of all a woman, whereas a male ascetic is first of all an ascetic. The second image, on the other hand, is somewhat too visible; that is, as an outsider and a transgressive religious woman. In both cases, the two images denote a religious experience that lacks a recognized religious dimension or religious status, or a precise religious and social identity.

In Tibetan Buddhism, realized women or women teachers of Dharma thus seem to present religious identities that are much more fluid, unsettled, and less codified than those of their counterparts, male Dharma masters. What is more relevant is the absence of terminology to verify their spiritual progress on the path. An analogous situation is the problematic categorization of ascetic women in Hinduism and Indian Buddhism in general. The ambiguous names used to designate them, *pravrajitā* and *parivrājikā*, seem to reflect the fundamental ambiguity that lies at the root of the concept of renunciant woman in Indian society. These two Sanskrit terms can be used to designate either a beggar who has renounced domestic life in order to dedicate herself to religion or a woman of “low morality” who is not subject to domestic control. From an androcentric perspective, the ascetic choice for women – escaping social and sexual masculine control – results in being devalued due to a denigrating suspicion of the absence of moral authenticity.⁵

Next, let us examine what the term *jomo* means in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. First, the term *jomo* is used to indicate a noble woman or a woman of high rank; the male form, *jo bo*, is mainly used to designate the eleventh-century Indian master Jo bo Atiśa. Second, the term is an appellation for a Buddhist nun or a good female practitioner. Third, it is used as an honorific term for a wife, mistress, or consort.⁶ The term *jo mo* is also used as an epithet meaning “goddess” to refer to certain mountains in Tibet, such as Jo mo Gangs dkar (White Snow Goddess, Mount Everest), Jo mo Kha nag, and Jo mo Lha ri. In addition, the term was used to signify “queen” during the age of the Tibetan Empire; for example, among the names of the donors of the renowned bell that is kept in Samye Monastery, dedicated to the emperor Trisong Detsen, we find the imperial consort “Jomo Gyalmotsen, mother and son.”⁷ In the Tibetan tradition, aside from the *jomo* disciples of Pha dam pa Sangs rgyas, not many historical women were accorded such a title. One exception is Jo mo sMan mo (1248–1283), perhaps the most well-known *jomo* of Tibet. An itinerant ascetic and later became the tantric consort (*mudrā*) of a reputed treasure revealer (*ter tön*) of the Nyingma tradition, she is described in the records as one of the rare women treasure revealers of the Land of Snow (Tibet).⁸

The term *jomo* (female religious practitioners or nuns) is still in use in the contemporary Tibetan traditions: “In Ladakh and Spiti, women renunciants are addressed as *jomo* (‘revered woman’), a respectful name for a nun.”⁹ And communities of *jomos*, celibate women devoted to the practice of Buddhism (distinguished as “working *jomos*” and “religious *jomos*”)¹⁰ have been living in Kinnaur, a Himalayan district of Himachal Pradesh, India, for at least a thousand years. To sum up, in the Tibetan tradition the term *jo mo* is always a term of respect given to a woman. It indicates a venerable woman, regardless of her religious *status* (woman practitioner, realised woman, *siddha*, treasure-revealer, nun or *yogini*) or social *status* (tantric consort or wife). In some cases, as we have seen, the term is adopted to indicate a goddess or a queen.

Who were the *jomos* of our text? The fourth one, Jo mo ‘Bar ma, the venerable “Shining One,” was initially a wife or tantric consort¹¹ who later became a wandering ascetic in the solitude of the mountains:

... She, that had [once] been the *jomo* of Dam pa cug, [one day] asked Dam pa for instructions. For three years, wandering alone in the mountains as a wild animal (or a deer), she gained [spiritual] experience.¹² Realisation arose in her.¹³ She obtained the *siddhis* (accomplishments).¹⁴

Jo mo Nya ma Khyim pa mo, the venerable “Female Disciple Householder” is described as a “female lay practitioner”¹⁵ and a “householder.”¹⁶ By practising compassion and generosity, she was recognized as a *jomo*:

... She was known as the female disciple (*nya ma*) [of rDor gsal di Pong shid]. She, who gathered children, husband, and wealth, was one who had compassion and generosity towards those in need. At the time of her death, rainbows and relics appeared in the valley. All were filled with wonder.

Another, called Jo mo gSer btsun, Gold Reverend or Gold Nun, was a nun (*btsun ma*):

One day she said to her father: “I am going to meet Dam pa. I ask you for advice.” “Do not go!” answered her father. “*Yogins* and nuns follow two religious traditions that are not compatible.”

She did not obey to her father’s advice and went to Dam pa to ask for instructions:

Realisations arose in her. She dedicated herself to her accomplishments with much perseverance. Sometimes she said: “The thief is coming! The thief is coming!” [meaning that death is approaching].

Among all the *jomos*, this is the only recorded teaching that remains.

As far as we know, none of these twenty-four *jomos* left behind any written text. Nevertheless, in the hagiography of Pha dam pa, we find seven other venerable women disciples (called *jomos* or *majos*) listed among his many disciples (men and women), who are not included among the twenty-four. “Songs of realisation” (*mgur*) are attributed to some of them.

To illustrate, Cug mo bza’ dge ‘dun skyid, one of the first disciples of Pha dam pa and a “naturally liberated *yogini*,”¹⁷ sang this verse of pairs:

The wish-fulfilling jewel¹⁸ of one’s one mind,
and the wish-fulfilling jewel of the ocean, [these] two.

The one who practises [the instructions] individually for the needs of lives to come,
and this beggar-woman [who practises] the [oral] instructions¹⁹ as the jewel of the essence of mind.²⁰

The wheat of the two accumulations, provisions for the time of death,
and the wheat of material wealth, provisions for [present] life.

The wise one who makes the detailed meaning [of words] his [or her] wealth,
and this beggar-woman who prepares provisions for death.

...

The one who protects himself [or herself] in the indestructible turret of the citadel,
and this beggar-woman who protects herself in the turret of the citadel of concentration.²¹

Ma jo rGya sgom ma, another disciple of Pha dam pa, sang a beautiful song of realization that ends with these words:

Realisation of experience²² is carried by this daughter of the sky!²³
Promises [arisen] from the depth [of the heart] are let go!²⁴

Two of these women are ascribed miracles or particular *siddhis*. The following verse praises the sixteenth *jomo*, Jo mo Nam ka gsal, Venerable Space Luminous-visible:

Her urine turned into honey. Everybody who [saw] it went in ecstasy. Somebody even drank it.

Another refers to the ninth *jomo*, Jo mo Chos skyabs, Venerable Refuge in the Dharma:

By subsisting for twelve years on water only, she gained [spiritual] experience.

But it is mostly after the death of the *jomos*, at their funeral pyre, that miracles and wonders occurred. It was these miracles, such as rainbows, divine images, relics, perfumes, and so on) that made their realisations visible to everybody.

In some cases, these *jomos* lived their entire lives as hermitesses; in other cases, after practicing for some years in the solitude of the mountains, they returned to society, living as laywomen and disguising their religious way of life. Apart from the master Dam pa, nobody seems to have been aware of the fact that they were realized women. This is the case of the twenty-third *jomo*, Jo mo gZhon nu ma, the Venerable Young Girl:

Realisations arose in her. But she showed herself without having changed her exterior behaviour. She stayed on her own. Even if she was able to speak, she gained [spiritual] experience by pretending to be mute. No one knew the truth. Before much passed, she obtained liberation.

The fifth *jomo*, Jo mo Ri ma, a beloved daughter. She once married a man, but he turned out to be wicked. She left him and joined a caravan of merchants:

Then, having met Dam pa in La stod, she asked him for instructions. She gained experience of them for seven years. Then realisations²⁵ arose in her; nevertheless, nobody knew about the *siddhis*²⁶ she had obtained.

One day she died. Dam pa circumbulated her funeral pyre many times. A lot of butter was thrown on [to her funeral pyre] by the people gathered in gLang skor and many prostrations were offered. A great number of relics appeared and everybody was filled with wonder.

Of the nineteenth *jomo*, Jo mo rJe'u ma, the text notes:

She was an expert weaver, very precise in her work. She was infused with bliss.

Some *jomos* lived together, as master and disciple or attendant. This is indicated in a verse about the sixth *jomo*, Jo mo Ye shes lcam, Venerable Lady Wisdom”:

[She] became the attendant²⁷ of a famous female *siddha*²⁸ called Jo mo rJe'u,²⁹ [who lived] until the age of 104.

In this text, the word *jomo* is used as a broad generic term to indicate an advanced woman

practitioner, a realised woman, an ascetic woman, a female *siddha*,³⁰ a wife or tantric consort; it does not seem to indicate a nun (that is, a renunciant leading a celibate life). While the text makes mention of numerous *jomos*, it does not thematize gender. The female body is not viewed as a source of suffering. No marginalization of the *jomo* as women is mentioned and no evidence of difficulties they had to face as women meditators is reported. Apparently, these twenty-four venerables were not critical of the *jomos*' gendered status. But the *jomos* did not write about their own experiences. Above all, they are recorded to have been "disciples of Pha dam pa." The stories are not intended to exalt the realisations achieved by the *jomos*, but to praise their master Pha dam pa Sangs rgyas through the realisations of his most advanced disciples, male and female.

Extraordinary and Luminous

These short life stories are stories of the luminous lives of practitioners who manifested their achievements by dissolving as rainbows and light in space, that is, in the openness of the space of awareness that lies beyond the ego. Bhiksuni Tenzin Palmo once said that whenever people ask her what she gained after twelve years of meditation in a cave in Lahul, she answered that it is not a question of what one gains but of what one loses.³¹ In the same way, these stories show us what is best left behind: the space the *jomos* opened up by losing. It is this space that is still alive and speaks to us. This is why the *jomos* are *jomos*: because they are masters of devotion and faith, of perseverance and of luminosity, capable of inspiring, through space and time, other women Buddhist practitioners.

In my opinion, the most poetical life story among these *jomos* is the eighteenth, Jo mo 'Phan mo:

Her native place was 'Phan yul in the region of dBus. Being an expert in making offerings to the Three Jewels, completely devoted to it, she made prayers to [remove] the obstacles occurring at the time of death and sickness.

In the meanwhile, she dedicated herself with care and attention to the making of fragrances, as there were many requests for medicines and offerings from the nearby regions of Nepal

The venerable and her attendant³² lived together for many years in gLang khor, dedicating themselves to ascetic practise.³³

The two died exactly together. At the time of their death, a perfume of medicinal herbs spread throughout the valley. Many signs of good fortune appeared and everybody was filled with wonder.

The extraordinary and unsubstantial fragrance of medicinal herbs that occurred at the time of their death is still capable, in some mysterious way, of reaching out to us.

NOTES

¹ A hagiography is the edifying story of a significant religious person.

² *Jo mo nyis sbus rtsa bzhi'i lo rgyus* in Kundga' et al, *The Tradition of Pha dampa Sangyas: A Treasured Collection of His Teachings Transmitted by Tug (sic) sras Kun dga'*, vol. 4 (Thimpu, Kunsang Tobgey), pp. 302–23. An abridged version of this text is 'Gos Lo Gzhon Nu sPal, *Deb ther sngon po*, 2 vol. (Si

khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1984), pp. 1068-1073 (English translation in G. N. Roerich, *The Blue Annals* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979), 915–20.

³ *Jo mo nyis sbus rtsa bzhi'i lo rgyus*, op. cit., 314.

⁴ Cf. Janet Gyatso, “The Development of the *gCod* Tradition,” *Soundings in Tibetan Civilisation*, ed. Barbara N. Aziz and Matthew Kapstein (New Delhi: Manohar, 1985), p. 329, n. 34; E. Lobue, “A Case of Mistaken Identity: Ma gcig Lab sgron and Ma gcig Zha ma,” *Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the 6th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies* (Oslo: The Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture, 1994), 481–90.

⁵ Cf. M. Jyväsjarvi, *Parivrājikā and Pravrajitā: Categories of Ascetic Women in Dharmaśāstra and Vinaya Commentaries*, in “Indologica Taurinensia”, vol. XXXIII, (2007), 73–92; C. Gianotti, *Donne di illuminazione. ākinī e demonesse, Madri divine e maestre di Dharma* (Roma: Ubaldini, 2012), 203.

⁶ T. Duff, *The Illuminator. Tibetan-English Encyclopedic Dictionary*, Electronic Edition (Kathmandu: Padma Karpo Translation Committee, 2012).

⁷ Cfr. H. Uebach, “Ladies of the Tibetan Empire (7th-9th Centuries CE),” in *Women in Tibet*, ed. Janet Gyatso and Hanna Havnevik (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 40–41. It is likely that two of the three consorts of King Tri Songtsen are Jomo Legmotsen and Jomo Tsengyal, while the three consorts are collectively referred to as ‘the *jomos* sisters’ (Tib: *jo mo mched*), 44–45.

⁸ For the hagiographies of Jo mo sMan mo see: Eva M. Dargyay, *The Rise of Esoteric Buddhism in Tibet* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979), 119–23; Dudjom Rinpoche Jikdrel Yeshe Dorje, *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism: Its Fundamentals and History*, 2 vol. (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1991), 771–74; Tsultrim Allione, *Women of Wisdom* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 195–200.

⁹ Karma Lekshe Tsomo, “Change in Consciousness: Women’s Religious Identity in Himalayan Buddhist Cultures,” *Buddhist Women Across Cultures. Realisations*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), 178.

¹⁰ Linda LaMacchia, *Songs and Lives of the Jomo (Nuns) of Kinnaur, Northwest India. Women’s Religious Expression in Tibetan Buddhism* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 2008), 41.

¹¹ Skt: *mudrā*, Tib: *phyag rgya*.

¹² Tib: *nyams su blangs*.

¹³ Tib: *rtog pa*.

¹⁴ Tib: *grub pa*.

¹⁵ Tib: *nya ma*.

¹⁶ Tib: *khyim pa po*.

¹⁷ Tib: *rang grol gyi rnal 'byor ma*.

¹⁸ Tib: *yid bzhin gyi nor bu*, scr. *cintāmani*.

¹⁹ Tib: *gdams [gdams ngag]*.

²⁰ Tib: *sems nyid nor bu*.

²¹ Chos kyi Seng ge e Gang pa, *Pha dam pa'i rnam thar* in *Pha dam pa dang ma cig lab sgron gyi rnam thar* (Xining: mTsho sngon Mi rigs Dpe skrun Khang [Qinghai Nationalities Publishing House], 1992), 75–76.

²² Tib: *nyams rtogs*.

²³ Lit. *bu mo*, “girl.”

²⁴ Ibid., 75.

²⁵ Tib: *rtogs pa*.

²⁶ Tib: *grub thob*, “accomplishments.”

²⁷ Tib: *nye gnas ma*.

²⁸ Tib: *grub thob ma*.

²⁹ The nineteenth *jomo* of our text.

³⁰ Tib: *grub thob ma*.

³¹ Berlin (2016), 17–19.

³² Tib: *nye gnas ma*.

³³ Tib: *dka'ba*.

Western Women, Maroon Robes: Australian Women in the Sangha

Lozang Tseten

The Buddhist tradition itself will not be strengthened merely by the numbers of people who become ordained. That will depend rather on the quality of our monks and nuns.

~ His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet

The growing numbers of Western women who are taking ordination in the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism are creating a Western monastic community (*sangha*) that is quite distinct from its Tibetan roots. These nuns meet some demanding challenges with patience and very little support or guidance from their ordaining *lamas*, who often live on a different continent. However, they are determined to overcome the many obstacles they encounter in order to live as Buddhist monastics in maroon robes.

In 1999, when Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo explained to H. H. Dalai Lama the often-exasperating situations that Western nuns experience, he was reduced to tears. First, they are expected to behave and act in accordance with the *vinaya*, but in reality there is very little training accessible to Western monastics. Second, they are required to live simply, but often have nowhere to live, as very few Tibetan Buddhist monastic communities exist in the West. Third, they are expected to live frugally, but many live at or below the poverty line. Having no financial support from their tradition, they sometimes have no choice but to undertake paid work and hence some are unable to wear their robes. As a result, many are so disheartened that they feel they have little choice but to disrobe.

In 2014, H. H. Dalai Lama addressed the aspiring monastics attending the pre-ordination course at Tushita Meditation Centre, Dharamsala.¹ He expressed his joy at the growing numbers of Westerners taking ordination and also his doubts that all of them had a clear understanding of the deep significance of the vows they were committing themselves to or the profound impact these vows would have on their lifestyle. He stressed that pre-ordination programmes and mentoring for new monastics are an essential element in the transition to living in vows. In 1988, Karma Lekshe Tsomo indicated that identifying supportive programmes that value and nurture Western novice nuns requires an intimate understanding of their unique cultural situation.² In 1999, Thubten Chodrön highlighted the dearth of sound research on the circumstances of Western Tibetan monastics, calling for more enquiry.³ My review of the literature in 2014 did not identify any significant changes in that situation in the intervening years. Indeed, the justification for this research was precisely the significant gaps I found in the literature.

As part of a Master's degree in Applied Buddhist Studies, I conducted a small phenomenological study that attempted to listen to the voices of Western nuns by chronicling the personal, lived experiences of a small, eclectic group of nuns living in Queensland, Australia. By recording their preparations for ordination and ensuing lives as Tibetan Buddhist nuns in a variety of circumstances, I hoped to draw fresh attention to their status, so that any future solutions might be better informed. This tentative social research project was gestated during my own journey to ordination. The lack of information and guidance frustrated me. Where could I go? Who could I turn to? Was it equally difficult for every Westerner who took the path I had chosen? Thubten Chodrön believed that it might be, because being a Western nun – a new phenomena in an ancient tradition – entailed taking radical action to practice the Dharma.

Although the nuns who participated in this study had various lineage *lamas* and had taken their vows in various global locations, at the time of the study they were practicing under the

auspices of the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT)⁴ and its monastic foundation, the International Mahayana Institute (IMI).⁵ The study subjects were indigenously Western by birth and their pale facial features made them universally and specifically recognizable as being of European descent. This precise racial description was necessary to highlight the challenges faced by women who choose to wear the robes of a tradition that is understood in the West as having emerged from an Asian culture, while the person wearing them evidently did not. Lama Yeshe, when speaking to the first group of entirely western monastics that he had ordained stated that “Our pink faces show that we are not part of Tibetan society, yet because of our renounced attitude, we’re outcasts from Western society as well.”⁶

Understanding Western Renunciant Women

Phenomenology allows an individual to describe her personal experience of an event in her life and to unrestrictedly explain how she recalls and interprets that experience. This methodology was chosen because it is appropriate to the sensitive nature of the study. Enquiry into the religious aspects of people’s lives offers many opportunities for misunderstanding and lack of objectivity. Details of the themes central to the study will be presented in this brief paper

Loosely structured interviews were conducted with eleven nuns, with my own experiences being included as the twelfth participant. Each nun had time to consider the study themes before her interview. My own familiarity with the issues and my status as an ordained nun encouraged a relaxed and comfortable, uninhibited atmosphere that enabled me to collect rich data. As Tsomo notes, the journey to becoming ordained often reflects how well a new nun will adapt to monastic life,⁷ and the interviews sometimes became very personal. The conversations were often interspersed with anecdotes of challenging moments in the nuns’ life journeys and their experience as novice nuns,⁸ and I was honored by these confidences. All the participants reported that they had enjoyed the experience of being interviewed and I learned a great deal about the craft of being a nun in the process and acknowledge this research as part of my own training.

In 2009, Chodrön specifically defined the problems faced by Western Buddhist nuns, reinforcing the view of H. H. Dalai Lama that many Western Buddhist nuns have no substantial knowledge of Buddhist monastic life when they become ordained and little appreciation of the significance of living by the precepts and training in the *vinaya*.⁹ It is entirely the nuns’ own responsibility to find appropriate guidance, which often is not forthcoming. My research was extensively influenced by Bhiksuni Thubten Chodrön’s work and her teachings at Sravasti Abbey with the community of fully ordained Westerners. The cultural differences between Western monastics and their Tibetan teachers can lead to significant cultural misunderstandings and, while Tibetan society respects and sustains the *sangha* even in exile, Western monastics come from cultures that are ambivalent at best about the value of monastic life.¹⁰ The Buddha constantly emphasized the importance of study, stating clearly that teaching the Dharma was a primary role for members of his *sangha* and this remains the key role of the *sangha* in all traditions.¹¹

In 2000, Chodrön argued that Western women who take Buddhist ordination are often highly educated, strongly motivated, self-sufficient, and mature women,¹² an assertion upheld by this study. All of the nuns interviewed were mature and experienced adults when they became ordained and, as Chodrön maintained, brought valuable life experience to the Western *sangha*, which richly enhances the community. Among the respondents were nurses, physiotherapists, librarians, an archeologist, women who had run businesses, nine mothers, and three grandmothers. Six of the nuns held one university degree and three held a second; all the others had received advanced

training in their chosen fields. The five nuns living independently in Brisbane had access to extensive study programmes available at sister Dharma centres and one senior nun was a distinguished peripatetic teacher, living wherever she was invited to teach. The others were members of Chenrezig Nun's Community (CNC).¹³ All the study participants felt that their higher education and life experiences enabled them to cope with both the intensive study programmes and the demands of supporting their respective institutes and Dharma centres, where they fulfilled numerous administrative and teaching roles and lead meditations. Some received a stipend for these duties.

Tsomo expressed the view that Western nuns, while acquiring the fundamentals of the Tibetan tradition, might eventually develop a specifically Western approach to practice.¹⁴ Lama Yeshe also recognised that the developing a Western monastic *sangha* required a distinctive form of practice: "You are not Tibetan! Go and do your own style."¹⁵ Chodron clearly recalls her own struggle to "act like a Tibetan" for a period after ordination.¹⁶

The senior participating nun in my study had lived in the Tibetan community in India for some time, both before and after ordination. Obviously, emersion in traditional monastic life is the best way to receive training and mentorship, but in today's political and economic maelstrom, training in India has become extremely difficult to access and too expensive for many Westerners. Three nuns lived for a while in India, both before and after ordination, among a "sea of maroon, the perfect way to begin ordained life." These nuns had attended the formal, mandatory pre-ordination programme and all three found it immensely valuable.¹⁷ Two other nuns had joined the Exploring Monasticism programme at Sravasti Abbey, which they had deeply appreciated, living amongst Westerners in robes following traditional practices and adapting them appropriately to Western mores. The remaining nuns tended to be unconvinced about the value of such programmes. Those who were associated with the Chenrezig¹⁸ nuns before their ordination believed that their close observation of those nuns over time had prepared them well for taking vows, perhaps as an informal type of training. One nun from a remote area of Victoria, Australia, had virtually no role models, but had "lived like a nun" at home for some time before ordination and read as much as possible. She was content with this. Those who had trained prior to ordination strongly maintained that such training should be obligatory, but one nun who had no formal training was convinced that, while such a programme would suit some, it was certainly not for everyone.

Tsomo has observed that Westerners who ordain, being motivated by a desire to study and practice the Dharma full-time, frequently find a reality that is a random confusion of where to live and study with no overall guidance.¹⁹ These practitioners often find it too difficult to survive as a Buddhist nun, eventually returning their vows – a situation also observed by Monlam, who estimates that approximately a quarter of IMI Western monastics disrobe by their tenth year, many much sooner.²⁰ He cited a lack of supportive infrastructure as a possible reason. This sad situation has undoubtedly led to a shortage of senior nuns (in robes for ten or more years) to mentor novices. The tradition of Tibetan monastics living with their guides and mentors in a monastery for many years, learning by discipline and example²¹ is again not practicable for westerners today with high costs and visa complications. All study participants agreed that mentorship was the ideal; some had found mentors and some had not. One nun formally requested a mentor and found it difficult to accept that not one nun she approached felt able to fulfil the role. She struggled with the conflicting advice she received, often insensitively offered and often very confusing. Several nuns had found constructive advice generously given but not by a designated mentor. This does in fact reflect the situation in the Buddha's early *sangha* when the novices' lack of understanding of acceptable behavior made an adverse impression upon lay practitioners. This persuaded the Buddha to make preceptorship a criterion for admission to his community,²² but the shortage of qualified monastics²³

to fulfil that role is as much a problem today as it was then. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has now revived the Buddha's idea of that vital element by supporting the newly evolving Western *sangha* who are often isolated from established traditional *sangha* training. Hopefully his encouragement will inspire positive change.

In 1988, Tsomo wondered whether ordination for women was a viable option if nuns have no monastery to live in, later observing that ordained Westerners are, in fact, “monastics without monasteries.”²⁴ There has been little change over the intervening years. Two participating nuns, when they were first ordained, had lived at a nascent Dharma centre in South Australia (at different times) but this proved to be very difficult for them both. There were no other monastics living onsite and they were expected to run the centre, meet with visitors, and organize talks and meditations. The two novice nuns were completely overwhelmed and deeply unhappy, until eventually they were able to move to the *sangha* community at Chenrezig. Another younger nun unexpectedly had to live at home after ordination because the community at Chenrezig was full. She found this isolation stressful, but her determination to remain in robes gave her the confidence to wait for admission to the nun's community – a clear example of the dire need for better planning before ordination. One of the five nuns living independently felt that moving to a community was too difficult a transition to make at her age, because she had only ever lived on her own and because, although the nuns living at CNC studied intensively, they were often expected to work for the Institute as well, which was extremely demanding. Tsomo felt that few Western women would willingly concede their independence to a power structure that they had no control over, such as a formal nunnery, preferring instead a situation with no-strings-attached educational opportunities.²⁵ Chenrezig Institute certainly met those criteria, but at a high emotional cost.

In 1986, when Tsomo was organizing the first Sakyadhita conference, she could find no one to speak about how monastics managed financially. The Asian nuns' temples provided their basic needs, while the Western nuns were too embarrassed and distressed at their precarious fiscal situation to speak.²⁶ All these years later, the participants in this study also downplayed their economic circumstances during interviews, hesitating to imply that there were any drastic problems. However, the nuns did disclose enough to reveal that their sources of income were diverse, ranging from invested income from a house sale or inheritance, to receiving aged or disability pensions, with one nun working full time. Despite living frugally, the economic future for all the nuns was precarious no matter how careful they were; still, there was no question of giving up. Some nuns living at CNC were able to take appropriate paid work at the Institute and all were offered a free meal each day and low-cost accommodations.

Over the course of these interviews, the emphasis of the research subtly changed as, contrary to expectations, the nuns totally dismissed the premise that they had been discriminated against due to being in robes. This line of enquiry did lead to some interesting stories, however – some amusing, a few rather intimidating – but the nuns had all managed to cope with the situation. Often they reflected on their good fortune in at least being recognised as monastics in the Tibetan tradition, even though they were often mistaken for monks. Overall, it is clear that finding suitable guidance and support when a nun is first ordained is closely allied with finding an appropriate place to live, which in turn relates to finances. All these issues raise challenges for Western nuns.

This research project has attempted to provide a snapshot of the situation of one group of Western nuns practicing in the Tibetan tradition in Australia.²⁷ The underlying issues of mentorship, training, and financial support will continue to be areas of concern. By capturing individual aspects of the stories of this group, I hope that this inquiry may offer some stepping stones toward a more

profound understanding of the circumstances of Western Buddhist nuns. These pioneering nuns themselves will instigate future solutions.

NOTES

¹ As far as I know, the formal preordination course is only offered at Tushita Meditation Centre in Dharamsala, India, and is required for taking novice ordination with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Sravasti Abbey, located in Washington State in the U.S., offers a programme that explores monastic life for those considering ordination. Students may stay for a year of further training before taking the precepts.

² Bhikshuni Karma Lekshe Tsomo, ed., *Sakyadbita: Daughters of the Buddha* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1988), 32

³ Bhikshuni Thubten Chodrön, *Blossoms of the Dharma: Living as a Western Buddhist Nun* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1999).

⁴ Lama Thubten Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche founded the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition in 1975, after they began teaching Western students in Nepal in the late 1960s. The foundation has grown to 165 centres in 37 countries. Lama Zopa Rinpoche has been the spiritual director since Lama Yeshe's death in 1984.

⁵ Lama Yeshe also founded The International Mahayana Institute to support his Western *sangha*. He felt it his responsibility to offer them that support. Nicholas Ribush, ed., *Advice for Monks and Nuns* (Boston: Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive for The International Mahayana Institute, 2002), 20–21.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁷ Karma Lekshe Tsomo, "Buddhist Nuns: Changes and Challenges," *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*, ed. Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 262.

⁸ If the interviews raised difficult and disturbing memories for the nuns, they were aware that a senior nun/counselor was available.

⁹ Bhikshuni Thubten Chodrön, *Western Buddhist Nuns: a New Phenomenon in an Ancient Tradition, Women's Buddhism, Buddhism's Women: Tradition, Revision, Renewal*, ed. Ellison Banks Findley (Wisdom Publications, Boston, 2000), 81–96.

¹⁰ For further details on this issue, see Geoffrey Samuels, "Tibetan Buddhism as a World Religion: Global Net Working and its Consequences," Paper presented at the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, Kings College, University of London, December 1995 (Revised February 22, 1996), 18. www.users.hunterlink.net.au.

¹¹ "In presenting its teachings to the world, the Buddhist tradition would thus point towards an unbroken lineage or succession of teachers and pupils: just as the Buddha took

care to instruct his pupils, so they in turn took care to instruct theirs. The visible and concrete manifestation of this succession is in the first place the Sangha, the community of ordained monks (*bhikkhu*) and nuns (*bhikkhuni*). Becoming a Buddhist monk or nun requires a particular ceremony that is legitimate only if properly carried out according to prescribed rules, which apparently go right back to the time of the Buddha himself. In particular the prescriptions for the ceremony require the presence of a minimum of five fully ordained *bhikkhus* of at least ten years' standing. Thus when someone ordains as a Buddhist monk there is in effect a direct link back to the presence of the Buddha himself. Of course, the principle of the passing of the teachings directly from person to person may also operate outside the Sangha, for members of the Sangha do not only teach other members of the Sangha, they teach lay people as well. Yet the Sangha remains the tangible thread of the tradition." Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1998), 37.

¹² "Most western nuns, however, are ordained as adults. Many are highly educated, have careers, and often have families and children." Bhiksunī Thubten Chodrön, "Western Buddhist Nuns: A New Phenomenon in an Ancient Tradition," Bhiksunī Thubten Chodrön, "Western Buddhist Nuns: A New Phenomenon in an Ancient Tradition," *Women's Buddhism Buddhism's Women Tradition, Revision, Renewal*, ed. Ellison Banks Findly (Boston: Wisdom Publications), 81.

¹³ Chenrezig Nun's Community (CNC) is associated with Chenrezig Institute, sharing the same property that was donated to Lama Yeshe in 1974 after his first teaching visit there and his first visit to west out of India. He envisaged building the Institute with the nun's community alongside the Gompa, and building started in 1975. The two are physically and financially separate organizations but interdependent. CNC is not a nunnery, having no abbess, but is a democratic community with a fluctuating residency as nuns attend teachings/retreats elsewhere, making their own decisions.

¹⁴ "We want to devise modes of practice which preserve the essence of the Buddha's teachings, yet are compatible with western civilization. We should strive to preserve the most excellent values of East and West," Karma Lekshe Tsomo, *Sakyadhita: Daughters of the Buddha* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1988), 302.

¹⁵ Quoted in Venerable Robina Courtin, "Monks and Nuns at the Heart of FPMT," *Mandala* April-June 2014, 40. <http://fpmt.org/mandala/>

¹⁶ Chodrön, *Blossoms of the Dharma*, 141.

¹⁷ Thubten Drolma, interview, Chenrezig Institute, Australia, May 3, 2014.

¹⁸ H. H. Dalai Lama is considered an emanation of Chenrezig, the *bodhisattva* of compassion, known in China as Guanyin.

¹⁹ Tsomo, "Buddhist Nuns," 262.

²⁰ Bhikkhu Lozang Monlam, "Sangha: Ordination: Caught Between Two Cultures," *Mandala* (magazine of FPMT), August/September 2008, 37. www.mandala.fpmt.org.

²¹ Alexander Berzin, Berzin, *Relating to a Spiritual Teacher: Building a Healthy Relationship* (Snow Lion Publications. Ithaca, New York, 2000), 28–30.

²² Mohan Wijayaratna (trans. C. Granger and S. Collins) *Buddhist Monastic Life according to the Texts of the Theravada Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 137–40.

²³ A mentor is a senior monastic who has been in robes for at least ten years. This is a *vinaya* rule.

²⁴ Tsomo, “Buddhist Nuns,” 12.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 265.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 276–82.

²⁷ This work is wholly my own and any mistakes, misrepresentations, or misinterpretations of the information shared with me by the participants is entirely my own responsibility.

Expanding Enlightened Awareness: Women in the Transmission and Indigenization of Buddhism in Brazil

Karma Lekshe Tsomo

The introduction and spread of Buddhism in North America has been the subject of considerable research and discussion in the field of religious studies, but Buddhism in South America has received far less attention. Buddhism was transmitted to Brazil in the late 19th century along with Japanese immigration and Buddhist temples developed as centers of Japanese diaspora culture. In the latter half of the 20th century, a fresh wave of Buddhist teachers introduced a variety of new Buddhist traditions, representing the Theravāda, Chinese Mahāyāna, Zen, and Tibetan Vajrayāna traditions. In recent decades, women have been active in a variety of new Buddhist temples and Dharma centers in Brazil. This paper will document women's contributions and explore the reasons for women's prominence in the transmission of Buddhism to Brazil.

This project began with library research on some of the dozens of Buddhist temples that have been established in the past six decades in Brazil. In addition, in May and June of 2016, I conducted field research at more than a dozen Buddhist temples, Dharma centers, and community centers in Rio de Janeiro, Brasília, Recife, Natal, Sao Paulo, Belo Horizonte, Viamão, Tres Coroas, and Caxias de Sul. As a participant/observer, and in collaboration with Brazilian scholars and Buddhist practitioners, I investigated the history, development, demographics, practice styles, and organizational styles of these temples and centers, with special attention to the roles of women. This paper documents Brazil's unique process of adapting Asian Buddhist traditions both historically and today. In addition, this study explores the reasons for women's prominent roles in certain temples and traditions. My thesis is that the prominence of women in Brazilian Buddhism and the emergence of women teachers is the result of a combination of three major factors: universal education, the inclusive nature of Buddhist rhetoric, and the compassionate encouragement of notable male Buddhist teachers. Because it could be argued that these factors are present in other countries as well, the focus of my analysis will be to explore what specific factors account for the prominence of women in Brazilian Buddhism.

Tracing the History of Buddhism in Brazil

Frank Usarski sets out a three-fold typology of Buddhism in Brazil: (1) ethnically rooted Buddhist traditions, especially traditional Japanese Buddhist schools; (2) intellectual or "cosmopolitan" Buddhism; and (3) more recent forms of Buddhism, which include contemporary Zen, Soka Gakkai, Tibetan, and other groups.¹ In this study, I will discuss two of these categories chronologically – first, ethnically rooted traditions and, second, more recent groups – and conclude with a consideration of the intellectual and cultural impact of Buddhism in contemporary Brazil. Although Brazil is perceived to be a predominantly Catholic country, in fact, religious life in Brazil is multifaceted, with a rich panoply of religious traditions. The iconic image of Christ the Redeemer dominates the cityscape of Rio de Janeiro with outstretched arms, yet the hearts and lives of the Brazilian people include many religious strands – Judaism, Evangelical Christianity, Pentecostalism, spiritualism, Afro-Brazilian religions (Yoruba, Candomblé), faith healing, native Brazilian religions, and others – in addition to Roman Catholicism. Many new religions are characterized by a high degree of syncretism.²

The religious landscape of Brazil has evolved continuously over the centuries, with successive waves of African, Portuguese, and Japanese immigration up to the present day. Since the days of Portuguese colonization, accompanied by Jesuit missionaries, Roman Catholicism has been the dominant faith in Brazil, but a recent census shows that the number of Catholics in Brazil has dropped precipitously, from 90 percent to 65 percent in 2010 alone. Afro-Brazilian religions, an amalgamation of religious traditions that evolved among African slaves brought to Brazil between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, are widely practiced. The most recent wave of religious immigration has been Evangelical Christianity in its many forms.

Early Waves of Buddhist Migration

The history of each of the Buddhist traditions that have been introduced to Brazil is unique. The stories of how new traditions were introduced, adopted, and adapted on Brazilian soil are quite distinct from earlier patterns of Japanese Buddhist acculturation. Whereas the development of Japanese Buddhism in Brazil was inextricably linked with the immigrant experience, the Theravāda, Chinese Mahāyāna, Zen, and Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhist traditions that subsequently developed have been adopted by native Brazilians. Of these, the Theravāda and Chinese Mahāyāna traditions have been transmitted from Asia by Asian Buddhist teachers and have developed very slowly over the years. By contrast, the Zen (largely Soto) and Tibetan Vajrayāna traditions (largely Kagyu and Nyingma) have been transmitted from the United States by American and Tibetan refugee teachers, and have grown rapidly in recent years. Women have played a variety of roles in all these traditions, emerging as leaders in some traditions and playing supportive roles in others.

Japanese immigrants arrived in Brazil beginning in 1908 and were mostly agriculturalists.³ Many brought their traditional Buddhist beliefs and practices with them and gradually established temples in Brazilian cities.⁴ Since the 1990s, as Cristina Rocha notes in her book *Zen in Brazil*, Buddhism has also become popular among urban, intellectual elites, and has attracted considerable media attention.⁵ In Rocha's view, Buddhism has had an broad impact on popular culture "as a set of humanistic values to counter the rampant violence and crime in Brazilian society." Her description of Japanese immigration and what she calls the "creolization" of Sōtō Zen are very useful.⁶ In more recent developments among "intellectual Buddhists," she believes that Buddhism is part of a process of "cannibalizing... the modern other to become modern themselves, ... driven by a desire to acquire and accumulate cultural capital both locally and overseas." Although Buddhism has certainly become trendy among modern elites, its popularity is not necessarily superficial. In my experience, Brazilians seem to be creating multiple forms of Buddhism that are both authentically Buddhist and uniquely Brazilian.

As Rocha notes, many Brazilians study and practice more than one Buddhist tradition, without any sense of conflict.⁷ They gravitate toward temples and centers that offer Dharma teachings and meditation training, and many see the different traditions as mutually enriching. Those who are attracted to Buddhism have often explored New Age religions and move from one tradition to another with ease until they find a center or approach that meets their needs and expectations, even if that means traveling to Buddhist centers in different parts of the country or abroad. The zeal to learn as much as possible from all available sources has given rise to a certain degree of Buddhist universalism, marked by tolerance, respect, and appreciation of the wide range of Buddhist philosophical and practice traditions.

Contemporary Zen in Brazil

The majority of Japanese immigrants who arrived in Brazil came from Buddhist families. Those who settled in urban areas gradually began to establish Japanese temples that were affiliated with different Buddhist schools. The Zen school gained an early foothold and evolved to become a major strand of Buddhism in Brazil, establishing Busshinji Temple as the Brazilian headquarters of the Sōtō Zen School in São Paulo. For many older members, the temple functions not only as a place for religious ceremonies, but also as a Japanese cultural center, serving to reinforce a sense of unique ethnic and social identity. Because the ashes and memorial tablets of their parents and grandparents may be enshrined there, members often feel emotional ties to the temple. Many members of the older generation still speak Japanese and attempt to maintain their ethnic and cultural identities. This is reflected in the architecture, aesthetics, food, and cultural activities organized at the temple, including classes in flower arrangement, martial arts, and so on. Traditional patriarchal patterns of thinking and behavior are maintained in the temple's organizational structures and daily operations.

Zen temples in Brazil generally mirror Zen temples in Japan, but are smaller and less elaborate. One noticeable difference is greater diversity in the memberships of Brazilian Zen temples. For example, at Busshinji, non-Japanese Brazilians have shown significant interest in the study and practice of Zen. Among them are many women, including some serious practitioners and teachers.

Cultural differences may still pose challenges, however. In one well-known example, a Japanese male Zen priest was unexpectedly replaced as the abbot of Busshinji by a Brazilian female Zen priest to accommodate the predominantly Japanese-Brazilian membership of the temple.⁸ Monja Coen Roshi (Cláudia Coên) received rigorous Zen training in Japan. When she returned to Brazil in 1995, Maruyama Roshi invited her to teach at Busshinji. This was quite unusual. In many Japanese Buddhist sects, appointments are still made by the headquarters in Japan. One might have expected Moriyama Roshi, a Japanese male priest, to take a more traditional approach, and Monja Coen, a Brazilian female priest, to take a more modern approach. To the contrary, Moriyama Roshi emphasized meditation and Zen study more than religious ceremonies and made it a priority to reach out to non-Japanese Brazilians, whereas Monja Coen emphasized the traditional ritual needs of Japanese Brazilians. In this case, the Sōtō Zen School headquarters in Japan decided to intercede and replaced Maruyama Roshi with Monja Coen. After some time, cultural differences apparently arose again and she was also asked to leave.

Today, Monja Coen is the teacher and director of Zendo Brasil, a Japanese-style Zen center in a residential neighborhood of São Paulo, where she lives with three big friendly dogs and three friendly nuns. Together, the nuns organize daily meditation sittings (*zazen*), periodic retreats (*sesshin*), Dharma talks, and other events. Monja Coen has published a number of books, has appeared on Brazilian TV, and is a familiar figure to many Brazilians. She is often invited to speak to public audiences and to company employees by businesses hoping to improve interpersonal relationships and the overall organizational climate. In the sophisticated atmosphere of contemporary Brazilian society, inviting a Zen Buddhist nun is nothing surprising.

Tibetan Tradition and Transformation

Brazilian society has also welcomed teachers of other Buddhist traditions in recent decades, many of whom are women. This trend began with H. E. Chagdud Rinpoche (1930–2002), a *lama* of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism who was recognized as the sixteenth incarnation of a 15th-century *lama* named Sherab Gyaltsen who was renowned for his ability to fold an iron sword into a knot. In 1983, Chagdud Rinpoche established Chagdud Gonpa, a retreat center in Oregon, where he taught and attracted a large number of devoted students. In 1995, he moved to Três Coroas in the south of Brazil, where he established Chagdud Gonpa Brasil, and built Khadro Ling, a large monastery in traditional Tibetan style that has become a major practice center and tourist attraction. Chagdud Rinpoche was a wise and compassionate teacher who quickly won the hearts of Brazilians from around the country. Of the six students that Chagdud Rinpoche ordained as *lamas*⁹ who live in Brazil, four are women. His wife, Chagdud Khadro, is the spiritual director of Chagdud Gonpa Brasil and lives at Khadro Ling. Lama Tsering Everest helped found Chagdud Gonpa Odsal Ling and Refúgio near São Paulo. Lama Sherab Drolma, the president of Chagdud Gonpa Brasil, is a resident lama at Khadro Ling. Lama Yeshe Drolma helped found Dordje Ling in Curitiba and Rigdjed Ling in Florianópolis.

Lama Tsering Everest served as an interpreter for Chagdud Rinpoche for 11 years. Although she did not know Tibetan and he did not know English well, they seemed to understand each other perfectly. After completing a four-year solitary retreat in 1995, Lama Tsering began teaching in Brazil. As the resident director of Odsal Ling in São Paulo, she continues to teach in Brazil and also at centers in the United States and other countries.¹⁰ This year, she and Chagdud Khadro toured New Zealand together. She is a holder of the Red Tara lineage and was recognized by Chagdud Rinpoche as an emanation of Tara. In a 2014 interview with *Buddhistdoor*, Lama Tsering notes that Chagdud Rinpoche, a very traditional *lama*, was very non-traditional in empowering women as *lamas*, four of whom have become his spiritual successors.

Even if Brazilian women do not have close relationships with these Buddhist women teachers, they find them to be a source of inspiration. Zenia Machado, a long-time Dharma practitioner who lives in Brasília, told me, “I love them all, had a few experiences of having teachings from them, and appreciate them very much.” When I asked her to explain why so many women are involved in Buddhism in Brazil, she responded,

Maybe because the women are more open to exploring and find more meaningful answers to their questions and their search in the body of knowledge and beliefs of Buddhism than in Catholicism.... Buddhism allows you to explore or live not only the devotional, sacred ritual aspects of the faith, but also the psychology and philosophy of life! And you can do this exploration by getting “drops” of the Buddhist teachings from here and there to understand and transform your mind, implying here dealing with feelings, intuition, insights. Women seem to be more sensitive to these topics, so they are immediately attracted to teachings that bring some explanation and meaning to life and ways to be a better person on a daily basis.¹¹

When I asked what explains the prominence of women at Khandro Ling Gonpa, for example, she said she believes that the women there are “wonderful and inspiring” and “have created a welcoming environment for women to learn and to make the most of their precious human life.” Talks by many of these women teachers can be found on the Internet and are appreciated for being simple, profound, straightforward, and relevant to daily life. When a popular TV celebrity and her crew arrived to film the monastery for her show, it was Lama Sherab, a female *lama* who was appointed to be the spokesperson. Women direct the translation and publication of Buddhist texts at the monastery and also its three-year retreat center. At Khandro Ling, women have become enthusiastic, competent, and reliable guides on the path.

Women are also very active in Centro de Estudos Budistas Bodisatva (CEBB), an organization founded by Lama Padma Samten in the south of Brazil in 1986. A Brazilian former professor of physics, he received teachings and training in several Buddhist traditions before being ordained as a *lama* by Chagdud Rinpoche in 1996. Since then, he has continued to teach and publish widely in an openhearted style that nurtures the potential of female and male students alike. Rather than emphasizing traditional tantric rituals in the Tibetan style, the CEBB network of centers around Brazil focus on generic Mahāyāna philosophy and practice. Due to the active encouragement of Lama Padma Samten, women play important roles in these centers as teachers, facilitators, counselors, and administrators.

The Future of Buddhist Women in Brazil

All signs indicate that the future of Buddhism in Brazil will be diverse and will include the active participation and leadership of women. In addition to Zen and Tibetan Buddhist centers, women have also been prominent in the Fo Guang Shan in Latin America organization. With headquarters in Taiwan, Fo Guang Shan has temples in four Brazilian cities – Cotia, Liberdade, Rio de Janeiro, and Olinda – as well as Argentina, Paraguay, and Chile. Zulai Temple in Cotia, near São Paulo, is the largest Buddhist temple in South America. In 2006, the temple hosted a visit by H.H. Dalai Lama that was widely publicized. The temple offers an eclectic blend of activities either in Chinese or Portuguese or both, including meditation, tai chi, lamp offerings, repentance ceremonies, after-school programs for slum children, Vesak and Chinese New Year celebrations, vegetarian cooking classes, and talks on such subjects as “Buddhism and Neuroscience.” Unlike other Buddhist groups in Brazil, these temples are all organized and staffed by *bhiksunis* (fully ordained nuns), typically Chinese speaking, who were educated and trained in Taiwan. The six nuns who are currently in residence at Zulai Temple are from Taiwan, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brazil.

The future of Buddhist women in Brazil is still being shaped, yet as these examples attest, women are active in ensuring the healthy development of Buddhism in the country. My research suggests several reasons why women have become prominent in Brazilian Buddhism as teachers, translators, organizers, and practitioners. First, women in Brazil are generally well educated, giving them a strong foundation for learning Buddhism. Second, they have access to Buddhist teachings and practices from a diversity of Buddhist temples and practice centers. Perhaps most importantly, women have received the compassionate encouragement of reliable, well-qualified Buddhist teachers, many of whom have been male.

Women are visible, well-respected Buddhist practitioners in Brazil, and many of them are in leadership positions. A new film series titled “Três Joias” (Three Jewels) will document Buddhism in

Brazil, including its many temples, centers, and traditions.¹² The film takes an ecumenical approach, with portraits of different schools of Brazilian Buddhism. The film also takes a gender-inclusive approach, with portraits of leading women teachers in Brazilian Buddhism. It is clear, looking to the future, that in order for Buddhist traditions to continue flourishing in Brazil, the capabilities of women must be nourished.

NOTES

¹ Frank Usarski, “Buddhism in Brazil and its Impact on the Larger Brazilian Society,” *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*, ed. Martin Baumann and Charles Prebish (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 163–76.

² Peter B. Clarke, “Japanese New Religious Movements in Brazil: From Ethnic to ‘Universal’ Religions,” *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response*, ed. Bryan Wilson and Jamie Crosswell (London: Routledge, 1999), 191–210.

³ Yukio Fujii and T. Lynn Smith, *The Acculturation of the Japanese Immigrants in Brazil* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1959).

⁴ John Sasaki, *Japanese Emigrants in Brazil: A Study of Integration of the Japanese People* (Rio de Janeiro: Sesi, 1957).

⁵ Cristina Moreira Rocha, “Zen Buddhism in Brazil,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 1(2000) 31–55.

⁶ Cristina Rocha, *Zen in Brazil: The Quest for Cosmopolitan Modernity* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2005).

⁷ Cristina Rocha, “All Roads Come from Zen: Busshinji as a Reference to Buddhism,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 35:1(2008) 81–94.

⁸ Christina Moreira da Rocha, “The Appropriation of Japanese Zen Buddhism in Brazil,” *Japanese Studies Review* 4(2000) 33–52.

⁹ The term *lama* is the Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit term *guru*, or teacher, denoting especially a spiritual teacher. A *lama* may or may not be a celibate monastic; not all *lamas* are monks, not all monks are *lamas*. Typically, in Tibetan cultural areas *lamas* are male, although in theory there is nothing to prevent a woman from being recognized as a *lama*.

¹⁰ Lama Tsering’s teachings are presented in a style that is lighthearted and easy to understand. For example, see Tsering Everest, “The Bodhisattva Peace Training,” *Buddhism Through American Women’s Eyes*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2010), 105–21.

¹¹ Email correspondence, May 28, 2107.

¹² The series is directed by Kentaro Sugao and sponsored by Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai (Society for the Promotion of Buddhism) and the International Association of Buddhist Culture (IABC). <http://www.tresjoias.com.br>.

Breaking the Glass Ceiling: For a Future to be Possible for Monastics in the West

Yeshe Bodhicitta

When I ordained, I did so with a heart of inspiration. I truly wished to reach enlightenment and benefit all beings. Buddhism transformed my life and gave it so much meaning. I wanted to become a nun because I saw the happiest people I knew were Tibetan monastics. It did not occur to me that I would be treated differently from the Tibetans who had ordained, nor did I realize that there is entrenched patriarchy and hierarchy in the tradition that often prevents ordained Western women from accessing resources, training, or even dignity.

I hit the Buddhist glass ceiling pretty soon, though. In the Dharma centre where I worked as a nun, I paid rent whereas Tibetan males stayed for free. One day, the centre hosted a Tibetan *lama* who told me that only men could become Buddhas and that I should pray to be reborn male. Not one woman in the room questioned him. Even if sexism was not always as overt as this, it was conveyed in a hundred small ways that Western monastics were not as valued as Tibetan ones. Even the *lama's* lay relatives, who were not practitioners, stayed in the centre for free, while Western monastics contravened their vows to work at lay jobs to pay rent. From the first day I ordained, I took off my robes and worked in an office. This is against the *vinaya* and a practice never heard before in the entire history of Buddhism.

In a survey of five Dharma centres in Nepal and India run for foreigners and often sponsored by foreigners, it was found that all charged Western monastics to stay and used the labour of Western monastics without pay. Three out of five centres offered a 20 percent discount in rent to Western monastics. All these centres had Tibetan monks staying for free. When we asked the biggest centre in Nepal (which was originally donated by a Western nun), we were told “Why should we support you? You are just tourists.”

If the Buddha clearly stated that it is the duty of ordination masters to provide robes, shelter, food, and medicine to their disciples, one must ask why Western monastics are being charged to stay – a practice not deemed acceptable by the Vinaya or Sutras. The purpose of a monastic's life is to devote themselves to the Dharma, meditation, study and Dharma work. They cannot do that if they are working in lay jobs. Tibetans now have thousands of well-established monasteries in India and Nepal. Therefore, one must ask why there is as practice of charging Western monastics to pay rent and money for Dharma talks, which has never been acceptable in 2,600 years of Buddhist history.

The monastic community was the first democracy in the world. If resources were given to the *sangha*, which was traditionally composed of both monks and nuns, they were supposed to be distributed equally. Monastics were seen as valuable, because they studied the Dharma full time, memorized it, and practiced it in a way that laypeople did not have time for. They created a spiritual environment for the lay community to take refuge in and receive spiritual sustenance from. Monasteries were the epicentre of Buddhist learning – places where the Dharma was upheld. When I ordained, I did not know that nowadays nuns receive far fewer donations than monks, that they have to struggle just to get the same education as monks, and that in most traditions they cannot take full ordination. I never questioned why only men sat on the throne, or only Tibetans were seen as “authentic” practitioners, or why our centre raised money for Tibetan men in India and not for Australian monastics who were contributing free labour to keep the centre going.

If we hear that Himalayan nuns are working in the fields instead of studying and practicing, we feel outraged, but if Western monastics are similarly having to work, we think, “Get a job.” How has this double standard developed? As women who sponsor Asian male teachers, we need to examine whether our donations are funding centres that enable gender inequality and, by charging Western

monastics and not Tibetans, whether we are supporting patriarchy. If your centre does not support Western monastics or have women as teachers and leaders, it is important to open a dialogue with them. One solution is to emulate the Western Theravāda *bhikkhunis* who have successfully started several monastic communities in the U.S. and Australia, although some still struggle. The *bhikkhunis* in these communities do not compromise on the precepts; the *vinaya* is carefully observed and monastics do not work outside the centres. Monasticism has always been an important part of a flourishing four-fold *sangha*. To say that we do not need monastics or *bhikkhunis* contradicts the *sutras*.

The Buddha said that the Dharma of the previous Buddhas disappeared quickly because the *vinaya* was not adequately established. He also said that until the “sons and daughters” of a place took the robe, the Dharma was not established in that land. He said that the monastic *sangha* was his legacy. Where the *sangha* flourished, the Dharma would last long; when it died out, the Dharma would quickly follow. We can see that in areas that did not have a strong monastic community, only a lay one, like the Buddhist culture that built Borobudur, the Dharma did not last long. The first thing Tibetan masters did when coming into exile was to establish monasteries, so that the Dharma would be preserved.

Do Tibetans deserve support? Absolutely. They have kept alive the Dharma for more than 1,000 years and their culture is an endangered Buddhist heritage. But should this preservation be done at the expense of developing a Buddhist tradition with well-trained Western teachers based on Tibetan Buddhism in other countries, particularly the West? Should this mean that we view ourselves as inherently inferior because we are not Tibetan men? The Tibetan refugee community is not well established in exile. Western monastics have been left behind. It is possible that the reification and the Shangri-La image of Tibetan culture and Tibetan *lamas* has made many Westerners doubt their own awakened potential and idealize Tibetans. If one is not Himalayan and is surrounded by archetypes of Asian men on thrones and asked to support these people as the only “real” holders of a tradition, it is bound to affect one’s self-esteem and identity. If our only ideal practitioners are Asian males and we have only a few rare female archetypes, we are likely to internalize patriarchy. Rather than working together with other women to overcome inequality, women may compete for the favour of men and fight over limited resources, reinforcing the patriarchal structure.

The Buddha created the fourfold *sangha*: laywomen, laymen, *bhikkhunis*, and *bhikkhus*. For the Dharma to flourish, we are all needed; we all play valuable roles. Monastics are considered valuable because they embody renunciation, the Buddhist’s greatest aspiration, and the full-time pursuit of awakening. They are resources for the community and create a spiritual environment in monasteries, which are the epicentre of Buddhist activity and learning. Monastics and laypeople can enrich each other. Even the tantric texts describes monastic precepts as the best foundation for practicing the Vajrayāna. If this is so, why are hundreds of centres in the West set up only for laypeople and why do they charge Western monastics money to stay there? There are approximately 30,000 Tibetan monastics in hundreds of monasteries in India. Outside India, there are hundreds of centres affiliated and largely controlled by *lamas* for the lay community. There are less than four Centres in the world where Tibetan Buddhist Western monastics can practice and study full time without being charged and study in their own language. Very few of these Centres actually have Western female leaders. In this conference we will hear about Western nuns including myself, who are starting monasteries, but the existence of handful of monasteries does not mean that the overwhelming double standards of gender and racial discrimination we face have changed. They can only change by being identified as habits and attitudes detrimental to the spreading of Dharma in the West and in the preservation of the four-fold Sangha.

The Southeast Asian Theravāda *bhikkhuni* lineage almost disappeared for hundreds of years due to war and apathy. In the West, this could happen again. For thousands of years, the idea of *karma* has been misconstrued to mean destiny, and used as an excuse to relegate women to an inferior status, such

that they receive less respect and fewer resources, and have fewer places to study and to ordain. Buddhist women often internalize patriarchy. Instead of questioning this double standard and working to change it, they have accepted it as their “bad *karma*” and “lack of merit.” Due to patriarchy, women experience unimaginable oppression.¹ In many Buddhist societies, women have been locked out of the fully ordained *sangha* and Buddhist studies for thousands of years.

Karma means action, and if we want good conditions to study and practice the Dharma, we need to create them. Women have always been the largest supporters of Buddhism, and yet nuns have always received fewer offerings and facilities than men. Why not stop internalizing the patriarchal status quo and start supporting women? We may accept stories about inequality coming from developing countries as the remnants of feudal culture, but it is much harder to look in the mirror and see that we are enabling patriarchy in the so-called developed countries as well. Even if all the facts are placed in front of us, this may be hard to accept. It challenges our faith and makes us see things about ourselves that we may not want to see. Why do we still ignore the glaring inequalities in centres that place Tibetan men on thrones, while non-Himalayan women in robes clean the bathroom, pay rent, and answer the phones? Why are women treating our own Dharma sisters this way? Sadly, patterns of male dominance and internalized patriarchy may infiltrate and condition the minds of women. Women may be so thoroughly conditioned that they no longer challenge the status quo that oppresses them, but instead attack those who question it.

When explaining the plight of Western monastics, I have received responses such as, “You are too attached. This is just self-grasping,” and “Western monastics don’t have the *karma* to be supported.” Although the word *karma* means “action,” we sometimes hear the phrase, “It’s your *karma*” to justify inequalities. This may cause people to blame themselves instead of recognizing structural violence and gender privilege. I have met many women who think that gender discrimination is their fault. They believe that if they just work harder, they will get support. But women already work harder than men and they still experience greater poverty, violence, and oppression. In some countries, women below 45 are more likely to die from violence at the hands of their partner than from cancer or malaria.

The Buddha made a bold statement 2,600 years ago. He said that women could become enlightened and gave them the option to become renunciants in his community. He affirmed that women could achieve awakening and had the right to determine their own lives. He encouraged them to become educated and liberated.

In my own story, with no monastery in my own country where I did not have to pay, I set out for India. After a few years studying Tibetan language in Dharamsala and living in the Tibetan community in exile, I met some Indian Buddhists in Bodhgaya. At the time, I was contemplating the contrast between the extreme poverty of the local people and the extreme wealth of the international Buddhist temples that had 6-foot-high barbed wire fences around them. I wondered, ‘If the Buddha was alive, which side of the fence he would be on?’ As I was thinking this, a man from the Ambedkar community came to me and asked about Buddhism. Members of the Ambedkar community are largely former untouchables, a hereditary group in India that has been enslaved for thousands of years and made to do the most demeaning work. It was then that my adventure into the Ambedkar Buddhist community began. We have a temple in central India where we offer Dharma teachings and run a girls’ hostel, a women’s job training centre, and extra study classes for 160 children. We cook 7,000 meals per year for slum children. We also offer counseling and domestic violence assistance.

Arriving in Central India, I was very moved by people’s enthusiasm and kindness. In my own country, Buddhists had told me that they only wished to offer food to Tibetan lamas. In the slums, people had nothing but offered everything. Because of the teachings of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, people were motivated to stand up for their rights as human being and to help themselves. They wanted their

daughters to be educated and to have better lives. People brought me extremely sick babies who were dying of dysentery and ask me to chant over them. I knew then and there that a purely spiritual response to their poverty and unnecessary misery would not be skillful or compassionate. One cannot think of spiritual things when one is oppressed. The same goes for women who are made to feel like second-class citizens in male dominated monasteries. It is hard to flourish when one is oppressed.

The Bodhicitta Foundation supports our socially engaged work in the slums of India to empower young children and women with education, job training, nutrition, and human rights. Compassion cannot just be a high ideal. To have compassion and wisdom is to understand that we are all interconnected. To understand interdependence is to know that one's privilege often comes at the expense of other people's exploitation. Everything we receive is provided by others. What we do to others and the earth, we do to ourselves. Happiness is not just a personal matter, it is a communal matter. That means that we cannot remain passive in the face of injustice, because we are already part of the web of life. If we truly are spiritual, we need to respond to the chaos and misery of the world, not just our own meditation. Sooner or later, we need to act on our compassion, redeem our Buddha nature, heal the broken parts of ourselves, and act to heal the world.

The fourfold *sangha* is the legacy of the Buddha. Buddhism in the West, or anywhere, cannot flourish when nuns have no training and support or when women are regarded as second-class citizens and unable to live as nuns. The Kalyanamitra Fund has raised \$35,000 AUD for scholarships for Western monastics and is currently trying to raise money for land for a non-sectarian hermitage in Australia.

In Tibetan Buddhism, there are Himalayan men on thrones everywhere we look. Please consider whether ignoring Western nuns and only supporting Tibetan Lamas that will create a future for your daughters and granddaughters. Will anyone even be able to ordain and live as a nun in the West the way we are going? Of the 15 people I ordained with, only 2 remain. Nuns are running centres, doing retreat, studying languages and philosophy, and helping keep the Dharma alive. They are a reminder that there are alternatives to violence, materialism, rampant greed, environmental destruction, and overpopulation. Women need to support gender equality and social equality to save the spirit of Buddhism. Otherwise, patriarchy will continue to drown out the voices of the daughters of the Buddha, as it has for hundreds of years, and something very beautiful will be lost to the world.

Results of The Survey of Western Vajrayana Monastics

Kalyanamitra Foundation, a 16-year-old foundation that works to raise awareness and funds for non-Himalayan monastics in the Tibetan tradition, did a survey of 35 Western monastics living in Australia and the United States in 2009. The results of the survey showed that:

- 65 percent of monastics were over the age of 50.
- 41 percent were over the age of 60.
- 64 percent of those surveyed lived in Dharma centres.
- 36 percent of those surveyed lived in private residences.
- 34 percent of those surveyed said they had savings or a pension.
- 100 percent of those who stayed in Dharma centres paid rent.
- 100 percent of the centres where Western monastics stayed did not charge Tibetan lamas to stay.
- 72 percent of those surveyed said they had experienced gender discrimination.
- 63 percent of those surveyed said they had experienced being treated as less important and less desirable than a Tibetan monastic.
- 15 percent of those surveyed said their centre supported them for food or for discounts

on rent (the maximum discount was 20 percent).
55 percent of those surveyed said their teacher had never taught them the Vinaya.
89 percent of those surveyed said their ordination teacher had not provided the four requisites of food, shelter, robes and medicine that the Buddha stipulated were the responsibility of an ordination master.
42 percent of those surveyed said they had become disillusioned because the lack of training and support.
73 percent of those surveyed said that they had saved up money before ordination, but after a few years it had run out.
26 percent of those surveyed said that they had a Western teacher who was female.
74 percent of those surveyed said they had a Tibetan teacher who was male.
48 percent said their teacher did not live with them, but visited from India (many people had more than one teacher).
36 percent of those surveyed said they had received verbal abuse in public because of the way they looked.
56 percent of those surveyed said they worked in outside jobs to make ends meet.
15 percent said they had a sponsor or a scholarship.
82 percent of those surveyed said they worked without pay more for 15 hours per week or more for centres controlled by lay people and/or for well below the acceptable minimum wage.

Seven years after this survey was conducted, 83 percent of those who had been surveyed had disrobed. Of these, 44 percent had disrobed because their *lama* had been asked to leave the community, 20 percent because they had felt socially isolated and had chosen to have relationships, and 19 percent (largely people below 45 years) said it was because they had no means to sustain themselves financially and were burnt out from giving so much service with so little in return.

NOTE

1. Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* (New York: Vintage, 2010).

Following Old Trails, Breaking New Ground: The Establishment of Shide, the First Tibetan Buddhist Nunnery in Germany

Thubten Choedroen and Thubten Jampa

Monastic life in the modern world has special challenges. Monastic life should mainly be based on the *vinaya* and this can only be practised in a community. In individualistic Western societies, however, it is difficult to find communities of Buddhist nuns dedicating their lives collectively to the Dharma. Many reasons can be identified to explain the unsatisfactory situation of Buddhist nuns in the West, related either to the monastics themselves, to lay practitioners, society in general, or other factors. Another option is to try to create better circumstances for monastic life in the West and break new ground while still following the path of the Buddha. We would like to report on our experiences, exchange ideas, and openly discuss the questions, challenges, the sunny side, and the difficulties we have encountered.

The Trail of the Buddha in Germany?

The seeds of Buddhism in Germany were sown over 150 years ago¹ and the beginnings of Tibetan Buddhism reach back to 1952 with the founding of the Berlin branch of the Arya Maitreya Mandala.² In the 1960s, the first Tibetan monastery and the first Tibetan Buddhist centre in Europe were founded. In the 1970s, high lamas such as His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama and His Holiness the 16th Karmapa visited Germany for the first time and more Tibetan Buddhist centres, such as the Tibetisches Zentrum in Hamburg, were founded. In the 1980s, the first German *sramaneri* in the Tibetan tradition was ordained. She also became the first German *bhiksuni*. In 1996, the Tibetisches Zentrum's meditation centre, Semkye Ling, in Schneverdingen, northern Germany, opened its doors. Two years later, it was able to welcome His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who gave teachings nearby attended by ten thousand people. The impact on the region was overwhelmingly positive.

The small town of Schneverdingen³ is now home to four Buddhist associations. The most recent one is our nunnery. As far as we know, it is the first nunnery in Germany. Two of us, who were living in Semkye Ling meditation centre in Schneverdingen, pragmatically took the first step and built a house for two nuns nearby. Fortunately, we had some financial resources and help from our families to start the project. Together with a handful of committed laywomen, we established a non-profit association at the end of 2015, called Shide Buddhist Nunnery.⁴ In Tibetan, *shide* means peace and happiness. We legally donated our house to the nunnery, so that after we pass away it will be available for other nuns. We were joined by a third nun and in March 2016, we three nuns moved in.⁵ Many people have been inspired by our project and donations are becoming stable, so that the association is able to cover the basic running costs of the house.

Our Initial Vision for Starting a Nunnery

The three of us who started Shide Buddhist Nunnery have a deep wish to practise the Dharma and lead a contemplative life in a monastic community. As our short biographies show, we come from different backgrounds, but we all have experience living in Dharma centres, one of us for more than 40 years. However, Dharma centres are generally places created for laypeople and managed by laypeople, and it is difficult for monastics to form their own community there. A nunnery seemed like a wonderful idea! We realized there was a need for a nunnery and saw that it was up to us to create one, for our own sake and for the sake of future nuns.

We envisaged the nunnery as a place of contemplation, where ordained women could study and

practise the Dharma intensively in a monastic context, as a way of life. In the long run, we hope to plant firm monastic roots in the West by having a *bhiksuni sangha* of at least five nuns who are able to pass on their knowledge and experience to others and make full use of their precious human life. We are planning to buy the neighbouring plot of land, so we can build a second house for more nuns and a meditation room.

Autonomy in Monastic Life

As women and as nuns we find it important that the nunnery be autonomous. There are several ways we understand this concept. First, the early communities that were established for the practise of *vinaya* (monastic discipline) functioned autonomously. Second, we understand autonomy in the sense of not being dependent on a Buddhist centre. Third, we understand autonomy in the sense of not being dependent on one Buddhist teacher. Fourth, to a certain extent, we understand autonomy in the sense of individuals living in the nunnery.

When the Buddha spoke of the fourfold assembly – comprised of the *bhiksu sangha*, *bhiksuni sangha*, male and female lay followers – he placed the responsibility for the practice and the continuation of the Dharma in the hands of the *sangha*. In the *vinaya*, the *bhiksuni sangha* was formally established as an autonomous entity, distinct from the *bhiksu sangha*. The *bhiksuni sangha* needed to have a certain amount of autonomy in order to survive through the centuries and keep Buddhism alive, as it is today.

Both the *bhiksu sangha* and the *bhiksuni sanghas* were established as autonomous entities and both have undergone changes within the framework set down by the Buddha, who allowed for change when it became necessary. From the perspective of *vinaya*, the *bhiksu* and *bhiksuni sangha* function autonomously, because each *sangha* recites the *pratimoksa* (bi-monthly confession rite) on its own twice a month.⁶ Each *sangha* carries out the formal acts (*karma*)⁷ and activities such as the *varsā*⁸ and *pravāraṇa*.⁹

At Shide, we do not yet have a full *bhiksuni sangha*, which requires at least five *bhiksunis*. We still have much to learn about *vinaya* practice and go to Vien Giac, a Vietnamese temple in Hannover, to take part in these rituals. The respected founding abbot of Vien Giac, Bhiksu Thich Nhu Dien, makes a point of inviting us and urges us to observe the rains retreat. He says it is not enough to be ordained for many years. In order to be able to ordain new followers, one must have completed a certain number of rains retreats (*varsā*). He says it is important for Germany to have monastic *sanghas*. Due to the kindness of this abbot and the Vietnamese community in Europe, several European nuns of the Tibetan tradition were able to take full ordination in Paris in 2015.¹⁰ One of our *bhiksunis* was one of them.

Autonomy in the Sense of Not Being Dependent on a Buddhist Centre

Shide Buddhist Nunnery is registered as a non-profit association in Germany.¹¹ We are not financially dependent on any Buddhist centre, nor are we a branch of one. We have experienced how one Buddhist centre almost became bankrupt, which would have left the monastics there without a roof over their heads. We do visit Buddhist centres and work closely with them – leading meditation, teaching, and translating - and, of course, as monastics are dependent on the good will of laypeople for their support. It is an interdependent relationship, as we will see later.

Autonomy in the Sense of Not Being Dependent on One Teacher

The nuns at Shide practise in the Tibetan tradition and all three of us were ordained as *sramanerikas* by Tibetan lamas whose *vinaya* lineage is Mūlasarvāstivāda. The *bhiksuni* lineage was never

transmitted to Tibet and, even after years of research, the question of full ordination for women still seems difficult for the Tibetan *bhikṣu sangha* to resolve.¹² Some, but not all, Tibetan teachers support full ordination for women. To become *bhikṣunis*, our only option was to receive the ordination in the Dharmagupta tradition.¹³ This means that Tibetan teachers are not responsible for us after ordination, but since we have Dharma teachers who are Tibetan lamas, we have placed ourselves in an awkward position. We did not ask for our teachers' permission before buying the land for the nuns' house, as it was called at first. The purchase was our own initiative and we asked for their blessing afterwards. In one sense, we are going against the tradition, breaking new ground, and this presents another challenge.

Individual Autonomy Within the Nunnery and its Challenges

The three nuns are quite a mixture. Two of us practise mainly in the Gelugpa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism and one in the Drikung Kagyu tradition. Our passports are from three different countries in Europe and we speak three languages, communicating with each other in German. We are educated, professional women and used to taking decisions on our own. This can be a real challenge when living in a close community. Each of us has Dharma activities outside the nunnery, including teaching, leading meditation, and translating at other centres and going to other places when invited. The structure we have developed at the nunnery allows us to be relatively flexible and gives us a sense of freedom, appreciating each other's Dharma activities.

Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo gave us extremely helpful advice when we met in June 2016. She said we should rejoice in our differences and respect them, seeing ourselves as facets of one diamond. "First get yourselves grounded in your individual practice and put down roots there. Do not study too long, but become stable in understanding, have genuine realizations, and you will be able to give to the world as teachers." As to our direction, she said: "Take the direction the Buddha taught: *Tö, sam, gom*. This means to learn, reflect, and meditate on it... Moreover, the Buddha stressed that harmony amongst monastics is very important."¹⁴ We are working on it!

Several months before moving into the nunnery, we met three times a week to meditate together, to make the transition to being a community easier. After moving in, we discussed what kind of schedule would be suitable and looked to see what Sravasti Abbey was doing.¹⁵ With some amendments, we orientated our daily timetable to theirs. We also had the good fortune to have an interview with the American *bhikṣuni* Thubten Chodron, who explained the internal structures of her monastery, Sravasti Abbey in Newport, Washington.¹⁶ Now we are experimenting with that and have already changed some things, allowing more time for individual practice and study.¹⁷ Creating a monastic community is an ongoing process.

Establishing a Tibetan Buddhist Nunnery in Germany

Buddhism is popular in Germany and enjoys a good reputation. There are groups or centres from all traditions, including several Theravada monasteries and two nunneries.¹⁸ In some European countries, registered Buddhist institutions are recognized by the state and have church status, thus being entitled to state funds.¹⁹ In Germany, however, Buddhist institutions do not have church status and are usually organized as non-profit associations or foundations.

Non-profit associations have the same rules, whether they are organized for sports, pets, or Buddhist nuns. One rule states that no individual may receive money or have personal benefit from the association. The officials make no exception for monastics, even when they are in a nunnery, as we are finding out. That is a real challenge and calls for expert advice, which has to be paid for.

Not having church status also means that the monastics do not have professional status like clerics or priests. As a result, there is no health insurance scheme we can enroll in, but German law states that everyone must have health insurance. There are health insurance schemes for other professionals, such as artists²⁰ and Catholic priests,²¹ but not for Buddhist monastics. This means we have to insure ourselves as private persons, which is expensive. Getting permission to use one's religious name in one's passport is also very difficult – this is possible only for artists.²²

These are just some of the disadvantages we encountered in not having church status in Germany. Buddhism is still new, but it is developing rapidly throughout the country. We find ourselves in a historical process and are facing these challenges.

Buddhist monastics in the Tibetan tradition either have to earn their own living, live from their savings (if they have any), work in a Buddhist centre for food and lodging or a small salary, or find an individual sponsor. There is no organization in Germany that is responsible for Buddhist monastics. Christian monasteries in Germany were traditionally rich, possessing a lot of land and property. The monks or nuns did social work, such as nursing or teaching, or worked in agriculture, making handicrafts that were sold in the monastery's shop.²³ So when people see Tibetan Buddhist monastics, they automatically think that they are taken care of. The concept of generosity (*dana*) as understood in traditional Buddhist countries is not common here.

Of course, people in the West do enjoy giving. Once we invited the people in our neighbourhood to afternoon tea. Many came bringing presents, even an apple tree, which they immediately planted for us. We were very touched by their friendliness. After the refreshments and exchange of local news, we told them about how we live, showed them the house, and offered a white shawl (*khatag*), as a parting present. They were all happy when they left.

We experienced other incidents of generosity. Before the house was finished, a man drove up, opened his window, held out a flower as a present for us, and drove on. A neighbour bought us a solar house number, which lights up in the dark. He was afraid that in an emergency the ambulance driver would not be able to find us in the dark. When we go out to teach, translate, and so on, we tell people about the nunnery. They like the idea and are very supportive. Some have offered garden tools, plants, a bench, or their expertise.

We are especially fortunate that our board members are committed, giving us moral support and helping to develop the nunnery. They understand the traditional Buddhist idea that laypeople support and protect the monastics, so that the monastics can dedicate themselves to the practice of Dharma, then give back their knowledge based on experience to benefit others. Our logo, the precious umbrella, symbolizes protection.

Summary

Establishing a Tibetan Buddhist nunnery in Germany presents many challenges on a financial, legal, and a personal level. It also has its joys, as we have seen. The house we built was the first step and we hope a second house will follow. Now that we are settled, we would like to look inward. On the one hand, we want to stabilize our individual and communal roots. On the other hand, we want to exchange ideas with others who have the same goals. We also want to look outward, make new contacts, and keep in touch with those around us to promote friendship, understanding and tolerance.

We still have many questions. In the modern world, how can we really live the rules given by the Buddha more than 2,500 years ago? What would a monastic training programme for educated, professional women look like? Which elements of Asian Buddhist nunneries should be adopted and which should not? How much time should be devoted to individual practice and how much to group

practice? We look forward to discussing these questions and to exchanging ideas.

We all share a common vision. May we all be able to understand ourselves and each other. May we be able to relax and laugh at the dramas presented by our *kleesas*. May we awaken to our true nature. May *samsara* end!

NOTES

¹ Carola Roloff, “Buddhism and Monastic Communities in Germany.”

http://www.buddhismandaustralia.com/ba/index.php/Buddhism_and_monastic_communities_in_Germany_by_Carola_Roloff Accessed August 31, 2016.

² In 1952, the German Hans-Ulrich Rieker established the Berlin branch of the Arya Maitreya Mandala that Lama Anagarika Govinda founded in India in 1933. <http://www.zentrum-oekumene.de/fileadmin/content/Materialien/Dokumentationen/Gesch.Dt.Buddh.Essay.pdf>. Accessed September 14, 2016. 1967 was a milestone in the establishment of Tibetan Buddhism in the West. In that year His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama started Rikon monastery in Switzerland so that the first Tibetan refugees would have a spiritual home. <http://www.tibet-institut.ch/content/tir/en/history.html>. Accessed September 27, 2016. In the same year Akong Tulku Rinpoche and Chogyam Rinpoche founded the first Tibetan Buddhist centre in the West, Kagyu Samye Ling in Scotland.

In the early 1970s, many high lamas, such as H. H. the 14th Dalai Lama (1973) and H. H. the 16th Karmapa (1974) visited Germany for the first time. See Michael von Brück, et al, *Buddhismus und Christentum. Geschichte, Konfrontation, Dialog* (München: C.H. Beck, 2000, 214). In 1977, Tibetisches Zentrum e.V. was founded in Hamburg and H. H. the Dalai Lama accepted the patronage. <https://www.tibet.de/das-zentrum/geschichte/>. Accessed August 29, 2016. This was the first Tibetan Buddhist centre to join the German Buddhist Union, which was founded in 1955. In 1981, Jampa Tsedroen received *sramanerika* ordination at the Tibetisches Zentrum. This was the first time in Germany that this ordination was given in the Tibetan tradition. In 1985, she became the first German *bbhiksuni*. In an email to Thubten Choedroen dated August 29, 2016, she state: “Ich war wohl die erste Deutsche, die in Deutschland als Sramanerika ordiniert wurde (1981 von Ven. Geshe Thubten Ngawang in Hamburg), und auch die erste deutsche Bhiksuni (1985 in Taiwan).“

³ <http://www.schneverdingen.de/desktopdefault.aspx/tabid-8869/>. Accessed August 29, 2016. In 2012, the Milarepa Retreat Centre was opened: “On 27 October 2012, the Milarepa Retreat Centre was formally inaugurated by H.E. Garchen Rinpoche. <http://www.milareparetreat.org/index.php/en/the-center/geschichte-des-mrz>. Accessed August 29, 2016. In 2013, a Theravada centre, the Maha Vihara, was founded: <http://www.buddhistischer-maha-vihara.de/> “Dieses Vorhaben wird Ende 2013 tatsächlich erreicht mit der Gründung des buddhistischen Zentrums Maha Vihara in Schneverdingen, das zum Ziel hat, vor allem Nonnen und Mönchen eine Stätte für ihre Praxis zu bieten, ebenso auch Praktikanten und Anwärtern.“ Accessed August 29, 2016.

⁴ The official name of the nunnery is Buddhistisches Nonnenkloster Shide e.V.

⁵ The three of us collaborated in writing this paper: Thubten Choedroen, Namgyal Chokyi, and Yeshe Metog

⁶ Thanks to Bhikkuni Sucinta from the Theravada nunnery, Anenja Vihara, Germany, for pointing this out.

⁷ Sanskrit: *karma*, Pāli: *kamma*. “At the end of the text Gunaprabha summarizes the 101 formal (or ecclesiastical) acts (karma) of the Samgha into 24 only [one] request (or announcement) acts” Bhiksuni Jampa Tsedroen, *A Brief Survey of the Vinaya* (Hamburg: Dharma Edition, 1992), 73:

⁸ Skr. *varsa*, Pali *vassa*, is the three-month-long rains retreat prescribed by the Buddha for monastics.

⁹ Sanskrit: *pravarana*, Pāli: *pavarana*, refers to the end of the rains retreat.

¹⁰ See Shide Nunnery website for the article in *Buddhismus Aktuell*, describing the full ordination in Paris in 2015. Namgyal Chokyi wrote, “... und plötzlich ist es möglich- Die Geschichte der Vollordination, *Buddhismus aktuell* 1(2016). <http://www.shide.de/medien/presseartikel/> Accessed September 14, 2016.

¹¹ In German, gemeinnütziger Verein.

¹² Thubten Choedroen wrote a letter to the minister of the Department of Religion and Culture at the Central Tibetan Administration in Dharamsala on behalf of several *sramanikas* in the Tibetan tradition, asking if there was any hope of receiving full ordination in the Tibetan tradition in the next one or two years. The answer from the minister, dated March 31, 2014, was: “... We think it will take more time for our sangha community to reach on a consensus in this matter.... The decision will be made by the *sangha* community, as the norms laid out in the *vinaya* sutra and commentaries” However, there is also good news. In 2016, the *geshema* degree for Tibetan nuns was conferred for the first time in history. See website of the Central Tibetan Administration: <http://tibet.net/2016/08/department-of-religion-and-culture-announces-annual-geshema-examination-results/>. Accessed September 14, 2016. The 17th Karmapa has been very encouraging about full ordination for Tibetan nuns: <https://www.buddhistdoor.net/features/exclusive-interview-the-17th-karmapa-and-the-buddhist-nuns-of-the-tibetan-tradition>. Accessed September 14, 2016.

¹³ The Dharmagupta tradition is the *vinaya* lineage of monastics in Taiwan, China, Vietnam and Korea.

¹⁴ Private Interview of Shide nuns with Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo on 14th June 2016 in Hamburg.

¹⁵ The schedule of Sravasti Abbey can be found on their website <http://www.sravastiabbey.org/monasticlife/schedule.shtm>. Accessed September 14, 2016.

¹⁶ The interview with Ven Thubten Chodron can be downloaded here: <http://www.shide.de/medien/>

¹⁷ We do morning recitation and meditation from 6 am to 7 am and in the evening from 7 pm to 8:15 pm every day. We keep silence until 9 am, during which time we do our own practice. From 9 am until lunchtime and for two hours in the afternoon, we do various types of service for the nunnery or other work, such as translating Buddhist texts, preparing seminars, assisting in the study

programme of an affiliated Dharma centre, answering mail, and so forth. We have weekly common study or discussion sessions on *vinaya* and *sutras*. We eat lunch together in silence, read a short Dharma text and offer the food to the Three Jewels before eating, and recite a dedication after the meal. We have a communal meeting once a week to discuss and plan things, and have decided to open to visitors from 2 pm to 3 pm daily, by appointment.

¹⁸ http://www.theravadanetz.de/Theravada_gruppen.html. Accessed October 6, 2016. The German Buddhist Union (Deutsche Buddhistische Union) estimates that there were 230,000 to 250,000 Asian Buddhists and 80,000 to 100 000 German Buddhists living in Germany in 2008. http://www.buddhismus.de/07_zahlen.php. Accessed October 25, 2016.

¹⁹ For example, there are said to be 43 Buddhist groups in Denmark, 15 of which are officially 'recognized. Buddhism has been recognized as a religion by the Austrian state since 1983. <http://religion.orf.at/lexikon/stories/2568980/> Accessed September 9, 2016.

²⁰ There is a health insurance scheme for artists and writers in Germany. <http://www.kuenstlersozialkasse.de>. Access September 9, 2016.

²¹ There is an inexpensive health insurance scheme for Catholic priests in Germany. <https://ligakranken.de>. Accessed September 9, 2016.

²² Thubten Choedroen knows one German monk who eventually got his monk's name put on his ID card after years of insistence. In his mail of 10th October to her he writes: "Nach einigen Jahren Streit und nachdem ich den Bürgerbeauftragten von RLP und das Innenministerium eingeschaltet hab, musste die Stadtverwaltung den Namen letztendlich eintragen. Als letzte Rache haben Sie dies aber nur als Künstlernamen getan. Ist aber auf dem Personalausweis nicht ersichtlich ob Künstler oder Ordiniertename. War aber alles ganz schön Nerven aufreibend."

²³ One example is the Benedictine monastery Königsmünster. <http://www.koenigsmuenster.de>. which makes various handicrafts and religious articles, selling them in its own shop along with books and CDs. <http://www.abteiladen.de/abteiwaren-kuche.html>. Accessed September 9, 2016.

Ordinary Women: The Portrayal of Laywomen in Two Chinese Buddhist Encyclopedias

Elizabeth Kenney

In this paper, I discuss the portrait of laywomen in two Chinese works, *Jinglu yixiang* (T.2121) and *Fayuan zhubin* (T.2122). Both of these mammoth works are usually called encyclopedias, in both English and Chinese. Because the encyclopedias are clearly organized, with categories, lists, topics, and subtopics, the two works are user-friendly. Throughout East Asian history, up to the present day, people have consulted these two encyclopedias in order to get an overview of Buddhist materials on a great variety of topics. The encyclopedias are also valuable for us today because they preserve Buddhist texts and Chinese stories found nowhere else. It is important to note that these two so-called encyclopedias consist largely of passages from Buddhist scriptures. Therefore they are perhaps better called anthologies than encyclopedias.

Most Buddhist women, today and throughout history, have been laywomen, or “ordinary women” (the terms used in the encyclopedias are *su nü* and *nü su*. It is instructive to look at what these two influential encyclopedias say about lay female members of the Buddhist community.

Jinglu yixiang (Various Aspects of Sutras and Vinayas) was edited by Baochang, based on earlier work by other monks. For convenience, I will refer only to Baochang as the compiler of *Jinglu yixiang*. This work was completed around 516 CE, and it seems likely that Baochang died a couple of years later. As Sakyadhita members know, Baochang has long been thought to be the author of the important early work, *Biographies of Nuns*, but recent scholarship casts doubt on Baochang’s authorship.¹

Fayuan zhubin (Pearl Forest in the Dharma Garden) was completed by Daoshi in 668 CE. Daoshi was an associate of the *vinaya* teacher Daoxuan. *Fayuan zhubin* is almost three times as long as *Jinglu yixiang*, and it has been the more influential work for later generations of Buddhist monks and scholars. The *Fayuan zhubin* section on laywomen has been translated by Professor Terry Tak-Ling Woo of York University in Canada. In this paper, I focus more on laywomen in *Jinglu yixiang* because this section of *Jinglu yixiang* has not been translated or even discussed.

Jinglu yixiang gives us seventeen stories from Buddhist scriptures. Some of these short dramas are fanciful; some are rather exciting. In contrast, only three of the eight items in *Fayuan zhubin* are stories. The other five items are didactic passages saying that a woman is like a poisonous snake, that she is filthy, that she is unreliable, and so forth. *Jinglu yixiang* makes for much lighter reading than *Fayuan zhubin*.

Fayuan zhubin, unlike *Jinglu yixiang*, includes introductions written by the compiler, not only excerpts from *sūtras*. Daoshi’s introduction to his section on laywomen is astonishingly misogynistic, even for readers who are familiar with anti-woman diatribes in Buddhist writings. Daoshi writes that women are deceitful, they seduce men with their cunning, and so forth. He then literally blames everything on women: family poverty, disharmony among relatives, lack of good karma, and the like. Following this introduction, the *Fayuan zhubin* section on laywomen has eight excerpts from *sūtras*. The selected passages variously emphasize the disgusting female body, the dangerous attractiveness of that body, and a woman’s shallow and selfish mind.

One of the eight excerpts comes from the *Mabābala-dbārānī-sūtra* (T.1341), translated into Chinese in the sixth century by Jñānagupta. The passage states that a woman has five types of worms that a man does not have. Each of these five types has 8,000 more worms.² These worms live in a woman’s vagina. The worms have two heads, each with a mouth that is like the sharp point of a needle. The worms constantly torment/irritate a woman and cause her to be filled with lust.

It is a standard Buddhist teaching that any human body, *not just a female body*, is inhabited by 80,000 worms. These worms are sometimes considered repulsive, and the Buddhist practitioner can

counteract attachment to his or her body by contemplating the worms and other disgusting aspects of the human body. At the same time, these worms have also been objects of compassion both in India and in China.

Many Buddhist texts describe the vagina in over-the-top negative terms, but it is uncommon to find a description of masses of horrible worms in the vagina.³ The *Mahābala-dhāraṇī-sūtra* passage on the two-headed worms is not cited by any other Buddhist author in the Taishō canon. By selecting this passage, Daoshi has gone out of his way to include a particularly pejorative description of women, with a focus on bizarre worms in the vagina. The original *sūtra* passage might have passed into obscurity if Daoshi had not included it in his authoritative compendium.

The *Jinglu yixiang* section on laywomen consists of seventeen passages from various *sūtras*. Unlike *Fayuan zhubin*, which has only negative things to say about women, *Jinglu yixiang* includes both positive and negative stories about women. A majority of the stories (ten out of seventeen) are positive. Six stories are negative. One story, which I will discuss later, is not easily classified as positive or negative in terms of its portrayal of women.

Here is the gist of one of the positive stories. A poor girl sold her long, beautiful hair to a queen and used the money to make offerings to the Buddha. Later, when the girl saw the Buddha, she bowed to the ground and circumambulated the Buddha three times. Her hair returned as before. The Buddha then said that for many lifetimes in the future the girl will pursue the *bodhisattva* path. This simple story is found nowhere else in the Chinese Buddhist canon. The message is straightforward: sincere giving will produce spiritual rewards.

Another, more unusual story centers on an old woman. In this story, a monk asked people to make him a meditation chamber. Only an old woman was willing to help the monk. She used her own hands to dig out a meditation chamber. The monk meditated, entered the “flame *samādhi*,” and the hut caught fire. When the old woman saw the fire from afar, she thought to herself, “I made this hut and immediately it is burning. How has there been such little merit?” Then the woman went to the hut, saw the monk inside the flames, understood the situation, and felt happy. After her death, she was born as a god. This is a memorable story built around the teaching, already known to its readers, that laypeople can gain merit by making offerings to monks.

Fayuan zhubin and *Jinglu yixiang* have only one story in common. It comes from the *Dharmapāda* (T.212). A woman, holding her child and carrying a jar, went to get water from a well. A handsome young man was sitting near the well. The woman and the man were attracted to each other. The mother was so distracted by her lust for the man that she mistakenly tied a rope around her child’s neck, instead of around the jar, and lowered the child down into the well. The child drowned. This wildly implausible story illustrates, of course, a woman’s lustful nature.

Next I pose some questions we need to consider before reaching any conclusion about the portrayals of laywomen in *Fayuan zhubin* and *Jinglu yixiang*. First, what about laymen? Both encyclopedias have sections on laymen. To fairly evaluate the treatment of laywomen, we must also analyze the portrayal of laymen. I have not yet read the laymen material thoroughly, but I can make some preliminary observations. In *Jinglu yixiang*, the section on laymen is almost twice as long as the section on laywomen, with 38 stories, more than twice the number of stories for laywomen. There are both positive and negative stories, but I cannot yet report how the good/bad ratio compares to the ratio for the laywomen section.

The *Fayuan zhubin* section on laymen, like the section on laywomen, starts with an introduction by Daoshi. He begins by saying that there are two types of laymen: rich and poor. Regardless of their material circumstances, both types of laymen are deluded and do not realize how impermanent their lives are. Daoshi asks, “How is this different from pigs and sheep who do not know that they are facing

death? How is this different from a fly that greedily enjoys a corpse?” In the end, wealthy laymen are no different from poor ones; their lives come to an end and they are nothing more than ash. Here Daoshi is describing the human condition.

In contrast, Daoshi begins his introduction to the laywomen section by saying, “Laymen and ordinary women suffer from an abundance of poisons. The Buddha taught that [laywomen’s] falsity and deceitfulness is much worse than men’s.” Thus, as is often the case, “man” equals “normal human” (deluded, unaware of impermanence), whereas “woman” equals something else, at best a deviant human type. Much of the *Fayuan zhubin* section on laymen urges laymen to leave the household life and become monks. The human (= male) condition may be desperate, but there is hope. As I have described, the *Fayuan zhubin* section on laywomen is a thoroughly negative description of women. Daoshi does not suggest that ordinary women can escape their situation by becoming nuns.

The second question I pose is: Are the *Jinglu yixiang* stories “about” women? In some stories, especially the most negative ones, the topic is clearly “women”: women are lustful, deceitful, and filthy. In contrast, other stories are about a person who happens to be female, who performs good or bad acts, and receives the appropriate karmic result. In this case, the story is about right and wrong actions, not female actions. In yet other stories, the main actor is a monk beset by a licentious woman and the point of the story is to illustrate the supernatural abilities of the monk (e.g., he can turn fire into water). The woman is a secondary character.

A further complication is the fact that four of the *Jinglu yixiang* “laywomen stories” are also found in *Fayuan zhubin*, but *not* in the *Fayuan zhubin* laywomen section. I will discuss only one of these stories, which is included in the *Fayuan zhubin* section on plotting, in a subsection on slander. The story, which comes from *Nirvana-sutra*, focuses on six heretical teachers who end up killing a pregnant woman. As the woman’s body is being cremated, her stomach splits open and a baby boy bursts out. The Buddha sends the doctor Jivaka into the flames to rescue the boy. The woman remains dead. Is this story about a laywoman? Or is it about the plotting and slander of the thrillingly evil heretics? Or is the real point of the story the dramatic, if gruesome, supernatural rescue scene? In any case, the woman barely features as an actor in the story. This is the one story that I cannot easily classify as either good or bad, as far as the woman is concerned. Perhaps Daoshi made a good decision to place the story in the section on plotting.

Finally, sometimes a *Jinglu yixiang* story is just a good story – entertaining and perhaps exotic to the Chinese reader. Here is an example. A childless couple prayed to the gods for a child. The woman gave birth to four magical things: a basket full of rice, a bottle of heavenly dew, a bag of jewels, and a seven-jointed staff. In an amusing and fable-like way, these four things do everything for the couple that a child would have done. I have classified this as a “good” story, because it does not feature a bad woman and it has a happy ending, but there is no genuinely Buddhist content to the story.

The third question is: Where else do women appear in the encyclopedias? Stories about all types of women appear in many parts of the encyclopedias. To start, we could look at the *Jinglu yixiang* sections on *upāsikās* (who all seem to be good women), queens, and princesses. (*Fayuan zhubin* does not have any similarly titled sections.) A systematic search of both encyclopedias for “woman,” “wife,” “widow,” “mother,” “old woman,” “sister,” “female slave/servant,” and so forth would yield enough material for years of study.

An article by Yu Zhang takes a first step toward studying the whole *Jinglu yixiang* on the topic of women.⁴ Zhang notes thirty *Jinglu yixiang* passages about women, only one of which is from the section on laywomen. Zhang’s examples include stories of exemplary women, such as the woman who cut off her own flesh in order to make medicine for a monk, as well as several examples of the oft-repeated statement that a woman may look beautiful from the outside, like a painted vase, but in fact

she is a vessel of filth. Zhang concludes that, for *Jinglu yixiang*, “The realization of women’s liberation is not in religion, but only in actual society.” I cannot agree with Zhang’s conclusion. *Jinglu yixiang* does not present an entirely bleak picture of women’s spiritual potential, nor does actual society offer liberation to women.

When *Jinglu yixiang* and *Fayuan zhubin* were compiled by Chinese Buddhist monks in the sixth and seventh centuries, their intended (and actual) audience was almost certainly male and mostly monastic. The two encyclopedias have survived and been well used for more than a millennium. Over the centuries, literate Buddhist laywomen must have opened the encyclopedias, curious to read what Buddhist scriptures say about laywomen. As far I know, we have no record of a pre-modern woman’s reaction to the portrait of ordinary women in either of the encyclopedias, but I guess that she would have preferred *Jinglu yixiang* to *Fayuan zhubin*.

NOTES

1. Tom De Rauw, “Baochang: Sixth-Century Biographer of Buddhist Monks... and Nuns?” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 125:2 (2005) 203–218.

² The *sūtra* actually says 80, not 8,000.

³ *Garbhāvākṛānti-sūtra* (*Sūtra on Entry into the Womb*) mentions worms in the vagina, but the worms do not have two heads.

⁴ Yu Zhang, “Shuo *Jinglu yixiang* ji zai zhi fo jing gu shi qun zhong de nu xing” [Women in the Buddhist Stories Recorded in *Jinglu yixiang*], *Fojing wenxue yanjiu lunji* (Shanghai: Fudan Daxue Chubanshe, 2004).

Spreading the Dharma is a Double-Edged Sword: Himalayan Buddhist Women as Messengers and Storytellers

Alyson Prude

In Vajrayana Buddhism, relaying messages has long been depicted as a feminine task. Whether goddesses, semi-divine beings, or ordinary women, tantric messengers include not only the well-known *dakini* and village oracle medium, but also messengers for the dead and the Lord of Death. The latter type of messenger is known, in Tibetan, as a *delog* ('*das log*). According to Tibetan Buddhists, a *delog*'s consciousness leaves her physical body and journeys to the intermediate state (*bar do*) and beyond, often for a period of several days. There, in the space that follows death, a *delog* witnesses the judgements of and accepts missives from the deceased. When she returns to her body, the *delog* relays news and communications from the dead, either reassuring the living that their loved one has found a favorable rebirth or alerting them to the need for merit-making rituals.

Just as village oracle mediums can be male or female but are most often female, *delogs* are most often women.¹ One commonly cited reason for women's predominance as *delogs* reflects the belief that women are emotional. Another is that women eagerly engage in gossip and storytelling. These perceived female characteristics are relevant to *delogs* because narrating compelling stories is a *delog*'s most important task. Laypeople value *delogs* for the information they provide about the dead, but from a Buddhist point of view, a *delog*'s value lies in her ability to convince others of the truth of the law of karma. To be effective, therefore, *delogs* must be able to communicate not just the facts but the affective quality of their experiences. By sharing with detail and emotion the agonies and pleas of those suffering in the lower realms, *delogs* help turn people towards the Dharma. Women's greater propensity for expressiveness, whether conveyed in words or by bursting into tears at the memory of the suffering they witnessed in the intermediate state, makes them well-suited to act as *delogs*.

The *delog* role further befits Himalayan women because it does not require even a basic education, religious or secular. In fact, *delogs* are rarely literate and, at the time of their initial *delog* experience, often have not received any sort of Buddhist training. For people from disadvantaged backgrounds, recognition as a *delog* can thus bring respect as well as social and economic benefits that might otherwise remain out of reach. This is especially the case for women who may gain a remarkable degree of autonomy as a result of becoming *delogs*. It is virtually unheard of, for example, for a Himalayan woman who is not a nun to live by herself. But because female *delogs* are expected to remain celibate, *delogs* are able to avoid marriage without taking up the constraints of monastic life. In the Golok region of eastern Tibet, I met two *delogs*, both of whom lived alone and supported themselves, albeit modestly, with donations provided by patrons. In Nepal, the two female *delogs* I interviewed had both managed to eschew being married. While all of these women articulated a commitment to celibacy, none of them had chosen to pursue the life of a nun, and it was due to their religious status as *delogs* that their independent lifestyles were accepted by their communities. The *delog* role thus provides Tibetan Buddhist women an opportunity to participate as religious specialists, and it affords them a degree of social and financial autonomy otherwise difficult to obtain.

On the other side of the coin, *delogs* describe their experience of leaving and returning to their bodies as painful and exhausting. The *delog* journey is emotionally taxing as well. A few of the deceased that *delogs* encounter have found fortunate rebirths, but the majority are suffering miserably as a result of their negative deeds. The *delog* experience is rarely pleasant, and when *delogs* revive, they must share news of the tortures they witnessed and anguished pleas they have received with people who are not eager to hear it. In some cases, the *delog*'s unfortunate reports provoke anger and lead, for example, to *delogs* being beaten, tied and dragged behind horses, or branded with fire pokers.

This undesirable aspect, on an individual level, of acting as a *delog* is compounded by the fact that women acting as *delogs* reinforce stereotypes of women as less intellectual, less in control of themselves, and less appropriate for more prestigious religious positions, such as that of abbot or learned scholar. How is this? First, the method by which *delogs* arrive at their extraordinary knowledge is significant and suggests a parallel with oracle mediums. The *delog* experience is commonly understood to be completely involuntary. Unlike a shaman who often studies with a mentor and acquires ritual procedures to put himself into a trance, a *delog* learns and does nothing to initiate her *delog* journey. It just happens. A *delog*'s access to information is therefore not said to involve skill or special ability. Instead, the unintentional departure of the *delog*'s consciousness from her body demonstrates vulnerability and a lack of mental and physical strength. When looked at from this perspective, the fact that most *delogs* are women reinforces gender biases according to which women's bodies and minds are weaker and more susceptible to external influences than are men's.

Second, *delogs* are not the only religious specialists who can provide information about what happens at death and the fate of the recently deceased. Meditative adepts and reincarnate lamas, the vast majority of whom are male, can do this, too. The means by which lamas offer reports about people's rebirths, however, stands in marked contrast to that of *delogs*. A lama's capacity to teach from personal experience about the intermediate state or to see the dead in their next life comes as a result of his clairvoyance and meditative visions. A lama's abilities, that is, are understood as the fruit of years and lifetimes of Buddhist practice. As a result, a lama speaks with authority in his own voice, and although he provides the same information that a *delog* does, his ability to know what the rest of us cannot is superior to the *delog*'s. A *delog* is only a mouthpiece for others; she either repeats the pleas of the deceased or the warnings of the Lord of Death.

Third, unlike lamas who carry out much of their work in the public sphere, sometimes performing in front of large audiences, *delogs* work in small-scale and informal settings. Patrons usually consult *delogs* in the privacy of the *delog*'s home. Cultural norms that work to keep women in the home have been well-documented in scholarly literature.² In addition, we are well-aware of the gendered division of labor that can be traced to exoteric Mahāyāna as well as esoteric Tantric Buddhist texts that depict wisdom and emptiness as feminine and compassion and skillful means as masculine. This gendered view of enlightened qualities manifests in Buddhist societies as a trend whereby men assume the active, creative tasks while women are relegated to more passive duties.³ The pervasive stereotype of men as leaders and women as their helpers surfaced when I asked a Dzogchen lama in Golok about the connection between *delogs* and women. "In order to understand why *delogs* are women," he said, "you have to understand method and wisdom. You have to understand the nature of assistance." "Men," in his words, "have the responsibility to bring forth the Dharma... [to] give blessings... [to] practice new Dharma." Female figures, on the other hand, are "caretakers" (*bdag gnyer*), helpers, and supporters. Indeed, when we compare *delogs* to male religious figures, such as lamas, we notice the supportive nature of the *delog* role. Lamas can rescue a consciousness from hell and deliver it to a Pure Land. *Delogs*, however, can only relay messages about the dead in hopes that the living will carry out, usually with the help of local monks and lamas, the rituals needed to help the deceased to a better rebirth. As Cuevas has observed, "the experiences of women *délok*... consistently reinforce the hierarchy of the dominant system and enhance the power of the monks and male lamas."⁴

As we see here, the extraordinary experiences that *delogs* undergo do not situate *delogs* outside the control of male-governed institutions. Quite the opposite. Since it is impossible for ordinary persons to assess the truth-value of a *delog*'s claims, people look to their local lama for guidance, such that verification and support from a respected lama is crucial to a *delog*'s acceptance by his or her community. Significantly, it is precisely insofar as a *delog* submits to the authority of local Buddhist leaders that she

or he will be acknowledged as a *delog*. *Delogs* who voice negative views about a popular and charismatic monk or lama face censure from religious authorities and accusations of being imposters, insane, or possessed by evil spirits. Furthermore, when male scholar-teachers rely on *delog* narratives as part of their instructional repertoire, the *delogs*' remarkable first-hand accounts of the intermediate state and realms of rebirth are used to "bear witness to the 'empirical' foundations of the canonical tradition."⁵⁵ The *delog*'s profound and very personal experience, that is, becomes co-opted by and "wielded in the interests of... institutional authority."⁵⁶

Finally, misogynist views about women's bodies illuminate additional, unofficial strictures by which female, as opposed to male, *delogs* must abide. Textual accounts notwithstanding, female *delogs* are expected to be celibate. This practical rule inhibiting the expression of women's sexuality is expressed in terms of cleanliness and purity. Even if they had previously borne children, female *delogs* made a point to mention that since their initial journey to the postmortem realms, they had maintained their purity. In the case of a *delog* in Nepal, her subsequent relations with a man led to her community losing faith in the veracity of her messages. Although she was said to have been an excellent *delog* in the past, as a result of her romantic relationship, she lost her status as a *delog*. Male *delogs*, on the other hand, are not expected to take permanent vows of abstinence. Instead, a male *delog* in Hyolmo was told by his lama to "keep clean (Nepali *sapbā*)" by avoiding his wife and children and sleeping separately in his shrine room during the time of his *delog* journeys. If his wife or any other woman, including his daughter, were to touch his body while his consciousness was in the intermediate state, his body would become polluted, and he would be unable to revive. Contact with a female would, in effect, kill him. This is not the case for a man's touch. When necessary, men can touch the bodies of both male and female *delogs* without ill effect. This unfortunate observation supports Makley's claim that there exist "greatly unequal moral and physical burdens for [Tibetan] men and women."⁵⁷ "The male body," she writes, "is inherently more morally pure and thus karmically auspicious... while the female body is morally impure and thus an inferior rebirth."⁵⁸ Tacit regulations imposed on female *delogs* and women's proximity to male *delogs* derive from and further this belief.

In conclusion, we see that taking up the role of *delog* is a double-edged sword for Tibetan Buddhist women. Like their recognition as village-level oracle mediums, women's acceptance in the *delog* role provides them an avenue for participation in a male-dominated religious system. Speaking as a *delog* is a way for women to contribute their voices to spreading the Dharma. But *delogs* are not central or highly-esteemed players within the Tibetan Buddhist hierarchy, and the messages they relay must conform to and support the doctrines established by the male elite. Women acting as *delogs* thus do little, if anything, to raise the status of women in Himalayan societies and may instead serve to maintain and to further negative stereotypes according to which women's minds are viewed as weak and their bodies unclean. For Tibetan Buddhist women, a *delog*'s extraordinary abilities are thus an "ambiguous privilege" from which the lamas who utilize their stories appear to derive more benefit than the *delogs* themselves.⁹

NOTES

¹ This fact is not reflected in the collection of *delog* hagiographies in which the number of men and women's *delog* accounts are roughly equal.

² A contemporary Tibetan example can be found in Charlene Makley, "Sexuality and Identity in Post-Mao Amdo," *Amdo Tibetans in Transition*, ed. Toni Huber (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 89.

³ Two references are Bernard Faure, *The Power of Denial: Buddhism, Purity, and Gender* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 125; and Charlene Makley, “The Body of a Nun: Nunhood and Gender in Contemporary Amdo,” *Women in Tibet*, ed. Janet Gyatso and Hanna Havnevik (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 270.

⁴ Bryan Cuevas, *Travels in the Netherworld* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 81.

⁵ Robert Sharf, “Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience,” *Numen* 42(1995) 270.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 265.

⁷ Makley, “Sexuality and Identity,” 53.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁹ Anke Passenier, “The Life of Christina Mirabilis: Miracles and the Construction of Marginality,” *Women and Miracle Stories*, ed. by Anne-Marie Korte (Leiden: Brill, 177).

The Gurudharma Rules for Buddhist Nuns in Contemporary Mainland China

Tzu-Lung (Melody) Chiu

Since the first nun, Mahāprajāpatī, accepted the eight “fundamental rules” almost two and a half millennia ago, these eight *gurudharma* rules have had a profound impact on the subordination of the nuns’ order to the monks’ order. Consequently, these rules have been the subject of considerable debate in the past and present. This paper examines how the term *gurudharma* is interpreted and practiced currently at a variety of different Buddhist nunneries in Mainland China in order to understand how female monastics interpret and practice the *vinaya* in their everyday lives.

Today, a revival of Chinese Buddhism is taking place in Mainland China and there has been an increase of the population of Buddhist nuns, which is now estimated to be around 60,000–70,000 (including Tibetan nuns). Further, the educational standards of Chinese Buddhist nuns have risen in recent decades. Against this backdrop, this study explores the religious life of present-day Chinese Buddhist nuns through multiple-case studies that I conducted at seven monastic institutions in Mainland China and aims to present new insight into how female monastics practice the *gurudharma*. I intend to present the nuns’ voices regarding each of the rules in detail, one by one, allowing us to understand various situations and issues from their perspective, including bowing to monks, dual ordination, and instruction practices.

Against this backdrop, this study explores the religious life of present-day Chinese Buddhist nuns through multiple-case studies from a long-term empirical study that I conducted at seven understudied monastic institutions in Mainland China. Against the background of the origins of the eight rules, we will learn how these contemporary female monastics practice the *gurudharmas*. We will hear the nuns’ voices and their observations regarding each of the *gurudharma* rules in detail. One by one, their perceptions will enable to understand various situations and issues from their perspective, as we gather new insights into how female monastics practice the *gurudharma* in Mainland Chinese monastic communities.

The Founding of the Order of Buddhist Nuns

According to Buddhist tradition, the first ordained nun was the Buddha’s stepmother, Mahāprajāpatī. Her story appears in the *vinaya* (texts on Buddhist monastic discipline), as well as in some other early Buddhist scriptures. According to the most frequently referenced version of the story, although the Buddha later answered in the affirmative to the monk Ānanda’s questions about whether or not a woman can become an *arhat* and thus achieve liberation, when Mahāprajāpatī first went to see the Buddha asking for the full ordination, her request was not granted. Extensive reference is made to the debt the Buddha is said to have owed to his stepmother for everything she had done on his behalf. Some have construed this to mean that Buddha’s decision to create a female *sangha* was influenced by his sense of filial duty.

Mahāprajāpatī and many other women of the Śākya clan followed the Buddha for quite some time before they were allowed to enter the Buddhist community as fully ordained nuns. During that time, they were away from home, dressed in monastic robes, with their heads shaved, which suggests, as recently argued by Bhikkhu Anālayo, that a semi-monastic life for women was implicitly allowed by the Buddha.¹ Due to the further mediation of Ānanda, the Buddha finally permitted women to enter the Buddhist monastic community, providing that they accepted eight *gurudharmas* that made the nuns’ order (*bhikkhunī sangha*) institutionally dependent upon the monks’ order (*bhikkhu sangha*). These eight particular rules have attracted considerable attention among Buddhist followers and scholars alike.

Numerous studies have been conducted, particularly on the complex issue of the authenticity of the story, and it has been argued by many that the rules were compiled after the nuns' order had been in existence for some time.

Mainland Chinese Nuns Today

When discussing contemporary Chinese Buddhist nuns' religious life, the nuns in Taiwan have been the subject of much scholarly attention because their numbers and education level are unparalleled in the history of Chinese Buddhism. Contemporary Mainland Chinese nuns' religious life, by contrast, has scarcely been explored or discussed. This may be due to the "closed" nature of the political system in Mainland China, especially in regard to religion, as well as the scarcity of ethnographic fieldwork on contemporary Chinese Buddhism more generally. Nevertheless, some prominent nuns in Mainland China (e.g., Longlian Shi) have held posts in the official organization of Chinese Buddhism or made important contributions to the Buddhist education and Dharma teaching. In recent decades, there has been a strong revival of Chinese Buddhism, amid which Buddhist nuns have exerted an ever-growing impact on the monastic environment, and their opinions have gradually become very influential. Significantly, contemporary *bhiksuniṣ'* education in Mainland China has evolved greatly over recent decades, with Buddhist nuns' colleges now established throughout the country. This study thus aims to explore the present-day religious life of Buddhist nuns in Mainland China, to which scant scholarly attention has hitherto been paid. In doing so, we focus on one of the central issues, namely, the eight *gurudharma* and the discussions they give rise to.

Selection of Mainland Chinese Nunneries

Mainland China has a rich monastic scene, but it would be difficult or impossible to conduct fieldwork in all the monastic institutions there. Therefore, this study uses a multiple-case approach. In such an approach, two issues are essential. First, the contexts in which the nunneries function have to be carefully taken into account. Second, it is crucial to select purposive samples to provide variety and a balanced overview, based on a typological method suggested by Stake.² The nunneries have been carefully selected so as to encompass the major different types of institutions in the context of China, each with its own representative characteristics and attitudes towards disciplinary rules. These include the following:

1. *Vinaya*-based institutes, such as Pushou Si (Wutaishan);
2. Buddhist nuns' colleges, such as Dingguang Si (Guangdong), ChongfuSi (Fuzhou), Zizhulin (Xiamen), and Qifu Si (Chengdu);
3. General institutes, such as Tongjiao Si and Tianning Si (both in Beijing).

Fieldwork Research on the Eight Gurudharma Rules

The first rule is actually one of the most debated *gurudharma* rules in monastic institutions and involves many intermingled issues. In the Dharmaguptaka school of *vinaya* tradition followed in the Chinese tradition, this rule states:

1. Even when a nun has been ordained for one hundred years, she must rise up from her seat when seeing a newly ordained monk, and she must pay obeisance and offer him a place to sit.

Exactly what is understood by “paying obeisance” is not clearly explained in the Vinaya texts, but from the reactions of our informants nuns, it is clear that they generally see it as a practice of bowing, usually interpreted as kneeling down in front of a figure or an image of authority. Before asking the nuns’ views on the first *gurudharma* rule, I had assumed that many nuns in Mainland China might possibly express willingness to pay homage to every monk they met, largely because Buddhists in Mainland China tend to be more traditional, or, in the words of Stuart Chandler, utilize “traditionalist rhetoric.”³ In fact, all the nuns I interviewed emphasized that they bow down to monks only on appropriate occasions, such as inside the monastery or when seeking instruction. When on the road, nuns normally join their palms and greet monks by saying “*Amitufo*,” a common way to say hello in a monastic environment. In other words, nuns do not in all circumstances bow by kneeling down, but instead consider the appropriateness of the timing as well as the setting for the act of “paying obeisance.”

However, the practice of paying obeisance cannot be categorised simply as a question of whether to bow to a monk or not. On the contrary, the practice of bowing contains many complex implications. For example, some of my informant nuns insisted on their right to choose an appropriate monk when practising the first *gurudharma* rule, since they did not want to kneel down unquestioningly before a monk of poor virtue.⁴ Most significantly, discussions of the first *gurudharma* rule have hitherto mainly focused on the practice of bowing to monks. However, it is interesting to note that the first rule includes another element that is often widely ignored; that is, in the first *gurudharma* nuns are required to stand up from their seats when they see a monk. My informant nuns at Tianning Si, Dingguang Si, and Chongfu Si reported that they would rise up from their seats to greet every male monastic member who enters an office or room no matter whether he is fully ordained or not.⁵ If the situation allows, they said they would bow down to fully ordained monks. In addition, my interviewees told me that they would similarly stand up to greet senior nuns or abbesses (without bowing) as part of the etiquette to express their respect for seniority.

2. A nun may not revile a monk, saying that he has broken the precepts, [or gone against] right views or right behaviour.
3. A nun may not punish a monk, or prevent him from joining in the ceremonies of the order (such as the *upavasatha* or the *pravāraṇā*). A nun may not admonish a monk, whereas a monk may admonish a nun.

When I asked for their opinions about the second and third *gurudharmas*, the majority of my informant nuns – whether they were for or against them – argued for the importance of the concept of seniority. My informant nuns had relatively similar viewpoints – that nuns would not admonish a monk even if he had made a mistake since monks generally are regarded as teachers or elder brothers whose duty and responsibility it is to teach and protect the nuns who are their students. In Chinese social contexts, people normally express respect towards the elderly and the wise, and juniors reviling or admonishing their seniors would attract criticism, irrespective of the religious context. In this sense, nuns, who are junior members in the monastic community, are commonly expected to show filial obedience towards monks who are senior members of the *saṅgha*. In short, my fieldwork data indicates that most members of the seven Chinese nunneries studied here thought that it was reasonable for nuns not to admonish a monk for his faults, in accordance with the fundamental value placed upon seniority in Chinese society (irrespective of the monk’s biological age).

4. After a woman has been trained for two years in the six rules as a probationer (*śikṣamāṇā*), the

ordination ceremony must be carried out in both orders (first in the nuns' order, and then in the monks' order).

As some scholars have shown, the *śikṣamānā* period was never or only very rarely implemented in Chinese Buddhist monasteries.⁶ However, my fieldwork data indicates important changes in *śikṣamānā* practices. A popular trend in contemporary Buddhism among nuns in Mainland China is for each novice (*śrāmaṇerikā*) to receive the probationary (*śikṣamānā*) precepts two years before receiving full dual ordination as a *bhikṣuṇī*. Buddhist monastic members in Mainland China today thus appear to pay more attention to the *śikṣamānā* period as a standard ordination procedure than monastics from the same region did in the past. The probationary period is now imposed on Buddhist nuns in contemporary Buddhist nunneries in Mainland China to an unknown but apparently large extent.⁷

5. When a nun has committed a *saṅghāvaśeṣa* offence, she has to undergo the *mānatva* in both orders for half a month.

One nun informant told me that ceremonies for *saṅghāvaśeṣa* [Translate.] transgressions were held at Pushou Si and Dacheng Si in 2010, followed by *mānatva* [Translate.] periods of two weeks in both orders, as described in the Vinaya. However, collecting detailed information regarding which *saṅghāvaśeṣa* offences monastic members had committed under the fifth *gurudharma* rule proved quite difficult in Mainland China (as indeed it was in Taiwan) since many *saṅghāvaśeṣa* offences referred to rules on matters of a sexual nature or dealt with serious disruptions in the community.

In an empirical study such as this, I found it difficult to collect detailed information about serious violations that might have occurred in Buddhist monasteries. To protect Buddhism's reputation, monastic institutions are understandably wary of making such disclosures. Even the experienced researcher Holmes Welch, for example, was unable to obtain information from Chinese monks about cases of expulsion.⁸

6. Every fortnight, nuns have to ask monks for instruction (*avavāda*).

7. Nuns cannot spend the summer retreat (rains retreat, *varṣā*) in a place where there are no monks.

8. At the end of the summer retreat, nuns have to carry out the *pravāraṇā* ceremony (also) in the monks' order.

Welch, who conducted research in Chinese Buddhist monasteries between 1900 and 1950, noted that monks seldom observed *varṣā* and *upavasatha*.⁹ Bhikṣu Sheng Yen, the founder of Dharma Drum Mountain in Taiwan, similarly thought that the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth *gurudharma* rules were not applied in Chinese Buddhism.¹⁰ In the course of my fieldwork, however, nearly all my informants in various nunneries reported that they conducted the relevant ceremonies required in the *gurudharma*, such as *avavāda*, *varṣā*, and *pravāraṇā*. My interview data indicates that the procedures of seeking instruction differed significantly in the seven nunneries, depending on each institution's conditions and local choices.

Welch reported that Chinese Buddhist monks during the period from 1900 to 1950 did not pay much attention to the three-month summer retreat. In most institutions, "life continued much as usual."¹¹ My fieldwork data indicates that Buddhist nuns in some nunneries in Mainland China now hold the *varṣā* toward the end of spring and beginning of summer, to strengthen their Buddhist practice.¹² It appears that some contemporary Buddhist nuns I met in both Mainland China and Taiwan focus on

advanced monastic practices during the *varṣā*, which shows a striking contrast to Welch’s research findings in the early twentieth century.

The invitation ceremony (*pravāraṇā*) was another rite with a variance between the text and monastic practice. According to the textual tradition, the ceremonies of *pravāraṇā* and *kathina* [Translate.] are held at the end of *varṣā*. Today, however, many monastic institutions in both Mainland China and Taiwan do not organize a *kathina* ceremony. The *pravāraṇā* ceremony, also held at the end of the summer retreat, and usually replacing the final *upavasatha* ceremony of the retreat, is strictly reserved for monastics only. As in the case of the rule about the *mānatva* period described above, my interviewees did not share much information on *pravāraṇā*, since it similarly involves offences and potential punishments.

Conclusion

This study has added significant information about issues related to each of the *gurudharmas*, as practiced in areas that have received scant scholarly attention to date. The nuns’ practice of paying homage to monks by bowing, for example, is an issue that has aroused lively debate among academics. My fieldwork data, gathered from the seven nunneries I researched, indicates that the issue has complex implications in Chinese contexts that cannot be understood in a reductionist way. As for the issue of not admonishing monks who have made a mistake, current practice indicates that the fundamental value placed upon seniority in Chinese society and culture exerts considerable influence on nuns’ perceptions. Significantly, my fieldwork data indicate an important evolution of relevant religious rituals and practices, including increased observance of the *śikṣamānā* period, dual ordination, seeking instruction from monks, summer retreat, and so on. The textual requirements regarding the *gurudharmas* and other ritual procedures (*karman*) also differ sharply in accordance with the conditions and local surrounding contexts of each institution.

NOTES

¹ Bhikkhu Anālayo, “Mahāpajāpati’s Going Forth in the Madhyama-āgama,” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 18(2011) 289–93.

² Robert E. Stake, “Qualitative Case Studies,” *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), 443–66.

³ Stuart Chandler, “Buddhism in China and Taiwan: The Dimensions of Contemporary Chinese Buddhism,” *Buddhism in World Cultures: Comparative Perspective*, ed. Stephen C. Berkwitz (Santa Barbara, CA: AB-CLIO, 2006), 169–94.

⁴ The *Dharmaguptakavinaya* (T 1428 940a27–b5), for instance, mentions that monks who are expelled or need to be expelled should not be greeted by other monks. The Pāli *vinaya* (Vin II 262, and V195) is even more explicit and states that monks who have acted disrespectfully towards nuns should no longer be greeted by the nuns’ community.

⁵ Nuns would not stand up to greet monks in certain situations: for example, when groups of nuns are eating food or reciting *sūtras* together.

⁶ For details, see Sheng Yen Shih, *Jielü xue gangyao* (Essentials of the Study of Buddhist Discipline) (Kaohsiung: Foguang Cultural Enterprise, 1997), 227; Guang Hua Shih, *Jiexue qian tan* (Basic Discussion on *Vinaya*) (Taichung: Nanputo Buddhist Temple, 2006), 16–17; and Ann Heirman, “Where is the Probationer in the Chinese Buddhist Nunneries?” *Zeitschrift Der Deutschen Morgenlandischen Gesellschaft* 158:1(2008) 133–34.

⁷ According to our informants’ statements, dual ordination is now regularly conferred in contemporary Mainland China. Still, Jin-Yu Wen discovered problems in recent ordination activities when he did a case study on a ceremony held in 2005 at Shaolin Temple. He comments that more and more women have been going forth and they request dual ordination, but sometimes the ordination is difficult to conduct, since many places lack the right conditions for conferring it. Jin-Yu Wen, “*Fabai tífang Zhongguo dalu jinnian chuanjie huodong de kao-cha*” (A Guarantee of Buddhist Teaching: Buddhist Ordination in Mainland China in Recent Years), *Fujian Religious Studies* 21(2010) 1–19.

⁸ Holmes Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism 1900-1950* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 119.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁰ Sheng Yen Shih, *Lüzhi shenghuo* (*Vinaya and Daily Life*) (Taipei: Dharma Drum Publishing, 2007 [1963]), 89.

¹¹ Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism*, 110.

¹² The time is between the sixteenth day of the fourth lunar month and the fifteenth day of the seventh month.

The Next Obstacles for Buddhist-Feminist Scholar-Practitioners: Rita Gross' Self-Identities and Legacies

Hsiao-Lan Hu

[I]dentity is a myriad, ever-shifting, ever-changing constellation, not something fixed, rigid, stable, and enduring.¹

Rita M. Gross

On November 11, 2015, world-renowned Buddhist-feminist scholar-practitioner Rita Gross (1943–2015) passed away, three weeks after suffering a massive stroke. For me, her passing was preceded and succeeded by two events that marked the identities she cherished the most. Three days before her stroke, she was teaching at my retreat center in Michigan, respected as a feminist practitioner. Nine days after her passing, she was honored at the American Academy of Religion Annual Meetings as a Buddhist scholar. When she taught at my retreat center, she always insisted that I should introduce her as “Buddhist-feminist scholar-practitioner.” In the last book she published, she explicitly said that two sets of dual identities were very important to her: one is “Buddhist-feminist” and the other, “scholar-practitioner.”²

At the 13th Sakyadhita Conference in Vaishali, India, Rita gave a talk that was later published in *Tricycle* magazine as, “The Man-Made Obstacle: Distinguishing Between Problems of Human Birth and Problems of Human Making.” Surely in her generation, Rita experienced many obstacles as a woman. Even more so, she experienced many obstacles when introducing critical scholarly works to Buddhist practitioners³ on the one hand, and for bringing the views of Buddhist practices to (Christianity-centered) religious studies on the other.⁴ Rita was well published and very eloquent about what she found questionable, as a scholar and as a practitioner, as a feminist and as a Buddhist. Rita never needed anyone to speak for her, and I would not be able to do it adequately even if I tried. However, at the memorial ceremony at the AAR, a few well-established scholars and Rita’s longterm friends told me that it had meant a lot to Rita to have me as her one and only graduate student (which she never expressed to me, by the way), so I feel obligated to write something in her memory and to carry on her work in some way. The fact remains that her voluminous publications make it impossible for me to review her work or rehash her arguments in one paper, and so I will not even attempt that. Instead, what I will do is to reflect on the identities that Rita held dear and discuss how my generation of “Buddhist-feminist scholar-practitioners” can carry on her legacies and tackle the next obstacles in her spirit.

The Obstacle of Female Birth

In “The Man-Made Obstacle,” Rita elaborated on the obstacles that she had to work with as a woman, as a feminist scholar, and as a Buddhist practitioner. While acknowledging that, in Buddhist teachings, obstacles can be beneficial because, by working skillfully with obstacles, wisdom and compassion are developed, Rita pointed out a necessary caveat: “This perspective only applies if the obstacle doesn’t kill us first.”⁵ Some obstacles can be so severe that they are deadly, leaving the people facing them crippled and unable to recover. Rita distinguished the obstacles that necessarily accompany human birth, and the severe obstacles that are man-made and so can and should be removed:

Some obstacles, such as old age, sickness, death, loss, and personal grief go with the territory of having a precious human birth. Other obstacles, such as sexism, racism, poverty, homophobia, religious intolerance, environmental degradation, and nationalism are not attributable to the inevitabilities of being human but are caused by human greed, hatred, and ignoring. Therefore, they can be overcome. It is difficult enough for us to cope with the obstacles inherent in having taken birth. Because some of us manage to cope with socially created obstacles in addition is no excuse or justification for anyone to promote or benefit from them. Buddhists, especially Buddhist teachers, should never suggest that simply because a few

people manage to cope well with socially created obstacles, it is permissible for Buddhist leaders and institutions to continue such practices.⁶

Naively telling people that obstacles can be our best allies on the path to awakening is mean, Rita said, especially when the obstacles are the results of systemic injustice and structural violence, such as the obstacle of female birth.

In “Feminism: A Transformational Politic,” published in 1989, bell hooks critiqued the tendency for privileged Western white feminists to assume that “racism and class exploitation are merely the offspring of the parent system: patriarchy.”⁷ Many white feminists of so-called “second-wave feminism” (which I would prefer to call “justice-oriented feminism”⁸), such as Shulamith Firestone, Mary Daly, and Adrienne Rich, certainly held this view.⁹ Like many white feminists of her generation, Rita considered androcentrism not just the primal example of systemic injustice, but the root of oppressive social hierarchies. In a book chapter published in 1994, for example, Rita stated regarding her feminist scholarship,

I had no idea that I had stumbled onto the concern that would occupy much of my scholarly and personal life. Nor did I realize that I had located *the most serious blind spot of contemporary scholarship*, not only in religious studies, but also in all humanistic and social scientific disciplines.¹⁰ (emphasis added)

Mary Keller, citing Franz Fanon, W. E. B. DuBois, Ifi Amadiume, and Amina Wadud, asked, “How did Gross arrive at the evaluation that the most serious blindspot of scholarship was androcentrism?”¹¹ Keller’s question reflects the perspective of the so-called “third-wave feminism” (which I would prefer to call “diversity-oriented feminism”); that is, as Randi Warne puts it, “in favor of a more complex analysis which included race and class, sexualities, age, (dis)ability and ethnic and colonial positionings.”¹² For diversity-oriented feminists, intersectionality is a crucial concept in understanding the ways in which each embodied person experiences oppressive social structures. Diversity-oriented feminists’ critique of the earlier form of white feminism that considered sexism to be the fundamental problem, in the simplest terms, is that women of color “cannot be women first and then Black or Hispanic.”¹³ Prioritizing the obstacles brought about by androcentrism over the obstacles brought about by other forms of institutionalized oppression is to dismiss the lived realities of people who have been more severely affected by white supremacy, imperialist domination, capitalistic exploitation, heterosexism, nativism, and/or Eurocentrism. Indeed, the most common criticism of Rita’s feminist scholarship, as Amina Wadud puts it, is that her methodology disallowed concerns of race to be included.¹⁴

Is that criticism of Rita’s feminist scholarship fair? On the one hand, in the roundtable where Amina Wadud issued that criticism, Rita readily dismissed the criticism as a distortion of her work,¹⁵ without taking into serious account Wadud’s point about the systematic aspect of racism or other forms of institutionalized social oppression. After all, just as Rita would say that her criticism of sexism and androcentrism is a criticism of a systemic social problem, not a personal attack on any individual man, so are Amina Wadud’s or bell hooks’ criticisms of racism and whiteness. However, even in “The Man-Made Obstacle,” which was published 20 years after the 1994 chapter, Rita was still convinced of the primacy of androcentrism as a social problem, “I’m not sure that any other topic that has emerged in Buddhist circles or in academia in the past 40 years is as significant as gender studies.” Furthermore, in my personal contacts with her for about ten years, I did experience her repeatedly dismissing my concerns related to ethnicity, nationality, and culture. On the other hand, in quite a few other writings, Rita did show that she was aware of intersectionality and the lived experiences of racism, nativism, imperialism, and cultural chauvinism. For example, in the last book she published, *Religious Diversity: What’s the Problem? Buddhist Advice for Flourishing with Religious Diversity*, Rita said,

One may be a member of any given religion, and that identity may be very strong, but it is never one’s sole identity. It would be self-deceptive to claim otherwise. One may have a religious

identity, but one also has family roles, an occupation, political views, a sexual orientation, a cultural identity, a racial identity, national citizenship, an educational level, membership in an age cohort, sexual identity, gender identity, membership in a denomination within one's larger religion, a relationship with the arts and/or sports...and other identities depending on the specifics of one's experience. ... Even if one is not biracial, bicultural, or a multiple religious believer, one always has a hyphenated identity.

Furthermore, throughout one's life, these various identities shift and change. Some become more dominant, and others decline in importance or drop away altogether.¹⁶

Rita was also very aware of diversity-oriented feminists' critiques of the feminist movement of her generation in North America, even though at times she did not seem to agree with those critiques:

Nevertheless, by the mid-1980s, the movement had fractured. Many women complained that the phrase 'women's experience' did not really include them. It was claimed that the movement reflected only white, middle-class, heterosexual women's concerns. Black women, poor women, lesbians, women of other cultures, and many others did not find themselves included in the rhetoric of the feminist-theology movement. ... Because so many early feminist leaders came from North America, many Asians and Africans even claimed that the feminist movement was another colonial project.¹⁷

Moreover, in one of the quotes from "The Man-Made Obstacle" given above, Rita did recognize the obstacles brought about by "racism, poverty, homophobia, religious intolerance, environmental degradation, and nationalism" in addition to sexism.¹⁸ In her 2009 book, *A Garland of Feminist Reflections: Forty Years of Religious Explorations*, Rita stated, "A major value of feminist theology is to include the voices that have not been heard, to widen the circle, to learn how to welcome diversity."¹⁹ That is, as a feminist scholar, Rita's writings, and sometimes behaviors, were indicative of inclusivity and at the same time not entirely sensitive to people whose minoritized identities she did not personally share.

Seeing into the Lived Realities of Others

How do we make sense of this contradiction, and where does it leave us regarding Rita's legacies? At this point, I would like to draw from another of her self-identities: a Buddhist practitioner. As a Buddhist practitioner, Rita took the rational, analytical, introspective aspect of Buddhist teachings very seriously, and she frequently challenged people to examine their habitual tendencies and blindspots. In "The Man-Made Obstacle," she acknowledged the blindspots that the socially privileged might have,

It is well known that, out of self-defense, those on the underside of worldly power and privilege often are double-sighted. We can see things from the dominant perspective, the one that is publicly taught and promulgated, but we can also see things that those who participate only in the privileged perspective cannot see. This tells us that, *on any topic in which we mainly operate out of privilege, we should be humble. That is why white people are so often so blind to racism or straight people blind to homophobia.* That is also why Buddhists should be much more careful about dismissing issues of social justice as irrelevant to dharma.²⁰ (emphasis added)

For the dominant and privileged, the system from which they benefit is simply normal. When dissecting the obstacle of female birth, Rita related the story about a male colleague's surprise at the "obviously correct" interpretations contained in her 1993 volume *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*. The male colleague was surprised because those "obviously correct" interpretations had never occurred to him. Rita's analytical response was, "It hadn't been in his self-interest as a male to notice how male dominant the conventional interpretations are. It is, as realtors say, a matter of 'location, location, location!'"²¹ Similar comments can be made about Rita's prioritizing

the issue of androcentrism, or her dismissing others' concerns about racism, nativism, imperialism, and cultural chauvinism: it is not exactly in her self-interest to gain an in-depth understanding of the obstacles brought about by skin color or national origin. The caveat Rita pointed out regarding seeing obstacles as allies is, "This perspective only applies if the obstacle doesn't kill us first."²² Nowadays, it is well recognized that racism and anti-immigration sentiments are obstacles that can literally get one killed. That is to say, the obstacles brought about by skin color or national origin can be even more crippling or deadly than the obstacle of female birth, but those are obstacles that Rita did not personally experience and so in these regards she was not exactly "privilege-cognizant."²³

Despite not being in the social locations that bear the brunt of racism or anti-immigration violence, Rita believed that a Buddhist practitioner should look deeper into oneself and into the realities around us. Drawing from her painful experience of having the obstacle of female birth overlooked and dismissed, Rita certainly understood the necessity of looking into other man-made obstacles and seeking to remove them for others: "We should not excuse overlooking serious obstacles to dharmic practice such as poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia, and so forth by naively reciting that obstacles can be one's best friend on the path. ... We must not slide into the temptations provided by the three poisons, the most dangerous of which, in this case, is ignoring."²⁴ As a scholar-practitioner, Rita was committed to removing ignorance in more than one sense. Rita would certainly agree with Barack Obama when he said in his commencement speech at Rutgers University, "In politics and in life, ignorance is not a virtue."²⁵

As a Buddhist practitioner, Rita also understood the harm of clinging to identities and the need to work toward non-attachment to self-identities:

Someone committed to a rigid, inflexible, monolithic identity, contrary to some popular ideas, has neither a strong nor a viable ego. It is in fact very brittle and fragile, easily threatened by change and diversity, timid and often overcome by fear. By contrast, those who recognize that identity is always hyphenated and changing are cheerful, flexible, and easily accommodate new information and situations. ... In the long run, identity is not something to reinforce or to hang on to, but something more like a cane or a stepping-stone. We use it as long as we need it to steady ourselves, but eventually it becomes a prison rather than an aide. Then we let go. We become so confident, so much simply ourselves, that we are no longer attached to stories or labels in communicating to others who we are. ...

Relaxing and taming our fear and rigidity about identity is most important in regard to those identities most likely to cause harm both to self and others when held too tightly. Those potentially harmful identities certainly can derive from religion, gender, race, nation, culture, class, sexual orientation, and political affiliations. It is easy to develop hostile, oppositional *us/them* styles of identity around such issues, and it is easy to see simply by following the daily news how much suffering such identities can inflict on others, when held too tightly, with too much attachment.²⁶

I am sure Rita would agree that her comment here applies to the self-identities she had, both the ones she held dearly, such as Buddhist-feminist scholar-practitioner, and the ones she did not think too much about but nevertheless were present, such as white, Western, and America-born.

As a Buddhist-feminist scholar-practitioner, Rita was dedicated to looking directly into realities, dismantling systems that cause suffering, removing ignorance, attenuating attachment to identities, and liberating women and men from the prison of rigid identities such as gender. There might be lived realities that she could not see well due to her attachment to certain aspects of her identities that she did not exactly explore, but that is true of each embodied human being with finite existence and limited perspectives. I think the best way for the next generation of Buddhist-feminist scholar-practitioners to carry on her legacies is to follow her in her dedication to looking directly into realities and striving to attenuate our attachment to our identities, whatever they might be. At the same time, we need to remind ourselves of the importance of examining our own blindspots and taking seriously the obstacles that we

do not personally experience but are still man-made and harmful.

NOTES

¹ Rita M. Gross, *Religious Diversity: What's the Problem? Buddhist Advice for Flourishing with Religious Diversity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 162.

² *Ibid.*, 161–62.

³ See Rita M. Gross, “Teaching Buddhist History to Buddhist Practitioners,” *Teaching Buddhism: New Insights on Understanding and Presenting the Traditions*, edited by Todd Lewis and Gary DeAngelis (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 166–85.

⁴ See Rita M. Gross, “Methodological Appendices,” *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 289–317. See also Rita M. Gross, “Feminist Theology: Religiously Diverse Neighborhood or Christian Ghetto?” and “Response,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 16:2(2000) 73–78, 124–31.

⁵ Rita M. Gross, “The Man-Made Obstacle: Distinguishing Between Problems of Human Birth and Problems of Human Making,” *Tricycle* Summer 2014. <https://tricycle.org/magazine/man-made-obstacle/> Accessed May 9, 2017.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ bell hooks, “Feminism: A Transformational Politic,” *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1989), 19. See also bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman* (London: Pinto Press, 1982).

⁸ In general, I resist the labels of “second-wave feminist” and “third-wave feminism,” and prefer to refer to them as “justice-oriented feminism” and “diversity-oriented feminism.” The former set of labels implies a generational divide that does not really exist. A feminist who was active during the so-called “second-wave feminism” may be very concerned about diversity issues, and a feminist who was born after the so-called “third-wave feminism” does not necessarily concern themselves with the experiences of minority “others.”

⁹ See Linda Martín Alcoff, “What Should White People Do?” *Hypatia* 13:3(1998) 10–11.

¹⁰ Rita M. Gross, “Studying Women and Religion: Conclusions Twenty-Five Years Later,” *Today's Woman in World Religions*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), 327.

¹¹ Mary Keller, “Raced and Gendered Perspectives: Towards the Epidermalization of Subjectivity in Religious Studies Theory,” *Gender, Religion and Diversity: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Ursula King and Tina Beattie (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 89.

¹² Randi R. Warne, “Gender,” *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. Willi Braun and Russell T. McCutcheon (London and New York: Cassell, 2000), 146.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁴ Amina Wadud, “Roundtable: Feminist Theology and Religions Diversity,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 16:2(2000) 90–100.

¹⁵ Gross, “Response,” 129–31.

¹⁶ Gross, *Religious Diversity*, 158.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 164–65.

¹⁸ Gross, “The Man-Made Obstacle.”

¹⁹ Rita M. Gross, *A Garland of Feminist Reflections: Forty Years of Religious Explorations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 216–17.

²⁰ Gross, “The Man-Made Obstacle.” For a brief account of the feminist standpoint theory, see Alison Bailey, “Locating Traitorous Identities: Toward a View of Privilege-Cognizant White Character,” *Hypatia* 13:3(1998) 28–30.

²¹ Gross, “The Man-made Obstacle.”

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Bailey, “Locating Traitorous Identities,” 27–42.

²⁴ Gross, “The Man-Made Obstacle.”

²⁵ Allie Malloy, “Obama Knocks Trump at Rutgers: ‘Ignorance is not a virtue,’” CNN Politics, May 15, 2016. <http://www.cnn.com/2016/05/15/politics/obama-donald-trump-rutgers-university/> Accessed May 9, 2017.

²⁶ Gross, *Religious Diversity*, 172.

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Thubten Choedroen was born in Germany in 1947 and grew up in England. In 1968, she received her B.A. in German and French at London University, after which she taught English in Germany for 16 years. In 1982, she attended teachings with H. H. Dalai Lama in Hamburg and became the disciple of Geshe Thubten Ngawang at the Tibetan Centre there. After working for Wisdom Publications in London for several years, she took the *sramanerika* precepts with Lama Zopa Rinpoche in July 1988. She returned to the Tibetan Centre and in December that year received full ordination as a *bhiksuni* at Hsi Lai Temple in Los Angeles. From then on, she lived, worked, studied, practiced, and eventually gave courses at the Tibetan Centre Hamburg and at Semkye Ling. In March 2016, she moved to Shide Nunnery, which she co-founded. She is the chairperson of the Deutsche Buddhistische Ordensgemeinschaft (German Sangha Association), a network of German-speaking monks and nuns ordained according to the Vinaya.

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Carla Gianotti graduated in Indology at the University of Turin and specialized in Tibetan Studies in Rome and New Delhi. She has taught courses on Buddhism, including Buddhism and Gender, and workshops on maternal philosophy. Since 2010, she has been a professor of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism at the Superior School Of Oriental and Comparative Philosophy in Rimini, Italy. Her books include *Cenerentola nel Paese delle Nevi; Donne di illuminazione. Çākini e demonesse, Madri divine e Maestre di Dharma; Il respiro della fiducia. Pratica di consapevolezza e visione materna*. Her other publications include, "The *srin mo*

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Thubten Jampa was born in Germany, studied politics and sociology at the Humboldt-University of Berlin, and received her diploma in social science in 2004. Professionally, she has worked for the International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) and the Tibetisches Zentrum in Hamburg. Pursuing her interest in Buddhist practice, she traveled to Japan in 2006, where she practiced *zazen* in a Zen monastery. In

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Lozang Tseten was born in the United Kingdom in 1947 and spent the majority of her working life as a community midwife in a small town in Kent. She has two adult children and a granddaughter, all living in the U.K. Tseten moved to Australia at the age of 58 and, while working as a midwife in a Brisbane hospital, was introduced to Buddhism a colleague, which changed her life completely. Retirement enabled her to become one of the first students in the newly founded Nan Tien Institute at Berkeley, New South Wales, where she completed a Master’s degree in Applied Buddhist Studies four years later. The intense Dharma study led directly to her taking ordination in 2013 with Khensur Geshe Tashi Tsering. She now lives fulltime at Chenrezig Institute in Queensland.

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Ma Vipula was born Mandalay, Myanmar, in 1986 and became a Buddhist nun at the age of 14. Since that time, she has studied primary and higher Pali Buddhist studies and was awarded the titles of Saddhamadhaja Lankara and Vinayavidu (master of *vinaya*, or monastic discipline) by the Department of Religious Affairs, Republic of the Union of Myanmar. She presently works as a lecturer of basic and higher Buddhist studies at Sakyadhita Nunnery in Sagaing Hills.

