

University of San Diego Digital USD

Theology and Religious Studies: Faculty
Scholarship

Department of Theology and Religious Studies


2009

Socially Engaged Buddhist Nuns: Activism in Taiwan and North America

Karma Lekshe Tsomo

University of San Diego, tsomo@sandiego.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital.sandiego.edu/thrs-faculty>

 Part of the [Buddhist Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Digital USD Citation

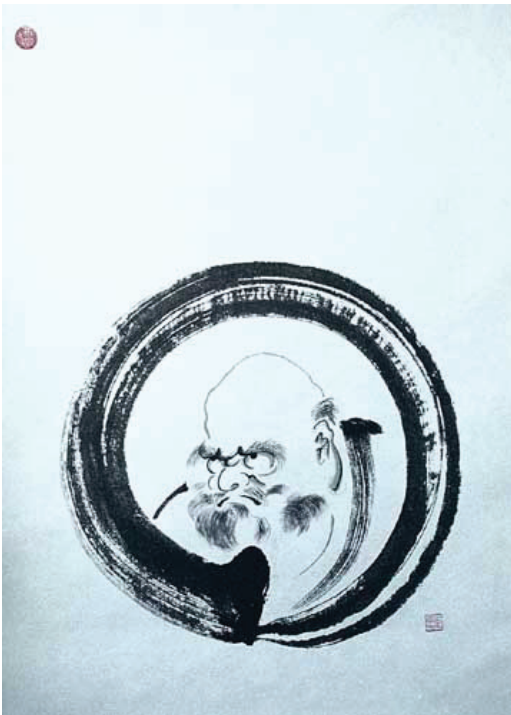
Tsomo, Karma Lekshe, "Socially Engaged Buddhist Nuns: Activism in Taiwan and North America" (2009). *Theology and Religious Studies: Faculty Scholarship*. 13.

<https://digital.sandiego.edu/thrs-faculty/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Digital USD. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theology and Religious Studies: Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Digital USD. For more information, please contact digital@sandiego.edu.

Research Article

Journal of Global Buddhism 10 (2009): 459-485



Socially Engaged Buddhist Nuns: Activism in Taiwan and North America

Karma Lekshe Tsomo

Department of Theology and Religious Studies
University of San Diego
5998 Alcalá Park, San Diego, CA 92110
ktsomo@san Diego.edu

Copyright Notes: Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no charge is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format with the exception of a single copy for private study requires the written permission of the author.

All enquiries to: <http://www.globalbuddhism.org>

R e s e a r c h A r t i c l e

Socially Engaged Buddhist Nuns: Activism in Taiwan and North America

Karma Lekshe Tsomo

Department of Theology and Religious Studies
University of San Diego
5998 Alcalá Park, San Diego, CA 92110
ktsomo@san Diego.edu

Abstract

The last decades of the twentieth century have been a time of new visibility and social activism for Buddhists in Taiwan and around the world. This paper compares the social engagement of nuns in the Chinese Buddhist tradition in Taiwan and North America. I would like to argue that whereas nuns in Taiwan have developed a variety of approaches to social involvement, their counterparts in the Chinese diaspora in North America have had to face a set of challenges specific to overseas Chinese communities in addition to Chinese Buddhist tradition. The article concludes with reflections on the prospects for nuns' social activism in Taiwan and North America in future years.

Introduction

The last decades of the twentieth century were a time of new visibility and social activism for Buddhists in Taiwan and around the world. (1) The social activism of nuns in Taiwan, in particular, is well-acknowledged both in Taiwan and in socially engaged Buddhist circles internationally (for instance, see [Cheng, 2003](#)). Buddhist organizations are widely admired for their abilities to respond compassionately to the needs of the people, especially in times of crisis. Taiwan's robust economic

growth from the 1970s, together with political liberalization after the end of martial law in 1987, contributed to a proliferation of social activism by religious organizations. In the years since then, temples in Taiwan have expanded their community outreach with social service activities that are often organized and implemented by Buddhist nuns and laywomen. In particular, Buddhist organizations have a distinguished record of relief efforts, such as their responses to the disastrous earthquakes that rocked central Taiwan in 1999 (Madsen 2007, p.xvii). They also played a significant role in alleviating the suffering caused by more recent earthquakes and typhoons on the island.

This article highlights the accomplishments of three leading nuns as examples of active social engagement in Taiwan: Bhiksuni Cheng Yen 証嚴 (1937-), Bhiksuni Chao Hwei 昭慧 (1957-), and Bhiksuni Shig Hiu Wan 曉雲 (1912-2004). Bhiksuni Cheng Yen achieved international fame for her compassionate social service and founding of the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu-Chi Association 佛教慈濟功德會. Bhiksuni Chao Hwei gained celebrity status as an activist for human rights, women's rights, and animal rights. Bhiksuni Shig Hiu Wan excelled as an outstanding artist and pioneering educator. In addition to these exemplary nuns, there are literally hundreds more who deserve recognition for their contributions to society and to raising social awareness among Buddhists and the general population in Taiwan.

The first topic to be discussed is the meaning and scope of Buddhist social activism. Against this background, I compare and contrast the contributions of these three eminent nuns to illustrate the varied modalities of social engagement among nuns in Taiwan. Next, I consider the work of nuns who are active in the Taiwanese diaspora in North America in an attempt to understand the roles and contributions of these nuns as

they encounter new social realities. Finally, I reflect on the challenges that Buddhist nuns in Taiwan and North America have faced, the reasons for their successes, and the prospects for their work in future years. Methodologically, I apply a Buddhist feminist analysis in an attempt to understand issues of gender and authority in Buddhist societies and institutions in both local and transnational contexts.

Activism in Context

Although the meaning of the term "activism" may appear obvious, interpretations of the term vary in different cultural and historical contexts. In the Buddhist context, activism may include overt social and political activism—advocacy, marches, and civil disobedience—and also include quiet activism, such as counseling, caring for the needy (orphans, and the sick, frail, elderly, and destitute), community action projects, and a range of temple activities. In the Buddhist communities of Taiwan, as exemplified in the lives of these three Taiwanese nuns, we find that overt social and political activism is flourishing alongside quiet activism: in my observations of Taiwanese Buddhist nuns since 1973, I have noticed that traditional practices of tending to the spiritual and material needs of temple members and the surrounding community have continued, in conjunction with more highly organized and more widely publicized educational and social welfare activities. The aim of both approaches is social transformation, but social and political activism in this context refers to activities that overtly challenge social and political structures, whereas quiet activism is more consistent with traditional Taiwanese Buddhist practice. In the Taiwanese Buddhist communities of North America, however, the focus is more on quiet activism. Further, many Buddhists consider spiritual practice itself a means of social transformation that extends

beyond their own individual lives to the whole world. For example, Bhiksuni Shig Hiu Wan, who held both the Chan and Tiantai lineages, steeped two generations of Buddhist nuns in the tradition of "enlightening education" and trained them to manifest *prajna* (wisdom) in their lives and in their communities, both in Taiwan and abroad. For Mahayana Buddhists, actions motivated by compassion and implemented through skillful means (*upaya*) constitute *bodhisattva* activity and may be viewed as a form of activism. Form is less important than intention. Consequently, actions that contribute to spiritual or social transformation are perceived as valuable, whether studying Dharma, practicing meditation, standing in a picket line, or volunteering in a soup kitchen. In accordance with this principle, activism takes multiple forms in Taiwan and North America, influenced by the cultural perspectives, ethical values, and priorities of their surrounding communities.

Since Emperor Asoka initiated public works projects throughout northern India in the third century BCE, Buddhists from Sri Lanka to Japan have provided a wide range of social services for the common good. (2) Without fanfare, Buddhist temples were both the primary providers of social services and cultural centers for their surrounding communities. This tradition has continued up to the present day, expanding and becoming more visible in recent years. The recent surge in Buddhist social activism, especially in Taiwan, can be attributed to many salient factors. The combination of financial resources and human resources, facilitated by improved education, transportation, and communications, created the ideal circumstances for a new era in Buddhist social activism. An increase in disposable wealth made it possible to expand charitable activities, especially between 1971 and 1997. Also, the hard work and dedication of a new generation of actively engaged nuns created a new dynamism in these Buddhist societies. All these factors undoubtedly

combined to foster an upsurge when the KMT 國民黨 (Kuomintang) no longer curtailed Buddhist social activism. The new sense of social freedom that resulted from the lifting of martial law in 1987 contributed to more outspoken social activist agendas. With freedom of the press in 1988 came a flurry of new publications, radio programs, and television broadcasts that greatly facilitated the spread of Buddhist news and teachings.

A New Generation of Buddhist Nuns in Taiwan

According to oral tradition, when the eminent Chinese bhikṣu Taixu 太虛(1890-1947) visited Taiwan in 1917, he predicted that nuns would play an important role in the future of Buddhism there. It was not until 1952, however, that the first full ordination ceremony was held in Taiwan. Before that time, although it was theoretically possible for women to travel to mainland China to receive full ordination, most renunciant women were very poor, uneducated, and practiced what was known as the "vegetarian religion" (*zhaijiao* 齋教). These "vegetarian women" (*zhaijiu* 齋姑) had left secular life to devote themselves to Buddhist practice, but did not shave their heads or formally take monastic ordination. They lived in temples known as "vegetarian halls" (*zhaitang* 齋堂), which far outnumbered Buddhist temples (Jones 1999, pp.14-30). (3)

The arrival of monks from China in 1949, after the Japanese occupation, contributed to a resurgence of Buddhism in Taiwan. The new form of Buddhism that emerged could be distinguished from earlier eclectic forms of practice that mixed Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian elements, and also from Japanese-style Buddhism. In 1953, one hundred nuns were ordained in the first Triple Platform Ordination ever held in Taiwan. (4) At this ordination, organized by the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China and held at Daxian Temple (Tainan County), eminent monks conferred

novice precepts, full ordination precepts, and *bodhisattva* precepts in a grand ceremony that involved hundreds of monks, nuns, and laypeople. The first dual ordination, in which nuns received *bhiksuni* precepts from both *bhiksu* and *bhiksuni* preceptors, was held at Linji Temple in Taipei in 1970 and was supervised by Bhiksu Baisheng 白聖 (1904-1989) and Bhiksuni Tianyi 天乙 (1924-1980). It is estimated that 75 percent of the Buddhist monastics ordained in Taiwan since 1953 have been nuns (Li 2008, p.189).

When monks arrived from the mainland in 1949 and thereafter, they were not immediately welcomed with open arms. In addition to suspicions that there might be Communists among them, there was initially a fairly serious language gap. In the transition, the Taiwanese nuns helped them get established by introducing them to potential supporters, organizing Dharma events (*fahui* 法會), cooking, fundraising, and helping construct and maintain temples. It is said that these refugee monks never forgot the kindness of the Taiwanese nuns and this symbiosis between monks and nuns continues to lend a special character to Buddhism in Taiwan. The nature of these relationships is distinctly patriarchal, with monks acting as benevolent father figures, while nuns discharged all domestic responsibilities. During the 1960s and 1970s, nuns began to receive more education and training. As they gained more experience, many nuns inherited or founded their own temples and began to assume leadership roles, both in the monastic community and in the lay community. Despite objections from some quarters, a Bhiksuni Association was established in 1996 that serves as a communications network for nuns throughout Taiwan. And, although the leadership of the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China (BAROC) is still exclusively male, some county Buddhist associations are now chaired by nuns. While *bhiksus* occupy positions of authority and retain their dominance in Sangha matters

and in Buddhist circles overall, many *bhiksunis* manage their own monasteries independently and set their own agendas. They reap the benefits of full ordination and increasingly are well-educated; today a third have college degrees (Li 2008, p.189). Due to their hard work, sincerity, and active social engagement, nuns in Taiwan are highly respected, and supported by a grateful lay constituency.

Luminary Activist Nuns

Although an accurate understanding of Buddhist activism is not possible simply by considering the most illustrious cases, the lives of certain leading figures are emblematic of the options open to nuns in Taiwan today. Although Buddhist structures in Taiwan remain quite hierarchical and women rarely occupy positions of leadership, three nuns have broken through boundaries in unprecedented ways. The diverse paths they have chosen typify the many paths open to Buddhist nuns and to Buddhist women more broadly. Each story is extraordinary and each has inspired thousands.

One Taiwanese nun who became a legend in her own time was Bhiksuni Cheng Yen, who founded the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Association in 1966. According to her biography, which can be found in many official Ciji publications, she was challenged by Christian missionaries who criticized Buddhists as passive. She responded with a determination to actively alleviate the sufferings of the needy and began by asking housewives to set aside a few pennies from their grocery allowances each week for charity. This endeavor led her to found the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Association, a relief organization that sends missions to disaster areas around the world and funds local and international projects focused on medical care, education, and environment. The organization boasts five million supporters and over

30,000 certified "commissioners." Venturing into Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and fifty-five other countries, Tzu Chi has disciplined teams trained and willing to provide emergency relief services around the world. It even runs a free clinic in downtown Honolulu with a fully qualified staff of volunteers. Bhiksuni Cheng Yen was awarded the Eisenhower Medallion for her contribution to world peace and understanding in 1994, the Magsaysay Award for community leadership in 1991, and was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1996.

Another leading Taiwanese nun is the outspoken Bhiksuni Chao Hwei, who is considered to be rather radical by many Taiwanese Buddhists. Born in Burma in 1957, she studied in the Department of Chinese Literature at Taiwan Normal University. After becoming a nun at the age of twenty-one, she became the first Buddhist nun to teach in a public high school and went on to teach at Fu Ren Catholic University. Now a professor of religion and director of the Research Center of Applied Ethics at Hsuan Chuang University, she is a prolific writer and well known for her advocacy work for human rights, animal rights, and environment. Never one to be shy of the press, she is a skilled strategist who has faced considerable opposition in her many battles. Although she declined an invitation to become vice-mayor of Nantou Province, citing separation of religion and politics, her work is highly political, especially as related to such issues as environmentalism. She created a major stir by having eight people rip down posters of the Eight Special Rules that subordinate nuns to monks, on national TV, just as H.H. Dalai Lama was due to arrive on a visit to Taiwan in 2001. (5) Her courageous work for women's rights causes discomfort among many people, especially monks, as she challenges authority and traditional assumptions about Buddhist women and the interpretation of certain Buddhist texts regarding women's roles. Her candid condemnation of corruption

in the monastic order also has caused discomfort, especially among those who may have something to hide.

Bhiksuni Shig Hiu Wan was born in Guangdong Province in 1912. She was a pioneer who overcame many barriers in her lifetime, especially in the field of education. Her accomplishments as an upper-class, educated, and cosmopolitan woman were many when, at the age of forty-six, she broke with tradition and became a nun. Her decision challenged prevailing perceptions of both Buddhism and of women. An outstanding Chan painter and poet, she studied and taught at Shanti Niketan University in Bengal for six years before arriving in Taiwan in 1966 to teach at the Chinese Cultural University at Yungmingshan—the first Buddhist nun to teach at a university in Taiwan. She founded the Institute for Sino-Indian Buddhist Studies to train Buddhist nuns and laywomen from Taiwan and the Chinese diaspora in what she called Prajna Chan or Enlightened Education. In 1976, with Richard Gard, she initiated the International Buddhist Studies Conferences, a distinguished achievement for which she has never been properly credited. Her leadership helped strengthen a growing international Buddhist women's movement, as well as Buddhist meditation practice and fine arts in Taiwan. At the age of seventy-six, she overcame many obstacles to establish Huafan University, now one of the leading institutions of higher education in Taiwan. She passed away in 2004 at the age of ninety-two.

Images of Activism

Each of these three exceptional nuns has taken a unique approach to social activism. Bhiksuni Cheng Yen has focused her work primarily on providing medical care to the needy and the general public by establishing hospitals, clinics, a bone marrow registry, and the Tzu

Chi College of Medicine. Through Tzu Chi Foundation, she has contributed substantially to emergency relief efforts both in Taiwan and in crisis areas around the world. In 1998, she established Da Ai Television Station to provide the public with positive, nonviolent news coverage and programming. In recent years, she has expanded her work to include care for the environment, encouraging followers to recycle and live simply.⁶ She does not speak from a standard feminist position, explicitly challenging patriarchal values, even though three-quarters of her followers are women ("blue angels"). Instead, she exhorts her followers to practice the "feminine" virtues of compassion and self-sacrifice. Chien-Yu Julia Huang and Robert P. Weller point out that Tzu Chi propagates the virtues traditionally assigned to Chinese wives and mothers, and then universalizes them to society at large (Huang and Weller, 1998). (7)

Bhiksuni Chao Hwei has focused her work primarily on human rights, especially women's rights. She is actively engaged in the political arena, where she organizes public protests on behalf of animal rights, speaks out against corruption, opposes the death penalty, and leads Free Burma protests. She pursues an active academic agenda of teaching, administration, and research, publishing widely on topics of social concern. Her work is explicitly feminist; for example, she denounces and seeks to dismantle what she calls the "gender order," namely, the social order that privileges men over women and the institutional subordination of nuns.

Bhiksuni Shig Hiu Wan focused her work primarily on education, specifically Buddhist education and culture. Although she did not explicitly employ feminist language, she was confident about women's capabilities and nurtured them. She trained her student nuns to be self-reliant and to "learn everything," not just *sutra* studies and meditation, but also Chinese brush painting,

taiqi (*taichi*), organizational management, and agriculture. Although she may not have seen herself as a social activist in any typical sense, she actively transformed social values in Taiwan by promoting Buddhist higher education for nuns in Taiwan. She helped gain acceptance for the idea that Buddhist nuns were not only capable of pursuing higher education, but were also fully capable of independently establishing and administering their own educational institutions. The Lotus Ashram and Institute of Sino-Indian Studies that she founded were open to overseas students from Southeast Asia and elsewhere and included training in painting, calligraphy, meditation, chanting, publishing, agriculture, conference organization, vegetarian cooking, and *taiqi* as integral components of the curriculum, providing practical skills and experience that students could then teach others. Although there were others who valued education for nuns, such as Bhiksuni Ruxue 如學 (1913-1992), Shig Hiu Wan's intensive education and training programs were unique in nurturing successive generations of well educated and competent Buddhist nuns who returned to their home temples and applied what they had learned to benefit society.

In addition to these three illustrious nuns, Buddhism in Taiwan has benefitted from the efforts of innumerable socially engaged nuns who are less well-known, but whose activities are regarded as equally significant in their own localities. In virtually every town in Taiwan, nuns run kindergartens, organize youth camps, distribute provisions to the poor, care for the disabled, and operate daycare facilities for the elderly. As rapid urbanization has disrupted traditional family structures based on filial piety, creating gaps in the social fabric, Buddhist nuns have stepped in to mend them. In addition to overt social assistance, nuns at hundreds of temples in Taiwan organize education programs to instill values in children and chanting events to help

elders spend their time meaningfully. Contributions to the social welfare by very traditional nuns who provide healing, guidance, and rituals for believers are also deserving of recognition. An example is Bhiksuni Fuhui 福慧 (1930-1985) of Da Xingshan Temple in Miaoli County, who is credited for the miraculous healing power of the water she blesses. (8) Another example is Bhiksuni Dijiao 地皎 (1954-) of Xiangde Temple, who is famed for her ability to foresee natural disasters and conduct rituals to Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva to mitigate the sufferings they cause (Li 2006, p.194). Nor are the compassionate activities of nuns limited to human beings; many nuns' communities protect and care for stray animals. It may also be argued that nuns contribute to society by promoting vegetarianism, which saves the lives of countless animals annually and brings health benefits to human beings as well.

From these synopses of luminary and less visible activist Buddhist nuns in Taiwan, I would like to draw a few preliminary conclusions. First and most obvious is that the activism of Buddhist nuns takes many different forms in Taiwan. From the confrontational methods of Chao Hwei to the artistic and contemplative methods of Shig Hiu Wan, Buddhist nuns have expressed their social concerns and acted on them in a variety of creative and innovative ways. Second, Buddhist nuns have done groundbreaking work in the field of social activism, both in Taiwan and internationally. The fact that Buddhist nuns in Taiwan have started hospitals and universities sends a strong message that women are capable and dedicated to the public good. Third, the social activism of Buddhist nuns is often unrecognized, ignored, or belittled. Most nuns in Taiwan do not speak foreign languages, which limits their engagement with the international community and is one reason the work of many of them is little known outside Taiwan. Most nuns work quietly and conscientiously without seeking attention to themselves. Fourth, despite their

humble profile, the social engagement of Buddhist nuns in Taiwan is fully supported by a laity that recognizes, values, and supports their compassionate social engagement.

From a Buddhist perspective, social service activities are certainly meritorious, in that they aim to alleviate the sufferings of living beings. The relative merits of contemplative practices and socially engaged practices are open to debate, however. For Buddhists, social transformation ultimately depends on individual transformation, which entails mental cultivation to eliminate the mental defilements—primarily greed, hatred, and ignorance—that are the root causes of personal and social problems. From a secular perspective, social activism ultimately means transforming the institutional structures that perpetuate poverty, oppression, violence, crime, and so forth. Both Buddhist and secular perspectives acknowledge that, while social services are very helpful, often life-saving, they are generally limited in scope and can only provide temporary solutions to human problems. An ideal solution would be to incorporate both these approaches.

In analyzing the social engagement of Taiwan's nuns, the distinction between social welfare services and activism in a broader, socially transformational sense is germane. Temporary measures to relieve suffering are integral to the Buddhist principles of loving kindness and compassion, but the definition of Buddhist social activism may also be broadened to include redressing the political, economic, and social inequities that make these measures necessary in the first place. A constructive theory of Buddhist social activism would therefore recognize that the psychological or existential causes of suffering can be addressed through mental cultivation, whereas the political, economic, and sociological causes of suffering that can be addressed

through structural change. The issue remains controversial in Taiwan, however. Especially among Pure Land practitioners, chanting the name of Amitabha Buddha and other contemplative practices are valued more highly than social welfare activities. This sentiment is echoed by Sri Lankan nuns who, when pressured to volunteer in hospitals and kindergartens, say that they did not become nuns to do social work, but to achieve liberation.

Methodologically, it is also critical to examine the notion of social engagement among nuns in Taiwan from a feminist perspective. The question of whether Asian Buddhist women feel a special obligation to create merit because of some perceived moral inferiority must be examined. The idea that being reborn as a woman is the result of unwholesome actions in the past can lead to the assumption that women are a lower rebirth. This idea has led many women, especially in Taiwan, to regard a male body as preferable to a female body. (9) This idea may then be used to justify women's subordination and give rise to gender injustice and social problems such as sex trafficking.(10)

Taiwanese Nuns in North America

Turning now to Taiwanese nuns living and working in North America, we see quite a different picture. Especially since the 1970s, numerous Chinese Buddhist temples have been established in the United States and Canada, the majority led by nuns from Taiwan. Following closely on the heels of the Taiwanese diaspora to North America, nuns have been pioneers in establishing Buddhist temples from San Diego to Montreal. These temples replicate the nature and organizational structure of their home temple in Taiwan, but with significant differences, due to the different needs of the North American communities that they serve. In my observation, one major difference is the

muted, less visible nature of social activism among Taiwanese nuns in the North American context. It is important to explore some of the factors that contribute to this phenomenon.

The efforts of Buddhist nuns in North America are dedicated primarily to serving the needs of an immigrant population. For the most part, members of the Taiwanese immigrant community are upwardly mobile professional business people, but almost all face a period of socio-economic adjustment when they arrive in North America. Their adjustment to life in a new land is generally cushioned by association with others who speak Taiwanese and who have gone through a similar process of acculturation, familiarizing themselves with new faces, customs, government regulations, systems of property management, and commerce. Many members of the immigrant community are struggling with issues of cultural adaptation, economic dislocation, and language differences, including communication gaps with the majority population, different segments of the Chinese immigrant population, and between generations. For many immigrants, the nearest Chinese Buddhist temple is a reliable source of refuge, information, and contacts. Even if all the congregants are not Taiwanese, new immigrants generally feel a welcome sense of security and community at the temple.

The nuns who run the temples are part of an extensive network of congenial people who visit the temple. Even if people are not religious, they often turn to the nuns in times of need, especially when there is a death in the family or any emergency. The nuns support them with counseling, solace, funerals, and other religious services upon request. They organize regular and periodic Dharma events and receive visitors to the temple throughout the year. The nuns not only provide religious services and counseling, but are also adept at

directing newcomers to useful resources. Their compassion and expertise are usually reciprocated in some form, whether material or otherwise, sometimes quite generously. In addition to their personal spiritual practices, the nuns discharge their ritual responsibilities at the temple, shop, cook for themselves and their lay followers, organize Dharma events, and perform innumerable mundane tasks. Through their selfless service, the nuns gain the respect of the community and a network of trusted devotees and affiliates.

In some ways, the lives of these nuns represent a reversal of the traditional pattern; instead of the lay followers serving the needs of the Sangha, the nuns often serve the needs of the laity. They depend upon the lay community for support to keep the temple running, which is not as easy to manage as in Taiwan, due to the additional demands of living in a foreign country. Members of the lay community in North America usually do not have as much disposable income as they did in Taiwan. Even those who were well-to-do in Taiwan and entered the country on an economic incentive scheme must struggle to get their businesses established in an unfamiliar environment. Consequently, nuns generally do not have the large, loyal, and generous followings that they have in Taiwan, since people are very busy and do not have as much time and opportunity to participate in activities at the temple. Their social service responsibilities have increased, but their activities remain within the limited sphere of their temple community.

Many factors combine to limit the social activism of nuns in the diaspora. First, and perhaps primary, is the character of the immigrant community they serve. The nuns tend to the traditional religious and cultural needs of Chinese-speaking immigrants and are dependent upon them for economic support. The services they provide, especially funerals and other merit-making

activities, are essential to the Taiwanese immigrant population, such that the nuns' efforts are focused almost entirely within their temple communities. Taiwanese Buddhists are well-known for their generous support of temples and monastics; however, because many in North America are working to establish their businesses, they may have less time and fewer financial resources to donate. In addition, the majority of Taiwanese nuns living in the United States and Canada are not fully conversant in English. As a consequence of linguistic and cultural affinities, the temple serves as a social center, a spiritual refuge, and an invaluable source of cultural identity in what can otherwise be an intimidating and alienating foreign environment. However, although the nuns are central to the social and spiritual life of overseas communities, they are simultaneously marginal to the broader society by virtue of their limited English competency and economic dependency. Also, the number of nuns in North America is far smaller than in Taiwan and their temples are located further apart, which limits their interactions with each other and keeps them close to the temples they serve. The activism of most Taiwanese nuns in North America is therefore typically subdued and limited to their own congregations and networks. Most do not venture far beyond the overseas Chinese community or take on large-scale social service projects, much less endeavor to transform social or institutional structures.

Further, some nuns working with the Taiwanese immigrant community in North America belong to organizations headed by monks and have limited decision-making power. Leading monks in these organizations often have the power to assign nuns to specific temples and responsibilities, in contrast to the autonomy and independence of many activist nuns in Taiwan. Some organizations, such as Foguangshan (佛光山), regularly rotate nuns among their affiliated temples

in Taiwan and North America. This system of rotation makes it difficult for the nuns to plan and implement ongoing social service activities. The fact that they may be reassigned after a year or two diminishes the incentive to begin projects that they may not be able to complete. Individual initiatives by nuns may even be discouraged, whereas diligent participation in activities initiated, sanctioned, and directed by the home temple in Taiwan are rewarded. Nuns in these organizations are generally dissuaded from cultivating their own cohort of supporters, which may limit the funds they have for initiating social service projects. Monks who belong to these groups are also expected to live up to the organization's expectations, but seem to enjoy greater freedom and mobility. They are frequently invited to give talks at temples around the world and receive substantial donations, unlike most nuns of their organizations.

Many nuns who are not affiliated with large organizations may travel freely back and forth from Taiwan to North America. Some nuns maintain temples in both Taiwan and North America, spending half the year in each place. Groups of supporters from Taiwan regularly visit temples in North America for special events, while immigrants also go back to Taiwan to participate in activities organized by Taiwan-based Buddhist organizations that reach out to the Taiwanese diaspora. This modern-day pilgrimage to and fro between Taiwanese and North American Buddhist temples enables nuns to exchange information and develop solidarity with other Buddhist women. In some ways, the nuns become more sophisticated due to this transnational exchange; in other ways, moving between familiar Taiwanese enclaves, they may confine their activities to relatively prosperous Taiwan Buddhist communities and make little progress in overcoming the discomfort and fears they feel in American society. Their innocence can easily be taken advantage of, as was

seen in the Hsi Lai/Al Gore fiasco (Madsen 2007, pp.61-62). Overall, while intercontinental travel expands the nuns' cultural horizons and lends a transnational character to Buddhism, it may curtail incentives for social activism. Continuity is crucial for the long-term success of social welfare programs; whether in food distribution, education programs, or prison outreach, interruptions can lead to a loss of momentum or even a loss of faith in the populations they attempt to serve.

All the factors that weigh against nuns' social activism can be reversed if language abilities improve, financial resources increase, greater decision-making power is assumed, and travel is reduced. As nuns improve their spoken English, for example, they may be invited to speak at college campuses or to participate in interfaith dialogue, community vigils, and similar gatherings. Community exchanges on topics of social concern, such as care for the dying, domestic violence, women's roles in religion, and so forth, may encourage nuns to think more deeply about contemporary issues and to share their own insights and experience with others. In a cultural milieu that may see Buddhism and immigrants as alien and threatening, activities may be organized that will yield both social benefits and greater social acceptance, such as English classes, Dharma classes in English, cultural exhibits, choral performances, and the like. Over time, as immigrants acculturate and accumulate capital, they are likely to increase their financial support for the temples and their social welfare programs. As nuns improve their language abilities and financial resources, they are likely to become more confident about accepting the risks and responsibilities that come with greater decision making and thereby become empowered to expand their social welfare activities. As their activities expand, they may cut back on international travel to focus on greater social engagement locally or expand their activism to

new locations.

Philosophical Qualms and Future Prospects

The high value that Buddhists place on loving kindness, compassion, and generosity augers well for Buddhist charitable activities, except that, in traditional Buddhist cultures, many place a relatively higher value on contemplative practices than on active social engagement. Human life is regarded as the best opportunity for mental cultivation, and since life is short, great significance is given to the efficacy of meditation, rituals, and other methods of mental cultivation that directly lead to the ultimate goal of enlightenment. Since social welfare activities can be carried out by laypeople, contemplative practices that require quietude and few distractions have traditionally been regarded as the proper sphere of activity for ordained monastics. Transforming one's own heart is typically valued more highly than working to transform institutions or society at large.

The movement toward greater Buddhist social activism that occurred in the latter half of the twentieth century and especially the movement toward greater involvement by Sangha members in the social and political spheres have not been without controversy in Buddhist societies. Many believe that involvement in social welfare activities helps proliferate distractions and discursive thinking, while contemplative practices help reduce it. Many feel that social service leads to greater involvement with worldly affairs such as fundraising, event management, and public relations, whereas the goal of Dharma practice is to renounce worldly affairs. For these reasons, it is sometimes claimed that the two spheres of activity—pure Dharma practice and social engagement—are contradictory in nature. By contrast, many Buddhist nuns, especially in Taiwan, feel that efforts to correct social injustices and

relieve the sufferings of the world are fully within their mandate or even entailed in their commitment to benefit living beings. According to this view, for Buddhists to speak of loving kindness, compassion, and the liberation of all beings from suffering without putting these lofty ideals into actual practice is hypocritical. Bolstering this view is the belief that a widespread decline of ethical values in society today makes intensive contemplative practice difficult or impossible. Under the circumstances, all avenues to alleviate the sufferings of our troubled world are seen as legitimate and valuable. Both in Taiwan and North America, intensive contemplation may be seen as a relic of the past and impractical in the modern world. Buddhist social activism may further be stimulated by the admirable social welfare activities of Christians and Jews.

At present, most Taiwanese Buddhist communities focus chiefly on merit making activities. Many congregants contend that creating merit for future lives is more valuable than social welfare activities that alleviate suffering temporarily. Even when Buddhists engage in activities for the social good, they often do so with the aim of increasing their store of merit. This definition of practice as a means to an end, whether it be a better rebirth or the ultimate achievement of enlightenment, is clearly inadequate in a world of widespread disparities and horrendous suffering. These narrow definitions of Dharma practice create dichotomies among contemplative nuns, socially engaged nuns, and politically active nuns, producing underlying tensions in the Buddhist community in Taiwan. For example, Taiwanese Buddhists may distinguish and evaluate differently those who focus exclusively on reciting the name of Amitabha, those who emphasize Buddhist studies, and those work in Buddhist kindergartens. A closer look at monasteries in Taiwan reveals that a majority of Buddhist nuns in Taiwan practice a

combination of all three practices, yet preconceptions persist that a contemplative life cannot be combined with a worldly one. As the Buddhist cultural and philosophical heritage is adapted to the needs of future generations in Taiwan and North America, the sharp demarcations among these practice preferences are likely to fade. All may be valued as legitimate practices, practiced either exclusively or in combination, in accordance with each monastic's inclinations and abilities.

Two major blind spots in Buddhist social awareness remain, both in Taiwan and in the Buddhist diaspora in North America. First, many Buddhists have not yet sufficiently recognized, let alone challenged, the structural inequalities that underlie much of the world's suffering. Buddhist voices in development efforts to address urgent issues like poverty, political oppression, and economic injustice are still faint. Second, most Buddhist communities have yet to challenge the oppression and exploitation of women. The sex trade continues unabated throughout Asia, preying on Buddhist women and children in particular, yet Buddhists have done little or nothing to stem it. These two oversights are closely interrelated, since the structures that give rise to and perpetuate social injustices are unbalanced in favor of the wealthy and powerful, perpetuating the disadvantaged and disenfranchised status of women. Although social injustices are not unique to Buddhist societies and women in Buddhist societies arguably have more freedom and opportunity to challenge these injustices, thus far few Buddhists have done so.

But in some respects, Taiwanese Buddhist society can be seen as a model. Equal opportunities for full ordination and Buddhist education have helped create and sustain an autonomous Bhiksuni Sangha that has earned the respect and support of the lay community for a broad

range of activities. Illustrious nuns such as Bhiksuni Cheng Yen, Bhiksuni Chao Hwei, and Bhiksuni Shig Hiu Wan have demonstrated that Buddhist nuns in Taiwan have the potential to activate millions of dedicated lay practitioners to work for the social good.

Many factors combine to explain the growth of social activism by nuns in Taiwan since the 1950s when nuns lent their support to struggling refugee monks newly arrived from mainland China. As nuns and the general populace became more educated, constraints on temples and free speech were liberalized and finally lifted, and the economy flourished, the strength of nuns grew exponentially into a global dynamic force. The results have been dramatic, with thousands of nuns selflessly and continuously dedicating their energies to social transformation. The nuns' conscientious efforts have resulted in widespread community support for nuns and their broad-ranging and successful social service projects.

In North America, nuns from Taiwan have the same energy and dedication, but are in a time of transition. The immigrant community that is their basis of support is still in the process of cultural adaptation and is sifting through what Buddhism means to them as they acculturate to new surroundings. Issues of survival and acculturation necessitate a certain cultural introversion. Because they are not yet fully integrated in the fabric of American life, new arrivals from Taiwan are dependent on and grateful to their immigrant communities. In the process, many are also devoted to and dependent on the Buddhist temples that welcome them, comfort them, and perform rituals that give meaning to their lives. In this way, the Buddhist temple community is an important stabilizing force. The nuns who run these temples are very active in attending to the needs of Taiwan immigrants, so active, in fact, that they have little time to reach out beyond their own communities.

Their lack of English fluency is the primary factor that limits both their engagement with the broader community and also their ability to reach out to their congregants' children, many of whom are more comfortable speaking English than Chinese. These limitations do not diminish the value or commitment of the nuns; they simply reflect the fact that the primary focus of the nuns' activities is their own community, since that community especially needs their strength, creativity, and compassion to survive and express themselves effectively in a new cultural environment. Even if their efforts are unacknowledged and unappreciated beyond their own communities, currently Taiwanese nuns in North America are fully engaged in the project of thinking globally and acting locally, moment to moment. With their exemplary activist legacy, these nuns have enormous potential to expand their sphere of action and become vital contributors to social transformation in the larger community.

Notes

1. The evolution of Buddhist social involvement and political identity in Taiwan have been the topic of at least two book-length studies. See Laliberté, 2004; and Madsen, 2007. Also see Elise Anne DeVido's 2006 article, in which she traces the roots of Taiwan's Buddhist social activism (DeVido 2006, pp.261-281).
2. For a useful introduction to Buddhist ethics and their social application, see Peter Harvey (2000, pp.1-59).
3. Cheng cites a 1919 Japanese survey that records seventy-seven Buddhist temples and 172 *zhaitang*, 156 Buddhist monastics, and 8663 members of *zhaijiao* (see Cheng, 2003).
4. Although Buddhist ordinations were held in Taiwan as early as 1919, ordinations held during the Japanese occupation were not always regarded as legitimate, because Japanese custom allowed Buddhist priests to marry.
5. Yu-chen Li recounts the background of this incident (Li 2008, pp.189-99). Another perspective on the eight

gurudharmas is found in Bhikkhuni Kusuma's article (2000, pp.5-12).

6. For more about Venerable Cheng Yen's work, please see Charles Jones' article in this special issue.

7. See Huang and Weller, 1998: 379-98. In "An Audience with Master Cheng Yen," Elise Anne DeVido critiques this gendered assignment of values: "Ciji promotes and reproduces an essentialist notion of feminine nature, of female as synonymous with Mother, as a self-sacrificing, infinitely forbearing, compassionate nurturer of others: the uncontested norm in Taiwan society." While these normative gender roles are no longer uncontested in Taiwan, the stereotypical image of woman as compassionate nurturer persists (DeVido 1999-2000, pp.79-89).

8. On an average day, Da Xing Shan Temple hosts fifty busloads of pilgrims who seek the healing benefits of the water that Bhiksuni Fuhui has blessed. As many as 500 busloads of pilgrims arrive when special annual festivals are held (See Li 2004, pp.98-99).

9. For an analysis of gender identification in the lives of Taiwanese Buddhist nuns, see Crane, 2007.

10. The question of women and the accumulation of merit are taken up in Falk, 2008. The roots of gender injustice in Buddhist societies are examined in two pieces by Lucinda Joy Peace (1999, pp.215-226; 2000: 50-74). For various perspectives on women's roles in Buddhist societies, see Karma Lekshe Tsomo (2004).

Cited Sources

Bhikkhuni Kusuma, 2000. "Inaccuracies in Buddhist Women's History." In Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Ed.), *Innovative Buddhist Women: Swimming Against the Stream*. Surrey, England: Curzon Press, pp.5-12.

Cheng Wei-Yi, 2003. "[Luminary Buddhist Nuns In Contemporary Taiwan: A Quiet Feminist Movement](http://www.Buddhistethics.Org/10/Cheng031.Html)" *Journal Of Buddhist Ethics* 10 [internet]. Available at <http://www.Buddhistethics.Org/10/Cheng031.Html> [Accessed August 20, 2009].

Crane, Hillary, 2006. "Becoming a Nun, Becoming a Man:

Taiwanese Buddhist Nuns' Gender Transformation." *Religion* 37. pp.117-132.

Devido, Elise Anne, 1999-2000. "An Audience with Master Cheng Yen." *Taipei Ricci Bulletin* 3, pp.79-89.

----- 2006. "Mapping the Trajectories of Engaged Buddhism from China to Taiwan and Vietnam." In Karma Lekshe Tsomo, ed. *Out Of the Shadows: Socially Engaged Buddhist Women*. Delhi: Sri Satguru, pp.261-281.

Falk, Monica Lindberg, 2008. *Buddhist Female Ascetics and Gendered Orders in Thailand*. Seattle: University Of Washington Press.

Huang, C. Julia, and Robert P. Weller, 1998. "Merit And Mothering: Women and Social Welfare in Taiwanese Buddhism." *Journal Of Asian Studies* 57 (2), pp.379-96.

Laliberté, André, 2004. *The Politics of Buddhist Organizations in Taiwan, 1989-2003: Safeguarding the Faith, Building a Pure Land, Helping the Poor*. London: Routledge.

Li Yuchen, 2004. "The Religiosity and Leadership of Taiwanese Bhiksuni Leaders: Guanyin and Bhiksunis Fuhui and Zhengyan." In Karma Lekshe Tsomo, ed. *Bridging Worlds: Buddhist Women's Voices across Generations*. Taipei: Yuan Chuan Press, pp.97-106.

----- 2006. "Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha and Buddhist Nuns in Contemporary Taiwan." In Karma Lekshe Tsomo ed. *Out Of the Shadows: Socially Engaged Buddhist Women*. Delhi: Sri Satguru, pp.190-196.

----- 2008. "The Gender Issue in Contemporary Taiwan Buddhism." In Karma Lekshe Tsomo, ed. *Buddhist Women in A Global Multicultural Community*. Kuala Lumpur: Sukhi Hotu Press, pp.189-199.

Madsen, Richard, 2007. *Democracy's Dharma: Religious*

Renaissance and Political Development in Taiwan.
Berkeley: University Of California Press.

Peace, Lucinda Joy Peace, 1999. "Buddhism and Human Rights in the Thai Sex Trade." In Courtney W. Howland, ed. *Religious Fundamentalisms and the Human Rights of Women*. New York: St. Martin's Press, pp.215-226.

_____ 2002. "[Social Responsibility, Sex Change, And Salvation: Gender Justice in the Lotus Sutra.](#)" *Philosophy East and West*, 52 (1), pp.50-74.

Karma Lekshe Tsomo, ed., 2004. *Buddhist Women and Social Justice: Ideals, Challenges, and Achievements*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.