

Introduction

Karma Lekshe Tsomo

For centuries, women have been relegated to live, practice, and teach in the shadows of far more visibly-placed men. History is dominated by the deeds, thoughts, and influences of men considered to be eminent, with the value of human achievement determined exclusively by the standards of men, the unfortunate method of assessment until recent times. But eminence can be interpreted in many different ways—to define it as merely having visibility, power, and authority is to misunderstand the word. When the word is applied to the majority of women in Buddhist cultures, the definition expands to influential, important, notable, and superior. As in other spheres of life, women perform vital functions in religion throughout Buddhist communities in Asia and abroad.

For too long, the measure of what was true and valuable in the human experience ignored a crucial component—millions of women who have loved, worked, fought, compromised, suffered, and succeeded in realizing their own highest potential, but who remain unknown to us simply because their stories were never deemed worthy of recording. When eminence is predicated on a larger set of qualities than those typically recognized as marks of achievement; when eminence recognizes inner qualities such as sincerity, warm-heartedness, kindness to children, care for the weak and disenfranchised, wisdom, tenderness, patience, and compassion, then the term eminence includes a host of individuals who existed and flourished throughout history but were overlooked, ignored, undervalued, or invisible simply because they were women.

Now, in an era of greater openness and awareness, it is appropriate and timely to reassess the lives of exemplary Buddhist women whose stories have been hidden or ignored. We can bring to light narratives that teach us to reconsider the past criteria of eminence and compel us to question how

and by whom those criteria are constructed and controlled. In the Buddhist world, until very recently, the reputed knowledge holders have been male. Upon reflection, this is rather odd, especially considering the nongendered nature of Buddhism's primary values: loving kindness, compassion, knowledge, wisdom, authenticity, spiritual attainment, and liberation. In view of this apparent contradiction between the universal nature of fundamental Buddhist principles and unapologetic male dominance for more than two thousand years of Buddhist history and development, a reassessment of the lives and experiences of women within the tradition is imperative. For instance, why is the story of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and her five hundred noble women companions, who led the first march for women's rights in recorded history, not well known today, even in many Buddhist countries? It is essential to recognize the work of women and their inner attainments so that this knowledge and inspiration can be imparted to future generations. In an effort to elevate the status of all women everywhere, especially because the struggles of women in earlier generations still remain largely unacknowledged and unappreciated, it is essential that we begin to collect these stories and bring to light the bountiful accomplishments of women thus far. A review of Buddhist women's contributions is a long-overdue tribute to their determination, realizations, and achievements. This book is a step along that path.

Rediscovering Buddhist Women's Legacy

The Buddhist traditions are not bereft of feminine imagery and exemplars. The legacy of eminent Buddhist women begins with Mahāmāyā, the woman who gave birth to Prince Siddhartha. Without her, there would have been no Siddhartha Gotama and hence no Buddha Śākyamuni. According to legend, she passed away just seven days after giving birth to the young future Buddha. As often occurred in the day, Mahāmāyā's sister Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī stepped in to nurture the young prince. Later, after Siddhartha Gotama's awakening and the death of Mahāpajāpatī's husband, she renounced the household life and became the courageous progenitor of the Buddhist order of nuns (*bhikṣuṇī saṅghā*). The Buddha offered special teachings to Mahāpajāpatī when she was a layperson and also after she was ordained as a nun. Her leadership in advocating for the admission of women to the monastic order is one of the earliest recorded instances of what today is termed feminist advocacy. In fact, she could be eulogized as the first great Buddhist social activist. According to the story, the Buddha eventually acceded to her request but asked her to agree to certain terms of inequality consistent with the society of the time as a condition for her admission to the order. Mahāpajāpatī's attempt to reverse one of these conditions—the one that clearly subordinates

nuns to monks—is evidence of her awareness of gender injustice and her determination to change it.

The legacy initiated by Mahāmāyā and Mahāpajāpatī continues today with the scores of eminent Buddhist women working as agents of social change. Not only did Mahāpajāpatī and her many disciples become liberated from mental defilements, but they also freed themselves from the prescribed roles that society allotted them. They blazed new pathways for women both personally and socially. Instead of being confined to the expected female roles of housewife and mother, thousands of women at the time of the Buddha became seekers, many of whom were publicly recognized by the Buddha as outstanding exemplars of spiritual attainment. Sujata, a young village woman who had offered milk rice to the emaciated renunciant Siddhartha and who sustained the fledgling Buddha in the crucial days leading up to his final awakening, was one of the first to enter his newly discovered path to liberation.

Mahāpajāpatī and the five hundred noble women who marched with her, traveling barefoot and resolute in their determined effort for women's rights, deserve immense appreciation and respect. Knowledge about this important chapter of history is long overdue. Mahāpajāpatī succeeded in founding the *bhikkhūṇī saṅgha* and skillfully guided its development until her death. Thousands of women became respected *arhats* and were recognized by the Buddha himself for their extraordinary attainments: Khema for her great wisdom, Uppalavanna and Patācārā for their exemplary monastic discipline, Dhammadinna for her proficiency in teaching Dharma, Nanda for her dedication, Sona for her energetic determination, and so on. Not only nuns, but also laywomen were acknowledged by the Buddha as eminent. Visākhā, the devout daughter of a millionaire, became renowned for her exceptional generosity to the *saṅgha*. By publicly recognizing the eminent qualities and spiritual attainments of outstanding women, the Buddha began challenging centuries-old views about women as objects for subjugation and neglect.

The sincerity and stature of these women stand in sharp contrast to the story of the Buddha's alleged reluctance to admit women to his order. If the women who surrounded him were so competent and well-intentioned, how could it be possible that the Buddha needed to have his arm twisted to accept them? Was his reluctance simply a test of their sincerity? Mahāpajāpatī and her resolute band of women exemplified solidarity and sincerity, giving lie to the banal myth that women are characterless and unable to cooperate and work harmoniously together. The spiritual determination they represented is unmatched by any other group in the Buddhist texts, and their march heralded immeasurable waves of spiritual attainment. The story of these women's valor has withstood twenty-five hundred years of telling and has provided significant meaning and encouragement to millions of the women in the generations that have followed.

Liberating Women to Speak in Their Own Voices

This collection of essays documents the quietly extraordinary lives of women from a diverse range of Buddhist cultures. These exemplary women have emerged from cultures that often dispossess, devalue, and marginalize women, and their stories easily could have been lost to history. Beginning in India and traversing the heartlands of Asia in all the directions in which Buddhism spread, weaving together threads of religion, art, culture, and custom, these orally transmitted legends are treasures of our shared human legacy. These stories belong to a new genre of literature on women in Buddhism that has emerged globally. In giving at long last a voice to Buddhist women, these narratives teach us about the strategies they used to realize their own spiritual liberation even when confined or ignored by society at large. In them, we hear about women who have broken through the stereotype of the undemonstrative Asian woman and have achieved greatness in ways that challenge our own preconceived notions and complacencies.

Recovering lost histories is an ongoing process through which we learn, among other things, the importance of recording our own lives and experiences. Never before, because of the rapid advances that have been made in modern education and technology, has the documentary potential of women been greater. Yet we must never lose sight of the fact that these new elements are still the domain of the privileged, and access to them remains a mere dream to countless millions of people, both women and men, in many parts of the world. A hidden agenda in this collection of stories is to give voice to some of the women who have until now been silenced, and by their example to provide strength for disempowered women everywhere. These narratives are focused on a few of the special jewels of humanity, each of whom has a story that will energize and empower the struggle of women everywhere for equality, justice, and acknowledgment in a world that has been conceptualized primarily only through the work of men.

The genesis of this collection is from within the international Buddhist women's movement that began in 1987 with the advent of Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women and its initiatives to reclaim and revalue the roles of Buddhist women within the multiplicity of Buddhist texts and traditions.¹ Many of the chapters are based on papers presented at the 11th Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women held in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, in early 2010. That conference was but one of the numerous national and international gatherings that have been convened thus far to celebrate and encourage millions of Buddhist women worldwide in the recovery of their rightful heritage.

The considerable variation in these stories reflects the vast and varied range of experience in the lives of Buddhist women.² Rather than homog-

enize these women's stories and experiences into some preconceived generic template or superimpose successive waves of feminist analysis, I have chosen to respect and retain, as much as possible, the narrative choices of those who tell the stories. Footnotes and prescribed page lengths do not necessarily deem stories to be authentic. Who decrees that footnotes are necessary for telling women's stories? Who demands uniform page lengths for legitimacy? Perhaps it is time to liberate women from these artificial constraints. I have chosen to allow the authors to tell the stories as they wish.

Chapter 1 begins in ancient India, with a female *bodhisattva* who has become a Buddha. The story is significant. It documents a woman's awakening and sets it into writing, providing a historical account of one woman's attainment of the highest achievement. It is stories like these that document the remarkable attainments that women have realized, beginning with the Buddha's foster mother and continuing with other laywomen who were also renowned for their remarkable spiritual accomplishments. The next chapter documents the lives of two distinct generations of twentieth-century Nepalese nuns who faced unimaginable challenges yet quietly triumphed in socially transformative ways.

The geographical focus then shifts to Southeast Asia, with stories that challenge the myth that Buddhist women in Burma, Thailand, and Vietnam are all content with their unequal and subservient status to men. Although these women may give priority to devotional practices, mental cultivation, and the accumulation of merit rather than to more visible external social advancements, it is demeaning to assume that these women lack awareness of the colossal disadvantages they face. Everyone wishes to be free, and no one wishes to be relegated to the fringes. The changes currently under way in these countries are nothing short of miraculous, and they are continually gaining momentum in expanding the inclusion of women at all levels of Buddhist culture. For example, it is significant that when a small group of young monks objected to the theme of the 11th Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women in Vietnam in 2009—"Eminent Buddhist Women"—on the grounds that women do not deserve this acclaim, they were overruled by the senior leadership of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha.

The focus of the book then moves to East Asia, highlighting the hard-won successes of Buddhist women in Korea and Taiwan. Beginning in the fourth century, nuns took the initiative to transmit the *bhikṣuṇī* lineage from Sri Lanka to China, where, despite political, economic, and social turmoil, successive generations have protected it ever since. Because of the courage and vision of the nuns of Korea and Taiwan, the lineage that was lost for nearly a thousand years in South and Southeast Asia is now being revived. This achievement has been a lifeline to the revitalization of women's spiritual awareness in those countries and the spread of Buddhism to the West. With

the advantages of universal education and higher ordination, many women are now emerging as Buddhist teachers, moral exemplars, and respected leaders in their communities, sometimes attracting large followings—accomplishments that were previously rare for women in other Asian countries, or unacknowledged.

Women in the Tibetan cultural sphere have followed their own unique trajectory, specializing in solitary retreats that have produced many exceptional women practitioners, but the isolation has also rendered most of them invisible to the public eye. Many of the highly eminent and dedicated women practitioners in Tibet, Sikkim, and Mongolia are not seen in historical records at all because their achievements have rarely been recognized in the exclusively male Buddhist hierarchy. Flying beneath the radar, their presence is usually recorded only in oral narratives. The stories of how these women have overcome the extensive disadvantages of a female rebirth have been inspirational to many successive generations of women. Considering the vitality and impact of the Tibetan tradition globally, one cannot help but wonder how much more effective it could be if women held leadership roles in Tibetan Buddhist institutions!

The book concludes with stories of several distinguished women who have been influential in transmitting Dharma to the West. For example, Bhiksuni Karma Khechog Palmo was instrumental in educating young Tibetan monks at the Young Lamas' Home in Dalhousie, India, and Bhiksuni Rui-miao brought people together across cultures from many countries despite differences of language and religion. Bhiksuni Hiuwan similarly transcended language barriers by speaking the universal language of compassion. Other teachers, such as Orgyen Chökyi, have reached across time and space to encourage women seekers and to share their realizations of things “as they are.” When we research, remember, and transmit the inspiring contributions of these outstanding women to future generations, we help to preserve their precious Dharma lineages and ensure that women will no longer be quite so invisible in the history of Buddhism.

Awakening from the Myth of Impossibility

Although some women receive encouragement along the Buddhist path, many others do not. Stories of ordinary and extraordinary Buddhist women practitioners, teachers, artists, community activists, and good-hearted human beings therefore encourage others to tackle retreats, Buddhist studies, and compassionate social-service activities that they might not otherwise attempt. But, perhaps most inspiring of all, these stories encourage strength and motivation for women who face hardships, obstacles, and uncertainties in their

everyday lives. The insights and accomplishments of women who are just like them can be the source of their greatest encouragement. For if other women successfully live by the Buddhist teachings in their relationships with partners, children, employers, and friends, then so can they. It is no secret that women suffer like all sentient beings, but they often suffer more because of the subservient status historically accorded to them. One is reminded of the sentiments of Lama Govinda: “Only those who have experienced great suffering are capable of great things in the realm of the spirit.” This is not to assert that women must suffer in order to achieve eminence, but to recognize that human suffering need not be debilitating. Given inspiration and encouragement, it can become a catalyst for awakening. Only by acknowledging the pervasiveness of suffering is it possible to move beyond the illusion of self, and self-cherishing, and generate great compassion for others and the suffering of all beings.

A revolution is currently under way in Buddhist societies to upset the myth of women’s inherent inferiority and to rescind the restrictions placed on women as a consequence of their imposed second-rate status. There is nothing in the Buddhist scriptures to prevent such a revolution and much to support it. After all, women’s equal potential for liberation was reportedly recognized and supported by the Buddha himself in his revolutionary creation of the *bhikṣuṇī saṅgha*. Today’s revolution is in the same spirit as the Buddha’s. This is not an adversarial or aggressive revolution, but a quiet and natural turn of events in the direction of inclusiveness, justice, and enlightenment for all. Tensions always arise around the fear of change, but Buddhist women are meeting these challenges with clarity and compassion. Many women have gained allies for their just and honorable cause and have revitalized important and lasting conversations with sympathetic male allies that have been beneficial and strengthening to all. This Buddhist feminist revolution is concerned with optimizing the precious human opportunity—a widespread awakening that is transplanting itself deeply into the hearts of millions of women around the world today. To move this awakening forward, Buddhist women need greater opportunities in the real world to realize their potential. At present, for example, despite their numbers and accomplishments, Buddhist women have little representation at the United Nations and many other global forums. This lacuna stems in part from the fact that Buddhist women’s capabilities and potential have not been fully recognized, even within their own communities. Another reason is that, until very recently, few Buddhist women have had access to the higher education and community leadership experience that is required to effectively take an active role in international discourse. Unfortunately, many Buddhists continue to believe their own propaganda—that Buddhist egalitarianism already extends to women—even while evidence of women’s subordination is before their very eyes.

Today, Buddhist women around the world are struggling for gender equity and the same opportunities as men in their traditions to gain access to education and ordination. There are historical precedents of similar struggles, beginning with Mahāpajāpati's charismatic leadership and valiant activism that initially won women admission to the *saṅgha* and continuing with the courageous actions of women, such as the Japanese nuns who reinvigorated the *bhikṣuṇī* lineage at Hokkeji in the thirteenth century. Despite resistance from men to accept that women are as eligible as they are to equal opportunities for ordination within entrenched Buddhist hierarchies, there is full justification for this struggle available in the Buddhist canon itself. In the traditional story of the beginnings of the *bhikṣuṇī saṅgha*, the Buddha risked social condemnation and exclusion from the religious body politic by admitting women to the *saṅgha*. The story of Buddha Śākyamuni rationally and magnanimously admitting his stepmother and her disciples to the order is told and retold with pride in Buddhist societies and is currently available on library bookshelves around the world. To deny this precedent and the Buddha's legendary acknowledgment of women's equal potential to attain liberation is folly.

Yet what might set the stage for gender justice in Buddhist institutions is marred by another, parallel narrative in which, oddly, the Enlightened One is represented as needing convincing before he allowed women to join the *saṅgha*. Over time, the legend of the Buddha's hesitation to admit women to the order worked to subvert his own ideal of a harmonious Buddhist society balanced among laywomen, laymen, nuns, and monks. Instead of this harmonious balance, the ritual and institutional subordination of nuns became canonized through the imposition of the "eight weighty rules," alleged by others to have been decreed by the Buddha, which has had a deleterious effect not only on the social and religious status of women in Buddhism, but also on the psychological, physical, and intellectual development of women up to the present day. Why, when the Buddha taught a path that was equally accessible for all human beings, has discrimination against women in Buddhist societies and institutions been allowed to continue for hundreds of years? Why would anyone think that it is justifiable for any tradition to abandon the Buddha's own vision and deny women equal access to his teachings? One can only imagine that it is a lapse into ignorance—the defilement that propels the wheel of *samsāra*—and is still deeply entrenched in the world and periodically triumphs even over the wisdom and truth of the Buddha's teachings.

Even with the recent spate of books, conferences, and research regarding women and Buddhism, a thorough feminist analysis of gender identity and power relations in the Buddhist context has yet to appear. The enormity of the task is daunting, because no two Buddhist traditions are alike. In each unique tradition, history, language, religion, and culture all intersect with gender to create complex relationships, all of which are currently in

the process of monumental changes. Now, after twenty years of publications and gatherings, there is a widespread recognition of the disconnect between egalitarian gender rhetoric and the reality of unequal opportunity for women. This struggle is ongoing and will be resolved as women continue to assert themselves in new and challenging ways. Even in socially advanced countries like Taiwan and Korea, where women stand confidently, teach articulately, and resourcefully manage internationally renowned charitable institutions, it remains common for women to devote themselves to men's projects, often at the expense of their own health and personal development. The independent identity of women is often hampered by antiquated gender expectations and presuppositions that collude to produce unequal, unhealthy power relations with men. I share the widespread assumption that Buddhist wisdom and practice are keys to redressing these problems, but specific solutions need to be wisely and sensitively crafted for each tradition.

The *bhikṣuṇī* ordination issue serves as a litmus test for attitudes toward gender in Buddhist societies. The questions that are being debated among conservative Buddhist scholars in the Theravāda and Tibetan Buddhist traditions today—about whether women should be allowed to take full ordination and, if they are, how it should be conducted—are questions that the Buddha has already answered in full. The mystery is not what the Buddha would have said in such a situation but rather why so many Buddhist scholars and religious leaders are not listening to what the Buddha said. The frequently echoed assertion that *bhikṣuṇī* ordination must wait until the next Buddha appears ignores the fact that Buddha Śākyamuni himself has already answered the question. The powerful established hierarchies hold change at bay, based on antiquated views of women's inferiority. Unwilling to relinquish these unreasonable and self-defeating views, some even manipulate the Buddhist teachings and the monastic codes to justify their dominance. Many monks are willing to ordain women as novices, although this is the right and duty of *bhikṣuṇīs*, yet refuse to allow women access to full ordination.

Access to full ordination for women both improves women's status and signals women's greater inclusion in Buddhist institutions, yet some Theravāda nuns argue against *bhikṣuṇī* ordination on the grounds that it could work to keep women under the institutional thumb of the male elite. This line of argument assumes that institutional subordination is a Buddhist nun's only option, which is certainly not the case. Current efforts to restore the *bhikṣuṇī* order around the world enable Buddhist women to affirm their own legitimacy. This is especially significant for women who are fully qualified and prepared to take their place within Buddhist institutional lines of authority, often for the first time. Renewal and invigoration of the *bhikṣuṇī* order will help to usher in a welcome spiritual revolution that will benefit not only Buddhist nuns and laywomen, but also practicing Buddhists everywhere.

Denying access to religious education and blocking the full participation of women in religious structures might have gone unnoticed in earlier social contexts, when even institutions such as slavery were widely condoned by religious practitioners. But now it is relatively easy to gain knowledge about how race, gender, color, religion, and hegemony have coalesced over millennia to sanction discriminatory power over millions of marginalized people and to endorse their exploitation through sex trafficking, debt slavery, torture, sadistic gratification, and myriad other human rights abuses. Although these offenses are widely deplored as inhuman and criminal, they still rage covertly and in full view, often at the expense of women. In certain Buddhist societies, hiding in broad daylight and justified by the rhetoric of maintaining “the purity of the tradition,” gender injustices continue to thrive. Bringing to light the stories of some of the unsung heroes among women who have challenged these clandestine codes and worked for social transformation, skillfully but without compromise, transports us closer to the enlightened society of the Buddha’s vision.

Notes

1. Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women, founded in 1987 in Bodhgaya, has initiated major changes for women in the world’s Buddhist traditions, especially changing perceptions of women’s potential for social and spiritual transformation. <http://www.sakyadhita.org>.

2. In recent decades, a number of studies about gender identity and power relations in Buddhism have appeared, including Alice Collette, “Buddhism and Gender: Reframing and Refocusing the Debate,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22:2(2006): 55–84; Nancy Auer Falk, “The Case of the Vanishing Nuns: The Fruits of Ambivalence in Ancient Buddhism,” in *Unspoken Worlds: Women’s Religious Lives in Non-western Cultures*, ed. Nancy Auer Falk and Rita Gross (New York: Harper and Row, 1980); Rita M. Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); and Karma Lekshe Tsomo, “Buddhist Feminist Reflections,” in *Buddhist Philosophy: Selected Primary Texts*, ed. Jay Garfield and William Edelglass (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).