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# Woman Changing Buddhism: Feminist Perspectives

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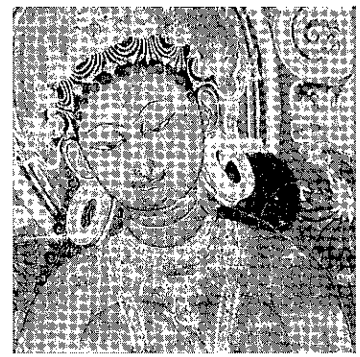
# WOMEN PRACTICING BUDDHISM

AMERICAN EXPERIENCES



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*Since 1987 Buddhist women from around the world have begun to unite on a grassroots level and assume leadership in working for the welfare of human society. Now, two decades after the founding of Sakyadhita ("Daughters of the Buddha"): International Association of Buddhist Women, the Buddhist women's movement is recognized as a highly dynamic forum representing some 300 million women worldwide. This movement, emerging from the margins into the international spotlight as a force for social change, is an example of how women can unite their resources and talents, work in harmony, and make significant contributions to global understanding. This innovative movement, while focusing on Buddhist women's issues and perspectives, embraces all living beings. It is innovative in incorporating scholarly perspectives, spiritual practice, grassroots activism, and cultural performance as equally valid dimensions of women's experience. Creating a forum that unites women from such a rich variety of backgrounds, disciplines, and perspectives with respect and appreciation is an expression of women's enormous potential for global transformation.*

—Karma Lekshe Tsomo 2005

This book is dedicated to Karma Lekshe Tsomo in gratitude for her work on behalf of the Buddhist women of the world.

# Women Changing Buddhism: Feminist Perspectives

*A conversation with bell hooks, Sharon Suh, and Karma Lekshe Tsomo; moderated by Susanne Mrozik.*

**SUSANNE MROZIK:** *Welcome to our conversation on "Women Changing Buddhism: Feminist Perspectives." My name is Susanne Mrozik. I am a member of the Religion Department at Mount Holyoke College, where I teach courses on Buddhism and comparative religion. I am delighted to introduce our panelists. Well-known visionary feminist thinker, cultural critic, and writer bell hooks is Distinguished Professor in Residence at Berea College in Kentucky. Sharon Suh is the director of Asian Studies and an associate professor of world religions at Seattle University. She writes and lectures on Korean American Buddhist experiences. Karma Lekshe Tsomo is an associate professor at San Diego University, the president of Sakyadhita: International Association of Buddhist Women, and the director of Jamyang Foundation, an initiative to provide educational opportunities for women in the Indian Himalayas.*

*This panel explores the diverse contributions that diverse kinds of women are making to Buddhism in the U.S. today. Yesterday Karma Lekshe Tsomo observed that it is "impossible to generalize about Buddhist women's experiences" because there is so much diversity. Before we begin I would like to* *remind all of us that no one person on this panel, as no one person in this room, speaks for all Buddhist women. Our discussion of the many ways in which women are changing Buddhism in the U.S. reflects the particular perspectives and experiences of those of us sitting on this panel. I will leave time at the end of our session for those of you in the audience to share your own experiences in the form of comments and/or questions.*

*Let me begin by asking each of you the central question of this panel: How are women changing Buddhism in the U.S. today?*

**Karma Lekshe Tsomo:** It is really challenging to look at all the different ways that women are going about this. Right away, we can note that women are very visible participants in the life of many Buddhist centers and temples in the United States, though their roles are often largely supportive to men. Another way that women are changing Buddhism is in the translation and interpretation of texts for their communities. Two processes are involved here. First, we need to translate Buddhist texts into English—a process similar to one that took several hundred years in China and Tibet. Second, we need to translate Buddhist ideas and practices in ways that are meaningful in North American culture. Whenever Buddhism is introduced to a new land, it is read through the lens of that culture. For example, in the United States we have a long history of philosophy and psychology, so we are reading Buddhism through the lens of Descartes, Freud, Jung, Einstein, and so on. My concern is that we read Buddhism authentically and not begin adapting too quickly before we have sufficiently understood the original texts.

Another way that women are changing Buddhism is by taking leadership roles. Here I would like to focus on an example from the Vietnamese community. The Venerable Dam Luu arrived in the United States as a refugee from Vietnam with just twenty-six dollars in her pocket. After spending a year in a refugee camp in the Philippines, she landed in San Jose, where she and two monks pledged they would help each other. She collected garbage on the streets of San Jose and gradually built the magnificent Duc Vien Temple, where she began to educate a generation of young nuns as well as the Vietnamese lay community. Now, on any given Sunday morning, three hundred members of her congregation gather together to study and practice the dharma. When I gave a talk there a few years ago, I was really impressed by how well educated this community of practitioners is about Buddhism. We were able to discuss Madhyamaka philosophy on a very deep level because they are real practitioners who study the teachings as well as meditate on them. So, here is an example of a woman who came to the United States without knowing English, with no resources, and yet she was able to make this huge sea change in American Buddhism. Her work is little known outside the Vietnamese community, but I think that she is a very inspiring example.



**Sharon Suh:** Let me first simply say thank you for inviting me to this panel. It is not everyday that one gets to sit with bell hooks *and* Karma Lekshe Tsomo, so I wanted to just acknowledge that I am really thrilled to be here. In order to answer your question, I need to raise another question: What do we mean by American Buddhism? There tends to be an assumption that American Buddhism is separate from Asian American Buddhisms or ethnic Buddhisms. I would argue that we need to view Asian American Buddhisms as a distinct but nevertheless integral component of Buddhism in America. There has been a long history of invisibility vis-à-vis Asian American Buddhisms. Some of this invisibility is imposed internally since many immigrants do not wish to venture outside of their own ethnic group. There are also many external forces such as language barriers, cultural barriers, and economic barriers that make it difficult for Asian American Buddhist groups to converse and interact with dominant white European American sanghas.

When looking at Korean American Buddhism, we could argue that women are changing Buddhism through increased lay participation. I do not think increased religious activity is a phenomenon unique to Korean immigrants. Many immigrants to this country have claimed that they are more religious in the United States than they were in their home countries. Korean American Buddhists are no exception to this general trend. So we see an increased lay participation on the part of Korean American Buddhist women. Moreover, we see that these laywomen are taking on more leadership roles in their communities. In this capacity they are called *pogyo sa*, or disseminators of the dharma. This title grants them the authority as leaders of the community to transmit their Buddhist tradition to the younger generations. Laywomen thus play a very important role in Korean American Buddhist communities.

Additionally, there are now a number of new Buddhist colleges associated with Korean American temples, which, in turn, are affiliated with temples in Korea, especially in Seoul. On Friday nights women attend classes in Buddhist studies from eight to nine o'clock. This is after working six or seven days a week. These women are working toward a certificate in Buddhist Studies. I would argue that one of the primary motives behind this practice is the desire to rework or edify the self. You need to be able to have a self before you can actually be selfless. The women that I have met are most concerned with the creation of a sense of subjectivity and the development of self-esteem. When you come to the United States, your sense of identity is dramatically altered. Where do you go when things fall apart? For many women, they go to temple to find a community of fellow ethnic Buddhist practitioners and to learn how to cultivate a positive sense of worth and value. For example, a woman estranged from her husband might turn to Buddhist practice in order to learn how to interpret her difficult marital relationship in light of the Buddhist doctrine of karma. Because of my interactions with these laywomen, I have learned that the value of Buddhism comes from its ability to help people come to terms with everyday struggle. These women are less concerned with becoming selfless than they are with reworking the self. If we take the concerns of Korean American Buddhist women seriously, we see American Buddhism in a new way.



**bell hooks:** I think first about how Buddhism changes women—that comes first. I shared last night my own confusion and how Buddhism has helped me to center. It is after Buddhism has changed women that women Buddhists are able to have a powerful impact in the United States. I recall Thich Nhat Hanh speaking about the significance of the presence of the teacher. I have been enormously affected by the presence of Buddhist women—the centeredness, the calm, and the strength they convey. Many of us have felt that here at this conference. Far from taking one into subordination, the Buddhism chosen by many women brings a centeredness, strength, and power of being.

**SM:** *The panel is subtitled "Feminist Perspectives." I added that subtitle knowing that it might be controversial because certainly not all Buddhist women—and perhaps not even the majority of Buddhist women—define themselves as feminists. Therefore before we can discuss how feminism is influencing Buddhism in America, we need to begin with a more basic question: Who identifies as a feminist? Do the women you know in the communities in which you participate define themselves as feminist? Why or why not?*

**SS:** In many ways I am frustrated by what I still perceive to be a very monolithic sense of feminism in America. Last night bell hooks spoke about moving beyond dichotomies and dualisms. I do not think we do that when discussing feminism in the West. I find this frustrating because when I teach "Buddhism and Gender" courses to my students, they have such a tendency to polarize East and West. They often assume that the East is so heavily influenced by Confucian values that women are, by necessity, oppressed. I always urge my students to try to reconceptualize what they mean by power, resistance, and a positive sense of self. If you were to ask the women that I know in Korean American communities whether they consider themselves feminist, they might respond by saying, "Why are you asking me this question?" On the other hand, if you were to sit and really discuss the issue with them, it would be apparent that there are many ways in which women conceive of their practices as being directly aimed at cultivating a positive sense of self.

We need to open up our definition of feminism to include the experiences of people that have ordinarily been considered "other." I do not think that many Korean American women would explicitly call themselves feminists. But they have the same experience of limitations and the same desire for equality as those who call themselves feminists. There is more than one way of being powerful. There is more than one way of resisting power hierarchies. There is more than one way of cultivating a positive sense of self. I have observed that women often tacitly resist power from behind the scenes instead of challenging it directly. My students want to see women fundamentally altering social and institutional structures. That level of change is not helpful for many immigrant women. If you come to the United States and you do not speak English, you do not have a lot of social resources outside of your own community. It does not make sense to try to completely alter certain patriarchal structures. It is more important for these women to learn how to resist power and create change in ways that are meaningful to them without disrupting social structures like family or institutional structures like the temple.

The Korean American Buddhist women that I know don't meditate. Sometimes meditation is a luxury. When you work 24/7 and you have a family, it is very hard to find the time to meditate. Therefore devotional practices such as chanting and prayer become more important. Women go to temple to perform these devotional practices. Coming together in community for devotional practices gives women the support to tacitly resist power from behind the scenes. One of the most interesting things that I experienced was sitting with women in the Diamond Sūtra Recitation Group. This is a completely lay-centered group of women who get together to chant Buddhist scripture. The chanting helps to cleanse and purify the mind. The chanting group, however, also creates a space for resistance by creating an intimate setting in which women feel comfortable, for instance, to poke fun at their husbands. I remember one night sitting and watching women make tortillas to feed everybody after the service. As they rolled their tortillas, one of the laywomen said, "You know the Buddha teaches us that we should look at all beings as if they are the Buddha. Okay, so, incorporating teachings of buddha nature. But, when I look at my husband, I can't imagine that the Buddha would look as bad as that." That was a very funny moment, but it was also a very telling moment. It shows us that our assumptions about the compliance or submissiveness of these women are wrong. These women are part of a community. It is a space that is intimate. It is a space where women can air out grievances and really make certain kinds of changes in the moment. We need to look at these kinds of communities if we are interested in understanding power, resistance, and the cultivation of a positive sense of self.



**bh:** I prefer the word "agency" to power, precisely because power is such a loaded term. Even in situations of powerlessness, people find ways to assert agency, especially women. All over the world, women are finding ways to assert agency in circumstances that may seem to us to be ones in which they have no power whatsoever. In the United States, Black women in particular often seem to be engaged with critical consciousness and feminist practice prior to coming to Buddhism. Many of us are coming, as I was, from fundamentalist Christianity. The very agency that allows you to move from fundamentalist Christianity to even thinking about Buddhism is in a sense a feminist practice. Although many of you laugh with me when I tell you that my mother says, "Buddhism is satanic," she really believes that. She believes that the devil and the Buddha are one. I teach at a Christian college. I live in a fundamentalist Christian environment, and in that environment, very unlike New York City where I also live sometimes, Buddhism is not cool or chic. It can be dangerous to talk about Buddhism in certain contexts. How do we have a working Buddhism, a lived Buddhism, in a context that is actually very, very hostile to the presence of Buddhism? Almost all the women I know, but particularly the Black women I know in fundamentalist contexts, come to Buddhism in part out of a courageous feminism. This feminism empowers us to stand with a tradition that is perceived to be so far away from what many think of as the more organic or fundamental "Black" experience.

**KLT:** Someone defined feminism as the radical view that women are fully human. If that is the case, then I think all Buddhist women in North America would support that. Many of them do not use the word "feminism," especially in the Asian and Asian American Buddhist communities. Even in the non-Asian Buddhist communities, I do not find very many women defining themselves as feminist, although I believe most of them are. This raises a number of issues. It is certainly true that there are certain areas of responsibility where women exert their agency, and one of them is the kitchen. The kitchen in most Buddhist temples of all types is completely a woman's realm. Except for some Zen centers, in this realm women are in complete control. In Theravāda communities, the monks are completely dependent on women for life, for food. And the monks respect women's competence and appreciate their support. Tibetan monks can cook, but most monks of other traditions cannot, so they are completely dependent on, and grateful to, the women who support them. The agency that women exert in this role is very, very important and not to be taken lightly.

Another example is women's financial competence. In the Theravāda tradition, the nuns are not fully ordained and are therefore subordinate to monks, but the flipside is that they can handle money. Ironically, in Theravāda temples nuns often handle donations on behalf of the monks, who are not allowed to touch money. In the Theravāda custom, the laypeople pin dollar bills to a money tree and offer them to the monks. Out of hundreds of people, the nuns are trusted by the whole community to handle this huge bag full of cash, which is very empowering. Outsiders might understand this very differently, but in these small ways, women are empowered and deserve respect for the important roles they play in the smooth functioning of the temples.

North American Buddhism is generally very lay oriented, which is a new direction for Buddhism. Except in Japan, the ideal has always



been to have a class of celibate religious specialists who dedicate their full time and energy to Buddhist learning and practice. The only model we have for lay Buddhism is Japan, where most male priests are married, and the temples have become hereditary. The eldest son inherits the temple and is expected to become a priest, even if he is not interested. This model of lay Buddhism needs to be scrutinized very carefully. The introduction of Buddhism to North America is still in process and is constantly changing. Whereas in the beginning the orientation was very much toward lay Buddhism, we can already see a change, with many women becoming interested in ordination.

**SM:** *Do women practice differently from men? If they do, how are these differences evaluated by the women themselves and by their communities?*

**bh:** When I reflect on that question, what comes to mind is that people often practice according to their circumstance. Let's say that as a young innocent female Buddhist, I was actually being preyed upon by patriarchal Buddhist men. That's a very gendered reality for many, many young women entering into communities where there are older male teachers. We do not talk enough about this particular gendered experience. How do you deal with inappropriate behavior when you adore a teacher? I remember the awe I felt when I first met a highly esteemed male teacher. I just felt that the teacher could ask anything of me. You would want to give anything to the teacher because you are so in awe of him. You are so humbled. So how do you cope? Practicing Buddhism has to focus on a balance between the will to subordinate oneself to a teacher and the will to protect oneself as well. This is especially the case for young women when they first enter into a patriarchal context in which there are male teachers. I remember years ago that I feared going to Naropa and meeting Chögyam Trungpa because I had heard many stories of seduction and power. I was really frightened that in such a context I would not be able to resist someone saying, "Come do this, do that." How do you find balance? Now as I look back at myself when I was seventeen, eighteen, and nineteen years old encountering many, many male predators, I see that I was often uncertain about what to do. What was really useful then was being aware that they were predators and, in many cases, staying away from them. In the future, we will have much more awareness of the need to create varied contexts for practice. How can you fully surrender to the presence of a teacher if you fear exploitation? We may need different kinds of settings for people who are younger because the mixed gender situations carry this possibility of sexual predation and threat.

**KLT:** For many women of my generation, part of the shaping of our feminist consciousness was resisting seduction attempts. Even nuns sometimes encounter these problems. Unfortunately some women are unable to resist the temptation to become "special" by entering into a sexual liaison with an idealized figure who heads a temple or dharma center. Male teachers who travel are also vulnerable. Some take advantage of their elevated status to seduce women, whereas some are the objects of seduction attempts. At one dharma center, we had to post guards outside the door of a certain teacher all night to protect him from unwanted advances. The Buddhist precepts are very clear about avoiding sexual misconduct, but unfortunately it is quite common, and it is a two-sided equation.

In this connection, another way that women are changing Buddhism is increased transparency. This is a very delicate issue, because right speech is a central Buddhist principle and Buddhists try to avoid revealing others' faults. At the same time, we need systems or structures to alert people if a teacher is not reliable. For example, if an attractive young woman says she plans to do a retreat with a particular teacher who is notorious, how can we alert her to the problem without being accused of gossip or wrong speech? Of course, some might say that speaking out about dangers like this is right speech. Nurturing women as dharma teachers is obviously one solution to the issue of sexual predation, since happily there have been few, if any, scandals involving women teachers. Increased transparency, new leadership



styles, and new organizational structures are all ways that American women are helping to change Buddhism.

In my experience, North American women practicing dharma are generally very sincere. In addition to intellectual curiosity, they approach Buddhist practice genuinely, from the heart. But because women take a disproportionate share of responsibility for organization, translation, communications, food preparation, public relations, and other support functions in the temples and dharma centers, they often do not have as much time as men to study. This is a pattern that I see repeated again and again. Women deserve support to develop as teachers. A person does not become a qualified Buddhist teacher overnight. In the Tibetan tradition, becoming a teacher requires at least twenty years of intensive study and practice. Sincerity and meditation alone are not enough. We cannot teach what we do not know—we need to think in terms of nurturing a generation of women, so they can evolve as fully qualified teachers.

**SS:** I have found that practice is highly gendered in Asian American Buddhist temples, as I report in *Being Buddhist in a Christian World.* There is no question about it. The space itself is always gendered. Women are on one side. Men are on the other side. But there are always so many more women than men. Often it is said that religion is women's work. I have always wondered why this is the case.

Men and women have very different conceptions of practice. Whereas women perform devotional practices at the temple, men rarely come to the temple. I used to ask women at a particular temple in Koreatown, Los Angeles, where I spent two years working, "Where are the men?" They told me, "The men are off playing golf," or "Men are working a lot so they probably do not have very much time off to come to the temple." I would ask, "Why are you here? What does Buddhism mean to you?" The women told me, "Buddhism is about finding and knowing my mind. Knowing my heart." In many Asian traditions, the idea of separating your heart and your mind does not make sense. The terms themselves are literally mind/heart *(maŭm).* Women perform devotional practices at the temple in order to transform their mind/heart. I also asked the men, "Why are the men not at temple? Why are there so many more women?" The men told me:

> Well, you see, men don't believe in praying for help to solve their problems. Life is difficult and exhausting, so in order to comfort their minds, men will go off on their own to get rid of stress by drinking. But a woman cannot let go of stress like a man because it looks bad in our culture. So women look to religion in order to alleviate stress, and they seek out programs for support. Men are not dependent and so don't rely on others. They don't think about going in front of the Buddha and begging for things. Women can do that because they are more sensitive, where men are more intellectually oriented. If you want to have a lot of men come to temple, then you have to have a program that matches men. A more rational program. Then the men will come.

According to one woman, men were too arrogant and too embarrassed or proud to come to the temple for devotional worship. Another woman told me:

> You see, men like my husband tend to practice religion through the intellect by studying the Buddhist teaching. But I don't think that is enough. Men think that they are too good to bow down to the Buddha or look like they are too attached to the Buddha, especially in the company of women. So a lot of times, men may pray at home, but they certainly won't in front of others. As for me, my personality is best suited for prayer and for focusing on finding one's mind.

Clearly the perceptions of male and female practices are very different. Men tend to view women's devotional practices as being associated primarily with the body: Bowing down with the body. Putting the



hands together in prayer. They associate these kinds of practices with a less authentic version of Buddhism. They associate authentic Buddhism with the intellect. As one man put it, "Buddhism is about awakening to your buddha nature. I do not have to be in temple for that. Anywhere you go is the seat of enlightenment. I can sit in my car while driving to work. I can be in my office. I do not need the temple." For many men the main form of practice is meditation. They regard meditation as an intellectual practice and value it more than prayer, which they regard as too devotional. Interestingly, the image of the ideal Buddhist self espoused by men seems to parallel Confucian models of maleness. The ideal male in a Confucian culture is a male scholar. How do you cultivate a positive sense of self if you are a man who has come to the United States in search of the American dream and that dream eludes you? One way to do that in a Buddhist context is to equate the ideal Buddhist self with the ideal Confucian male: the male scholar, the head of the household, the independent and powerful figure in the family.

Women acknowledge the fact that their practice is different from men's. In fact, they embrace this difference. For them, devotion is a much more powerful means of reworking the self than meditation. For example, devotion helps women to let go of attachment to a sense of having been wronged by their husbands. Devotion helps them to let go of these negative thoughts, feelings, and self-images. In the end, devotion is really about letting go of ego, that is, letting go of limited and limiting conceptions of the self. For these women, letting go of ego is something that can only be done by bowing in front of the Buddha.

**SM:** *Everyone on this panel is a college professor. How do your own experiences as Buddhist practitioners and as members of different Buddhist communities affect your teaching and your pedagogical goals? Does your engagement with Buddhism spill over into the classroom?*

**KLT:** I teach Buddhism and world religions to undergraduates and comparative religious ethics in a graduate program at the University of San Diego, a Catholic institution. In all my classes, I try to incorporate feminist perspectives at every opportunity. I also include special units on religion and gender, Buddhism and gender, and women's human rights. I raise issues of the construction of gender, social justice, and sexual orientation continually. We discuss gendered images of God and human perfection, the story of the Buddha hesitating to ordain women, leadership opportunities for women in religious communities, and similar topics. Every semester, I require the students to visit two places of worship in the community. Whether they visit a temple, mosque, or synagogue, I encourage them to take note of the roles women play and to compare them to those played by men. When students come to discuss possible field research topics, among other suggestions, I recommend a critical analysis of women's roles in religious institutions. These are some of the ways I bring gender issues into the classroom.

**bh:** I think it is important to consider the impact the presence of powerful Buddhist women teachers will have on males devoting themselves to those teachers. To what extent will this reality change the nature of conventional gendered structures within Buddhism? I do not hear men expressing the same kind of adoration for women teachers that they have expressed for powerful male teachers like Chögyam Trungpa or Thich Nhat Hanh. At the same time, I see tremendous movement right now in terms of the emergence of strong women teachers like Pema Chödrön. To what extent will that begin to alter our perceptions of the teacher?

Last night after my talk, I had a big discussion with a group of women about the whole idea of being transgendered. There was a confusion in our conversation because some people speaking didn't make a distinction between nuns and monks. They saw all robed people as monks. We talked about the whole visage of gender identity being wiped away to some extent by the absence of the demarcations that usually signify gender in the Buddhist context. Many of us have had the experience of being on retreat, or being somewhere where you



could not easily tell the gender of the teacher in the same way. I wonder what impact this moving beyond gender will have on Western Buddhism. Here we are talking about the experiential place of learning, which is different from the place of words. It is really exciting to begin to think about a movement beyond gender where women can be powerful teachers and be recognized as women, but the fact that they are women is not the central reason that we go to them. We go to teachers because of the power of their presence and the power of their capacity to transform our understanding, not because they are male or female.

**SS:** In terms of pedagogy, I teach classes at Seattle University, which is a Jesuit university. I begin all of my classes—Buddhism and Gender, Introduction to Buddhism, World Religions, and Asian Religions—with a chapter on the study of non-Western cultures from Martha Nussbaum's *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*. All students at Seattle University are required to take a theology course. They often want to take my classes because they think we will cover traditions that are the exact opposite of what they have experienced. Therefore I try to de-exoticize Buddhism for them. For example, some of my students come into my classes with an assumption that Buddhism is a world-renouncing religion. They imagine Buddhists seated alone on top of a mountain meditating. I teach my students that Buddhist practice is about everyday life; it's not about transcending everyday life. The challenge is to maintain mindfulness in the midst of the chaos of everyday life. I try to get my students to understand that Buddhism is lived experience. That means that it is full of trouble, it is full of suffering, and it is also full of great joy. I think a lot of my students assume that when Buddhists transcend suffering they also transcend happiness. I tell them that most of the monks and nuns I know are actually very happy people. They are not completely depressed. Students get very caught up in the First Noble Truth, which states that "life is suffering." I tell them, "Life is not suffering, but in life there is suffering. So what are you going to do about it?"

I also incorporate a lot of ethnography. When I teach my students, I always say that if you want to know what Buddhists are thinking, you have to ask them. You cannot read about them. You have to ask them. Then the exoticized Buddhist out there becomes the person right here. I also encourage students to move beyond sole reliance on texts. I think we have highlighted texts to the point where we have completely overlooked material culture. Students become so much more knowledgeable when they understand that the active presence of women does not just have to be in a text. For example, we can look at the material contributions *(dāna)* women traditionally make to monastic communities in order to see how vital their role is in the maintenance and transmission of the dharma. I encourage my students to look for women where they are and where they have been historically, not where they have been historically excluded.

**bh:** I'd like to add this to Sharon's point about Buddhism and transcendence. I'm very obsessed this year with equanimity and balance. I believe that what is exciting about Buddhism right now is both its grounding in reality and also its transcending of everyday reality. I want us to acknowledge that we can hold onto both things. There is a very grounded bell hooks engaged in ordinary life, but there is also a bell hooks who spends a tremendous amount of time in contemplation and in silence, which is about transcendence. The practice of moving beyond dualism and either/or models requires that we open up a space where we can sense that we can have both—a practice addressing everyday reality and a focus on transcending this reality. I do not have to choose one over the other. I can embrace the totality of being in which there are moments of groundedness and moments of transcendence.

**SS:** That is a very helpful insight. When I look at Buddhist practice and the circumstances of a lot of women, I see the desire to have these moments of transcendence, but at the same time I see so many difficulties in terms of achieving such moments. Many of us are struggling to find time for mindfulness and contemplation. *I'm* struggling to find



that time. Mindfulness and contemplation are the carrots that are constantly held in front of me. I sometimes think, There is no way I could really be a Buddhist because I do not have the time to meditate. My meditation is the two minutes before I go to bed.

I also believe that we need to spend more time examining the role of devotional practices in overcoming suffering. The women I know are not trying to find time to meditate; their focus is on going to temple to pray. What I want to do in my work is to place devotion on an equal footing with meditation. We do not focus enough attention on devotional practices when talking about Buddhism in America. But these practices are the core practices of many—if not most—Buddhist women in this country.

**bh:** Maybe we have to think differently about those two minutes. Maybe we have to see those two minutes as just as valuable as two hours or ten hours. Those few minutes may be very precious if someone is struggling with overwhelming everyday realities. Those two minutes of meditation or devotion may mean more than when someone is free to give ten hours.

**SM:** *At this point I would like to open up the conversation to our audience.*

**Q:** *This is a question for bell hooks. Could you say more about your experience of practicing Buddhism within fundamentalist Christian communities?*

**bh:** An important text for me has always been *The Raft Is Not the Shore*—the conversation with Thich Nhat Hanh and Daniel Berrigan—because it gave me a framework for talking within Christianity about Buddhism and for drawing from both traditions. If we study the work of Thich Nhat Hanh in the last ten years, we see how he constantly recognizes the power of Christianity within this nation. He shows us that there are parallel teachings within Buddhism and Christianity. It is in these parallel teachings that fundamentalist Christians are more able to hear a Buddhist perspective. Christianity becomes defamiliarized because lots of everyday Christians assume that Christianity is the only religion that has thought of certain things. So simply sharing with people texts, ideas, and stories has been very useful in a fundamentalist Christian context. Often my students really are resistant because of their fundamentalist Christianity to any challenge that they be radically open. As a consequence of being raised in a fundamentalist Christian context, I can set my knowledge of the Bible alongside Buddhist texts and Buddhist ways of thinking. Addressing commonalities is a useful intervention.

**Q:** *Do you find that the nature of the students in your classroom changes how you teach Buddhism?*

**KLT:** I definitely think you have to read your audience. Teaching at a Catholic university, most of my students identify themselves as Catholic or unaffiliated, and a few are evangelical Christians. When I introduce Buddhist meditation, to make them feel more comfortable, I always say, "If meditation conflicts with your religious beliefs, please think of it as stress reduction." Also, as bell said, drawing parallels between the traditions in terms of contemplation, ethics, social issues, and compassion is very, very helpful.

**Q:** *Concerning sexual predation, I wonder if you can comment on how Buddhist monastic regulations* (vinaya) *can fail so completely in some situations and how in other situations they sometimes succeed in protecting people. Perhaps even a little more broadly, could you comment on what the point of monastic discipline is for American women practicing Buddhism?*

**KLT:** There is definitely a place for monastic practice in American Buddhism. In this respect, I would like to stick up for the tradition. In any society, there will always be some people who are naturally inclined to a contemplative life and are not interested in family life, so it is good to have monasticism as an option for that kind of person. The monastery is designed to be a safe space—a place where people do not



have to think about issues of appearance, sexual attraction, and sexual predation. In the Buddhist teachings, certain passages say that when you see a monk, you can feel safe and at ease because you know that he is not going to hit you—or hit on you.

Of course, to be a celibate monastic is not easy, especially in contemporary society. It is always a bit sad when someone leaves the monastic life, but it is not surprising, considering all the temptations of modern society. Monastic life represents an alternative to hedonistic, consumerist culture, but it is not easy, so we need to support monastics by helping them keep their precepts. In all Buddhist traditions, there is always the option of dropping out, but as long as monastics wear the robes, they are expected to keep the precepts.

Here it is important to clarify the difference between a monk and a lama. The term *lama* means guru, and *guru* means teacher, especially a spiritual teacher. In all Buddhist traditions, there are teachers who are laypeople. Not all teachers are monks or nuns. There are many monks and nuns who are not qualified to teach, but they live a disciplined monastic life. So we need to distinguish between monastic teachers, who are celibate, and lay teachers, who may be married. The confusion comes when a monk teacher succumbs to temptation and gets involved in a sexual relationship but, instead of honestly returning to lay life, continues to wear the robes of a monastic. Admittedly, it is very difficult to maintain a celibate lifestyle in a pleasure-loving society, unless a person is extremely well disciplined. Many former monks are now working in factories. This is quite sad because they have been trained in Buddhism for ten or twenty years, and there is a desperate need for qualified Buddhist teachers here. But once a monk loses his monastic vocation, he usually either gives up teaching to support his family or falsely represents himself as a monk when, in fact, he has broken the precepts. Sometimes I joke that it is unwise to invite a monk to the West unless he is over seventy and extremely ugly.

In a sense, monastics are transgendered. Nuns are often mistaken for monks. In airports and shops, I am often addressed as "sir," which is only slightly annoying. I remember an incident about twenty years ago in Honolulu, when the nuns were finally allowed to participate fully in a fire *pūjā* with Situ Rinpoche. Afterward I heard two Anglo women saying, "Isn't that disgusting? The nuns are just clones of the monks." Finally we had been fully included as monastics in a ceremony, for the first time, and yet we were misinterpreted as trying to become monks. In some communities in the United States, women monastics prefer to be called monks. But I find this odd because you will never find a man wanting to be called a nun. As a young woman, I always wanted to be a monk, and it took me many years to reconcile myself to becoming a nun. Why do the two terms conjure up such different connotations? Since the term *nun* simply means a celibate female monastic, I think the term is appropriate, and we should embrace it.

There are many perks to the monastic lifestyle. We save a lot on hairstyling and shampoo. We do not have to worry about what to wear in the morning, since we wear the same thing everyday. Our time is our own, and we have very few distractions. We have complete freedom to practice dharma morning, noon, and night. Of course, monastic life is not for everyone. It requires discipline, commitment, and hard work. It is important to clarify that monastics do not consider themselves superior to laypeople. I hope we can dispel this notion once and for all. Monasticism is simply a chosen lifestyle. It is not an attempt to assert power or superiority over anyone. Nuns often face great hardships and also humiliation. It is a great practice in developing humility.

**bh:** Could we talk a little bit about the eroticization of the teacher? We brought up the issue of predation, but it is also the case that often a good student wants to be special. I would say my students eroticize me way more than I have ever considered them erotic. I feel that in the future, visionary pedagogy, which includes a focus on spiritual practice, will make a place for more evolved discussions about the power of the erotic and what to do with it. I have tried to write about constructive uses of erotic energy in my teaching books. Part of what has happened in monastic and other cloistered settings, is that our denial of the



erotic leads to negative transgressive sexuality because we are pretending it does not exist. Therefore we cannot address sexuality even when it so clearly exists in the form of predation. We must come up with other forms where we can express the radiance of that attraction because there is a tremendous, tremendous attraction to the teacher that is eroticized. I like to think of that attraction as energy and fuel that can be used to strengthen spiritual practice. We cannot do that if we deny its existence or if we want to define it as bad, rather than thinking of it as a force that can strengthen us, that can be part of devotion. I think that is very, very hard, particularly here in the United States where almost all our ways of thinking about sexuality and desire are patriarchal and spring from dominator culture. Although it is very hard to honor erotic energy and to see it as potentially constructive, this is the task of visionary feminist thinking for the future, both in terms of spiritual practice and the culture as a whole. How can we remap sexuality and the erotic, so that that tension between teacher and student can in fact be seen as a powerful, useful tension and not an occasion for shame, grandiosity, or exploitation?

**KLT:** What I think you are talking about is the charisma of a teacher. Why is it necessarily sexualized? Why does it have to be eroticized? Why can it not just be a genuine warmth and spiritual power?

**bh:** That is like the little kids asking me why are we different colors. That is a really hard question because I do not know where that desire to grasp, to touch, to move beyond simple appreciation of the charisma comes from. I don't know why it is eroticized. Does anyone have any ideas?

**Q:** *I think it is because we're born into this human body and sexuality is part of who we are. Often women and men, but especially women, come to a practice when they are searching to find out who they are. And they do this right when they are at the height of their sexuality, when it's very easy to be seduced by a teacher. I've seen an effort, at least in my lineage, to reeducate the* *senior men and women so that we recognize the importance of transparency. We've recently gone through a case of sexual predation in our sangha. This particular case did not involve a young woman, so it is also important to realize that anyone can be the target of sexual predation. It can happen when we come to a community and are unsure of ourselves and have low self-esteem. I agree with bell hooks that we need to remap erotic sexual energy. Sexual predation is often just about the desire for approval. Men want approval too, but it usually doesn't play itself out in the same sexual way.*

*Eroticism necessarily gets expressed in teacher/student relationships because opening up to our conditioning as sexual persons is part of the process of awakening. The challenge for us as teachers is to see this as part of an unfolding process in which there is the potential for shifting from a personal attraction to the teacher to feeling the passion of being alive in the moment. We need to understand that erotic energy is part of the process of awakening, but as a teacher I think it is incredibly challenging not to personalize this energy. It is extraordinarily difficult to keep holding that boundary.*

*When we point out sexual misconduct we are using right speech, not wrong speech. We must come together as women to support each other and to find ways to create a context for speaking about sexual misconduct. As elders, we should warn younger women in our communities that this can happen. We need to develop the language to speak to each other about sexual misconduct, so that we can educate each other, educate monks, and educate men about this erotic energy. So that leads me to this question: What can we bring back from this conference to the men and women in our communities in order to change these communities?*

**KLT:** In addition to everything that has been said yesterday and today, which I fully support, I would also ask you to think about the children, the younger generation. If we do not create programs for children, we may not have a next generation of American Buddhists, so those are my words of advice.

**SS:** Thank you for saying that. This is a huge issue. What do we do with the children? How do we incorporate the children into Buddhist communities? I picked up *Buddhist Women on the Edge* before coming to this conference. So much in there is exciting to me. But some of it also worries me. One article in the book suggests that in America we spend far too much time and energy on work and family and not enough time developing the kinds of practice communities that contribute to a sane life. I'm hoping that you take home to your communities an understanding that a Buddhist life can also be worked out within the context of family, and that this life can be sane. There are many Buddhist communities such as Vietnamese, Chinese, and Korean that are losing their children. The children are not coming to temple because they are being increasingly Christianized. Let's face it, Christian organizations often have a monopoly on college campuses in terms of recruitment. This is a particular challenge for Asian American communities. So we have to figure out what to do with the second, third, and fourth generations of children, especially since they may not speak the language of their parents and first-generation monastics. There is a huge group of children that are being lost or that are going to churches. The question is, how do you retain them inside the community or the sangha?



**bh:** I like the idea that we start where we are. All of you know your communities more intimately than any of us. Only you will be able to decide what will be useful for you to bring back to your community. This is your visionary challenge in the present moment. We cannot say what would be useful for your community. I feel that in my community, which is so deeply a small Christian community, there is at times a competition between Buddhism and Christianity. So I turn to the contemplation and practice of equanimity. I encourage folk in my community to see that we can have Christianity and Buddhism. We can have both. Whenever we ask people to give up something, there is a violence in asking them to do that. Rather than seeing Buddhism and Christianity as opposed, rather than thinking we must choose between one faith or another, let's focus on connections, on codependent arising. This allows for interdependency. As I said last night, I read my Bible, and I pray every day. I meditate. I read Buddhist texts. I feel we're too obsessed in the West with "I am" and not engaged enough with practice, whether it be Christian practice or Buddhist practice. What we are hearing at this conference again and again is the value and importance of practice.

**KLT:** I would also like to put in a plug for Buddhist studies. Many Asian Buddhist temples need teachers who can teach Buddhism in English, so I would like all of us to see ourselves as potential teachers. Every American Buddhist woman should be able to give a dharma talk, so we can take that as a goal. Another goal is to develop Buddhist Sunday school programs for children, summer camps for the youth, and retreats for college students. This takes preparation, so I believe we should help women evolve as teachers, especially for the sake of the children and youth. We can also develop local chapters of Sakyadhita for women to get together to study Buddhist texts. Buddhist women supporting and encouraging each other in Buddhist studies and intensive practice is a great goal.