Navigating Change:
Buddhist Women
In Transition

Conference Proceedings

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Buddhist Women in Transition

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CONTENTS

Acknowledging
Karma Lekshe Tsomo ix

Welcoming
Sharon A. Suh

Introducing
Pamela Ayo Yetunde

SUSTAINING THE BUDDHA DHARMA

Changing and Challenging Roles of Bhikkhunis in Sri Lanka
Bhikkhuni Kundasale Subhagya

The Changing Roles of Buddhist Women: Empowerment, Feminism, and Leadership Sister
Loh Pai Ling

The Queerness of Buddha and Buddha Dharma
Tashi Choedup

The Development of Theravāda Bhikkhunīs in Indonesia: Progress Toward Gender Equality in Sangha Agung Indonesia
Julia Surya (Thītācārinī Therī)

Vietnam Buddhist Nuns: Bridging Tradition and Modernity
Thich Nu Hue Quang

So That the Sun May Never Set: The Role of Monasticism in Sustaining the Buddhadharma
Bhikshuni Thubten Lamsel

BUDDHIST NUNS NAVIGATING & FOSTERING CHANGE

Beyond the Monastary Walls: Myanmar Buddhist Nuns Engaging with the Contemporary
Sayalay Santacari

On the Transformative Journey of Female Monastic in the Kingdom of Bhutan
Namgyel Lhamo

The Changing Roles of Leadership of Korean Bhikkhuni Sangha
Ilmoon Cho

Gratitude and Taking Initiative: Navigating Change as a Buddhist Woman in Transition
Samaneri Ariya Dhammajivi

MONASTICS & LAITY BREAKING NEW GROUND

Does Early Buddhist Notion on Women Endanger Male Celibacy?
Tran Thi Cam Van

Women and the Ritual of Sacralization and Commodification of Buddhist Amulets in Thailand
Amnuaypond Kidpromma

Leadership and Governance: The Role of the Thai Nun Organization in Education and Social Work
Maechee Punyaporn Saengkhum

Amid Changes in "Hip Buddhism" in Korea, New Roles and Leadership of Female Lay Buddhists
Jin-sook Nam

Empowering Voices: The Evolution of Tibetan Buddhist Women in Leadership
Karma Tashi Choedron and Tenzin Dadon

CREATING MODELS FOR EFFECTIVE CHANGE AND HEALING

Healing Trauma through Sangha
Mia Livingston

Voices of Healing: How Self-Talk Bridges Modern Women's Psychology and Buddhist Principles
Le Thi Kim Ngan

Healing at the Crossroads: Integrating Buddhist Teachings, Mental Health Counseling, and Societal Oppression in Working with Domestic Violence Survivors
Thich Nu Lien Anh (Le Thi My Hieu) and Shannon Chang

Reflections on Pilgrimage, Research and Coping with Changes
Sandra Ng Siow San

Vietnamese Bhikkhunis Continuously Innovating Dharma Propagation Methods for Youth in the Era of Global Integration

Thich Nu Lien Hien

DHARMA TEACHERS: AUTHORITY & TRANSMISSION

In Her Footsteps: Celebrating the Multifaceted Legacy of Bhiksuni Dr. Shi Heng-Ching
Christie Chang

The Dharma Teacher Venerable Dhammawati
Shradda Gautami

The Master of the Nuns Huỳnh Liên: The Beacon of Vietnamese Khat Sĩ Buddhism in the Central Highlands
Thích Nu Thương Hu and Bhikshu Thích

Bhikkhuni Dhammananda's Life and Legacy on Women's Empowerment and Modern Buddhism
Cindy Rasicot

Venerable Nun Dieu Khong: A Pillar of the Vietnamese Buddhist Nun Community in the 20th Century
Thich Thien Phu and Phan Thi An Phu

BUDDHIST NETWORKS: CARE, EDUCATION, & TRANSFORMATION

Planting Seeds: Teaching Buddhist Values for Social Harmony to a Secular Generation in Interfaith Contexts
Malia D. Wong, OP

Women Using Global Buddhist Networks to Leverage Better Outcomes for Animals
Catherine Schuetze

Female Veterinarians, Community Networks and Animal Welfare in a Traditional Buddhist Society
Diki Palmu Sherpa

From Making a "Vow" to Raising Children in a Buddhist Way: The Path and Progression in a Myanmar Buddhist Mother's Religiosity
Rachelle Saruya

Building Education Through Temple Education Program: A Story in Countering Mobile Game Addiction and Moslem TPQ
Kustiani

From Monasticism to Modernity: Exploring the Lives of Former Himalayan Buddhist

Nuns in Transition
Gendun Lhamu

REDEFINING TRADITION, MAKING TRANSITIONS, & EXPANDING EDUCATION

The Dharma-Propagating Effort of Post-War Taiwanese Bhiksunīs: Venerable Tian Yi, Tzu Hui, and Tzu Jung
Shi Zhiquan

Nun of the Slum: Bodhichitta Foundation and its Barefoot Buddhism
Ayya Yeshe

Navigating Change – Himalayan and Tibetan Buddhist Women in Transition
Teena Amrit Gill

Vietnamese Buddhist Nuns: Constantly Innovative Methods of Dharma Preaching to the Youth
Thích Nu Liên Hien

Changing Roles of Buddhist women Empowerment, Feminism and Leadership
Madhuri Krishna Kudwalkar

Coming Together in Dialogue with the Broader World: Logics, Metaphysics, Cultures, and Practices of Gender
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LOCATING BUDDHIST WOMEN IN INSCRIPTIONS & LITERATURE

Women Translating the Dharma
Sarah Harding

Echoes of Yaśodharā: Names in Transition Across Buddhist Texts and Times
Arun Kumar Yadav

The Role of Female Deities in Shaping Nepal Mandala Buddhist Traditions
Ursula Manandhar

Exploring the Tenet of Feminism in Early Pali Literature
Praveen Kumar

Buddhist Japanese Women: Facing Centuries of Challenges
Kathy Uno

Appreciation

In an age of cataclysmic changes, the Buddhist teachings on impermanence ring truer than ever. Now, in a time of chaos and cruelty, the teachings on loving kindness and compassion inspire us to reimagine a kinder, more compassionate world. An ethos of insatiable greed and endless desires helps us recall that "contentment is the greatest wealth." Seeing through the blindness of ignorance, we appreciate each precious moment with insight. Engaging these timeless teachings helps us restore peace to our hearts, families, and our communities.

Sakyadhita ("Daughters of the Buddha") creates forums for Buddhist women and like-minded friends around the world to join together in harmony to realize these valuable teachings on compassion and wisdom and put them o action. The experience of working together across cultures opens our hearts. There is a special magic in joyful, loving human interactions.

To put together an international gathering such as a Sakyadhita conference on a tiny budget is only possible with pure intentions and enormous effort on the part of countless selfless friends. The experience is an amazing opportunity to practice mindfulness, wisdom, and loving kindness toward all. To create such a huge international event requires heartfelt cooperation, patience, and perseverence. We have countless people to thank.

It is virtually impossible to acknowledge each person individually and it is working collectively that makes everything possible. We are immensely grateful to the presenters, compilers, editors, participants, and the translators who make cutting edge ideas on Buddhism, gender, and social justice, this time available in Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese.

The Program Committee worked tirelessly to select 45 diverse papers on cutting-edge topics We appreciate the efforts of the members of this committee: Karma Tashi Chodroen, Amnuaypond Kidpromma, Ngar-sze Lau, Hsing Lin, Nita Mishra, Darcie Price-Wallace, and Cindy Rasicot. The papers were then edited and formatted by the members of the Editorial Committee: Cindy Rasicot, Joan Harris, Tom Jennings, Barbara Knapp, Micah R. Krohn, Greg Moses, Darcie Price-Wallace, Sandra Albers, Rebecca Paxton, and Karma Lekshe Tsomo. Three teams of translators rendered the papers into other languages. We wish to especially express our sincere appreciation to Grace Ho, Lisa Yu, Quah Siew Kheng, and Chong Jin Chua of the Chinese Translation Team; Hyung Eun Chung and the members of the Korean Translation Committee; and Thich Nu Nhu Nguyet and Le Nga of the Vietnamese Translation Committee

May they all live happily! ..

Gathering Buddhist Women: A Welcoming

It is with deep joy and reverence that we present the proceedings of the 19th Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women. This publication is the fruit of a remarkable gathering – hundreds of Buddhist women, both lay and monastic, scholars and activists, artists and meditators – from over 35 countries across the globe. Representing an extraordinary range of traditions, cultures, languages, and lived experiences, this global *sangha* exemplifies the strength, wisdom, and resilience of Buddhist women today.

The theme of this year's conference, "Buddhist Women: Sustaining the Dharma, Empowering Communities," invites reflection on the multifaceted and transformative roles Buddhist women continue to play. As practitioners and preservers of the Dharma and agents of change, they bring the Buddha's teachings to bear on the urgent challenges of our world. Throughout history, Buddhist women have embodied healing, courage, innovation, and peace. This gathering celebrates that legacy while also calling forth renewed commitment and creativity in our time.

Over the course of the conference, participants engaged with this theme through a rich program of academic panels, Dharma talks, experiential workshops, and community-building events. Topics ranged from the evolving roles of *bhikkhunī*s and laywomen, to the intersections of Buddhist practice and LGBTQ+ identities, to trauma-informed approaches to the Dharma. We heard from emerging leaders and seasoned practitioners alike, each offering insight into the challenges and opportunities facing Buddhist women today.

Workshops provided further space for embodied practice and collective learning. From meditation, chanting, and arts-based healing to nonviolent activism, interfaith dialogue, and caregiving across generations and species, these sessions nurtured connection, empowerment, and joy.

The stories shared during this conference – of women who have broken new ground, uplifted their communities, and practiced compassion in the face of adversity – are powerful testaments to the vitality of Buddhist women's leadership. We are particularly moved by the presence of practitioners across generations, especially young women and gender-diverse participants, whose voices offer essential wisdom for envisioning a more just and inclusive future. Their contributions challenge us to deepen our practice – not only in mindfulness, but in justice, equity, and collective care.

This conference was made possible by the tireless work and vision of many. We express our heartfelt gratitude to the International Conference Planning Committee, the Sarawak Conference Planning Committee, the Program and Workshop Committees, and especially to Mr. Chua, Pek Geok Chua, Professor Eunsu Cho, Lunah Kim, Hyung Eun Chung, Darcie Price-Wallace, Cindy Rasicot, and Venerable Lekshe. Their dedication and care have shaped this conference into a space for meaningful dialogue, celebration, and transformation.

Our deepest thanks go to the Kuching Buddhist Society, our generous hosts, and to the staff of the Waterfront Hotel for their warm hospitality. Your support reflects the heart of compassionate community. To our donors and sponsors: thank you for making it possible for participants from under-resourced regions to attend and contribute. Your generosity is an essential act of *dana* and solidarity.

As you read through these proceedings, may you encounter voices that inspire, challenge, and move you. May the insights shared here spark new collaborations, deepen your practice, and contribute to the flourishing of the Dharma in all its diversity.

This conference is not an endpoint but a continuation of a journey that began nearly four decades ago – and will continue for generations to come. May the seeds planted here blossom into a more compassionate, just, and awakened world.

With deep gratitude,

Sharon A. Suh, PhD
President, Sakyadhita International
Association of Buddhist Women

Adapting to the Reality of Our Power
Pamela Ayo Yetunde

In the U.S. and around the world, people are negotiating the understanding of what a woman is, what her role in society should be, what determines her worth, and whether she is worthy of self-determination. For Buddhist women in particular, maybe, we are still navigating the changes that take place within us when we reflect on the impact of Buddhist practices on our sense of a gendered self. As a Buddhist practitioner, counselor, and scholar living in the U.S., I have conducted research on whether Buddhist practices are good for Black people in the U.S. I have concluded that Buddhism is good for the mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being of people in general, including Black people in the U.S., and especially for women, wherever they may live. It seems clear to me that gender still matters, and it is vitally important that we take our lives seriously because who we are and what we are capable of is immeasurable.

It is psychologically complicated to be a Buddhist woman who without question follows Buddhist philosophy and Buddhist anthropology. The foundation of Buddhist teachings, for all the wisdom and healing and inspiration that comes from it, is largely based on the awakening experiences of one man, born 2,600 years ago in Nepal. One ancient male construct is not something contemporary women fit neatly into, but it is through the exercise of our power that we have sought out how Buddhism can support women and humanity, to be liberated in every way possible. This is a power cultivated by curiosity and courage, mindfulness, as well as teachings and practices in the Brahma Viharas/Four Immeasurable/Heavenly Abodes of lovingkindness, compassion, equanimity, and sympathetic joy. The cultivation of Buddha intelligence and Buddha power are worthy of examination and application, especially by Buddhist women all over the world, and especially now. These practices help us navigate change in transition.

The Sakyadhita International Conferences on Buddhist Women are auspicious gatherings that attract laywomen and nuns, lay and ordained, as well as our allies and others who may not fit neatly into these categories, from around the world. I am from and live in the U.S. In the U.S., there are influential and extremely wealthy people with international appeal and acclaim, who are saying publicly and convincingly that empathy, an important emotional factor in the Four Bramha Viharas, is wrong. I want to say this again, then ask you to reflect. Influential and extremely wealthy people with international appeal and acclaim people in the U.S. are saying publicly that empathy is wrong. If this is true, then the factors that lead to loving kindness, compassion, equanimity, and sympathetic joy, are also wrong. From a Buddhist psychology perspective, the implication of this anti-empathy turn is that the sense doors have no meaning, the consciousnesses that arise as the result of our sense doors perceiving external objects and phenomena, are patently distorted. The suggestion is that human beings should be more like robots that privilege artificial intelligence. Do you think this is right? Please reflect on the invitation before you. Human vs. robot? Feelings vs. no empathy?

If you reflected on the invitation, then you used the power of your human intelligence and if you used the power of your human intelligence and concluded that we should not become like robots without empathy, then you used your Buddha intelligence. If you thought more deeply about this question, then maybe you got to the place where you realized that we are unable to raise the next generation of human beings to be unempathetic robot-like children because children only thrive when empathetic people raise them. Our power as Buddhist women is to say collectively that we renounce the ignorance that undermines the cultivation of empathy

and we, like we have before, will navigate this transition away from humanity to bring us back to our true homes – our very beings. Now, I want to dig a little deeper into the story of Siddartha Gautama's enlightenment journey.

I am inspired by the life depicted in Siddartha Gautama's story. Like many people, his parent had an agenda for his child that he was afraid would not manifest if his son encountered a wise person who would tell his son about the life cycle of human beings, including our vulnerabilities. Parents make decisions all the time about when and what they will expose their children to. As the story goes, Siddartha Gautmata, even with his high position in society, including his wealth, still didn't know what most people on earth knew before they became adults – because he was shielded from reality. Once he encountered illness, aging, death, and so on, he experienced a moment of disempowerment – his world and self-view were shattered. Shocking? Yes. Traumatic? Yes. But he used his shock and trauma as motivation for navigating change and in so doing, he gained self-power to learn and accept what is real – this is what it means to adjust to the reality of our power. When we want to learn and accept what appears to be real by adjusting, we are using our self-power for positive purposes – to bring ourselves into everyday reality with insight and learn how to steady ourselves for what may come next.

As this is an international conference, I feel that is important to share a message with you from the U.S. There is a persistent effort to de-liberate women. In other words, many law makers and policy makers are gathering in their legislative chambers to determine how to incentivize younger women to abandon the work that brings them a sense of competence, even joy, and instead get married, have children, and stay at home. I know that not every woman in every country is concerned about being de-liberated, but in the U.S., there are even threats to surveille pregnant women. It is also the case that when human rights violations increase in the U.S., law and policy makers in other countries imitate and emulate our elected officials. It is this choice to detach our feelings from the suffering of others that begs a powerful response from us *if* we are willing to adapt to the reality of our power. We can adapt to the reality of our power by committing to being skilled spiritual friends to one another. This entails really committing to the spiritual path together.

Really committing to being in life, in this body, for the welfare of ourselves and others, sometimes with attention on healing our own hurts, sometimes with attention on supporting others in their healing, always returning to our ethical ground of being when we realize we've stepped away from it. That is power – Buddha power informed by Buddha intelligence that, with the cultivation of patience and mindfulness, allows us to adjust to our power in due time. Why is timing important?

It is said that it took six years in the wilderness, six years and a near death experience, preceded by being exhausted by efforts to avoid the human condition, before Siddhartha Gautama was in a situation where an empathetic and compassionate young woman, Sujata, saw a starving man and offered him nourishment that he did not refuse. Would he have accepted her offer if he had not been hungry? Was he hungry when he first fled to the forest? Was he hungry after the first, second, third, fourth, fifth, and part of the sixth year of spiritual practice? For whatever reason, awakening took a long time. Would Sujata have forced the nutriment into his mouth if he had refused it? Who knows, but sometimes in our quest to provide people advice and other things they need, we unwittingly "force" advice onto people who have not had the time to arrive at a place where they know they're suffering and are willing to relieve it. It takes time, the right conditions, the human Buddha intelligence that comes from our sorrow, and Buddha intelligence to sense how we should use our power to help create the conditions whereby one can

adjust to the reality of their own power *because* when in the state of deep suffering, people don't believe they have power. We all have power in different amounts, even when we think we've lost it. A good spiritual friend can remind us of the power we think we have lost, and a really good spiritual friend helps us navigate change in times of transition.

Now friends, my spiritual friends, the time is here for us to reflect on the cultural atmospheres we find ourselves in. Please give some thought to where you live and with whom you live. Do the conditions in the places you usually find yourself support thriving? Where do you see loving kindness, compassion, equanimity, and sympathetic joy in the laws and policies of your households, neighborhoods, and countries? Are the people around you living into their power, living in the midst of feeling disempowered, on the road to adjusting to their power, using their power for good, in need of support of the wholesome uses of power? Is your power, as a Buddhist woman, typically used secretly or sparingly? I asked the question about secretly for a reason.

I participated, as a teacher, in a program about Buddhist women and leadership. I suggested to the group that we watch the debate between two U.S. presidential candidates, one a White man, the other a Black woman. For the U.S., it was a historic match up. As you can imagine, there was some pushback to the idea that Buddhist women, even in a leadership course, should not watch a political debate. I believe it was a reaction because some Buddhists have been taught to ignore politics. My view is that politics, at its foundation, is about the organization of people to decide the conditions for our attempts at living together. Consequently, problems and solutions arise from these organizations of people, so to ignore the phenomena of our co-existence, co-being, and opportunities for collaboration is to negate the importance of knowing the causes and conditions of our suffering and relief from our suffering. As Buddhist practitioners, we say we don't want to live in ignorance, so let's pay attention to how politics is affecting us all, especially when we've been told to turn away from the conditioned realities around us. The subjugation of women manifests through politics, policy, and laws, and compassionate women work to prevent suffering.

One of the teachers who watched the debate said that she learned, as a woman, that she should not go toe-to-toe against a man. Her method of using her power would be subversive because she did not want to experience the repercussions of punishment that was sure to follow if she succeeded in outdoing a man in the public eye. Let's reflect on this a moment. The Buddhist teacher didn't say that she would not use her power, but that she would use it skillfully. That is not to say that the woman political candidate did not use her power skillfully. She most certainly did and *had* to because that particular debate game is not played any other way. She won the debate on skill, truthfulness, and calling out the dehumanization of others, but alas, millions of people in the U.S. do not judge their representatives on Buddhist values. The woman candidate was temporarily disempowered, and has taken the time necessary to adjust to the power she still has. One way I know that the time and energy it takes to adjust to the reality of our power, supported by human and Buddha intelligence, is when the comeback from defeat shines as relational resilience – a remarkable quality that inspires others to engage. Can we, as spiritual friends, provide the nutriments to bring the downtrodden back to life like Sujata did for Siddhartha Gautama?

After years of observing Black women in the U.S. hold positions of political power whereby they were obligated to hold the then-former U.S. president accountable to the rule of law, I felt that his return to office would mean terrible things for Black women. I developed and offered a course on spiritual direction whereby we reflected on assessing levels of power,

whether a sense of dignity that needed to be recaptured, whether there were any emotional or psychological injuries for having to erase their work in DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion), whether they were being stigmatized and dehumanized, and whether a plan could be created for empowerment. I hope that this course was in the spirit of being a good spiritual friend to help women get back up and keep moving upward and forward after defeat.

I mentioned earlier that I am a counselor and scholar. I did my doctoral research on African-American women who practice Buddhism. I learned through that research that these women, who practice mindfulness in the Insight Meditation tradition, value loving kindness meditation, going on meditation retreats, defining no-self or non-self as interdependence, embracing African spirituality and/or being of Christian and Buddhist traditions. In short, they used the wisdom and experience of their entire lives to support their awakening. They were cultivating relational resilience – the ability to be mostly nonjudgmental, embracing of differences, and not oppressive people *even though* they belong to multiple oppressed groups. I call this remarkable because conventional wisdom would suggest that these women would be downtrodden, facing difficulty in having positive relationships, but because of their deep commitments to Buddhist practice and philosophy, they aren't severely damaged by being vilified. Isn't that remarkable, relational resilience? This is another way of saying through Buddhism and life's vicissitudes, we can learn to see, with as little prejudice and judgement as possible, life's ups and downs, empowerment, disempowerment, and adjustments and re-adjustments to the reality of power as a means of learning how to skillfully use power to speak truth where there is deceit, declare interconnection where there is dehumanization, generosity where there is greed, and power where there is disempowerment.

Friends, and may I say kin, since we all belong one human family, we don't have forever to try and get things right between us. If someone were to ask you the question, "How many more children have to die of starvation to get you activated to support a hunger program?" what number would you state? Let's think about this quietly. How many more children have to die of starvation to get activated to support a hunger program? How many more women have to be raped before we get activated to support an anti-rape program? How many more girls have to be sold into sexual bondage before we support a freedom movement? We can go on and on. You don't have to be involved in every movement. Choose one close to home. And while supporting that cause, we need to think globally and remind those in power, because in addition to personal and spiritual power, we also have social and political power. One look at our troubled world tells us that we can do better than we have been doing.

Whether we believe it in our hearts that a global transformation of the human heart is possible or not, let's have faith in the Buddha's teachings that even if you are being torn limb by limb by bandits, you will not abandon the heart and mind of loving kindness and will have the mindful awareness to remind the perpetrator that they can do better than they are doing. The Buddha told Anguilimala, the man who intended to kill him: "Stop!" With loving presence of mind, the Buddha told Anguilimala that he needed to needed to stop murdering people and had to stop living in ignorance. This koan caused Anguilimala to fall to his knees in devotion.

Kinfolk, at this dangerous time in world history, it is time for all us to fall to our knees in devotion to the goodness that is part of human intelligence, informed by the awakened intelligence that knows our sorrow, and the sorrows of the world, are the beginning of wisdom. The knowledge of our sorrow is what helps us empathize with others. The power to empathize with others is the foundation of human civilization. Human evolution, a kind of karmic restructuring that values wisdom and compassion, can be hastened when Buddhist women speak

truth to deception and, when we get together as we are getting together at this extraordinary conference, to strengthen our interconnections. Like Indra's Net, our cosmic interconnectivity is inescapable, as the mirrors of our mind shining and reflect throughout space and time. Recognizing our interdependence, we polish our gems and our capacity to reflect, without distortion, our true Buddha nature and receive that pristine reflection from others.

We are all shining stars, grateful for our neighborly shining stars, reflecting and expanding all good qualities. My faith in humanity is strengthened by Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women, by our collective joy in coming together to learn and reflect on how we can best navigate changes in times of transition. By transforming despair into an opportunity to cultivate the reality of our power, we wake up to the remarkable relational resilience that we embody. We must pay attention and navigate transition as skillfully as possible, for the benefit of all. Let's do this together!

The Changing and Challenging Roles of *Bhikkhunī*s in Sri Lanka

Bhikkhuni Kundasale Subhagya

This paper studies the changes and challenges of *bhikkhuni*s in Sri Lanka over time. The research is based on observations of the slow modifications, gradual development, and social location of Sri Lanka *bhikkhuni*s as they actively participate and contribute to every aspect of society. Data for the study has been collected from both primary and secondary sources, relevant monographs, and religious texts. An ethnographic study has been conducted using direct observation and interviews with Buddhist monks, nuns, and laypeople.

According to the Buddha's advice, the term "four assemblies" refers to the community of Buddhist disciples, divided into the following four groups: *bhikkhu*s, *bhikkhunī*s, male lay followers (*upāsaka*), and female lay followers (*upāsikā*). Five years after the Buddha's enlightenment in the 6th century BCE, the *bhikkhunī* order was established by the Buddha at the specific request of his foster mother, Mahāprajāpatī Gotamī. The Buddha asked Mahāprajāpatī Gotamī to accept eight strict rules, the *atta garudhamma*.[1] At first, *bhikkhunī*s received *upasamapadā* (full ordination) from the Buddha, and then from the *bhikkhu sangha* only. Then the Buddha suggested that the *bhikkhunī sangha* come to ask the required questions and participate in the ordination process. The *bhikkhunī sangha* alone gives the ordination and the *bhikkhu*s confirm and complete the process. This was the beginning of what is called "dual ordination" as opposed to ordination by *bhikkhu*s alone.

The Buddha was convinced of the women's ability to practice, and highly praised the attainments of many enlightened *bhikkhunī*s in his communnity. The Buddha had two chief *bhikkhu*s, Sāriputta and Moggallāna; likewise, he had two foremost *bhikkhunī*s, Uppalavannā and Khemā. According to the Buddhist literature, there were also nearly 75 *arahant mahatheri*s, who were great disciples of the Buddhasāsana.

During the reign of Emperor Asoka (304–232 BCE), Buddhism was well established in India. Emperor Asoka sent his own son, Mahinda Thera, to Sri Lanka to teach the Dhamma and establish the *bhikkhu sangha*. Princess Ānula, the sister-in-law of the Sri Lankan king, converted to Buddhism and wished to get ordained and join the *sangha*. Mahinda Thera said: "I am not authorized to give ordination for female lay disciples" and suggested inviting his sister, Sanghamittā Therī, from India, together with other *bhikkhunī*s, to establish female ordination in Sri Lanka.

In 245 BCE, Arahanta Bhikkhunī Sanghamittā, the daughter of Emperor Asoka, left her home in India and traveled to Sri Lanka to establish the *bhikkhunī sangha* there. She brought with her a branch from the *bodhi* tree, carried in a golden vase. This historical incident, with the *bhikkhunī*s leaving India for Sri Lanka to facilitate the first ordination for Princess Ānula, marked the beginning of the female ordination lineage traveling outside of India. Centuries later, the *bhikkhunī* lineage traveled from Sri Lanka to other lands in Asia, and eventually throughout the world.

In 1017, Cholian tribes, who were not Buddhist, came from India and conquered the island of Sri Lanka. When they ruled Sri Lanka, they did not encourage Buddhist practices and created many obstacles for the monastic orders. As a result, during the 50 years of Cholian rule, the *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī* orders gradually disappeared. When a new king took over the country, the Cholian invaders were expelled. During this period. local Buddhist practices returned and the new king resolved to revive the monastic *sangha*. To do so, he needed to bring *bhikkhu*s from

Siam (now Thailand) and Burma (now Myanmar) to reestablish the Buddha *sāsana*. However, there were no *bhikkhunī*s in those countries to facilitate or conduct the ordination process for lay female devotees who wished to join the *sangha,* so the *bhikkhunī* order in the Theravāda tradition died out during the latter period of Sri Lankan Buddhist history. Nevertheless, Buddhist women continued to practice the Buddhadhamma. According to historians, roughly 1,500 years ago, Sri Lankan *bhikkhunī*s took lineage of full ordination for nuns to China, whence it spread to Korea and Taiwan. Over the centuries, *bhikkhunī* orders have thrived in these countries.

The revival of the Theravāda *bhikkhunī sangha* began in 1996 in Sarnath, India, , where the Buddha preached his first sermon, under the auspices of Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women and the Mahabodhi Society of India. According to the written records of the Mahabodhi Society of India, this program was presided over by Korean *bhikkhunī*s and hundreds of *bhikkhu*s from Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, Tibet, Korea, and Nepal. Their robes spanned a range of colors, from saffron to maroon.

The first ten Sri Lankan nuns who received higher ordination were selected from about 300 nuns who applied for Buddhist Missionary Service in India. Prior to their arrival in India, the nuns who were selected were given residential training for eight months at the Parama Dhamma Chetiya Pirivena, Ratmalana, Sri Lanka, in a program that included Dhamma, *vinaya*, and English. After receiving the ordination, these *bhikkhunī*s received two years of training in India. Thousands of Buddhist laypeople from all over the world and many *bhikkhu*s and *bhikkhunī*s gathered to witness this major breakthrough in Buddhist history.

Presently, there are nearly 5,000 Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka ,including 3,500 fully ordained *bhikkhunī*s, 1,000 *dasa silmātā*s (ten-precept nuns), and 500 *anagārikā*s. The higher ordination (*upasampadā*) for *bhikkhunī*s is conducted by three organizations in Sri Lanka: Dambulla, Naugala, and Dekadhuwala. All three organizations are well organized according to the *vinaya*, and the higher ordination training programs and ceremonies are held annually. Higher ordination programs in Sri Lanka are conducted and monitored by a qualified senior *bhikkhu sangha* and the senior *bhikkhunī sangha*.

Although Sri Lankans have been the pioneers of restoring the Theravāda *bhikkhunī* higher ordination, this initiative has not only been for the benefit of Sri Lankans; many foreign *sāmanarī*s and *sikkhamānā*s also come to receive higher ordination in Sri Lanka. Hoeever, even though Sri Lanka has a large number of fully ordained *bhikkhunī*s, and even though Sri Lanka has become the world center for higher ordination for women in the Theravāda tradition, the Sri Lankan government, the Ministry of Buddhist Affairs, and most of the leading *bhikkhu*s of the three major chapters of the *bhikkhu sangha* (Siyam, Amarapura, and Rāmaña) do not agree to give legal, social, or religious validity and recognition to the *bhikkhunī*s of Sri Lanka.

Social and Legal Considerations

Sri Lanka is a developing country firmly established in Theravada Buddhism. Since its early establishment, there have been ups and downs in the Buddhist dispensation in Sri Lanka. For example, the nuns' community died out in the 11th century. In 1905, the mims community was restored and in 1996, the higher ordination for nuns took place and thus the Theravāda *bhikkhunī* ordination was reestablished. However, even though nearly three decades have passed since the revival of the Theravāda *bhikkhunī* ordination, Sri Lankan *bhikkhunī*s are still struggling with issues of social status, human rights, and legal rights.

The Sri Lankan government and the Ministry of Buddhist Affairs still have not made preparations or implemented rules to give national identity cards to *bhikkhunī*s in Sri Lanka. Legally, the government and the Ministry of Buddhist Affairs give priority to the *dasa silmātā*s, based on the advice of the Sri Lankan *bhikkhu sangha*. The *samanerī*s and *bhikkhunī*s must get approval from the association of *dasa silmātā*s for every single personal matter. Most of the time, the Association of Dasa Silmātās does not approve the documents and, because of that, many *bhikkhunī*s miss out on opportunities for higher education, passports, and voting rights. Many *bhikkhunī*s in Sri Lanka still use their lay identity for situations of personal need. Not only that, but also at any religious or social event the Sri Lankan government or Ministry of Buddhist Affairs does not use the termy "*bhikkhunī*" to introduce fully ordained Buddhist nuns to the audience. *Dasa silmātā* or *maniyo* (mother) are the common terminologies they use in public to recognize *bhikkhunī*s.

The all-island Buddhist Nun's Association – Dasa Silmātā Jathika Mandalaya (SMJM) – is the organization conducted by the *dasa silmātā*s, the ten-precept Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka who have the approval of the government and the Ministry of Buddhist Affairs. Every district in Sri Lanka has a branch of this organization, which is run by the resident nuns of the district. This is an active organization that encourages and solves all kinds of problems of Buddhist nuns. But this organization only gives membership to *dasa silmātā*s. Therefore, the *bhikkhunī*s have established an all-island *bhikkhunī* assoiation with branches in most districts, but it is not approved by any of the authorities. These divisions make it difficult to achieve the common goals of the ordained women.

Educationsl Development

Education is, indeed, needed for the development of capable Buddhists in the world. However, in Sri Lanka, none of the Buddhist nuns' education centers were sponsored by the government until 2017. Due to major efforts by Sri Lankan Buddhist nuns, the government finally approved 12 education centers for Buddhist nuns as public schools. Now, more than 430 students are studying at these education centers and 30 Buddhist nuns are working as teachers. This education centers for Buddhist nuns are sponsored by the government, including textbooks and teachers' salaries. Student nuns can complete secondary education at these centers – an excellent achievement compared to earlier periods of history. At the advanced level, the nuns must go for private classes, which are expensive in Sri Lanka. This poses a major barrier for nuns who wish to continue their higher education.

Presently, there are more than 100 Buddhist nuns (including *dasa silmātās* and *bhikkhunī*s) who are working in government service as teachers and in many departments. There are currently *bhikkhunīs* working as university lecturers in Sri Lanka. It is wonderful to see that one *bhikkhunī* is working as a deputy director for the Education Department in Sri Lanka. Every year, two or three Buddhist nuns graduate from the universities, obtaining internal and external degrees. When compared with the past, we can see that the number of educated nuns with a sound knowledge of languages, including English, is increasing. Most of the young nuns are capable in the use technology, including computers and smart phones.

These education centers are called Sīlamātā Adyapana Āyatana, education centers for ten-precepts nuns. This may be fine for ten-precept nuns, but in my interview with the Bhikkhuni Supeshala (Deputy Director for Education), I founded that it is prohibited to use the word

bhikkhunī in any official letters or documentaries on education centers for Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka, which demonstrates the unfairness of the authorities.

Religious Activities

Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka are active participants of all kinds of religious activities in the country. Most Buddhist nuns have their own nunneries and monasteries, which follow a daily routine. The nuns make offerings to the Buddha three times per day. Sri Lankan Buddhist nuns are capable of conducting Dhamma teachings, guiding meditations, and almsgiving programs. It is good to see that in some villages Buddhist monks and nuns are invited together for almsgiving programs, though they sit separately. Recently, Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka also participate in and lead funeral rituals, which has received negative attention from the monks.

As a patriarchal society, Sri Lankan *bhikkhunī*s must get approval from the *bhikkhu*s for every religious and social event. There are few nunneries and monasteries who conduct independent religious activities without the blessings of the *bhikkhu sangha*. The majority of the Buddhist community in Sri Lanka is run by the *bhikkhu sangha* and Buddhist nuns are under its control of them. Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka lack independence.

Conclusion

The leadership of Sri Lankan Buddhist nuns in moving toward gender equity and sustainable development is equivalent to the contributions of monks. As the Buddha advised, Buddhist nuns are working for the good of the many and the happiness of the many. Buddhist nuns there are especially working to free women and girls from violence. It is wonderful to see the strong bond that the younger generation has with Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka, which gives a strong indication of the future of the country. It is important that they develop a strong social awareness of the legal issues facing *bhikkhunīs* in Sri Lanka and work to find suitable solutions vis-a-vis the authorities. It is a positive sign that many young girls are entering the Buddhist nuns' community; in the villages, women are often encouraged and empowered. Sadly, Sri Lankan Buddhist nuns are under stress due to male dominance in society. It is wonderful that there is very strong uinity among Sri Lankan *bhikkhunī*s and together they are facing all challenges with determination to make things better for future generations.

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Note

[1] *Gotami Sutta,* AN 8.53 (London: Pali Text Society).

The Changing Roles of Buddhist Women: Empowerment, Feminism, and Leadership

Pai Ling Loh

Buddhism, frequently perceived through the lens of its monastic traditions and a predominantly male monastic ideal, offers a unique perspective on gender roles. Yet, throughout history, lay Buddhist women have consistently played vital roles in shaping and enriching Buddhist communities and societies. In today's changing world, Buddhism needs a re-evaluation of these roles. As gender boundaries shift and societal expectations evolve, lay Buddhist women face new challenges and opportunities to express their faith and contribute meaningfully.

This presentation explores the journey of a Buddhist woman leader, drawing on my personal experiences. With over 25 years of service and leadership in Malaysia's prominent national Buddhist organization, the Buddhist Missionary Society Malaysia, I will share insights into women's empowerment, feminism, and leadership in contemporary Buddhism. The reflections will be structured around four key areas:

1. The Evolving Landscape
2. Navigating Challenges and Embracing Opportunities
3. Assuming the Mantle of Leadership
4. Empowerment Through Action

The Evolving Landscape

Since the time of the Buddha, codified rules have existed for both monastics and lay practitioners. The *Patimokkha* or *Vinaya* outlined monastic disciplines for *bhikkhus* (227 rules) and *bhikkhunis* (311 rules). The *Sigalovada Sutta*, in contrast, details the roles and responsibilities of lay followers.

While the *bhikkhuni* precepts seem more numerous, a closer look suggests they were designed for the well-being of both genders and the harmony of the *sangha*. Women who joined the monastic order were empowered to engage in the same practices as men and could attain *arahantship*. Examples include Mahapajapati Gotami, who petitioned for the establishment of the *bhikkhuni sangha*;[1] and Kisagotami, known through the mustard seed parable;[2] and Patacara, whose life was marked by profound loss.[3]

The Buddha's affirmation of women's capacity for enlightenment was revolutionary. As reflected in *Anguttara Nikaya* 8.51, women can realize all stages of enlightenment, including *arahantship*. The precepts for lay Buddhists are identical for both *upasakas* (men) and *upasikas* (women). Buddhist texts record lay *arahants* showing that spiritual attainment is not limited to monastics. Examples include Bahiya Daruciriya[4] and Yasa[5] (male) and Khujjutara, Queen Samavati's servant; and Nandamata, also known as Velukantaki[6] (female).

While lay *arahants* were fewer, women were prominent among them. Khujjuttara was praised by the Buddha for her learning (*etadaggam*) and was known as Bahussuta for her exceptional memory. These lay *arahants* typically entered the monastic order or passed away soon after as *arahantship* is incompatible with continued household life. Spiritual cultivation and development therefore are equally accessible to all, regardless of gender.

Navigating Challenges and Embracing Opportunities

In November 2011, I was elected to cover for Dato' Chee Peck Kiat, the sixth president of BMSM, who had fallen ill. I had mixed feelings: gratitude for the opportunity to serve, and apprehensive being the first woman to be deputized for the position of president. My *saddha* (faith) in the Dhamma did give me strength. I was fortunate to have the guidance of BMSM's invaluable advisers. Dato' Ir Ang Choo Hong, our lay advisor and former president, offered support and advice. I was also blessed to be able to consult the BMSM Religious Advisor, Venerable Mahinda, whose wisdom and kindness were a source of encouragement. I am grateful to both of them.

Today, BMSM has a good team of Central Management Committee members. Even with diverse skills and backgrounds, we were able to work together. An important factor was the members' openness to respect and support their leader, showing gender is not a factor.

My advice to all Buddhist women is to embrace opportunities, have faith in the Dhamma, and serve with gratitude, confidence, and joy. Do not let gender be a barrier. Leverage your unique feminine skills to enhance service; this creates space for women to participate actively in Buddhist communities.

Assuming the Mantle of Leadership

In 2013, I was officially elected as the seventh president of BMSM. Up to now, I have served six terms, a total of 11 years, as president. My journey with BMSM began in 2000 as a parent enrolling my foster daughter (the youngest daughter of my single-mother sister) in the Kajang Sunday Dhamma School. I was elected to the BMSM Kajang Branch committee in 2003, and became its honorary secretary in 2009. I moved up to the national level when elected as BMSM's first female vice president that same year.

A good leader has to be a good follower. I learned from exemplary presidents: Dato' Ir Ang Choo Hong (2001-2007) and Dato' Chee Peck Kiat (2009-2012). Stepping into leadership myself, I drew on the experience I had gained as a follower. My first five years as president focused on completing ongoing projects:

(1) Consecration and opening of the Shrine Hall of BMSM Samadhi Vihara (2012 and 2013)
(2) Renovation of BMSM Kajang: (2014 and 2016)
(3) Development of the BMSM-Pa Auk Dhammavijaya Meditation Centre (2012-2024)

BMSM also embarked on formalizing its nationwide presence by establishing branches in each State. This was to reconnect with members recruited by the Founder, the late Ven Dr K Sri Dhammananda, in his fifty-four years of dhammaduta service traveling the length and breadth of Malaysia. Through efforts in the "Connect, Communicate, and Engage " initiative between 2015 and 2022, BMSM set up branches in seven states, with six more to go.

Another significant development in directing BMSM was the expansion of our presence beyond our birth temple, the Buddhist Maha Vihara in downtown Kuala Lumpur. This was inevitable with the population dispersal and migration from the major urban center. BMSM proactively established Samadhi Vihara in Shah Alam and later developed a Buddhist center in Malaysia's new administrative capital of Putrajaya.

The Malaysian government had designated an enclave in Putrajaya for the five major faiths (other than Islam) practiced in the country. BMSM was successfully awarded a 0.67-acre site to establish a house of worship representing the Buddhist faith. Construction of the BMSM

Pusat Buddhis Dhammaduta Malaysia (PBDM) began in 2017, and it opened its doors in May 2023. Today PBDM stands as a national Buddhist center, operating as BMSM National Headquarters and home for the BMSM Putrajaya Branch.

A milestone accomplishment of BMSM turning 60 in 2022 was marked by a renewed vision "To Touch Lives with Dhamma " and Mission "To Cultivate and Be the Dhammaduta of Service, Purity and Wisdom ".

These achievements showcase teamwork and underscore that women can lead effectively and inspire meaningful change. They also demonstrate the supportive spirit of our Dhamma brothers who have embraced and encouraged women leaders worthy of their trust.

The appointment to the Malaysian Government's Committee for the Promotion of International Religious Understanding among Adherents in 2011 provides clear and compelling evidence that women can be empowered to lead effectively. I have been reappointed to this Committee, now renamed Committee on Interfaith Harmony, for the new 2025-2026 term.

In the international arena, I have been given the privilege to serve as the chair of the Interfaith Dialogue Standing Committee of the World Fellowship of Buddhists and vice president of the International Association of Religious Liberal Women.

Empowerment Through Action

From personal experience, I have found that empowerment through action, grounded in the Dhamma, is effective when framed through the following three approaches: leading by example, recognizing imperfections, and leveraging strengths.

Leading by Example. Leading by example means embodying the Dhamma in action. It is not about authority or dominance but about inspiring others through one's conduct and demeanor, rooted in virtues such as *metta* (loving-kindness), *karuna* (compassion), and *panna* (wisdom). The Buddha, in the *Mangala Sutta,* listed qualities like respect, humility, contentment, and gratitude as blessings to be cultivated. A leader who embodies these qualities becomes a role model worthy of emulation. In the *Dhammapada* (Verse 158), the Buddha emphasises setting an example through one's conduct: "One should first establish oneself in what is proper; then only should one instruct others. Such a wise person will not be reproached. " By prioritizing ethical conduct over self-interest, demonstrating humility, and fostering inclusivity, such actions speak louder than words. They break stereotypes and prove that leadership is not defined by gender but by character, commitment, and the ability to inspire.

Recognizing Imperfections. Acknowledging one's imperfections is strength, not weakness. It aligns with the teaching of *anicca* (impermanence) and *anatta* (not-self), reminding us that no one is perfect, and growth comes from accepting our limitations. As the Buddha taught in the *Anguttara Nikaya* 4.159, "One who sees their own faults clearly is wise; one who covers them up is foolish. "This encourages self-reflection and honesty, which are essential for personal and collective growth. Leaders who openly acknowledge their own and others' faults create a culture of sincerity and trust. This shows that leadership is not about being flawless or condemning faults but embracing imperfections to learn from our mistakes and improve.

Leveraging Strengths. The opposite of embracing imperfections is leveraging the strengths of those we lead, tapping their potential to bring out each individual's best. It is about recognizing the value of diverse perspectives, approaches, and strengths in others. In the *Anguttara Nikaya* 4.28, the Buddha compares a wise teacher to a skilled gardener who knows how to cultivate plants according to needs. Similarly, a good leader identifies the unique

strengths of each individual and provides the right conditions to flourish. The *Dhammapada* (Verse 124) states, "If a person does what is good, they should do it again and again. They should find joy in it, for joy is the accumulation of good. " This highlights the value of encouraging others to use their strengths for meaningful and skillful actions.

Through the Buddhist principle of non-discrimination, the inherent worth and potential of beings are recognized. Embracing these strengths, leaders demonstrate that true leadership is not about power over others, but empowering others. This also highlights the Buddhist values of interdependence and interconnectedness, recognizing that individual well-being is linked to the well-being of the whole. It challenges the notion that leadership is inherently masculine and demonstrates that feminine qualities are equally valuable and effective.

Conclusion

The evolving roles of Buddhist women represent a dynamic and ongoing process. As traditional gender roles continue to shift, they open up new opportunities for Buddhist women to embrace leadership, serve the Dhamma, and deepen their spiritual growth in the process. By sharing my experiences as a Buddhist leader, grounded in both personal experience and the timeless principles of the Dhamma, I hope to shed light on the fact that Buddhist women can make dynamic contributions that will inspire further dialogue and understanding.

The path forward requires us to continue embracing these evolving roles, fostering inclusivity, and recognizing the unique strengths that women bring to the leadership of Buddhist communities in the 21st century and beyond.

In closing. I leave you one key takeaway. True leadership is about character, compassion, and wisdom – qualities that transcend gender and inspire us all to walk the path of liberation together.

Notes

1. AN 8.51 & Thig 157-162
2. Dhp 114 & Thig 10
3. Dhp 113 & Thig 112-116
4. Udana 1.10
5. Vinaya Mahavagga
6. AN 7.53

Queerness Embodied by Buddhism

Tashi Choedup

I am a transgender person, a Buddhist monastic, and a social justice worker, not a scholar, researcher, or academic. I put together this writing as an individual who is attempting to share with my Buddhist sangha and queer sangha the peculiar relationship I cherish between my queer self and Buddhist self. What I share here are my thoughts, feelings, and experiences from my lived reality and encounters that were offered to me by my teachers and friends to whom I am very grateful.

The title of this paper, "Queerness Embodied by Buddhism," is meant to simply convey some of my intimate emotions concerning the Buddha as my teacher, Dharma as my guardian, and Sangha as my guide.

Even though this subject matter is something that I engaged with in my contemplation and reflection for the past few years, this is the first time I am sharing it with a larger community through such a formal medium as this. What I am sharing here is personal to me and also is beyond personal as much of what I share is an offering I received from the communities that I inhabit and friendships I cherish. I request the listener, the reader, to engage with my nascent thoughts with loving kindness and openness.

Queerness

As Buddhists, one of the most significant things we study is the 'conventional truth' and the 'ultimate truth.' Irrespective of how we progress in our understanding of these truths, we very much live in conventional reality. In the Buddhist presentation of reality, the world itself is conventional, and this conventional world keeps producing conventions or norms. Depending on the geographical, cultural, and socio-political contexts, they differ across the globe. However, one thing common across the world is that all societies live by certain norms, mostly enforced by the powerful and dominant of that society.

Marriage and progeny are examples of such norms that are highly regulated and enforced and commonplace across cultures around the world. If someone either refuses to get married at all or decides not to have children after the acceptable marriage, both cisgender men and women will have to face respective consequences of their own kind. These consequences range from losing standing in society, being considered deviant, and being disowned by the natal family, and in some cases, particularly that of cis women, it could result in physical violence.

Although in the contemporary world 'queer' is a label used for people of diverse sexual and gender identities, anyone who does not fit into the society's mold of 'normal' is 'queer' even if they are not labeled with the exact word. In this scope, it is not just the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and asexual folks who embody queerness; many other folks do it in their contexts and lived realities. Essentially, anyone who fails to comply with the "norms" will be excluded by the 'mainstream' world and deemed not respectable.

Society has been structured in a clear hierarchy framework, and everyone's position in that framework is well dictated. This hierarchy operates in the confines of race, gender, caste, class, religion, ethnicity, and so on. Now, in this manner, power is very neatly distributed, and everyone is expected to live within the confines of this framework. This structure and system have been developed to this form and shape through generations of control, policing, and violence, and these tools are used very efficiently to this day to maintain it.

LGBTQIA+ folks disrupt this entire arrangement and enrage the 'normal' in the world. This involves not just queer folks in terms of gender and sexuality, but also queer defined as cis women who refuse to marry; interreligious, interracial, intercaste couples; married couples who choose not to have children; people involved in nonmonogamous relationships: those who engage in nonnormative sexual practices; and so on. These individuals challenge the status quo and power that has been so carefully nurtured and guarded. To protect the same, the "normal" of humankind continues to engage in the most inhuman practices.

In this broader view of existence, those who fail or refuse to fit into the mold of "normal" risk their "respectability," are people who embody queerness, the queerness that challenges the world order and its power, questions its notions and beliefs, erodes the structures and systems, redefines desire and the very notion of existence, and demands a renewed look at the world and the self. It is this queerness that threatens and scares the "mainstream" and its "power". This is queerness, and many of us embody it in this world of joy and struggle.

Buddha is Queer

Many great practitioners and teachers narrate Tathagata's life from the perspective of their understanding. HMany historians have presented the Buddha's story in different narratives. anthropologists have made diverse presentations on the Buddha and Buddhism. Theologians have done a range of readings of the Buddha and his life.

At least according to some presentations of the Buddha's life, he was born into a royal family, and destined to be a ruler. Different encounters with suffering moved him to the urgency of finding answers to resolving this suffering. The colloquial presentation of this is that Siddhartha Gautama encounters old age, sickness, and death, and that displaces him from his life, metaphorically and eventually literally. Being born in a family of power and privilege with access to a good deal of resources, with a prediction that he would rule the world if he chose to, one would imagine that Siddhartha Gautama should have championed authority, power, or socialist or communist approaches.

But the Buddha opted not to choose the most predictable path of human nature, probably something to do with being a *bodhisattva* for many lifetimes! He chose not to seek answers to address suffering in the very system that inflicts suffering, nor was he going to rely on worldly power to remove suffering. Both of these are the most "normal" and most instinctively (dictated by habit) sought-out responses of humankind. We want to fix any problem by either fixing the system or by creating a new system or securing ourselves from problems and difficulties by accumulating power. For the Buddha, these "normal" choices were not choices.

He decided to seek out answers outside the scope of these frameworks, outside these systems and habitual instincts. One might argue that the Buddha opted to take up asceticism, which was not so uncommon in his time. However, he did not choose to surrender to any popular ascetic tradition available but rather engaged with many with a sense of inquiry and questioning. Thus, his approach was questioning and queer!

As he continued on his path, performing severe ascetic practices for six years, living on simple food, with five devoted followers who considered him a great ascetic, he did not lose sight of his inquiry, and he abandoned that path the moment he realized it was not the way. Unlike many of us who would conform to certain things for the sake of the respect and acceptance we get in return, he refused to give into that conformity and his followers' admiration and respect. That is queer again.

After he attained Buddhahood, he chose to engage with the world, share his learning and realizations, and help beings experience the state of awakening he attained. He did not consider his accomplishment of awakening a result of his effort and karma alone, and he did not use it as a reason to excuse himself from engaging with the world. The hope for a world that seemed unprepared for what he has to offer is queer.

Many of his actions, such as the ordination of Upāli, an oppressed caste person before his natal family cousins, recognizing Upāli as senior to them, thus skillfully destabilizing the notion of caste supremacy. In another case, he receives Amrapali, a courtesan with an openness that people like her rarely meet in the world. Even as he established an order of both ordained and lay *sangha*, with ordained beings revered and respected, even before that hierarchy began to settle in he would invite ordained disciples to learn from Vimalakirti, who was not just a lay person but a worldly playboy of his time. These are just some of the Buddha's actions that defy the "normal" and question the "status quo. Such are many of his deeds that are queer.

One might argue that these are just the Buddha's skillful actions and even if they seem queer, it doesn't make the Buddha queer. But what makes a person queer, if not their thoughts, choices, actions? Isn't it embodied through these?

Centuries after Buddhism was practically erased from the geographical landscape where it was born and flourished, Babasaheb Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian Constitution, who belonged to the "untouchable" community, in his fight against millennia of injustice and caste oppression, took refuge in the Buddha and presented the Buddha's teachings as an answer to his community and a means to break away from the Hindu caste system. The majority of Indian Buddhists even today constitute Ambedkarite Buddhists who keep their faith in the Buddha through "Navayana" Buddhism (the new vehicle of Buddhism) proposed by Babasaheb. This is just one historical example to understand how Buddha continues to be an inspiring teacher in challenging the "norm" and questioning the "power," thus destabilising the "status quo" and queering the world!

Relying on the very courage I draw from the Buddha I will dare to stretch this argument a bit further to think of Buddha as a queer person not just in terms of nonnormative actions but also in his sexuality and gender identity.

In the *Great Praise of the Twelve Acts of Buddha*, Acharya Nagarjuna writes the below verse:

> By skill in means, to conform to the conduct
> Of the world, and for avoidance of
> Blameworthiness, you ruled at court,
> Possessed of female retinue – homage to this deed.

Since my first reading, this verse has held my attention, and I continue to think about it even today. Acharya Nagarjuna is not simply praising the Buddha in these verses, he is communicating with a larger audience about the Buddha's deeds and explaining their context in some way. The way I read and understand this particular verse is that it implies that the Buddha, as Siddhartha Gautama, conformed to worldly conventions because that was the skillful thing to do, not because he had a firm belief in them or he unquestioningly subscribed to them. In a sense, the Buddha conformed to worldly conventions when it was needed and also defied them when that was the way ahead on this path. Essentially, he did what needed to be done in pursuit

of enlightenment. Even if the presentation of the Buddha's life is cisgender and heterosexual, he did not conform to norms because they are the only reality, even conventionally!

How do we know for sure his sexuality and how he perceived and experienced his gender before becoming a Buddha? How can we be so sure that historical narratives that get sanitised and shaped by the dominant did not erase any other aspects of his life before becoming a Buddha? And certainly, after enlightenment, how can a Buddha be categorized into the confines of one sexuality and one gender? To become free of our assuming mind and see the Buddha beyond the confinements of the notion that cis heteronormativity is what is required for us to embrace our Buddhist practice open-heartedly. Being able to do that also helps us relate to the world liberated from those assumptions about one's self and others. Thus, for me, the Buddha's queerness is evident in his very existence; it is for us to shed our assumptions and prejudices, and move beyond our comforts to be able to see it, recognize it, and acknowledge it, realizing freedom and joy.

Dharma is Queer

Dharma, the word of the Buddha, requires us to reorient ourselves to the world differently; it inspires us to look beyond what seems to be the truth. It urges us and encourages us to closely examine what we believe in. It helps us deconstruct the popularly accepted views and notions and renounce those that hold no more truth in the face of rational analysis.

Queerness can be understood as a space of possibility (Edelman, 1998; Weiss, 2016). To queer ideas means to engage critically; interpreting moments, thoughts, data, bodies, and the like from multiple directions and perspectives while rejecting traditional norms and values. It challenges (Butler, 1990) and deconstructs binaries in and across cis-hetero patriarchies. Yet, queer theory is not siloed. It emerges with and from seeds sown in fields like Black Cultural Studies (e.g., Mercer, 1994), decolonial studies (e.g., Pérez, 1999), critical race theory (e.g., Harper et al., 1997), and indigenous studies (e.g., Driskill, 2011), among others. (https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/queerness)

Dharma is not a declaration or an announcement that should be abided by and that beings should surrender to. In the *Kalama Sutta,* also called, *Buddha's Charter of Free Inquiry,* the Buddha says:

> Come, Kalamas. Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumor; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another's seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, 'The monk is our teacher.' Kalamas, when you yourselves know: 'These things are good; these things are not blamable; these things are praised by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness,' enter on and abide in them. (https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/soma/wheel008.html)

Thus, the Buddha advises not to accept anything just because it is from scripture or tradition or your teacher, but to investigate and verify it before accepting it. Dharma is to be realized by one's experience, unlike most things in the world, which we accept because they are popular beliefs, said by a charismatic, powerful teacher, or come from a dominant scripture-instructed, powerful institutional dictum.

Similar to Queerness, Dharma does not rely on power and authority; it cannot be enforced by any such means. Both Queerness and Dharma do not exist in power but in freedom of inquiry and experience. As they both run counter to popular beliefs and notions, they both share a commonness of questioning in their journey.

Often, people ask me why there are not many Buddhists in India. Historically speaking, one can possibly look at a range of socio-political circumstances that almost erased Buddhism from India. To revive Buddhism in India, one must deal with the lack of its presence in regional languages, an absence of resources, and other practical reasons. In addition to all these, another reason could be "the society that is rooted in conventions unquestioningly" – a society that finds itself deeply entangled with its conventions without ever questioning them, finding comfort in the familiarity of those conventions and exercising violence to enforce it. It would be difficult for such a society to be open to Dharma that requires them to do quite the opposite of this. When the queer community, challenging normative conventions, is perceived to threaten Indian society, how can that society, be open to Dharma, which demands a deeper questioning of conventions?

Toppling the conventional world is not the agenda of Dharma. The Dharma does not settle into conventions. The Dharma encourages constant investigation, analysis, and shaking up conventions. In that Dharma embodies queerness.

Buddhism and Queerness

Living among lay communities, I am often asked, "What is Buddhism about?" Is it about meditation, asceticism, rituals, or chanting?

Buddhism offers a practice and path to becoming free of suffering in an ultimate sense. It dwells upon the inner workings of the mind to find liberation from suffering.
In the *Upajjhatthana Sutta*, the Buddha teaches about the Five Remembrances:

1. Inevitability of aging
2. Certainty of illness
3. Reality of death
4. Impermanence of possessions and relationships
5. The law of the consequences of the actions

In this way, the Buddha is teaching us to accept our reality and come to terms with the fragility of our existence, rather than fighting it and adding to the suffering.

On the other hand, I believe queerness enables, facilitates, and allows seeing how the so-called secure, sorted world order rooted in control, policing, authority, and power is the cause of so much human and non-human suffering. Queerness attempts to build a counterculture that does not see "Power" as the solution but embraces our shared vulnerability as the way forward toward a liberative transformation.

Dharma helps us move towards a non-dual view of reality, whereas queerness facilitates a non-binary understanding of the world. Queerness is embedded in the Dharma, and Dharma enables and nurtures queerness in its true sense.

Conclusion: Can the Buddhist *Sangha* Not be Queer?

As Rita Gross says in her work *Buddhism beyond Gender*, *"*Buddhism was simply too profound to let the patriarchs have it without protest.*"* Dharma is too precious to be gate-kept by people of certain (privileged) identities, and by all means, that keeping should be considered non-virtuous.

In the same work, Gross goes on to say, “Buddhism requires a feminist reconstruction.” For me as a queer person, it is required to recognise the queerness embedded in Buddhism. Ignoring the queer aspect of Buddhism is like attempting to see the stars and moon without seeing the sky!

So the question to ask is: One can be queer without being a Buddhist, but can one be a practicing Buddhist without being queer? One of the practices to engage in to be a Buddhist is not to abide in conformity, as Buddhists who took refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, either as a lay person or as ordained, even if we attempt to practice a grain of Dharma, how could we not go against the grain of mainstream world? The *Pathamaruparamasutta: Delight in Forms* states,

> The noble ones have seen as happiness
> The ceasing of identity.
> This view of those who clearly see
> Runs counter to the entire world.
>
> What others speak of as happiness,
> That the noble ones say is suffering;
> What others speak of as suffering,
> That the noble ones know as bliss.” (Source: readingfaithfully website)

I hope that as we progress on our paths, we find it less and less difficult to embrace the Queeryana that is integral to Buddhayana.

The Development of Theravāda Bhikkhunīs in Indonesia: Progress Toward Gender Equality in Sangha Agung Indonesia

Julia Surya (Bhikkhuni Thītācārinī Therī)

The development of Theravāda *bhikkhunīs* in Indonesia represents a significant shift in the traditional structure of the Buddhist monastic community. For centuries, the Theravāda tradition has been predominantly male-dominated, with *bhikkhus* (male monks) playing the central role in religious leadership. The ordination of women as *bhikkhunīs*, however, has remained a contentious issue within this tradition. In recent years, however, there has been a remarkable shift in the Indonesian Buddhist landscape, particularly within the context of the Sangha Agung Indonesia (SAGIN), the oldest monastic organization in Indonesia, which was founded by the late venerable Ashin Jinarakkhita in 1959. The Sangha Agung Indonesia comprises monks and nuns from three Buddhist traditions: Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna. Members from these traditions follow their respective *vinaya* and teachings while coexisting harmoniously within the same community.[1] This article explores the progress of Theravāda *bhikkhunīs* in Indonesia, especially Theravāda *bhikkhunī*s of Sangha Agung Indonesia, focusing on the transformative role of *bhikkhu* support in fostering gender equality and empowering women within Buddhist institutions.

Historical Context of *Bhikkhunīs* in Theravāda Buddhism of Sangha Agung Indonesia

Historically, the ordination of women as *bhikkhunīs* in the *Theravāda* tradition has been fraught with challenges. While the Buddha is said to have allowed the ordination of women into the monastic order, many *Theravāda* countries, including Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Myanmar, have faced resistance to the full institutionalization of female ordination. One key issue has been the interpretation of the *vinaya*, the monastic code, which is traditionally understood to restrict the ordination of women in certain contexts.[2]

The situation in Indonesia is unique in several ways. As a predominantly Muslim nation with a rich history of Hindu and Buddhist influence, the Buddhist community in Indonesia has always been a minority. However, with the increasing interest in gender equality and the rise of feminist movements globally, Indonesia's Buddhist community has witnessed growing acceptance of women's ordination. The establishment of Sangha Agung Indonesia (SAGIN) in 1959, which represented the Theravāda tradition in the country, initially focused on ordaining male monks. However, in the last few decades, there has been increasing momentum toward the ordination of women, culminating in the formal recognition of *bhikkhunī*s within SAGIN.

Long before the first restoration of the Theravāda *bhikkhunī* ordination in Sarnath, India, Theravāda *samanerī*s had already appeared in Indonesia. In 1963, the founder of SAGIN, the late Ashin Jinarakkhita, ordained a *samanerī* in accordance with the Theravāda tradition at Vimaladharma Temple in Bandung, West Java, Indonesia. The *samanerī*, named Jinakumari, is recognized as the first Indonesian *bhikkhunī* after a lapse of over 1,000 years. In 1966, due to the absence of a Theravāda *bhikkhunī sangha* at the time, *samanerī* Jinakumari and several other *samanerīs* were sent by Ashin Jinarakkhita to receive full ordination in the Mahāyāna tradition at Po Lin Monastery in Hong Kong.[3] The dedication of Ashin Jinarakkhita endures over time. His compassion and wisdom have been passed down to his disciples and the monks who have joined SAGIN, particularly in relation to the advancement of Buddhist women in Indonesia.

The year 2008 marked a turning point for those who had doubted the emergence of

Theravāda *bhikkhunī*s in the country. It became a significant moment in the history of Buddhist women in Indonesia, as it represented a new opportunity for those committed to pursuing a life as Theravāda *bhikkhunī*s. On February 14, 2008, Nyanasuryanadi Mahāthero performed the first *pabbajja* (ordination) for women at Veluvana Monastery in Ampel, Boyolali, Central Java, Indonesia. Among the women ordained were *anagarinī* Sri Utami and *anagarinī* Julia Surya, who later became known as Bhikkhunī Dhammācārinī and Bhikkhunī Thitācārinī. On May 12, 2012, following a recommendation from Nyanasuryanadi Mahāthero and after four years of training as *samanerī*s, Dhammācārinī and Thitācārinī received full ordination as *bhikkhunīs* in Sri Lanka. Since then, SAGIN has included Theravāda *bhikkhu*s, *bhikkhunīs*, *samaneras*, and *samanerīs*, all of whom have equal opportunities to practice the *dhammavinaya* of the Buddha.

After the ordination of these two *bhikkhuni*s, in the years 2015 and 2016, again the female disciples of the Nyanasuryanadi Mahāthero received full ordination as *bhikkhunīs* in Sri Lanka. Following in the footsteps of his disciples, a *samanerī* who is a member of SAGIN, went to Sri Lanka to receive full ordination as a *bhikkhunī*.

More than a decade after the first Theravāda *bhikkhunī* ordination by SAGIN in Sri Lanka, a new chapter in the development of the Buddha Dhamma in Indonesia was written with the holding of the first Theravāda *bhikkhunī upasampadā* by SAGIN at Borobudur Temple, Magelang, on February 7. This sacred ceremony marked a significant moment for the Buddhist community in the country, as for the first time, six *bhikkhunī* candidates received full ordination at Borobudur, the largest Buddhist temple in the world. Nyanasuryanadi Mahāthero, who is the *mahānayaka* of SAGIN, led the ordination ceremony as *bhikkhu upajjaya* and the Padukka Sumithra Therī of Sri Lanka as *bhikkhuṇī pavattinī*.

With this ordination, SAGIN now has eleven Theravāda *bhikkhunī*s, including six who were recently ordained. This *bhikkhunī* ordination marks an important milestone for the Buddhist community in Indonesia, particularly for SAGIN. Previously, an ordination for bhikkhus was held at Borobudur Temple on May 2, 1970, which included the ordination of the late Jinadhammo Mahathero and several other *bhikkhus*. The late Jinadhammo Mahathero was a member of SAGIN and a renowned meditation teacher in Indonesia.

Challenges and Cultural Norms in Recognizing *Bhikkhunīs*

The recognition of *bhikkhunīs* in Indonesia has faced considerable cultural and normative challenges. Indonesia's social fabric, shaped by patriarchal values, has often relegated women to subordinate roles, particularly within religious institutions. In this context, the ordination of women as *bhikkhunī*s was met with skepticism and resistance from many quarters. Buddhist communities, influenced by traditional interpretations of gender roles and religious texts, were initially reluctant to recognize the legitimacy of female monastics.

Moreover, the broader societal norms in Indonesia, including those derived from Islamic, Hindu, and Christian teachings, placed significant obstacles in the path of women's spiritual empowerment. As a predominantly Muslim nation, the majority of Indonesians were unfamiliar with the concept of female ordination in Buddhism, and the idea of a female monk was often perceived as an anomaly.[4] Additionally, gender-based discrimination in religious and social life further exacerbated the challenges faced by *bhikkhunīs* seeking recognition.

However, with the increasing advocacy for gender equality, both within Buddhism and Indonesian society, the role of women in Buddhism began to change. *Bhikkhunī* ordination was seen not only as an expression of gender equality but also as a significant step toward the institutional transformation of the Buddhist *sangha*. The role of *bhikkhus* of SAGIN in supporting this change became essential for ensuring the success of *bhikkhunī* ordination.

The Role of *Bhikkhus* in Supporting *Bhikkhunīs* in SAGIN

A key factor in the development of *bhikkhunī*s in Indonesia has been the active support of *bhikkhus*. Historically, the *bhikkhu* community has held significant authority in Theravāda Buddhist monastic institutions, and their endorsement of female ordination has been crucial in legitimizing *bhikkhunī*s. The mutual support between *bhikkhu*s and *bhikkhunī*s has played a critical role in fostering inclusivity and creating a collaborative model that facilitates institutional transformation toward gender equality.

*Bhikkhu*s, particularly those in positions of leadership within SAGIN, have been instrumental in advocating for the ordination of women and providing the necessary support for *bhikkhunī*s. Their involvement has been significant not only in ensuring the institutional recognition of female ordination but also in creating a more balanced and egalitarian monastic environment. *Bhikkhu*s and *bhikkhunī*s have worked together to develop educational programs, meditative practices, and community service initiatives that promote the role of women in Buddhist teachings.[5]

Furthermore, the collaboration between *bhikkhu*s and *bhikkhunī*s of SAGIN has facilitated constructive cross-gender dialogue within the Theravāda tradition. This dialogue has challenged traditional gender norms within the monastic community and has fostered a more inclusive interpretation of the Buddhist teachings. By working together, *bhikkhu*s and *bhikkhunī*s have been able to promote the core Buddhist values of wisdom, compassion, and interconnectedness, which align with the principles of gender equality.

Institutional Transformation and Gender Equality

The recognition and empowerment of *bhikkhunī*s in Indonesia are not merely a matter of individual achievement; they represent a broader institutional transformation within Theravāda

Buddhism. As *bhikkhunī*s continue to be ordained and actively participate in monastic life, they contribute to the transformation of Buddhist institutions, ensuring that gender equality is more than just a theoretical ideal; it becomes a practical reality.

Every individual, regardless of gender, possesses the equal potential to attain spiritual realization. Over 2,500 years ago, the Buddha told Ānanda that women, upon renouncing worldly life and practicing the *dhammavinaya*, are capable of achieving perfection (Cv.X.1, 2-3). This principle was also the foundation for Nyanasuryanadi Mahāthero's decision to allow women to embrace the homeless life as Theravāda *bhikkhunī*s. When questioned about his decision to admit women to this monastic path, despite opposition from some Theravāda *bhikkhu*s to the re-establishment of the Theravāda *bhikkhunī sangha*, he responded: "Women possess the same potential as men and are capable of achieving what men have achieved." He emphasized that women have the strength to cultivate moral conduct and develop spiritual and mental qualities in accordance with the Buddha's teachings.[6]

The involvement of *bhikkhunī*s in leadership roles and decision-making processes within the *sangha* has contributed to a more balanced and representative structure within Buddhist institutions. For example, in Indonesia, *bhikkhunī*s have taken on roles in teaching, meditation, and leading community activities, thus demonstrating their integral place within the monastic order. Their participation in religious education and outreach programs has also had a profound impact on the broader society, promoting a more egalitarian approach to religious practice.[7]

By receiving equality and justice from the *bhikkhu sangha*, the revival of the TheravāvS bhikkhunī sangha within SAGIN has made a significant contribution to Buddhism in Indonesia. This revival allows *bhikkhunīs* to freely study and practice the *dhammavinaya*, subsequently enabling them to disseminate the Dhamma to the lay community. As a result, Buddhist women in Indonesia are now provided with the opportunity to receive intensive guidance from the *bhikkhunī*s. Reflecting on the teachings of Mahāpajapati Therī, Buddhist women should not hesitate to exert the same efforts in training themselves and developing their lives according to the Dhammavinaya. As Mahāpajapati Therī expressed,

> If you have any sympathy for me, and if you have any gratitude, then make a substantial effort, all of you, for the continuation of the true doctrine; The Fully Awakened One granted women the going forth when I implored him. Therefore, just as I would rejoice in it, so should you practice it." (ApA.146).

That institutional transformation is not limited to the Buddhist community alone; it also has wider social implications. The recognition of *bhikkhunī*s challenges deeply entrenched gender norms in Indonesian society, where women have historically been marginalized in religious, political, and cultural spheres. By empowering women within the monastic community, the recognition of *bhikkhunīs* also sends a message of social change to the broader Indonesian society, encouraging greater gender equality in other religious and social contexts.

Impact on Society and Broader Social Change

The increasing acceptance and recognition of *bhikkhunī*s in Indonesia has significant implications for gender equality in the broader social and cultural context. As women gain visibility in religious leadership, they challenge traditional gender roles and offer an alternative model of female empowerment. In Indonesia, where women have long faced discrimination in

both public and private spheres, the ordination of women as *bhikkhunī*s signals a shift toward greater social justice and equality.

*Bhikkhunī*s have become advocates for gender equality, not only within the Buddhist community but also in the broader society. Through their teachings and activism, *bhikkhunī*s have helped address social issues such as domestic violence, unequal access to education, and economic empowerment for women. By advocating for women's rights and playing active roles in societal development, *bhikkhunī*s in Indonesia contribute to the broader global discourse on gender equality and social justice. Consequently, the re-establishment of the Theravāda *bhikkhunī sangha* is crucial. Today, Buddhist women in Indonesia are increasingly more active than their male counterparts. With the presence of the Theravāda *bhikkhunī sangha*, these women have the opportunity to receive more focused guidance and support.

The presence of a Theravāda *bhikkhunī sangha* in SAGIN within the monastic community also fosters greater cooperation between male and female monastics, promoting a more harmonious and inclusive approach to spiritual practice. This model of collaborative, gender-inclusive religious practice is increasingly recognized as a vital force in shaping the future of Buddhism, both in Indonesia and worldwide.

Conclusion

The development of Theravāda *bhikkhunī*s in Indonesia represents a significant step toward gender equality in Buddhist monastic traditions. The active support from *bhikkhu*s has played a crucial role in legitimizing female ordination and ensuring the integration of *bhikkhunī*s into the monastic community. This mutual support has not only facilitated the institutional recognition of *bhikkhunī*s but also fostered a collaborative model of monastic life that promotes gender equality and the core Buddhist values of wisdom, compassion, and interconnectedness.

Even though some *bhikkhunī*s may experience discriminatory treatment from the *bhikkhu sangha*, this paper highlights that the Theravāda *bhikkhunī sangha* within SAGIN receives strong support from the *bhikkhu*s. SAGIN greatly values the revival of the *bhikkhunī sangha* within the Theravāda tradition. The organization enables women to embrace the life of a *bhikkhunī*, providing them with the opportunity to study and practice the *dhammavinaya*.

The recognition and empowerment of those *bhikkhunī*s have profound implications for both the Buddhist community and Indonesian society. By challenging entrenched gender norms and promoting social change, the ordination of women as *bhikkhunī*s has contributed to a more inclusive, egalitarian approach to religious practice. As the collaboration between *bhikkhu*s and *bhikkhunī*s continues to shape the future of Buddhism in Indonesia, it offers a hopeful model for the broader global discourse on gender equality in religious contexts.

Notes

1. Julia Surya, et al., "Theravāda Bhikkhunī of Sangha Agung: Equality and Justice in Education, Spiritual Practice and Social Service" (Atlantis Press, 2020), 353–58.

2. Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History, and Practices*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

3. Medya Silvita, "Bhikkhuni Jinakumari and the Early Indonesian Buddhist Nuns," *Compassion and Social Justice*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Yogyakarta: Sakyadhita, 2015), 7–12.

4. R. Wilkinson, *Buddhism in Indonesia: Cultural and Historical Perspectives* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

5. T. Sung, "The Role of Bhikkhunīs in Modern Theravāda Buddhism," *Journal of Buddhist Studies* 33:2 (2016):156–75.

6. Surya, et al., "Theravāda Bhikkhunī."

7. M. Jormakka, "Gender Equality in Buddhist Monasticism: A Global Perspective," *Buddhism Toda*y, 2015.

So That the Sun May Never Set: The Role of Monasticism in Sustaining the Buddhadharma

Thubten Lamsel

In the modern context, monasteries and their monastics no longer serve as the single or central hub for propagating the Buddha's teachings. Dharma centers, online study courses, lay teachers, and "secular Buddhism" abound. All members of the Buddha's four-fold assembly may rightly ask: Is there still an important role – or any role at all – for the ordained Buddhist community in modern times? Taking direction from the Buddha's own words, yes.

Various scriptural sources indicate that Śākyamuni Buddha saw a fully functioning monastic community, able to perform the prescribed monastic rituals, as essential to the longevity of his teachings. This paper has two purposes: (1) to make explicit the connection between the existence of the monastic community and the endurance of the Buddha's teachings, and (2) to outline the impact of efforts made at Sravasti Abbey to establish a *bhiksunī sangha*. The short- and long-term benefits of upholding the Prātimoksa to both the individual and society will be discussed, and the particular power of monastics *in community* highlighted. All members of the Buddha's four-fold assembly benefit when the Buddha's ordained disciples take up their responsibility to practice in community, uphold the precepts purely so that the ten benefits follow, and perform the prescribed monastic rituals so that the sun of the Buddha's teachings will never set.

The Power of the Prātimoksa

At the cusp of entering parinirvāna, Śākyamuni Buddha identified the unique role monastics play in the long abiding of his teachings:

> Do not say after my parinirvāna that pure practitioners have no protector. Now that I have taught the Prātimoksa Sūtra and the excellent Vinaya well, regard these as the World-honored One after my parinirvāna. "If this sūtra remains long in the world, the Buddhadharma will be widespread, and because it is widespread, nirvāna can be attained. Failure to keep the Prātimoksa Sūtra and to conduct the posadha as it should be is like the setting of the sun, when darkness shrouds the entire world. [1]

Throughout the Pāli canon, Śākyamuni Buddha emphasized that he would not enter *parinirvāna* until there were capable disciples from each of the four assemblies – fully ordained monks (*bhiksu*s), fully ordained nuns (*bhiksunī*s), and lay men and women upholding the five lay precepts.[2] Why did the Buddha attribute the long abiding of his teachings to the existence of the *Prātimoksa Sūtra*, and specifically to monastics able to perform the posadha (Pāli: *uposatha*)? In the Vinayapitaka, Śākyamuni Buddha attributed extensive expounding of the teachings and the establishment of monastic precepts as the causes for why the Dharma of some of the past seven *buddha*s lasted longer than others.[3] Just like flowers held together by string are not blown away by the wind, so too, monastics "bound" by precepts do not scatter after a buddha's *parinirvāna* but remain to sustain the Dharma for a long time. Similarly, in the Tibetan Buddhist presentation of the stages of the path to awakening (Tibetan: *lam rim*), the topic of "precious human life" identifies living in a "central land" – a place where there exists a community of *bhiksu*s or

*bhiksunī*s who perform the three principal Vinaya rites – as one of 18 essential conditions for success in one's Dharma practice.[4]

At the time of establishing each precept – 250 for *bhiksu*s and 348 for *bhiksunī*s in the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya – Śākyamuni Buddha listed ten benefits of doing so (Table 1).[5] As Vinaya Master Bhiksunī Wuyin states, "[The Buddha's] actions were geared toward spreading the Buddhadharma and stabilizing the *sangha* assembly, neither neglecting the individual nor the community, and taking a further step to obtain social acceptance."[6] The ten benefits can be understood to have a cause-and-effect relationship, culminating in the "ultimate" (tenth) benefit of the Dharma being sustained for a long time:

> By observing the precepts, we subdue our defilements, those who have a sense of personal integrity and remorse are protected, those who are untamed are disciplined, the sa?gha community is healthy and pure, the general public's faith in Buddhism is strengthened, the Buddhadharma can spread widely to benefit all beings, and the precious Buddhadharma will last long in the world.[7]

These ten benefits encapsulate the broad and multi-faceted purpose of upholding the Prātimok?a precepts, extending far beyond the individual practitioner.

Table 1: The ten benefits of establishing the precepts

To promote harmony within the sangha 1. To direct the monastics 2. To make monastics peaceful and happy 3. To protect monastics	**The ultimate goal** 10. for the Dharma to be sustained forever
To transform society 4. To inspire those without faith 5. To advance the practice of those with faith	
To bring about individual liberation 6. To restrain the restive 7. To stabilize those with a sense of integrity 8. To eliminate present defilements 9. To prevent defilements from arising in the future	

At the individual level, the precepts lead the practitioner to attain liberation (benefits #6-9). His Holiness the Dalai Lama clarifies, "The monastic way of life is praised not because it is inherently worthy of respect, but because it has direct relevance in aiding the development of the three higher trainings."[8] Indeed, Śākyamuni Buddha himself was a monk, and remained so after full awakening, the ethical restraint embodied in the monastic lifestyle being a natural reflection of a pure mind, free of defilements. To remember and uphold hundreds of precepts that regulate how to eat, sleep, walk, talk, and engage with manifold aspects of the external environment, monastics must cultivate strong mindfulness and introspective awareness – two mental factors essential for concentration and wisdom. On the basis of pure ethical conduct, one's mind free from the burden of regret at having committed negativities of body, speech, and mind, concentration and liberating wisdom can naturally grow.

The ability of the precept-holder to transform society (benefits #4-5) is embodied in the story of how Venerables Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana became disciples of the Buddha. Inspired by the impeccable comportment of Bhiksu Aśvajit (P. Assaji), Śāriputra approached him and inquired, "Who is your teacher, and what does he teach?" By simply hearing the "Essence of Dependent Arising Dhāranī," Śāriputra immediately attained stream-entry. Śāriputra later recited the Dhāranī to his spiritual companion Maudgalyāyana, who attained the same realization. Following this, Śāriputra and Maudgalyāyana approached the Buddha and became his disciples foremost in wisdom and supernormal powers respectively, going on to teach and spread the Buddha's Doctrine widely.[9]

This story conveys how the power of the sa?gha lies in their humanity. The true Dharma refuge is not the books that contain the Buddha's words but rather the actualization of them in the minds of practitioners. By being embodied vessels of the Dharma – with actions of body, speech, and mind expressing the principles of nonviolence, contentment, and wisdom – monastics make the practical possibility of the Buddha's teaching tangible. In this way, the visibility of the Sangha, clearly identified by their external transformation of shaved head and robes, has a significant function: to expound the efficacy of the Buddha's teachings through their example of freedom from at least *external* displays of attachment, animosity, and ignorance.

A Community Intent on Virtue

While the Buddha did not require monastics to live in monasteries, the practice of doing so is beneficial. The Dalai Lama advises,

> Lone trees are twisted and felled by the wind, but trees in a forest protect each other from the wind and grow upward together. Similarly, monastics grow in the same direction – the three higher trainings, bodhicitta, and so forth – together. Living together in a monastery – in an environment designed for Dharma practice – they can easily keep their precepts and progress on the path. Monastics support one another in avoiding negativities and help one another to purify negativities.[10]

Whether monastics live in monasteries or not, the three prescribed monastic rituals (the *posadha*, *varsā*, and *pravāranā*) require at least four fully ordained *bhiksu*s or *bhiksunī*s.[11] It is notable that Śākyamuni Buddha specified monastics in community – four or more monastics gathered, "*conducting the posadha as it should be*" – as key to the sun of his teachings remaining long in this world.

To reap the benefits of practicing together, harmony is essential. The Buddha specified six harmonies that, when practiced, ensure the growth of the monastics: harmony in (1-3) body, speech, and mind, and in (4) precepts, (5) views, and (6) requisites. These six harmonies provide a world plagued by conflict with a powerful example that a different way of living is possible. For instance, when monastics treat their spiritual companions with loving-kindness in body, speech, and mind, both publicly and privately, they challenge any social normalization of physical violence, harsh and divisive speech, and malice. When monastics live together while upholding shared guidelines for living and distributing requisites (food, clothing, shelter, medicine) equitably, they demonstrate the possibility of going beyond self-centeredness for the benefit of the collective. What better way to sustain and spread the Buddhadharma than to embody the method and the fruit?

"Safety mechanisms" present within the regulations and rites of monastic life further help to protect the purity of Buddha's teachings and its practitioners and thus sustain its existence in the world. By means of the bi-monthly *posadha*, monastics confess transgressions and restore the purity of their precepts. During the three-month rains retreat (Sanskrit: *varsā*, Pāli: *vassa*), monastics focus on study and practice, refraining from pointing out others' faults or transgressions. Nonetheless, *varsā* concludes with the annual invitation for correction (Sanskrit: *pravāranā*, Pāli: *pavāranā*), where each *bhiksunī* publicly invites their fellow monastics to point out any faults seen, heard, or suspected during *varsā*, so that they can purify and progress in their practice. The public transparency required by monastic rites both holds practitioners back from committing faults in the first place and encourages them to make appropriate amends when transgressions occur. Master Wuyin also points to the protective power of accountability for monasteries themselves. As public institutions, they can be "assessed and examined by society[12] – a powerful safeguard against individual or collective corruption and hypocrisy. In contrast, individual practitioners living alone, monastic or lay, have little to no formal or public mechanisms for accountability, as long as their actions do not stray too far from the law.

Sravasti Abbey: Creating Peace in a Chaotic World

Aware of the benefits of living the monastic life of ethical purity, both for the individual and society, and the advantage of a monastery-based lifestyle to facilitate that, Bhiksunī Thubten Chodron founded Sravasti Abbey in 2003. The connection between the monastic community and the endurance of the Buddha's teachings forms the heart of Sravasti Abbey's mission statement:[13]

> Sravasti Abbey supports a flourishing monastic community where learning and practicing Buddha's teachings on ethics, non-violence, compassion, and wisdom – then sharing them widely – cultivates peace in the hearts of individuals and the world.
>
> We seek to preserve Buddha's teachings, to root them deeply in Western soil, to share them with others, to build an enduring sangha, and to serve sentient beings for as long as space remains.

As demonstrated above, the presence of fully ordained monks and nuns able to perform the three key Vinaya rites is central to the flourishing of the Buddha's teachings in any given place. Thus began an ongoing, decades-long process to establish the *bhiksunī sangha* in Newport, Washington, in the United States (Table 2).

Table 2. Establishing the *Bhiksunī Sangha* at Sravasti Abbey

Year	*Event*
1977	Venerable Thubten Chodron receives *śrāmanerī* ordination in Dharamsala, India
1986	Venerable Thubten Chodron receives *bhiksunī* ordination in Taiwan
2003	Sravasti Abbey is established
2006	First novice ordination (*śrāmanerī* and *śiksamānā*) is performed, with the help of Chinese monastics
2008	First Abbey monastic receives full ordination in Taiwan
2011	Five resident *bhiksunī*s can now perform the bi-monthly *posadha*

2014	First *varsā* and *pravāranā* are performed
2018	First *śrāmanerī*/*śiksamānā* ordination is given entirely by Abbey monastics
2019 & 2024	Venerable Chodron is one of the 10 witnesses for a full ordination at Fo En Si Temple, Taiwan
In the future	Full ordination ceremony, conducted in English, at Sravasti Abbey

The impact of these efforts has been widespread. Growing from one resident monastic in 2003, the Abbey now has 22 monastics: 16 *bhiksunī*s, one *bhiksu*, and five novices. The *posadha*, *varsa*, and *pravāranā* have been conducted annually, in English, for over a decade. Through this experience, the Abbey serves as a "training monastery" able to guide others to learn the precepts and adapt the important Vinaya rites to their own communities. International Vinaya courses were hosted at the Abbey in 2018 and 2024. In 2023, Abbey *bhiksunī*s helped organize, facilitate, and teach at the International Bhiksunī Varsa in Sravasti, India, where 145 nuns gathered from various countries and practice traditions.[14] This included Nepalese and Bhutanese nuns who had received the first Mūlasarvāstivāda *bhiksunī* ordination in Bhutan one year earlier.[15]

Moreover, Abbey monastics contribute to the local community in various ways: they engage in prison work, serve on the board of a local support group for homeless teens, teach the Dharma both in person and online, and engage with local schools as part of their religious education program. Through living together in harmony, bound by precepts and monastic rituals that ensure purity in actions of body, speech, and mind, the personal practice of the Prātimoksa radiates out to benefit society.

It is notable that such far-reaching activity takes place in a practice tradition (Tibetan Buddhism) where full ordination is largely unavailable for women. Abbey monastics receive the full ordination in Taiwan in the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, Taiwanese *bhiksunī*s generously offering their practical and profound knowledge at every step in the development of this American *bhiksunī sangha*. Without attempting to influence or meddle in the monastic communities of the Tibetans, the lived experience and impact of Sravasti Abbey sends a clear message: a flourishing *bhiksunī sangha* is possible, and beneficial.

Conclusion

Śākyamuni Buddha was clear in his intention to establish a four-fold assembly able to understand, practice, and propagate his teachings. Moreover, he emphasized the importance of the Prātimoksa and the community of fully ordained monastics able to perform the prescribed Vinaya rites to the long endurance of the Dharma. The Buddha had a broad and multi-faceted purpose in establishing the Prātimoksa precepts. Most immediately, the individual precept holder is led towards liberation and directed to practice with the collective in harmony. Through the visible example set by monastics' external and internal transformation, the efficacy of the Buddhas teachings is both embodied and proclaimed. Faith is inspired afresh in some or stabilized in the hearts of others. Seeing this infallible dependent-arising, monastics must embrace their responsibility to practice in community, uphold the precepts purely so that the ten benefits will follow, and perform the prescribed monastic rituals so that the sun of the Buddha's teachings will never set.

Notes

[1] Bhiksu Hongchuan and Bhiksu Huaisu, *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya: Bhiksunī Posadha and Rites to Establish the Territory* (Newport: Sravasti Abbey, 2017), 45.
[2]Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta (DN 16); see also Bhikkhu Anālayo, *Bhikkhunī Ordination: From Ancient India to Contemporary Sri Lanka* (Āgama Research Group, 2018) 28–30.
[3] See Methunadhamma Bu, Pj 1. PTS 3.1–3.40 (Pali Vinayapitaka).
[4] Bhiksu Tenzin Gyatso and Bhiksunī Thubten Chodron, *Following in the Buddha's Footsteps,* (Somervill, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2019), 115.
[5] Adapted from Venerable Bhiksunī Wuyin, *Choosing Simplicity: A Commentary on the Bhikshuni Pratimoksha*, (Snow Lion, 2001), 59.
[6] Venerable Bhiksunī Master Wuyin Shih, *Living the Vinaya: An Introduction to Karmans and Skandhakas* (Newport, WA: Sravasti Abbey, 2023), 22.
[7] Vinaya Master Bhiksu Benyin, *Karmans for the Creation of Virtue: The Prescriptive Precepts in the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya* (Newport, WA: Sravasti Abbey, 2003), 8.
[8] Gyatso and Chodron, *Following in the Buddha's Footsteps,* 116.
[9]Nyanaponika Thera and Hellmuth Hecker, *Great Disciples of the Buddha: Their Lives, Their Works, Their Legacy* (Somervill, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2003), 4–11.
[10] Gyatso and Chodron, *Following in the Buddha's Footsteps,* 136.
[11] The Dharmaguptaka Vinaya contains a transaction whereby a *bhiksu* can perform the *posadha* alone. Nonetheless, the *bhiksu* is instructed to prepare the hall for the assembly to gather and to perform the rite with visiting monastics if they come, indicating the Buddha's intention for this to be a communal activity. *Bhiksunī*s do not have this allowance.
[12] Shih, *Living the Vinaya,* 24.
[13] https://sravastiabbey.org/who-we-are/history/
[14] https://sravastiabbey.org/sravasti-nuns-at-shravasti-varsa/
[15]
https://www.lionsroar.com/women-receive-full-ordination-in-bhutan-for-first-time-in-modern-history/

Bridging Tradition and Modernity: Myanmar Buddhist Nuns Engaging with the Contemporary

Sayalay Santacāri

Buddhist nuns in Myanmar, known as *thilashin*s or *sayalays*, which translates to "holders of morality," occupy an essential position in society. Historically, *thilashin*s have significantly contributed to spiritual practices, moral discipline, and social welfare while facing structured obstacles and institutional marginalization. In the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, *thilashin*s are excluded from achieving full ordination (*upasampadā*), placing them in a secondary role within the monastic hierarchy. However, their resilience and adaptability have enabled them to go beyond traditional limitations, actively interacting with contemporary society in revolutionary manners.

The *Therīgāthā*, a text in the early Buddhist canon, illustrates that women have historically endeavored to assert spiritual power within Buddhist societies, transcending cultural and institutional constraints (Blackstone, 1998). Through this heritage, *thilashin*s have persistently contested patriarchal norms and exemplified the lasting significance of Buddhist teachings in contemporary society.

This research examines the development of *thilashin*s' obligations to the critical needs of their communities. Through education, activism for gender equality, and community development, *Thilashin*s establish themselves as agents of change, adeptly reconciling tradition with modernity. Their contributions confront rooted gender disparities while demonstrating how Buddhist principles can stimulate positive societal change.

*Thilashin*s in the Theravāda Buddhist Hierarchy

*Thilashin*s occupy a complex role within the Theravāda Buddhist hierarchy in Myanmar. Although they are regarded as exemplars of ethical behavior and spiritual strictness, their religious authority is limited. Unlike *bhikkhu*s, *thilashin*s are prohibited from attaining full ordination (*upasampadā*), which restricts their participation in monastic rituals and ceremonies. The lack of full ordination corresponds with conventional interpretations of the Vinaya Pitaka, which asserts that women may only be ordained by a dual *sangha* of monks and nuns, a framework that is unavailable in Myanmar owing to the deterioration of the *bhikkhunī* order (Analayo, 2021).

Historically, *thilashin*s faced significant obstacles to education and acknowledgment. Despite the presence of educated nuns, they were excluded from critical examinations such as Pathamapyan and Dhammacariya. These restrictions exemplify the systemic gender discrimination within Theravāda Buddhism, as reflected in canonical texts like the Cullavagga, which delineates a subordinate position for women in the monastic hierarchy.

Government Exams

The following is a survey of examinations currently available in Myanmar:

1. Pathamapyan Exam
   (*Mūla* - primary, *Pathamange* - secondary, *Pathamalat* - middle, Pathamagyi - high)
2. Dhammacariya Exam
3. Five Nikāya Exam

4. Tipitaka Exam (exclusively for monks)
5. Abhidhamma and *Visuddhimagga* Exam (three levels)

Well-Known Institutional Exams

1. Sakkyasīha Dhammacariya Exam (for monks under 35)
2. Sakkyasīha Sāsanālankāra Exam (for *sāmanera*s under 20)
3. Sāsanālankāra Exam (for sāmaneras under 25 and nuns under 28)
4. Five Nikāya Exam (Myanmar version)
5. Abhidhamma Oral Exam
6. Pitakattayapāragū Exam

Despite these historical and systemic barriers, *thilashin*s have exhibited remarkable resilience. By increasing their participation in both governmental and private examinations, they have regained access to religious instruction and recognition. Nevertheless, challenges persist: prestigious examinations such as the Tipitaka exam remain inaccessible to nuns in Myanmar, underscoring the enduring inequalities in religious acknowledgment and institutional opportunities.

Even in ceremonial circumstances, *thilashin*s are often assigned subordinate roles. Cultural norms frequently perpetuate these inequalities since monks typically regard their status as higher than that of nuns. Notwithstanding this marginalization, *thilashin*s persevere in affirming their significance within Buddhist practice, deriving inspiration from personalities like Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the pioneer *bhikkhuni*, who steadfastly championed women's ordination (Bartholomeusz, 1994).

Education as an Empowerment

Education has emerged as a fundamental aspect of *thilashin*s' involvement with contemporary society. Nunneries in Myanmar currently serve as educational centers, integrating traditional Buddhist studies with modern disciplines such as foreign languages, computer literacy, and vocational training. This dual methodology reflects the Buddha's teachings in the *Dhammapada*, which underscore the significance of wisdom (*paññā*) as the ultimate virtue (*Dhammapada*, verse 354).

*Thilashin*s have acknowledged the significance of global involvement. By integrating foreign language education into their curricula, they empower themselves and their students to navigate a progressively interconnected world. These efforts seek to establish *thilashin*s as advocates of Buddhist traditions while facilitating multicultural discourse, akin to the early Buddhist missionaries who modified teachings to address the needs of many populations.

Buddhist Studies and Monastic Training

*Thilashin*s are essential in preserving and propagating Buddhist doctrines. They often hold Dhammācariya courses centered on Buddhist texts and ethical theory, as well as Sāmanekyaw Lankāra training, which emphasizes textual recitation and interpretation. These initiatives correspond with the Buddha's admonition in the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta* to preserve the Dhamma and propagate it to future generations (*Digha Nikaya*, 16).

Nonetheless, the contributions of *thilashin*s are inadequately documented in comparison

to those of monks. Texts like the *Sāsanavamsa* and *Sāsanālankāra*, which offer comprehensive narratives of male monastics, do not have comparable documentation for nuns. Notable prominent nuns like Thilashin Saya Kin and Thilashin Mae Nat Pe are inadequately documented in historical accounts, highlighting the general cultural disregard for women's contributions to Buddhism.

Secular Education and Community Growth

*Thilashin*s have gradually introduced secular education into their curricula through global programs that promote inclusive education and sustainable development. This integration addresses the practical needs of communities, particularly marginalized groups such as women and girls. Many convents presently provide vocational training programs that teach skills like tailoring. Women educated in tailoring at these convents can establish their own modest businesses, transforming cycles of poverty and dependence within their communities.

Additionally, some nunneries enhance their educational offerings to include literacy courses, computer training, and leadership, therefore equipping them with modern skills necessary for thriving in an increasingly interconnected society. These endeavors underscore the Buddha's principle of *kusalakammapatha* (wholesome conduct), which advocates for actions that benefit both oneself and others (*Dhammapada*, verse 183). *Thilashin*s illustrate this concept by addressing spiritual and material needs, thus promoting a holistic educational framework that integrates traditional Buddhist concepts with practical skills. *Thilashin*s promote sustainable community development by providing women and girls with secular education and spiritual understanding while challenging entrenched patriarchal norms.

This pragmatic approach to education and community development exemplifies the enduring relevance of Buddhist ideals in contemporary culture. *Thilashin*s exemplify the practical implementation of ancient principles of compassion and ethical behavior in addressing modern challenges by integrating secular skills with spiritual growth.

The Development of Gender Equity

Notwithstanding structural complications, *thilashin*s have arisen as proponents of gender equity. They empower women and girls through education and community engagement, cultivating a culture of equality and advancing social change. These initiatives correspond with the *Therīgāthā*, which honors the spiritual accomplishments of early Buddhist women and their victories against cultural limitations (Blackstone, 1998).

Partnerships with local and international organizations enhance the effectiveness of *thilashin*s, facilitating projects that tackle gender-based violence, educational access, and economic empowerment. This activism highlights the transforming capacity of Buddhist women as catalysts for change.

*Thilashin*s' interaction with modernity extends beyond their contributions to education. Through engagement in international Buddhist conferences and retreats, they foster cross-cultural discussion and enhance the worldwide Buddhist community. This reflects the Buddha's focus on adaptation in instruction, as seen in the *Upaya Kausalya Sutra*, which praises the application of skillful ways to engage varied audiences.

Integrating Tradition and Modernity

The *thilashin*s' commitment to both tradition and modernity characterizes their approach to their responsibilities. By following the eight precepts and maintaining moral discipline, they devise solutions to contemporary issues such as environmental sustainability and technological advancement. Some nunneries have adopted eco-friendly activities, including the establishment of organic gardens and the promotion of waste reduction efforts, illustrating how Buddhist values of mindfulness and reverence for all life can tackle ecological challenges.

Furthermore, *thilashin*s integrate technological innovations into their educational curricula, providing instruction in computer literacy and digital competencies to equip their communities for contemporary challenges. Through these initiatives, they connect ancient teachings with modern circumstances, demonstrating the Buddha's timeless precepts of compassion, wisdom, and ethical conduct by contextualizing Buddhist principles within contemporary frameworks.

Conclusion

*Thilashin*s demonstrate how spiritual leaders may adeptly maneuver through the intricacies of contemporary culture while being rooted in tradition. They tackle social needs and advance gender equity, comprehensive development, and spiritual growth via education, activism, and community development. Acknowledging their contributions is vital for cultivating a more inclusive and empathetic society. By elevating their voices and confronting institutional obstacles, *thilashin*s persist in fostering togetherness, resilience, and advancement, reconciling the gap between tradition and modernity.

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On the Transformative Journey of Female Monastics in the Kingdom of Bhutan

Namgyal Lhamo

"A strong woman stands up for herself. A stronger woman stands up for everyone else."

Bhutan is a small Himalayan kingdom, widely known for its concept of Gross National Happiness, where the country's development is measured in terms of its citizens' mental wellness over material wealth. Bhutan is a Buddhist country where the majority of the population follows and practices Mahāyāna Buddhism. Buddhism spread to Bhutan in the 8th century after the Indian master Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche) visited Bhutan. After that, many scholars and practitioners from Tibet and India also visited Bhutan. Some of the great Buddhist masters, such as Pema Lingpa, Desi Tenzin Rabgay, and Pekar Jungney, were born in Bhutan and worked tirelessly for the Buddhadharma. It is believed that Guru Rinpoche blessed every corner of Bhutan and granted the *upasakā* and *upasikā* (male and female) lay vows. We believe that all Bhutanese people possess these vows to this day.

Origins of the First *Sangha* in Bhutan

Although Buddhism reached Bhutan as early as the 8th century, the earliest record of monastics occurred in the 16th century when Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel unified Bhutan as a nation-state, founded Chagri Monastery, and ordained 30 monks. Although there are no valid records of when the first nunnery started in Bhutan, there are stories of a few very well-known nuns who lived in the 14th and 15th centuries. Ani Chorten Zangmo, the granddaughter of Pema Lingpa, was well known for her practice. She also built a monastery called Dramtse Drupchu Gonpa, which still exists, as an institute for monks.[1]

Around the 16th century, the fourth Druk Desi Tenzin Rabgye (the secular ruler of Bhutan) had two well-known female students. One was a *yogini nun*, known as Jetsunma, the sister of Desi. Another was Lacham Kunley, the daughter of Desi. Around the 17th century, there were three well-known *yogini* nuns – Chumey Jetsuma, Lopema Rinchen Zangmo, and Ani Ngawang Dema – who were students of the second Je Khenpo Sonam Yoeser. Their stories illustrate that there were nuns in Bhutan as early as the 14th century.

One common thing I noticed in biographies of great masters who appeared in Bhutan is that most of them traveled to Tibet for their ordination, education, and to receive teachings. There were also nuns who did the same, such as Princess Konchok Wangmo, the daughter of the first king of Bhutan. She later became one of the well-known female students of the 16th Karmapa.

Currently there are 30 nunneries across Bhutan with nearly 1,500 nuns.[2] I can happily report that I noticed a significant rise in the number of nunneries and nuns during my service with the Bhutan Nuns Foundation (BNF).

How Do Girls Choose to Become Nuns?

There is one common question that many people ask, "How do girls/women choose to become a nun in Bhutan?" They can be roughly categorized in three groups: (1) those who genuinely wish to renounce worldly life; (2) those who are influenced by their cultural background; and

(3) those who are from less privileged families. The first group are those who commit their lives to the practice of Buddhism, whereas the latter two groups may choose to stay as nuns or may leave the nunnery at a later stage of their lives.

Generally, people perceive monastics as being divine, pure, and flawless. This misconception creates obstacles for people's own connection with Buddhadharma in the long run. I try to remind them that nuns are normal human beings who are trying to follow Buddhist principles by becoming better human beings.

How Nunneries Function

Normally nunneries consist of three parts: (1) *dratshang*, the main part of the nunnery where nuns receive preliminary monastic training; (2) *shedra*, the monastic college where nuns focus mainly on Buddhist texts and philosophy; and (3) *drubdra*, the retreat center where nuns practice various stages of meditation. However, not all nunneries have all three of these. In the past, nuns did not have the privilege of education like monks did. However, now there are many improvements.

Nuns' Education

In the past, nuns had no access tor higher education equivalent to monks. They were only trained to do rituals and go into retreat. However, they were content and happy to engage in Dharma practice. When I joined BNF in 2013, I received the opportunity to take a tour around Bhutan to visit nunneries. I found only a few nunneries with facilities for higher education. Most nunneries were engaged in basic training and the performance of rituals.

Fortunately, now, there is more recognition of the importance of education, and education for nuns has become a pertinent and prioritized topic. Leaders and coordinators of nunneries have taken steps to initiate higher education for their nuns. I personally witnessed nuns taking a keen interest in both traditional and modern education, such as computer skills, English language, and so on. The good news is that today almost all nunneries have their own curriculum for their community. Furthermore, there are nuns with Master's degrees and doctoral degrees, skilled teachers, and those trained in traditional medical sciences.

Rights and Empowerment

Along with these opportunities, the nunneries have fostered developments in education, health, economic growth, social mobility, and made contributions to improved livelihoods and overall well-being. The nuns have broadened their perspectives and recognized their capabilities to step out of their small world and move forward. The profound aspects of Buddhist philosophy, mediation practice, modern education, and life-skills training nurtured them to engage with and improve conditions in the contemporary world. Today, people may be extremely rich and powerful, but within they struggle to find peace. I believe Buddhist teachings teach the right path to bridge the gap between the outer and the inner world. We always get this message from our great masters, such as H.H Dalai Lama, 70th Je Khenpo, Karmapa, Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse, and others. Although education is very important to develop our intellect, we will only be considered wise when we contemplate our mindset and behavior so that we become calm and compassionate.

As Bhutanese nuns gain access to the "Three E's" – education, experience, and exposure – their prospects change. They come forward and boldly participate in gatherings, share their problems, and offer solutions. Observing such positive transformations in the nunneries, people in their communities have begun to visit nunneries, participate in Dharma gatherings, and even seek advice and support from nuns when necessary. Many nuns say that they have seen local people expressing respect and appreciation more than ever before. Since women in general possess an innate motherly nature, nuns are able to handle family situations and problems in genuine ways. For this reason, people seek counseling from them, which builds mutual trust. Perhaps this is the reason why many people say that they prefer to listen to the teachings and talks of nuns. They also love and prefer to invite nuns to perform rituals and pujas at their homes.

In 2016, a female United Nations Officer and I were travelling to nunneries and communities for a health awareness program. We asked a group of women if they would visit nunneries to receive teachings from nuns. With innocent faces they said that teachings are meant to be received from monks and not nuns. When asked "Why?" they said they have only seen *lamas* or monks teachingdoing so and have never seen nuns giving teachings. Then we said that we would organize a teaching program by nuns and they should come. They agreed to do so.

At our request, the nuns agreed to schedule and organize a teaching program for them. Therefore, after one week, the group of local women gathered to listen to the nuns' teachings in the main temple. When they saw the head nun delivering wonderful teachings with full confidence, they were astonished to see that such a knowledgeable nun was living near them. Afterwards, we received a phone call from the local women, who shared their experiences and thanked us for showing them the path.

Furthermore, during my meetings with nuns from different nunneries, the nuns shared their stories about how their connections with the local people have changed over time in a positive way. One such example is that the local people now make equal offerings to nuns and monks from the harvest that they yield from their fields. I have also noticed local people visiting nunneries bringing vegetables, fruits, eggs, and so on. These are simple yet beautiful traditional gestures to show respect in their own way. A few times, local people have come to see me with the same gesture of respect. The most beautiful thing I heard them say is, "If you educate a woman, you educate a nation."

Institutional Development

Early on, male abbots made every decision in the nunneries. They decided what nuns should do from a male perspective, which was often inappropriate for nuns. To take a simple example, the restroom settings were designed from a male perspective, which was problematic for nuns. Another example is that when monks led prayers, the sessions would be quite long. Quite often, nuns need to use the restrooms and when prayer sessions are very long, it becomes problemic for them. Currently, a few nunneries are under the leadership of senior nuns, where they make decisions from their own experiences aligned with nuns' comfort and well-being, which is the most logical thing to do.

There are girls and women who come to nunneries from various backgrounds. In some cases, they may need special, full attention. Such cases can be dealt with more properly when the person in leadership is a nun. It is not an easy task to take care of a nunnery where many girls and women from diverse backgrounds reside under one roof. In any case, the head nun or a group of female committee members work together to create a comfortable environment for their

their nuns and nunneries. This is possible only when women take responsibility into their own hands.

Higher Ordination

In 2017, with the support of BNF, His Holiness the 70th Je Khenpo Trulku Jigme Choedrak, our current spiritual leader, bestowed *getsulma* (*sramenerika*) vows to 147 Drukpa Kagyu nuns at Sangchen Dorji Lhendrup Nunnery in Punakha. This was the first ever *getsulma* (*sramenerika*) ordination he had bestowed to female monastics. I believe this was one of the first crucial steps for nuns to come forward and assume their rights. During the first International Conference on Bhutanese Nuns, held in December 2013, the idea of full ordination was raised. BNF had been reflecting on the issue for nearly a decade. The debate about the full ordination of nuns (*bhiks.un.ī* ordination) was thus a central topic for many decades. While I was studying at the Central University of Higher Tibetan Studies from year 2004 to 2013, I attended a few talks about higher ordination by western nuns. During that period, I did not have much of an idea about this topic. Later on, I realized that this is an important topic to discuss and practice.

Fast forward to June 21, 2022, when the dream of the full ordination became a reality when His Holiness the 70th Je Khenpo Trulku Jigme Choedrak bestowed the first *bhiks.un.ī* ordination to 144 nuns from Bhutan and neighboring countries. I was privileged to be one among those who received the precepts of full ordination. It was certainly a life-changing experience for all of us. It was also like a big step forward for nuns to receive the title of Khenmo (abbot), Lama, and Rinpoche, titles that are deeply honored and respected in our society.

Support for Bhutanese Nuns and Nunneries

Among the 30 nunneries in Bhutan, five function under the Zhung Dratsang (Royal Monastic Body) with the support of the Bhutanese Government. The remaining nunneries receive support from private organizations, donors, and local communities. In 2009, under the patronage of Her Majesty the Queen Mother, Tshering Yangdon Wangchuck, an organization called Bhutan Nuns Foundation (BNF) was founded for the welfare of nuns residing in Bhutan. Since then, BNF has worked tirelessly with nunneries across the country.

BNF works in partnership with the Bhutanese Government, the United Nations, and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) toward the improvement of nuns' education, health, skills development, rights, protection, and much more. In addition, BNF works with individual donors and volunteers to support nunneries to build accommodations and other facilities, such as classrooms, kitchens, toilets, and improved water supply access. BNF supports nunneries with financial assistance, particularly to provide a nutritional diet for the younger nuns. With rapid change over time, nunneries could not solely rely on donors and supporters. For that, nunneries are working toward self-sufficiency and sustainability. BNF always gives a core message to nunneries that nunneries cannot be parasites who only rely on donors. Now, it is time for every nunnery to think of its own sustainability and giving back to the community and society. There is always a mutual exchange between nuns and laity, where laypeople offer donations such as money, food, and clothes to the nuns, who in turn recite prayers and do *puja*s for them.

Challenges and Future Prospect

With the evolution of time, the needs of nunneries also change in various ways. The nunneries struggle to fulfill their needs, especially in education. There are very few monastic colleges for nuns compared to monks. Receiving a Buddhist education often requires nuns to travel to India or other countries to pursue higher education. Although the situation is changing for the better, nevertheless nuns were often not recognized or excluded from certain religious roles, leadership positions, and decision making. Cultural and social expectations for female practitioners are comparatively very low. Women are pressured by their families to marry rather than ordain. There is also consistent financial instability for nuns, since they often receive less support from their communities and donors.

Conclusion

In the past decade, I have seen a huge transformation among nuns and nunneries in Bhutan. They have walked an extra mile to reach and cope with a fast-changing world. They are still determined to keep moving forward. At present, my research focuses on female monastics of Bhutan. I look forward to compiling the history of nuns and nunneries in the past and how they practiced and lived their lives. While reading biographies of great scholars and masters, I came across some female figures, including nuns, who were great practitioners and supporters. This is clear evidence of a long history of nuns and female practitioners ever since Buddhism appeared in Bhutan.

Notes

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The Changing Roles of Korean *Bhikkhunī Sangha* Leadership

Ilmoon Cho

Ever since Buddhism was first introduced to Korea in the first century, it has played a central role in society, politics, and culture. Traditionally, within Korean Buddhism, female Buddhists have played a wide range of roles in the religious order and society as a whole. To this day, compared to other Buddhist countries, Korean *bhikkhuni*s are dynamically carrying out Buddhist activities. At the same time, in a rapidly changing society, Korean Buddhism and the Korean Bhikkhuni Sangha are facing unprecedented crises and difficulties. There are serious concerns about the decline in the number of monks and nuns due to low birth rates, which is a general trend in Korean society, and the aging of existing monks and nuns, as well as the serious decline in the religious population. In this paper, I examine the emergence and activities of the Korean Bhikkhuni Sangha, in terms of its present situation and its direction for development. In addition, I examine the challenges that the Korean Bhikkhuni Sangha will address in the future.

The Birth and Present Situation of the Korean Bhikkhuni Sangha

Buddhism was first introduced to Korea during the Three Kingdoms Period (1 BCE–7 CE) and was nationally recognized in the second year of King Sosurim of the Goguryeo Dynasty (372 CE). At the time, the three kingdoms (Goguryeo, Baekje, and Silla) regarded Buddhism as a spiritual pillar for maintaining a ruling system centered on kingship. Therefore, Buddhism was officially adopted as the national religion with the active support of the royal family. Official records indicate that, in the process, nuns became ordained. According to *The History of the Three Kingdoms*, nuns were officially permitted to become ordained in the fifth year of King Jinheung's reign (544 CE).

The Goryeo period (918–1392), which followed the Three Kingdoms period, is called "the golden age of Buddhist culture." Taejo Wang Geon, who founded the Goryeo Dynasty and reigned from 918 to 943, announced in *Ten Aspects of Discipline* that the great aim of the Goryeo Dynasty was accomplished through the deeds of the Buddha and he left a message asking that Buddhism be protected. Numerous historical records can be found showing that Buddhist nuns of the Goryeo Dynasty received formal ordination, participated in retreats, and practiced asceticism. Records show that *bhikkhuni*s were active in various Buddhist temples and protected them, were active in promoting Buddhism, worked to educate *bhikkhunī*s, and were passionate about personal development.

During the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910), Korean Buddhism was suppressed due to the Joseon Dynasty's policy of "Respect Confucianism and Suppress Buddhism." Many policies were implemened to suppress Buddhism. In particular, *seong-gwa*, the national gateway to becoming a monk, was abolished, putting the *sangha* in crisis. As a result, the system of ordaining *bhikkhu*s to lead Buddhism was rapidly collapsing. At that crucial time, the *bhikkhuni* leaders who led the *sangha*, worked together with upper-class lay Buddhist women, including the royal family, to take on roles that ensured the continuity of the Buddhist tradition. They were independent, confident, well aware of public sentiment and political trends, and responded wisely to the trends of the time.

In the early 20th century, with the opening of ports and the Japanese colonial period, changes came to Korean Buddhism. In this era, Korean society as a whole was economically very poor. The *bhikkhunī* community suffered even greater difficulties. Nevertheless, they had a

thirst for learning and established the early Bhikkhuni Gangwon Institute to increase the number of opportunities for learning. A large number of excellent nuns practiced under the teachings of the great Zen masters Mangong and Hanam. As a result, the cohesion of the Korean Bhikkhuni Sangha increased in a short period and many nuns with leadership abilities emerged, laying the foundation for the strength of today's Korean Bhikkhuni Sangha.

After the Korean War in 1950, *bhikkhuni*s restored temples that had been destroyed across the country. They went into abandoned temples and temple sites amid the ruins of war. They risked and sacrificed their lives to rebuild the ruined temples. They actively carried out missionary work centered on temples that were built with great difficulty, and the number of ordained women gradually increased. The Korean Bhikkhuni Sangha has been able to maintain its economic power and organizational independence to this day by operating independent *bhikkhuni sangha* training centers, and independent temples in mountain hermitages, where they have smoothly carried out practice, study, and Dharma propagation.

Changes in the Leadership of the Korean Bhikkhuni Sangha

Various changes in the leadership of the Korean Bhikkhuni Sangha can be observed. First, there has been an expansion of the roles of *bhikkhuni*s both inside and outside the Buddhist community. Korean nuns have successfully performed their traditional roles, including practice and guarding the temple. Today, the nuns are active in a variety of fields, such as education, social welfare, culture, arts, and community participation.

Second, the Korean Bhikkhuni Sangha has strengthened its expertise, based on study and practice, and its scope of activities has expanded in professional fields required in contemporary society. Compared to other religions, the Bhikkhuni Sangha in Korea has established itself as association of female religious specialists who continue to perform religious ceremonies from a long time ago.

Third, the Korean Bhikkhuni Sangha has expanded is social influence. Today, the number of talented nuns who exert a positive influence on society through broadcasting, YouTube, and other social media is gradually increasing in various fields, both inside and outside the religious sphere in Korean society.

The most important influence Buddhism has is the social movement of enlightenment. For example, Zen Master Daehaeng (1927–2012), the founder of Hanmaeum Seonwon, opened branches of Hanmaeum Seonwon not only in Korea but also around the world during her lifetime, and accepted the general public as disciples, taking the lead in the social movement of enlightenment. In these ways, the Korean Bhikkhuni Sangha has become active among people of all walks of life, gradually increasing its social influence and demonstrating it relevance through its prosperity, Buddhist teachings, and cultural activities.

Fourth, the Korean Bhikkhuni Sangha has instrumental in overcoming institutional inequality. The patriarchal character of Korean society is a reality that affects the entire community. Despite the outstanding personal abilities and dynamic energy of Korean Buddhist nuns, the status of *bhikkhunis* in Korean society is often restricted by unequal structures. Social recognition of competent nuns is increasing, but the vast majority of teaching positions in the Central Jogye Order are still held by *bhikkhu*s. Due to these social realities, there are various restrictions and limitations on the rights and activities of *bhikkhuni*s. The Korean Bhikkhuni Sangha is making efforts and doing research in various fields to help nuns strengthen their own practice and expertise, which will naturally expand their social influence.

The Korean Bhikkhuni Association, Center of the Korean Bhikkhuni Sangha.

The Korean Bhikkhuni Association, an organization representing the Korean Bhikkhuni Sangha, was first launched as the Udambara Association in 1968. In 1980, it was renamed the Korean Bhikkhuni Association and it continues to this day. The Korean Bhikkhuni Association began participating in international networks by attending the World Women's Buddhist Conference in 1991 and established Beobryongsa Temple in 2002. The association has been actively carrying out various educational and Dharma propagation activities since then. The main activities and areas of achievement are as follows:

(1) Expanding programs for the welfare of *bhikkhuni*s.

The Korean Bhikkhuni Association strives to protect the rights and interests of nuns and improve their welfare. He Associaion promotes welfare projects for sick and elderly nuns, such as supporting medical costs and promoting the establishment of nursing homeds exclusively for nuns.

(2) Supporting Buddhist activities.

The Korean Bhikkhuni Association promotes projects to support nuns' Dharma practice and activities. The Associatiton supports spiritual practice and teaching activities for those in the general public who want to learn Buddhism, including projects to spread Buddhist cultural activities such as temple stay programs, temple food, animation, movies, music, and many other activities.

(3) Systemizing education.

The Korean Bhikkhuni Association provides free training annually and regular advanced courses, such as temple stay programs, and supports systematic Buddhist education by expanding scholarship programs.

(4) Social participation.

The Korean Bhikkhuni Association responds actively to the demands of contemporary society by active engagemen in activities such as counseling, temple management, Dharma teachings, social welfare programs, and cultural activities.

The Challenges of the Korean Bhikkhuni Sangha

Currently, Korean Buddhism is facing several challenges, such as the decline in the number of monks and nuns, the aging of *sangha* members, ensuring the welfare of aging monastics, and overcoming institutional inequality. The decline in the number of monks and nuns is caused by low birth rates and the aging population of Korean society. Planning is needed to respond to these concerns. The issue of aging *sangha* members is closely related to the social environment, life in retirement, and ensuring the welfare of the Korean Bhikkhuni Sangha.

Ensuring the welfare of the Korean Bhikkhuni Sangha is an issue because the system of elder care is very poor compared to other religious groups, such as Catholicism and Won Buddhism. Providing adequate care to an aging monastic populatiton is an ongoing problem that must be addressed by the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism.

Finally, the task of overcoming systemic inequality within the Jogye Order of Korean

Buddhism must begin with efforts to discover and optimize the talents of capable *bhikkhuni*s. In addition, in utilizing professional human resources and abilities, it is important to encourage the active participation of both *bhikkhuni*s and laywomen. To make this happen, the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism needs to establish a system to deal effectively with the perspective and issues currently faced by *bhikkhunis* and laywomen.

Conclusion

Although the Korean Bhikkhuni Sangha has a long history and rich tradition, there are few records documenting it. This is due to the unique humility of Korean nuns and their stance of not putting forward their accomplishments. As a result, they tend to be reluctant to reveal anecdotes about themselves and senior nuns to the world. Fortunately, in recent decades the perception of nuns has changed. The nuns themselves have realized the importance of recording their history and accomplishments and are attempting to compile academic and professional data and research on Korean *bhikkhuni*s.

In this paper, the leadership and other essential roles played by the Korean Bhikkhuni Sangha in society and in the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism has been examined by focusing on the Korean Bhikkhuni Association, which represents the Korean Bhikkhuni Sangha. The Association is making great efforts to protect the rights and ensure the welfare of Korean *bhikkhuni*s. It puts into practice the saying, ‘‘First attain enlightenment, then instruct all sentient beings.” The important leadership role that the Korean Bhikkhuni Association has played in the development of Korean Buddhism transcends sectarianism and factitonalism. This paper has demonstrated that the past and present Korean Bhikkhuni Sangha has been active in leading Korean Buddhism and benefiting the public in a rapidly changing society. The Korean Bhikkhuni Sangha is the hope for the future, exerting leadership and playing significant roles that will ensure the ongoing progress and development of Korean Buddhism.

Gratitude and Taking Initiative: Navigating Change as a Buddhist Woman in Transition

Sāmanerī Ariyā Dhammajīvī

As a Buddhist woman in transition, I have been using gratitude and taking initiative to navigate change. Gratitude allows me to focus on the positive aspects of my life, recognize the help I have received, and naturally reciprocate that kindness. Taking the initiative enables me to return the favor.

With gratitude to my parents, I worked hard to support my family. With gratitude to my birthplace, I provided financial and social support back to my Cambodian community. With gratitude to the Buddha's teaching, I undertook an initiative to complete the Fourfold Assembly of the Buddha and to establish inclusivity in my community, which led me to become a monastic recently.

My name is Sāmanerī Ariyā Dhammajīvī, formerly Dr. Marlai Ouch, a co-founder of Cambodian Bhikkhuni Sangha Initiative with a doctorate in Educational Leadership from San Francisco State University. Bhikkhuni Tathālokā Therī, founding abbess and *bhikkhunī* preceptor of the Dhammadharini Bhikkhuni Sangha in Northern California, has served as my *bhikkhunī* mentor for the last seven years as I have worked in support of reviving the Cambodian Bhikkhuni Sangha. On the full moon of November 15, 2024, I received my *sāmanerī pabbajjā*.

As a *sāmanerī*, I continue to apply gratitude and take initiative in my training. These two qualities are praised by the Buddha (Āsāduppajahavagga). He trained us to be grateful and thankful and not to forget even a small thing done for us (*dutiyasi gālasutta*). With gratitude for my training, I focus my initiative on harmony in the *sangha*. I will use the Buddha's teachings to accomplish this initiative.

Gratitude to Parents

As a Buddhist, I learned that parents cannot be repaid for being helpful to their children but they can be repaid if their children help them to be faithful, ethical, generous, or knowledgeable in wisdom (Samacittavagga). So, with gratitude to my parents, I, as a refugee teenager avoided wrong behavior and instead studied hard so that I could find a good paying job to support my family.

After I started working, I hosted a gratitude ceremony for my parents once a year around my birthday. I coordinated Dhamma classes at our local temple to help ground them in wisdom. I also sponsored their pilgrimage to the Buddhist sites in India to strengthen their faith. I further encouraged them to listen to my readings of the canonical *sutta*s, which I recorded on videos and shared on YouTube and Facebook. I strove to be kind and helpful to them, as they were to me (*Puttasutta*).

Gratitude to my parents kept me focused on beneficial tasks. Taking on the burden and care of my family helped me strengthen my character. This ability then allowed me to see beyond my family.

Gratitude to My Birthplace

I was born in Cambodia, where Buddhism is the national religion. I came to the United States with my family during my teenage years as a refugee. I started school and built a life here and gave back to my Cambodian community.

In Cambodia, I provided financial support to relatives, poor people, hospitals, Pāli teachers, monks, and temples. In India and Nepal, I was a regular supporter of the Cambodian monasteries. In the U.S., I taught Cambodian language classes and coordinated Dhamma classes. I was an active member of three local Cambodian temples and of the Khmer Women's Alliance. I rallied against the deportation of Cambodian refugees in Northern California, which resulted in their release and enabled them to become U.S. Citizens. Gratitude to my birthplace has helped me to generate a network of friends and supporters. This network connected my gratitude to the Buddha's teaching.

Gratitude to the Buddha's Teaching

Until thirteen years ago, I did not know *bhikkhunī*s existed or could be revived. Because of teaching Cambodian classes, Bhikkhunī Tathālokā Mahatherī and another *bhikkhunī* came to see me after class at my local temple in San Francisco, California. They were the first *bhikkhunī*s I ever saw and I became curious. I started researching and found many positive teachings on the fourfold assembly (*bhikkhu*s, *bhikkhunī*s, laymen, and laywomen) and thus learned about *bhikkhunī*s. The five verses below demonstrate the Buddha's intention, goal, and purpose in establishing the fourfold assembly and, therefore, his aim or "founding mission statement" as the Buddha.

> The Buddha intended to establish the fourfold assembly when he was first awakened and he determined that he would not enter parinibbāna until these conditions had been fulfilled (*Mahāparinibbānasutta*).
>
> He taught that the long-lasting effect of his teaching is when this assembly continues their respect and reverence for the teacher, the teaching, the training, and each other (*Kimilasutta*).
>
> He told us that harmony among the fourfold assembly is for the benefit, welfare, and happiness of gods and humans (*Sanghasāmaggīsutta*).
>
> He enlightened us that a beautiful *sangha* consists of *bhikkhu*s accomplished in virtue, greatly learned *bhikkhunī*s, laymen endowed with faith, and laywomen endowed with faith (*Sobhanasutta*).
>
> His gift to the communities of both *bhikkhu*s and *bhikkhunī*s after his passing is the highest religious donation bestowed on a *sangha* (*Dakkhi āvibha gasutta*).

The above verses triggered my sense of urgency to do what I could to help complete the fourfold assembly and thus propagate the Buddha's *sāsana*. As a layperson, I helped spearhead the revival of the Cambodian *bhikkhunī sangha* and presented a paper on this at the 18th Sakyadhita Conference in 2023.

However, many people in the Theravãda tradition still have different beliefs and views that overlook the Buddha's efforts to establish the fourfold assembly. As part of my continued efforts, sharing records of *bhikkhunī*s beyond India in the Buddha's lifetime is one of my initiatives to clear up some of those views.

Records of great ancient *bhikkhunī*s beyond India, documented in the Pāli chronicles of Sri Lanka, begin with the Emperor Asoka's missions to spread Buddhism to other countries in the 3rd cntury BCE. Sri Lankan vice-reign Ānula Devi was the first woman to be ordained in Sri Lanka, together with her 1,000 women companions. Their ordination was facilitated by dhammic diplomacy and statecraft between the emperor of India and the king of Sri Lanka, who delivered the *arahatī* Sanghamitta Therī with an *arahatī bhikkhunī sangha* and a sapling of the sacred *bodhi* tree, along with a delegation of great expertise from India, both to teach and ordain aspirants as *bhikkhunī*s, as well as to share their knowledge with their lay community.

Not long after their ordination with Sanghamitta Theri, these first 1,000 *bhikkhunī*s also attained the state of arahantship. Queen Ānula Devi became known as Arahatī Ānula Tissa Therī and is recorded as the first *bhikkhuni arahatī* in Sri Lanka. Subsequently, the prime minister of Sri Lanka and his 500 male companions were ordained and attained arahantship. This series of ordinations established the fourfold assembly and *arahat bhikkhu-bhikkhunī sangha* in Sri Lanka. Their stories have also been preserved in archeological records and antiquities (Cambodian Bhikkhuni Sangha, 2025). The chronicles further record *bhikkhunī*s who were teachers of *vinaya*, the *sutta*s, and *abhidhamma* over the subsequent centuries in Sri Lanka.

The Pāli chronicles of Sri Lanka also record short stories of Emperor Asoka's missions to other places outside of India during the same mission. The *arahat* Sona Thero and the *arahat* Uttara Thero of great psychic powers were sent to establish Buddhism in Suvannabhumi, generally considered to refer to mainland Southeast Asia. They taught the canonical *Brahmajālasutta* (The Divine Net) to the gathering of people and established them in refuge and precepts. Sixty thousand people penetrated the Dhamma and 3,500 sons and 1,500 daughters of good families went forth.

However, records of who ordained these 1,500 women in Suvannabhumi are not clear. Were they ordained by the *thera*s or by *bhikkhunī*s via a similar Dhammic diplomacy as those in Sri Lanka? Did some or all of these men and women attain arahantship like those ordained in Sri Lanka? If so, *arahat bhikkhu*s and *bhikkhunī*s would have resided in Suvannabhumi during that time even if less than 100% of those who were ordained attained arahantship.

Two records on Suvannabhumi are found in Cambodia. One is a stone Sanskrit inscription (K.1419) that mentions the word "Suvannabhumi," dated to the 7th century. The inscription translates as "…the great King Isanavarman is full of glory and bravery. He is the King of Kings who rules over Suvannabhumi until the sea, which is the border, while the kings in neighboring states honor his order to their heads..." The stone inscription is displayed at the National Museum of Cambodia. Second, a Chinese record from the Sui Dynasty published by the Buddhist Institute of Cambodia mentions many *bhikkhu*s and *bhikkhunī*s during the reign of King Isanavarman (Buddhist Institute of Cambodia, 1958).

Furthermore, the Sanskrit word *pravrajyā* (Pāli: *pabbajjā*) is translated into Cambodian as *buah*, a term utilized only for ordained monastics and recorded as being used to ordain young women. This is found in the Great Stele of Phimeanakas by Queen Indradevi. She was the chief queen of King Jayavarman VII of Cambodia, who reigned from the late 12th century to the early 13th century. The use of the word *pravrajyā*, translated as *buah,* implies that those ordained women were at least *sāmanerī*s, if not *bhikkhunī*s.

If we connect Emperor Asoka's mission to Suvannabhumi to the above records, Sona and Uttara Theros would have gone to Cambodia; although it was much larger then than it is today. Thus, *bhikkhunī*s or at least *samanerī*s are recorded as existing in Cambodia into the early 13th century.

Records exist of at least two groups of Sri Lankan Sinhala *bhikkhunī*s who traveled to China by sea. They show that the second group, led by Devasarā Therī, gave dual ordination to over 300 Chinese *bhikkhunī*s at Nanjing Temple in 5th century CE (Tsai, 1994; Ven. Tathaloka Theri, 2019), centuries before the *bhikkhunī* lineage in Sri Lanka died out around 1017 CE (Goonatilake, 1997). This is the *bhikkhunī* lineage that has contributed to reviving the Sri Lanka *bhikkhunī sangha* from 1996-1998 to the present.

My gratitude to the Buddha's teaching has led me to "go forth" and ordain (*pabbajjā*) recently. As a monastic, I have an opportunity to fully live the spiritual life according to the Buddha's teaching and to share that life to inspire confidence in those without it and to increase confidence in those with it.

Gratitude for My Training

I chose my ordination to help complete the fourfold assembly in my community, where the majority has been silent in support of *bhikkhunī*s. My deep connections with the community enabled me to be the first to receive my *sāmanerī pabbajjā* with a full traditional Cambodian Buddhist ordination ceremony, which was celebrated by the fourfold assembly. However, Wat Meangkolvorn where I was ordained was not set up to provide accommodations or train female monastics.

I am grateful to Bhikkhunī Tathālokā Mahatherī for agreeing to be my *bhikkhuni* teacher and mentor and to the Dhammadharini Bhikkhuni Sangha for allowing me to stay and train. Dhammadharini Monastery is located near Wat Meangkolvorn where my Cambodian preceptor, Bhikkhu Noun Chandara Ñānadipako Mahathero, resides.

I am committed to train according to the Buddha's vision. With gratitude for my training, I focus my initiative on harmony in the *sangha*, which I have made my theme. I will apply the Buddha's teaching to sincerely live in harmony, appreciating everyone, without quarreling, blending like milk and water, and regarding each other with kindly eyes (Parisavagga). This will drive harmony in the fourfold assembly as the Buddha envisioned and intended it for his *sāsana* and thus for the benefit, welfare, and happiness of gods and humans (*Sanghasāmaggīsutta*).

Gratitude and taking initiative have been the navigating principles of my life, which has been full of hope, joy, and inspiration amid our worldly conditions. These two principles allowed me to see my benefactors as my responsibility and have triggered my sense of urgency to help them. In doing so, I also help myself in the process.

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Does The Early Buddhist Notion on Women Endanger Male Celibacy?

Tran Thi Cam Van

The first scholastic research on Buddhism and gender debates within Western scholarship were published in 1893, in the work of early female scholars of Buddhism by Caroline Rhys Davids, Mabel Bode, and I. B. Horner. Writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these female writers paved the way for textual study on women in early Buddhism. Modern feminists Alan Sponberg and Diana Paul interpreted Buddhist teachings by comparing them to the Jewish and Christian religious traditions. Their studies concluded that Buddhist interpretations of women are fourfold: soteriological inclusiveness, institutional androcentrism, ascetic misogyny, and soteriological androgyny. The researchers then examined how early Buddhist doctrine presents gender and women without considering institutionalized androcentrism and ascetic misogyny, concepts that are strongly criticized by anti-religious feminists.

This study will investigate the question of whether early Buddhist teachings support the view of women as endangering male celibacy. To address this point, content analysis, textual criticism, and qualitative research methods will be adopted.

Gender and Asceticism

The dynamic between gender and asceticism in early Buddhist traditions reveals a compelling duality. On the one hand, texts like the *Therīgāthā* celebrate the spiritual accomplishments of women, and the Buddha's inclusion of women in the *sangha* underscores a commitment to soteriological inclusivity. On the other hand, institutional frameworks, particularly those codified in the Vinaya Pitaka, often depict women as threats to male celibacy, reflecting societal anxieties about sensuality and attachment.

Pioneering scholars such as Caroline Rhys Davids and Mabel Bode shed light on this dual narrative. Rhys Davids highlighted the progressive dimensions of Buddhist teachings, emphasizing the recognition of women's spiritual capacities. Meanwhile, Bode's research exposed the constraints imposed by institutional androcentrism. Building on these insights, Alan Sponberg and Diana Paul developed analytical frameworks to interrogate the apparent contradictions. Sponberg's typology – soteriological inclusiveness, institutional androcentrism, ascetic misogyny, and soteriological androgyny – offers a critical lens for analyzing gender dynamics in early Buddhism.[1]

This paper employs the following methodologies:

1. Content Analysis: Identifying recurring themes in primary texts, including the *Vinaya Pitaka* and *Therīgāthā*.
2. Textual Criticism: Analyzing the historical and cultural contexts of these texts.
3. Engagement with Feminist Scholarship: Contextualizing findings through secondary analyses.

By bridging doctrinal inclusivity and institutional priorities, this study examines whether women were genuinely perceived in Buddhist doctrine as endangering male celibacy or whether these portrayals were products of broader cultural and institutional concerns.

Historical Context: Women in Early Buddhist Teachings: Early Feminist Engagement

The contributions of early feminist scholars reframed women's roles in Buddhist history. Caroline Rhys Davids' *Psalms of the Early Buddhists* illuminated the spiritual triumphs of nuns

recorded in the *Therīgāthā*.[2] These verses, she noted, celebrated liberation with "feminine voices that sing not of inferiority but triumph." Her work emphasized the egalitarian potential of Buddhist doctrine, challenging patriarchal interpretations.

Mabel Bode expanded on these findings, chronicling women's historical leadership roles in Buddhism.[3] She highlighted the tension between doctrinal inclusivity and institutional limitations. I. B. Horner's study of the Vinaya Pitaka brought to light the *garudhamma*s, androcentric regulations that subordinated nuns to monks. Horner observed that these rules were likely institutional responses to societal norms rather than doctrinal imperatives.[4]

Sponberg's Typology and Feminist Critiques

Alan Sponberg's typology categorizes early Buddhist attitudes toward women into four dimensions: soteriological inclusiveness, institutional androcentrism, ascetic misogyny, and soteriological androgyny. According to Sponberg, "ascetic misogyny" perceives women as obstacles to male celibacy.[5] Diana Paul contextualized this across religious traditions, noting parallels between Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, and Christian ascetic ideals. Paul argued that such depictions of women as temptresses reflected shared patriarchal anxieties rather than inherent doctrinal hostility.[6]

Women and Male Celibacy in the Pāli Canon

The Vinaya Pitaka, a foundational text for monastic discipline in early Buddhism, codifies rules designed to maintain the *sangha*'s integrity by regulating interactions between monastics and laypeople, particularly those of the opposite sex. Among these regulations, *Pācittiya 8* and *Pācittiya 18* explicitly establish boundaries for monks (*bhikkhus*), reflecting an institutional effort to safeguard celibacy and minimize sensual or emotional entanglements. *Pācittiya 8* declares: "If any monk should engage in physical contact with a woman, it is an offense of expiation" (*yo pana bhikkhu itthiyā hatthasa sagga samāpajjeyya, pācittiya*). This rule associates physical contact with the arousal of sensual desires, framing such interactions as risks to a monk's discipline. Similarly, *Pācittiya 18* states: "If any monk should engage in private conversation with a woman in a secluded place, it is an offense of expiation" (*yo pana bhikkhu itthiyā vivittam kathāvasena saddhim samsattho nisajjāyam bhaseyya, pācittiyam*). This rule underscores institutional concerns about intimacy arising in private, reflecting a broader anxiety about preserving the ascetic detachment and celibacy.

Notably, the Vinaya Pitaka extends similar behavioral expectations to female monastics (*bhikkhunis*), reinforcing equal discipline across genders. The *Bhikkhuni Pācittiya* contains parallel rules, such as: "If a *bhikkhuni* should engage in physical contact with a man, it is an offense of expiation" (*sace bhikkhunī purisena hatthasamsaggam samāpajjeyya, pācittiyam*). This reciprocity highlights the shared expectation of celibacy and the mutual recognition of physical interactions as distractions from the spiritual path. Likewise, the prohibition of private conversations with the opposite sex is mirrored in the *bhikkhuni pācittiya*: "If a *bhikkhuni* should engage in private conversation with a man in a secluded place, it is an offense of expiation." (*yo pana bhikkhunī purisena vivitta kathāvasena samsatthā nisajjāya bhaseyya, pācittiyam*). These parallel rules reflect an institutional effort to uphold disciplined celibacy for both male and female monastics, emphasizing the shared challenges in adhering to ascetic ideals.

In her analysis, I. B. Horner interpreted these provisions as practical measures rather than

expressions of doctrinal hostility toward women.[7] She argued that these rules were intended to create an environment that minimized distractions, supporting monastics' renunciate lifestyle. However, Horner also acknowledged the *vinaya*'s broader androcentric framework, exemplified by the *garudhamma*s, the special rules that subordinated the *bhikkhunī* to the *bhikkhu*. While specific prohibitions against physical contact and private conversations demonstrate some equality, additional restrictions imposed on *bhikkhunī*s reflect the code's patriarchal context.

Despite these imbalances, the equivalency in certain prohibitions, such as *Pācittiya 8* and its counterpart in the *bhikkhuni pācittiya*, underscore a doctrinal recognition of both genders' shared vulnerabilities and spiritual potential. These rules were not punitive but protective, intended to foster a disciplined environment conducive to renunciation and meditative practice. By regulating interactions with the opposite sex, the *Vinaya Pitaka* sought to maintain the monastic community's integrity, ensuring that *bhikkhu*s and *bhikkhunī*s could equally dedicate themselves to the Buddhist path. This dual emphasis on equality and pragmatism reflects the Buddha's balanced approach to monasticism, aiming to reconcile inclusivity with the challenges of sustaining celibacy within patriarchal India.

Symbolism of Women in Buddhist Narratives

Early Buddhist texts frame sensuality and desire as universal challenges transcending gender, posing significant obstacles for both men and women. Narratives from the *Jātaka Tales* and the *Udāna* demonstrate how *rūpa* (form or appearance) can evoke desire and disrupt ascetic practices, underscoring the shared susceptibility to sensual attraction. While women are often depicted as seductresses hindering male ascetics, these texts also acknowledge that men's *rūpa* can evoke desire among women. This highlights a doctrinal acknowledgment of sensuality as a universal hindrance to spiritual discipline.

Women as Sources of Desire: The Kumbha Jātaka

The *Kumbha Jātaka* (Jātaka512) exemplifies the portrayal of women as potential disruptors of male spiritual discipline. In this story, a female antagonist uses her physical beauty to attempt to seduce a meditating ascetic. Her allure is vividly depicted as a deliberate strategy to distract him from his practice. However, the ascetic, reflecting on the impermanent and deceptive nature of physical beauty, remains steadfast in his meditation. This narrative, framing women as embodiments of attachment, aligns with Alan Sponberg's concept of "ascetic misogyny," which characterizes women as obstacles to male spiritual discipline. Such portrayals reflect a cultural anxiety within early Buddhist societies regarding the disruptive potential of sensuality in monastic life.

Men as Sources of Desire: Udāna 3.2

Conversely, *Udāna 3.2* provides a counter-narrative in which male *rūpa* triggers desire among women, offering a balanced perspective on the dynamics of sensuality. This *sutta* recounts the story of Nanda, the Buddha's half-brother, who joins the *sangha* reluctantly due to his attachment to his beautiful fiancée, Janapada Kalyānī. Struggling to renounce his desires, the Buddha takes Nanda to Tāvatimsa Heaven, where Nanda is shown heavenly maidens whose celestial beauty far surpasses his fiancée's. Although captivated by the heavenly forms, the

Buddha reminds Nanda of the fleeting, illusory nature of sensual pleasures. While the narrative primarily addresses Nanda's attraction to female beauty, it also implicitly acknowledges that *rūpa* can inspire desire regardless of gender. This reinforces that sensuality is not inherent to women, but is a universal human experience.

Mutual Susceptibility to Desire

Together, the *Kumbha Jātaka* and *Udāna 3.2* illustrate the reciprocal nature of desire, emphasizing that men and women alike face challenges related to sensuality. The Samyutta Nikāya (SN 35.120) further elaborates on the nature of sensual desire, with the Buddha teaching: "Dependent on the eye and forms, eye-consciousness arises; the meeting of the three is contact" (*cakkhuñca pa icca rūpe ca uppajjati cakkhuviññānam, tinnam sangati phasso*). This teaching highlights how these experiences are not gender specific but are universal barriers to liberation.

The recognition of mutual susceptibility in these narratives underscores the Buddha's nuanced understanding of desire as a shared human struggle not limited to a particular gender. The narratives of the *Kumbha Jātaka* and *Udāna 3.2* reveal a balanced perspective on sensuality and attachment, presenting desire as a universal challenge faced by both men and women. By recognizing the mutual vulnerabilities associated with *rūpa*, early Buddhist teachings emphasize the shared responsibility of all practitioners. This inclusivity reflects the egalitarian principles underlying the Buddha's teachings, which affirm the potential for liberation as independent of gender. Rather than perpetuating gendered stereotypes, these texts highlight the universality of sensual obstacles, emphasizing the transformative power of insight and disciplined practice.

The Therīgāthā: Women's Spiritual Triumphs

The Buddha's decision to admit women into the *sangha* demonstrated his recognition of their spiritual potential. This inclusion challenged institutional androcentrism, suggesting that Buddhism's portrayal of women as a threat was more a cultural adaptation than a doctrinal truth. This has been proven by women's efforts to cultivate their own spirituality under the Buddha's guidance in the *Therīgāthā*. In it, they live up to the trust of the Buddha, the *sangha*, and most of all, they live up to their own spiritual nature.

The *Therīgāthā* serves as a profound testament to the spiritual achievements of women in early Buddhism, with the stories of Kisā Gotamī and Patachārā epitomizing the transformative power of insight and liberation. Kisā Gotamī's verses (vv. 213–223) recount her journey from inconsolable grief to enlightenment. Consumed by sorrow over the death of her only child, she approaches the Buddha in desperation. In response, he instructs her to procure a mustard seed from a household untouched by death. Through this seemingly simple task, Kisā Gotamī encounters the universal nature of mortality, leading her to a piercing realization: "Why do you search for what cannot be found? He who has died does not come back again." (*Therīgāthā*, v. 219, translated by Rhys Davids, 1909). This insight propels her to embrace impermanence, culminating in her liberation, which she likens to an elephant breaking free from its bonds (v. 214). Similarly, the verses of Patacārā (vv. 112–116) narrate a harrowing tale of personal loss and ultimate spiritual triumph. Devastated by the deaths of her entire family, Patacārā is consumed by anguish and grief. Her verses poignantly capture her despair: "Pierced by the arrow of grief, worn out by suffering, I could not raise myself" (v. 113). Through the Buddha's guidance, she reflects on the transient nature of existence, uprooting *tanhā* (craving), the source

of her suffering: “Now, having uprooted craving – the source of sorrow – I ordained in the homeless life and found peace” (v. 116). Both narratives challenge androcentric notions of women as inherently bound by attachment and emotion, instead portraying them as exemplars of resilience and spiritual accomplishment. The *Therīgāthā* not only affirms the doctrinal inclusivity of early Buddhism but also underscores its recognition of women’s capacity for enlightenment, positioning Kisā Gotamī and Patacārā as paragons of Buddhist practice.

Conclusion

The early Buddhist notion of women reveals a nuanced relationship between doctrinal egalitarianism and institutional androcentrism. While institutional structures often portrayed women as threats to monastic discipline, doctrinal teachings affirmed their spiritual equality. Buddhism thus transcends simplistic characterizations of ascetic misogyny, offering an inclusive and egalitarian vision of liberation.

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2. C. A. F. Rhys Davids, Psalms of the Early Buddhists (London: Pali Text Society, 1909).

3. Mabel Bode, *Women Leaders in Early Buddhism* (London: Trübner & Co., 1893).

4. I. B. Horner, *The Book of the Discipline*, vol. IV (London: Pali Text Society, 1938), 234–40.

5. Karma Lekshe Tsomo, *Buddhist Women Across Cultures* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), 10–15.

6. Diana Paul, *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in Mahāyāna Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 120–30.

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Leadership and Governance: The Role of the Thai Nuns' Organization in Education and Social Work

Maechee Punyaporn Saengkhum

The Thai Nuns' Organization exemplifies the transformative power of leadership, governance, education, and social work in empowering Buddhist women in Thailand. Rooted in Theravāda Buddhism, the organization has adapted to meet modern societal and spiritual needs while preserving traditional values. Since its establishment in 1969, the organization has developed a robust governance framework that promotes inclusivity, transparency, and collective decision-making. Educational initiatives, including those offered at Mahapajapati Buddhist College, provide nuns with spiritual knowledge and practical skills, preparing them to lead both religious and community development efforts. The organization's community-based programs address pressing issues such as public health crises and natural disasters. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it mobilized resources to provide masks, food, and sanitizers to affected communities. It also supports rural education through initiatives like the "Elder Siblings Supporting Younger Ones on Mountain Heights" project, which benefits over 1,000 students across ten schools in remote border areas. In addition, the Thai Nuns' Health Empowerment Program promotes the physical and mental well-being of nuns nationwide. Leadership development is central to its mission, blending Buddhist principles with modern management techniques to prepare nuns for contemporary challenges. By actively engaging in international collaborations, the organization strengthens its capacity to address shared challenges and foster global solidarity. This study highlights the Thai Nuns' Organization's profound impact on Thai society, showcasing its innovative programs and sustainable strategies that empower Buddhist women and reflect resilience, compassion, and adaptability in a rapidly changing world.

The Thai Nuns' Organization plays a vital role in empowering Buddhist women in Thailand by demonstrating how leadership, governance, education, and social work can drive societal change while preserving spiritual values. Rooted in Theravāda Buddhism, the organization has continally adapted to address contemporary challenges. This paper highlights its achievements and strategies, emphasizing its transformative impact in religious and social contexts.

Historical Background

The journey of the Thai Nuns' Organization began with the establishment of the Thai Nuns' Institute on August 28, 1969, to formalize the role of Buddhist nuns (*maechee*) in Thai society. In 1972, the Thai Nuns' Institute Foundation was created to support initiatives aimed at empowering nuns. In 1977, the foundation received royal patronage from Her Majesty Queen Sirikit, The Queen Mother, enhancing its legitimacy and national importance. In 2018, the organization transitioned to the Thai Nuns' Institute Association, expanding its legal and operational capacities. These milestones reflect the organization's commitment to navigating societal changes while adhering to Buddhist principles.

Governance within the Thai Nuns' Organization

The governance structure of the Thai Nuns' Organization ensures efficiency and inclusivity across its operations. Each province is led by a head nun who oversees local activities, adheres to Buddhist principles, and fosters community engagement. Collaborative leadership is a cornerstone of this governance model, with decisions made collectively at provincial and national levels to ensure inclusivity and shared vision.

Transparency and accountability are central to the organization's governance framework. Regular evaluations ensure that activities align with Buddhist teachings and community needs. By fostering trust among communities, governmental bodies, and international partners, the Thai Nuns' Organization has positioned itself as a credible leader in both spiritual and social spheres.

Educational Initiatives

Education is a cornerstone of the Thai Nuns' Organization's mission, focusing on equipping nuns with the skills and knowledge to navigate both spiritual and societal responsibilities. The organization integrates traditional Buddhist teachings with practical, modern skills to promote comprehensive development, for example:

Mahapajapati Buddhist College: This institution provides a well-rounded education, including Pali studies, meditation, leadership, and community management. It prepares nuns to lead initiatives benefiting both religious communities and society.

Community-Based Education: Programs such as Sunday schools and outreach initiatives instill Buddhist values in younger generations and lay practitioners, fostering ethical leadership and social responsibility.

Through these educational efforts, the Thai Nuns' Organization empowers nuns to balance their spiritual commitments with their roles as leaders and contributors to societal progress.

Social Work and Community Service

Social work is a vital component of the Thai Nuns' Organization's activities, reflecting its commitment to addressing the needs of marginalized and vulnerable populations. The organization has implemented various initiatives to tackle pressing social issues:

COVID-19 Response: During the pandemic, the organization mobilized resources to produce masks, distribute meals, and provide hand sanitizers, demonstrating its ability to address urgent public health crises.

Flood Relief: In response to severe flooding in northern and northeastern Thailand, the organization distributed essential supplies such as food, drinking water, and survival kits to affected families, underscoring its dedication to disaster resilience.

Elder Siblings Supporting Younger Ones on Mountain Heights Project: This initiative provides educational opportunities for youth in remote areas, ensuring access to resources and guidance for their academic growth.

Thai Nuns' Health Empowerment Program: Aimed at improving the health and well-being of nuns nationwide, this program provides training and resources to support physical and mental health.

These initiatives exemplify the organization's ability to mobilize resources effectively, fostering trust and goodwill within communities while embodying Buddhist principles of compassion and service.

Leadership and Change Management

Leadership development is central to the Thai Nuns' Organization's mission. Grounded in Buddhist values such as compassion, mindfulness, and selfless service, the organization prepares nuns to manage both spiritual and social responsibilities effectively.

Fieldwork and Community Engagement: Hands-on projects allow nuns to lead by example, fostering strong relationships with their communities and demonstrating practical applications of Buddhist values.

Workshops and Seminars: Regular training sessions focus on governance, resource management, and conflict resolution, blending traditional teachings with modern management techniques to ensure resilience and adaptability.

This approach ensures that nuns are well-equipped to address contemporary challenges while maintaining their spiritual integrity.

International Collaboration

The Thai Nuns' Organization actively participates in international collaborations, enhancing its practices and expanding its influence through global networks. These partnerships enable the organization to share experiences, learn from global best practices, and address common challenges faced by Buddhist women worldwide.

Conferences and Exchanges: Participation in international forums provides opportunities for knowledge-sharing and capacity-building, enriching the organization's leadership strategies.

Global Partnerships: Collaborations with international Buddhist groups bring additional resources and perspectives, enabling the Thai Nuns' Organization to tackle both local and global issues effectively.

Through these efforts, the organization not only strengthens its global network but also contributes to the broader discourse on Buddhist women's empowerment.

Achievements and Future Directions

The Thai Nuns' Organization has achieved significant milestones in governance, education, and social work. Its initiatives have not only improved the lives of nuns but also positively impacted communities across Thailand. Looking ahead, the organization aims to:

1. Expand educational programs to reach more marginalized groups.
2. Enhance disaster response capabilities through better resource allocation and training.
3. Strengthen international collaborations to foster global solidarity among Buddhist women.

By aligning its goals with contemporary needs, the Thai Nuns' Organization ensures its continued relevance and impact.

Conclusion

The Thai Nuns' Organization exemplifies how governance, education, and social work can harmonize to support spiritual and societal progress. By fostering leadership, providing ethical education, and offering vital community services, the organization empowers Buddhist women to navigate modern complexities with confidence and compassion. Its adaptability and commitment to addressing contemporary challenges make it a beacon of hope and progress for Buddhist women in Thailand and beyond. Through its work, the organization embodies the principles of resilience and transformation, as encapsulated in the theme, "Navigating Change: Buddhist Women in Transition."

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The Hip Buddhist Era in Korea, the New Role and Leadership of Female Lay Buddhists

Jin-sook Nam

In line with the rapidly changing trends of the times, Korean Buddhism has been developing to meet modern sensibilities and popular needs while maintaining traditional doctrines and practices. One of the phenomena that emerged among them is a new Buddhist paradigm called 'Hip Buddhism'. The combination of the neologism "hip" and Buddhism shows that Buddhism is not just maintaining the classical religious framework, but is also communing with the cultural trends of modern society.

"Hip Buddhism" is an attempt to reconstruct traditional Buddhist doctrines and practices with a modern sensibility to make them more familiar to the public. For example, terms and activities such as "Buddha Handsome," "Paradise is Rock," "I Am a Temple," "NewJeans," and "Temkangs" make it easier for the younger generation to accept Buddhism, and at the same time, they can rediscover the charm of Buddhism through humor and creativity. This trend is not just a cultural trend, but it is significant in that Buddhism reflects popular and contemporary needs. In particular, the 2024 Seoul International Buddhist Expo attracted young people in their late teens to 30s as the main visitors during the event held under the theme of 'Fun Buddhism', which led to a threefold increase in the number of visitors to the expo compared to the previous year. This shows that hip Buddhism is exerting a new form of social influence beyond simply popularizing Buddhism.

The proportion of female lay Buddhists in Korean Buddhism is very high. About 70~80% of lay Buddhists are women, and on the other hand, women play a significant role in Jogye Buddhism, the largest sect of Buddhism in Korea, as nuns make up half of the population. Nevertheless, women Buddhists have traditionally been limited in their ability to hold formal religious authority or leadership, and women's contributions to Buddhism and their roles have often been underestimated.

Therefore, this paper will examine in depth the specific roles that lay Buddhists should play in modern Buddhism and the new leadership. Women lay Buddhists will propose ways to extend bodhisattva practices based on traditional Buddhist teachings to modern social cooperation and leadership, thereby contributing to the Buddhist community and social harmony. In particular, we will continue a detailed discussion on how female lay Buddhists can expand their role as leaders of social change, spreaders of popular teachings, and community-centered leaders in the hip trend of Korean Buddhism.

The Role of Female Lay Buddhists in the Hip Buddhist Era

Traditionally, lay Buddhists have focused on religious activities centered on the family and community. Prayers, preparations for offerings, and participation in Buddhist festivals and temple events have been the main roles played by lay Buddhists, which have greatly contributed to maintaining the well-being of their families and the stability of their faith. However, in the past, the role of lay Buddhists was often excluded from major decision-making processes in the community or the scope of their activities was limited. This practice was largely personal and internal and focused on strengthening one's family and faith. In this article, we will focus on the role of female lay Buddhists among lay Buddhists. Therefore, in this chapter, I would like to propose what role lay Buddhists should pursue in the future as they are playing a key role in the modern age in line with the times.

First, in the digital age, lay Buddhists need to play a role in spreading Buddhist teachings by utilizing new technologies and platforms. Currently, we are using various digital platforms such as YouTube, podcasts, and blogs to deliver Buddhist teachings to the public. This digital media is important

in that it breaks away from the traditional forms of Buddhism and makes it more accessible to new generations and the wider public.

Moreover, regarding the increase in the number of young people, "According to the SWOT [Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats] analysis of Korean Buddhism, it is worth reminding ourselves of the importance of networks and contents in the digital age, as the specialization of teaching manpower and networks, and the development of teaching content and methodology[1] are also important opportunities in the WO strategy (supplementing weaknesses and utilizing opportunities). In addition, it is also a point of contact where the development of methodology and the role meet.

Second, laywomen need to play a role as facilitators of peace and harmony. Therefore, inclusive activities for the socially disadvantaged are needed. It is necessary to develop activities that include various social issues and groups, such as gender equality, multicultural families, and LGBTQ+,[2] based on the core teachings of Buddhism, compassion and equality. Efforts should be strengthened in the future to be considerate of the marginalized, respectful of each other's differences, and realize social justice and peace. In Buddhism, compassion means equal love and consideration for all beings, and this applies to all people, regardless of race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, nationality, etc. Accordingly, lay Buddhists should reach out to the socially disadvantaged with the belief that anyone can gain inner peace and healing through Buddhist teachings, regardless of gender or social status.

Neighboring religions, especially Christianity, are active in this regard, while Buddhism is relatively weak in this regard. Considering that Korea is gradually developing into a multicultural society, it seems that more such roles and activities will be needed in the future. Buddhism values mutual respect in the community, and for this reason, it is important for lay Buddhists to actively engage in solidarity activities that include people from various social backgrounds.

Third, Korean Buddhists should play an active role in building a community through connection with the local community. The practice of the core values of Buddhism, such as altruism and compassion, will form bonds with local residents through environmental protection activities, support for the underprivileged, and volunteer activities, and will contribute to improving the welfare of the local community. Just as many female lay Buddhists are practicing Buddhist values by volunteering in the local community, we should be more active and energetic in these activities to form social solidarity. In the future, leaders must reorganize their organizations to demonstrate leadership in carrying out their activities.

Meanwhile, environmental protection and sustainable development are important issues in modern society. Lay Buddhists can be examples and promote environmental awareness in their communities through recycling campaigns, energy-saving programs, and ecological education, all of which are based on the Buddhist values of compassion and altruism, and emphasize sustainable ways of life. Buddhism emphasizes a harmonious relationship with nature more than other religions. Conserving and protecting the environment with compassion is considered one of the most important practices.

Fourth, lay Buddhists are spreading mindfulness and meditation to solve mental health problems in modern times. Meditation programs for mental health support need to be actively promoted. Various programs to help modern people find peace of mind and improve their mental health are being developed, for example, through the Myung Myung Award for social leaders. This is a very important issue and a real need. However, there are no female lay Buddhists on the meditation committee.

Fifth, lay Buddhists should play the key role of leaders, educators and exert an important influence in the Buddhist community. This is an innovation in Buddhist education through modern educational methods. Lay Buddhists must restructure traditional Buddhist education methods to fit the lives of modern people, and to play a role in providing effective Buddhist education to people of various ages and social backgrounds. In the past, Buddhist education mainly relied on lectures at temples or oral-based teaching methods, but the approach to Buddhist education has diversified to reflect the changes in modern society and the digital environment and is moving toward a more practical and participatory approach. This modern approach to education focuses on delivering the core teachings of Buddhism in a more intuitive and accessible way.

Female lay Buddhists are using digital technology to expand the scope and impact of Buddhist

education. Digital teaching materials or online lectures transcend the constraints of time and space, making Buddhist teachings easily accessible to anyone in the world, regardless of physical distance. This digital education is especially useful for workers with busy schedules or those who have difficulty finding time due to childcare, and it is meaningful which can provide them with the opportunity to participate in Buddhist education anytime, anywhere.

Sixth, it should play a role in expressing Buddhist values through culture and art. Female lay Buddhists express Buddhist teachings and values through various artistic activities such as art, music, and dance. These cultural and artistic activities strengthen communication with the public and enable a modern reinterpretation of Buddhist culture.

Seventh, it is the role of international exchange through a global network. Lay female Buddhists promote exchanges with Buddhist organizations and communities overseas. Through this, mutual understanding with various cultures will be promoted and an international Buddhist network will be built. For example, they participate in overseas Buddhist events or hold international online forums to develop Buddhist activities from a global perspective. This is possible through cooperation with nuns and women lay Buddhists, such as participating in the current Shakadita World Congress, who should come forward and make presentations so that the role of female lay Buddhists as well as those of bhikshuni monks can be strengthened.

It is time to play an important role in solving the problems facing the global community by teaching "life, peace, and respect for human beings." Korean Buddhism needs[6] to change its perception to play a role as a responsible actor in society, and religion must solve global problems together.
Lastly, lay Buddhists should play a role in pursuing institutional change through policy proposals and social participation. The Buddhist teachings of compassion, equality, and justice are important criteria for them to solve social problems, and through this, lay Buddhists should make efforts to improve social inequality and unreasonable systems.

In conclusion, female lay Buddhists in the hip Buddhist era should go beyond their traditional roles and spread Buddhist values through the use of digital media and solve modern social problems, fulfill their responsibilities as leaders and educators, and open up new possibilities. It should become an important player in the development of Buddhism and modern practice in the Buddhist community and society as a whole, contribute to the spread of Buddhist teachings to a wider area through the popularization and practicality of hip Buddhism. In addition, the activities of lay women should be linked to the modern reinterpretation of the Buddhist tradition, and become a model for the practice of the new era that fuses religious values with contemporary social needs. This trend means that Buddhism is contributing to a more sustainable influence in modern society and presenting a religious direction for future generations, and it should play a more active role in the future.

New Leadership Orientation for “Sustainable” Buddhism

A leader's thoughts and values are very important in leading an institution, an organization, and a society. In general, a leader's values shape the organizational culture, influence decision-making and direction, which motivate members. In addition, a leader's behavior plays an important role in conflict management and building external relationships. And when the influence of the leader's leadership exudes out, the public feels valued and gets influenced by it. Furthermore, the focus of leadership has shifted beyond the internal dimension such as the leader's self-identity and the level of the cooperative relationship of the members, to the level of the community that develops with both of them. This brings a total change in the way a person lives, and it is a paradigm shift that is acting and holistic. The Buddha and the Sangha community demonstrated[7] this Buddhist leadership. Therefore, in addition to general leadership, we need leadership that becomes one of Buddhist theory and practice. Basically, with these points in mind, this chapter would like to propose what kind of leadership lay women Buddhists should become and what kind of leadership they should aim for.

First is creative communication leadership. It refers to leadership that delivers Buddhist teachings innovatively and creatively that is suitable for the modern society and the digital environment. It focuses

on using digital platforms and modern media to communicate and engage with various age groups. The key is to use digital platforms and modern media to make it more accessible and understandable to people. A leader should at least understand this trend and encourage and communicate with the members or themselves so that they can move in that direction.

To effectively demonstrate creative communication leadership, it is necessary to be familiar with the digital environment and have the ability to handle social media and online content proficiently. It is a characteristic that can be better demonstrated in the generation that is familiar with the digital environment than the younger generation or the post-middle-aged generation. In particular, young lay Buddhists may be more advantageous in demonstrating creative communication leadership. Most of them use digital devices, the internet, and social media daily, and are accustomed to obtaining information and interacting through various online platforms. Therefore, lay Buddhists in this age group have the potential to demonstrate creative communication leadership and convey Buddhist teachings in new ways.

On the other hand, elderly lay female Buddhists may have relatively low access to or use of digital technology. They prefer traditional exchanges or face-to-face communication, and their distance from digital media can make it difficult for them to demonstrate creative communication leadership. While these generations may be able to make better use of religious experiences and traditional methods in spreading Buddhist teachings, they may be limited in their ability to actively communicate through digital media. Nevertheless, it is important to support elderly lay Buddhists to learn and use digital platforms. Creative communicative leadership is especially important for the younger generation of lay Buddhists, but older leaders need to support and demonstrate in this direction. In addition, we need to support the elderly lay female Buddhists to expand their access to digital technology and try to communicate creatively through it. When such intergenerational cooperation and skill acquisition are achieved, Buddhism can be effectively spread to various age groups and have a wider social impact.

Second, inclusive leadership is a leadership that recognizes the value of diverse people and ensures that each of them is treated equally. It is based on an attitude of acceptance and respect for all people, regardless of gender, age, cultural background, sexual orientation, and social status. A female lay Buddhist who demonstrates inclusive leadership is a person who embodies the Buddhist idea of compassion and equality as a modern value and can actively respond to various social needs and problems.

This is a characteristic of women's leadership, which is similar to shared leadership. In other words, rather than focusing on individuals, it means helping[8] all members achieve their goals through organic relationships as equal individuals. The most important characteristic of inclusive leadership is the willingness to respect and integrate diversity and differences. This stems from the Buddhist idea of compassion and equality and is in line with the core doctrine that Buddhism aims to help all beings be free from suffering and achieve peace.

Third is community-based leadership. Community-based leadership is a leadership that has a deep connection with the local community based on Buddhist teachings and plays an important role in solving problems in the community through practical activities. The core of this leadership is to bring about practical change based on compassion and empathy for various problems that arise in the community. Lay Women Buddhists who demonstrate community-based leadership do not just pass on religious teachings, but also fulfill their social responsibilities through volunteer work, environmental protection, and psychological support. Their work puts Buddhist ideas of compassion into practice and plays an important role in building trust and creating positive change within the community. This means that Buddhist theory and practice are one in line with life, in that there is[9] a necessity and significance of Buddhist leadership in that it draws the power of inner insight from Buddhist values and applies it to contact the world in one's own life.

The key condition for this leadership is the formation of close relationships with the local community. Because community-based leadership focuses on directly addressing community problems, lay women are expected to communicate closely with local residents, understand their needs and problems, and provide practical solutions. What is important in this process is that Buddhist teachings should go beyond mere personal faith and serve as a tool for developing the community and peace. The

ability to build trust with local residents and move forward together toward a common goal is essential. This kind of leadership can be demonstrated by anyone regardless of age or occupation, but it can be more effective for middle-aged and elderly lay Buddhists. They have a wealth of life experience and have a variety of social relationships, which gives them strength in building trust within the community. In addition, women with children or women who are active in their communities can demonstrate strength in this leadership role. They must understand the importance of service and support as an important link between home and community.

Professionally, women in education, welfare, and the environment are more likely to demonstrate community-based leadership. For example, a lay Buddhist in education can organize programs that allow students to serve their communities while practicing Buddhist teachings, while women working in the welfare field can perform various acts of compassion to help the vulnerable. Women working in the environmental field can demonstrate community-based leadership through concrete activities, such as practicing sustainable living and leading environmental protection campaigns in line with Buddhist values. Fourth is leadership of psychological and spiritual healing. Modern people live under a lot of stress and anxiety, and mental health problems are becoming more serious. In particular, social, economic, and workplace problems are adding to the mental burden, which leads to an increase in depression, anxiety disorders, and stress. In situations like these, Buddhist philosophy and mindfulness can provide an important solution.

The target of this leadership is very wide. This is the kind of leadership that many people need, especially in today's society where stress and anxiety are rampant. The need for psychological healing is growing in all age groups, including office workers, adolescents, middle-aged people, and even the elderly. Workers are suffering from mental distress due to work pressure and relationship problems, and adolescents are struggling with academic stress and social pressure. Lay female Buddhists can provide practical help through Buddhist meditation and mindfulness techniques. They can also reach out to people who feel mentally isolated with compassion and empathy, and contribute to solving their inner problems. The female lay Buddhists can demonstrate psychological and spiritual healing leadership are with excellent emotional empathy. They have the ability to understand and empathize with the emotions of others based on deeper teachings of Buddhism. In particular, you can reach out to people with high mental burdens, such as office workers or teenagers, listen to their stories, and suggest ways to relieve their mental burdens. In addition, this leadership requires a deep understanding and experience of meditation, mindfulness, and Buddhist philosophy.

In particular, middle-aged and older lay Buddhists can show strength in this leadership. Because they have overcome stress and difficulties through various experiences in their lives, they can empathize more deeply with others and provide practical help. Additionally, specialized education and training may be required to demonstrate such leadership. In order to take on the role of a meditation leader or psychological support, it is necessary to understand not only Buddhist philosophy but also psychological approaches.

Fifth is modern educational leadership. This leadership is responsible for restructuring and delivering the traditional teachings of Buddhism to suit the lives of modern people. It is an educational approach that helps people easily understand and practice the deep philosophy and doctrine of Buddhism through modern language and examples. Although Buddhism is based on classical literature and philosophy, these doctrines can often seem esoteric and complex to those living in the modern world. Therefore, lay Buddhists need to translate Buddhist teachings into modern languages and provide concrete ways to apply them to everyday problems. Through this, it helps Buddhist philosophy to be applied to real life, not just theoretical teachings.

This leadership style is suitable for lay women who have a strong interest and ability in education and communication. This is because it is necessary to be able to easily unravel difficult doctrines to people and explain how they can be applied to their daily lives for conveying Buddhism through an educational approach. In addition, the ability to communicate with different generations is important because it can provide customized education to people of different ages and environments, such as youth, office workers, and the elderly.

Therefore, modern educational leadership plays an important role in helping people of different generations and backgrounds to reconstruct Buddhist doctrines in the context of modern life, beyond simply transmitting Buddhist doctrines. In the era of hip Buddhism, lay Buddhists should spread Buddhism in a contemporary context through a variety of leadership, using digital technology, modern thinking, community solidarity, cross-cultural understanding, and professional education and healing abilities. Creative communication, inclusive approaches, community-based activities, spiritual healing, and educational leadership make Buddhism not only more than just a faith but a practical tool for life. It can also play a key role in solving complex problems in modern society and enabling Buddhism to contribute to both social change and personal growth. Leadership does not mean only people with a high age group or special background. Anyone who can demonstrate leadership according to their position is qualified to be a leader.

Conclusion

Currently, Korean Buddhism is in a great stage of its transformation from a feudal & authoritarian religion, and in returning to the basic ideas of early Buddhism. Additionally, in pursuing the ideas of peace and equality, the role and enthusiasm of women are in a great stage.[10] At this point, this paper explored how female lay Buddhists could play a new role in the contemporary trend of Korean Buddhism, called “hip Buddhism”, and spread Buddhist teachings more effectively.

Lay women Buddhists have traditionally played a role in supporting the faith of families in the home and community. Their prayers, preparations for offerings, and participation in temple events provided the maintenance and stability of the community's faith, but they were mainly limited and subsidiary. However, the era of hip Buddhism requires new roles and leadership for lay Buddhists, and it is also an opportunity for them to emerge as key actors in solving modern social problems and spreading Buddhist teachings.

In conclusion, female lay Buddhists should play an important role in restructuring Buddhist values in a modern way and putting them into practice in the trend of hip Buddhism. They must use digital technology and modern leadership to drive real change in the Buddhist community and society at large. These activities make Buddhism more than just a faith, and a tool for solving modern social problems.

It is significant in that it has presented the possibility of Buddhism expanding its social role and exerting sustainable religious influence through the important role of Lay female Buddhists. It will contribute to laying the foundation for Buddhism to connect with a wider public, create social value, and establish itself as a sustainable religion in the future.

Notes

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discrimination and oppression, and create a society that recognizes diversity of sexual orientation and gender identity.

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Empowering Voices: the Evolution of Tibetan Buddhist Women in Leadership

Karma Tashi Choedron and Tenzin Dadon

Democratic reforms have provided women with rights and opportunities to develop their leadership capacity, despite ongoing challenges.[1] Historically, Buddhist women have played crucial leadership roles and contributed significantly to the monastic community despite obstacles.[2] The study highlights the emergence of Tibetan Buddhist women leaders from the Himalayan region and Southeast Asia, focusing on their challenges, opportunities, and the new generation of female leaders.

Leadership and Historical Roles of Buddhist Women: Challenges and Discrimination

Traditionally, Tibetan Buddhism has been male-dominated, marginalizing women in religious and leadership roles due to societal and monastic patriarchy.[3] Women had limited access to education and leadership.[4] Tibetan women leaders emerged after the 1950s within the Exile Community, but traditional caretaker roles and the absence of fully ordained nuns further restricted their leadership opportunities.[5]

Women leaders face gender bias, stereotypes, and cultural expectations that conflict with the assertiveness required in leadership roles.[6] Balancing religious, professional, and personal responsibilities is challenging, especially in cultures with strong traditional gender roles. Many women experience imposter syndrome, self-doubt, and hesitancy in decision-making.[7] They often struggle to access informal networks and mentorship opportunities, feeling excluded in male-dominated industries.[8] Cultural expectations to prioritize family over religious pursuit or professional ambitions, such as lack of support for gender diversity in organizational setups, which perpetuates male hierarchy, further hinder women's progress in leadership roles.[9] These challenges highlight the obstacles Tibetan Buddhist women face in their pursuit of leadership roles.

Reconciliation

Tibetan Buddhism has increasingly promoted gender equality in leadership roles, with strong advocacy from the Dalai Lama. Historically, women faced challenges due to traditional norms, but movements like the restoration of full ordination for women (Tib: *gelongma*) have gained support. Reconciliation efforts include reinterpreting sacred texts and promoting women's ordination and education\ bringing women into the forefront and ensuring their stories are told.

Initiatives like the *geshema* degree and leadership programs for Tibetan women in exile have empowered many nuns.[10] In Buddhist-majority countries, nuns and female scholars are challenging patriarchal rules and assuming leadership positions. These efforts aim to address historical gender inequalities and promote balanced representation in leadership roles.[11]

Recent Milestones in Tibetan Buddhist Nuns' Achievements

Tibetan Buddhist nuns have made significant contributions to promoting and preserving Buddhist teachings. This section highlights their dedication, spiritual achievements, and efforts to revive ancient traditions, focusing on recent milestones and notable accomplishments.

Less than ten years ago, the first Tibetan Buddhist nuns made history by graduating with the *Geshema* degree, equivalent to a PhD in Tibetan Buddhism. This milestone was particularly remarkable because, until 2012, this highest degree was only available to men. The 2016 *Geshema* graduation ceremony, presided over by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, marked a new chapter in the education of ordained Buddhist women. Since then, many nuns have followed in gheir footsteps, with a record 144 nuns sitting for various levels of the four-year *geshema* exams last year, and 13 graduating as *geshema*s, bringing the total number of *geshema*s to 73. It is important to note that Kelsang Wangmo, though not of Himalayan origin, was the first woman to receive the *geshema* degree and has been a trailblazer in academic and spiritual education.

In February 2025, nine *Geshema*s graduated from a year-long Tantric Studies program at Gyuto Tantric University near Dolma Ling Nunnery and Institute. This program, launched by the Tibetan Nuns Project in 2017, has provided nuns with the opportunity to formally study *tantric* Buddhism, a level of scholarship and Buddhist training that was previously only open to men.

The *khenmo* degree, equivalent to a PhD in Buddhist philosophy, is awarded to nuns after many years of rigorous study and examination. The *khenmo* degree signifies academic excellence, spiritual maturity, and leadership within the monastic community. These nuns are expected to contribute significantly to the preservation and dissemination of Buddhist teachings, serving as role models and mentors for future generations of nuns. On June 14, 2022, the first group of Tibetan Buddhist nuns was enthroned as Khenmos at Sakya College for Nuns in Dehradun District, Uttarakhand, India. This event marks a significant educational achievement, allowing the Khenmos to take on the responsibility of producing qualified students and dedicating their lives to the service of Dharma (Tibetan Nuns Project 2022). These pioneering Khenmos, including Khenmo Kunga Paldon, Khenmo Kunga Woetso, and Khenmo Ngawang Yangga, have contributed to the education and leadership of nuns. They are now recognized as qualified teachers and scholars who can give high-level teachings to other nuns.

The term *togdenma* refers to female yogic practitioners in the Drukpa Kagyu lineage. These nuns undergo long, rigorous, and austere training, often spending many years in retreat to attain spiritual realization. The tradition of *togdenma* was almost lost, but is now being revived in places like the Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery. The revival of the *togdenma* tradition is crucial for maintaining the rich spiritual heritage of the Drukpa Kagyu lineage. The nuns who train as *togdenma*s are dedicated to achieving high levels of spiritual realization and are respected for their deep commitment and discipline.

In Buddhist *tantra*, the term *yogini* (Tib: *naljorma*) refers to female contemplative specialists, who may be celibate ascetics or householders. They play a vital role in Tibetan Buddhism through advanced tantric practices and meditations. Notable Naljorma Tsering Dolma has been instrumental in promoting Buddhist *yogini* practices in the Himalayan region, ensuring the continuity and vitality of these esoteric traditions.

Lopenma is a title for nuns who have completed advanced studies and are qualified to teach. They play a crucial role in preserving and transmitting Buddhist teachings. Lopenmas educate and guide younger nuns, ensuring the monastic community remains vibrant and knowledgeable, contributing to the development and dissemination of Buddhist philosophy and practice.

These titles represent the significant achievements and contributions of Tibetan Buddhist women in leadership and spiritual practice. They highlight the dedication, discipline, and spiritual depth required to attain such esteemed positions within the monastic community. The

recognition and support of these women are crucial for the continued growth and flourishing of Tibetan Buddhism.

Notable leaders among Tibetan Buddhist nuns include Khandro Rinpoche, who advocates for women's inclusion in leadership, and Geshema Delek Wangmo, who inspires others with her leadership and scholarship. Lopenma Dechen Zangmo plays a crucial role in preserving and transmitting Buddhist teachings. Renowned Togdenmas like Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo and Togdenma Achos have been key figures in reviving the Togdenma tradition. Togdenma Achos, a senior *yogini* at Tashi Jong Khampagar Monastery, has been personally instructing nuns aspiring to become *togdenma*s.

On October 17, 2024, four nuns at DGL Nunnery received their red and white robes after a 16-year retreat, officially recognizing them as Togdenma. This event reestablished the lost Togdenma tradition, fulfilling Jetsunma's life mission at the request of the 8th Khamtrul Rinpoche. On February 19, 2025, Gyaltsen Tulku Rinpoche, a Bhutanese Drugpa Kagyü Master, bestowed the title of Mahāyogini on four female practitioners after a strict twelve-year retreat in Bhutan. This event marks the recognition of the practitioners' dedication to Naropa's Six Yogas and Mahāmudra, following in the footsteps of Tibet's great *yogi* Milarepa.

Other notable Tibetan Buddhist nuns in South Asia have also demonstrated strong leadership qualities in various fields. Bhiksuni Karma Pema Tsultrim exemplifies leadership through her global interreligious dialogue and compassionate guidance on societal issues. Her journey from a Catholic high school education to Buddhist ordination and solitary retreat highlights her dedication to spiritual growth and leadership. Dr. Tenzin Dadon (Sonam Wangmo) is a pioneering leader and the first Himalayan nun to earn a Ph.D., recognized for her advocacy in gender equality, environmental issues, and the rights of female monastics. Dr. Pooja Dabral's leadership is evident in her academic contributions to Buddhist philosophy and psychology, as well as her role in establishing educational programs at prestigious institutions.

The humanitarian efforts of Ani Choying Drolma include founding schools and providing medical services, showcase her leadership in community service and global charitable work. Dr. Tsering Palmo's establishment of the Ladakh Nuns Association has significantly empowered Ladakhi nuns, demonstrating her leadership in education and awareness. Dr. Tshering Choezom, a nun and Tibetan doctor at Men Tsee Khang in Dharamsala, is known for her dedication to Tibetan medicine and her contributions to the community through her work at the Tibetan Medical and Astrological Institute. Dr. Rigzin Lhamo's perseverance in practicing traditional Bhutanese medicine and supporting her family reflects her resilient leadership. Gelongma Namgyel Lhamo's advocacy for nuns' education and welfare through the Bhutan Nuns Foundation highlights her commitment to leadership in religious and social spheres. Getsulma Genden Lhamu's achievements in Buddhist studies and women's empowerment further illustrate her role as a leader in contemporary Buddhism. Getsulma Tenzin Lekdron founded the Tara Lanka Study Group and led initiatives like the Medicine Buddha Project to promote Tibetan Buddhism in Sri Lanka.

Ordination

In Bhutan, significant progress has been made in recognizing female spiritual practitioners and promoting their leadership within monastic institutions. On June 21, 2022, His Holiness the Je Khenpo conferred the *gelongma* (Skt: *bhikshuni*) precepts to 144 nuns, marking a historic step

towards greater equality,[12] ending institutionalized gender inequality in Tibetan Buddhism, and promoting gender-inclusive leadership.[13] This large-scale ordination guarantees a lasting *gelongma* community and may influence other Buddhist communities to follow suit, further advancing women's leadership within the tradition.

Prominent Tibetan Buddhist Nuns in Southeast Asia

The status of Tibetan Buddhist women, especially nuns, in Malaysia and other countries in Southeast Asia is evolving. With more opportunities for education and leadership, they are significantly contributing to the growth of Tibetan Buddhism in the region. This section highlights notable nuns in Malaysia and Thailand and their impact on the Buddhist community.

Karma Yeshe Palmo, a respected Buddhist nun with the Karma Kagyu Dharma Society in Kuala Lumpur, is dedicated to teaching and leading Dharma activities. Her efforts significantly contribute to the community's spiritual growth and well-being. Dr. Karma Tashi Choedron is an environmental sociologist and meditation teacher recognized for her leadership in gender and Buddhism, as well as her advocacy for marginalized communities.[14] She serves as an assistant professor at the University of Nottingham Malaysia, deputy Director of Education of the Vajrayana Buddhist Council of Malaysia, and Vice-President of the International Buddhist Confederation.

Venerable Ani Chodron is known for teaching and promoting Tibetan Buddhism, contributing significantly to spiritual education. Venerable Ani Yeshe Padmasambhava, founder of the Padmasambhava Children Loving Association in Klang, exemplifies compassionate leadership by providing shelter for orphans and supporting single mothers and marginalized communities, making a significant impact on many lives.

Prominent Tibetan Buddhist nuns in Southeast Asia are increasing, though literature on them is limited. Notable figures include Boonattakarn Passaro from Thailand, who ordained as Bhikkhuni Choejin Samdrup in 2011. She dedicates her life to volunteer work, studying Buddhism, and promoting women's leadership. Inspired by the Dalai Lama, she is pursuing a Ph.D. in Peace Studies and works at the Sujata Sikkalaya Center to support and motivate women.

Conclusion

The status of Tibetan Buddhist women and nuns in South Asia and Southeast Asia is gradually improving, with increasing recognition of their contributions and efforts to provide equal opportunities for spiritual and educational advancement. Their achievements in leadership, education, and spiritual accomplishments promote gender equality within the monastic community and inspire future generations. Despite challenges, these women continue to make significant strides and contribute to their communities, advocating for gender-inclusive leadership and more equitable environments.

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Healing Trauma through *Sangha*

Mia Livingston

[Content warning: trauma and sexual assault)]

This is my story of how I recovered from complex trauma with the help of a broader definition of *sangha*. This diagnosis is also known as "complex post-traumatic stress disorder" or CPTSD. It has been referred to as "an affliction of the powerless."[i1] Officially it is defined as "exposure to prolonged or repetitive events of an extremely threatening or horrific nature from which escape is difficult or impossible, including repeated sexual or physical abuse."[ii2]

For a long time the definition of post-traumatic stress disorder was officially limited to soldiers, inevitably men, at war. But Harvard psychiatrist Judith Herman noticed extensive traumatic symptoms especially among women and children who suffered domestic violence and childhood abuse, and pioneered the diagnosis of CPTSD in her work. Still, her feminist understanding of complex trauma did not enter the mainstream until thirty years later, in the World Health Organization's International Classification of Diseases in 2022.

Symptoms can include overwhelming and intrusive memories; an unusual lack of control over negative thought patterns; hypervigilance and disproportionate startle reactions, or an absence of appropriate reflexes; emotional numbness and dissociation; a deep belief that one is worthless; and difficulty in sustaining relationships and closeness with others.[iii3]

CPTSD differs from singular trauma in that it takes place over many years – often a lifetime – during which time traumatic events may vary and repeat themselves in different ways, rather than occuring only once within a limited timeframe. As a result of this complex presentation, the impact of the condition on psychological development also differs. In this article I will address some of those differences, as well as some paths to recovery, from my own experience.

My family travelled extensively, and by the time I graduated high school aged eighteen, I had attended nine schools across three continents. In addition, my parents had grown up relatively sheltered, and they wished to give my siblings and me the freedom and independence that they had not had.

While their intent was potentially wonderful, good things often have a flip side. We children spent a lot of time alone and with people we did not know very well, and at age seven I had an experience of sexual assault with a much older relative. My intuition had told me that I did not want to be alone with him; but people did not generally listen to the intuition of little girls. I tried to tell my parents about what happened; but for some reason they did not hear me, so I received no support or justice. Without personal experience, it can be hard to imagine something like incest happening in your own family, and unfortunately their well-intended belief in non-violent communication contributed to their conflict avoidance and naiveté.

Luckily my two siblings did not experience the same thing. My assault happened because I was female, exposed, unlucky, pre-conditioned to ignore my own intuition, and to be unquestioningly respectful and affectionate; especially towards seniors.

Our frequent country moves meant that I had no support network outside the family. At age twelve my best friend and I exchanged stories of our abuse, but her parents had similarly not heard her; shortly afterwards, I had to leave that country and start afresh. It did not occur to me to tell a teacher.

CPTSD is never just “one thing” or one event. It accumulates. And it did not begin with that one assault; it began with specific conditions: the combination of my particular type of vulnerability and circumstances. Even if it had not happened at that time, unless conditions changed, something similar would likely have occurred to me at another time.

Not every assault leads to CPTSD, particularly if the victim enjoys resilience and support in other areas of their life. For me, however, the event increased my isolation and planted seeds of cynicism and despair in my heart. It seemed to me that my only value was as an object for others’ pleasure and that my feelings, thoughts, preferences, gifts, the love that I had to give, and the relationships that I wanted were of no use or value. I grew up with little hope and a low opinion both of myself and others. While I still believed in trying to work and contribute to a better world, due to my defended heart I could not hear what its wish was. I put my efforts into work and people whom I did not care for, and my lack of direction resulted in failed jobs and abusive relationships.

My ability to limit risks was broken, and I was assaulted again multiple times into my twenties. I did not know what healthy boundaries looked like, was generous to a fault, and hungry for the smallest scrap of affection. By the age of thirty, I was burned out both mentally and physically from stress, hyper-vigilance, and the lack of support.

I had been interested in Buddhist practice nearly all my life, and had attended a Vipassana meditation retreat in my twenties; but I did not take Buddhist practice seriously until I felt as if I had lost everything. At age thirty, I gave up my work and rental apartment to study for a year with monks at a Zen monastery in the north of England where I lived at the time.

It felt like a new lease on life. For the first three months of training I finally felt understood, accepted, and safe; as if I was exactly where I needed to be, doing what I needed to do. Unfortunately, many of the issues that arise in trauma also arise in traditional Buddhist practice, at least for beginners like me: the emotionally isolated and controlled practice, the potential for dissociation during meditation, the denial of physical needs, the strict and unquestioning expectation of hierarchy and subservience. For a trauma survivor, feeling at home in such an environment does not necessarily mean that we feel safe in the long term. We do not know what “safe” really feels like, so we are unable to create, defend, or insist on it, when inevitably it is challenged.

From my teachers’ perspective, meanwhile, as a trauma survivor I likely seemed emotional, fragile, and childlike, and from a point of view of Buddhist training, potentially in need of stricter discipline, denial of emotional support, and denial of relational connection so that I could delve freely into meditation. It is often said that Buddhism is a practice only suited to “spiritual adults,” and like most monasteries, this one wisely did not accept new trainees with mental health issues. But even I was not yet aware of my own CPTSD and, after all, at least at the start of training, are we not all mentally unhealthy? How, then, can a teacher discern between someone who might benefit from training and someone who might not?

These things are complicated, and even as I spiralled further into some negative symptoms, Buddhist practice helped me to heal from others. I remain deeply grateful for the opportunity to train and to learn, and at the end of my residential year I restarted my life with fresh hope.

I believed that I was much happier and more resilient. Unbeknownst to me, however, some of that “happiness” depended on my ability to dissociate from my true feelings. While I felt free and trusting, I still failed to truly connect with people or to address things that were going on beneath the surface in different relationships. I had not yet become “myself,” and what is worse,

because I believed that Buddhist practice was all I needed, I had stopped searching.

Having a strong sense of self is rarely spoken of as helpful in Buddhist training. On the contrary, students may be warned that the self-sense contributes to delusion. As someone who did not have a sense of self for most of my life, however, in my experience it is a privilege and a necessity: a powerful, positive, and healthy consequence of being alive. It helps us to find the things that bring us joy, gives us direction, and connects us to our gut feeling about what we need to do to survive in the world. As opposed to narcissism, which elevates a false self while disconnecting us from other beings, knowing one's genuine self, that which differentiates us from others,creates stronger connections.[iv4]

Violence perpetrated by humans on each other corrodes the self-sense early on, and inhibits the victim's development. In effect, victims grow up "sideways," as if in the shadows. They know that they are different, but in their experience, that has been a negative thing. So they hide and try to become invisible, or they try to create an inflated, intimidating, and artificial self. They are primed to become anti-social in service of self-protection.

Until this relationally created wound is healed, CPTSD persists, and relationally created wounds can only be healed in relational ways. While I was generally accepted at the monastery and we functioned as a collective, in practical terms, for better and for worse, the inherent conservatism of Buddhist training skews towards mental and physical isolation. I was required to find other ways of realizing interconnection, in order to progress my health and my training.

I spent as long studying afresh the ways of the world as I have done studying Buddhism. After leaving the monastery, freed from the expectations that come with being a Buddhist student, I meticulously studied the psycho-social boundaries that non-traumatised people take for granted. I trained in conflict resolution, anti-racism,[v5] embodied psychotherapy,[vi6] fine arts, and contemplative care.[vii7] I attended meditation retreats that were as deeply serious as the monastery's had been, but in which we broke the mold by dancing, hugging, singing, laughing, and crying, surprisingly without breaking any precepts. I even tried internet dating (it's horrible but if you're going to do it, do it with Dr. Jennie Young's feminist critical discourse analysis.[viii8]

Slowly over many years, I made amends with my family of origin. They apologised that they had not helped me in my times of greatest need, and I understood. I returned to places that I loved, re-learned my first language, and made new connections. I fell in love with my husband; we learned each other's religion, and attend the monastery together now. The path is rarely straight, and it certainly is not simple. But with time, I heard and found the way back to my heart's wish.

Notes

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Healing at the Crossroads: Integrating Buddhist Teachings, Mental Health Counseling, and Societal Oppression in Working with Domestic Violence Survivors

Bhikkhuni Thich Nu Lien Anh (Le Thi My Hieu) and Shannon Chang

Intimate partner and family violence, often referred to as domestic violence (DV), is a pervasive transnational form of suffering. While DV impacts individuals of all genders, female-identified individuals historically and statistically experience the highest rates of victimization. This violence has ripple effects on survivors, who experience profound mental health challenges, impacting their families and broader social networks. Survivors at all stages of life are often confronted with geographical, psychological, and emotional changes; coping involves finding existential meaning amidst the transitions.

This paper examines the intersection of domestic violence, oppression, mental health, and the therapeutic approach based on the foundation of Buddhadhamma. We aim to highlight how this framework can be harmonized to catalyze healing and resilience. We drawing on our experiences as a Buddhist nun and a layperson who are training to be mental health counselors at Naropa University, a Buddhist-inspired university in the U.S., and share insights from our work with DV survivors at Safehouse Progressive Alliance for Nonviolence (SPAN). We discuss how the Dharma can complement Eurocentric psychology by providing tools for clinical work that support clients and counselors. Furthermore, in order to support this work through Buddhadhamma, we advocate that the root causes of DV must be addressed with a lens of societal oppression in mind. A holistic, equitable system of care only exists when our global community collectively takes responsibility against violence. By adopting an integrated view of healing as justice – a view that encompasses individual recovery and societal transformation – we strive to inspire advocates to embrace a dual lens of personal and collective liberation.

Background and Context

Violence and gender oppression existed at the time of Gautama Buddha and it still exists now. What has shifted over time is the understanding and the ability to work as a global community to address and dismantle it. Every 10 minutes, a woman is murdered. In 2023, around 51,100 women and girls globally were killed by an intimate partner or family member. “This means that, on average, 140 women or girls are killed every day by someone in their own family” (UN Women 2024). The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that “about 1 in 3 women have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime” (WHO 2024). A more jarring statistic is that “less than 40% of the women who experience violence seek any help” (UN Women ECA 2023). Buddhism and many other religions and spiritual communities have advocated for a peaceful, non-violent world for generations, yet here we are. How does violence occur on an everyday basis right in front of us, whether we see it on the streets, in our own families, or even in ourselves? And what can we do about it?

At SPAN, we are encouraged to think of ourselves not only as therapists but also as advocates or change agents. Advocacy is the act of speaking out, and change agents are people who strive to move against the status quo when they feel that it is oppressive. We believe that Buddhists have the compassion and wisdom to speak out and make the changes needed for a more equitable and less oppressive societies. In the following sections, we discuss how

Buddhism has been relevant in our work, the importance of understanding societal injustices, and the value of adopting an integrative framework that can be used to work with survivors of DV.

Buddhism Applied Clinically

Clients experiencing DV often seek support from profoundly vulnerable situations. Their suffering encompasses multiple dimensions of their lives, including psychological, physical, and emotional well-being, as well as disruptions to their sense of love, belonging, self-esteem, and capacity for self-actualization. They enter the therapeutic space hoping that the work will facilitate meaningful changes, both in their internal experiences and their external realities. A psychotherapist trained in Buddhist-informed practices provides clients with a therapeutic environment where they can engage in interpersonal work to address unresolved emotional wounds and nurture their inner potential for self-realization.

While Buddhist teachings have been applied in various ways within talk therapy, the Three Marks of Existence (impermanence, not-self, and suffering) serve as a central theme when working with clients who have experienced DV. The first, navigating change through DV, can be especially challenging due to the experience of not just abuse but also loss. The teaching of *anicca* (impermanence) can be implicitly integrated to help clients recognize that everything in life, including themselves, is subject to change. Acceptance of change allows space and time for the body and mind to adjust to life's psychological, physical, and emotional shifts.

Second, approaching life events through the lens of *anatta* (non-self) helps clients understand that events occur as part of a larger interconnected system shaped by numerous external factors beyond an individual's control or purview. The concept of *anatta* encourages them to release the need to control external circumstances and focus on their internal processes. Last but not least, when clients who have experienced DV come to therapy seeking to understand why traumatic and unjust events have occurred in their lives – events that should not happen to anyone – both clients and therapists often grapple with an overwhelming sense of powerlessness. *Dukkha,* which captures the inherent imperfections of life with its pervasive suffering and constant dissatisfaction, provides a profound lens through which the clients can understand that their DV experience is suffering, reformable, and something that no longer serves them. Skillfully integrating this fundamental truth helps clients realize suffering as suffering and may encourage them to change, which can lead to boundless peace and healing.

In short, the Buddhist teachings are well received and practiced in different therapeutic spaces. The Three Marks of Existence serve as an effective theme to explore DV clients' experience and support their recovery process. According to the American Psychological Association (APA, 2018), counselors possess the knowledge and understanding necessary to address clients' issues and provide guidance or suggestions. The clinician who deeply understands and practices Buddhadhamma approaches counseling work as a process of cultivating self-awareness and awakening, rather than reinforcing the ego as a "helper" or "healer." Working with survivors of domestic violence as a Buddhist and mental health practitioner is therefore a spiritual practice. Through witnessing the immense pain and suffering of a survivor, there is an opportunity to work with one's own ego, reconnect with compassion in yourself and the client, and ultimately work towards the cessation of suffering for all sentient beings.

Buddhism and Societal Oppression

In the process of preparing this paper, we encountered a substantial body of literature addressing the importance of integrating social justice with Buddhist practice. Numerous Buddhist scholars have dedicated their work to socially engaged Buddhism. Despite this, the integration of social justice into the Buddhist path is still not universally recognized as an essential component of spiritual practice. We hypothesize that the reason for this challenge lies in its inherent difficulty. To ask a suffering individual to critically examine societal structures designed to oppress marginalized groups, represents a significant demand, particularly for those who may not perceive themselves as directly affected.

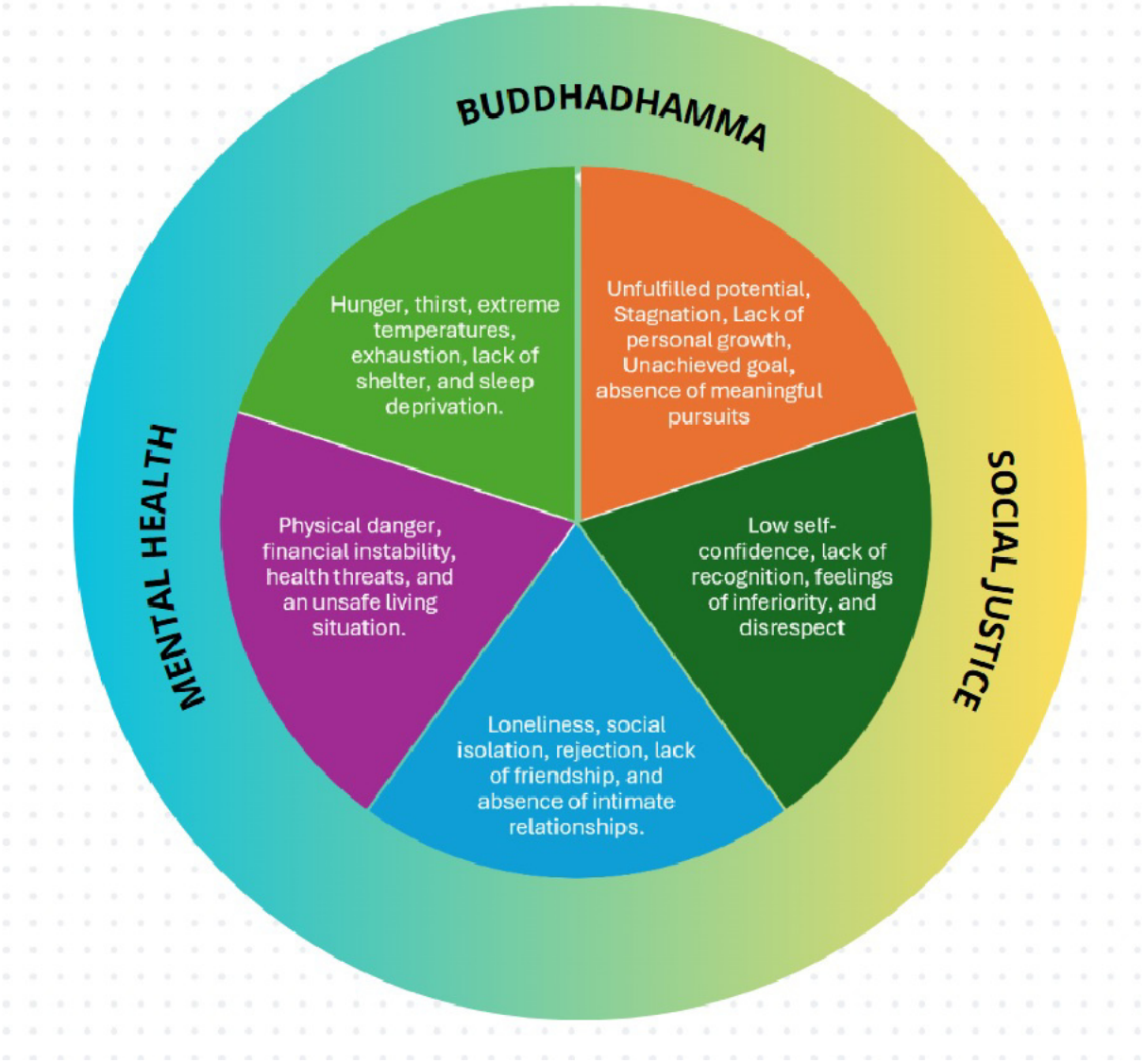
Oppressive societal structures affect everyone, particularly individuals who identify as women. Those of us walking the Buddhist path have a unique vantage point, shaped by experiences of gender-based oppression and, potentially, other intersecting forms of marginalization. We have committed to following the path of the Buddha, who advocated a way of life that seeks to benefit all sentient beings. This dual process – the recognition of societal suffering and the motivation to dismantle oppressive structures – places us in a distinctive position to understand the interconnectedness of oppression and liberation.

While we cannot compel others to alter their worldview, we can assert that neglecting the systemic causes and conditions that have contributed to our clients' experiences of domestic violence constitutes a failure to fully engage with their needs. Although SPAN serves individuals of all genders, the majority of clients are cisgender women or individuals assigned female at birth, highlighting the prevalence of gender-based oppression. These clients often come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and possess limited resources, rendering them more vulnerable to class discrimination and inequitable access to support as they navigate social systems. Ignoring these social dynamics would hinder our ability to serve clients effectively and would perpetuate their sense of self-blame for their circumstances.

Buddhism offers invaluable guidance in our work with survivors, yet it must be coupled with an understanding of the societal forces that shape their experiences. In the following section, we propose a framework for integrating these insights into both professional practice and personal life.

Framework

Based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs (HON) and the diversity of experiences due to one's social location, survivors of DV deal with multiple layers of distress. Maslow (1943, 1954) outlined five levels of human needs, starting with access to food and water, progressing to safety, love and belonging, esteem, and finally, to self-actualization, where individuals strive to reach their full potential. While HON allowed us to explore our DV clients' needs from a multi-layered perspective, we acknowledge the criticisms of this model in its linear approach to social, cultural, and intellectual needs (Hofstede 1984; King-Hill 2015). This explains why the five different layers are presented as a pie chart below, instead of a pyramid, as it was originally presented by Maslow.



The Integrative Wheel of Healing

The Integrative Wheel of Healing framework above includes two concentric circles representing the survivors' experiences of distress in the center, surrounded by Three Aspects we believe are required for healing: Social Justice, Mental Health counseling, and Buddhadhamma. From the synchronization of the Three Aspects, we aim to create a system of care where DV survivors have their basic needs met, feel heard and understood, and can explore what meaning their life has. Additionally, while the framework was developed based on our clinical experience of working with DV, we designed it to be adaptable for use with other populations in diverse contexts.

Conclusion

The Buddhadhamma encourages an inward examination of the self. Drawing from our experiences as a Buddhist nun and a lay practitioner working with clients, we contend that

awakening is unattainable without a comprehensive understanding of how individuals have been shaped by the societies, cultures, and contexts in which they exist. Self-reflection, therefore, requires a parallel examination of the external environments that influence our lives. In presenting the framework outlined in this paper, we offer Buddhist practitioners a method for gaining a deeper awareness of the multifaceted dynamics involved—not only to work with DV survivors but also to foster a more non-violent and peaceful world. As a global sangha, we possess the collective power to support survivors within our communities, denounce behaviors and attitudes that perpetuate violence, and create systems and structures that provide access for all individuals, irrespective of their backgrounds, to pursue their liberation.
We invite you to join us in this essential endeavor!

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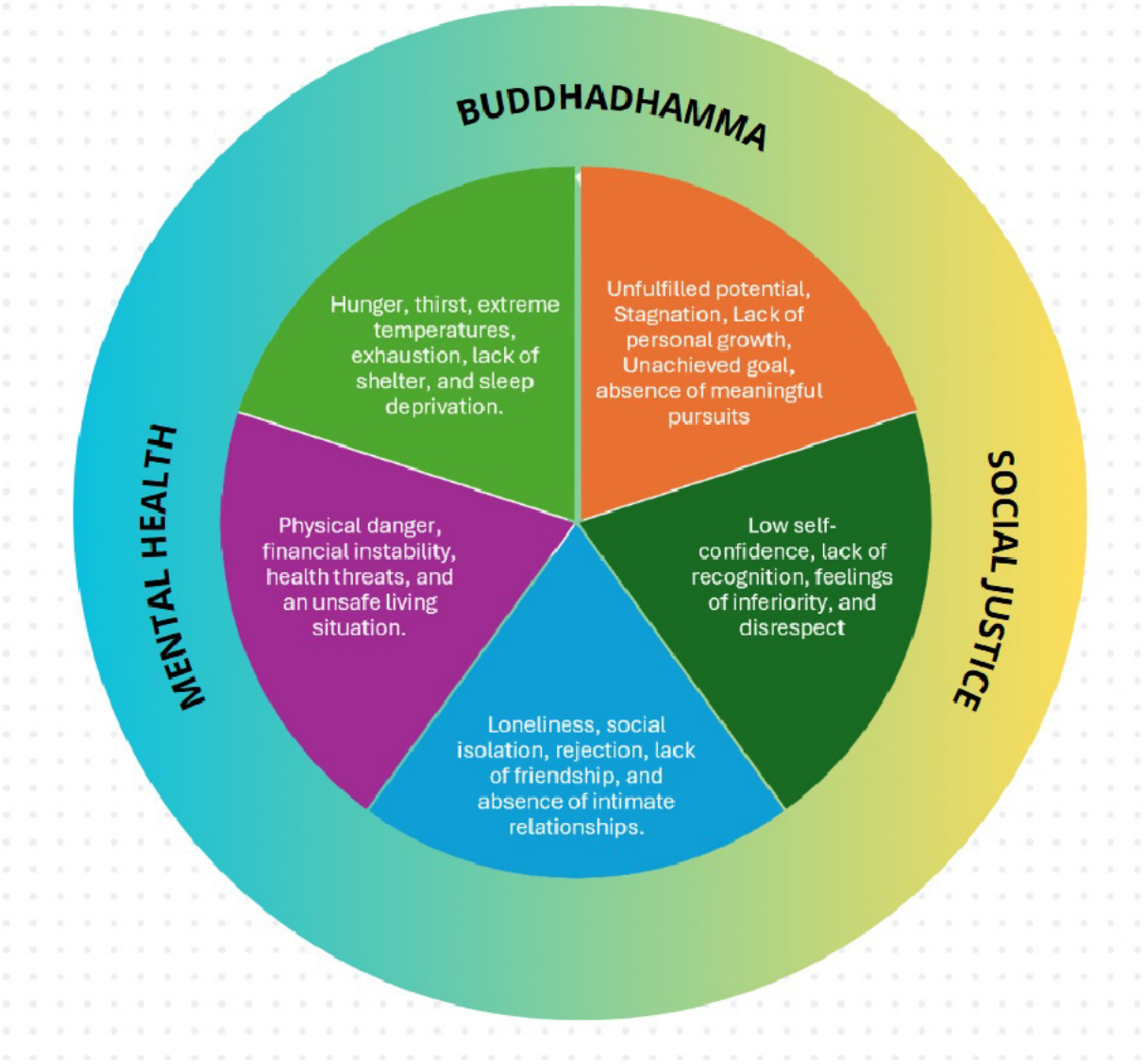

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Reflections on Pilgrimage, Research, and Coping with Change

Sandra Ng Siow San

A pilgrimage is both an outward and inward journey that should not be mistaken as a guarantee to salvation. While the external, physical journey may bring the pilgrim to "distant sacred" places that are "new, strange, dangerous," it is the internal journey that can prove most transformative.[1] The pilgrimage evokes and nurtures internal awakenings and reconciliations, drawing out profound self-discovery, spiritual growth, and a deeper understanding of one's place in the world. For the pilgrim, the journey does not simply move across geographical distances, but traverses the terrain of the self, revealing unfamiliar, unusual, or unpredictable aspects of their own being.

D. A. Leeming identifies "three essential steps" in a pilgrimage: The "separation" from "ordinary life"; the "interaction with the sacred"; and "the return" with "a sense of renewal."[2] These stages resonated with my experience while working toward a PhD. The first step mirrored my departure from the comfort of conventional academic frameworks, immersing myself in unfamiliar ideas and methodologies that pushed the boundaries of what I thought I knew. The second step echoed the moments when I encountered new information that challenged my assumptions, thereby stretching my limits and thinking. The final step occurred as my PhD journey neared its conclusion. I found myself returning not only to my initial research questions but also to a deeper sense of self. This return was not just intellectual; it was personal, integrating challenges, experiences, and insights from my journey that reshaped both my research and my evolving sense of self.

In other words, the PhD journey was not just an academic pursuit, but ws also a personal exploration of knowledge and purpose. Just as a pilgrim might experience spiritual growth through physical and emotional challenges, my own sense of knowing shifted. What once seemed like established truths gave way to deeper questions, prompting me to break from the comfort of fixed thinking and immerse myself in both the uncharted terrain of my research and the equally uncharted territory of my inner being. Through this process, my research became not just an exploration of external knowledge, but also a journey of personal and spiritual nurturance, one that continues to unfold through the questioning of the world around me and the re-examination of the assumptions within.

The Web and the Quilt as Metaphor

Ray and McFadden's metaphors of the web and the quilt offer a meaningful lens through which to reflect on my experiences within the broader tapestry of Buddhist teachings and practices. Both metaphors encapsulate the intricate, non-linear, and interdependent nature of my personal, intellectual, and spiritual becoming.

The metaphor of the web represents an intricate, interdependent network, whether "material" like a spider's web or "virtual" like the World Wide Web.[3] Both forms illustrate the interconnectedness and dynamism of a relational system with the capacity to educate, co-create, inspire, and nurture. In my academic journey, the web – each strand symbolizing a pivotal element – represents supervisory support, conversations with research informants (both formal and casual), interactions with peers, and moments of solitary reflection with readings and data gathered. These strands were not static; they evolved as my research developed, where an unexpected conversation with a peer would spark a new idea, or a solitary moment of reflection

would lead to a creative connection between concept and data. Each interaction, whether planned or spontaneous, was a strand weaving together the larger picture of my project. These relationships underscored the interdependent nature of my personal, intellectual, and spiritual becoming. Moreover, listening to the stories of my participants navigating their paths and practices, I found parallels to my journey, its challenges, insights, and transformations. The PhD process was far from linear: There were moments of getting lost, retracing steps, and navigating unexpected detours. Yet, these moments became windows of opportunity for looking inward. This perspective helped me remain open to the uncertainties of the journey and find value in the process itself rather than fixating on the outcome. It was through the disruptions and detours that I found my voice in the research, giving rise to unexpected insights and connections to ideas.

The metaphor of the quilt further complements this understanding by highlighting the layered and evolving nature of the journey. Whether following "an organizing structure" or forming a "crazy quilt,"[4] each piece, when seen as part of the whole, reveals its unique beauty. Although we might desire a linear and predictable process, crafting a quilt – like the journey of well-being, mindfulness, and spirituality – reveals that linearity is not necessary for wholeness. The process is gradual, often moving in non-linear, unpredictable, and unexpected ways. The quilt metaphor resonates with my academic experience: The process at times felt disjointed, with moments of confusion, doubt, and frustration. Yet, as the various threads – research questions, methodologies, theoretical frameworks, fieldwork, and interactions with data gathered – interwove, they formed a pattern of "intricate stitching" that brought my thesis to completion. In moments of confusion, doubt, and frustration, I learned to embrace the process rather than rush towards an outcome.

Creative Practices as Coping Strategies

The demands of the PhD often took a toll on my physical, emotional, and mental well-being, requiring me to find ways to cope and restore balance. I fell ill almost every week. My skin sensitivity flared up. Persistent headaches and eye strain compounded my struggles. At one point, I was hospitalized to ensure my liver was healthy and balanced. All this happened despite my practicing yoga and pilates four to six times a week. While the routine was beneficial for my physical health, it eventually became a chore and felt stressful. The rigidity of the routine seemed to mirror the pressures of my academic journey, leaving me yearning for more spaciousness and flexibility. I desired less – to do less, move less, have less. Simultaneously, I desired more – more self-expression, more weightlessness, more meaningful creation, more communication and alignment with my inner guidance. The conflict between these opposing desires catalyzed a deeper reflection on what I truly needed to remember and care for myself.

Eventually, I grew fearful of writing. Yet, I desired to put words down, but only "illogically and incoherently"[5] in ways that could allow me to express the messy, muddy, fragmented inside. Thus, I began doing "writing practice" as a way "to [re]learn to trust [my] own mind and body; to grow patient and nonaggressive."[6] This practice allowed me to "gather energy" organically and nonjudgmentally, thus enabling me to write chapters at my own pace, part by part, that gradually came together as my findings. By giving voice to my inner turmoils and struggles, I began paving the way for personal, intellectual, and spiritual nurturance and healing. Writing in this way became an antidote to the rigidity and limitations of my academic assumptions and expectations, giving me the space to explore the raw, vulnerable parts of myself that I had previously hidden away or had not met.

In retrospect, the more trapped and pushed I felt, the more I longed to heed the instructions coming from within and temporarily let go of external demands. Painting, specifically intuitive painting, became a complementary practice that provided space and a medium for self-expression. This is why I paint without a plan, allowing my thoughts and feelings to take form in visual representations on paper or canvas. I recall times when only one stroke of a brush or one dot of a pen would emerge after sitting in front of the paper for 30 minutes or an hour. This process became a form of meditation, helping me externalize and make sense of my inner landscape.

The Virtue of Slowness

Slowness, both literally and metaphorically, is an intrinsic aspect of the pilgrimage experience. Walking long distances to sacred sites requires patience and paying attention to our footsteps and surroundings. Similarly, the internal pilgrimage involves observing one's thoughts and emotions. Beyond the context of pilgrimage, slowness has broader applications in navigating life's transitions, whether anticipated or unexpected. In our fast-paced society, characterized by haste and productivity, not feeling rushed can serve as a deliberate choice to prioritize depth over speed, and process over progress. In the realm of intellectual work, slowness "means [being] careful, deliberate and perspicacious… [although] the aim is not slowness for its own sake."[7]

Throughout my research journey, I learned that slowness is not a hindrance but an opportunity for discovery, learning, reflection, and integration. Of course, incorporating slowness into my professional and personal life required a shift in mindset. I had to, and sometimes still do, resist the urge to measure progress by conventional metrics of productivity and instead focus on the quality of my engagement with each task. For me, this is not about getting better at time or project management or being fixated on the end goal; it is about acknowledging that becoming is a process that involves paying attention to and honoring personal rhythm and flow. Slowness, in this sense, becomes a practice.

The very act of slowing down or not rushing allowed me to deepen my appreciation for the layers of impermanence. It is in the pauses, the gaps between moments of uncertainty, and the willingness to let go of the need for immediate answers that transformation can occur. I also felt more ease in letting go of expectations and embracing the uncertainty that accompanied my PhD journey by acknowledging the impermanence of both the research process and the self. Moreover, slowness reinforces that my work, just like the wider world, was shaped by countless interconnections and interplaying forces, from the influences and support of my personal and professional relationships to the social, cultural, and historical contexts that surrounded my research project. Increasingly, I understood my PhD as part of an interconnected web of knowledge, a small but integral patch in a much larger quilt.

Conclusion

Reflecting on my academic journey, I realize that the seeds of my coaching work were already being sown. Although I was not formally trained, the philosophies and principles of coaching and mindfulness were interwoven into my approach to overcoming challenges. These experiences laid the groundwork for my subsequent training, certification, and practice as a life coach, further bridging the personal and professional aspects of my journey. In addition, my PhD work has illuminated the intricate ways in which the personal and professional dimensions of my

research are intertwined. From the pilgrimage framework that encapsulates the transformative nature of my journey to the web and quilt metaphors that helped me discern the interconnectedness of my work, each experience has shaped the person I am today. Slowing down, whether in research or life, has been a key to finding clarity and balance amidst uncertainty and chaos. The creative practices I explored, from intuitive painting to writing as a meditative practice, have allowed me to bridge the internal and external worlds, giving voice to my thoughts, emotions, and insights in ways that traditional academic frameworks could not. Ultimately, this journey has taught me that the process of becoming, whether as a researcher, coach, or person, requires patience, presence, and an openness to the unknown. As I continue to evolve both personally and professionally, I am reminded that transformation is not a destination but a continuous unfolding process that thrives in moments of stillness, reflection, and interconnectedness.

Notes

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1. R. Barber, *Pilgrimages*)Woodbridge: Boydell Press,n 1991). 1.

2. D. A. Leeming, "Pilgrimage," *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion*, ed. D. A. Leeming, et al (Chyam: Springer, 2020).

3. R. E. Ray and S. H. McFadden."The Web and the Quilt: Alternatives to the Heroic Journey toward Spiritual Development," *Journal of Adult Development* 8:4(2001):201–11.

4. Ibid., 205.

5. Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2016), 13.

6. Ibid., 12–13.

7. N. C. Burbules, "Slowness as a Virtue," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 54:5(2020): 1443–52.

Women and the Ritual of Sacralization and Commodification of Buddhist Amulets in Thailand

Amnuaypond Kidpromma

This paper highlights the traditional and changing roles and positions of women in the ritual of sacralization and commodification of Buddhist amulet-medallions (talismans) in contemporary Thailand. Earlier studies studies by Stengs (1998), Tambiah (1984), Kitiarsa (2007), Soontravanich (2013), Seeger (2013), and Reynolds (2019), among others, suggest that religious objects such as amulets and various Buddhist sacra are male gendered. The rituals and the meaning of such material sacra are read, conveyed, and sustained by male monastics and their lineages. Amulets are sacralized and commodified by men. Those who authenticate amulets are known as "amulet experts" (*sean phra* or *nak leng phra*). On the other hand, women are traditionally thought of as "untouchables" in the sacred domain due to their filthy and polluted bodies. A woman's interaction with such sacred objects is believed to desacralize or even destroy the power of the amulets. These cultural reasons are given to substantiate why women are excluded from involvement in the amulet cult and from participating in its exchange circuits. This paper, as part of ongoing research, challenges these cultural gender assumptions and argues that more women are taking active roles in the ritual of amulet sacralization and commodification. Their new roles in the amulet cult as ritual performers and amulet experts entail gender transition in contemporary Thai society.

Buddhism and the Supernatural

Buddhist reformation in Thailand during the reign of King Rama IV (1851-1868) implicitly and explicitly introduced the new perception towards supernatural and magic rituals performed by monks as well as Buddhist lay practitioners. The reformation cast out magic as not Buddhist, something related to ignorance and blind faith (*gnom-gnay*) (Jackson 2022). Different forms of magic and practices related to the supernatural, including amulets of the Buddha and famous monks, were devalued and regarded as uncivilized. In addition, people who believed in magic and the supernatural were regarded as uneducated rural folk (*ban nog*). To date, the Thai *sangha* has banned the practices of magic and the supernatural in the monasteries. Monks are not allowed to practice or perform any kind of magic rituals such as fortune telling, making sacred spiritual items, or tattooing (*sakyant*). However, the ban does not seem to stop the belief in and practice of magic and the supernatural in Thai Buddhism. Once modernity and capitalism took root in the country, those two forces brought back magic, the supernatural, and superstition. The expansion of the amulet cult relates to capitalism in Thai modern socio-economics (Tambiah 1984). Jackson (2022, 24) argues that amulets and other forms of magic are not premodern residues residing in the period of global capitalism: "[T]he alternative modernity of economically neoliberal, digital mediatized, military dominated, and monarchist Thailand is reproducing magic anew."

Scholars of gender studies in South and Southeast Asia such as Meena Khandelwal (2001), Hiroko Kawanami (2001), Monica Lindberg Falk (2007), and Pui-Lan Kwok (2002) describe the female body as the site of marginalization and suppression. However, female

suppression in Thai sacred spaces is fluid. On the one hand, female bodies are seen as inferior and polluted; on the other hand, female bodily fluids and lower garments can be transformed, made powerful, and used in many sacred rituals.

In the past, men living in villages were traditionally assigned to leave home for trading or searching for their fortune in a far away land. Those men always travel with amulets, sacred objects, and tattoos on the body in order to protect them from evil people and spirits, and ensure good luck. It is said that it was a must for a man on a journey to take the edge of his mother's old *sarong* (*chai pha thoong*) for protection. Furthermore, the used sarong was implicitly contaminated by the impurity of female fluids which could also be used to dispel bad luck. A mother's *chai pha thoong* was believed to be even more powerful than other fetishes. Its power is believed to be able to destroy men's sacred power. As we shall see, many sacred locations in the temples prohibit women from entering, for fear that their femininity will destroy the sacredness buried underneath the temple or pagoda *(chedi*). While women inherit an internal sacred power, this power has not been used in the production of amulets and sacred objects. It seems that power has to be suppressed or discarded from the particular sacred realm of those objects.

Feminine power, gained either from bodily fluids or pious Buddhist practice, is excluded from the domain of normative sacra. The reason why women are not involved in the production and commodification of sacredness including amulets is still unclear. The extensive studies of Stanley J. Tambiah (1984), Pattana Kitiarsa (2007) Chalong Soontravanich (2013), and Martin Seeger (2013) suggest that religious products such as amulets and various sacred objects are frequently male gendered. The rituals and the meaning of such sacra are read, conveyed, and sustained by male monastics and their lineages. Amulets are commodified among male members of the urban settings. In addition, those who are amulet experts (*Sean Pra* or *Nak Leng Pra*) are often men.

Amulets can be the symbol of power for a man. Having famous amulets in possession (such as *Pragring* and *Prasomdet To*) is a way to display a man's socio-economic power (Tambiah 1984). The early work of Bas Terwiel also suggests that amulets are not for women, who are not permitted to wear these items (1975). However, Stengs pointed out that women do receive amulets from monks and keep their new sacralized amulets in the form of lockets (1998). In his study of underrepresented female Buddhist practitioners, Martin Seeger (2013 also mentioned 2018) argues that women have a crucial role in the production and sacralising of amulets. They produce and sacralize the amulets without male involvement. However, their active role in the amulets' sacralisation has been underrepresented and even hidden.

Women in a Sacred, Amulet World

The changes of time and women's new roles in public spaces are factors that encourage women to be involved in amulets production and commodification. However, women involved in amulet cults are marginalized by their male counterparts, who are of the view that women do not have knowledge of amulets. Some think that the filthy female body will desacralize the sacred power of amulets, and thus many amulet experts do not allow women to touch their amulets. This limits women's opportunities to learn about sacred amulets and to become amulet experts earning better income and reputation in the masculine sacred domain.

Indeed, there are women who challenge these orthodox beliefs and practices by turning

themselves into amulet experts, selling, trading, and handling amulets. These women are aware of the taboos, and thus navigate their ways in, negotiating with the male system. However, their path is not easy even though they are better off than their male peers by attracting more buyers or earning more income. Actually, there are many men who enjoy buying and trading the amulets with female amulet experts on account of women's perceived ignorance. They think that women will not have much knowledge about amulets and will easily sell the expensive ones for a lower price.

> Male customers will confuse the female amulet sellers by selecting many amulets and asking many questions at one time, so that the female amulet sellers get confused, selling the expensive amulets cheaply. (Female amulet seller A)

There are also men who love to come to female amulet experts rather than males due to their beauty and femininity. They are of the view that some male amulet sellers are rough, arrogant, and overconfident. This makes customers avoid talking to them, unless they are a well-known expert or have good authentic amulets.

> I love to chat with a female amulet expert more than a male. They are beautiful, soft and gentle when they explain about their amulets. They are also attractive and willing to share with us more than the male. (Male buyer A)

Another issue that women face is the stigma on the female body. Although modern society allows women to become amulet experts, they often are challenged by senior males who assert that their female bodies could pollute and desacralized the amulet's power. Women do not try to change or explicitly challenge this idea. They explain that, although women are prohibited from touching some amulets by some men, there are many amulets that they can work with. They can deal with these amulets and the men who accept them.

Another issue that this paper is concerned with is whether women can be ritual performers or sacralizers in the amulets' sacralization ritual. This role is usually performed either by monks or laymen. But, in fact, there are a good number of women who join ritual performer training courses organized by the local organization for ritual performers in Chiangmai, Thailand. After joining such a training course, male participants are eligible to be ritual performers for religious or spiritual events. Women are accepted to learn and acquire knowledge about performing religious rituals, but they are not allowed to put their knowledge into practice. That is, they cannot act as a ritual performer even though they know how to perform the ritual. Reasons as to why women are ~~de~~barred from being ritual performers are unclear. One of the trainers, who is a well-known ritual performer, explains that "Women can learn but they cannot do it, as it does not look good for the ritual to have a woman as a ritual performer."

Modernity and capitalism encourage women to take a step into the domain that they have not been allowed into, either as ritual performers or as amulet sellers/experts. Women's entry into that prohibited space not only demonstrates women's ability to perform the role usually reserved for men but also reflects society's gender ideology and bias. Women can gain better socio-economic status by working as an amulet seller, some even earning more income than their male counterparts. But in the spiritual domain, ignorance and beauty seem to be presumed to be

a woman's nature. Women who step into the amulet cult are identified in terms of their ignorance and beauty. Their success in this domain is based neither on their intelligence nor their capability to trade.

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Bhikkhuni Dhammananda's Legacy as a Leader for Buddhist Women Seeking Empowerment

Cindy Rasicot

I have been her devoted student of Bhikkhuni Dhammananda for more than twenty years and it is a great honor and privilege for me to share her story of courage and compassion with you today. Most of what I share with you comes from my latest book.

For those of you who may not know her, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda defied convention to become the first fully ordained woman in the Thai Theravāda Buddhist tradition. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda explains her decision this way, "I have traversed the globe so that my grandchildren will be proud of their grandmother who cleared the path for them to walk proudly as Buddhist women." Bhikkhuni Dhammananda's ordination ushered in a new era of equality and inspired a new generation of Thai women to be ordained. Today, there are approximately 285 *bhikkhunī*s spread out over 30 of Thailand's 77 provinces.

Bhikkhuni Dhammananda has dedicated her life to strengthening the *bhikkhunī sangha* in Thailand and Asia. Because of her tireless work to restore the female monastic lineage in Thailand and Asia, in 2019, the BBC named her to its list of 100 most influential and important women in the world. She is a socially engaged Buddhist and environmental activist. In 1987, she co-founded Sakyadhita in 1987, along with Bhikkhuni Ayya Khema and Bhikkhuni Karma Lekshe Tsomo. She has accomplished so much, but today, I would like to focus on her importance as a feminist religious leader for Buddhist women seeking empowerment. As I mentioned, the two qualities that distinguish her leadership are courage and compassion. Let me begin first by talking about her academic/activist background, followed by her path to ordination, and conclude with her vision of Buddhist women leaders for the future.

Academic/Activist Background

I cannot overstate the value of Bhikkhuni Dhammananda's contributions as an early Buddhist feminist scholar. She established the credible academic foundation upon which the current *bhikkhunī* revival movement is based.

Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, previously known by her lay name Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, is an internationally recognized Buddhist scholar and socially engaged Buddhist feminist who taught Buddhist studies for twenty-seven years at Thammasat University in Bangkok. She spent years researching the original texts to confirm that the Buddha ordained women in his lifetime. She said, "The Buddha was the first feminist because he was the first religious leader in the world to acknowledge that women and men are equal spiritually. When the Buddha gave permission for women to be ordained, he declared that they can be enlightened. That was the golden phrase. Double underlined. The Buddha said, 'They can see it with their own eyes'"

Bhikkhuni Dhammananda had a major turning point early in her career, in 1983, when she changed from an academic to an activist. She gave a presentation on the future of *bhikkhunī*s in Thailand at the Harvard Divinity School since she was the recognized authority on the subject. A seed was planted at the conference. Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh became more involved in the *bhikkhunī* struggle in Thailand.

Prior to the conference, she had all the information about Buddhism and the plight of the

*bhikkhunī*s, but in her words, she was "not happy as an academic sitting in an ivory tower, away from the turmoil of the world." At Harvard, she was exposed to Western feminism for the first time. She said, "I had heard about feminism but never experienced it. I was inspired to be around forty strong feminists, some of them angry and militant. One woman had been jailed so many times her hair had turned white. It was an emotional experience for me; I was shocked by the women's stories of suffering."

"Still," she said, "I was conflicted about the militant feminists; they were so angry. I empathized with their cause but did not want to be angry like them. In Thai culture we do not confront or humiliate anyone publicly. Especially women. It is very difficult for Asian women to speak up – to go against the status quo. If I behaved like the Western feminists, I would never achieve anything."

Bhikkhuni Dhammananda wanted to be more engaged and involved in the struggle to ordain women as *bhikkhunī*s, but she was worried about the suffering part. "If we hold so much on our shoulders, we suffer, and when we do, we are not helpful to anyone." That is when she decided to come back to her Buddhist roots. She said, "To confront any issue, you must have your spiritual root – it is like a well you draw from that never dries up. Buddhism is such a great strength, a really great strength."

Bhikkhuni Dhammananda always says she is a Buddhist first and a feminist second. "Because of my training and understanding of Buddhism I emerged a better feminist. I wanted to be involved, but in the Buddhist way, with loving-kindness, not hating those who disagreed with me. Now as a feminist I am not fighting against individuals, I am fighting against ignorance."

Having practiced with Bhikkhuni Dhammananda for more than twenty years, I have come to understand that the heart of her message is service. We must be of service and we must act. That is her definition of compassion. It is not enough to care, we must act. In 2011, she instituted a ten-week dharma training program for women prisoners in Nakon Pathom Prison called "Mental Freedom in Prison." This progam still continues today.She is an environmental activist, and her temple is a model eco-temple with a zero-waste policy of 100% recycle and reuse.

Path to Ordination

Bhikkhuni Dhammananda, did not begin to think seriously about being ordained until her mid-fifties. At that time, she was an internationally recognized Buddhist scholar and socially engaged feminist professor who taught Buddhist studies for twenty-seven years. In addition, she was a celebrity of sorts, she hosted a popular TV dharma show for seven years prior to her ordination. She also published more than 100 books and was married for thirty years with three grown adult sons.

She tells a great story about how she made the decision to be ordained. One day when she was preparing for her TV show, she looked in the mirror and heard a voice in English say "How long do I have to do this? "You should have seen me," she said. "Dressed up in matching outfits perfectly manicured nails. I wore lots of jewelry and make-up. At the time I was desperately lonely and wanted to do something more meaningful in my life."

At the beginning of the talk, I mentioned two important qualities of leadership that distinguish Bhikkhuni Dhammananda as a Buddhist feminist leader. Those two qualities are courage and compassion. I would like to talk about courage first.

Bhikkhuni Dhammananda had to go to Sri Lanka to be ordained since Thailand, which is 90% Buddhist, does not permit ordination. At the time she received novice ordination in 2001, there were approximately 300,000 male monks in Thailand and no ordained women. When she returned to her native Thailand, she faced a wave of vitriolic criticism in the Thai press who dubbed her the Rebel monk and she received hate-filled emails. Things were so difficult she stopped reading the newspapers for two years. She said, "Apart from my mother I was literally standing alone." Throughout the personal attacks, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda did not respond with anger or hatred; she faced her adversaries with patience and determination. She even challenged people who criticized her behind her back, to come to the temple and speak to her directly, but they never did.

In terms of courage, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda said, "Even though people think I was courageous, I have a different perspective. My commitment to ordain came from my academic background. I studied the text and understood the importance of the fourfold community as the Buddha established it. I felt it was my personal responsibility to fulfill the Buddha's intent. I did not see myself as being particularly courageous to ordain, I saw it as my duty. I did feel courageous when I stood alone in a large crowd of male monks in 2001 who refused to give their permission for women's ordination, going against the intention of the Buddha."

The second quality of leadership I would like to talk about is compassion. In 2000, as a lay woman, Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh traveled to Taiwan to take the lay Bodhisattva vows. This exemplifies Bhikkhuni Dhammananda's commitment to compassionate care for others. In her words, "When you take the Bodhisattva vows you are no longer looking out for yourself, you are working on behalf of others, caring for society and for the world. She once said, "The heart of the Bodhisattva is ideal for socially engaged Buddhism."

Let me back up for a moment and explain that in order to understand Bhikkhuni Dhammananda's journey we must understand the influence of her mother, Voramai Kabilsingh who was the first modern *bhikkhunī* in Thailand. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda once said, "My mother was the law giver; whatever she asked, we did." On May 2, 1956, Voramai Kabilsingh, tired of waiting for the monks to give her permission to be ordained, shaved her head and asked for eight precepts from her teacher Pra Pronmuni, Vice Abbott of Wat Boovornnives. Bhikkhuni Voramai chose to wear a yellow robe and called herself *nakbuad,* "an ordained person." In 1960 she founded Songdhammakalyani Temple, the all-female monastery where Bhikkhuni Dhammananda is abbess today.

In 1971, Bhikkhuni Voramai traveled to Taiwan, where she received full ordination in the Dharmaguptaka lineage becoming the first modern Thai *bhikkhunī*. In her case, because the Thai sangha and society viewed her ordination as Mahayana rather than Theravāda, they did not raise strong objections.

The other major influence in Bhikkhuni Dhammananda's life was her father. She claimed he was the first feminist she ever met. She said, "He really liberated me from the traditional female stereotypes by encouraging me to do whatever I wanted." A member of parliament, Korkiat Shatsena spent most of his life living and working with people in the province of Trang, Southern Thailand. He was a dedicated politician who won three consecutive elections. The military government didn't like him for speaking out against the government and he was imprisoned several times.

When Bhikkhuni Dhammananda was ordained, she credited her father for teaching her to be righteous against all odds. “I walked the soil of this country as the lone *bhikkhunī*, thanks to my father who was a role model for protesting the system. I inherited my sense of social responsibility from my father and my commitment to the monastic lifestyle from my mother.

Conclusion

In January, I went to Thailand to visit Bhikkhuni Dhammananda and asked her to speak about her vision of roles for Buddhist women leaders in the future. She said, “This is the time that Sakyadhita can talk about the changing role of women as Buddhist leaders. We are no longer working to revive the *bhikkhunī sangha* because the *bhikkhunī sangha* is already established. Now we need to think about how to nourish the sangha and walk the path with sure footing.”

“To lead, Buddhist women need to be truthful, kind, and educated. They must be critical thinkers, aware of the larger social context in which they live to address the complex problems in our fast-changing world.”

“We need to think of ourselves not strictly as Buddhist leaders, but set an example as religious leaders meaning we can cut across Christianity, Buddhism and Islam to see the urgency of what the world needs.”

“Our role as women and as Buddhists is to address certain questions in the society in which we live. Whom are we speaking to? If we are speaking to the younger generation, we need to understand their mindset and understand their social context and what they need. Our relationships need to reflect the new setting in which we live.”

In Her Footsteps: Celebrating the Multifaceted Legacy of Bhiksuni Dr. Heng-Ching Shi

Christie Chang

This paper pays tribute to Bhiksuni Dr. Heng-Ching Shi (1943–2024), a luminary in Buddhist scholarship and education. Her legacy encompasses academic achievements, digital preservation of Buddhist texts, and the advancement of Bhiksuni ordination. Interweaving academic rigor with personal reflections, the paper explores her enduring impact on the Buddhist community and the author's life. It celebrates her dedication to promoting Buddhist values, her compassionate mentorship, and her role in bridging traditional practices with contemporary needs.

The passing of Bhiksuni Heng-Ching Shi in July 2024 marked the end of an era for Buddhist scholarship and activism. Known for her groundbreaking contributions to Buddhism, Bhiksuni Heng-Ching embodied the perfect balance of academic excellence, and spiritual humility. This paper reflects on her multifaceted legacy, emphasizing her academic and digital initiatives, her pivotal role in advancing *bhiksuni* ordination, and her deeply personal mentorship that touched countless lives. Drawing on my personal experiences with Bhiksuni Heng-Ching, this tribute seeks to preserve and honor her memory as a teacher, mentor, and trailblazer.

Academic Achievements

Bhiksuni Heng-Ching's academic journey was marked by several firsts. She earned a Ph.D. in Buddhist Studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, becoming the first Taiwanese Mahayana *bhiksuni* to achieve this milestone in the United States. Upon returning to Taiwan, she joined the Department of Philosophy at National Taiwan University (NTU), the most prestigious university in the country. There, she lectured in her monastic robes – a profound symbol of harmonizing traditional Buddhist values with modern academia and yet another remarkable first in her groundbreaking career[1]. Her teachings were not confined to the classroom; she mentored numerous students and researchers, inspiring them to engage deeply with Buddhist philosophy and practice.[2]

Her scholarly contributions are vast and enduring. Among her published works are *The Syncretism of Ch'an and Pure Land Buddhism* (in English), *Buddha Nature* (in Chinese), and *Good Women on the Bodhisattva Path* (Üì ð«Ô³ ß¾Üà ¼Ò³ ì Ñ, in Chinese). The latter is particularly significant for its profound influence on the naming and development of Sakyadhita in Taiwan. It was through this book that the Chinese translation of Sakyadhita became *sanniuren*, literally good women), a term deeply resonant with Chinese-speaking Buddhists due to its frequent occurrence in Buddhist texts. I adopted this name for the first-ever Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women held in Taiwan in 2002 – the 7th Sakyadhita conference. This was the very first Sakyadhigsa confefence I attended, marking the beginning of my 20-year journey of devotion to this inspiring movement. This name continues to be used in the work of Sakyadhita Taiwan.[3] It reflects the deep inspiration drawn from the scholarship of Bhiksuni Heng-Ching, who consistently served as a vital and steadfast mentor to Sakyadhita Taiwan, offering invaluable guidance from behind the scenes, despite never accepting any official titles.

Digital Preservation Initiatives

A visionary leader, Dr. Heng-Ching recognized the potential of digital technology to preserve and disseminate Buddhist teachings. She initiated the Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association (CBETA), a project that digitized the Chinese Tripitaka[4]. This monumental effort revolutionized access to Buddhist scriptures, providing an invaluable resource for scholars and practitioners worldwide.

In addition, Dr. Heng-Ching founded the Center for Buddhist Studies at NTU in 1995. Under her leadership, the center launched the Buddhist Studies Internet Database, a pioneering repository that made Buddhist research materials accessible globally. Her work in digital preservation ensured that the wisdom of the Dharma would endure for generations to come.

Advocacy for Bhiksuni Ordination

Bhiksuni Heng-Ching's dedication to promoting *bhiksuni* ordination remains one of her most significant contributions. Appointed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama as an advisor to the Western Nuns Committee,[5] she co-authored a handbook addressing questions about ordination. This guide became a critical resource for nuns worldwide. It was one of Bhiksuni Heng-Ching's greatest inspirations to ensure that *bhiksuni* ordinations existed everywhere, across all Buddhist traditions. I distinctly remember her saying, As soon as the Bhiksuni lineages in all traditions can be brought back, I could die tomorrow.

In 2018, I accompanied Bhiksuni Heng-Ching to Bhutan to advocate for *bhiksuni* ordination. During this trip, we met the Queen Mother of Bhutan to discuss the importance of ordination for nuns. Moved by Bhiksuni Heng-Ching's compassion, the Queen Mother embraced her warmly. We presented bilingual booklets to the Queen Mother, and distributed them—both in hard copy and digital format—while visiting many monasteries along the way. This pivotal meeting was a crucial step toward the historic full ordination of nuns in Bhutan in 2022. Bhiksuni Heng-Ching's unwavering dedication and meticulous follow-up were key to the success of this groundbreaking event, marking a significant stride toward gender equality in Buddhist monasticism.

Personal Reflections

To me, Bhiksuni Heng-Ching was not just a mentor but a spiritual mother. Our relationship was both light as water (Ó¿ åýâ©) and sweet as honey (ÌðÈçÃÛ). She was humble and unassuming, always careful not to impose on others. Yet her warmth and humor made every interaction delightful. I recall our days warmly translating the Khandhaka, a *vinaya* text, together.The hours were filled with laughter and a shared sense of purpose.

I first met Bhiksuni Heng-Ching in 2001 when I returned to Taiwan from Honolulu to work and assist with the 7th Sakyadhita International Conference. Initially, she struck me as reserved and formal. However, her actions revealed her generosity and resolve. She personally funded travel for 11 nuns from various countries and secured a venue at NTU for the conference's opening ceremony. Her determination and magnanimity left a profound impression on me.

Her sense of humor was another endearing quality. I later learned that her university students affectionately nicknamed her The Abbess of Total Annihilation, or The Abbess Who

Erases All.[6] This was a reference to a strict yet beloved character in Chinese literature. I often joked about her resemblance to my mother, both in temperament and in the proximity of their birthdays. These lighthearted exchanges added a special sweetness to our relationship.

In addition to our trip to Bhutan, my most cherished memories stem from another earlier journey with Bhiksuni Heng-Ching to China. Although Bhiksuni Heng-Ching was already aware that the abbess of Pu-Shou Temple (ÜÅá øÞÑ) at Wu-Tai-Shan (çé Óæß£), the leading *bhiksuni* in China, could not possibly join the 2017 Sakyadhita conference in Hong Kong, she still accepted the mission to personally deliver the invitation letter alongside me. Our first stop was Beijing, where Bhiksuni Heng-Ching gave a profoundly impactful Dharma talk, deeply appreciated by the audience. Her wisdom, combined with her humility, left a lasting impression. We also visited the renowned Long-Quan Temple (ý^ È[a]ËÂ) near Beijing, where Bhiksuni Heng-Ching engaged in a nearly hour-long discussion with the head monk, the leading monk in China at that time. She passionately advocated for the importance of Sangha education, emphasizing the need for monks and nuns to undergo thorough education before ordination to ensure the sustainability of a balanced Buddhist community.

After successfully delivering the invitation to the abbess of Pu-Shou Temple, we traveled to Xi'an, the ancient capital of China. There, we paid tribute to Master Xuánzàng, the great Tripitaka translation master, and visited the nunnery under the famous Fa-Men Temple (ÛöÚ|ÞÑ). This visit laid the foundation for Bhiksuni Heng-Ching's subsequent trip, where she taught the nuns there. The nuns were overwhelmed with gratitude, feeling privileged to learn from such a remarkable and humble senior Bhiksuni, a true role model.

Her Final Days and Legacy

Bhiksuni Heng-Ching's final days were a testament to her resilience and grace. Despite her illness, she remained focused on the Dharma and her responsibilities. I was fortunate to visit her in the hospital, where she expressed gratitude for our time together and offered her blessings. A week before her passing, she recorded video messages to reassure her community, her composure and wisdom shining through[7].

Her passing has left an indelible void, but her legacy lives on. As I promised her during our last meeting, I will continue to strive as a good woman on the bodhi path, honoring her teachings and preserving the memories we shared. Her compassion, wisdom, and dedication will forever inspire those who had the privilege of knowing her.

Conclusion

Bhiksuni Dr. Shi Heng-Ching's life was a beacon of dedication, compassion, and innovation. Her contributions to Buddhist scholarship, digital preservation, and the advancement of *bhiksuni* ordination have left an enduring legacy. For me, she was more than a mentor; she was a spiritual mother whose guidance and kindness enriched my life. This paper is both an academic tribute and a personal homage, celebrating the profound impact of a remarkable woman who devoted her life to the Dharma.

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Notes

1. Bhiksuni Heng-Ching was the first to teach in monastic robes at National Taiwan University, the top university in Taiwan. Despite teaching while wearing Buddhist robes, Bhiksuni Heng-Ching was careful to avoid any perception of preaching. She ensured that her students respected her as a professor, ratther than as a monastic, maintaining a clear distinction between her academic role and her monastic identity.
2. As I have been involved in collecting articles in memory of Bhiksuni Heng-Ching, I have been struck by how many esteemed scholars and devoted practitioners have been influenced by her in one way or another.
3. Approved by Sakyadhita International in 2008 and officially registered as a national NGO/NPO in Taiwan in 2012, Sakyadhita Taiwan became the very first national branch of Sakyadhita International. Taiwan was initially used as a samplef to complete the application process when the Sakyadhita International Committee, of which I was vice president at the time and later president, developed guidelines for establishing Sakyadhita branches and chapters. Since its founding, Sakyadhita Taiwan has focused on supporting Sakyadhita International in various capacities, including training (international) translation volunteers for the Sakyadhita conferences.
4. Bhiksuni Dr. Heng-Ching, in her humility, entrusted the CBETA project to the Dharma Drum Team, believing they would better manage its distribution and maintenance. She never sought recognition for her efforts. However, when I discovered that the Encyclopedia of Buddhism failed to mention her involvement in the CBETA project, I wrote a letter of protest, though apparently in vain. Ven. Heng-Ching had been the key initiator, securing initial funds, negotiating with publishers, and playing a crucial role in bringing the project to fruition, yet her contributions were overlooked in the record.
5. The Committee of Western Bhikshunis, composed of six senior Western nuns, was formed in the autumn of 2005 with guidance from two advisors from Taiwan: Ven. Bhiksuni Heng-Ching Shih, a Professor of Philosophy at National Taiwan University, who was ordained as a Gelongma in San Francisco in 1975, and Ven. Bhiksuni Wu-Yin, a Vinaya Master. This initiative came after the Dalai Lama encouraged Bhiksuni Jampa Tsedroen to ensure greater involvement of

Western bhikshunis in helping establish bhikshuni ordination within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

6. Mie Jue Shi Tai (Øþ?ÞÔ÷¼) literally translates as “The Abbess Who Kills All” or “The Abbess Who Wipes Out All,” with Øþ? meaning extinguish, destroy, or annihilate, and ÞÔ÷¼ meaning abbess. This term is a playful, exaggerated nickname found in popular culture, especially in Chinese martial arts fiction, where it humorously refers to someone who is relentless or harsh in their actions. I first encountered this nickname from a younger Dharma sister, a former student of Bhiksuni Heng-Ching before her retirement from National Taiwan University. When I mentioned it to Bhiksuni Heng-Ching, she laughed heartily. The nickname later became widely known when she shared it with the nuns at Pu Yi Yuan. During my first visit to Ven. on her deathbed, perhaps to lighten the somber mood, we began joking about this nickname. Despite her weakened condition, she humorously mentioned an alternative name she had heard later: “Ò³ØªèÝ” (female demon-master, translated as The Demon Queen), and we both laughed out loud.

7. https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=nIh_sdgGDRk

Dharma Teacher Bhikkhuni Dhammawati over the Generations: Authority and Transmission

Sayalay Shraddha Gautami

Bhikkhuni Dhammawati Guruma, my revered Dhamma teacher who lives, practices, and teaches in Nepal, has made many important contributions. Presently, she is 91 years old and continues to conduct various kinds of religious activities. This paper highlights Bhikkhuni Dhammawati's practice of the Dhamma and her authority and transmission to propagate Buddhism. Since a book of her life up until 2016 has already been published, this paper foregrounds her work for the benefit of national and international students between 2016 to 2024. It will show how she serves the Dhamma in the face of continuing struggles and challenges.

Introducing Bhikkhuni Dhammawati

Bhikkhuni Dhammawati Guruma[1] is known to all of her students as a Buddhist teacher, preacher, writer, scholar, and social reformer. Dhammawati, whose lay name was Ganesh Kumari Shakya, was born in July 1934 in Okubahal, Lalitpur.[2] Her father was Harshman Shakya and mother was Herathakun Shakya. From her childhood, she wanted to study and practice Theravāda Buddhism. However, the Nepali government strongly prohibited girls' formal education at that time. Whatever problems arose, she remained determined to study Theravāda Buddhism with Bhikkhu Buddhaghosa Thero.

At the age of 14, Ganesh Kumari left Nepal for Burma to study Buddhism. Before reaching Burma, she was ordained in Kushinagar, India, by a Burmese monk named Dhammawudha. Dhammawati Guruma was the only Nepali nun studying in Burma until the 1950s. Later, Ratnamanjari Guruma and other nuns joined Dhammawati Guruma at Khemarama Nunnery in Burma. Due to Dhammawati Guruma's hard work, she achieved the title of Sasandhaja Dhammachariya, the highest level of Burmese monastic education in Myanmar. She was asked to stay in Burma because of her oratory skills, but she chose to return to Nepal in order to promote Buddhism and raise awareness among Nepali female housewives, who mainly remained confined to their homes as they fulfilled their duties as mothers and wives. She returned to Nepal in 2020 V.S. (1963 CE) with Guruma Ma Gunawati. In 1965, Dhammawati Guruma established Dharmakirti Vihar in the heart of Kathmandu, marking the first active and versatile nunnery in Nepal until now. She shifted the concept of a nunnery from a place of spiritual and religious prayers to a "dynamic learning center."

Activities in Dharmakirti Vihar

After Dhammawati Guruma established Dharmakirti Monastery, she began numerous activities to introduce students to Buddhist practices and an understanding of the Dhamma. She also established many branches of Dharmakirti Monastery to spread Theravāda Buddhism in various places in Nepal. She handed over those monastery branches to her educated and talented disciples. Today the branch monasteries of Dharmkirti Vihar are follows: Padmakirti Vihar in Kamal Pokari, Bagmati Province; Dharmakirti Vihar in Basundhara, Bagmati Province; Nirvanamurti Vihar in Kimdol, Bagmati Province; Sulachenkirti Vihar in Cobhara, Bagmati Province; and Gautami Vihar in Lumbini, Lumbini Province.

To organize those monasteries, Dhammawati Guruma established units. There are seven

units in Dharmakirti Vihar, as follows:

Dharmakitri Buddhapuja. Buddha *puja* means reciting the qualities of the Triple Gem together with monastic members and lay devotees five times monthly. Buddha *puja* is held on the first day of the month, full moon day, on the waxing and waning (light, dark) eight days of the month, and dark moon day.

Dharmakirti Baudha Adhyana Gosthi. This unit is well known in Buddhist Study Circles, especially for educating the laity and the monastic *sangha*. This education includes teaching disciplinary education, spreading Buddhism to rural areas, encouraging the publication of books on Buddhism instead of spending money on death rituals, inviting international teachers to prepare and present Dhamma talks, holding temporary ordinations for young girls and boys, and initiating Tripitaka classes on Saturdays for nuns and laity. This unit includes Saturday classes for adults and children, the Dharmakirti Buddhist Library, and short-term ordinations for lay children (*samanera* and *risini pabbaja*) during their school vacation.

Dharmakirti Monthly Magazine. Dhammawati Guruma is the publisher and adviser of "Dharmakirti," a monthly Buddhist magazine published since 1973. The magazine is published twelve times a year. Dhammawati Guruma sees this magazine as an additional support for people to learn more about Theravāda Buddhism. The magazine highlights the Buddhist activities of Dharmakirti Vihar and Buddhist activities and news from different monasteries in Nepal.

Dharmakirti Health: "Yo gilanam upatthati, so mam upatthati" means "Anyone who looks after someone who is sick will look after me." As the Buddha taught, the Dharmakirti Health unit is a free health clinic on the Dharmakirti Vihar premises for both monastics and lay devotees. There has been a yearly blood donation program since 1983. It provides help for anyone suffering from various natural disasters, such as earthquakes and floods.

Dharmakirti Gyanamala. *Gyanamala* means garland of the Buddha's knowledge. According to Ven. Dhammawati Guruma, most Nepali people are uneducated about the Dhamma. Devotional music is common in Nepali Theravāda Buddhism and she teaches *gyanamala* music to help spread the Buddha's teaching. *Gyanamala* performances and songs are part of every special program.

Dharmakirti Education. The main aim of the Dharmakirti education communityis to teach Buddhism from early childhood through adolescence. In addition, Dharmakirti Vihar organizes scholarships for small nuns and poor children to study in school. Nowadays, bhikkhuni Dhammawati provides annual scholarships in Anandakuti secondary school where nuns and monks are studying.

Dharmakirty Public Image Channel. Since 1985, this unit's main theme has been propagating Buddhism through broadcast radio. This unit shares Buddhism by recording audio and video of Dhamma talks of monastics, including Dhammawati Guruma's talks on Abhiddhamma and various *sutta*s. Emaga Channel transfers all these Dhamma talks onto media like CDs and DVDs, and provides these to devotees for free.

Major Contributions of Dhammawati Guruma from 2016 to 2024

In 2016, Dhammawati Guruma published of *The Life of the Tathagata*, which was launched by the Sri Lankan ambassador.[3] She also published *Beloved Daughter: The Story of Dhammawati Guruma* in English. As a result of this book, a legendary biography, Dhammawati Guruma became popular internationally.[4]

In 2017, Dhammawati Guruma organized a children's quiz contest on Buddhism and a children's art competition on Buddhism. Her children's talent show contest is particularly unique. She includes awards on themes such as "The best way to respect the Buddha," "The best way to chant *paritha*," and "The best way to sing Buddhist songs." After the programs, she distributes prizes to the winners. This program continues to be held once every year for school children.[5]

In 2018, Dhammawati Guruma organized a talk with the poet Willa Schneberg, from the United States, who spoke on the poems of American Buddhist poets.[6] In 2019, she hosted an event expressing appreciation for Bhikkhuni D. O. Gunawati for her efforts to propagate Buddhism in Nepal even she was a foreign nun.[7] In that year, she also held an event to express heartfelt condolences at the passing of Bhikkhu Asaghosa Mahathero, the 6th Sanghanayaka of Nepal, honoring one who served the Dhamma in Nepalese society his whole life.[8]

In 2020, Dhammawati Guruma presented a valuable talk on Buddhist ethics to the ministers and politicians of Nepal.[9] In 2021, she organized a ceremony in which the nuns chanted *mahaparitta* to bless Gyanapurnika Mahathero, the 7th Sanghanayak of Nepal, the chief *bhikkhu* of the *sangha* in Nepal, who translated *Beloved Daughter: The Life Story of Dhammawati* into Newari language. In 2022, she expressed heartfelt condolences at the demise of the chief donor Drabemana Sing Tuladhar, who built the new Dharmakirti Vihar.[10]

In 2023, on the occasion of her 90th birthday, Dhammawati Guruma established an education fund known as the Dhammawati Damma Prasikchhena. The main purpose is to provide various kinds of monastic education and training, including MC training and public speaking training for empowering nuns.[11] In 2024, she released a Thai language edition of *Beloved Daughter: The Life Story of Dhammawati*.[12] To celebrate her 91st birthday, a ceremony was organized with seven days of Abhidhamma chanting attended by the Bhikkhu Mahasangha, Mahayāna Sangha, and Vajrayana Gurus. She hosted the 11th interaction program of Sakyadhita Nepal, expressing gratitude to Bhikkhuni Sujata for her service to promote Theravāda Buddhism.[13] Moreover, she made donattion to the cancer hospital and two other hospitals to provide health checkups for the entire Bhikkhu Sangha and Bhikkhunis Sangha of Nepal.[14]

Bhikkhuni Dhammawati has received numerous awards, including:

2023 The Home Minister Narayanakaji Shrestha of Nepal honored Bhikkhuni Dhammawati for her Dharma service

2024 The award-winning Buddhist national spiritual national magazine Samyaka Sandesha presented her with an award respecting Dhammawati Guruma's contributions to spreading Buddhism in Nepal.

2024 Bhikkhuni Dhammawati received 23rd Outstanding Women in Buddhism Award.

2024 Lumbini Buddhist University awarded her an Honorary Doctorate of Philosophy for her outstanding contributions to the development of Buddhist teachings and religion, and their dissemination in the global community.

Bhikkhuni Dhammawati's Authority and Transmission

According to the Buddha's teachings, there is no obstacle for a woman to achieve her goal if she has good intentions. Nonetheless, Bhikkhuni Dhammawati's authority and transmission challenged many norms of Newar society, religion, culture, politics, and education. According to Brahminism and Shamanism, women are unable to gain their final goal without obeying men. Based on teachings of the Buddha, Bhikkhuni Dhammawati particularly guides women. She

teaches that, “With pure mind and hard work everyone can attain the final goal.” Her motivating personality draws women out of their homes, as she leads regular Buddha *pujas*, meditration practices, Buddhist studies programs, moral education, and activities to purify the mind. As a result, her leadership has produced female monastic and lay Dhamma leaders who continue to teach and lead these activities today

Even at the age of 91, Bhikkhuni Dhammawati continues to provide systematic Buddhist education on key teachings from the Jatakas to the Abhidhamma. Because of her systematic method of Buddhist education, many young girls and boys have become familiar with Buddhism. Many of her more devoted female students have become religious leaders in her branch monasteries. They are teaching Buddhadharma in schools and universities, such as Lumbini Universityand Lotus University, and preaching and discussing Dhamma in monasteries and on social media.

Many of Bhikkhuni Dhammawati’s lay disciples who have become politicians, teachers, scholars, doctors, and dignitaries attend her birthday celebrations. She has become well-known nationally and internationally, a sign of her authority and skilled transmission of the Dhamma. As shown above, different schools of Buddhism and also non-Buddhists honor her with national and international awards. Recently, the Government of Nepal made a commitment to support her medical bills in her old age. This is a great honor.

Just as Lord Buddha faced many challenges, in the same way Guruma continues to faplemany challenges in propagating the Dhamma, for example, her use of the title “*bhikkhuni*” and the performance of rituals related to *bhikkhuni* practice. The Bhikkhu Sangha of Nepal demanded a justification of why this term was being used. Patriarchy and sexism are one of the persistent issues that all Nepali Buddhist communities still face, even Bhikkhuni Dhammawati. Still, she continues to teach Dhamma with loving kindness and compassion. She reminds us that even when we face challenges, we must continue to spread the teachings of the Buddha. From the bottom of my heart, I honor and respect her as the most compassionate Dhamma teacher.

Conclusion

Bhikkhuni Dhammawati, known as “Beloved Daughter,” began her Dhamma journey at the age of 14 and continues to promote Buddhism up to today. She is a role model, teacher, preacher, writer, and advisor to nuns, monks, and lay followers, respected by both Buddhists and non-Buddhists. High-level politicians, including the Prime Minister of Nepal, attend her events and confer awards for her remarkable Dharma service. Her contributions are recognized nationally and internationally, including the title Agga Mahagantha Vachaka Pandit,” granted to her by the Burmese Government in 1995. She truly is the Yomha Mhyayam, a beloved and compassionate daughter of the world.

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Notes

1. Newari Buddhists use the term *guruma* fr a female teacher, especially those who are Theravāda nuns.

2. “Lalitpur” is the old name for the city of Patan.

3. https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10207937307086259&set=t.100069622052734

4. https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10207937307086259&set=t.100069622052734

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6. https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10157028338002538&set=t.100069622052734

7. https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10218976847952400&set=t.100069622052734

8. https://myrepublica.nagariknetwork.com/index.php/news/bhikkhu-aswaghosha-s-last-rites-to-be-performed-with-state-honour

9. *The Dharmakirti A Buddhist Monthly Magazine*, August 19, 2024, No. 10, 25.

10. *The Dharmakirti A Buddhist Monthly Magazine*, January 1, 2022, No. 5, 64.

11. *The Dharmakirti A Buddhist Monthly Magazine*, January 25, 2024, No. 10, 21.

12. https://www.un.org/en/en/observances/ending-violence-against-women-day/stories

13. *The Dharmakirti A Buddhist Monthly Magazine*, January 18, 2024, No. 6, 25.

14. *The Dharmakirti A Buddhist Monthly Magazine*, October 16, 2024, 21.

Bhikkhuni Master Huynh Lien: A Pioneer in Propagating Khat Si Buddhism in the Central Highlands

Thich Nu Thuong Hue and Thich Thien Phu

The Kinh people migrated to the Central Highlands of Vietnam in multiple waves. Alongside lay Buddhists, some monastics ventured into this new land to spread the Dharma. Influenced by the Buddhist Revival Movement and the establishment of the An Nam Buddhist Association, monastics undertook the mission of bringing the Dharma to the highlands. Notably, Bhikkhuni Master Huynh Lien played a pioneering role in establishing and developing Khat Si Buddhism along the nation's frontier.

Khat Si Buddhism is a distinctly Vietnamese tradition. Under the leadership of Bhikkhuni Huynh Lien, it rapidly expanded in the Central Highlands. Facing religious discrimination under the Ngo Dinh Diem administration, she led and participated in protests advocating religious freedom. She also advised the women's rights movement and spearheaded demonstrations demanding the release of political prisoners in Dak Lak and Kon Tum.

Bhikkhuni Huynh Lien established monasteries to provide training for nuns, founded orphanages for the elderly and children, and set up schools for underprivileged students. In addition, she collaborated with hospitals to offer medical aid to those in need. Recognizing the importance of monastic education, she actively mobilized resources to build Buddhist schools and supported nuns in studying abroad to strengthen the monastic community. An exemplary disciple of her master, Bhikkhuni Huynh Lien combined humility with resolute leadership. She nurtured many accomplished nuns within the Khat Si tradition, particularly in the Central Highlands. Gifted in poetry and literature, she transformed Buddhist scriptures and commentaries into verse, making them more accessible to future generations. Her literary contributions, including poetry and prose, infused Vietnamese literature with the essence of the Buddha's teachings.

With a steadfast commitment to propagating the Dharma, Bhikkhuni Huynh Lien played a crucial role in shaping a uniquely Vietnamese Buddhism in the Central Highlands. Her efforts not only strengthened Buddhist influence in the region but also contributed to safeguarding the national frontier and illuminating the red basalt land with the light of Buddhism. This study aims to highlight her remarkable contributions and the impact of Khat Si Buddhism in the Central Highlands.

The Development of Khat Si Buddhism in the Central Highlands

Between 1956 and 1961, the missionary delegation of the Khat Si Buddhist sect arrived in the Central Highlands. However, it was not until April 22, 1966, that the Government of the Republic of Vietnam officially recognized and granted permission for the establishment of the Khat Si Buddhist Church. Bhikkhuni Huynh Lien was a key figure in bringing the mission of "continuing the lamp of wisdom" to the Central Highlands.

In 1967, Bhikkhuni Huynh Lien founded Ngoc Bao Monastery, located on Hung Vuong Street, Pleiku. In its early days, the area was little more than an unmarked burial ground. Once established, the monastery was entrusted to her disciple, Bhikkhuni Hanh Lien. In 1968, she founded Nhat Chi Mai Orphanage, which was relocated to Lam Dong Province in 1972. In the same year, she established Ngoc Phu Monastery in Ayun Pa Town. Once completed, this

monastery was placed under the care of Bhikkhuni Kiem Lien. In 1969, she further established Thanh Quang Orphanage in the same district, now known as Hoa Mi Kindergarten, to care for orphans and the elderly. Currently, Bhikkhuni Phuc Lien serves as the abbess of this monastery.

Alongside Bhikkhuni Huynh Lien, the elder *bhiksu* Giac An was one of the esteemed monks who was instrumental in establishing monasteries in the Central Highlands, particularly in Gia Lai Province. His dedication to spreading the Dharma and training monastics ensured the continuity of the Khat Si Buddhist lineage in the region. After eight years of living in the Khat Si monastic community and fulfilling the mission of propagating the Dharma for the benefit of sentient beings, Bhiksu Giac An decided to move to the highlands in the central region to accept disciples and establish monasteries. In 1957, he founded Ngoc Phuc Monastery (also known as the Yellow Robe Pagoda) in Pleiku, under the administration of Congregation III of the Khat Si sect. In 1960, he established Ngoc Tuc Monastery in An Khe District, later entrusted to Bhikkhuni Canh Lien. Due to his Dharma propagation efforts, in 1974 he handed over Ngoc Phuc Monastery in Pleiku to the elder *bhiksu* Giac Phuc, who continued its development and accepted new disciples. Later, Bhiksu Giac Thanh followed in the footsteps of Giac Phuc. Ngoc Phuc Monastery became the foundation for the growth of numerous Khat Si monasteries in the province and served as the patriarchal monastery of Congregation III of the Khat Si sect in the Central Highlands.

The Life and Legacy of Bhikkhuni Huynh Lien: Early Life and Ordination

Bhikkhuni Huynh Lien, was born Nguyen Thi Tru in 1923. She grew up during French colonial rule and the division of Vietnam into North and South. Coming from a revolutionary family, she was deeply influenced by the call of President Ho Chí Minh to fight for national liberation. Initially engaged in the resistance movement, she later turned to the monastic path, receiving ordination from the Minh Dang Quang in 1947. From that moment on, she dedicated her entire life to the service of Buddhism and her homeland.

Contributions to Culture and Education

Continuing the mission of "Nurturing and Spreading the True Dharma of Shakyamuni: Khat Si Buddhism of Vietnam," Bhikkhuni Huynh Lien played a crucial role in preserving and promoting Buddhist culture among monastic women and lay followers. In addition to her religious contributions, between 1963 and 1975 she actively participated in movements advocating for peace, freedom, and national reunification in southern Vietnam.

During the 20th century, the Buddhist revival movement emphasized the importance of education as a key factor in preserving Buddhism. Bhiksu Khánh Hòa once remarked, "The decline of Buddhism stems from the ignorance of its followers." Inspired by this, Bhikkhuni Huynh Lien devoted herself to the education and training of young monastics, especially in the Central Highlands. She believed that it was only when monks and nuns were equipped with both spiritual discipline and knowledge that they could effectively spread the Dharma to ethnic minority communities. She not only encouraged the study of Buddhist teachings but also emphasized their practical application in daily life. To achieve this, she organized Dharma study classes and short and long-term retreats, attracting both monastics and laypeople.

Social and Humanitarian Efforts

Beyond education, Bhikkhuni Huynh Lien was a dedicated social activist and philanthropist. She established healthcare centers, schools, and community centers to improve the material and spiritual well-being of the people in the Central Highlands. In 1968, she founded Nhat Chi Mai Orphanage in Bien Hoa, which later became the model for orphanages across the highlands, including Ngoc Bao Orphanage in Gia Lai and Dieu Quang Orphanage in Phu Bon. She also consistently supported various humanitarian institutions such as Leprosy Hospital 175, Ben San Leprosy Camp, Thu Thiem Leprosy Center, Bien Hoa Mental Hospital, Go Vap Spiritual Home, Thi Nghe Elderly Home, and Thi Nghe Center for Disabled Children. Her selfless contributions solidified her reputation as a compassionate and wise leader, greatly influencing the sustainable development of Buddhism in the Central Highlands.

Ordination and Monastic Training

Bhikkhuni Huynh Lien expanded her Dharma mission to central Vietnam with the vow, "Selflessness for the benefit of others, alms-seeking to transform sentient beings," and focused on training the next generation of Buddhist leaders. She strongly encouraged and supported young nuns to pursue higher education and Buddhist studies. She cared deeply for her disciples, ensuring that even those who were less fortunate or in poor health received the support they needed. One of her devotees recalled, "She cared for each of her 'children,' sharing her food, peeling fruit for them, and even picking through peanuts and coconut candies to ensure they had enough nourishment to study well." In the Central Highlands, she established numerous monasteries and ordained many disciples, several of whom became prominent figures in Khat Si Buddhism, such as Bhikkhuni Hanh Lien, Bhikkhuni Kiem Lien, and Bhikkhuni Phuc Lien.

Translation and Literary Works

Blessed with a natural talent for poetry and profound insight into Buddhist scriptures, Bhikkhuni Huynh Lien pioneered the use of the Vietnamese national script (Quoc-ngu) to make Buddhist teachings more accessible. She translated and widely disseminated key Mahāyāna *sūtra*s, such as the *Amitābha Sūtra*, the Universal Gate chapter of the *Avalokiteśvara Sūtra*, the *Ullambana Sūtra*, and the *Sūtra in Forty-Two Sections*. In addition, she translated Theravāda texts, such as the Blessings Sūtra, Robe Offering Sūtra, Life Liberation Sūtra, Meditation Prayer Sūtra, and Non-Self Sūtra. Following the guidance of Bhiksu Minh Dang Quang, she also compiled important Buddhist liturgical texts, including *Hymns of the Triple Gem, Repentance of the Triple Gem*, and *Repentance of the Three Karmas.* Furthermore, she composed numerous Buddhist poems and literary works, infusing them with the wisdom of the Buddha's teachings, enriching Vietnamese Buddhist literature.

Lasting Legacy

Bhikkhuni Huynh Lien was more than a spiritual leader; she was a beacon of compassion, wisdom, and social engagement. She firmly established Khat Si Buddhism in the Central Highlands, fostering both monastic education and humanitarian efforts. Her unwavering

dedication to the Dharma and the nation continues to inspire generations of Buddhists. Her legacy shines brightly, like a guiding light on the red basalt land of the Central Highlands, ensuring that the flame of Vietnamese Buddhism continues to illuminate countless hearts and minds.

Engaged Buddhism Spirit

Witnessing the country's division and the people's suffering under the Diem regime, although she was a monastic, Bhikkhuni Huynh Lien could not ignore the pain of her homeland. Thus, poetry and practical actions became her tools to express the spirit of engaged Buddhism:

> Even as a monastic, I am a citizen of this land.
> For love and righteousness, I take a stand.
> For freedom in peace, united we remain,
> For eternal joy and prosperity to reign.
> (Khúc Thanh Bình, "The Melody of Peace")

These four lines clearly demonstrate Bhikkhuni Huynh Lien's deep love for her country and people. She was not only a Buddhist nun but also a devoted patriot, always concerned about the nation's fate and ready to take action for independence, peace, and collective happiness. Her spirit of struggle reflected both Buddhist compassion and a profound sense of engaged Buddhism, closely linking religion with life. Another aspect of this engagement was her active participation in movements opposing the Republic of Vietnam's government, particularly supporting anti-war movements and initiative to advocate for religious freedom, democracy, and social rights for Buddhists.

Conclusion

Bhikkhuni Huynh Lien was an outstanding figure in the tradition of Vietnamese Khat Si Buddhism, dedicating her entire life to serving Buddhism and the nation. With unwavering determination and boundless compassion, she laid a solid foundation for the development of Buddhist Khat Sĩ in the Central Highlands, spreading the light of the Dharma to distant regions and contributing significantly to education, culture, and social welfare.

Through her efforts in training monastic disciples, establishing religious and social institutions, and composing profound literary works, she left behind an invaluable legacy. Her life and career stand as a shining example of engaged Buddhism and selfless sacrifice for the greater good, inspiring future generations to continue preserving and promoting Buddhist values in the journey of building and developing the nation.

Bhiksuni Dieu Không: The Great Pillar of the Vietnamese Buddhist Nuns in the 20th Century

Thich Thien Phu and Pham Thi Thanh Vien

In the 1930s, Vietnamese Buddhism appeared to be a means of bolstering people's faith during the nation's turmoil. Advances were made with the global Buddhist revival movements and the initiation of Buddhist reform throughout the three regions of Vietnam, with the establishment of the An Nam Buddhist Association led by renowned monks from the central region such as Bhiksus Tinh Khiet, Giac Tien, Tri Thu, Don Hau, along with kings and intellectuals such as King Bao Dai, Nguyen Khoa Toan, and Queen Mother Tu Cung, Le Đinh Tham, among others. However, the flourishing of Vietnamese Buddhism today would not have been possible without the contributions of Bhiksuni Dieu Không.

After ordaining, Bhiksuni Dieu Không established many orphanages from Hue to Ho Chi Minh City to care for unfortunate children. With education as her mission, she founded many nuns' monasteries to provide spaces for nuns to study, practice, and participate in the establishment of Buddhist cultural centers and Buddhist academies. In addition, she founded women's associations and developed vocational training classes. Bhiksuni Dieu Không also launched *Nguyet San Liên Hoa* (Lotus Journal), which became a publication center for Buddhist scriptures.

Bhiksuni Dieu Không embodied the *bodhisattva* spirit, as a woman, with a noble aspiration, demonstrating the spirit of compassion and wisdom to illuminate the path of Vietnamese Buddhist nuns. Through studying her life's work, we gain a deeper understanding of the philosophical, ethical, and spiritual contributions she made to Vietnamese Buddhism.

Family Background

Born into an aristocratic family, the Ho Dac lineage, Bhiksuni Dieu Không grew up immersed in Confucian education. She was familiar with Buddhist texts and Confucian classics from an early age. After gaining a thorough comprehension of Buddhist theory, she was ordained under Bhiksu Giac Tien as a member of the Lieu Quan Zen sect, adopting the monastic name Trung Hao and the Dharma name Dieu Không. When she was younger, she was hailed as "the most accomplished woman of the 20th century in the historic capital of Hue" for her proficiency in the traditional arts of painting, poetry, chess, and music." Despite being the youngest daughter in a powerful family – her father, Ho Đac Trung, served as Minister of Education and held high rank in the royal court – Bhiksuni Dieu Không chose to follow the Buddhist path. Her father was a "National Mentor" (father-in-law to King Khai Dinh) and held great power within the court. Having a deep karmic connection with Buddhism from a young age, the daughter, named Hanh, received ordination and took the Dharma name of Dieu Không. She joined veteran Buddhist leaders to support the Buddhist revival movement and the establishment of the An Nam Buddhist Association, aiming to preserve the Buddhist teachings under the regime of Ngo Đinh Diem.

The Buddhist Revival Movement and Founding of the An Nam Buddhist Association

Since the French colonialists established control over Vietnam and divided the country into three regions for easier governance, the country experienced constant internal turmoil, creating

disorder in the community. In Hue, Bhiksu Giac Tien, together with other respected monks and intellectuals, founded the An Nam Buddhist Association. This is considered the beginning of Buddhist reform in central Vietnam. On August 16, 1932, King Bao Đai issued a decree authorizing the establishment of an organization to study and promote Buddhism in the imperial city of Hue. The membership of the Association included three main categories: intellectuals who had studied in the West and understood French, aristocrats from the royal court, and scholars of Confucianism, as well as distinguished Buddhist monks and nuns who were deeply knowledgeable in Buddhist teachings and lived a life of purity.

The An Nam Buddhist Association developed a well-organized and unified structure, operating in a hierarchical system with five levels: the central level, represented by the An Nam Buddhist Association itself, followed by provincial associations, district and town chapters, commune-level organizations, and finally village-level groups. This well-organized structure was acknowledged by Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, who stated: "Around 1940, the organizational foundation of the An Nam Buddhist Association had become solid, extending from the cities to the rural areas across the country." Bhiksuni Dieu Không devoted all her energy and determination to protect the Dharma, playing a significant role in the Buddhist revival movement in Vietnam.

Major Contributions of Bhiksuni Dieu Không to Vietnamese Buddhism

Social Work. With her intelligence and kindness, Bhiksuni Dieu Không began engaging in charity work at the age of 15: "The princess joined the charity association led by Ms. Đam Phuong, where she held the position of treasurer."

In 1926, she founded the "Women's Association," and under her leadership, the association not only flourished in Thua Thien but gradually spread throughout central Vietnam. The association promoted the preservation of traditional cultural values, fought for human rights and women's rights, and aimed to elevate the position of women in Vietnam at the time.

In 1928, Bhiksuni Dieu Không established the "Lac Thien Association" with the mission: "To help comrades with revolutionary spirit, support the Cuong De movement in Japan, assist students in China, contribute to the An Nam Overseas Students Fund, and aid families who lost loved ones in Nghe An, as well as orphaned children."

In 1944, after ordaining as a nun, Bhiksuni Dieu Không continued to take on greater responsibilities for society. With a compassionate heart, she decided to establish orphanages that spanned from Hue to Sai Gon. Additionally, she opened free medical clinics at the Hong Đuc Pagoda in Hue to provide healthcare services to those in need.

Cultural Activities. Bhiksuni Dieu Không always held a strong belief in the importance of Vietnamese cultural traditions. As was well known, "Bhiksuni Dieu Không was always deeply concerned with building a cultural foundation rooted in national identity, avoiding assimilation with Western culture... She recognized that in order to overcome the limitations faced by women, it was essential to first establish a national cultural foundation." Furthermore, Bhiksuni Dieu Không was very interested in traditional handicraft villages. She established a store called "Nam Hoa" (Vietnamese goods): "I opened a store named Nam Hoa, specializing in selling entirely domestic products, while also encouraging women to use local goods. The store even accepted orders from foreign countries for products made by Vietnamese artisans."

In addition, Bhiksuni Dieu Không established the magazine *Nguyet san Liên Hoa* in 1952

with the mission: “To bring people from the secular world into the spiritual realm, and to integrate the Dharma with daily life; to act as a bridge between the world and the Dharma.”

Educational Work. Bhiksuni Dieu Không placed great emphasis on the training of monks and nuns for the future of Vietnamese Buddhism. In Hue, she founded the first educational institution for nuns,Dieu Duc Pagoda. Several other nunneries were established nearby, including Dieu Đuc (Hue), Dieu Vien, *Khai An*, Hong An, Kieu Dam, Dinh Hue, Dong Thuyen, Hong Duc, *Lien Tri*, *Lien Hoa* (Hue), *Bao Thang* (Hoi An), *Bao Quang* (Da Nang), Tinh Nghiem (Quang Ngai), and Dieu Quang (Nha Trang).

Bhiksuni Dieu Không actively supported and campaigned for the establishment of the first Buddhist University in Saigon, which was led by the late Bhiksu Thich Minh Chau as its principal. She also established the Lieu Quan Cultural Center in Hue, under the guidance of Bhiksu Duc Tam. She was dedicated to promoting education, including both secular and Buddhist education: “If the conditions are right, Bhiksuni Dieu Không would never miss an opportunity to develop educational institutions for both worldly and spiritual knowledge.”

Supporting the Sangha and the Community. Bhiksuni Dieu Không lived simply and was close to the people, always carefully teaching every little detail, from dignified gestures to proper conduct as well as learning and practice. Therefore, “Most of her life was spent in deep practice, establishing monasteries, guiding practitioners, and wholeheartedly serving the Dharma and humanity.” She showed deep respect for the *sangha*, even for young novices. This exemplified her virtuous example, teaching future generations the value of “humility.” This is reflected in the words of Bhiksu Thich Thai Hoa, who recalled, “Compared to her age, we are just her children, compared to her seniority, Bhiksuni Dieu Không surpassed us by thirty years. In her contributions to both Dharma and life, she was truly extraordinary. But every time she met us, she greeted us with great care and respect in accordance with the Dharma. This is what made her shine brightly in the spiritual landscape of the capital.” She understood and practiced the Eight Provisions throughout her life, because “Bhiksuni Dieu Không clearly understood the value of the Eight Provisions as established by the Buddha and preserved by the Patriarchs in the transmission of the Buddhist lineage.”

Translations and Writing

Bhiksuni Dieu Không dedicated her life to both the Dharma and the world. Although the responsibilities of Buddhist affairs were always demanding, she tirelessly translated and wrote many scriptures and treatises, leaving behind valuable works for posterity. She translated the *Đaio Trí Đo luan* in the later years of her life, when she was over 80 years old. Her poetry collection, *Dieu Không Thi Tap*, includes six sections with a total of 241 poems and couplets. This work not only holds literary value but also represents a historical journey and the messages of liberation that Bhiksuni Dieu Không shared throughout her life dedicated to the Dharma.

Bhiksuni Dieu Không’s Philosophy

Concept of Human Life and Worldview. Bhiksuni Dieu Không spent her life understanding the principle of dependent arising, seeing the world as impermanent:

What is there to speak of,

the crane within the thousand clouds,
The body is a transient form,
soon to be gone."

She understood the impermanence of life both in terms of external phenomena and in the physical body. Thus, she witnessed the fleeting nature of all worldly existence, viewing it as a "flower's life" or as transient as "the shadow of a pigeon," and saw the human experience as "a dream." The life of a flower blooms and fades in a day, much like the fate of human beings. "The flower's life is but a brief moment and so, too, is the turning of human fortune." With her philosophy of the world's "impermanence," she deeply understood all forms of suffering: "Impermanence teaches us that tears will flow." This understanding was profoundly reflected in her poem "Life":

What does life bring in its fleeting existence?
Laughter when we meet, tears when we part.
Fame and wealth are but dreams,
Noble titles and high rank hold no true value.

All things are ultimately devoid of inherent existence, and it is due to attachment and ignorance that beings continue to cycle through birth and death. However, with the wisdom of Bhiksuni Dieu Không, she saw that all phenomena are ultimately transient:

All phenomena unfold without obstruction,
Because of attachment to self, delusion arises.
Returning to the original nature, the mind has no attachment,
Only then can one see the true, wondrous nature.

Practice and Liberation

Faith was always at the forefront for The Bhiksuni. For her, only by relying on the Three Jewels could one escape the cycle of birth and death:

Deep faith, firm confidence, and sincere refuge in the Three Jewels,
These are the seeds of virtue that will lead to abundant merit.

Thus, faith is the mother of all good deeds:
By relying on faith and vows, one establishes the foundation of practice.
Once taking refuge, one should dedicate their whole body and mind to the Three Jewels,
With no other thoughts dwelling on external influences or heretical paths.

Bhiksuni Dieu Không always made vows throughout her life of practice:

I take refuge in the Three Jewels to endure forever,
With unwavering faith that never changes.

Inheriting and Developing

As a nun embodying virtue and discipline, Bhiksuni Dieu Không was a living *bodhisattva* in the world. She truly embodied the qualities of a "noble practitioner beyond the mundane." Despite the oppressive regime under the Ngo government, she persisted in maintaining her resolve:

> Living under an unjust and biased regime,
> I offer my life to call upon the restoration of humanity's conscience,
> Let us not use power to suppress the weak.

In the essence of her being, she led a simple, unpretentious life, yet her presence radiated with immense dignity.

> Not depending on others, not relying on others, not proclaiming or teaching, but walking freely and effortlessly through the cycle of life and death, making sure to live in harmony with the heart, and to honor the teachings of the Buddha and the ancestors.

The actions of Bhiksuni Dieu Không were not only a reflection of the truth of the Dharma but also of her teachings. She became a shining example in daily life, living simply and humbly, deeply connected to the world. Her presence served as a reminder to those walking the *bdhisattva* path.

Conclusion

Bhiksuni Dieu Không was entirely devoted to both life and the Dharma. She embodied the qualities of a *bodhisattva*, dedicated to alleviating suffering and bringing joy. She exemplified the noble qualities of a Vietnamese woman, carrying the noble blood of her aristocratic family while wearing the robes of liberation. Her life was lived in simplicity and freedom, untouched by the dust of worldly life. As a woman, her lofty aspiration was like that of a great man. She manifested to save sentient beings and walked freely through her 93 years of life and 53 years of ordination. The life of Bhiksuni Dieu Không is beyond the capacity of words to fully express, as her deeds and aspirations were profound and immense.

Planting Seeds: Teaching Buddhist Values in a Secular World
Màlia D. Wong, O.P.

Many times, I hear my students say:
"Why do I need to study other religious traditions?"
"I can be good without religion."
"Religion causes conflict and division."
"I believe in spirituality but not organized religion."
"I have not experienced anything that convinces me."

In their renunciation of faith traditions, students often prioritize reason, the Big Bang, personal freedom, and alternative sources of meaning and morality in response to life's questions. As an educator, how can I widen my students' perspectives by informing not only the mind but also the heart? The world is in deep pain, where another generation of children has grown up knowing only war, fear, distrust, and un-peace. How can we lessen the divide that keeps people apart?

As a Catholic professor teaching at the intersection of interfaith dialogue and secular education, I aim to balance universal relevance with cultural and religious sensitivity. The richness of Buddhism's philosophy, history, and cultural expression offers a middle way to promote social harmony. By creating inclusive learning spaces that benefit all students – Buddhist or otherwise – dialogue is fostered alongside mutual respect between diverse groups.

This presentation highlights three key strategies for navigating the delicate balance of teaching Buddhist values for social harmony to a secular generation in interfaith contexts:
(1) Framing Buddhist Teachings Universally
(2) Respectful Collaboration with Buddhist Groups
(3) Promoting Dialogue on Shared Values
add space
I would like to begin with the Abinha Jataka tale in preparing the ground for our exploration together.

The Elephant and the Little Dog

Once upon a time, in a busy city, there was a grand elephant who belonged to the king. Every day, a little stray dog would sneak into the elephant's stable to eat the rice that fell while the elephant ate. Over time, the elephant and the dog became the best of friends. They played together, ate together, and never wanted to be apart.

One day, a man visiting the city saw the dog and decided to take it home with him. The elephant felt heartbroken. He stopped eating, wouldn't take his bath, and looked very sad.

When the king noticed this, he asked his wise advisor to find out what was wrong. The advisor visited the elephant and quickly realized that he was missing his friend, the little dogThe advisor thus informed the king.

The king then announced: "Whoever took the elephant's dog must return it, or they will face a fine!" Hearing this, the man let the dog go. The dog raced back to the elephant. The elephant happily lifted the dog onto his head with joy. The king was amazed and rewarded the wise advisor, learning that true friendship knows no boundaries.

Let us now explore how we can go beyond boundaries in teaching Buddhist values.

Framing Buddhist Teachings Universally: Practical Applications in Education

In an increasingly pluralistic and secularized educational landscape, Buddhist principles such as mindfulness, compassion, and interdependence have been effectively introduced as practical tools rather than religious doctrines. A trove of Buddhist wisdom can also be evidenced in the arts, music and film. These principles provide frameworks for enhancing well-being, fostering ethical decision-making, and cultivating a sense of interconnectedness in diverse educational settings. The planting of these seeds often motivates students in their pursuit of happiness or meaning, prompting them to further explore Buddhism.

Mindfulness in the Marketplace

In the Catholic tradition, there is the example of how the monk John of the Cross remained centered amid the uncertainties of his time, teaching that even in darkness, one can cultivate peace through spiritual practice. Similarly, Buddhist mindfulness practices equip students with the ability to manage stress, develop emotional intelligence, and cultivate inner peace.

In the Japanese art of ikebana, inspired by Buddhist philosophy, we can find immeasurable beauty in simplicity. Likewise, the Japanese martial arts of aikido, judo and kendo; or, in Korea- taekwondo, sunmudo, and simgumdo; or, in China- the Shaolin martial arts, all emphasize the cultivation of mindfulness, self-control, and peaceful conflict resolution stemming from Buddhist influence. Calligraphy and chado, the way of tea, also promote inner harmony.

Teaching Through Film

Using film is another helpful way to introduce Buddhist concepts, especially in a social media driven generation. While “May the Force be with you” is not a direct Buddhist teaching, the concept of the Force in Star Wars draws heavily from Buddhist philosophy touching on the interconnectedness of everything. Likewise, Jedi Master Yoda's character portrays the themes of selflessness- putting the needs of others before one’s own, compassion and non-attachment.

I once observed a young Catholic sister using a teaching from “Kung Fu Panda” in her kindergarten class. When she wanted the children to gather, she would say, “Peace.” The children immediately stopped whatever they were doing, gathered at the carpeted area, sat cross-legged, closed their eyes, and mirrored Po, the kung fu warrior panda. Imagine an entire kindergarten class settling down through mindfulness rather than needing to use traditional discipline.

For today’s students with shortened attention spans, full-length films and those with subtitles can be more challenging to teach. short video clips can initiate dialogue about Buddhist philosophy or values imparted. Anime and manga, such as “My Neighbor Totoro” are contemporary ways to teach respect for nature and introduce the concept of bodhisattvas.

Compassion And Social Responsibility

One year, I was using Donald Rothberg’s book, *The Engaged Spiritual Life: A Buddhist Approach to Transforming Ourselves and the World*, in class. One of my students somehow got arrested that afternoon and spent the night in jail. He read his book to pass the time. Later, he

told me that fellow prisoners wanted a copy. Thus, after his release, he bought extra books for them.

By highlighting the Buddhist concept of karuna (compassion) as a transformative educational tool, rather than as a religious ideal, students have been able to develop a deeper sense of social responsibility. By incorporating reflective journaling and ethical reasoning exercises in class, students pursuing careers in healthcare, criminal justice, business, education, and psychology, etc. are encouraged to integrate these principles into their professions.

Interdependence: "It's a Small World"

When I think of an example of interdependence that students can relate to, my mind drifts to the happy place of Disneyland. Disney's "It's a Small World" ride and song highlight our connections and celebrate our differences. It is a secular way to teach tolerance, empathy, kindness, and international peace, thus planting the seeds of global citizenship. No one is here on this earth, alone.

In Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh's founding of the Order of Interbeing, monastics and laypeople together commit to the continuous practice of mindfulness and recognizing the deep interconnection of all life. Similarly, His Holiness the Dalai Lama's emphasis on educating the heart aligns with the same principles fostering environmental stewardship and social harmony.

Respectful Collaboration with Buddhist Communities

In 2019, after I broke my leg, I was most grateful to have a wide circle of Buddhist practitioner friends who stepped in to cover my Buddhism class. Clark Ratliff from Honolulu Diamond Sangha covered my classes in Zen; Clyde Whitworth from Honpa Hongwanji taught about the Shin Buddhist tradition; Venerable Fred, a Theravadan Forest monk from France, led my students in forest meditation practices; Dr. Thanh Huyn and his wife Xuanshared on Vipassana, insight meditation; and Dharma teacher Ernestine Enomoto introduced them to the teachings of Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh of Plum Village. I wish I could have attended all their classes!

Growing up in Hawai'i, every Saturday I used to carry two bags of oranges for my great-grandmother up some stairs that were much taller than I to be offered at Hsu Yun Temple. My grandfather and grandmother have their memorial tablets there. I was too young then to understand what Buddhism was about, but, from my great-grandmother, I learned deep respect.

Later in life, I met my first meditation teacher, Zen Buddhist Robert Aitken Roshi of then Koko-An, now known as Honolulu Diamond Sangha. Welcomed into the sangha, we drank tea and cookies together after Wednesday evening sittings and sesshins. We worked together, samu, as our new home was being built in Palolo Valley.

In 1994, when His Holiness the Dalai Lama visited Hawai'i, a nun in maroon robes decided to adopt a Catholic nun in white. She took me under her wings, and mentored me along the path of interfaith and academic partnerships. That year, Bhiksuni Karma Lekshe Tsomo also introduced me to the Bhiksuni Rui Miao of Yuk Fut Temple in Hawai'i. I continue as a member of that temple today.

After Aitken Roshi's retirement in 1996, I began looking for another group to sit with to develop my mindfulness practice and began studying insight meditation under Steven Smith and Michelle McDonald of Vipassana Hawai'i. In the year 2000, Karma Lekshe Tsomo invited me to join her socially engaging work of educating for women's rights in my first Sakyadhita

conference in Nepal. Since then, I have worked with Tzu Chi in their chaplaincy training program, with the Hawai'i Association of International Buddhists on programs, and with the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawai'i, on the board of the Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai-Fujitani Interfaith Program, currently as the program director. Such collaborations have been mutually enriching as we share common commitments to alleviating suffering, environmental stewardship, and social justice.

Promoting Dialogue on Shared Values

Hawai'i has a thriving interfaith community, with organizations such as the Interfaith Alliance of Hawai'I, Interfaith Communities in Action, Sunrise Foundation Hawai'I, Hawai'i Interfaith Power and Light, Hawai'i Conference of Religions for Peace.

At Chaminade University, we host the BDK-Reverend Yoshiaki Fujitani Interfaith Program. Over the past few years, I have mentored my students to take the lead in delivering these interfaith events, such as:

"Honoring Our Ancestors: Faith and Tradition, "
"Spirit in the Time of Radical Change"
"Do You Know Why? Exploring Rituals in Sacred Spaces"
"Disarming Violence: Contemplative Solutions to Violence"
"I'm Not Okay, But It's Okay: Finding the Middle Way"

These programs foster dialogue, ethical alignment, and appreciation of religious diversity. Rather than focusing on doctrinal differences, the emphasis is on shared values and collaborative contributions to social harmony. Students have been able to deepen their understanding of Buddhist teachings while having the opportunity to make meaningful connections with the Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Hawai'ian and other communities.

Of course, there remain the challenges of some Buddhist communities that are more culturally bound or linguistically challenged, and protective of their rituals, sacred spaces, and monastic traditions. Cultivating deep listening and respect is taught when my students inquire why they might not feel so welcome in certain spaces. These challenges require culturally sensitive approaches

Conclusion

Returning to the Abinha Jataka tale, we see that true friendship and understanding transcend boundaries. In the same way, teaching Buddhist values for social harmony calls us to nurture meaningful connections – across faiths, cultures, and educational spaces. By embracing universal wisdom, respectful collaboration, and dialogue on shared values, we can equip students with the tools to navigate an increasingly complex world with compassion, mindfulness, and interdependence.

As we continue this conversation, I invite you to reflect on the question: How might we, like the elephant and the little dog, build bridges of friendship in our own communities?

May we all walk the middle way toward a more harmonious world.

Using Global Buddhist Women's Networks to Relieve the Suffering of Animals

Catherine Schuetze

Within Buddhist philosophy and practice exist the moral codes and teachings that support animal welfare and rescue activities. The desire to alleviate the suffering of all sentient beings, including animals, is gradually nurtured through the concepts of *mettā* (loving kindness), *karunā* (compassion), *ahimsā* (non-violence), *karma* (cause and effect), and dependent origination. From the six realms of *samsāra,* animals are the only other beings most Buddhists can easily interact with.[1] Therefore, I argue that the logical consequence of Buddhist philosophical and moral reflections should be compassionate actions aimed at alleviating the suffering of animals. Over millennia, Dharma teachers, practitioners, and philosophers from all traditions have advocated for the same.[2]

Engaged Buddhist activities often support animal rescue and perform live animal release (Tib: *tshethar*; Chin: *fangsheng*, mercy release), in which animals destined for slaughter are freed to live a natural lifespan. However, this practice can have unintended harmful consequences for the environment and the animals. It also creates a specialized wildlife market targeting Buddhists that increases the number of animals caught or bred for sale, ultimately undermining the benefits of the practice.[3] In response, several Buddhist leaders and environmental groups urge Buddhists to seriously consider a lifestyle that reduces the number of animals sold to slaughter and, hence, the need for mercy release altogether. By adopting a vegetarian or, preferably, vegan lifestyle, Buddhists can reduce the number of animals being bred or caught for slaughter. Each day a person adheres to a vegan diet, they save one animal life, 4,164 litres of water, 18 kg of grain, three m^2 of forested land, and nine kg of carbon dioxide.[4] This has significant long-term effects, saving the animals that would have been killed for meat and benefiting the environment, its wildlife, and us, through our interdependencies on global health.

In addition to these beneficial animal activities, Buddhists support urban animals in our communities, whether on the street, in animal shelters, or through wildlife rescue efforts. As part of these activities, organizations and governments frequently surgically sterilize and vaccinate street dogs against rabies. This is the internationally recognised method for controlling rabies transmission and preventing human and animal deaths from this horrific disease. Commonly referred to as ABC-AR (animal birth control-anti-rabies) or TNVR (trap, neuter, vaccinate, and release), these programs have effectively replaced the killing of street dogs for population and rabies control, which was the method used previously. The exponential benefit of ABC-AR is that it also saves humans, livestock, and other animals from terrible rabies deaths. This multiplying health benefit is understood because our more-than-human world is interconnected and interdependent. Veterinary public health programs like ABC-AR understand these interdependencies. They are good examples to demonstrate how improving animal health and welfare leads to increased welfare and health for all sentient beings.

I became involved with these ABC-AR programs in India 23 years ago. Initially, Buddhist networks involving women led to introductions and local community partnerships in Bodhgaya, Dharamsala, Tashi Jong, and Sikkim. As an Australian veterinarian, I marshalled resources and volunteers to assist these local communities to desex, vaccinate, and treat their stray and community dogs. Most, if not all, of these volunteers were women. My earlier visits to India led to a small group of mainly female Australian veterinarians and Buddhists forming Vets Beyond Borders. VBB aimed to fund more ABC-AR programs by providing resources and volunteers. It

also trained many local colleagues in veterinary public health, ABC-AR protocols and techniques. By then, I was living in Dharamsala and through more, mainly female networks, our programs spread to new communities who wanted to end the killing. Buddhist communities are often intimately aware of animal suffering and are strongly motivated to alleviate it. Over the years, I helped develop programs in Indian Buddhist and Tibetan refugee areas such as Bodhgaya, Sikkim, Dharamsala, Ladakh, Bylakuppe, and Bhutan. Vets Beyond Borders (VBB) has since extended its activities to the Pacific, Southeast Asia, and Australia, with most of its volunteers still being female.

This paper describes how women, animals and Buddhism intersected to advance the health and welfare of animals and their communities. It also proposes strategically using networks of Buddhists and women, locally and internationally, to foster a Sangha community whose moral concern extends beyond humans to include animals. The paper also draws connections between ecofeminism, feminist ethics of care, Buddhism and the interdependencies of global health. Today, women are at the forefront of international animal welfare initiatives, forming alliances with veterinary professionals, advocacy groups and funding organisations. This paper examines how these collaborations foster innovative, culturally sensitive solutions to animal welfare challenges in Buddhist regions.

Gender and Animals

During my decades as a vet working in animal welfare programs, I observed an intriguing convergence of Buddhism, animals, and women. The veterinarians I work with and who volunteer with Vets Beyond Borders are predominantly female, and animal welfare organizations and western Dharma centers are mostly run and staffed by women. This would not surprise academic scholars of ecofeminism, transitional feminism, animal studies, and veterinary anthropology.

Ecofeminist studies connect the global systems of oppression that subjugate women in ways similar to those faced by racial minorities, non-human animals, the environment, and colonized peoples.[5] An expanding body of literature describes common narratives in racist, sexist, speciesist, ableist, and classist ideologies and institutions, such as those found in the patriarchy and capitalism. Women more easily recognize other oppressed beings who encounter similar genealogies of violence and oppression. This "seeing" fosters empathy and compassion for those who suffer. This may help explain why women report higher animal welfare awareness scores than men globally[6] and comprise 70–80% of the volunteer workforce in animal shelters and wildlife rescue organizations.[7]

In the case of animal welfare programs, a feminist ethic of care is commonly utilized. The philosophical and ethical approach of feminist care ethics underscores relationships, interdependence, and responsibility in moral decision-making. Feminist care ethics highlight how gender, race, class, and other social structures shape caregiving and moral expectations. It critiques how care work, often performed by women, racialized communities, and marginalised groups, is devalued under capitalism and the patriarchy.[8] In concordance with Buddhism, feminist care ethics cite compassion, empathy, and attentiveness as essential moral capacities.[9]

Women's Leadership in Animal Welfare

Women's leadership is central to the success of animal welfare programs, providing unique perspectives and community trust. Dr. Diki Palmu's upcoming presentation on the SARAH program in Sikkim is a good example. Feminist scholarship highlights the intersection of gender and caregiving roles, emphasizing how women often take active roles in grassroots fundraising, volunteer coordination, and public education. Their involvement enhances the effectiveness and sustainability of these initiatives, especially in rural and underserved areas where animals play critical roles in livelihoods and ecosystems.

Feminist community leadership theories build on women's leadership styles, prioritizing collaboration, collective decision-making, and inclusivity.[10] These attributes are particularly relevant in Buddhist animal welfare programs, where ethical frameworks emphasize interconnectedness, kinship through rebirth, and shared responsibility. The integration of feminism and Buddhist leadership presents a compelling framework for understanding how women drive social change. Feminist ethics emphasize relational care and interdependence, which align with Buddhist teachings on compassion and interdependence. The success of women in animal welfare, whether they are Buddhist or not, exemplifies how leadership rooted in relational ethics can foster meaningful social change.

Women are often moral leaders in the home and community, teaching children and demonstrating Buddhist ethics through action. Women who take an active role in animal care model this compassionate attitude towards animals for the family and community. They are often key participants in animal welfare activities and are involved in education programs. Women-led initiatives are changing the landscape by bringing Buddhist ethics into direct action and fostering long-term engagement with local communities.

Community feminist leadership is particularly relevant in Buddhist contexts, where the monastic tradition has historically been male-dominated and has subjugated women. However, contemporary Buddhist women have reclaimed leadership roles by forming networks prioritizing collective action over hierarchical structures.[11] The women leading veterinary and animal welfare programs embody this shift, demonstrating how feminist values can be integrated into Buddhist activism.

Case Study: Vets Beyond Borders and SARAH Program

One of the most notable examples of a Buddhist-inspired animal welfare program is the Sikkim Anti-Rabies and Animal Health (SARAH) initiative. This revolutionary program was initially developed in collaboration with local Buddhist communities who objected to the government shooting street dogs for population and rabies control. The Sikkim State Veterinary Department, Vets Beyond Borders, and the Foundation Brigitte Bardot partnered to develop this innovative statewide animal welfare program. Reaching out through Buddhist networks locally helped Dr. Diki Palmu and Dr. Thinlay Bhutia overcome many challenges in Sikkim. Using international networks helped raise awareness, funds, and volunteers. These networks of women *sangha* also created a foundation of support and encouragement, helping many of us overcome the ongoing internal and external obstacles and challenges while working with constant exposure to suffering. Buddhist practices provided the mental stability and motivation to continue, which, along with healthy senses of adventure and humor, were equally vital.

By promoting sterilization and vaccination campaigns, SARAH aligns with the Buddhist values of *ahimsā* and *karunā* while providing sustainable solutions to public health concerns. The SARAH initiative has almost eliminated rabies cases and improved community perceptions of stray dogs, leading to more dog adoptions. Its success demonstrates the potential for Buddhist values to influence public health policy and animal welfare. It is a model for other Buddhist regions seeking to develop ethical, sustainable animal welfare programs.

Expanding the Impact: The Power of International Buddhist Networks

International Buddhist networks amplify the impact of local efforts through resource sharing, knowledge exchange, and advocacy. Partnerships between Buddhist communities and veterinary and animal rights organizations further expand the reach and influence of these programs, fostering multidisciplinary approaches to animal welfare. There are many Buddhist communication pathways like the Sakyadhita conferences, Dharma magazines, documentaries, and local and international news where Dharma networking can occur. Advocacy organizations like Dharma Voices for Animals (DVA)[12] and the many Buddhist animal rescue organizations globally strive, as engaged Buddhists, to relieve animal suffering and provide Dharma imprints for those animals' future lives. This aspect of Buddhist animal welfare work is often overlooked. Some would argue that attending to the animal's future life welfare is as vital as this life's welfare. This is an important work and what distinguishes a Buddhist from a non-Buddhist program.

The global benefits of volunteering flow in both directions. Hundreds of Australian and international veterinarians and veterinary nurses have volunteered in Sikkim over the last twenty years, experiencing Buddhist culture and Buddhism through this cultural immersion. The skills they learn from their Sikkimese colleagues extend beyond veterinary practicalities. These volunteers often return home with new perspectives on Buddhism, animal sentience, Buddhist cosmology, karma, and past and future lives. These returning volunteers form a new source for future networking as they have experienced the profound benefits of programs like SARAH.

Conclusion

Many Buddhist women are at the forefront of a transformative movement integrating compassion, ethics, and veterinary science to improve animal welfare. By leveraging global Buddhist networks, they create sustainable, culturally resonant programs addressing ethical and practical concerns. This case study of Vets Beyond Borders and the SARAH program illustrates how Buddhist teachings can inspire effective solutions to animal suffering.

As women continue to take leadership roles in both animal welfare and traditional Buddhist communities, their contributions alleviate animal suffering and strengthen their communities' ethical and spiritual fabric. By fostering international collaboration and education, these initiatives pave the way for a future where Buddhist principles guide humane, sustainable, and effective animal welfare practices.

I want to extend my deep and sincere gratitude to all the remarkable women I have met on this journey. You were instrumental in establishing Vets Beyond Borders, the SARAH program, and all the people and animals who have benefited worldwide from those small beginnings. Without you, my life would be impoverished and missing the warmth, wisdom, and light you

bring into it. Several of these Dharma sisters are here at this conference, including Dr. Diki.

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5. Chinsya, 2024.

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7. 2010; Haering *et al.*, 2020; Jacobs and and Reese,

8. (Chang and Ralph, 2013

9. Simonds, 2023.

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Female Veterinarians, Community Networks, and Animal Welfare in a Traditional Buddhist Society

Diki Palmu

As the Buddha said, "The pure diamond mind is within all of us; one simply needs to recognise it and never stop doing good for all sentient beings." This teaching forms the foundation of my work with the SARAH Programme (Sikkim Anti-Rabies and Animal Health Programme), a holistic and sustainable initiative under the Government of Sikkim's Animal Husbandry & Veterinary Services Department, which began in 2005. This program embodies the Buddhist principles of love, compassion, and nonviolence while tackling public health and animal welfare issues. Sikkim is a Himalayan state in Northeast India with a significant Buddhist community and cultural heritage.

Women as Catalysts for Change

In traditional Buddhist societies such as Sikkim, compassion for all living beings is deeply embedded in cultural and religious values. Women are crucial as educators and moral leaders within the home and community. Leveraging the strengths of women's networks and female-led groups has been fundamental to the SARAH Program's success. Initiatives like *Ngung Ney*, a female-led Buddhist prayer and meditation practice, have shaped our approach to nurturing compassion and service. By empowering women as community educators and leaders, we ensure public participation and establish the foundation for sustainable change.

A key aspect of our strategy involves encouraging the next generation of female veterinarians and paravets, equipping them with leadership skills to tackle animal welfare challenges. Today, an all-women team manages dog sterilization and anti-rabies vaccination programs across remote villages, embodying both professional excellence and Buddhist values of service.

Buddhist Values and Veterinary Science: A Harmonious Synergy

As a female Buddhist veterinarian, I have found that combining scientific knowledge with Buddhist principles of *ahimsa* (nonviolence) and *karuna* (compassion) creates impactful solutions. The SARAH Program tackles issues like rabies and the overpopulation of stray dogs in a way that aligns with these values. In the past, stray dogs were killed as a quick fix for population control and rabies prevention. This inhumane practice not only conflicted with the Buddhist ethos but also proved ineffective. Through sustained efforts, SARAH has introduced humane methods, such as Animal Birth Control and Anti-Rabies (ABC-AR) programs, which have eliminated mass shootings and brought rabies under control.

The challenges were significant. During the program's early years, many resisted neutering dogs, citing cultural beliefs that sterilization violates the laws of nature. Others argued that animals with removed organs would not experience a proper rebirth. Addressing these concerns required patience, education, and the integration of Buddhist teachings about equanimity and the shared suffering of all sentient beings. Public awareness campaigns highlighted the interconnectedness of humans, animals, and the environment, gradually gaining community trust and support.

In pursuit of making great change, challenges are inevitable. As a dedicated Buddhist, I wasn't afraid to face these challenges, drawing on the strengths of Buddhist practice and my community to bolster my determination and courage. Instead, I leveraged my Buddhist network to facilitate the work more efficiently. I sponsored and led three years of continuous Nungney practice in my village. I assisted the Buddhist nunnery practitioners in understanding the significance of animals and our program, which was centered on cause and effect and interconnectedness. This was very beneficial, as they now participate in our vaccination and neutering program. Additionally, they helped spread the word to other villages, which has contributed significantly to the program's success.

Another factor that led to the program's success was public education. I conducted many awareness camps at monasteries and schools all over Sikkim to educate the community on the importance of animals and how killing is unethical and destructive for our society. Understandably, many people are scared of dogs, fearing rabies and dog bites. They remember seeing people and animals die from rabies in the past. Due to this, they opposed our program and thought it was more effective to kill the dogs. Even though the majority of the population follows Buddhist philosophy, this didn't translate to empathy for the dogs due to this danger. It was not that easy to convince them to coexist with the dogs in the community. Gradually, through awareness and networking, relying on Buddhist principles, the community understood that dogs were no longer a threat after we had neutered and vaccinated them. This patient, bottom-up approach to social change is often led by women in communities. This worked in Sikkim, where the community are now a strong supporter of the SARAH program.

Nothing is impossible; however, you need to have dreams and trust in your inner awareness to support all sentient beings. In today's world, action matters more than preaching.

The Role of Women's Networks in Social Change

Women's networks and community groups played a crucial role in raising awareness and fostering acceptance of our program. By leveraging these groups, we connected with households and villages where women, as caregivers and decision-makers, significantly influenced attitudes towards animal welfare. Their intrinsic compassion made women natural allies in advocating for the humane treatment of animals and sustainable practices.

For example, we highlighted the role of dogs as silent protectors in rural and urban settings. They guard homes from wildlife intrusions and reduce conflicts with Himalayan black bears and jackals. Women-led community education programs helped shift perceptions of dogs from being seen as nuisances to valued members of the ecosystem. This shift was crucial in reducing resistance to neutering and vaccination initiatives.

Transforming Rabies Control in Sikkim

Before SARAH, Sikkim experienced frequent rabies outbreaks, leading to numerous annual human deaths. The government implemented a mass culling of dogs, which did not control the disease and resulted in significant suffering. As a Buddhist state, this method deeply unsettled the community. The SARAH Programme was established in response to the public's demand for humane solutions.

SARAH implemented a One Health approach, addressing the interconnected health of

humans, animals, and the environment. Our activities include:

1. Mass canine rabies vaccinations to break the rabies transmission cycle.
2. Humane dog population control through neutering programs.
3. Treatment of injured and sick animals to improve overall welfare.
4. Community education programs to promote coexistence and respect for animals.

Since its inception, SARAH has vaccinated thousands of dogs, carried out neutering surgeries to manage the population, and conducted regular awareness campaigns. Consequently, rabies cases in Sikkim have dramatically decreased, and the state now serves as a model for humane and effective rabies control in India.

Empowering the Next Generation of Female Leaders

Training and mentorship have been central to SARAH's philosophy. I've worked closely with young female veterinarians and paravets, encouraging them to take on leadership roles in animal welfare. These women now lead programs in some of Sikkim's most remote regions, demonstrating resilience, compassion, and expertise.

Their efforts extend beyond technical work; they embody the principles of socially engaged Buddhism, promoting kindness and responsibility within their communities. They have become role models for younger generations, inspiring others to see veterinary science as a noble profession grounded in service.

Social and Cultural Impact

The SARAH Programme has significantly changed societal attitudes. People no longer witness the traumatic mass shootings of dogs that were once common. Instead, they see a compassionate approach that aligns with Buddhist values. This shift has enhanced the state's cultural and ethical fabric, fostering peace and harmony.

Teaching children to care for animals has also had a profound impact. Schools now include animal welfare education, instilling values of kindness and empathy from a young age. This cultural shift supports the broader goals of public health and environmental sustainability. For example, better animal care leads to improved food safety, reduced zoonotic diseases, and healthier communities.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Implementing SARAH was not without its obstacles. Cultural resistance, logistical challenges in remote areas, and limited resources tested our resolve. However, these challenges also offered valuable lessons:

1. Education is key. Public awareness programs that connect scientific practices with cultural values are essential for long-term change.
2. Women are powerful agents of change. Engaging women in leadership roles creates a ripple effect, influencing entire communities.
3. Compassion is transformative. Applying Buddhist principles to practical challenges fosters both acceptance and innovation.

Conclusion: Dharma in Action

The SARAH Program exemplifies socially engaged Buddhism, wherein compassion and nonviolence are practiced in service to the community. Women leaders have been at the heart of this transformation, utilizing their networks and inherent compassion to foster a more humane and sustainable society.

Sikkim's journey from mass shootings to compassionate animal welfare demonstrates that change is possible when values align with action. By empowering women and integrating Buddhist teachings into practical solutions, SARAH has alleviated animal suffering, prevented untold human and animal deaths from rabies, and strengthened the community's moral and ethical foundation. We are very proud to say this year is the 20th anniversary of the SARAH program. This small program started by a handful of dedicated animal welfare veterinary professionals has changed Sikkim in profound, beneficial, and long-lasting ways. The SARAH team has spread this compassionate mission to surrounding regions and countries through extension and training programs, thereby bringing a nonviolent and compassionate approach to stray dogs in many new areas.

As the Buddha taught, "Love all beings. This is the main *sūtra*." By following this path, we can navigate change, uplift others, and create a world where compassion prevails.

From Wishing at the Banyan Tree to Raising Children in a Buddhist Way: The Path and Progression in a Myanmar Buddhist Mother's Religiosity

Rachelle Saruya

Giving birth and raising children changes a woman physically and mentally, a process known to anthropologists by the term *matrescence*. How it might affect her religiosity, however, has not been the subject of much inquiry. Accordingly, this paper looks at the world of aspiring and new Buddhist mothers, and in particular, how their wishes to conceive and give birth to children, followed by pregnancy and birthing experiences, may (re)define them as lay Buddhists. Building on previous scholars' work on the Buddhist path for mothers as set forth in scripture (Engelmajer 2020, Langenberg 2017, Ohnuma 2012), I ask: What does this path look like in contemporary lived Buddhism? Does giving birth and having children make women more religious? To answer these questions, I examine the lived experiences of Myanmar Buddhist women inside and outside Myanmar, highlighting their own voices and experiences, which are largely absent from the Pāli canon.

My methods for collecting data for this project, at the time of writing, have included semi-structured interviews, in addition to a survey that has received 30 responses. For this presentation, I will mainly look at a couple of the survey answers and one of the in-depth interviews.

Lived Buddhism: From Pregnancy to Giving Birth

There is scant research on Buddhist women's lived experiences of pregnancy and childbirth. However, I identified Susan Starr Sered's (1991) work on the motherhood/birth experiences and changing religiosity of 55 women in Israel as useful to my project. Although 90 percent of her participants were Jewish, they "straddled several different conflicting cultural contexts, without truly adopting any one" (Sered, 9). That is, while they were Israeli Jews, many had migrated from the Jewish diaspora from different regions of the world, and their Jewish heritage did not necessarily mean that they were practicing Jews in the strictest sense.

Sered found that, shortly after giving birth, these women did not tend to think of the experience as religious or spiritual, and many expressed a belief that their husbands were "in charge of religion," e.g., because they assisted with circumcisions or recited certain prayers. Women, Sered concluded, were more "in their bodies" and did not have access to the religious language that would have enabled them to make sense of their experiences in a religious way. Sered endorsed Caroline Bynum's (1991) critique of Victor Turner's theory of ritual, i.e., that women do not go through the "sharp ruptures" that men do, because "women who are raised by women, mature into a continuous self." My research, however, seems to point to a different set of outcomes, notably, that Buddhist women in Myanmar and abroad frequently do have spiritual/religious experiences during birth, and that this tends to catalyze their journey to stronger religious feeling – indeed, as a "rupture" in some cases. Conceivably, becoming pregnant, giving birth, and raising children stands in for the formal rituals that men require, such as perhaps for full or novice ordination as monks.

Starting at the beginning of women's journey into motherhood, I looked at their rituals of wishing for children. A woman's vow or wish for a child can be viewed scripturally in a few different ways, but chiefly, I looked at it through the deeds of Sujātā. Notably, she was able to

meet the Buddha because of her enormous merit and connections in the past. As many of you know she gave the Buddha-to-be milk-rice in the mistaken belief that he was the banyan tree deity that granted her wish to have a son. Wishing for a child at the banyan tree, as she did, is a practice that continues to this day, in part because each tree can be seen as a "relic of the Buddha." Of course, wishing for a child is also performed at pagodas and other sacred locations, as I show in previous research. Out of 29 respondents to my survey, 17 (58.6%) had performed what is called in Burmese *tharsupan* which means "wishing for a son" but can also mean more generally "wishing for a child." However, the survey failed to distinguish whether the child in question had already been conceived, and the woman was wishing for it to have a certain gender or some other characteristic, vs. if the woman was not yet pregnant and wishing to become so. My interview data reflect both these phenomena.

In an in-depth interview, one Burmese woman who gave birth in Japan responded as follows when asked about wishing-for-children rituals:

> [M]y mom wanted a boy because he was the first grandchild. She didn't push me but I know what she was thinking, I wanted to help fulfill her wish. […]. Since I knew I was pregnant I started to do good things, not to do bad things, I tried to be more careful, observing the Five *Sīlā* [Precepts]. I am very short tempered, and with the hormone changes, I had to control myself. I was working in Japan and it was not easy. I said I will do this kind of thing and in return I want my baby to be this and this, but not particularly but because of my mom, she wanted a boy, because they want to do *shinpyu* [novice ordination].

In Myanmar Buddhist culture, as noted in the above-quoted interview passage, one of the reasons having a boy is important is that the mother and her relatives want to perform the *shinpyu*. Even though it is the boys who become novice monks, Nancy Eberhardt (2006) has shown how the celebration, which can last three days, is mainly for their mothers and families.

My evidence suggests that wishing for a son in Myanmar is more than twice as popular as wishing for a daughter (29.2% vs. 12.5%), although 41.7% of my respondents said it did not matter (Fig. 1). There could be various reasons for this, beyond whole families' – but again especially mothers', desire to have a son join the *sangha* as a novice monk. Another reason is they may already have a daughter. Conversely, wishing for a daughter appears to be commonly driven by already having a son or sons. While sons are important for the *sangha*, from what I have found in the villages, traditionally daughters take care of their parents, and often even when married, daughters and their husbands will live with the wife's parents for a brief period. Therefore, being a mother of a boy can have spiritual and soteriological advantages, but in the here and now, a daughter can provide for her parents in their old age.

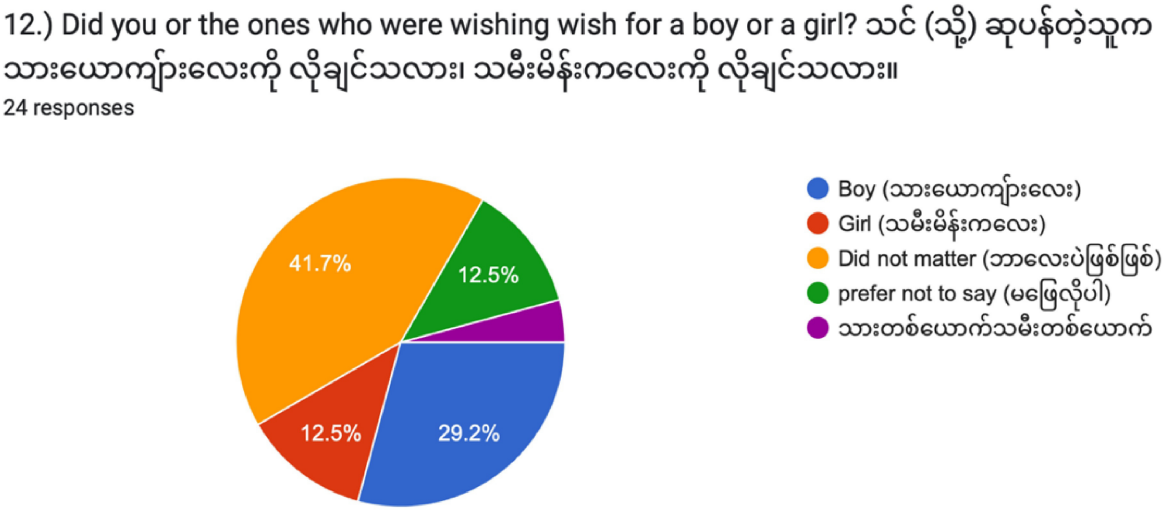

Figure 1. Survey about the target of the wish and its results

Another of my survey items asked:

> If you were pregnant and/or gave birth, how did Buddhism or another religion help or not help in pregnancy and/or giving birth? This could include chanting certain *gatha*s and/or *sutta*s (e.g., *Angulimāla Sutta*), meditation, or receiving blessings from monks. Please be as specific if you can.

The *Angulimāla Sutta* was mentioned multiple times. One wrote of her belief that meditation would give her a peaceful mind while pregnant, and that this peace would extend to the baby in the womb. Another wrote that, at the beginning of pregnancy, she did more meditation, chanting the *paritta*, or protective verses, and the *Patthāna* in an attempt to pacify her mind. Another said she chanted the *metta sutta* (loving kindness), and another noted that it was important for babies to hear sounds in the womb, "no matter the religion."

More than half my respondents (56%) said that pregnancy and/or motherhood had made them more religious.

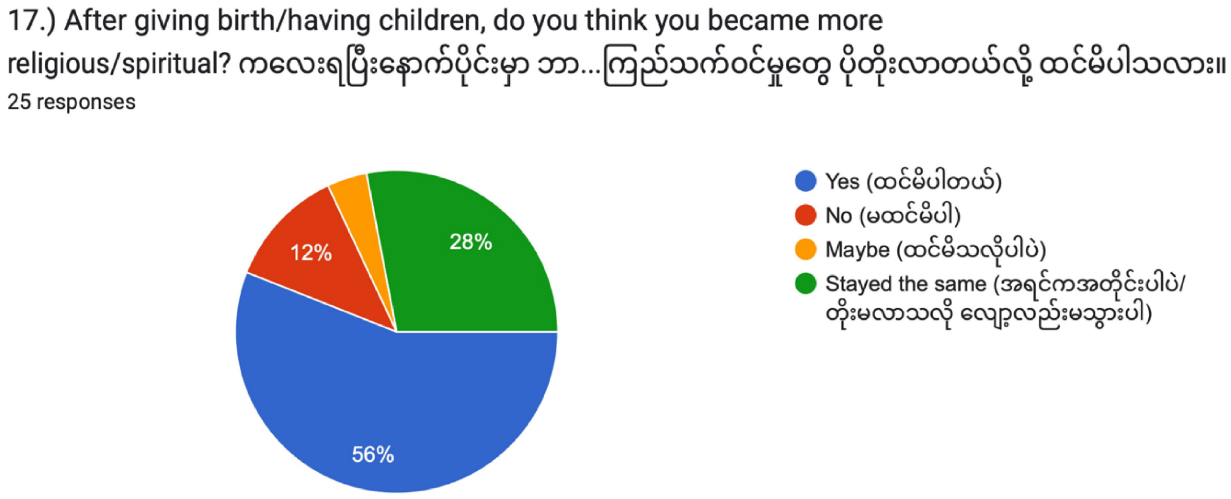

Figure 2: Survey about changes in religiosity and its results

What the survey cannot tell us is how religious those individuals who "stayed the same" post-pregnancy were to begin with. When those who had answered that they had become more religious Buddhists were asked why, their answers included the following.

> "Now that we have a family, I think for the baby's future."
>
> "Because I developed more understanding about the human mind and moral character."
>
> "After I had the child, my worries and *lobha* [greed], *dosa* [adversion], and *moha* [delusion] increased. Only when doing meditation could I get a peaceful mind. I dedicated time to do meditation continuously."
>
> "When the baby is sick, I pray for it to be free from danger."
>
> "Because I believe in Buddhism so when the baby was born, I wanted to do more."

In short, even though babies were cited as catalysts to becoming more religious, the reasons were varied and included the safety of the baby, its future, and the development of a more "peaceful mind" due to the unwanted "unwholesome types of consciousness" that the parents themselves were accumulating.

The same interviewee whose mother wished for her first grandchild to be a boy told me that, when she was giving birth, her husband and mother were both in her hospital room, and the husband chanted the *Angulimāla Sutta*. However, the birthing process was so long and painful that she passed out. After, she saw a vision that included the Buddha's face; the three Chinese gods of fortune, prosperity, and longevity, Fu, Lu, and Shu; and Guan Yin. She said she could not think of why they were Chinese, as she

was not Chinese herself, but came to believe that "these gods could help anyone," describing them as "universal." After she saw their faces, she said, she found the strength to push out her son.

She said that she became more religious specifically because she could not control her body at that time, and that meditation had since become a very big part of her life, for the same reason. When I asked her if she meditated while in labor, however, she said it was too painful to concentrate. I imagine that this would be the same as Sered's description of the woman being "too much into their body."

How Does Buddhism Help with Raising Children?

When asked about raising children or teaching Buddhism to them, some of my interviewees, informants and respondents spoke about *akutho* and *kutho*, i.e., unwholesome and wholesome consciousness and the laws of cause and effect. Some of the respondents' answers are shown below:

> "[W]ith the doctrines of the Buddha, a person can develop a good character *cārita* ['conduct']. In their mind someone takes care so they feel safe, but if it is extreme, it is not good."
>
> "[A]s a suitable Buddhist, they teach the child slowly to know *kutho* or *akutho*."
>
> "[W]hen they are young, they instruct their religion, but when the child grows, let them study all the religions and choose the suitable one they want to take."

The idea that, as grownups, one's children can choose what they want to believe was prevalent among members of the diaspora. Parents, as the "first teachers" of Buddhism, are believed to make merit by teaching the *Dhamma*, which also helps them to escape from greed, hatred, and delusion.

Conclusions

So what might the motherhood or mothering path look like? For some, it starts with a vow, at a banyan tree or some other dedicated spot for *tharsupan*. Others start by becoming more religious during pregnancy, while giving birth, or when raising children. It can include wishing for the child's well-being, as well as for one's own well-being.

Interestingly, none of my participants mentioned elite male monastics. While such figures, along with astrologers, may at times play a role in wishing-for-children rituals and prayers for children's safety, women and their partners appeared to be in charge of that process, choosing when, where, and why to make vows and making their own decisions about whether to meditate or pray. Yet, despite their unique situations, whether in Myanmar or abroad, having children indeed appeared to lay the foundation for their greater religiosity, that mothering and becoming a mother in its various forms can serve as a kind of rupture and lead to a transformation to greater religious practice and perhaps one day, *nibbāna*.

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Building Education through a Temple Education Program: Countering Mobile Game Addiction and Moslem TPQ

Kustiani

This paper explores the theme of "Buddhism and Education: Innovation and Social Harmony." Children's habit of playing games with mobile phones discourages their use of critical thinking skills and limits their ability to learn. These traits are evident in Buddhist children in the Central Java region of Indonesia. This talk will discuss how a temple program called Taman Pendalaman Dhamma (TPD) has been implemented in Central Java to help reduce gaming activity in Buddhist children while educating and encouraging the development of positive character traits. The program teaches children to memorize the *sutta*s and study general subjects such as mathematics, science, geography, and English. TPD is evidence-based and illustrates how educating children in The Dhamma builds their character.

The Muslim community responded to this problem of gaming addiction among their children by creating an activity called the Al-Quran Education Park or Taman Pendalaman Alguran (TPQ), which is carried out routinely every day. Seeing TPQ in action, the Vihara administrators could not just sit back and let Buddhist children continue to play games and not make any breakthroughs by creating new activities at the *vihāra*.

There are many challenges in implementing TPD since this is an activity that has never been carried out before. In memorizing *sutta*s, it is necessary to provide information about the meaning and value of the *sutta*s, in order to build positive qualities among the Buddhist children. In terms of general learning, the program must be able to meet the needs of children, and this requires a competent teacher who has broad insight and training in teaching TPD.

Game Addiction: A New Condition in the Society

Playing games for a long time continuously can lead to a condition called game addiction. Game addiction in this context is "a repetitive habit pattern that increases the risk of disease and/or is associated with social and personal problems."[1] Game addiction has six components: salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal symptoms, conflict, and relapse. How does a video game create addiction? Addiction happens because different stimuli offer different rewards to different people. The reward might be intrinsic, such as improving your higher score, beating your friend's higher score, getting your name in the hall of fame, and mastering the game, or extrinsic, such as peer admiration.[2]

Currently, game addiction is a new field in the study of psychology. This shows that game addiction is a phenomenon that occurs in many groups of people and it needs special studies to develop appropriate treatment responses. Game addiction not only happens in the city but also reaches remote villages. The rise in game addiction has given rise to many studies and a researcher has grouped people who experience game addiction into four groups: socializers, explorers, achievers, and killers.[3]

Role of the Buddhist Temple: Building Education and Reducing Game Addiction

Even though education carried out in the temple setting is informal, it is still important to help improve the quality of the younger generation, both in terms of mastering moral ethics and

procuring general knowledge. This was demonstrated in the 5th century CE when Nalanda Mahavihara became one of the greatest learning centers in the region and eventually became a large university that played an important role in improving the quality of life for people in its time.[4] The great role of Nalanda University[5] has had an impact on many aspects of human life, not only in India but in many countries. For example, the existence of Nalanda University helped encourage the birth of an ancient university in Indonesia, Muara Jambi.

Seeing how important education is in the monastery in ancient times, there is nothing wrong with creating informal learning in the monastery setting in modern times. One argument about education is, "Modern Buddhist education was aimed at creating Buddhists capable of operating in the environment while keeping their traditional religious allegiance; its goal was to utilize modern institutional forms and pedagogical devices as "skillful means" (*upaya*) to ensure the survival of Buddhism on the global religious market, in the competition with formidable rivals."[6] This opinion can be stated in simpler terms. Education is an important means to ensure the continuity of the legacy of the teachings of the Budhhadharma in navigating life in the midst of global challenges.

The concept mentioned above is the spirit behind the creation of Taman Pendalaman Dhamma (TPD) or Dhamma Study Park program in several temples in Central Java Province, Indonesia. As stated in the background of this article, the initial aim of creating the Dhamma Study Park was to counter and reduce the phenomenon of game addiction that has spread to Buddhist children.

Dhamma Study Park: Its Purposes and Progress

The activities of the Dhamma Study Park are carried out with two main focuses: strengthening belief in the Triple Gem (*Triratna*) and strengthening general knowledge. Strengthening faith remains an important element because many Buddhists still do not have a proper understanding of basic Buddhist principles. As a result, when people choose a life partner who asks them to change their faith, they do so willingly. This situation still occurs in many villages, especially in the province of Central Java, Indonesia, and statistical data indicates that the population of Buddhists continues to decline from year to year.[7]

Another important aspect is strengthening general education skills for the younger generation of Buddhists. This is because there are many young Buddhists who have not yet mastered basic knowledge in the fields of mathematics, natural sciences, English, and so on. For example, many still cannot memorize multiplication tables, which is a basic mathematical skill that a child needs in order to pursue further education. In terms of natural science, many children still do not understand what the meaning of one year is in relation to the rotation of the earth and the sun. They do not understand how natural processes occur, such as earthquakes, rainbows, rain, floods, and all the phenomena in nature that occur through natural laws, *niyama*.

Based on these facts, we chose the *Mangala Sutta* as the text for children to memorize. Why was the *Mangala Sutta* chosen for the Dhamma Study Park program? As stated by Bhikkhu Khantiphalo, "It is a rewarding text for the wholesome shaping of complex human civilization. This discourse provides a lesson with a direct practical application capable of immediate and fruitful use by people in all walks of life, irrespective of differences of sex, status, race or religion."[8]

Another important thing about the *Mangala Sutta* is that it contains elements of teachings

about hard work and seriousness to produce blessings or good luck in this life. The concept of *mangala* emphasizes that a blessed life is the result of accumulated virtue and hard work; it is not a gift from an extraordinary creator outside of human beings. There is even an opinion that the *Mangala Sutta* can help release human beings from mystical and superstitious beliefs because "it is a wonderful stimulus for reform." The Buddha adopted the *sutta* to wean people from superstitions and irrational attitudes so that they could grow and mature towards an enlightened outlook."[9]

The *Mangala Sutta* was adopted in the Dhamma Study Park to teach children that to achieve success in this life, it is not enough just to play games or play the lottery via mobile phone, we must work hard and fulfill the 38 good deeds as taught in this *sutta*. At each meeting, different reinforcements are carried out step by step, one by one for the 38 good deeds, as explained in this teaching. For example, the first teaching is not to associate with stupid people; children must be able to choose good friends, namely, friends who do not invite them to play games that lead to addiction because that makes the mind dull in thinking and working. Apart from that, it also emphasizes that choosing good friends does not mean differentiating friends based on their gender, ethnicity, religion, and social status.



In the implementation of the Dhamma Study Park activities, the first 30 minutes are used to memorize and understand the translation of the *Mangala Sutta*, after which general knowledge on different subjects is reinforced each week. The selection of general topics to be studied is usually based on requests and input from children so that the material studied is in accordance with their wishes and needs.

Apart from being based on the children's wishes, the topics are also switched every week; for example, if we study English this week, then next week we study mathematics, and the week after that natural sciences. As a result, children are now able to explain what one year means, namely the time during which the earth orbits the sun from its starting point and returns to that point again after approximately 365 days. They also understand that day and night are phenomena that occur when the earth is orbiting the sun while rotating on its axis, meaning that the part of the earth that is closest to the sun experiences daytime and the other side experiences nighttime.

Dhamma Study Park: Its Challenges

The Dhamma Study Park is a new program that still has several challenges to solve both in terms of human resources and materials to be presented to the children. Regarding human resources, training is needed to improve the quality of the instructors so that they are able to contextualize the teachings of Dhamma in everyday life in the 21st century. There are many questions to be dealt with, for example, who will conduct the training, how will it be done, who will the tutor be

– all questions to be explored.

One challenge is to create a manual for the Dhamma Study Group and appoint a media coordinator to create a WhatsApp group for teachers so that all the materials presented are the most up-to-date. The other concern is how to explain Buddhist values to children in ways that are relevant to their lives, both at school and in society.

To answer this challenge, one or more individuals in the group need to create a manual and appoint an administrator of a WhatsApp group, so that the Dhamma Study Park can function effectively. The sustainability of this program is still a big issue because the Dhamma Immersion Park is still a new entity in the Buddhist community. This program demonstrates that the Buddhist temple is not only a place to pay respect to the image of the Buddha, but it is also a place to reduce game addiction, improve the quality of education, and improve the spiritual and social well-being of the children involved.

Notes

1. Ryan G. Van Cleave, *Unplugged My Journey into the Dark World of Video Game Addiction*, FL: Health Communications, Inc., 2010), vi.

2. Ibid., ix.

3. Neils Clark and P. Shavaun Scott, *Game Addiction: The Experiences and the Effect* (Jefferson NC: Mc Farland and Company Inc Publishers. 2009), 62.

4. R. N. Sharma, *History of Education in India* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 2004), 56.

5. And exemplified by other Buddhist universities, such as Takshila University.

6. Michael Jerryson, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press. 2017), 519.

7. In 2019, Buddhists populations were 73,296; in 2021, Buddhist populations were 72,040 https://jateng.bps.go.id/id/statistics-table/1/MjI0OSMx/jumlah-penduduk-menurut-kabupaten-kota-dan-agama-yang-dianut-di-provinsi-jawa-tengah-2020.html

8. Dr. R. L. Soni, *Life's Highest Blessings: The Mangala Sutta*.U(Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 2006), xii.

9. Ibid., 3.

From Monasticism to Modernity: Exploring the Lives of Former Himalayan Buddhist Nuns in Transition

Genden Lhamu

The Himalayan region is renowned for its unique geographical and cultural diversity, making it a crucial area for scientific research, adventure tourism, and cultural exploration. However, the region also faces challenges related to environmental conservation, sustainable development, and geopolitical tensions between neighboring countries.

The Himalayan region is home to several monasteries, nunneries, and monastic communities that follow the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. These monasteries and nunneries have served as learning centers and played a crucial role in preserving and promoting the teachings of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

This paper is based on my PhD research, "The Historical Documentation of the Mahāyāna Nuns in the Himalayan Region." One aspect of my study is recording the lives and experiences of former nuns of the region who now reside in Europe and live secular lives. The study aims to record the transition from a monastic to a secular life, the reason for the transition, the duality, and the problems and difficulties they encountered.

During my field study for my PhD, I visited over 50 nunneries across the Indian Himalayan region and interacted with numerous nuns, young and old. I observed their longing to leave their homeland and nunneries to start a new life abroad, which was a dream for many. This made me realize the neglected issue of properly educating nuns on such a sensitive and important issue, one that could seriously impact and change their lives.

I was able to travel to Europe recently, with the help of two amazing people (Sister Dominique and Brother Olivier). Their crucial support helped me to travel abroad to Europe to meet former nuns. This, in turn, fulfilled my long-standing desire to learn more about the lifestyle of nuns who have given back their monastic vows after they left the nunnery. I was able to interview them in the context of their "new" lives and witness some of the outcomes of their choice. These personal encounters allowed me to observe first-hand the samsaric circumstances in which these former nuns find themselves.

Through these findings, I aim to educate, encourage, motivate, and spread awareness to the younger generation and to young nuns who may be considering leaving monastic life. Their wish and reasons for giving back their monastic vows and robes are often driven by misconceptions, misperceptions, and a limited understanding of the challenges and realities beyond the nunnery. Over the past decade, more than forty young nuns have left the nunneries in the Tawang region of Arunachal Pradesh, and disrobed, citing the lack of an adequate education system within the nunneries as a primary reason.

Exploring the Lives of Former Monastics: Navigating Life Beyond the Monastery

During my time in Paris, I was struck by the deep sense of regret shared by former monks and nuns, as they reflected on their difficult transitions, revealed the unseen struggles of their new lives, marked by hardships they never anticipated and the unspoken longing for the opportunities they had never known.

On arriving at the Paris airport, I was warmly welcomed by two former nuns and two former monks. I am deeply grateful for their kindness. In the subsequent days, I had the opportunity to engage with them to learn about their lives after leaving the monastic community.

Some of these individuals were childhood friends who shared with me the challenges they have faced throughout their transition and relocation. One of the most surprising comments they made was, “Wow, how lucky you are,” to which I responded affirmatively, recognizing the underlying sense of regret in their words. This insight suggests that their lack of exposure to external realities may have contributed to their feelings. I spent three weeks in Paris observing their daily lives, which I found to be extremely difficult, a sentiment they also expressed. During my stay, I learned that approximately 500 former monks and nuns reside in various cities across Europe, where they work primarily in restaurants. The majority of these individuals are between the ages of 30 and 50. I had the opportunity to interact with around ten of them, including a few childhood friends. They shared insights about their decisions to leave their monastic lives and relocate abroad, discussing the challenges, disappointments, achievements, and daily routines they now face.

Endless Struggles: The Challenges Faced by Former Nuns Working Abroad

Former monks and nuns, caught in a relentless cycle of long hours and overwhelming expectations, struggle to reconcile their past spiritual practices with the harsh realities of their new lives, leaving them with regret, anxiety, and a loss of peace. Almost 98% of former monks and nuns are employed in the restaurant industry and face demanding work schedules, with their days starting at 9 am and concluding at 10 pm on weekdays (13-hour shifts), and extending from 9 am to midnight on weekends (15-hour shifts). They are allotted four days off per month, which they prefer to take at the month’s end. They express frustration at the difficulty of finding time for personal reflection and social interactions, particularly lamenting their inability to engage in the spiritual practices they had cultivated during their time in the nunneries with so much hard work. This realization makes them regret their decision and the regret leads them to depression and anxiety, which ultimately destroys their mental peace. Another big challenge is language barriers. In Europe, learning the local language is mandatory, which presents considerable difficulty for individuals with little to no academic background. Former nuns shared that this is particularly challenging for those who predominantly come from non-academic backgrounds.

Former nuns describe their experience of coming abroad as an ongoing cycle of hardship. Initially, they endure the prolonged and arduous process of obtaining a visa, followed by the struggle to repay the loans taken out for the visa. Subsequently, they face challenges in securing the necessary approvals to work and find a place to stay. Once these logistical obstacles are overcome, they are confronted with heightened expectations from their families. This sequence of continuous difficulties embodies what they perceive as “endless suffering.”

My concern lies in the situation of young nuns who, upon witnessing the external allure of life beyond the monastery, may not fully understand the realities that await them after leaving their convents and homeland. Most of them leave the nunneries after more than decades of staying in vows, making it more difficult to transition to secular life.

Empowerment and Education

Seeing these challenges, I realized that, regardless of whether nuns remain in the nunneries, providing them with education is crucial. Education serves as a vital bridge, transforming lives from adversity to aspiration and offering a path from struggle to opportunity. It is essential for opening greater opportunities and enabling the nuns to pursue career paths beyond the confines of restaurant work and road construction. I firmly believe in the transformative power of education. As we all know, in general the education of female monastics has been very minimal, particularly for those in the remote Himalayan regions who receive only basic instruction in reciting religious texts and performing rituals.

It is crucial to ensure that nuns receive a well-rounded education that encompasses both modern and monastic education. This comprehensive approach will enable them to make informed decisions and avoid potential difficulties. Therefore, establishing a vigorous learning center in every region is essential to support nuns' educational development and decision-making capabilities.

The education of nuns not only enhances their spiritual practice but also equips them with confidence and critical thinking skills applicable to various aspects of life. Extensive philosophical studies empower women, preserves traditional Buddhist teachings, and strengthens the transmission of knowledge within society and beyond. Nuns' ability to make an impact in society is directly related to the standard of education they receive. Today, the majority of nuns come from underprivileged family backgrounds and parents send their daughters to nunneries with the hope that they will receive some education.

After leaving the nunnery, wherever they live, most of the former nuns are forced to work as laborers in road construction or the restaurant industry. In my interactions with many individuals in India, I found that they cite the lack of access to formal education as a significant barrier. I have witnessed the difficult lives led by former nuns, particularly those from remote Himalayan regions such as Tawang, Zanskar, and Spiti. Many young girls between the ages of 25 to 30 now work in various restaurants in Majnu Ka Tilla, a Tibetan refugee settlement in north Delhi. This situation is heartbreaking, as their limited educational qualifications and lack of formal degrees leave them with few employment options. I encountered many of them dealing with depression and anxiety, not being able to get visas to travel abroad.

Seeing the challenges they face, my aim in Tawang is to establish a solid and sound educational training center for nuns within the nunnery to enhance both their religious and secular education, which has yet to be recognized as a priority. By showing the limitations of life outside of the vows through these nuns' experiences, I hope to inspire current nuns to maintain their vows and explore the limitless potential of educational systems to be established within the nunneries to educate the female monastic *sangha* and prepare them to face the challenges of life, and to continue joyfully living inside the nunnery. Combined, these educational systems will lead to their highest happiness and aim.

Today, there is growing concern about the declining number of monks and nuns, a decline driven by a variety of issues, including family concerns, health issues, an increased focus on external appearances, and the absence of a well-established educational system in monasteries and nunneries, particularly in the remote regions of the Himalayas. However, rather than

addressing these underlying issues, many simply resort to choices that represent the easiest course of action. The challenges associated with family and health make it difficult for individuals to reconsider their decision to remain in monasteries and nunneries. However, the other two factors – a lack of education and attachment to external appearances – present opportunities for intervention through education, particularly for younger nuns, to help them make more informed and meaningful decisions.

It would be a profound honor to receive your support and commitment in this important initiative to advance the education of nuns in our region. I remain hopeful and confident that this project will significantly benefit young nuns, many of whom joined the nunnery with the aspiration of receiving a quality education.

Who Becomes a Nun and Why?

Many young girls are sent to religious life not by choice, but by circumstances driven by societal biases and financial hardship. It is crucial to ensure that every child has the opportunity to feel valued and secure in their decisions, so that the path to monastic life is one of personal calling, not a consequence of necessity or external pressures.

The majority of nuns ome from disadvantaged backgrounds, where their families are unable to afford the costs associated with education. In some instances, parents send their daughters to religious life for reasons that reflect societal biases, such as perceptions that the child is unattractive, not academically capable, or too physically weak for labor. Such decisions, made under the guise of practical considerations, can have long-lasting emotional effects on the individuals involved. Consequently, it is essential to provide adequate educational opportunities for these children, ensuring they feel valued and secure in their decision to pursue monastic life, rather than being sent into it out of necessity or societal pressures.

In our region, the closure of several government schools due to declining student enrollment has exacerbated the issue. Families who can afford it now prefer to send their children to private schools, while those who cannot often send their children to nunneries and monasteries. Although monasteries typically have facilities for schools, there are no proper schools dedicated specifically to nuns in our region, except for the TCVB, which was established by the late 13th Tsona Rinpoche for girls in general and particularly for young nuns within our community. However, following Rinpoche's sudden demise, the school has faced significant financial challenges, resulting in an inability to offer adequate salaries and attract well-qualified teachers.

A Call for Action: Enhancing Girls Education in Remote Himalayas

The past cannot change, but taking action in the present for the future generation is crucial. When I bserving the economic challenges faced by certain families, including inadequate access to necessities such as clothing and food, and the absence of immediate family support in some cases, I was motivated by my limited access to education to take action. In 2015, with the assistance of compassionate individuals from the Tibetan community, I facilitated the enrollment of young girls from Tawang at the Tibetan Children Village (TCV) in Dharamshala, Himachal

Pradesh, to ensure they received an education. This initiative, undertaken alongside my academic pursuits, has since resulted in the enrollment of 20 girls who are now receiving both formal education and co-curricular training opportunities that would have otherwise been unavailable to them. This effort underscores the importance of providing such opportunities, given the necessary resources and support.

The monasteries have established well-developed educational systems for the *male sangha* community, often guided by esteemed figures such as *rinpoche*s, *geshe*s, and *khenpo*s. However, many nunneries in the Himalayan region remain underdeveloped. Although some nunneries have been founded by the same *lama*s or *rinpoche*s, there is a clear disparity in the quality of education and the facilities available. It is crucial for educated nuns, particularly those who have attained titles such as *geshema*, *khenmo*, and *togdenma*, to take an active role in advancing the educational opportunities for nuns in their respective regions. Their involvement in this case would be highly significant in enhancing the educational development of girls in general and nuns in particular.

Empowering girls through education in rural areas has been the biggest dream of my life, as I witnessed that girls are not given the same opportunities as boys in rural areas. Most of the women can be seen working in road construction and doing other odd jobs. Today, I have the opportunity of guiding approximately 200 young nuns and girls in Thuptan Choeling Balika Vidyalaya in our region in Tawang, whose futures squarely lie on my shoulders. Therefore, to educate these young girls, I need the blessings and any possible support from all of you, as it is a difficult task to accomplish alone.

Conclusion

The education of nuns in the Himalayas is key to preserving both spiritual traditions and the future of society, as they embody the blend of study, practice, and leadership that benefits the Dharma and humanity. The ability of nuns to impact society is directly related to their standards of education. In countries where nuns get a good education, they have been able to practice with greater freedom and have become more skilled in helping support the Dharma and the greater society.

Historically, it has been the lack of higher education that has most affected nuns and women in Himalayan society. However, despite having limited resources and opportunities, in different ways these women called Anis or Jomos have been contributing to society and preserving the age-old Buddhist tradition, based on various approaches: morality (vows/*vinaya*), study (contemplation and debate), and *sadhana/samaya* meditation commitments. Through their practice, educational perseverance, and roles as educators and leaders, we can look forward to their outstanding contributions to bring benefit to the Dharma and humanity in the 21st century.

As is widely acknowledged, the people of the Himalayan region, both monastic and lay communities, have played an essential role in preserving our precious spiritual traditions. Thus, the preservation of our religion in the future largely depends on the integration of religious and secular education, especially in this increasingly materialistic era.

Taiwanese Bhiksunīs in the Post-War Dharma Propagation Effort: A Study of Bhiksunīs Tian Yi and Tzu Hui

Zhi Quan Shih

After Taiwan's retrocession, women began to play increasingly significant roles in Taiwanese Buddhism, with many outstanding bhiksunīs emerging. Bhiksuni Hengqing divides the development of Buddhism in Taiwan into three periods:
1. The first period (1946–1960) focused primarily on reconstructing the precept platform for Chinese Buddhism and establishing Buddhist colleges. These efforts laid the foundation for local Buddhist education.
2. The second period (1961–1980) coincided with Taiwan's economic growth and educational expansion. It saw the formation of Buddhist youth societies and the rise of college Buddhist youth summer camps. These initiatives attracted many young people to Buddhism, enhancing the educational level of both the monastic and lay communities. This marked one of the most transformative phases in Taiwanese Buddhism.
3. The third period (1981–present) has seen substantial achievements in healthcare, charity, education, and Buddhist studies in Taiwanese Buddhism.[1]

This study focuses on Bhiksunis Tian Yi and Tzu Hui. Bhiksuni Tian Yi witnessed the development of the first and second periods. Bhiksuni Tzu Hui of Fo Guang Shan, who began following Master Hsing Yun (1927–2022) in 1953 at Lei Yin Temple in Yilan, has been actively involved in Dharma propagation across all three periods of Taiwanese Buddhist development.

Both Bhiksuni Tian Yi and Tzu Hui witnessed Taiwan's Buddhist transformation and studied abroad in Japan, where they received a modern education. Bhiksuni Tian Yi specialized in the establishment of precept platforms and the education of *bhiksunī*s in precepts. Bhiksuni Tzu Hui focused on monastic education, the compilation and editing of Buddhist canons, and the founding of universities. Through Dharma propagation, especially through the conferral of precepts, cultural initiatives, and educational endeavors, they reshaped the gender power structure within Taiwanese Buddhism. Their work promoted the institutionalization and modernization of the *bhiksunī* community, leaving a profound mark on the development of Taiwanese Buddhism.

The life stories of these two *bhiksunī*s are documented in their published biographies, including life histories and oral histories.[2] This paper, however, takes a collective perspective, analyzing and organizing their achievements to highlight their shared contributions to the broader transformation of Taiwanese Buddhism. The paper provides case studies to highlight the backgrounds and contributions of Bhiksunis Tian Yi and Tzu Hui in the transition from tradition to modernity, especially their efforts to propagate the Dharma.

Bhiksuni Tian Yi: Pioneer of the Bhiksunī Precept Platform

Bhiksuni Tian Yi (1924–1980), born Hong Jin-zhu, came from a family that ran a pastry shop in Fengshan, Kaohsiung. In 1940, she traveled to Japan to study liberal arts at Showa University in Tokyo. After returning to Taiwan in 1947, she assisted her father in managing the family pastry shop. In 1948, she was ordained under Bhiksu Yuanrong at Dongshan Temple.

Following her ordination, Bhiksuni Tian Yi served as the superintendent of a temple. There she assisted with Buddhist association affairs, acted as an interim chairperson, hosted Dharma services, gave lectures, organized chanting societies, and guided disciples.[3] Her training

at Dongshan Temple primarily focused on administration and Dharma propagation, equipping her with the skills to lead others.

In 1953, the first post-war Triple Platform Full Ordination Ceremony was held at Daxian Temple. Recognizing that the number of female monastics exceeded male monastics in Taiwan, Bhiksu Master Baisheng established a women's hall within the precept platform. Bhiksuni Tian Yi, along with her preceptor Bhiksu Yuanrong and her disciple Bhiksuni Yichun, participated in the ordination, marking a significant moment as three generations received precepts together. Bhiksuni Tian Yi was appointed the chief *srāmanerī* (novice nun).[4]

During the second Triple Platform Full Ordination Ceremony held at Lion's Head Mountain in 1954, Master Baisheng broke tradition by appointing "guidance masters" to assist newly ordained monastics. Bhiksuni Tian Yi was one of them. She later became an important assistant to Master Baisheng in organizing the precept platform.[5] Guiding monastics required a deep understanding of the precepts and Buddhist teachings, making the precept platform a training ground for elite *bhiksunī*s in post-war Taiwan.[6]

In 1976, Bhiksuni Tian Yi led a Triple Platform Full Ordination Ceremony at Longhu Hermitage, marking the pinnacle of her ordination career. During this event, she served as both the female *sila upadhyaya* (precept master) and the master of ceremonies. Notably, as the female master of ceremonies, she directly instructed female monastics in ceremonial practices, which was a groundbreaking achievement in Taiwanese ordination history.[7]

From 1954 onward, Bhiksuni Tian Yi dedicated over 20 years to the precept platform. She frequently assisted mainland preceptors by translating their speeches into Taiwanese, bridging language and cultural gaps. Over the years, she served in various roles, including guidance master, chief guidance master, and *sila upadhyaya*. After 1963, she began teaching the *bhiksunī* precepts herself, realizing her belief that "women should teach women."[8] Wherever *bhiksunī*s were taking precepts, Bhiksuni Tian Yi made it a point to attend, tirelessly advocating, "*Bhiksunī*s must be taught by *bhiksunī*s and *bhiksunī* precepts must be explained by *bhiksunī*s."[9] Her efforts not only nurtured new talent for the precept platform but also solidified the status of women within it. Through her dedication, she earned widespread recognition and respect for the abilities of *bhiksunī*s in Taiwan's Buddhist community.

Beyond her contributions to the precept platform, Bhiksunī Tian Yi adhered to the principles: "Better a servant in the Buddha's household" and "No new temples, no reduction of old temples." She successively took over the administration of four temples: Ziyun Temple in Bantianyan, Xinglong Temple in Kaohsiung, Baiyun Temple in Changhua, and Yuantong Academy in Taipei. She emphasized the responsibility of *bhiksunī*s to Buddhism, stating, "It is necessary to organize a *bhiksunī* order to train *bhiksunī*s so that their comportment can deliver sentient beings. Anyone with this vision is welcome to contact me. I deeply hope for the formation of a true *bhiksunī* order."[10]

According to the biography written by Bhiksuni Jianye, Bhiksuni Tian Yi stressed the importance of self-reliance and independence for *bhiksunī*s. While she acknowledged that precepts required *bhiksunī*s to rely on *bhiksu*s for receiving the precepts, she believed that *bhiksunī*s should strive for independence daily lives.

Ironically, while Bhiksuni Tian Yi believed that monastic education was essential for cultivating monks and nuns, and that monastics must cultivate both merit and wisdom, her methods seemed to emphasize the cultivation of merit over wisdom. For instance, she advocated that monastics engage in chores and agricultural Chan to gain deeper insights into their practice. However, her methods for cultivating wisdom were limited, focusing primarily on traditional

practices, such as bowing, chanting, and reciting scriptures. While these practices are undeniably valuable, they often did not extend to helping disciples deeply comprehend doctrinal principles or engage in critical study of Buddhist texts.[11]

Bhiksuni Tzu Hui: Promoter of Education and Culture

Bhiksuni Tzu Hui, born Zhang Youli in 1934 in Yilan, began her journey with Bhiksu Master Hsing Yun in 1953 at Lei Yin Temple in Yilan. There, she participated in the youth choir and the youth Dharma propagation team. In 1956, she was assigned by Master Hsing Yun to enroll in a childcare training program in Taichung. The following year, she became the principal of Yilan Ci'ai Kindergarten.

In 1965, when Master Hsing Yun established Shoushan Buddhist College in Kaohsiung, Bhiksuni Tzu Hui, though not yet ordained, served as the academic supervisor, managing students' daily affairs. That same year, she was ordained under Master Hsing Yun and received the Triple Platform Full Ordination Ceremony at Fayun Temple.[12]

In 1969, during the early stages of Fo Guang Shan's establishment, Master Hsing Yun sent Bhiksuni Tzu Hui, along with desciples Tzu Yi, and Tzu Jia to study abroad in Japan. Bhiksuni Tzu Hui enrolled in the Department of Buddhist Studies at Otani University, progressing from undergraduate studies to earning a master's degree. This educational path differed from Bhiksuni Tian Yi's experience. Bhiksuni Tian Yi studied in Japan before her ordination, during Taiwan's Japanese colonial period, while Bhiksuni Tzu Hui pursued advanced studies in Japan post-ordination, after World War II. These differing educational contexts may explain the variance in their attitudes toward education.

Since beginning her work in early childhood education in 1957, Bhiksuni Tzu Hui has consistently taken on educational responsibilities within Fo Guang Shan. From 1965 onward, she managed Shoushan Buddhist College and Fo Guang Shan Tsung-Lin University, eventually establishing 16 Buddhist colleges worldwide. Her contributions spanned administration, teaching, and the establishment of systems for monastic education. In 1977, she founded Pumen High School and since 1990, she has overseen educational matters related to the Fo Guang Shan University Consortium. Her lifelong dedication to education has nurtured countless talented Buddhists.[13]

Bhiksuni Tzu Hui also focused on advancing Buddhist cultural endeavors. She directed the compilation of the *Fo Guang Buddhist Canon* and the *Fo Guang Dictionary of Buddhism*. In 1995, she established the Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Electronic Texts project to digitize Buddhist scriptures. After founding the Fo Guang Shan Foundation for Buddhist Culture and Education in 1988, she actively organized various academic seminars, fostering exchanges in Buddhist academic research domestically and internationally.[14]

In addition, Bhiksuni Tzu Hui was committed to promoting Dharma through music. In 1979, she founded the Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Choir, which has performed worldwide. In 2003, she organized the "Lyrics for Sounds of the Human World: Master Hsing Yun's Buddhist Songs Competition," attracting music enthusiasts from five continents and over twenty countries. The lyrics were translated into over ten languages, making the Dharma accessible to global audiences.

Differences in Propagation Philosophy

Bhiksuni Tian Yi believed that monastics should focus on diligent cultivation, engaging in morning and evening chanting, scripture recitation, farming, weeding, and precept recitation. Bhiksuni Tian Yi's disciple, Bhiksuni Wuyin, once recalled her lament, "Highly educated monastics have no place to utilize their skills in ordinary temples. They endure hardships in the Buddhist community and are not valued. What is the point of university graduates becoming monastics?"[15] For her, monastic practice aimed at transcending birth and death, and she felt that temples did not necessarily need to organize many activities. This approach was also related to the fact that most of Bhiksuni Tian Yi's disciples were older, less formally educated, and more accustomed to hardship.

For highly educated individuals entering monastic life, planning and envisioning their post-ordination careers is necessary. Master Hsing Yun had already considered this when sending his disciples to study abroad. Upon completing their studies, they returned to their monastic communities to assume important roles, allowing their talents to be appropriately utilized within the Buddhist community.

From its inception, Fo Guang Shan established education, culture, and charity as the core principles of its Buddhist mission. Under Master Hsing Yun's guidance, Bhiksuni Tzu Hui focused on education and culture, founding 16 Buddhist colleges globally, along with primary and secondary schools, universities, and various forms of social education. Master Hsing Yun aimed to cultivate talent for propagating the Dharma and to nurture a generation of young people with balanced personal growth, sound character, and thoughtful minds for the betterment of society.

Conclusion

The propagation journeys of these two *bhiksunī*s reflect the three stages of Taiwanese Buddhist development. From the post-liberation era to the 1960s, mainland Chinese monastics helped revitalize Chinese Buddhism in Taiwan and reconstructed the precept platform, thereby fostering the popularization of Buddhist education. Bhiksuni Tian Yi was a representative figure during this period.

After the 1960s, Taiwanese Buddhism saw the gradual organization of monastic communities. Fo Guang Shan, established in Kaohsiung in 1967, exemplified this transformation. The propagation model of *bhiksunī*s evolved from solitary efforts to collective creation, with the scope of their services expanding from monastics to devotees. In addition to focusing on scripture, chanting, and repentance services, their work encompassed culture, education, academia, charity, music, sports, and more. With globalization, Taiwanese Buddhism extended its reach to the world, showcasing the global practice of Humanistic Buddhism.

Notes

1. Shih Hengqing, "The Virtuous Women in Modern Taiwanese Buddhism," *The Virtuous Women on the Path of Bodhi* (Taipei: Dongda Publishing, 1995), 169–71.

2. Shih Jianye, *Bhiksunī Shih Tianyi: Walking Through the Transitional Period of Taiwanese Buddhism* (Taipei County: Zhongtian Publishing, 1999); Bhiksuni Tzu Hui (oral narration); and Cai Menghua, *Starlight and Water: Seventy Years with Master Hsing Yun, Interviews with Venerable Tzu Hui* (Kaohsiung: Fo Guang Culture, 2024).

3. Shih Jianye, *Bhiksunī Shih Tianyi,* 52–53.

4. Ibid, 23.

5. Ibid., 23–27.

6. Li Yuzhen, "Ordination and Education: The Formation and Consolidation of Bhiksunī Identity in Postwar Taiwan," *Modern Chinese Women's History Studies* 25(2015): 15.

7. Shih Jianye, *Bhiksunī Shih Tianyi*, 151.

8. Ibid., 52-53.

9. Ibid., 140.

10. Shih Jianye, *Bhik unī Shih Tianyi: Walking Through the Transitional Period of Taiwanese Buddhism*, p. 142.

11. Shih Jianye, *Bhik unī Shih Tianyi: Walking Through the Transitional Period of Taiwanese Buddhism*, p. 165.

12. Venerable Tzu Hui (oral narration), Cai Menghua (compiled), *Starlight and Water: Seventy Years with Master Hsing Yun - Interviews with Venerable Tzu Hui*, 2024, pp. 141–142.

13. Venerable Tzu Hui (oral narration), Cai Menghua (compiled), *Starlight and Water: Seventy Years with Master Hsing Yun - Interviews with Venerable Tzu Hui*, p. 928.

14. Venerable Tzu Hui (oral narration), Cai Menghua (compiled), *Starlight and Water: Seventy Years with Master Hsing Yun - Interviews with Venerable Tzu Hui*, pp.548-551.

15. Shih Jianye, *Bhik unī Shih Tianyi: Walking Through the Transitional Period of Taiwanese Buddhism*, p. 165.

The Nun of the Slum: Bodhicitta Foundation and its Barefoot Buddhism

Ayya Yeshe

In 1956, several hundred thousand people from the community previously known as "untouchable" gathered under the charismatic leadership of Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar, their hero and emancipator (their Martin Luther King Jr.), in the hot industrial city of Nagpur in central India where temperatures can soar to 48°C/118°F in Summer. It was a watershed moment. For at least 2,000 years, this community had been enslaved by the Hindu caste system – a form of Hinduism that favours a social hierarchy in which the vast majority of the population are condemned to act as menial labourers or, at worst, slaves of inferior intelligence and spiritual nature who make others impure merely by being seen or touched.

For thousands of years these enslaved people were not permitted to enter Hindu temples, to own quality land, to learn to read and write, to recite mantras or prayers, or even to access water. Their footprints were to be erased by a palm frond tied to their clothes, and they were forced to carry a jar in which to spit because it was considered too "impure" to touch the ground. They rang a bell to inform others of their approach. Gang rapes, lynching, and violence were common. It wasn't unlike slavery in ancient Rome or in America, but the difference was that this discrimination was religiously sanctioned. A slave in America or the Middle East could go to church or a Mosque and feel that God cared about them. In Hinduism, however, Dalits (ex "untouchables") were told they were spiritually inferior people derived from the feet of God, whereas Brahmins were born from his head.

Shaking off the yoke of this discrimination and oppression, Dr Ambedkar, one of the first Dalits to get an education, the 10th child born in a mud brick house, who had to sit outside the door to study at school, won scholarships for Columbia University and the London School of Economics. Dr Ambedkar spent the rest of his life non-violently advocating for an end to casteism and sexism.

The Buddha is one of the greatest Indians who ever lived, and yet if you ask most Indians today who he was, they will tell you he is an incarnation of their Hindu Gods. This is not by mistake, it's by design. The Buddha was anti-caste and anti-blind faith, he accepted women and lower caste people into his Sangha, and said people could seek liberation and did not need priests to propitiate Gods. This was a huge threat to the Indian social order and the power of Brahmins. Buddhism disappeared in India due to Buddhists dividing into smaller and smaller sects, monks relying on rich sponsors (who the Brahmins connected to as well), and losing touch with the peasant masses, but also through active persecution by Brahmins.

It became very hard to distinguish between Madhyamaka and Advaita Vedanta, or between Hindu and Buddhist Tantra. The key difference though is that one embraced caste, self, soul, and God, and one was more liberal and advocated personal responsibility, not feudal allegiance to the social order. The Himalayan temples of Kedarnath and Amarnath were originally Buddhist and were forcefully taken and made Hindu. Also, many Buddhist temples in the South have had Buddhas covered in gold and converted to Hindu temples. The final blow came when the Brahmins convinced many Hindus that Buddha was an incarnation of Vishnu, but a "bad" one that showed anti-Dharma, and then everyone is reminded to only follow their caste and duty. Thus people in unhappy marriages remained in them due to "duty" and didn't seek liberation, and lower caste people remained bonded in slave-like working conditions due to the belief that slavery was due to their bad karma, and they must accept it, effectively using religion to support slavery.

In Australia, I had been a street kid and seen for myself the dark underbelly of the raw vulnerability of homeless teenage girls. My father died when I was 14, and this pushed me into an existential crisis, questioning the meaning of life. I went to India as a 17-year-old hippie in search of the meaning of life.

At the age of 29, I was in Bodh Gaya when, moved by the Buddha's kindness to the world, I decided I should repay that kindness by helping Indian women, whom I saw as the most oppressed in Indian society. Twenty-two percent of Indian women are married below the age of 18 and, according to government statistics, domestic violence occurs in 40 percent of homes. I would estimate, however, that the rate is much higher in the slums. At this time in Bodh Gaya, the sacred place where the Buddha attained enlightenment, poor women were routinely married at a very young age, gave birth to up to a dozen children, and were either dead or completely exhausted and white-haired by 50.

There is no industry in Bodhgaya or in the State of Bihar as a whole, so landless peasants are at the mercy of landowners. The sacred town that attracts countless pilgrims from all around the globe spans two worlds — the white marble world of retreat centres for foreigners, with air conditioning and six-foot-high barbed wire fences all around, and armed security guards at the front — and the world of the local inhabitants in which poor children die from dysentery, women are violently controlled by their husbands, and where millions of girl babies have disappeared due to gendercide. As I was wondering which side of the barbed wire fence the Buddha would be sitting on if he returned, I was approached by an Indian man who politely asked me where he might receive Buddhist teachings. He told me he was an Indian Buddhist and Ambedkarite. I had never heard of Indian Buddhists. He invited me to Nagpur.

In Nagpur, I was warmly received. People in India love and respect those devoted to the spiritual path, which is seen as the pinnacle of civilisation, and those who seek liberation are thought to uplift the rest of the population. This was very different to my experience in Western Dharma centres, in which I was regarded as "not as good as a real Tibetan monk" and instructed by a visiting Tibetan Lama to pray to be reborn as a man. In Kopan Monastery, purchased, founded, and bank-rolled by Western nuns, I was told: "Why should we support you? You are just a tourist."

In Nagpur, people desperately wanted blessings. They wanted their struggle for human rights to be recognised and their embracing of Buddhism to be treated seriously. Many Ambedkarites don't believe in karma and rebirth because karma and rebirth were weaponised by Brahmins to enslave them for millennia. Those who study Dharma, however, gradually come to understand the workings of their minds, but there are few fully trained Dharma teachers working in the community, and most people are still struggling just to emerge from poverty. The sad fact is, there is not a lot of good knowledge of Dharma.

My first task was simply to get to know the people. I found slums really fascinating. I was amazed at how people could survive on so little—sometimes five people in a single room—without killing each other or themselves, and emerge each day clean and majestic like goddesses and movie heroes in colourful sarees and freshly pressed shirts. I found poor people to be very friendly and genuine.

I began by chanting prayers and teaching Buddhist philosophy, but when someone placed a baby dying of dysentery in my arms, I quickly realised that that was not enough. In Australia, a pill to save that baby would cost $2. I reflected on the fact that even a small amount of money could go far in India, so I started making posts on Facebook about sponsoring children to go to school, buying uniforms, and training women to earn money whilst they watched their kids.

Having a shared faith meant people trusted me and made it much easier to do social work at the same time as teaching Dharma.

In Australia, I could walk for miles, even to Buddhist centres, and receive no food in my alms bowl. In India, my bowl would be overflowing before I reached the end of the street.

I have encountered so many brave and kind people who love their families and have struggled to overcome tremendous odds. Let me tell you about my foster daughters: Rakkhi was 15 years old, weighed 16 kg, had a severely twisted spine, and lived in constant pain. Her mother worked as a cleaner, and her father was an alcoholic who constantly asked her to fetch things for him. Rakkhi would gather up lost souls from the neighbourhood and bring them to the monastery. She liked to meditate in the temple with older people, as she couldn't join in sports with people her age. She always found troubled people and offered them comfort. Rakkhi gradually came to spend every day at my house, and we went everywhere together. She died many years ago from her disability, but she left an indelible mark on my heart. She truly showed me how deep love can go and what a difference each of us can make in other's lives.

Arti was eight when I met her. Her mother had a ninth-grade education and her father had just died from alcoholism and tuberculosis. She was full of joy and optimism, despite living in a tin shack. She said she trusted me from the very beginning because I showed her so much love. As Arti grew up, I took the place of a parental figure to supplement her lack of a father. We spent a lot of time together, reading stories and engaging in temporary nun retreats. We visited gardens and travelled here and there, and often went out for coffee and food, experiences not possible on her mother's income. Arti loves social work and the Dharma in equal measure. She has been to Sakyadhita conferences and has become a nurse.

Manisha came to us after having escaped being sold by her father to a brothel to pay off his drug debt. Manisha was just 15. She climbed down a drainpipe and called us from a police station for help. Manisha studied hard and became a high-level detective. Today she protects vulnerable girls from human trafficking.

Some of the girls were ten years old, admitted to the home covered in burns from when large pots fell on them as they were cooking for families of eight. Some came from child labour factories, brothels, child marriages, or homes in which they were being raped or beaten. Some just lived in remote villages. These girls grow to become women and change-makers. Many have graduated as physics majors, doctors, lawyers, professors, or social workers. Every being is conditioned by social, spiritual, economic and cultural causes and conditions. I have learned that if we offer people a little help and encouragement, it is often the case that a bit of love and sunshine, a bit of social and economic justice, is all they need to blossom and fulfil their potential and dreams.

HIMALAYAN WOMEN PRACTITIONERS: HISTORICAL CONTEXTS AND CHANGING ENVIRONMENTS

Teena Amrit Gill

Patriarchy in the Indian subcontinent has deep roots, and its presence is thousands of years old. When the Buddha allowed women into the *sangha*, this was one of the first times that women were given the opportunity to opt out of marriage, reproduction, and domestic work – undoubtedly a revolutionary step. Further, the acknowledgement that *all* women were as capable as men of achieving *nirvāna* challenged the foundations of not just gender discrimination, but also that of caste and class hierarchies.

When establishing the nun's *sangha*, the Buddha gave equal importance to the *bhikkhuni* and *bhikkhu* orders. The voices of the *therī*s, the senior nuns from the time of the Buddha, is a deep reflection of this. The nuns not only independently ran their own nunneries, they were also reputable and advanced practitioners and teachers. Bhikkuni Dhammadinna and many other nuns, such as Bhadda (Bada) Kapilani, were renowned preachers during the time of the Buddha, and were acknowledged by the Buddha as such:

> The bhikkhunl Dhammadinna….has great wisdom," the Buddha said to lay practitioner Visakha, "If you had asked me the meaning of this, I would have explained it to you in the same way…. Such is its meaning, and so you should remember it. (*Majjhima Nikaya*)

Women thus were not only accepted into the *sangha* after the Buddha's initial reluctance, they flourished and received a monastic education on par with the monks'.

However, the eight special rules (*gurudharma*s), which the nuns supposedly had to accept when the Buddha established the *bhikkhunī sangha*, not only resulted in the institutional subordination of nuns, it perpetuated the same discrimination that women were subjected to in worldly life. All nuns had to be subordinate to monks, furthering the worldview that women were not as capable as men and never could be.

However, the timeframe of the *gurudharmas*, like many other discriminatory rules, has been questioned by both male and female monastics and scholars. One of the rules in question stipulates a two-year probation period prior to ordination, and scholars like Ven. Khantipalo and Venerable Dhammananda have argued that since Mahaprajapati was not required to wait two years before being ordained, the *gurudharma* rules appear to be from a later period, being backdated to include them in the *vinaya*. Despite these special rules, if they existed at the time of the Buddha, nuns grew in confidence and strength, both intellectually and spiritually.

Although Buddhism arose as an alternative to Brahmanic orthodoxy, over the years many such discriminatory views found their way into Buddhist texts. In the *Satapatha Brahmana*, compiled before the Buddha's time, it is said that a woman, a *sudra* (an untouchable), a dog, and a crow are the embodiments of untruth, sin, and darkness. Later on, in the *Milindapanha,* a Buddhist text of the 1st century CE, a woman without a husband is referred to as one of ten kinds of disreputable individuals, including gluttons, sinners, and those who had no character. However, patriarchy is not a monolithic system, and there are variations in its influence over regions, communities, and individuals

Some 250 years before the rise of Buddhism, large communities of women were ordained by sage Parsavantha, the root *guru* of Jainism, another movement breaking away from Brahmanism. By the time of the Buddha's contemporary, Mahavira, more than twice the number

of nuns as compared to monks joined the Jain order, and over 300,000 laywomen became Jains. Not only were women seen to be capable of attaining the highest religious goal, they also had the same opportunities as men in the order, including as teachers and preachers, and Jain laywomen participated in the political and administrative activities of the state. Women undoubtedly gravitated towards those new religious communities that gave them respect, honor, and opportunities to grow. This included women from the so-called lower castes, who were now subjected to the brunt of caste oppression and discrimination.

The *theri*s, or senior nuns from the Therīgathā, joined the Buddhist order for many reasons – to seek freedom from poverty and domestic drudgery, to escape from unhappy marriages, and to gain knowledge and spiritual liberation. Parental pressure sometimes also played a role. Today across the Himalayan belt of India, from Ladakh in the west to Tawang in the east, women choose to become nuns for similar reasons. In Tawang, one of the main reasons for becoming a nun is the hope of getting some education, and to skip the poverty and hardship of village life, Tsunma Genden Lhamu, a PhD student from Tawang, explains.

> However, all the nunneries in Tawang are under the care of monasteries and do not have schools. Many young nuns trek long distances to attend government schools or have to travel to schools outside of their regions.

Thanks to the foresight and commitment of the 13th Tsona Rinpoche a school was established in Tawang close to Tsunma Genden Lhamu's Singsor Nunnery, where the nuns can have a modern education and also study Tibetan and Buddhist philosophy till the 8th class. After that, they either return to the nunnery or continue their education at other institutes, including the Central Institute of Himalayan Culture in Dahung also set up by Tsona Rinpoche. Around 200 girls study at this school, including thirty nuns.

In Kinnaur, the literacy levels for women have traditionally been low but now there are a few strong study programs offered to nuns in upper Himachal Pradesh, including at Jangsemling Ponda Nunnery and at four nunneries in Spiti, including Dechen Choling, where a modern monastic curriculum includes Tibetan grammar, Buddhist texts, philosophy, logic and debate, and English. In Ladakh, while earlier there was almost no education system in the nunneries, the Ladakh Nun's Association has initiated various study programs, though many Ladakhi nuns still travel out of their state to further their education.

Despite large numbers of women joining the Buddhist *sangha* during the Buddha's lifetime, the rule that nuns could only teach nuns, but not monks or the larger community, undermined their ability to be recognized as Dharma teachers. As they were not recognized, this in turn had an impact on support from donors, probably a significant reason why funds for nunneries slowly dried up. In the second and first centuries BCE there is evidence, from Sanchi, that nuns were thriving and that they, along with laywomen, were major donors, but by around the 8th century there is little evidence of a nun's community in India. In fact, by the 1st century CE, with the rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India, women are no longer seen as being capable of enlightenment and their hope lies in the possibility of being born as men, including in Amitabha's Pure Land.

Inscriptions from the first and second centuries CE, show that nuns were influential in shaping Buddhist practices and Buddhist art. Women became identified with positive cosmic energy, beginning with the veneration of Prājñapāramitā as the mother of all Buddhas. Female deities, saintly nuns, *yogini*s, and *bodhisattva devi*s, including the 21 Taras and Vajrayogini, evolved during the Mahâyâna era.

The period of the split between early Indian Buddhism and Mah āyāna gave rise to increasing anti-women rhetoric and men were granted important positions in the hierarchy and mythology. Asanga's opinion in *Bodhisattvabhumi* by the late 5th century CE is that all women are by nature full of defilements and have weaker intelligence.

It is no coincidence that nuns appear rarely in Mahāyāna *sūtra*s, more rarely than women lay disciples. Despite this, liberal portraits of women's spiritual achievements are found in a few *sūtra*s, considered to be some of the more popular and influential texts in the Mahāyāna scripture. In the *Vimalakirtinirdesa Sūtra*, Śariputra has a strong position on women's inability to be enlightened while debating with a highly accomplished female practitioner and finally admits, "the female form and innate characteristics neither exist nor do not exist." The *Avatamsaka Sūtra* portrays a nun known as Lion Yawn whose teachings are highly accomplished and impressive. She has multitudes of students, and an authority and style usually attributed to advanced *bodhisattva*s in Mahāyāna literature, while the *Sūtra of Queen Srimala* extols her highly advanced and effective teachings, and she is sometimes described as a female Buddha. By the time of late Mahāyāna Buddhism, towards the 10th century CE, the *sūtra*s mention that women are capable of enlightenment, but ironically by this time, there appear to be few or no nuns left in India.

Parallel to the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India was the accompanying rise of Vajrayāna Buddhism in India around the 3rd and 4th centuries CE, later transmitted to Tibet and China. Vajrayāna Buddhism absorbed the concept of the feminine cosmic mother and deepened and extended the feminine principle. However, "folk wisdom" in Tibet saw female birth as unfortunate and the word for "woman" in Tibetan translates as "born low." Men controlled positions of religious power, authority, honor, and respect.

By the 7th century, nunneries in India were struggling as Buddhism competed with the rise of popular forms of Hinduism. The existing nuns were seldom named or recorded, nor do they appear to be part of the flourishing student bodies at the renowned Buddhist universities of that time, including Nalanda.

When Vajrayāna Buddhism was transmitted to Tibet from India between the 7th and 10th centuries CE, the *bhikkhuni* lineage was not introduced to Tibet. Thus, nuns lived as perpetual novices taking 36 vows, with discouragingly limited educational opportunities. Their living accommodations were limited and they usually had to construct their own dwellings, walking long distances for water, wood, and so on. With the monasteries under the control of monks, many well-known female practitioners chose to live the lives of wandering ascetics or *yogini*s (tantrikas). Vajrayāna Buddhism celebrated and encouraged these women, but their code of conduct was neither monastic nor lay.

By the time of the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*, he had accomplished his goal of creating a strong body of both male and female monastic and lay communities. In the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, the Buddha says, "I shall not come to my final passing away until my *bhikkhu*s and *bhikkhuni*s, laymen and laywomen, have come to be true disciples – wise, well disciplined, apt and learned,…and, having learned the Master's word, are able to expound it, preach it, proclaim it…."

But within a few months after the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*, trouble was already brewing at the First Council. Bhikkhu Ānanda, the Buddha's trusted attendant and senior disciple, was accused of committing an offense by supporting the introduction of the nun's order and he had to accept this "offense" in order not to cause a rift in the monastic community. Senior *bhikkhuni*s,

who were advanced practitioners and respected by the community, were not allowed to attend. It is perhaps not surprising that over the years, the *bhikkhuni sangha*, one of the four foundations of the Buddhist order, suffered significant decline.

But the wheel is now undoubtedly turning. Over the last 30 years, the nuns' order has slowly and confidently built itself up again. Nuns in the Himalayan region are once again beginning to run their own nunneries and get an education, on par with the monks, as it was at the time of the Buddha.

The *yogini* lineage, lost in Tibet, is being revived at Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery in Himachal Pradesh, and the deep teachings and knowledge of the tradition are once again returning to the nuns as educational opportunities open up. For the first time since Buddhism went to Tibet, women have begun taking the prestigious *geshema* exams and are becoming *lopon*s (Buddhisty scholars). Since 2016, over seventy nuns have become *geshema*s. Most significantly, in June 2022, for the first time in the history of Tibetan Buddhism, women received full ordination as *bhikkhuni*s (Tib: *gelongma*s) in Bhutan.

Only the future will reveal how these possibilities develop and how women practitioners take them forward, as nuns once again get an education, become teachers and leaders, strengthen their practice, and build their communities. They may once again write their own stories and speak about Dharma, from a woman's perspective.

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Vietnamese *Bhikkhunī*s Continuously Innovating Dharma Propagation Methods for Youth

Thich Nu Lien Hien

Entering the 21st century, Vietnamese Buddhist nuns have numerous opportunities to showcase their capabilities and knowledge in alignment with modern trends. Following the principle that "Buddhism accompanies the nation," the Vietnamese Nuns' Order has contributed significantly to spreading the Dharma and educating the youth through diverse methods: summer retreats, student retreats, preschools, outdoor meditation programs, life skills classes, online courses, meditation workshops, book publications, "Magical English" classes, scholarships for the youth, support for underprivileged students, Mid-Autumn Festival celebrations, and International Children's Day events. These initiatives sow the seeds of *bodhi* deeply in young hearts with the spirit of "compassion" and "wisdom," fostering ethical consciousness and a virtuous lifestyle, and helping young people avoid social vices. Notable contributions have been made by *bhikkhunī*s such as Ven. Nhat Khương, Ven. Như Như, Ven. H nh Tâm, Ven. Hương Nhũ, Ven. Như Nguyet, Ven. Hu Dâng, Ven. Nhu n Bình, Ven. Hu Tâm, Ven. Như Ý, Ven. Di u Minh, and Ven. Hu Giác, along with the Youth Dharma Propagation Club, which has now evolved into the Central Committee for Propagating the Dharma to Buddhist Youth and the Central Committee for Buddhist Youth Affairs, bringing a fresh and dynamic approach.

While propagating the Dharma to youth is not inherently difficult, it requires a deep understanding of their psychology, continuous innovation, and creativity. Programs need to be engaging, age-appropriate, and tailored to the cultural and regional characteristics of their target audience. These efforts inspire young people to love and appreciate the Dharma, develop creativity, acquire diverse skills, and build confidence. Through participation in such programs, youth can simultaneously engage in spiritual learning and recreational activities that are both enjoyable and meaningful.

This study explores the contributions of Vietnamese *bhikkhunī*s, who are continuously innovating methods for propagating the Dharma among young people in an era of global integration. Their aim is to help cultivate well-rounded, virtuous, and talented young individuals to benefit both society and Buddhism. Their innovative efforts underscore the pivotal role of Vietnamese *bhikkhunī*s throughout the history of the nation and the advances they are making to embody a versatile and comprehensive approach.

Traditional Values and Modern Pressures

In the context of globalization and international integration, disseminating Buddhist philosophyand teachings to the younger generation has become a central mission for Vietnamese *bhikkhunī*s. Today's youth not only inherit traditional values but also face challenges arising from cultural diversity, digital technology, and the pressures of modern society. This situation urgently calls for innovative approaches in Dharma propagation to ensure effectiveness and alignment with current trends. Vietnamese *bhikkhunī*s, holding an increasingly significant role in Buddhist history, strive to both preserve traditional values and seek creative methods to help the youth recognize the core values of Buddhism, thereby fostering a sustainable spiritual and ethical life in a new era.

This study employs methods such as collecting, synthesizing, and analyzing materials on the history of the methods of teaching Dharma, particularly among the

youth, that have been developed by the Vietnamese Nuns' Order. Practical surveys include interviews with nuns, young Buddhists, and Buddhist scholars to evaluate current methods. New propagation methods are tested in retreats and classes, and compared with traditional approaches. Data is statistically analyzed to propose appropriate innovations.

Dharma Propagation for Youth

Dharma propagation for youth involves transmitting Buddhist teachings and values to help build character, develop spiritually, and learn to apply the Dharma in everyday life. Activities encompass a variety of teaching methods, retreats, educational programs, and community activities designed to suit the psychology and needs of youth in the modern context.

In her book *Vietnamese Bhikkhunīs' Mission to Propagate Dharma in the Modern Era*. senior *bhikkhunī* Thích Nu Hu Giác emphasized, "Youth are the seeds of the future, and the teachings of compassion and wisdom are the guiding light that helps them build character and find peace amidst a turbulent world." She referenced the *Lotus Sūtra* (*Saddharma Pundarika*), Chapter XX, to encourage approaching the teachings with an open heart: "A Dharma teacher must be like a master holding a lamp, always illuminating the path for the youth – not imposing but guiding them to discover the light within themselves."

Similarly, in her book *Buddhism and Youth*, Bhikkhuni Thích Nu Trí Hai stressed, "If we only teach the Dharma without understanding the psychology of the youth, the teachings will become distant and abstract. Compassion and wisdom must be the foundation, applied flexibly, so that they experience the Dharma as a refreshing breeze in life." She quoted the Buddha's words in the *Mahāparinirvā a Sūtra*: "Be a light unto yourself."

These teachings not only affirm the significance of transmitting the Dharma to younger generations, but also highlight the necessity of innovation and flexibility in approach. This ensures that the youth are deeply integrated into modern society while preserving and advancing the core values of Buddhism, becoming inheritors and transmitters of compassion and wisdom in every facet of life.

Social Context and Challenges

Advances in technology and social media have caused young people to pay less attention to traditional and spiritual values, leading to a growing disconnect with Buddhist teachings. Currently, the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha consists of 54,773 monastics, of which *bhikkhunī*s account for more than 32,800 (approximately 60 percent). With a network of 18,491 Buddhist establishments, including temples, monasteries, meditation centers, and prayer halls, *bhikkhunī*s play a vital role in propagating the Dharma and education. Among these, Mahāyāna temples constitute the largest group, with 12,912 locations.

Bhiksu Thích Trí Quang emphasizes, "*Bhikkhunī*s can participate in every area of

activity. Do not let gender biases overshadow the transcendent potential of each individual. Harnessing the intellectual capacity of everyone to build the Dharma embodies the Buddha's principle of equality, while also fostering a peaceful and sustainably developed world in *samsāra*."

In the modern era, *bhikkhunī*s face challenges from the competitive dynamics of media, requiring creativity in their approaches. Their roles now extend beyond teaching the Dharma to organizing practical activities, retreats, outdoor programs, and charitable initiatives, helping young people discover the value of ethics, wisdom, and compassion in their lives. To integrate contemporary trends and meet the needs of young people today, Vietnamese nuns have adopted many creative and effective methods for propagating Dharma among the youth today.

Innovative Teaching Methods Using Technology and Media

Several nunneries in Vietnam have modernized their Dharma propagation methods to better resonate with young people. Many have leveraged social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok to disseminate Buddhist teachings, attracting a large number of young participants. Online seminars on platforms like Zoom and Google Meet are also regularly held, allowing them to easily make connections with Buddhists worldwide.

In *Education in Ethics and Life Values Through Buddhism*, Thich Nhat Tu emphasizes that modern and flexible Dharma teaching methods help the younger generation develop both intellectually and morally. Teaching methods have also been enhanced with the use of visual aids, lively videos, and relatable storytelling. Short meditation practices of 5–10 minutes during lessons enable youths to experience Buddhist teachings directly.

Examples of these efforts include programs at Buu Lien Temple in Binh Thuan. Under the guidance of the nun Thich Nu Hue Minh, life skills courses for high school students combine applied meditation with teachings through stories. At Phuoc Vien Temple in Khanh Hoa, meditation classes for college students led by the nun Thich Nu Tinh Giac regularly attract over 200 participants per session. Thien Quang Temple in Binh Duong is renowned for charitable programs guided by the nun Thich Nu Huong Nhu that incorporate ethical education for youth, encouraging them to protect the environment and support the community. At Dai Phap Temple in Can Tho, summer retreats on the theme "Understanding and Loving," directed by the senior nun Thich Nu Nhu Hue, and focused on filial piety and social responsibility, gather hundreds of young participants. At Long Hoa Temple in Vinh Long, under the leadership of the mun Thich Nu Tam Tinh, courses in soft skills emphasize positive thinking and conflict resolution, aiding holistic youth development.

Some temples have also embraced advanced technologies like artificial intelligence and virtual reality to create modern meditation spaces, sparking youth interest. These innovations not only bring Buddhism closer to the younger generation but also contribute to building a morally upright and responsible youth community.

Creative Experiential Activities

Bhikkhuni Thích Nu Nhu Nguyet established and manages the Sen Vàng Kindergarten System in Ho Chi Minh City. Campus 1, located in Binh Chanh District, was founded in 2020, while Campus 2 is situated in Ward 16, District 8, Ho Chi Minh City. The educational programs at Sen Vàng Kindergarten are designed to foster the holistic development of children through creative experiential projects, diverse learning environments, life skills development, self-reliance, problem-solving abilities, and practical skills, preparing them for higher education and life ahead.

Bhikkhuni Thích Nu Hu Dâng conducted a meditation practice session for students of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City, in May 2023. During the session, she shared meditation techniques and practical ways to apply them in daily life. At Di Đà Temple in Lam Dong, the Subcommittee for Buddhist Laypeople under the Central Bhikkhuni Committee organized a retreat titled "Returning Home" for 350 young participants. Bhikkhuni Thích Nu Hu Dâng, who serves as the head of the Organizing Committee, delivered a congratulatory speech in which she expressed her hope that, after two days of participation, the attendees would gain peaceful energy to complete their work and greet the new year with joy and success. These activities demonstrate Bhikkhuni Thích Nu Hu Dâng's dedication over the past ten years to bringing meditation practices and Buddhist teachings closer to the younger generation and the broader community, contributing to the creation of a peaceful and harmonious society.

As of 2024, Bhikkhuni Thích Nu Nhuan Bình has published a total of nine works, including two collections of short stories and seven books imbued with the essence of "mindful observation." Notable titles include *Opening the Path of Love*, *Sowing Seeds of Happiness*, *Overcoming Life's Ups and Downs*, *If You Knew Tomorrow Would Be Your Last Day*, and *Gently Picking Up the Petals of Impermanence*. These books are not only spiritual gifts for young readers but also a source of encouragement and inspiration for them to live positively, lovingly, and happily. Bhikkhuni Thích Nu Nhuan Bình has used the proceeds from her book sales to create scholarships, helping students continue their education. Creative experiential activities combine Buddhist teachings with life skills and art, helping youths cultivate themselves and foster compassion through meditation, painting, and community charity.

*Bhikkhunī*s organize creative experiential activities that integrate Buddhist teachings with life skills and the arts, enabling young people to cultivate themselves and foster compassion through practices such as meditation, painting, and community charity work. According to *Mindfulness for Students* by David Brazier, meditation and Buddhist teachings not only assist in managing emotions and reducing stress but also contribute to building character and social awareness. At Tinh Nghiêm Temple in Ben Tre, the senior *bhikkhuni* Thích Nu Hu Tâm organizes retreats on "Nurturing Wisdom" with over 600 young participants each year, helping them gain greater confidence in handling life's pressures. At Dieu Quang Temple in Dong Nai, under the leadership of Bhikkhuni Thích Nu Tinh Hieu, more than 500 young people participate in summer retreats that feature

musical meditation, painting, and yoga. Likewise, at Hong Ân Temple in Soc Trang, under the guidance of the seior *bhikkhuni* Thích Nu Như Ý, meditation music sessions, and art exhibitions are held annually, attracting over 400 participants. Buu Long Temple in Dong Thap hosts youth camps with 350–400 participants, integrating meditation and Buddhist teachings through art. At Phuoc Thinh Temple in Ho Chi Minh City, the senior nun Thich Nu Hanh Tam leads a "Seeds of Compassion" course for over 700 students annually, focusing on time management, conflict resolution, and positive thinking. At Tu Quang Temple in Binh Duong, under the leadership of the nun Thich Nu Dieu Minh, a mobile app teaching meditation and emotional regulation based on Buddhist teachings reached over 12,000 downloads in 2024, showcasing Buddhism's appeal to modern youth.

For nearly 20 years, the Youth Dharma Propagation Club has initiated summer retreats combining meditation, Dharma teaching, and creative activities like art, theater, and charity, drawing thousands of young participants annually. In 2024, the club led the 14th Youth and Buddhism camp at Quoc An Khai Tuong Temple in Dong Nai, with over 5,000 participants engaging in activities like meditation walks, candlelight vigils, and large-scale games. The camp achieved Vietnamese acclaim for creating formations of eight lotus flowers and popu;arozomg the phrase "Connecting Hands" around Dien Tho Tower.

Strengthening International Exchanges

The Vietnamese Nuns' Order has actively participated in international Buddhist conferences such as the United Nations Day of Vesak, where delegates present research and share their experiences of spreading Dharma. International Buddhist cultural exchange programs at temples like Dai Phap in Can Tho and Tinh Nghiem in Dong Nai provide opportunities for youth to broaden their horizons, learn about global Buddhist cultures, and connect with the international community.

In Thailand and Sri Lanka, Buddhist teachings are integrated into life skills programs, with 78 percent of students showing improved stress management and focus. These programs combine theory and practice, such as meditation, enabling students to apply teachings effectively in their daily life and studies. Training programs in Dharma teaching skills involving international experts have enhanced nuns' teaching abilities, modern technology use, and creative approaches. These activities make Buddhism more accessible to youth and spread the values of compassion, wisdom, and ethics in daily life. The international efforts of the Vietnamese Nuns' Order affirm their pioneering role not only domestically but also globally. These initiatives significantly contribute to building a globally connected Buddhist youth community and fostering international cooperation in Dharma propagation, aligning with global cultural and technological integration trends.

Conclusion:

Vietnamese *bhikkhunī*s have continuously innovated Dharma propagation methods to meet

the needs of youth in an era of international integration. By leveraging technology, organizing educational programs, and engaging in community activities, Buddhism has become more approachable and relevant to younger generations. These innovations contribute to preserving and promoting traditional cultural and ethical values while cultivating a generation of youth who live with ethics, wisdom, and compassion.

*Bhikkhunī*s not only reaffirm their crucial role in the *sangha* but also convey the Buddhist message of compassion and wisdom to the broader community, especially to the youth, who are the future inheritors and developers of Buddhism. This is not merely a trend but a responsibility, ensuring that *bhikkhunī*s continue to make positive contributions to the sustainable development of society and the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha.

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Changing Roles of Buddhist Women: Empowerment, Feminism, Leadership

Madhuri Krishna Kudwalkar

The ancient Buddhist text *Therīgāthā*, a cornerstone of Buddhist literary tradition, provides a profound exegesis of the spiritual trajectories, existential challenges, and soteriological accomplishments of early Buddhist nuns. Mahāpajāpatī Gautamī's leadership of the *bhikkhunī sangha* underscores her pivotal role in Buddhist history, with her narrative and the Therīgāthā collectively illustrating the indispensable contributions of women to early Buddhism. The evolving sociopolitical, educational, and anthropological landscapes, influenced by factors such as patriarchy and colonial legacies, continue to shape the status of Buddhist women, particularly in marginalized regions like India, the birthplace of Buddhism.

The historical dissemination of Buddhism during Emperor Ashoka's reign, significantly aided by his daughter Theri Sanghamitra, highlights the crucial role of women in propagating the Dhamma. Contemporary Buddhist women, both lay and monastic, empowered by egalitarian ideals and educational advancements, actively challenge entrenched gender biases. Eminent monastic figures such as Bhikkhunī Dhammananda, Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Bhikkhunī Sunīti, Vijaya Maitreyī, and Ayya Dhammadinnā critically engage with canonical texts to address gender disparities in monastic ordination and other institutional issues. The establishment and subsequent decline of the *bhikkhunī sangha* in India reveal complex historical dynamics.

Young lay Buddhist women are at the forefront of dismantling patriarchal paradigms through critical engagement and activism. Monastic and social institutions like the Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī Foundation, Bodhipakkhiya Foundation, Trailokya (Triratna) Bauddha Mahāsangha, Bauddhajan Panchayat Samiti, and Bauddha Mahāsabha provide vital platforms for laywomen to promote Buddhist philosophy and the Buddha's teachings, contributing to an evolving landscape of Buddhist women's empowerment with nuanced peripherality and academic discourse.

Transformative Shifts

The role of women in religious traditions remains a critical area of scholarly inquiry. Reflecting on a recent International Bhikkhunī Sangha Day I attended, organized by an esteemed *bhikkhunī w*ho is both a renowned Abhidhamma scholar and an influential leader, I recognize that her intellectual acuity and authoritative presence underscored the transformative shifts within contemporary Buddhism. This study interrogates the evolving roles of Buddhist women, emphasizing the intersections of feminist theory, empowerment discourses, and emergent leadership paradigms that are reshaping the Buddhist monastic landscape:

1. Identifying and analyzing the ways in which Buddhist women are challenging traditional gender roles and power structures.
2. Documenting the experiences and perspectives of Buddhist women leaders and practitioners.
3. Analyzing the obstacles and barriers that prevent women from achieving full equality and leadership roles in Buddhist communities.

To achieve these objectives, I used a small-survey methodology with qualitative techniques such as in-depth, audio-recorded interviews, and observations. Consultations with scholars and Buddhist leaders enriched the data, which was meticulously coded to ensure a coherent, structured analysis with academic precision, leading to insightful conclusions.
My research explores the transformation of women's roles in Buddhism, from the Brahmanical tradition to contemporary practices. Preliminary research, including a review of peer-reviewed

articles and books (e.g., "Buddhism and Women Empowerment," *Eminent Buddhist Women*, "The Thai Bhikkhunī Movement," and "The Advent of Ambedkar in the Sphere of Indian Women Question"), revealed a gap in the literature regarding the specific interplay between historical legacies and modern reforms.

While Brahmanical texts highlight women's initial prominence, they also reveal underlying restrictions. The early Buddhist period offered women significant socio-religious and intellectual parity, evidenced by the *Therīgāthā* and the establishment of the *bhikkhunī sangha*. However, the ongoing need for women to reaffirm their agency within the Buddhist order, even in the face of feminist challenges to patriarchal structures, demonstrates the continuing tension between tradition and reform. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's advocacy for women's rights, including his work on the Hindu Code Bill, highlights the importance of women's progress in societal advancement.

The evolution of women's roles from Brahmanical to contemporary Buddhist practices is a dynamic history. Ancient texts highlight high-ranking Brahmanical women's access to education, politics, and warfare, though Vedic laws also imposed strict controls on their independence and mobility. These restrictions intensified in post-Vedic Indian history, reflecting socio-religious shifts. This study links these historical dynamics to modern Buddhist traditions, illustrating the interplay of historical legacies and contemporary reforms in women's religious roles.

The ancient Buddhist period marked a key era for gender parity, granting women significant socio-religious and intellectual status. Texts highlight their vital roles, with Buddha's teachings rejecting gender discrimination and supporting women's education and monastic life.The Therīgāthā, a key text in the Pāli canon, testifies to the spiritual achievements of Arahant Bhikkhunīs, whose paths to enlightenment showcased resilience, insight, and dedication despite societal challenges. Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī's ordination as the first *bhikkhunī* and the formation of the *bhikkhunī sangha* marked a pivotal moment in Buddhist history, reflecting not only institutional inclusion but also support for women's spiritual leadership. Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī's legacy symbolizes a shift that empowered women to overcome patriarchal barriers, achieving excellence in intellect, morality, and meditation, upholding Buddhism's ideals of inclusivity and equality.

Feminist discourse has redefined women's roles, challenging entrenched patriarchal norms. Historical and contemporary feminist movements have highlighted women's struggles for rights, dignity, and equality in social, political, and religious spheres. Engagement with prominent female figures in the Buddhist order shows that while women's fundamental roles persist, they continually reaffirm their position and agency, reflecting the dynamic tension between tradition and reform.

In India, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was a staunch advocate for women's rights, recognizing that the progress of a community is intrinsically linked to the progress of women. His efforts in drafting the Hindu Code Bill and advocating for right to education and gender equality in political representation (e.g., reservation of seats for women in local governance) were groundbreaking. He said, "I made it a point to carry women along with men. That is why you will see that our conferences are always mixed conferences. I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved…." In a discussion with Bhikkhuni Vijaya regarding the current challenges of the *bhikkhunī sangha*, she emphasized that ordination is no longer the primary obstacle in encouraging young women to become *samaneri*s and engage deeply in the study of the Dhamma. However, there is a noticeable lack of interest

among women in pursuing this path. This disinterest may stem from the unfavorable conditions of the *bhikkhunī sangha* in India, where many *bhikkhunī*s lack proper living accommodations and receive insufficient donations, despite being held in high regard by the Buddhist community, similar to *bhikkhu*s.

In Nagpur, Bhikkhuni Suniti and Bhikkhuni Vijaya Maitreya manage the Gautami Maha Prajapati Education Training Centre, where they train novice nuns in accordance with *vinaya* rules and conduct *sutta* workshops. Despite these efforts, young women primarily show interest in meditation. In addition, many entrants face mental health challenges requiring medical attention, presenting new issues within the *bhikkhunī* order.

A senior *bhikkhunī*, who has been a renunciant for 25 years and later received full ordination, may currently be the only *bhikkhunī* in Mumbai. She resides in a small room within a slum area and struggles to receive food donations due to the mixed-community population. A few years ago, she visited Thailand but, due to limited education, found it challenging to communicate with foreign *bhikkhunī*s. She highlighted the need for young, educated women to join the sangha to provide better leadership and address the challenges faced by Indian *bhikkhunī*s. She observed that in Buddhist countries like Thailand, the *bhikkhunī sangha* enjoys better conditions compared to India. The *bhikkhu* order, while honoring the monastic constitution, often overlooks the pressing need for gender equality and women's spiritual parity as established by the Buddha. Over the past years the revitalization of the *bhikkhunī sangha* has flourished in regions like Thailand under leaders such as Bhikkhunī Dhammananda, but in India progress has been slower due to a disrupted female Buddhist lineage, though it has regained strength since the late 20th century. Figures like Bhikkhunīs Suniti and Vijaya Maitreya challenge *vinaya*-based gender disparities. Senior Indian *bhikkhunī*s stress the importance of empathetic, resilient leadership within the *sangha* and the need for support from the *bhikkhu*s, which has been limited ever since the Buddha's era. Although Buddhism offers women equal educational and spiritual opportunities, persistent institutional barriers to ordination hinder their path to liberation and perpetuate systemic monastic inequities.

Bhadda Kapilani is recognized as having been a pivotal figure in *bhikkhunī* ordination efforts, though her initial request was denied by the Buddha due to sociocultural constraints and unfavorable time. Her journey with the Ajivaka order highlights the tension between individual spiritual pursuits and communal acceptance. The Buddha's eventual acceptance of the *bhikkhunī sangha* , prompted by Queen Mahāpajāpatī's collective petition with 500 Shakya women, underscores the power of collective agency. Today, the *bhikkhunī* community continues to face challenges, but the historical precedent set by Mahāpajāpatī demonstrates how unity can drive institutional change and foster inclusivity.

Scholarly discourse highlights the need for collaboration between the *bhikkhunī* and *bhikkhu sangha*s and Buddhist communities, emphasizing that the Buddha's teachings rely on their synergy. Although historically revered, the *bhikkhunī sangha* is often marginalized in India. Contemporary scholars note that feminist discourse in Buddhism faces critique from both men and women, reflecting deep-rooted socio-cultural issues.

Despite Ambedkar's monumental contributions to social reform, Buddhist women in India – particularly Ambedkarite Buddhist women – continue to grapple with the compounded discrimination of gender and caste. This underscores the profound intersectionality inherent in their lived experiences and necessitates a more robust, inclusive framework for empowerment, informed by both feminist theory and Ambedkarite social justice principles.

Conclusion

The pursuit of gender equality and women's empowerment in Buddhism and Indian society remains an evtionsolving discourse. While seminal figures such as the Buddha and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar established foundational principles of equality, the enduring influence of patriarchal norms and socio-cultural biases necessitates continued scholarly inquiry and systemic advocacy. A critical, interdisciplinary approach that integrates feminist hermeneutics, Ambedkarite social justice frameworks, and Buddhist philosophical tenets is essential for dismantling structural inequities. Advancing women's empowerment within this context is not merely a pursuit of social justice but an imperative for the holistic advancement of Buddhist praxis and societal progress. In India and Asian Buddhist countries the *bhikkhunī* ordination lineage was historically discontinued, leading to debates about the legitimacy of reviving it. Efforts to reestablish this lineage have encountered resistance due to traditional interpretations of monastic codes and concerns about procedural validity.

Durng my observations, I could see that the *bhikkhunī*s often struggle with limited financial support and donations. In some regions, the Buddhist community prioritizes supporting monks (*bhikkhu*s), leaving the nuns (*bhikkhunī*s) with inadequate resources for their daily needs and monastic activities. Institutional and cultural norms have historically placed *bhikkhunī*s in a subordinate position to *bhikkhu*s. Modern youth may lack awareness of the existence and significance of the *bhikkhunī sangha*. This can be attributed to limited representation in media, educational materials, and community activities, leading to a diminished interest in monastic life among women. Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts to promote gender equality within the Buddhist world.

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Coming Together in Dialogue with the Broader World: Logics, Metaphysics, Cultures, and Practices of Gender

alicehank winham

This paper discusses how the fourfold *sangha* might converse with the broader world concerning logic, metaphysics, cultures, gender practice, and the global community's soteriological transformation. This paper considers what philosophical possibilities arise from applying *śūnyatā* (emptiness) to social-ontological categories like gender. If gender is not carved into reality, how do we conceive the future of a four-fold *sangha* seemingly predicated upon gender/sex? What implications do Buddhist women's conceptions of womanhood have for global feminism? How can such conversations support full ordination and education for Buddhist women beyond gender binaries?

This paper looks at academic feminism and philosophies of gender in terms of Buddhist women's ordination, education, and practices. This approach asks (1) how bridging Buddhist and academic institutions facilitates public discussions on these complex topics, linking abstract formulations to the impact upon daily lives and pursuits; (2) what concrete actions were, are, and will be necessary to generate meaningful change for those for whom gender designations have imposed institutional obstacles to soteriological pursuits. The paper depicts how Euro-Americans perceive the situation. The goal is to understand participants' interpretations of *svabhāvaśūnyatā* (emptiness of intrinsic nature or essence) as related to gender practices.

I, a "young" Anglo-American philosophy PhD student, respond to a growing transnational discourse that addresses Buddhist female precept takers' conditions. My sources include recent international collaborations between Tibetan women, ordained practitioners, and scholar-activists; available Buddhist women's writings from Larung Gar in the *Dakinis' Great Dharma Treasury* and Bhiksuni Jampa Tsedroen's *The Buddhist Nuns' Ordination in the Tibetan Canon*.[1] I examine how insights meet traditional and "radical" Euro-American philosophy and gender-theory scholars. I trace how recent advances in educational degrees (*geshema*), access to *vinaya* (monastic code), Tibetan tradition full-ordination, representation in decision-making, and unique Tibetan conceptions of womanhood interdependently support changes that help overcome gendered constraints. I welcome corrections, conversations, and collaborations to discuss all I cannot include concerning how wider transformations of deep-rooted gender conceptions can open up ordination-practicing avenues.

The Fall 2012 Tibetan Nuns Project newsletter headlined, "Historic Decision to Grant Degree," reported that "nuns of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition will at last be able to receive the Geshema degree."[2] This advanced degree was historically only available to male counterparts and its conferral to nuns "reflects academic achievement within the monastic educational system." This newsletter contrasted this academic degree with the issue of full ordination that involves "vows in a lineage of transmission that reaches back to the Buddha himself."[3] A decade later in 2022, one Tibetan school, Drugpa Kagyu, granted full ordination to Tibetan-tradition females for possibly the first time compared with male full-ordination vows that extend to the 8th century CE. At the crux of this issue is that *vinaya* weaves through both the advanced academic degree (*geshema*), and full-ordination (*gelongma*) resolutions, and clinches the final knot in *geshema* Tibetan monastic curricula. The *vinaya* is interpreted and applied through gendered lenses. In particular, the gendered lenses and attitudes of authorities who interpret the *vinaya* shape Buddhist ideals' enactment across cultures. As Buddhist women's voices inspire shifting

attitudes, applications of the *vinaya* may likewise shift. One *khenmo* encourages "reducing 'the view that men are superior and women inferior'" alongside the call "If you're a dharma practitioner, then practice!" and the suggestion that, "We need to do work about women. And we need to help each other. If we do this, our mutual ability will improve… For women from each culture, whoever does beneficial work, all of us should esteem and support each other… If we can all help each other, even if we don't have a lot of wealth or capacity, then each of us will have some success; we can help each other gain results."[4] The past 50–60 years, including the activity of young precept-takers in Tibetan demonstrations since 1987, attest to changing norms,[5] including improvements in education. Female precept-takers' *śila* manifests as "agency within power relations which to an external observer seem simply suppressive."[6] Let us see how female practitioners shape changing Buddhist practices.

Various Buddhist communities and cultures implement *vinaya*, which both defines ordination requirements and must be studied to attain Tibetan educational degrees. Recent implementations of *vinaya* offer nuns, *geshema*s, and *gelongma*s access to teaching and decision-making opportunities previously only afforded to monks. These changes bring new perspectives, signaling cultural adaptability and changing attitudes around gendered practices. Recognizing that attitudes towards gender can change across time and cultures is important, but can also leave advances vulnerable to being lost. Therefore, we might reason about how to interpret gender and the *vinaya* with Buddhism's philosophical resources, such as by applying the concept of *śūnyatā* to gender to orient towards the unfixed future of Tibetan girls.

A growing number of Euro-American philosophers question a *sangha* they perceive as split along binary gender lines. We can divide these philosophers into two groups. Metaphysical realists hold the philosophical view that there is a true way the world of properties, objects, and relations exist independent of our minds and perceptions. For them, gender and/or sex are somehow objectively grounded in the nature of reality. On the other hand, gender theorists and anti-essentialists query such gender essentialism, seeing genders as socially constructed and normatively tracked into the ordained *sangha*. From these two groups, Buddhist institutions either ultimately reify or deem gender/sex essentialism conducive to the ending of suffering. Whence *śūnyatā*, the emptiness of essential nature? They can either analytically investigate the Buddhist teachings, or rely on other authorities. Buddhist female precept-takers' testimonies are our starting authorities. Indeed, their very collective name moves us beyond Euro-America's expected gender binaries.

These female precept-takers face interrelated educational, economic, and ordination obstacles to soteriological practice that *vinaya*-refuge is intended to support. Even referring to them is more complicated than for their male counterparts. The Buddhist canon records nuns ordaining since the Buddha's time, but only a few ordination lineages continued unbroken. Countries present differing stances towards transnational efforts to reinstate lineages. For instance in Thailand and Myanmar, *mae chis* and *thilasins* locally adapt names and practices, illustrating their persistent resourcefulness in "the tradition of 'going forth as nuns'"[7] and push for change. My wish is that global allies would recognize, reference, and make sense of nuns' positions. I argue that anyone who advocates for equity must collectively generate communicative and hermeneutic resources to counter exclusion, silencing, and systematic devaluing of knowledge and existence. Inclusive empowering terminology is not enough without clarifying and critically questioning conceptions of gender.

In my sources, practitioners invoke gender identities that "gradually transform a woman

into a nun"[8] with spiritual and ordination progression through *vinaya* rites: *upāsikā*, *śrāmaṇerika*, *śikṣamāṇā*, *bhikṣuṇī.* Some "once-females" ordaining from lay life assert, "We are not women."[9] The world's gendered terms that initially divide the path do not have to persist. Thai and Tibetan practitioners reflect that the appearance of two gendered orders does not appear to transcend duality as the Buddhist soteriological path promotes – indeed, in some traditions women can attain enlightenment in this very life. Some gendered-interpretations of the *vinaya* do not always reflect this gender transformation that concerns understandings and practices of Buddhist teachings. We witness multiple interpretations of the *vinaya* that are not fixed to dominant understandings of gender; institutional transformation **is** envisionable. I support opening conceptual spaces to hear and see these different possibilities, listening here to those who identify or would be identified as women or gender non-conforming in the Tibetan tradition.

Vajrayāna Buddhism features prominent female figures: deities, *bodhisattvas*, Buddhas, *yoginī*s, and *dākinī*s. Let us trace moves among Tibetans in exile and Larung Gar *khenmo*s who reach beyond Buddhism to Tibetan ethnicity to challenge Tibeto-Buddhist "cultures of gender" in a radical retelling of their histories. They bring to this Buddhist authoritative sources to which they have increased access through education and ordination. In 2017, the Larung Gar *khenmo*s published over 53 volumes on Tibetan women in the *Dakinis' Great Dharma Treasury*. They, as wisdom incarnate, ascribe the dominating gender view as "based on a few biased outdated customs... which have been tossed aside as merely bygone history."[10] They produce *vinaya* scholarship to enhance understanding and direct study of ordination processes and their conduct. Together, the community might alter Dharma-*vinaya* practices.

To start with education: male heads of Tibetan schools authoritatively interpret the common Mūlasarvāstivāda *vinaya*. *Geshema* and *gelongma* titles require access to the *vinaya*, usually reserved for *vinaya* experts or those studying the final class in long monastic degrees. In 2011, German *tsunma* Kelsang Wangmo became the first *geshema* after 20 years at the Institute for Buddhist Dialectics, Dharamsala. Her trailblazing path differed from male *geshe*s' in the final class: *vinaya*. Without fully ordained *gelongma*, technically she could not study Prātimokṣa, so her teacher suggested related works. This single degree holder, albeit marking improved educational access since post-1951 rebuilding efforts, did not ensure a repeatable degree path. Solidification required solving the issue of females' access to the final *vinaya* stage of the doxographical ordered doctorate.[11] Tibetan females sought to counter beliefs that "girls cannot do certain things, and cannot finish certain things, so why should they go to school?" and "The view that men are superior and women are inferior."[12] In particular, TNP Director Rinchen Khandro Choegyal's prestigiously clever *political* maneuvering secured the *geshema* through a *vinaya*-curriculum rooted in earlier-Indian commentaries.

Qualifying degree-holders further transformed cultures of gender as *geshema* returned to nunneries to teach. Both access to education and the content changed. In 2020, Dr. Carola Roloff produced Tibetan-English critical editions of *Mahāprajāpatīgautamīvastu* (MJP) and *Bhikṣuṇyupasaṃpadājñapti* (BSJ), covering the Mūlasarvāstivāda *vinaya'*s first female-ordination story and full-ordination rites. She outlines that the Karma-Kagyu 17th Karmapa preferred in 2015 an "ecumenical" ordination (while other schools hesitated) to ensure the *sangha*'s stability[13] and how the *gurudharmas* differ between recensions. Her work marks a shift beyond the rules' historicity as a criterion for use to question the possible interpretations of the words. With increased access to these words, what possibilities arise from female precept takers' and developing lay conceptions of gender rather than the current culture of gender? For example,

one can read the transcendence of gender identity in parallel with spiritual progression into the way the *gurudharma*s are systematically articulated and conveyed. Close attention reveals a shift from woman to *bhikṣuṇī*, opening up the possibility that the after-formula applies only to women, as long as women are perceived. If lay perception changes, the contrast ("woman") might change, disappear, or be radically transformed. What do female aspirants think of this discrepancy? The full *sangha*'s examining these texts might reveal underlying cultural assumptions.

In 2022, 144 *gelongma* were ordained in Bhutan. As granting degrees to *geshema* and ordaining *gelongma* becomes institutionalized, the future remains open as these title-holders transform cultural perceptions of gender. How can global philosophical discourse further the interweaving forces that further Buddhist females' education and ordination in direct discussion with the *vinaya*, gender, and politics? How do we ensure women's voices are heeded in decision-making arenas, where advances have historically transpired: *geshema* when the TNP's then-director ensured representatives joined DRC meetings, *gelongma* when Bhutan's queen supported the plight; *Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī* established her presence with Ānanda's mediation and the 8th-century king's wife ordained. Global supporters must ask questions such as: Do you seek space in politics after all? The 1892–1940 teacher-consort Sera Khandro "presag[es] her spiritual vocation against the political ambitions of her father."[14] *Geshema* and *gelongma* speak to non-dual gender. What do *khenmo* and other Buddhist females say? As we have shown, we cannot assume one Buddhist conception of gender. What transpires when versions of anti-essentialism challenge the notion of gender as a useful category? Even if there were philosophical agreement, how could this pronouncement further current efforts? What would the transcendence of gender mean for the fourfold *sangha* as an institution? Alternately, what do Buddhist women have to share with such gender theorists? Perhaps, while tackling these philosophical issues, we laity can ask if and how women would like to be represented in *vinaya*-interpretation arenas. For example, when a motion is made, the DRC in-exile members follow *vinaya*'s consent by silence. If female aspirants as representatives remain absent, they cannot consent or respond to the formula: "Those who do not agree, please speak."[15]

The *khenmo*s from Larung Gar stated, "Our objective is *... for our Tibetan girls in particular* not to think 'we are women' and consider ourselves inferior...".[16] Rather than presume Tibetan monastics' conceptions or goals, I argue that lay philosophers like myself should carefully listen to their requests. I have illustrated a picture wherein issues of education, ordination, *vinaya*, and decision-making are thoroughly intertwined. What further space can we create to listen and act? For any of your goals, including the reorienting titles towards the goal of reaching *Tibetan* and other *Buddhist girls in particular*, rather than merely becoming part of academic discourse, I am here to listen and help act.

Notes

[1] Carola Roloff, *The Buddhist Nuns' Ordination in the Tibetan Canon: Possibilities of the Revival of the Mulasarvastivada Bhiksuni Lineage* (Bochum: ProjektVerlag, Hamburg Buddhist Studies, 2020), 15.

[2] *Tibetan Nuns Project* (2012) 'Historic Decision to Grant Degree', 1. Available at: https://tnp.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/TNP-Newsletter-2012.pdf.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Padma'tsho (Baimacuo) and Jacoby, S. (2020) 'Gender equality in and on tibetan buddhist nuns' terms', *Religions*, 11(10), p. 543. Available at: https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11100543.

[5] Ha¨rko¨nen , M. (2016) *Tibetan Nuns between Oppression and Opportunities: An Intersectional Study*. University of Helsinki, 5.

[6] Ibid., 10.

[7] Havnevik, H. (1989) *Tibetan Buddhist nuns: History, Cultural Norms, and Social Reality*. Oslo: Norwegian University Press.

[8] Schneider, N. (2023) 'Editorial: gender asymmetry and nuns' agency in the asian buddhist traditions', *Religions*, 14(2), p. 285. Available at: **https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020285.**

[9] Salgado, N.S. (2013) *Buddhist nuns and gendered practice: in search of the female renunciant.* Oxford University Press.

[10] Padma'tsho and Jacoby, 'Gender equality,' 1.

[11] Pramana, Prajnaparamita, Madhyamika, Abhidharma, and Vinaya.

[12] Padma'tsho and Jacoby, 'Gender equality,' 4–5.

[13] Roloff, *The Buddhist Nuns' Ordination,*330.

[14] Tsomo, K. L. (2016) "Love and Liberation: Autobiographical Writings of the Tibetan Buddhist Visionary Sera Khandro by Sarah H. Jacoby" (review). *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 35:1, 287.

[15] Roloff, *The Buddhist Nuns' Ordination*, 226.

[16] Padma'tsho and Jacoby, 'Gender equality,' 1.

Women Translating Dharma

Sarah Harding

I was tasked with a comprehensive review of women translators of Buddhist teachings. But as I began my research, I realized I just could not gather enough information. So I decided to focus unapologetically on what I know, which is my own experience as an oral interpreter and translator of Buddhist texts from Tibetan into English, with just a few bits of background information that I have gleaned from my inadequate research. It is divided into two areas: textual translation and oral interpretation.

Lost in Translation

Translators in general get short shrift. We all read translated books, yet few readers will remember or even notice the translators' names. Who translated the Odyssey from Greek, or the Epic of Gilgamesh from Babylonian? The Bhagavad Gita, or the I Ching? The most translated book in modern history is the Bible; maybe we think King James translated it! The translators are long forgotten, and many feel that's as it should be. After all, they are not authors, they are not artists, just inconsequential go-betweens. It is stunning how marginalized translators are, given their crucial role. The study of translation has only become a field in its own right recently. But now that it has, we have learned quite a lot and the field of Buddhist studies has benefited greatly. The Tsadra Foundation, which sponsors my work, has hosted numerous translation conferences. The discussions are replete with ideas and revelations, too many to mention here. But one now commonly accepted theme across the field is that there is no such thing as a literal translation and that every translation is a new creation. Indeed, something is "lost in translation." But something is also gained.

What is translation, after all? Is it a faithful word-for-word transcription? But already we know there is no such thing. And faithful to whom? Or should we rely on what we, the translators, guess is the intention of a work? What did the author want the reader to experience? Is there any hope to replicate that? Many critics think not. So not only is the translator invisible, maybe there is no such thing as translation.

Among the marginalized translators through the ages, female scholar-translators may be the least visible, perhaps by choice. But to end this brief introduction on a hopeful note, the second most translated book after the Bible, surprisingly, is *The Little Prince*, translated in 1943 from French into English by a woman, Katherine Woods.

Buddhist Translation

In terms of Buddhist translation, we must first acknowledge the problem of identifying what are actual Buddhist texts. Scholars speak of "the myth of the original." Jan Nattier states:

> If, by the 'original' we mean the discourse as pronounced by the Buddha, in the language of the region of Magadha in around the fifth century BCE, this original has been forever lost. What we have instead, when versions of these discourses have been preserved in writing, are a variety of snapshots (as it were) taken of the text, in one or more Buddhist languages, at various stages in the course of its development.[1]

Languages such as Pāli, Apabraḥśa, Sanskrit, and Buddhist-Hybrid Sanskrit were never spoken

by Lord Buddha. But that is another discussion.

In the long history of Buddhist translation efforts, there is very little record of women's work. The earliest translations from Buddhist texts into Chinese started in the mid-second century CE, but "[N]ot a single female translator is attested in the entire history of Chinese Buddhism."[2] Many assemblies across Asia simply recite the texts in Chinese. When I asked one friend, a Korean nun, about female translators from the Chinese, she described nuns working carefully in groups, without credit, which she said would seem too egocentric. Their work is then passed through the final editing by scholar-monks before use in the congregation.

Two 19th-20th century female translators who stand out as an exception to the unwritten rules are the women of the Pali Text Society. In 1900, Caroline Rhys Davids (1857–1942), published a translation of the *Dhammasanganī* under the title *A Buddhist Manual of Psychological Ethics*;[3] and in 1909, published *Psalms of the Sisters*, an early translation of the *Therīgāthā*, verses traditionally ascribed to early Buddhist nuns. (The latest version of this, *The First Free Women*, published by Matty Weingast in 2021, caused a huge controversy for its claim to be a translation at all. Indeed, what *is* a translation?)

I. B. Horner (1896–1981), who served as president of the Pali Text Society from 1959 to 1981, was a leading scholar and renowned translator of Pāli literature. In 1930, Horner published a translation of *Women Under Primitive Buddhism*, a section of the Sanskrit epic *Ayodhyakanda*. In the Introduction to that translation, Horner acknowledges the problem of conveying the "purity" of the scriptures and suggests the possibility that the monks rendering translations of these texts may have skewed the views attributed to the Buddha to reflect the monks' own biases:

> [There are] various editions, glosses, and revisions which [the scriptures] have undergone at the hands of the monks. In consequence it is sometimes impossible to disentangle the original matter from later accretions; and in many places it appears as if much of what Gotama thought, said, and did has become lost or distorted. If the monk-factor be kept in mind, some of the distortion may be accounted for, and in part rectified. It partially explains the views, more favorable to monkdom than to lay-life, more favorable to men than to women, which are usually ascribed to Gotama.[4]

Tibetan Translation

I find this to be the case in the Tibetan translations of Indian scripture as well as in indigenous Tibetan writings. The work of translating Buddhist texts into Tibetan began in the 7th century and continued nearly unabated for almost 900 years. The production of the translations that became the Tibetan canon was one of the greatest cultural exchanges the world has ever seen. The assimilation of Buddhism that occurred in two semi-distinct waves is even couched in the language of translation: the Early Translation period and the Later Translation period. The two parts of the Tibetan Buddhist canon are called the *Kangyur* ("The translated Buddha-word") and the *Tengyur* ("the translated treatises"). The translators of Tibet, called *lotsāwa*, were greatly revered for their skill and knowledge. Nearly every one of the approximately 5,262 texts in the canon records the names of the Tibetan translators and the Indian scholars who collaborated. This is how we know that there were no women translators or at least none that used female names.

Unfortunately, this scholarly necessity of attribution failed to influence some modern

translation practices, which often omit translators' names out of some kind of naive and misplaced idea of fealty and false humility. Not to seem self-serving, but this is an affront to the tradition, and undermines the need to determine the authenticity of a translation and thus preserve the tradition more carefully.

On top of this canonical basis, Tibetans themselves have continued to produce vast literature of Buddhist doctrine, commentary, ritual, poetics, liturgy, biography, esoteric instructions, and so on. This is the area in which I and many others of my generation have focused since our encounter with the great Tibetan *lama*s of the diaspora. Although still a minority, many women have ended up in the position of translators. Some of my translation work has focused on a few early Tibetan female saints who are credited with their own Dharma teachings. However, those whose stories managed to at least survive in myth, if not history, are difficult to document after a thousand years of "the monk factor." More recent female saints, such as Sera Khandro (1892–1940), left legacies in print in their lifetime, which are receiving some translation attention.[5] And now a great advance in Tibetan women's studies came about as a project initiated by nuns and *khenmo*s of Larung Gar Monastery in Eastern Tibet to create an anthology of work either by or about Buddhist women in Tibet. After many years of hard work, the 53 volumes were published in 2017 with the name *Dākinīs Great Dharma Treasury*.[6] Now this remains to be translated and funded. Who will do that? Is there anyone willing to sacrifice all their time and money?

Traduttore, Traditore

It was, and is, even worse for oral interpreters. Not only is it exhausting, but the interpreter for a great "infallible" *lama* inevitably takes all the blame and none of the credit. The proverb "traduttore, traditore," means "translator, traitor," but it sounds much better in Italian. It certainly sets the tone. In general, oral interpreters wield awesome powers. Just consider international relations, war correspondents, technical instructions, the invisible UN translators, and our own invisible translators here in your ears. And now, Dharma interpreters are responsible for your understanding of Buddhist teachings. Oral interpreters are supposedly best kept out of view and to some extent out of mind, because the recipients or target audience is meant to believe that they are hearing the exact meaning and intent of the speaker, with no intervening "interpretation." And here, I have to admit, my main motivation for learning Tibetan in the first place was to communicate with my own teacher, the late Kalu Rinpoche, without the irritating intrusion of an interpreter.

But it is impossible to render an exact interpretation. Take, for example, the delicate dance of diplomatic translation, where the speaker is angry or uncouth, and the translator must defuse the situation. Or, in some cases, the teacher may simply be wrong and the interpreter has to decide whether to correct the mistakes in translation or trust in the so-called "oral tradition." Conversely, an exact translation may not be clear enough for the audience, and the interpreter must add information for it to make sense. The multi-cultural complexities of the job are tremendous and difficult to carry. I have had to make such choices countless times. For one example: I usually interpret using the first person "I" to convey a more direct experience of the speaker. But when a great *lama* starts bragging about their great accomplishments, I cannot get the "I" out of my mouth. I helplessly revert to "Rinpoche says…" At such times, I wish I really were invisible. Is this just a cultural response, or is it gendered? Could a male interpreter boast more easily and faithfully?

More and more women are taking this role, since it is open to them and, in general, women are accepted in "service" roles. The life of an oral interpreter means traveling a lot, getting little reimbursement (let alone childcare), and being prepared for almost any subject that the speaker might introduce. If it goes well, the master is great, if it goes badly, "shoot the messenger." For female translators, even the optics are cringe-worthy: the great man on a high silk-draped throne declaring words of wisdom; the little lady down on the ground scribbling frantically in a notebook.

So why now do many women become interpreters and translators? Is it the urge to facilitate communication? To get close to great spiritual or powerful teachers? Or are we more comfortable being invisible? Though I hope to inspire more women translators, at the same time, I have two warnings to add to my previous precautionary tale. One is that Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) will likely be able to do the job better very soon. The other, in the case of Tibetan, is that the younger refugees now regard translation as Western attempts to further "colonize" their culture, and what was once encouraged by the Tibetan *lama*s is now very much resented. Luckily, there are many Tibetans, and especially Tibetan women, who are emerging as great writers and even translators, though not yet of Buddhist texts.

Notes

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1. Jan Nattier, *A Guide to the Earliest Chinese Buddhist Translations: Texts from the Eastern Han "Dong Han" and Three Kingdoms "San Guo" Periods* (Tokyo: The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology, Soka University, 2008), 24.

2. From Nattier's keynote speech, Lotsawa Translation Workshop Series, University of Colorado, Boulder, 2018. Also see Nattier, *A Guide to the Earliest Chinese Buddhist Translations*.

3. The full title was *A Buddhist Manual of Psychological Ethics, Being a Translation, Now Made for the First Time, from the Original Pāli, of the First Book in the Abhidhamma Pitaka, entitled Dhamma-sangini (Compendium of States or Phenomena*) (Royal Asiatic Society, 1900).

4. I. B. Horner, *Women Under Primitive Buddhism: Laywomen and Almswomen* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1930/1975), xx-xxi.

5. There are four volumes authored by Sera Khandro Kunzang Dekyong Wangmo. See translations by Sarah H. Jacoby, Ngawang Zangpo, and on the Lotsawa House website.

6. *Mkha' 'gro'i chos mdzod chen mo*, published by *Bla rung ārya tāre'i dpe tshogs rtsom sgrig khang,* 2017.

Tracing Yaśodharā: Unfolding Her Identity in Buddhist Literature

Arun Kumar Yadav

Buddhist literature is not only an introduction to the philosophical subjects related to the Buddha but also provides a profound insight into the lives of personalities closely associated with him. Among them, his wife Yaśodharā (Pāli: Yasodharā) is an especially intriguing figure. The depiction of Yaśodharā's character in Buddhist literature exhibits many ups and downs. This portrayal is evident not only in her biography but also in the different names attributed to her. This research paper aims to analyze the various names used for Siddhārtha Gautama's wife in Buddhist literature.

Yaśodharā is depicted in Buddhist literature as a devoted wife, a mother, and a *bhikkhun*ī (nun). While scholars of literature honor her as Siddhārtha's wife, some also express sympathy for her due to the hardships she faced in her early life, even criticizing Siddhārtha's renunciation. There is no doubt that Siddhārtha's renunciation and subsequent attainment of Buddhahood secured Yaśodharā a place in the indelible pages of history. However, this very renunciation must have deeply shaken her at that time. Literature and art provide glimpses of this emotional turmoil, particularly in the depiction of Buddha's first return to Kapilavastu after enlightenment, where Yaśodharā deliberately refrains from meeting him, instead encouraging their son Rāhula to seek his rightful inheritance. This act suggests her attempt to bring Siddhārtha back to household life.

Various scriptures refer to her by different names, reflecting the cultural, religious, and literary developments of different periods. This paper examines the chronological use of these names in the Pāli Tipitaka (Skt: Tripitaka), *Athakathā,* Buddhist Sanskrit literature, classical Sanskrit texts, and later works. Understanding these names not only sheds light on Yaśodharā's life but also helps in comprehending the socio-religious atmosphere of different eras.

Yaśodharā in Buddhist Literature

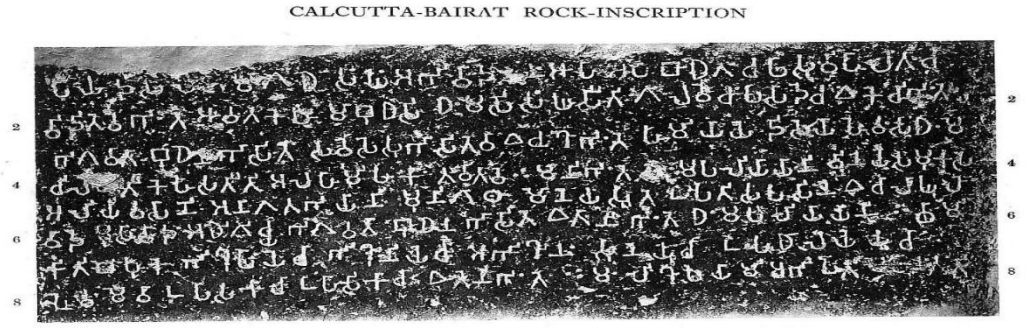
As per tradition, the Pāli Tipitaka is considered the oldest collection of Buddhist literature. Therefore, scholars believe that the information recorded in it is relatively ancient, although some details may have been added over time. In the Pāli Tipitaka, Siddhārtha's wife is primarily referred to as Rāhulamātā, Bhaddakaccānā. Bimbā, Yasodharā. These names reflect her noble lineage and inherent qualities. Here, we will analyze each name individually.

Rāhulamātā: The most commonly used term for Siddhārtha's wife in Pāli Tipi aka literature is *Rāhulamātā*, which means "mother of Rāhula." This term appears in the *Rāhulavatthu* of the Vinaya Pitaka.[1] However, this designation is not found in Buddhist Sanskrit texts. Traditional accounts state that Rāhula was born on the same day as Siddhārtha's renunciation,[2] while some sources suggest he was born a week earlier. However, certain Chinese translations of Buddhist Sanskrit texts mention that Rāhula was born several years after Siddhārtha's renunciation.[3] Due to this, Yaśodharā had to endure accusations and humiliation. This matter was resolved when Buddha, upon his first visit to Kapilavastu after attaining enlightenment, clarified that Rāhula was indeed his son, explaining that he had remained in the womb for an extended period due to certain reasons. This reflection also appears in Gāndhāra art, where newborn Rāhula is never depicted sleeping beside Yaśodharā. This suggests that the story influenced Gandhara artistic traditions.

This raises the question: Which account is closer to the truth: the Pāli Tipitaka or the

Buddhist Sanskrit texts and their translations? Upon examining various sources, we find that Buddhist Sanskrit literature and Gandhara art references appear around the 1st century BCE, whereas the Pāli accounts seem more ancient. Although there is a possibility of later interpolations in the Pāli texts, it is fairly certain that these references date back to at least the 3rd century BCE.

One strong supporting factor is Emperor Ashoka's minor rock inscription-III[4] mentioning the *Lāhulovāda Sutta,* which is most probably the Pāli *Rāhulovāda Sutta*,[5] which corresponds to the text available in the Pāli canon.[6] This indicates that Rāhula was seven years old,[7] already known and recognized before Ashoka's time. If his name existed in inscriptions from the 3rd century BCE, it must have been in use earlier.



Emperor Ashoka's Minor Rock Inscription at Bairat

Additionally, the legend that Siddhārtha named his son Rāhula – interpreting it as *Rahu* (an obstacle)[8] – gains some credibility. However, this interpretation appears only in the *Athakathās* (Pāli commentaries), suggesting it may be a later addition. On the other hand, the absence of Rāhula in some Buddhist Sanskrit sources and Gandhara art raises doubts about their reliability. It also indicates that these later traditions may have emphasized a particular sectarian perspective rather than historical accuracy.

After analyzing the historical and textual aspects, we now consider the practicality of using the name Rāhulamātā. It is evident that this designation arose simply because she was the mother of Rāhula. From a psychological and cultural perspective, the Indian tradition has long followed the practice of addressing mothers by their child's name. This convention is deeply rooted in social customs and continues to be widespread, particularly in rural North India and even in urban areas influenced by these traditions. For example, in many families, elders, including fathers, often address the eldest son/daughter's mother by her child's name, adding *mātā* (mother) as a suffix.

Given this cultural background, the compilers of the Tripitaka likely chose to refer to Siddhārtha Gautama's wife as Rāhulamātā out of respect, rather than using her direct name. This reinforces the idea that Rāhulamātā was one of the earliest and most authentic names used in the Buddhist tradition. However, it is clear that this was more of a practical, colloquial designation rather than her actual personal name.

Bhaddakaccānā: Now, we examine the second most frequently used name for Siddhārtha Gautama's wife in the Pāli Tipitaka: Bhaddakaccānā.[9] Buddhist literature describes her as one who has attained great insight, highlighting her auspicious nature.[10] According to the *Athakathā* (commentary) of the Anguttara Nikāya, the renowned Buddhist scholar Buddhaghosa confirms that she was born in the house of Suppabuddha during the Buddha's time and was given the name Bhaddakaccānā. The commentary also explicitly identifies her as Rāhula's mother.[11]

The name Bhaddakaccānā is a compound of two words: *bhadda*, meaning "auspicious" or "noble," and *kaccāna*, referring to a Brahmin *gotra* (clan). This has led some scholars to question why she bore a name reflecting a Brahmin *gotra* despite belonging to the Kśatriya class.[12] If we consider the development of traditions and their evolution, Bhaddakaccānā appears to be one of the earliest names used for Siddhārtha's wife.

A closely related name, Bhaddakaccā, is also found in Pāli literature,[13] while some Buddhist texts mention Subhaddakā,[14] which seems to be a variant of Bhaddakaccānā. Given the similarities, it is reasonable to consider these names as connected, indicating a historical or linguistic evolution of her identity within Buddhist texts.

Bimbā: The third most frequently used name for Siddhārtha Gautama's wife in the Pāli Tipitaka is Bimbā. In Buddhist literature, Bimbā means "reflection" or "image," symbolizing her beauty and charm.[15] Later Buddhist texts further define her name, stating:

> Bimbā refers to one who possesses the qualities of an excellent woman (itthiratanabhāva) and is considered exceptional among all women in the human world. Since she embodies beauty and form (bimba), she is called Bimbā.[16]

The *Athakathā* (commentary) of the Dīgha Nikāya explicitly identifies Bimbā as the mother of Rāhula.[17] Thus, we see these two names – Bhaddakaccānā and Bimbā – are both used to refer to Rāhula's mother in Buddhist literature.

A noteworthy point is that while various Buddhist commentaries describe Bimbā as Rāhula's mother, the original Pāli Tipitaka does not contain this name. This raises the question: Could Bimbā have been a later addition, influenced by its usage in Sanskrit Buddhist texts? A closely related name, Bimbāsundarī, is also found in Pāli *Athakathā*s (commentaries).[18] Given its phonetic similarity, it seems logical to associate Bimbā with Bimbāsundarī, indicating an evolution or adaptation of the name over time.

Yaśodharā: In both Pāli and other Buddhist literature, the most widely recognized and accepted name for Siddhārtha's wife is Yaśodharā, which translates to "Bearer of Glory." This name highlights her noble status and her integral role as a member of Siddhārtha's royal lineage.[19] The emphasis on her name signifies her dignity and her connection to her husband's spiritual destiny. However, it is important to note that while the name Yaśodharā does appear in Pāli Tipitaka literature, its authenticity is questionable. This name is found only in a few instances in the Apadāna,[20] and surprisingly, even in the *Therīgāthā*, a collection of verses composed by enlightened Buddhist nuns, neither Yaśodharā nor Bhaddakaccānā is mentioned. The *Therīgāthā* provides insights into the emotions and spiritual journeys of female monastics, yet the absence of Yaśodharā and Bhaddakaccānā is indeed striking.

In the rest of the Pāli literature, only the names Rāhulamātā and Bhaddakaccānā are commonly used. Additionally, many scholars consider the Apadāna a later text, with some parts potentially added at a later stage[21]. This raises the possibility that the name Yaśodharā became prominent in Buddhist tradition only after its inclusion in later Sanskrit Buddhist texts. If we examine Sanskrit Buddhist literature, the name Yaśodharā first appears in the Mahāvastu,[22] which is dated to the period between the 1st century BCE and the early centuries CE. Subsequently, this name continued to be in use in Nepal until the 11th–12th century CE and has since remained popular across various Buddhist countries. Based on the examination of these Sanskrit Buddhist texts, it seems reasonable to conclude that the name Yaśodharā was first introduced in Sanskrit Buddhist literature. Due to its widespread usage, it was later, albeit to a

limited extent, incorporated into Pāli literature at a later period, a topic we will discuss further.

Regarding Yaśodharā's father, Buddhist texts present differing accounts. Pāli literature identifies her as the daughter of Suppabuddha (Skt. Suprabuddha),[23] whereas Mahāvastu states that she was the daughter of Mahānāma, a minister (*amātya*). Meanwhile, Lalitavistara attributes her lineage to Dandapāni.[24] This variation in accounts indicates differing textual traditions regarding her parentage.

Gopā: In Buddhist literature, particularly in the *Lalitavistara*, the name Gopā is used for Siddhārtha's wife, though it is less frequently found in later texts.[25] Meaning "protector of cows," this name is associated with agricultural prosperity and nurturing qualities. It reflects Indian traditions that connect women with nourishment and caregiving. However, determining the exact reason for its usage in Buddhist literature is quite challenging. Given that cattle-rearing was a significant occupation at the time, it is possible that this name was introduced in that context.

Subhadrā: Occasionally mentioned in later Sanskrit Buddhist literature, the name Subhadrā signifies auspiciousness. It aligns her character with ideal virtues such as compassion and beauty, emphasizing her noble and graceful nature. Some Buddhist texts mention Subhaddakā,[26] which is very close to this name as well.

If we analyze all these names in the light of the chronological order of the texts, we know that the Pāli *Tipitaka* literature is considered the oldest among them. In this literature, the names Rāhulamātā, Bhaddakaccānā, Bimbā, and Yaśodhara are mentioned.[27] Among these four, Rāhulamātā and Bhaddakaccānā appear most frequently. However, Rāhulamātā is not used as a personal name, so it is not necessary to discuss it in this context.

Notably, Yaśodhara is nowhere explicitly mentioned as the mother of Rāhula in the early Pāli texts, whereas Bimbā and Bhaddakaccānā are directly identified as such. While there may be agreement or disagreement about the final date of the Tipitaka's compilation, there can be no dispute that Rāhula's name existed before the 3rd century BCE. The *Athakathā* (commentarial literature) further reinforces this, as it recognizes Rāhula's name and then associates Bimba and Bhaddakaccānā with him as his mother. However, apart from the Apadāna Athakathā, no other Pāli Athakathā refers to Yaśodhara as Rāhula's mother.

Interestingly, in the *Apadāna* text (*Yasodharātherīapadāna*), where the name Yaśodhara is used,[28] there is no mention of Bimbā or Bhaddakaccānā. The same is true for its commentary (*Athakathā*). This further strengthens the suspicion that the name Yaśodhara was adopted later in the Pāli *Tipitaka* literature due to its popularity in Sanskrit Buddhist texts.[29] Another reason for doubt arises from the fact that while Bimbā and Bhaddakaccānā appear in other *Athakathās* written by Buddhaghosa (who composed his works no earlier than the 4th–5th century CE), he does not use Yasodhara as the name for the wife of Siddhārtha. This does not mean that Buddhaghosa was unfamiliar with the name Yaśodhara, as he does mention it in his own *Athakathās*, but not in reference to Siddhārtha's wife[30].

This raises an important question: Why did Buddhaghosa use Bhaddakaccānā and Bimbā/Bimbāsundari for the same person in his commentaries but avoid using Yaśodhara? Perhaps he wanted to maintain a distinction between the Pāli tradition and the Sanskrit Buddhist tradition. However, if that were the case, why did he use Bimbā/Bimbāsundari at all? Additionally, why did Sanskrit Buddhist texts never use Bhaddakaccānā? This remains a thought-provoking issue.

On the other hand, the author of the Apadāna Athakathā remains unknown, and its

composition extends to the 7th century CE. By that time, it is likely that the name Yaśodharā had become extremely popular, prompting the Apadāna commentator to include it. Given that the Apadāna text is incorporated into the Tipitaka and is known to have undergone additions in later periods, it is possible that this name was inserted into the text.

Conclusion

The analysis of the aforementioned names confirms that determining the true name of Siddhārtha Gautama's wife is highly challenging and uncertain. Various names, such as Rāhulamātā, Bhaddakaccānā, Bimba, Bimbasundari, Yaśodharā, and Subhadrā, have been used in Buddhist texts. However, if we consider the chronological order of textual traditions, Bhaddakaccānā emerges as the oldest name and close to real name without any doubt. Although this name did not gain widespread recognition, it appears to be the most historically authentic. It was almost forgotten, likely due to the lack of reference in Sanskrit Buddhist texts, which instead widely popularized the name Yaśodharā. As a result, Yaśodharā has become the most commonly recognized name for Siddhārtha Gautama's wife worldwide today.

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Notes

1. *Atha kho rāhulamātā devī rāhula kumāra etadavoca – ‘‘eso te, rāhula, pitā. Gacchassu [gacchassa (syā.)], dāyajja yācāhī’’ti.* MahāV, 1998: 104.

2. *Tassa jātadivaseva bodhisatto nikkhamitvā bodhima e sabbaññuta patvā lokānuggaha karonto anupubbena kapilavatthu āgamma ñātīna sa gaha akāsi.* ANAK-I (1998): 279.

3. H. Kern, *Manual of Indian Buddhism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1896)m 16.

4. *Aliya-vasā i Anāgata-bhayāni Muni-gathā Moneya-sūte Upatisa-pasine e chū Lāghulovāde musā-vāda adhigichya bhagavatā : Budhena bhāsite etāni bhamte dha ma-paliyāyām ichhami.* Hultzsch 1925: 172.

5. *Mahārāhulovādasutta* of Majjhima Nikāya.

6. *Āyasmanta rāhula āmantesīti ovādadānattha āmantesi. Bhagavatā hi rāhulattherassa sambahulā dhammadesanā katā. Sāma erapañha therasseva vutta . Tathā rāhulasa yutta mahārāhulovādasutta cū arāhulovādasuttamida ambala hikarāhulovādasuttanti.* MNAK-3 (1998): 90.

7. *Ayañhi āyasmā sattavassikakāle bhagavanta cīvaraka e gahetvā ‘‘dāyajja me sama a dehī’’ti dāyajja yācamāno bhagavatā dhammasenāpatisāriputtattherassa niyyādetvā pabbājito.* MNAK-3(1998): 90.

8. *ekasmi tāva jāte evarūpo puttasineho, parosahassa kira me puttā bhavissanti, tesu ekekasmi jāte ida sinehabandhana eva va hanta dubbhejja bhavissati, rāhu jāto, bandhana jāta’’nti āha.* DNAK II (1998): 14.

9. *Mahābhiññāpattāna yadida bhaddakaccānā.* AN-I (1998): 35.

10. *Pañcaka buddhaputtassāyasmato rāhulassa mātari. Bhadda kalyā e, sokhye ca. Kulācārarūpādivasena kalyā attā bhaddā.* Abhidhānappadīpikā īkā (1998): 232.

11. *imasmi buddhuppāde suppabuddhasakkassa gehe pa isandhi ga hi, bhaddā kaccānātissā nāma aka su. Sā vayappattā bodhisattassa geha agamāsi. Sā aparabhāge rāhulakumāra nāma putta vijāyi.* ANAK-I (1998): 279.

12. G. P. Malalasekera, *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names* II (London: John Murray, 1938), 742.

13. Ibid., 741.

14. Ibid.

15.*bimba vuccati sarīra , atisayava asarīrayuttatāya bimbā, vamidhātumhā vā bo, vassa batta* - Abhidhānappadīpikā īkā (1998): 232.

16. *Rucaggatīti ruca pabhāta āgatibhūtā, ga-kārāgama katvā vutta . Itthiratanabhāvato manussaloke sabbāsa itthīna bimbapa icchannabhūtāti bimbā.* Dīghanikāya īkā II (1998): 13.
Atha bimbādevī putta rāhulakumāra āha - APAK II (1998): 261.
Satthari pana sāvatthi upanissāya viharante rāhulamātā bimbādev, JAAK II(1998): 322.

17. *Etā tesa sattannampi puttāna mātaro ahesu . Bimbādevī pana rāhulakumāre jāte rāhulamātāti paññāyittha. Aya bhariyaparicchedo.* DNAK II (1998):14.

18. *Bherī uppalava āsi, pitā suddhodano ahu*;
Mātā āsi mahāmāyā, amarā bimbasundarī, JAAK VI (1998):310.

19. *Yaso vuccati parivāro, kitti ca, te dhāretīti yasodharā*, Abhidhānappadīpikātīkā (1998): 232.

20. Apadāna II (1998): 253.

21.(Oskar von Hinüber, *A Handbook of Pali Literature* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), 61.

22. Mahāvastu Avadāna-II (1965): 34, 68, 86, 64, 96, 65, 101, 103, 117, 125, 126, 132, 133, 160, 161, 224, 248, 264, 265, 224, 326, 330, 697.

23. *imasmi buddhuppāde suppabuddhasakkassa gehe pa isandhi ga hi*, ANAK-I (1998): 279.

24. *Lalita Vistara* (1958): 300–303.

25. Ibid., 140-43.

26. Malalasekera, *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names*, 741.

27. *Bhaddakaccānā [bhaddā kaccānā (ī.)] rāhula, mātā bimbā yasodharā*. Abhidhānappadīpikā (1998): 29.

28. Apadana II (1998) : 253.

29. *So tato cavitvā devamanussesu sa saranto ubhayasampattiyo anubhavitvā imasmi buddhuppāde amhāka bodhisatta pa icca yasodharāya deviyā kucchimhi nibbattitvā rāhuloti laddhanāmo mahatā khattiyaparivārena va hi.* APAK II (1998):13.

30. *Anomadassissa pana bhagavato candavatī nāma nagara ahosi, yasavā nāma rājā pitā, yasodharā nāma mātā, nisabho ca anomo ca dve aggasāvakā, varu o nāmupa hāko, sundarī ca sumanā ca dve aggasāvikā, ajjunarukkho bodhi, a hapa āsahatthubbedha sarīra ahosi, vassasatasahassa āyūti.* JAAK-I (1998):45.

The Role of Female Deities in Shaping Nepal Maṇḍala Buddhist Traditions

Ursula Manandhar

Who are the female deities we venerate in modern Nepal Maṇḍala? How did they originate, and what narratives define them? Are they authentic divine figures or symbolic representations? While the Pāli canon does not reference women as deities, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions place female goddesses at the heart of their sūtras, tantras, and rituals. The anthropomorphic imagery of Buddhist deities began during the Kusāna Empire (1st century CE) and evolved through the intellectual contributions of institutions like Nālandā, Taksaśilā, and Vikramaśilā. Nepali scholars, monks, and artists adapted and refined these traditions into distinct artistic and ritualistic expressions that shaped Himalayan Buddhist art and culture.

Legendary Accounts of Nepal Maṇḍala

Nepal has been known as Nepal Maṇḍala from ancient times, originally referring to the central area of origin and the surrounding areas. This region corresponds with Nepal's contemporary borders. Nepal was then a single area with several districts rather than separated territories. The name "Nepal Maṇḍala" stood for the government, which was divided into two systems: a central government controlling the capital and a provincial system handling several provinces. Modern use of the word "*maṇḍala*" corresponds to the idea of a "nation."

Both Buddhist and Shaiva systems depend extensively on the *maṇḍala*. *Mandala*s in Buddhist philosophy – especially Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna – symbolize several facets of Buddhist practice. Vajrayāna Buddhists envisioned Nepal as a *maṇḍala*-like entity, According to Vajrayāna traditions, the Earth itself is seen as a *maṇḍala*, with Mount Sumeru at its center and four main continents arranged in four cardinal directions. Nepal Maṇḍala is supposed to be located inside this holy cosmological framework.

Nepal Maṇḍala is steeped in mythical narratives, folklore, and spiritual traditions. Before its modern statehood, it was regarded as Bodhisattva Bhūmi, a domain of enlightened beings. Female deities emerged during the evolution of Mahāyāna Buddhism, beginning with Prajñāpāramitā, the embodiment of wisdom, in the 1st century CE. Other semi-wrathful deities, such as *yoginī*s, were introduced through their iconographic representations.

The divine essence of Nepal Maṇḍala is rooted in the Svayambhū Purāna, which recounts how Vipaśyī Buddha visited Lake Nāgarhadā and released a lotus seed into the water. This seed transformed into a thousand-petaled lotus, upon which Svayambhū (Ādi Buddha) manifested. Nairātmya Devī (Guhyeśvarī) emerged from the lotus, symbolizing selfless wisdom. Her role is central to Vajrayāna Buddhism, alongside figures like Hāritī, the protective Yaksanī. These narratives highlight a matriarchal cultural ethos, where female deities embody wisdom, protection, and enlightenment.

Prajñāpāramitā: The Embodiment of Perfect Wisdom

The term "*prajñāpāramitā*" combines "*prajñā*" (wisdom) and "*pāramitā*" (perfection), and is often translated as the "mother of all Buddhas," or in Nepal Bhāsā, Buddha Mātā. She is not a literal mother but represents the source from which enlightenment arises. Her philosophical foundation lies in the Prajñāpāramitā *sūtra*s, which emphasize wisdom as essential to attaining

enlightenment.

Illuminated manuscripts, such as the *Astasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* (Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Verses), serve as both devotional objects and teaching tools. These manuscripts reflect reverence for Prajñāpāramitā, especially during the Licchavi period when her worship became prominent. The oldest known scripture, Śatasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā, resides in Tham Bahī (Bhagwan Bahal), Nepal Maṇḍala, and is believed to have been partially written by Mañjuśrī himself.

Artistic depictions of Prajñāpāramitā in Nepalese Buddhist art portray her with serene majesty. She is often shown seated in meditation, holding a lotus and a manuscript symbolizing purity and wisdom. Her representation underscores her spiritual significance and connection to the philosophy of emptiness (*śūnyatā*).

Visualization of Ultimate Wisdom

Vajrayāna Buddhism, or the "shortcut method," focuses on achieving enlightenment through *tantra*, *mantra*, and *sādhana*. It categorizes *tantra*s into father, mother, and non-dual. *Yoginī tantra*s, as mother *tantra*s, emphasize enlightenment through purification and meditation. They feature mother goddesses like Hevajra-Nairātmya and Cakrasa vara-Vajrayoginī, symbolizing the union of wisdom (*prajñā*) and method (*upāya*).

Nairātmya (Guhyeśvarī). The selfless Nairātmya represents transcendental wisdom. According to the Svayambhū Purāna, she emerged from the lotus planted by Vipaśyī Buddha. When Mañjuśrī drained Lake Nāgarhadā, he invoked Nairātmya to control the water. Her dual compassionate and wrathful forms symbolize her protective and transformative nature. The Guhyeśvarī Temple in Kathmandu remains a key site for her worship.

Vajrayoginī. Linked to the ancient city of Sankhu, Vajrayoginī's veneration began after Mañjuśrī's visit. Known as Khadgayoginī for her iconography involving a sword, she is celebrated in an eight-day festival in Caitra. She embodies ultimate wisdom and is honored as a transformative guide.

Vajravārāhī. A consort of Cakrasa vara, Vajravārāhī (Diamond Sow) epitomizes the indestructible nature of wisdom. Her practices, conducted by Guthi groups, are esoteric and transformative, aiming to purify defilements and expedite spiritual progress.

Deities of Compassion

In Nepal Maṇḍala, numerous deities are revered, based on diverse ceremonies, customs, and meditative practices. The *yoginī*s belong to the category of wrathful deities, whereas the Tārās are classified as tranquil and compassionate deities who alleviate the suffering of sentient beings. They safeguard and defend these beings much like a mother caring for her child. The concept of these benevolent female deities originates from the revered *Guhyasamāja Tantra*, wherein they are presented as the consorts of the Pañca Buddhas, or the Five Transcendent Buddhas. The names of these deities are Māmaki, Locanī, Pāndaravāsinī, Tārā, and Vajradhāteśvarī.

In addition to these figures, there are 21 emanations of Tārā referenced in tantric literature, including the *Sādhanamālā, Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*s, and *Tārā Tantra.* The inhabitants of Nepal Maṇḍala perform Tārā Dharma Pūjā in reverence to Goddess Tārā. These rituals are conducted to invoke prosperity and seek the blessings of the goddess.

Tārā is typically depicted as an attractive female, not beyond the age of 16, with a

youthful visage and serene expression. She and her manifestations symbolize the boundless adaptability of wisdom and compassion in addressing the diverse needs of sentient beings. Through her various forms, Tārā offers a path to transcend fear, ignorance, and suffering, guiding practitioners toward enlightenment.

Prosperity, Abundance, and Longevity

Vasudhārā is the Buddhist deity of abundance, prominently venerated in Nepal Maṇḍala. Historically, there appears to be a connection between Tantric Buddhism and the occult rituals associated with Vasudhārā Devī. The sacred shrine room of the Newar people, known as the Āgam, is comprised of two distinct sections: the inner shrine and the outer shrine. As a *guhya*, or hidden shrine, access to the inner sanctum is restricted to initiated individuals, while the outer shrine remains accessible to the public. The Āgam venerate several deities, including Vajrasattva, Mañjuśrī, and Vasudhārā.

Vasudhārā embodies the "public" dimensions of Vajravārāhī, the esoteric *yoginī* residing within the inner sanctum of the Āgam. Known as the "bearer of treasures," Vasudhārā is venerated alongside the principal deity in the outer sanctuary. She is the goddess of wealth, prosperity, abundance, and fertility, symbolizing "temporal prosperity" in its entirety, including material wealth, physical health, and emotional fulfillment.

The etymology of Vasudhārā stems from the Sanskrit terms *vasudhā* and *dharā*. *Vasudhā* translates to "earth" or "land," while "*dharā*" means "holder" or "bearer." Hence, Vasudhārā signifies "holder of the earth" or "bearer of the earth." In Buddhism, she is also referred to as Dhānyatārā (grain-rich) and Śobhanā (beautiful or decorated), highlighting her association with prosperity and abundance.

In Buddhist rituals, Vasudhārā is occasionally identified as Prthivī Mātā, the goddess of the soil. During Siddhārtha Gautama's pursuit of enlightenment under the Bodhī tree, Mārā, the embodiment of obstacles to enlightenment, presented significant challenges to his meditation. Prthivī Mātā was the only witness to his innumerable previous lives, during which he fulfilled the Daśa Pāramitā (ten perfections) believed to lead to enlightenment. Vasudhārā or Prthivī Mātā bore witness to Śākyamuni Buddha's *pranidhāna* (vow) as Sumedha Rishi before Dipankara Buddha (the 24th preceding Buddha from Gautama Buddha) to become a Samyaksambuddha Therefore, Siddhartha Gautama invoked the goddess as a witness to his perseverance and vow fulfillment. The Bhūmisparśha Mudrā is the earth-touching or earth-witnessing gesture that Siddhartha Gautama used to summon the earth goddess as a witness to his attainment of enlightenment.

Usnīsavijayā, the deity of long life, is portrayed with a crown (*usnīsa*) atop her head, symbolizing victory (*vijayā*). She embodies longevity, health, and prosperity, which are closely connected to White Tārā, Amitāyus, and Usnīsavijayā. She is depicted with a hue resembling the autumn moon, featuring three faces and eight arms that carry various objects and perform distinct actions.

The Janko ritual, observed at the age of 77 years, 7 months, and 7 days, holds deep significance among Newar Buddhists. This ceremony marks the transition into old age and celebrates the cumulative wisdom and experience acquired over a lifetime. A central element of this ritual is the construction of a *stūpa*, which symbolizes an individual's spiritual journey and commitment to enlightenment. The *stūpa* is revered for the sacred relics or texts it contains.

During the Janko ritual, Usnīsavijayā is enshrined within the *garbha* (inner sanctum) of the stūpa. The ritual underscores the interconnectedness of life's longevity, spiritual progress, and reverence for sacred traditions.

Protective Mother Goddesses

The Ājīma goddesses serve as protectors of Nepal Maṇḍala. Derived from the term "grandmother" in Nepal Bhāsā, they are venerated as nurturing and safeguarding figures. Key Ājīma deities include:

Hāritī Ājīma. Originally a demoness, she transformed into a guardian of children, worshipped at Svayambhūnātha.

Nyatabhulu Ājīma. Associated with purity and protection.

Lunmari Ājīma (Bhadrakālī). Believed to ward off evil.

Lutī Ājīma (Indrayānī). Revered as a guardian.

Pañcaraksā. The Pañcaraksā goddesses embody protective energies, safeguarding practitioners from harm and promoting well-being. Their texts and rituals emphasize their role as guardians against adversity.

Conclusion

Nepal Maṇḍala and its Buddhist traditions are a treasure trove of narratives that celebrate the profound glory of female deities. These goddesses are far more than mere tales, myths, or symbolic figures; they embody the very foundation of the great civilization that thrives today. They are reservoirs of profound knowledge and serve as vital mediums for *sadhana*, the spiritual practices that guide individuals toward enlightenment. Rituals and traditional practices of this region remain incomplete without venerating and meditating upon these divine feminine forces. Through engagement with deities such as *yogini*s and Taras, practitioners cultivate the ten wholesome deeds, thereby purifying their *citta* (mind) from unwholesome tendencies. Thus, these female deities must not be relegated to mere objects of blind devotion but should be revered as catalysts for mental concentration and spiritual awakening.

However, the socio-cultural landscape of Nepal Maṇḍala has undergone significant changes over time. Despite the historical emphasis on non-duality and gender equality evident in ancient practices, today's society has largely shifted towards male-dominated norms. This shift has contributed to a diminished recognition of the philosophical and metaphysical contributions of female deities to the region's heritage. Ancient texts and rituals clearly illustrate that Nepal Maṇḍala's civilization was built on the principles of balance and mutual significance between masculine and feminine energies. Yet, contemporary societal structures often overlook these foundational truths.

The term "consort," frequently associated with female deities, is particularly misunderstood in this context. Rather than signifying a secondary or subordinate role, it represents *prajna* (wisdom), an integral aspect of Buddhist metaphysics. Female deities embody both conventional truth and ultimate truth, underscoring their pivotal role in maintaining the spiritual and cultural fabric of Nepal Maṇḍala.

Through this study, it becomes evident that reconnecting with these ancient traditions is crucial. Acknowledging the historical significance of female deities not only honors their legacy

but also challenges contemporary societal norms that marginalize their role. The deities of Nepal Maṇḍala are more than symbols; they are living embodiments of equality, wisdom, and enlightenment – ideals that remain as relevant today as they were in the past. Reintegrating their veneration into modern consciousness offers a pathway to restoring balance and fostering a more inclusive and spiritually aligned society.

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Japanese Buddhist Women: Centuries of Challenges and Change

Kathy Uno

My talk reflects my specialization in modern Japanese history. Due to available sources, this talk focuses on the stories of wealthy, educated Buddhist women, rather than their poorer sisters. My two main aims are:

1. to present selected stories of Japanese Buddhist women facing challenges over nine centuries, sometimes in their own words, and
2. through these stories introduce the history of Japanese women from ancient times to the 15th century to counter common, deeply ingrained stereotypes.

The relatively favorable position of women in Japanese society impacted Buddhism as it entered and evolved in Japan from the 6th century CE. Some women wielded power as emperors and empresses, and earlier as warriors and chieftains. Women and men cultivated rice, essential for living in small, thatched-roof villages. Women accumulated, managed, and inherited land. They made and traded products. Marriages were by consent, impermanent, and not regulated by the state; sexual fidelity was not required of women or men, and spouses generally lived in separate dwellings, with the man visiting wife and children, so women were not living with or dominated by their in-laws.

As for religion before Buddhism, the centrality of women is striking. There are female and male spirits ("deities," Japanese: *kami*) found in nature, animals, spirits of deceased humans, and anthropomorphic forms. Amaterasu, Sun Goddess of agriculture and weaving, and an ancestor of the imperial family, emerged as the most powerful one. Contented *kami* ought good fortune, but their displeasure resulted in crop failure, illness, death, and other misfortunes. As a rule, shamans (mediums) in Japan are female, so it was women who communicated with the *kami* to ask for commands, advice or prophecies, and to pacify dissatisfied, harmful kami. Pleasing *kami* required purity through cleansing and abstinences; avoiding death, illness, and blood, and approaching with purity, giving praise and thanks before making a request. Over time, this polytheistic way of the *kami* (Shinto) accommodated Buddhism. Some distinguished little between *kami* and Buddhas in their prayers. Others regarded certain *kami* and humans, including some female *kam*i and women, as manifestations of Mahāyāna *buddha*s and *bodhisattva*s, For example, some saw the Sun Goddess as a manifestation of Cosmic Buddha (Vairocana, Japanese:. Dainichi), omnipresent like sunlight. Shrines and their *kami* protected the buddhas venerated in temples, and vice versa. From this shrine, temple complexes developed.

Given the centrality of women in native spirituality, it is not surprising that the first Buddhist clergy in Japan were female. Furthermore, the first Japanese dispatched overseas to Korea for Buddhist study were women, revealing high regard for female literacy, learning, and intelligence. By 624, under female Emperor Suiko, records show 569 nuns, 816 monks, and 46 temples. From associations of women with healing in Shinto, nuns resided in some homes. The imperial court embraced Buddhism for this-worldly benefits – its promise to protect the peace and well-being of the realm – and to dispel the pollution of death. No longer were palaces abandoned when the sovereign died.

In the early classical period, Empress Kōmyō (701–760), who was literate, devout, beautiful, a woman of wealth, status, and power, engaged in a wide range of activities deepening Buddhism in Japan. She established a shelter for the poor and orphans, a medical clinic, and a vast *sūtra*-copying project. She turned part of her palace into a convent, Hokkeji Temple, which

survives to this day. She also opened a bathhouse. Legend has it that at a bather's request, she sucked pus from the leper's sores all over his body. When she finished, he became radiant Ashuku (Akśobhya), Buddha of the East.[1]

Furthermore, from 741 Empress Kōmyō was involved in the founding of provincial temples, each flanked by a nunnery and monastery. At these state temples, female and male Buddhist officials chanted the *Sūtra of the Golden Light of Kings* for the protection of emperor and nation. Like her mother, she, her husband Emperor Shōmu, and her daughter who ruled twice as Emperor Kōken, and Emperor Shōtoku took Buddhist vows. Outside the court in a desperate time of epidemics and famine, prospects of healing, improved livelihood, lessening death's pollution, and salvation drew thousands of ordinary women and men out of their homes to follow Gyoki, a compassionate monk who flouted the state's ban on teaching Buddhism to commoners. On government orders, he founded pairs of nunneries and monasteries for his followers, to replace mixed-gender monastic institutions.

In the classical and medieval ages, although a full female ordination platform was absent in Japan, women took vows in private ordinations – to heal, find solace after family members died, to cope with social and economic difficulties. Women of means supported priests, endowed institutions, and entered convents. Nuns' lifestyles varied. Hair length ranged from floor-length hair with one short lock to shoulder length to shaven heads. Clothing ranged from simplified lay clothes to monastic robes. Residences ranged from convents and hermitages to lay dwellings to wandering without a fixed dwelling.

Although doctrines of women's greater karmic obstacles were thought ubiquitous, e.g., the Five Hindrances and Three Obediences, and women's entry into Amida's Pure Land requiring her transformation into a man, recent scholarship reveals little awareness or concern about this among noblewomen, noblemen, or commoners before the 14th century. Belief in powerful female *kami* and women's indispensable religious roles as shamans, healers, and oracles, worked against viewing them as defiled or facing greater karmic obstacles than men. Before the late thirteenth century, save one very obscure *sūtra*,[2] women's greater spiritual obstacles did not appear in Maitreya, Kannon, Jizô, Medicine Buddha, or even Amida practices. Maitreya's Tuśita Heaven and Tenjukoku (Land of Infinite Light) were popular concepts in which women could enter into female bodies. Tales of young and old nuns and laywomen from the 9th century describe purity, long years, or intense practice leading to an encounter with a *bodhisattva*, enveloping purple or fragrant clouds, or a promise of rebirth in paradise, all as women.

Following a late 13th-century revival, nuns and visitors to Hokkeji worshipped Empress Kōmyō as a manifestation of Eleven-Faced Kannon (Avalokiteśvara) at the convent she founded. The image remains there today. At Chūgūji, a nunnery once the empress's residence, restored from the 1260s by nun Shinnyo (1211-?), residents and pilgrims alike followed Empress Hashihito (?-665) as a manifestation of Amida (Amitābha). The abbesses and female monastics led commoners and nobles at these nunneries in venerating these devout empresses as models of devotion and as *bodhisattva*s of compassion, healing, guidance, and wisdom, having the power to bring comfort in this life and rebirth, respectively, in the Land of Infinite Light (Tenjukoku) and the Pure Land.[3]

In Lady Nijō's diary, lost until the 20th century, we see in detail one highborn, imperfect, frank, very articulate Japanese Buddhist woman's life – a favorite consort (but not wife) of Retired Emperor (RE) Go Fukakusa, raised in the imperial palace from age four, and hailing

from a well-known line of poets. In her 1271–1306 journal, Lady Nijō conveys her life experiences first at the top of Japanese society and then on its periphery after the empress, resentful of Lady Nijō's youth, similar name, and finally her indiscretions, forced her from the palace. Her description of a royal birthday party in 1285 reveals the centrality of Buddhism in court life in the 13th century, as in the 8th to 19th centuries.

> By dawn the mansion was prepared for the celebration [of 90th birthday of the grandmother of the reigning emperor]. The main room, which faced south, had three sections, In the middle [section], a Buddhist altar had been set up…. on the northern side and a picture of the historic Buddha hung … In front of the altar stood a table for incense and flowers, flanked on either side by candleholders. A raised mat for the priest reading the sutras was placed in front of that table, and behind it a mat for the priest conducting the service. On the [south] veranda … was a table with two sutra boxes containing the Long Life Sutra and the Lotus Sutra. … Religious banners and filagreed ornaments hung on the pillars in the main room.
>
> The emperor's seat in the western section of the room consisted of embroidered cushions in the Chinese style surrounded by bamboo blinds… [Screens surrounded] Empress Oomiya's seat in the eastern section.
>
> The celebration began with the procession of [emperor, retired emperors, and their spouses, and high officials]….The dancers and musicians performed.. [Then] the lecturers … went to their seats… and an assistant struck a gong.The altar boys …after Sanskrit chanting, … distributed baskets of petals. Then musicians played… and the priests circled around the altar once, scattering petals and chanting sutras. [Then] more dancing… and [followed by] presentation of gifts to dancers and priests. [The celebration ended with meals served to the imperial family.[4]

Like many noblewomen without income or relatives to turn to, Lady Nijō became a nun. Feeling out of place and lonely, from 1289 she journeyed alone in her robes, mainly on foot, to famous temples and shrines, describing her travels, her religious practice, and her retrospective devotion to RE GoFukakusa. She left and returned to the capital several times, all the while copying *sūtra*s using brush and ink to accumulate merit for him. By chance, at Iwashimizu Hachiman Shrine housing her ancestral deity, the god of warriors, she reunited for one night with RE GoFukakusa who was also visiting there.

***

Until the 19th century, Shinto and Buddhism were intertwined in Japan; Kumano is a splendid, ancient shrine-temple complex. Although the power and wealth of emperors and nobles declined, and that of warriors rose during the centuries of transition from late classical to medieval times, in the descent into dark times, the faith and devotion of Buddhist women and men of all classes continued, and institutions for female believers increased. The early medieval period saw an upswing in the number of women entering and founding convents due to the deaths of husbands, relatives, and allies in armed conflict. Women became nuns due to illness; imminent death; reversals of fortune; to mourn or pray for the afterlife of deceased children, husbands, lovers, or employers; or following their mistresses. Also, some convents were associated with Dharma

lineages of temples and networks established by the highest military authorities (*shoguns*).

In the late 12th century, Kenreimon'in (Taira no Tokuko) (1155–1214), former empress, mother of eight-year old Emperor Antoku who drowned in the Taira family's epic defeat at Dannoura in 1185, ended her years as a nun in quiet solitude at Jakkoo-in, praying for the salvation of son, kin, and allies, far from the transient splendor of the court and short-lived glory of her clan. As violence and disorder increased, in 1355, less famous women like Myoo'a from local warrior families founded or took refuge in convents. She had lost four male relatives – husband, brother, nephew, and father-in-law – in battle in 1351.

Women entering convents like Myooa's Shion'in aimed at better rebirths and comfort for the souls of men who died in battle. They also gained material and spiritual sustenance for themselves. Some early medieval convents lasted only a generation or two, but others founded later by top military authorities and aristocratic families lasted into the late warrior age and beyond, providing devotional spaces and shelter from political and economic upheavals. In the late warrior period, some tonsured royal and aristocratic girls faced marriage restrictions. A few served as refuges for wives who were granted divorces after two to three years of practice and service. Ordinary women worshipped at home, attended rites and festivals at local temples, or even went on long pilgrimages. Kumano nuns continued to travel from place to place, raising funds for shrines and temples and teaching Buddhism through their paintings and narratives.

To conclude, I present very briefly Japanese women in the modern age (1868–present).. Buddhism anchored the radical visions of Japan's two great 20th-century feminists. Like Lady Nijō, both were highly educated, extremely articulate writers, and adventurous. Like compassionate Kannon, drawing on the Buddhist faith of her parents, from the 1920s,Takamure Itsue (1894-1964) wrote history to help realize her burning dream of renovating Japanese society by abolishing an oppressive family and the state supporting it, to nurture, protect, and uplift the dregs of society, e.g., the poor and abused children and women. Hiratsuka Raichō (1886-1971) founded Seitō (Bluestocking) women's group and journal (1913–16), heralding women's creativity and freedom and criticizing the existing family, claiming "In the beginning woman was the sun…," the origin of Japan. Then she developed the New Woman Association (1920–22), which advocated for woman suffrage, protection of mothers and children, postwar women's federations, and world peace, while continuing the Zen practice she began in her twenties.

> When we started were were still in our twenties,... [even] teens, and not always fully aware of the consequences of our actions … In many instances, we acted because we were driven by an irrepressible inner force. As to the manifesto, 'In the Beginning, Woman Was the Sun,' I little imagined it would resonate so strongly in the hearts and minds of women, or that … be remembered in women's history as women's first "declaration of their status as human beings" or 'declaration of women's rights.
>
> But in retrospect, perhaps this was to be expected. Trampled and despised for generations in a male-dominated world, Japanese women were ready to explode and I happened to be the escape valve. I was no doubt the right person, for I had practiced Zen for several years and freed myself of preconceptions and reached the realm where there is no Self.[5]

Notes

1. M. Ury,"Nuns and Other Devotees in *Genkō shakusho* (1322) Japan's First History of Buddhism," *Engendering Faith: Women and Buddhism in Premodern Japan* (University of Michigan Press, Center For Japanese Studies, 2002), 194–205.

2. See especially the reference to Junko Nishikawa's exhaustive research (p. 303) in Lori Meeks, *Hokkeji and the Reemergence of Female Monastic Orders in Premodern Japan* (, 2010.

3. Lori Meeks, "In Her Likeness: Female Divinity and Leadership at Medieval Chuuguuji," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 32:4(2011): 351–92.

4. Lady Nijō (trans. Karen Brazell), *The Confessions of Lady Nijō* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973), 163–66.

5. Ibid., 214.

Vietnam Buddhist Nuns: Bridging Tradition and Modernity

Thich Nu Hue Quang

Vietnamese Buddhist nuns have played a pivotal role as a dynamic bridge between tradition and modernity within Vietnamese Buddhism, especially in the modern period. Tracing their historical evolution from the 1st century CE to the present highlights their enduring contributions to spiritual practice, societal engagement, and national development. From overcoming socio-cultural constraints during feudal times to actively participating in national liberation movements and post-war reconstruction, Vietnamese nuns have consistently demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability. Exemplary figures such as Bhiksuni Dieu Nhan, a recognized Zen patriarch, and others who contributed to national independence embody this spirit.

This study examines the multifaceted roles of contemporary Vietnamese Buddhist nuns, encompassing religious cultivation through precept observance and traditional ceremonies like Ullambana. It further investigates their dedication to education, including pursuing advanced degrees and conducting scholarly research, and their innovative utilization of information technology and social media for Dharma dissemination, reaching wider audiences. The study also explores their exemplary commitment to social welfare through active engagement in community healthcare, counseling, disaster relief, and other charitable endeavors, embodying engaged Buddhism.

Addressing contemporary challenges faced by young nuns, particularly in integrating advanced academic training with practical monastic life, this paper identifies key areas for improvement: enhanced mentorship, better integration of specialized skills within monastic structures, and expanded networking. Proposed solutions include fostering foreign language proficiency, establishing international exchange programs, leveraging online platforms for global connectivity, supporting translation projects, and facilitating participation in international volunteer programs. These initiatives aim to strengthen connections between Vietnamese nuns and the global Buddhist community, fostering mutual learning and contributing to the global advancement of Buddhist studies and practice. Ultimately, the dynamic interplay between tradition and adaptation is essential for the continued flourishing of Vietnamese Buddhist nuns in the contemporary world.

Bridging Traditional Values and Modern Life

In the unending flow of time, Vietnamese Buddhist nuns have played a vital role as a bridge, harmoniously connecting sacred traditional values with the rhythms of modern life. Not only have they played significant roles in preserving and safeguarding the essence of Buddhism, they have also demonstrated dynamism and creativity in applying Buddhist teachings to contemporary society. This adaptability has made Buddhism increasingly relevant, practical, and deeply embedded in the lives of Vietnamese people. From the remarkable nuns of history, who overcame social prejudices to dedicate themselves to the path of spiritual practice and service, to contemporary nuns who are making major contributions in various fields of society, Buddhist nuns have continually affirmed their indispensable role in the development of Vietnamese Buddhism. This article delves into the historical journey, roles, challenges, and opportunities of Vietnamese nuns in the current context.

An Overview of Vietnamese Buddhist Nuns Throughout History

Vietnamese Buddhist nuns emerged as early as the first century CE, during a time when feudal society imposed severe restrictions on women's roles. Even in such circumstances, exceptional female monastics like Bhiksunis Phuong Dung, Vu Thi Thuc, Thieu Hoa, and Khau Ni arose, harmoniously integrating spiritual practice and worldly responsibilities. These figures vividly exemplify the indomitable spirit and courage of Vietnamese women. They not only overcame societal biases against their gender but also directly participated in struggles against foreign invasions, making significant contributions to the nation's independence. After victory, instead of seeking fame or public acclaim, they chose the path of monastic life, returning to the serenity of the Dharma, quietly practicing and embodying virtue and wisdom as enduring examples for future generations.[i]

From the 10th to the 18th centuries, an era when Vietnamese Buddhism flourished, numerous virtuous and talented nuns emerged. A notable figure was Bhikkunī Dieu Nhan (Ly Dynasty), a highly attained monastic honored as a Zen patriarch, marking her as the first nun in Vietnamese Buddhism to achieve such a prestigious title.[ii] During the Tran Dynasty, Bhikkunī Tue Thong, known for her strict adherence to the precepts and profound understanding of scriptures, was bestowed the title "Tue Thong Great Master" by King Tran Nghe Tong, showcasing the royal court's respect for the contributions of nuns.[iii]

Continuing this tradition, throughout various historical periods, Vietnamese Buddhist nuns have consistently demonstrated a spirit of service to both the Dharma and the nation with flexibility, adapting to the social context of the time. At the dawn of the 20th century, the Buddhist revival movement received enthusiastic support from senior nuns such as Bhiksunis Dieu Ngoc and Dieu Tinh, who laid a solid foundation for the development of the nunneries in a new era. During the anti-French and anti-American resistance wars, nuns from both the North and South endured hardships and actively participated in patriotic activities, contributing to the defense of the nation. The names of Vietnamese Buddhist nuns such as Bhiksuni Dam Thu, Dam Soan, Dam Huu, Dam Tin, Huynh Lien, and Bach Lien became symbols of patriotism and dedication. These individuals were not only virtuous monastics, but also silent warriors who contributed significantly to the nation's ultimate victories. In the modern era, Bhiksuni Nhu Thanh (1911–1999) made significant contributions to the establishment of the Northern Buddhist Nun Sangha, playing a crucial role in consolidating and advancing Vietnamese nuns' development up to the present day.

After the country's reunification, nuns continued their path of spiritual practice, spreading the Dharma, and actively engaging in social activities to contribute to national reconstruction. The election of many nuns to representative bodies such as the National Assembly and People's Councils serves as evidence of society's recognition of their contributions. The prestigious awards bestowed by the State further affirmed the relentless dedication of Buddhist nuns to the nation's development.

Vietnamese Buddhist Nuns Today

The transmission and observance of monastic precepts remain a top priority for the religious development. nuns. Annual ordination ceremonies, guided by highly learned *vinaya* teachers, ensure the preservation and rigorous practice of precepts. Additionally, the Central Nun

Subcommittee organizes short-term *vinaya* training courses, offering young nuns opportunities to enhance their understanding and application of precepts in modern life.

In their roles as inheritors and promoters of the essence of Buddhism, Vietnamese Buddhist nuns have been and continue to be instrumental in preserving and spreading traditional cultural and spiritual values. Through generations, Vietnamese nuns have tirelessly preserved and disseminated profound humanistic values embodied in major ceremonies like Ullambana (Vu Lan) filial piety ceremonies, Buddha's Birthday, Medicine Buddha Sūtra chanting for peace, Amitãbha Buddha Day, and other traditional rituals. Under the guidance of nuns, these rituals not only serve as spiritual practices but also as significant cultural and spiritual events, creating a serene, solemn, and meaningful space for Buddhist communities.

In addition, as dedicated spiritual teachers, Buddhist nuns frequently organize Dharma classes, ranging from basic to advanced levels, as well as traditional retreats such as One-Day Mindfulness Retreats, the Eight Precepts Retreat, Buddha Recitation Retreats, and other specialized retreats at monasteries. These activities provide lay Buddhists with opportunities to systematically learn Buddhist teachings and diligently practice, thereby deepening their faith and understanding of the Dharma.

Notably, to meet the increasingly diverse needs for spiritual practice in modern society, retreats have been expanded to cater to various groups, including children, students, busy individuals, entrepreneurs, and those newly exploring Buddhism. These retreats, with content tailored to each specific audience, have received positive feedback from the community and have contributed to spreading the values of mindfulness, peace, and morality to a wide range of people. They help participants apply Buddhist teachings in their daily lives, address challenges, and discover the meaning of life. Through these efforts, Buddhist nuns not only preserve traditional values, but also make them more vibrant and relevant in the context of modern society.

Education and Academic Research

Building on the spirit of learning and practice of their predecessors, contemporary Vietnamese Buddhist nuns are tirelessly striving to enhance their expertise and knowledge of Buddhist teachings. The younger generation of nuns enjoys more favorable conditions for education, not only within domestic Buddhist institutions but also through access to renowned Buddhist centers and academies worldwide. This global exposure enables Vietnamese nuns to acquire profound Buddhist knowledge while broadening their perspectives and fostering international cultural exchanges.

Beyond studying, many nuns take on significant roles in the administration of Buddhist schools and research institutes, contributing to the education and training of future monastics for the Buddhist community. In addition, they actively engage in research, translation of scriptures, compilation and creation of Buddhist literature, enriching the cultural heritage of Vietnamese Buddhism, and spreading the noble values of wisdom and compassion to the broader public. These endeavors showcase the dynamism and creativity of Vietnamese nuns, while affirming their critical role in the development of Vietnamese Buddhism in an era of global integration.

Embracing Technology in Buddhist Activities

Today, Vietnamese Buddhist nuns extend their influence beyond monasteries by actively utilizing information technology and social media platforms (Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and so on) to spread the Dharma to the community. The use of modern communication tools allows messages about mindful living, peace, and Buddhist activities to be conveyed quickly and accurately to all levels of society, especially younger audiences, creating an open and approachable space for interaction between nuns and the public.

Through online lectures, Dharma talks, short videos on meditation, practice guidance, and charitable activities shared on social media, nuns have broken barriers of space and time, reaching people around the world and spreading the ethical and spiritual values of Buddhism in lively and accessible ways. Young nuns, with their dynamism, knowledge, and enthusiasm, have emerged as pioneers in applying technology, serving as an essential bridge between traditional Buddhism and modern life. They have made Buddhist teachings easier to relate to and practical for everyday living, becoming not just teachers of the Dharma but also modern Buddhist communicators, fostering a growing and connected Buddhist community.

Cultural and Social Engagement

In addition to their study and practice of Buddhist teachings, contemporary nuns actively participate in specialized training across various fields, such as traditional medicine, psychology, sociology, education, and other fields. This professional development not only enhances their capabilities and skills, but also empowers them to embody "engaged Buddhism" effectively and practically.

Through diverse activities like community healthcare, combining traditional and modern medicine, providing free medication to the poor, environmental protection, psychological counseling sessions, emotional support for those in need, building shelters for the underprivileged, disaster relief, and other charitable initiatives, nuns vividly express the compassion and selflessness central to Buddhism.

This harmonious integration of Buddhist practice and professional expertise not only makes Buddhism more relevant and practical for modern life, addressing societal needs, but also elevates its prestige and value in today's society. It underscores the role of Buddhism in fostering a peaceful, happy, and civilized society. Furthermore, these activities have created a positive public image of Vietnamese Buddhist nuns as individuals who are not only devoted practitioners but also valuable contributors to society.

Empowering Young Nuns: Challenges and Solutions

In the context of contemporary Buddhism, Vietnamese Buddhist nuns have achieved significant accomplishments in study and Dharma propagation, demonstrating flexible adaptation to global changes. However, fully realizing the potential of young nuns, especially those with advanced training (master's and doctoral degrees, or overseas education), remains a considerable challenge. Unlike the secular environment, where there are clear recruitment processes and career pathways, the organizational structure and operations of the nunnery follow distinct principles and mechanisms. This difference sometimes creates a gap between the specialized knowledge

acquired through education and the practical needs of Buddhist activities. As a result, many young nuns face difficulties finding service opportunities that align with their expertise after graduation, leading to a waste of valuable resources.

One primary cause is the lack of an effective information network connecting the need for human resources in Buddhist organizations with the professional capacities of nuns. In addition, young nuns often lack guidance, orientation, and support from senior mentors or experienced peers in bridging theoretical knowledge with practical application. This situation leads to two tendencies. On the one hand, some dedicated young nuns independently organize isolated activities, forming small, fragmented groups that dilute resources and weaken the collective strength of the nunnery. On the other hand, a portion of young nuns develops a hesitant mindset, limiting themselves to temple activities and showing reluctance to participate in collective efforts within the nunnery.

To address this issue effectively, a coordinated approach from multiple sides is essential. From the perspective of the nunnery, it is crucial to establish a mechanism for assigning tasks based on professional expertise, for creating an information system linking Buddhist organizations and nuns, and for providing practical environments and opportunities for nuns to engage in Buddhist activities. Simultaneously, greater emphasis needs to be placed on guidance and orientation from senior mentors for young nuns. From their perspective, young nuns need to actively cultivate soft skills and practical knowledge in addition to their specialized expertise, demonstrating readiness to dedicate themselves to the mission of Dharma propagation.

A particularly pressing issue for Vietnamese young nuns today is the expansion of opportunities for exchange and connection with the international community of Buddhist nuns. In the context of globalization, the lack of bridges for connection and forums for professional exchange has significantly hindered access to knowledge, advanced practice methods, and effective propagation experiences around the world. This limitation not only affects the personal development of nuns but also impacts the overall development of Vietnamese Buddhism on the international stage.

Recognizing the importance of this issue, I propose several solutions to strengthen the connection between Vietnamese nuns and the global community of female Buddhist monastics, contributing to the shared advancement of Buddhism worldwide:

Enhancing Foreign Language Proficiency: Encouraging and providing favorable conditions for nuns to improve their foreign language skills, particularly English for Buddhist studies, through courses and training programs.

Establishing International Exchange Programs: Developing both short-term and long-term exchange programs with nunneries and renowned Buddhist centers abroad. These programs will allow nuns to experience diverse practice environments, learn effective propagation methods, and engage with various Buddhist cultures.

Leveraging Online Platforms: Maximizing the potential of online platforms, such as social media, forums, websites, and webinars to connect, share information, and organize lectures and specialized discussions with the international community of nuns, laywomen, and the wider community.

Encouraging Translation Activities: Motivating and supporting nuns to engage in the translation of scriptures, books, and Buddhist lectures into other languages. This is an effective way to disseminate the Dharma and introduce Vietnamese Buddhist culture to the world.
Participating in International Volunteer Programs: Facilitating the participation of nuns in

international volunteer programs, especially those related to Buddhism or humanitarian efforts, to broaden their perspectives, refine their skills, and contribute to the global community.

Implementing these solutions comprehensively will establish a strong network connecting Vietnamese Buddhist nuns with the international community, thereby advancing the global development of Buddhism.

Conclusion

Throughout the history of Vietnamese Buddhism, nuns have proven their indispensable capacities to benefit society, from pioneering female monastics in the early centuries CE, who overcame societal prejudices to dedicate themselves to spiritual practice and serving the nation, to contemporary nuns who continue this tradition with flexibility in adapting to modern changes. Nuns have not only preserved the essence of Buddhism but have creatively applied it to societal contexts, making Buddhism increasingly accessible, practical, and relevant to the lives of the Vietnamese people. This continuity of tradition and adaptability is the key to the sustainable development of Vietnamese Buddhist nuns in the future.

Notes

i. Truc Lam Tri Duc Nunnery, *The History of Vietnamese Buddhist Nuns from the 1st Century to the 18th Century* (Hanoi: Hong Đuc Publishing House, 2020), 16.

ii. Tu, Thich Thanh, *Vietnamese Zen Master*. (Hanoi: Religious Publishing House, 2010), 173–174.

iii. Ibid., 385.

The Shravasti Varsa 2023: A Model for Nuns' Leadership

Khenmo Drolma and Alison Melnick Dyer

How are leadership skills being incorporated into Buddhist nuns' communities in the 21st century, and what are the implications of these changes for nuns and other women across the Buddhist world? This paper specifically reflects on the momentous and historic 2023 International Bhikshuni Varsa in Shravasti, India.[i] The gathering was wholly organized by Buddhist nuns.

The Shravasti Varsa event reflects two layers of leadership, both imbued with ideals of women's leadership. First, the Varsa planning committee was organized by Khenmo Drolma and an international team of senior nuns from Dharma Drum and Sravasti Abbey. While the gathering was supported under the auspices of the Drikung Kagyu denomination, the nuns' leadership was international and interdenominational. They incorporated these approaches in their organizational scheme and transferred leadership responsibilities in multiple innovative ways during the Varsa. Throughout the gathering, nuns from nine countries and speaking five languages (and numerous dialects) lived together in a dynamic community of learning, exchanging ideas, developing crosscultural and interdenominational understanding. In this paper, we look at how the leadership honored the necessary senior leadership in the monastic rituals and *vinaya* teachings while elevating representatives from each of the countries and junior nuns in shared leadership. This collaborative Varsa offers a new view on nuns' empowerment. The event, five years in the making, saw a series of challenges and successes. We reflect on these, and the implications that such an event has for twenty-first-century nuns.

The History of the Shravasti Varsa 2023

From the earliest stories of the *Therīgatha* to the challenges faced by nuns in the 21st century, we have examples of how women have navigated, and continue to navigate, life in the *sangha*. This paper addresses how one group of Mahāyāna nuns came together for an unprecedented Summer Rains Retreat (Varsa). The event took place over seven weeks in Shravasti, India, where Shakyamuni Buddha was said to have conducted the same rituals for 25 summers, some 2500 years ago.

The Varsa was first conceptualized and sponsored by His Holiness Drikung Kyabgon Chetsang Rinpoche, the head of the Drikung Kagyu lineage. In 2018, he expressed his vision to sponsor traditional Varsas annually in his newly built temple at Shravasti. Khenmo Drolma, along with three other nuns, requested that he include nuns in his vision. He accepted her request and asked her to organize the first international Varsa for Mahāyāna nuns. H.H. Chetsang Rinpoche gave the nuns complete responsibility; he also lent his full support along with his financial sponsorship, the use of the Great Shravasti Temple, and staff, food, cooks, and translators. There would be many stops and starts from 2018 to 2023, but ultimately the event would be the first of its kind.

There is a firm commitment among senior nuns internationally to support *bhikshuni* development. Many senior nuns and their nunneries supported the progress toward the creation of the Varsa retreat. In particular, Sravasti Abbey and Dharma Drum freed their most experienced nuns from their home commitments so that they could participate in the effort to plan and lead the Varsa. The group centered on a team-building approach, which they supported with an ethos of confidence in the nuns' spiritual authority, as well as the actual authority

stemming from decades of work by *bhikshuni*s worldwide. This ethos permeated all aspects of planning. In the five years leading up to the event, three areas came into focus: 1) identifying a presiding abbess, Vinaya (precept) teachers, and curriculum; 2) connecting with *bhikshuni*s internationally; and 3) addressing logistical necessities.

Vision Becomes Reality

Bhikshuni Guo Goang accepted the invitation to serve as presiding abbess and the main teacher of *vinaya* (in an auspicious assembly. She possessed the rare combination of extensive scholarship and many years of experience leading a monastic community. Khenmo Drolma acted as hosting abbess and retreat meditation teacher, and the primary logistical organizer. Senior nuns from Sravasti Abbey taught critically important *varsa* rituals and *vinaya*.

Bringing the vision into reality then radiated out in multiple directions as we moved from the preparation phase to implementation. The planning committee addressed many challenges as they arose. For example, prayer books needed to be created. Shravasti Abbey had translated all of their ritual texts into English. However, there were more than seven languages and dialects represented among Varsa participants. We were able to identify four key languages (Tibetan, Vietnamese, Chinese, and English) that would be required for all participants to read the relevant texts. Bhikshuni Wangchuck translated texts into Tibetan, and Khenmo Trinlay collected existing Chinese and Vietnamese translations of prayers and compiled the manuals for the nuns' use.

The teaching team arrived in Shravasti, India, in July 2023, amidst the hottest summer recorded. As planning and logistics accelerated, 130 nuns from 22 different monasteries in nine countries began to arrive. We quickly realized that the group had a great diversity of experiences, and we would need to find common ground across those differences. For example, one might say that the assembled nuns had little in common other than their precepts. But even in the case of precepts, we had significant differences between novices and those with full ordination. Then, when one considered education and daily practice, the disparities were even more clear. There were *bhikshuni*s with a great deal of Buddhist philosophical education, but no meditation experience; there were new *bhikshuni*s with little *vinaya* understanding or education, and others with little monastic ritual experience but extensive retreat experience. The majority of nuns in attendance had no *shamatha* meditation experience.

Although there had been a *bhikshuni* ordination in Bhutan the previous year, most ethnically Tibetan nuns from India and Ladakh do not yet hold *bhikshuni* precepts, and the newly ordained Bhutanese *bhikshuni*s had received little *vinaya* instruction. It is required that a minimum of five fully ordained monastics be present to conduct rituals. Many residing in small rural monasteries do not have the required number of nuns to conduct monastic rites, nor do most Western nuns, who live alone or in small centers. As we were conducting the rituals in the form used by Sravasti Abbey (in English with Chinese melodies), no attendees had familiarity with the formal opening and closing *varsa* rituals. The Shravasti Varsa began with three days of these rituals!

We immediately recognized that establishing trust and a sense of community was essential to be able to function as one *sangha*. A Drikung novice nun named Acharya Kunsang became an ombudsperson, the key person to contact about any logistical, health, or other issues or concerns. She also became the point person for handling community issues that

arose. She liaised with the retreat center manager, a monk with no knowledge of the *bhikshuni sangha* or rituals.

The first meeting in the temple established two kinds of seating. We formed two large circles, one of *bhikshuni*s and another of novices. All the language groups, ethnicities, and denominations merged into these two groups according to their shared vows. Then we arranged the circles by ordination dates and snaked through the temple to our cushions in order of seniority as dictated for monastic rites. This was challenging for some novice nuns as they faced the realization that the status they held at home was still subordinate in the bigger monastic world. Then we rearranged by language groups, which became the seating for the teachings and was less hierarchical. Nuns from different nunneries in the same country met for the first time and appointed contact people for each language spoken, which facilitated better communication.

The *varsa* is bookended by a series of long and complicated monastic rituals. The Sravasti nuns brilliantly planned how to teach and conduct the rituals to a large group. We learned three key musical arrangements, and after an introduction to the ritual, were taught details in smaller language groups. In each of the rituals, there were opportunities for inclusion. For instance, the first ritual was to invite the presiding abbess to teach. Ten nuns representing the assembly went to her room to sing the request and bring it back to the assembly.

Perhaps the most moving moment of the Shravasti Varsa was our first *sojong* or bi-weekly confession ritual. For those in the Tibetan tradition, the ceremonies are conducted by monks, so the nuns confess to the male assembly. Here, for the first time for many nuns, the ritual was led by an abbess and nuns heard the confessions of other nuns. Finally, the ceremonies culminated in a walking meditation to the archaeological site where the Buddha had taught 2,500 years ago. There we meditated, sitting around the remains of his teaching seat. The Buddha's daughters were returning home.

The daily morning and evening meditations were among the most appreciated aspects of the Shravasti Varsa. Each morning, prayers were chanted in all four languages in the most beautiful melodies. The *umze* (chant leader) rotated among our communities. In the evening, we did walking meditation, a practice we held in common but with different methods. Each week, the walking meditation leader introduced one of these methods to the group. We experienced ourselves walking in the footsteps of the *bhikshuni*s of Buddha's time as we circled the temple.

Throughout the *varsa*, our strength was our flexibility. Many of our systems were created in the moment. H.H. Chetsang Rinpoche sensitively recognized that dietary needs among cultures could not easily be combined, so he sent two cooking teams, along with supplies. Our two dining rooms also self-organized the event's elaborate food offering ceremonies. The Vietnamese group led the pre-meal prayers in the dining room serving Taiwanese and Western nuns. The Himalayan nuns wished to maintain their tradition of serving the main meal in the temple. Some of the Drukpa Kagyu nuns of Nepal and Ladakh had required ceremonies on feast days. They offered these, and the assembly was delighted to witness the Vajrayāna *tsok* rituals. These small elements created a sense of belonging.

The Shravasti Varsa curriculum was divided into three sections: discipline, contemplation, and wisdom. Bhikshuni Guo Goang and Bhikshuni Thubten Damcho gave a series of lectures on the *vinaya* and the history of the *bhikshuni* lineage. Khenmo Drolma gave a week-long course on beginning meditation based on the *Anapanasati Sutra*, which had been taught by the Buddha in Shravasti. Bhikshuni Guo Goang offered a retreat on Silent Illumination, considered to be an advanced practice.

Of course, in any community, misunderstandings arise. Halfway into the event, the teaching team decided to conduct an anonymous group evaluation to elicit a fuller picture of the experience of the participants. We devised simple questions regarding the schedule, degree of difficulty of the lectures, what was most enjoyed, etc. We were met with surprise, as it was a new experience for many nuns to have an opportunity to give feedback to teachers and to have input into scheduling. For some, the program was too tightly scheduled and the heat was causing great fatigue. This was also when we discovered the great disparity in Buddhist education. We were able to quickly adjust the schedule in small ways and recalibrate the upcoming lectures on meditation. This became a breakthrough moment, as the capacity for listening and responding allowed a sense of co-created community to arise.

The presentations on monastic life were illuminating for all. Most of us had no idea how nuns in other countries defined their monastic life. We simply had no exposure outside our own lineages. Some operated temples focusing on the needs of their towns and villages, and held responsibility for a variety of rituals ranging from prayers for the dead to creating a menstruation day, offering much-needed health education. Some communities prioritized education and focused on study, training junior nuns in philosophy. Some encouraged extensive retreats, while others focused on physical service. We learned that some had endured years of hardship, poor diets, and low hopes for training. We also learned of great courage, dedication, and generosity of service collecting food and necessities during COVID. One group had an annual bicycle trip across their country, stopping in villages where they presented Kung Fu demonstrations, offered anti-violence education, and self-defence classes for women. From group after group, we learned of the wholehearted commitment to establishing the *bhikshuni sangha* and the work to benefit the welfare of women and the community at large.

After seven weeks, the time for concluding ceremonies arrived, and there were tears of appreciation and gratitude. When H.H. Chetsang Rinpoche arrived, we thanked him for sponsoring the extraordinary gathering and processed again to the seat of Buddha's teaching for our final prayers. The next morning, nuns boarded their buses, nurturing the seeds planted. It was not simply the excellent curriculum (which will soon become a book), or experiencing the ancient monastic ceremonies that were so moving for the participants. It was also how the Shravasti Varsa had offered a model for nuns to confidently hold the mantle of spiritual authority. As leaders, we assumed wisdom, and so that is what we found, glimpsed within our *sangha* as we shared our lives for this brief moment.

In conclusion, we wish to express our gratitude to His Holiness Drikung Chetsang Rinpoche, Bhikshunis Thubten Chodron, Guo Goang, Chang Wa, Chang Zai, Thubten Chonyi, Thubten Damcho, Khenmo Trinlay Chodron, Acharya Kunsang, Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen, Khenpo Wangchuck, Khenpo Woeser, Samanerikas Tenzin Tsepal, Yangkyi, Gyaltsen, Konchog Lhamo, Lhamo Chodron, and Tiffany Salter

Notes

[i] Throughout this piece, we use two different spellings for “Shravasti.” These reflect the conventions of different organizations. While the town in India and the Drikung Kagyu center use “Shravasti,” Sravasti Abbey in Washington, USA, uses the spelling “Sravasti.”

Exploring the Tenet of Feminism in Early Pāli Literature

Praveen Kumar

Before discussing the tenet of feminism in early Pāli literature, it is essential to acknowledge that the history of the world has been predominantly male-centric, with the role of women being quite neglected. Civilization and culture have largely been constructed by men. Even in some of the greatest ancient civilizations, such as Greco-Roman, Mesopotamian, and Egyptian, women did not have the same social, political, religious, and economic rights as men. Indian civilization is no exception to this trend.

Although women in Vedic civilization enjoyed complete political, economic, and religious rights similar to men, these rights diminished over time due to changing social, political, economic, and religious factors. This decline is evident when compared to the rights they enjoyed during the Rigvedic period.

At the time of Buddhism's emergence, women had become subjects of exploitation in a male-dominated society, as noted in the Pāli texts such as the *Therīgāthā*. The Buddha took a revolutionary step in this adverse social environment by establishing the *bhikkhunī saṅgha* (the order of nuns) in Vaishali, just five years after the founding of the *bhikkhu sangha* (monk's order).

The *bhikkhunī saṅgha* opened a path for religious freedom for women in Buddhist society, which was highly successful. This order ordained many nuns who were highly adept at studying and practicing the Dhamma. The Buddha imposed no restrictions on nuns regarding the teaching and dissemination of Dhamma. Buddhism empowered women spiritually, religiously, culturally, socially, politically, and educationally. *Nirvāna* is the ultimate goal in Buddhism, and according to the Buddha, *Nirvāna* is the means to escape worldly suffering. There was no distinction between monks and nuns in the pursuit of *nibbāna*.

The *bhikkhunī saṅgha* developed notable nuns such as Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, Khema, Uppalavanna, Patācārā, Dhammadinna, and Sona, who became prominent in their own right. Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī was a leading figure among long-serving nuns. Khema was foremost in wisdom, while Patacara was prominent among those adhering to the *vinaya* (monastic rules).

Like their male counterparts, these nuns achieved significant accomplishments in the spiritual domain. The dialogues recorded in the *Therīgāthā* reveal that they overcame ignorance and craving to attain experiential wisdom. Thus, the changes experienced by these nuns were not fanciful but genuine transformations. The Buddha provided women with a rare opportunity to participate in religious life. He was the first teacher to establish equality between men and women in the religious and spiritual realms.

In the Bhikkhunī Vibhanga of the Samyutta Nikaya, there is information about ten such nuns who, after defeating Māra, reached the highest spiritual levels. Among them, the dialogue between Bhikkhuni Soma and Māra is particularly significant. Māra told Bhikkhuni Soma that women could not achieve liberation. Soma responded to Māra with verses, explaining that:Being a woman does not hold much significance if the mind is well-focused. The truth of the world can be understood through wisdom. This wisdom can arise in both women and men.

Thus, we find that the Buddha created equality between men and women in the spiritual realm, which was a revolutionary step in the sixth century. This was not the first instance in Indian history where women were involved in religious activities. From the Vedic and Upanishadic periods, we have records of women like Gargi, Romasa, Ghosha, Lopamudra, and

Maitreyee. However, the difference between the Buddha's era and the Vedic and Upanishadic periods is that the Buddha provided women the opportunity to progress in an organized manner. Even women from the courtesan class, such as A??hakāsī, Abhayamātā, and Ambapālī, were given such opportunities, which is a unique event in world history. Just as men had the chance to progress as monks, women had the opportunity to advance as nuns. Therefore, the stories of the Therīs described in the *Therīgāthā* show that there was no discrimination between men and women in achieving *nirvāna*.

In addition to spiritual and religious domains, Buddhism also developed leadership qualities in women. For example, Patācārā had 500 disciples who, by following her teachings on Vipassanā, were liberated from their sorrow. These women no longer mourned the deaths of their husbands and sons. They sang songs about how their husbands and sons came and went, questioning why they should grieve or for whom.

Besides Patācārā, many other nuns had their own groups of disciples, such as Mahāprajāpatī Gotamī, who also helped many sorrowful women attain *nirvāna* by teaching *vipassanā*. These nuns were capable of guiding others to *nirvāna* even without male elders. They developed not only leadership skills but also organizational abilities and oratory skills, which empowered them in the Buddha's time.

In addition to leadership capabilities, Buddhism also empowered women educationally. Many nuns became poets and served as sources of education for other women. Prominent names include Alavikā, Kisāgotamī, Vijayā, Uppalavannā, Selā, Chālā, Upacālā, and Siśupacālā.

Soma Bhikkhuni discusses the mental state of women, countering the common belief that women could not attain the ultimate goal of *nirvāna*. Her statement is significant in this context. She argued that being a woman does not imply that one cannot achieve liberation. If the mind is well-focused, women can also attain liberation. The Buddha also indicated that a woman's mind is the same as a man's. Dhammadinnā delivered the C*hūlavedalla Sutta*. The 73 nuns in the nīgāthā provided evidence of their educational and intellectual development. These *therī*s played a crucial role in spreading the Buddha's teachings and informed other women about their capabilities, allowing them to find their path even in adverse circumstances.

The Right to Initiate Women

The *bhikkhunī saṅgha* was granted the right to initiate women, a right that the Buddha conferred on women 2500 years ago. This is significant, as it took the Christian church until the 20th century to grant similar rights to women, reflecting the Buddha's foresight.

In addition to spiritual, educational, and religious fields, Buddhism also empowered women socially. When King Prasenajit of Kosala was disappointed by the birth of a daughter from his queen, the Buddha consoled him by pointing out that women could sometimes surpass men. This was a revolutionary step for the sixth-century society. Buddhism does not view women as inferior to men; the birth of a daughter is not seen as a misfortune, and both genders are considered equal. Buddhism believes that both genders have equal potential for progress in spiritual and domestic life.

The Buddha was equally concerned about the duties of both husband and wife. In the Sigalovada Sutta, he emphasized the duties of a husband towards his wife. Buddhism provides women with equal rights and opportunities. It improved the situation of widows and abandoned women by alleviating their suffering. Compared to women in other communities, Buddhist women enjoyed more social freedom. Early Buddhist literature suggests that male and female lay followers met each other, while monks and nuns stayed separately. The Buddha had long discussions with his

female disciples. This liberal attitude of the Buddhist community had a positive impact on the status of women in Buddhism.

Buddhism also granted women the right to education and involvement in religious activities. The Buddha held the view that both men and women are capable of attaining the ultimate goal of *nirvāna*, which is why he included women in the *saṅgha*. Initially, he was hesitant about admitting women to the *saṅgha* because he feared that the presence of both men and women together might create problems, which could be detrimental to the future of Buddhism.

For those nuns who were capable, the Buddha granted them all kinds of rights. There were nuns within the *sangha* who were very adept at spreading the Dharma. The *Saddharmapundarika Sūtra* states that all beings can attain Buddhahood, and mistreating others is equivalent to mistreating oneself.

The Buddha emphasized equality in a society characterized by inequality. He believed that wisdom could arise in both men and women, and therefore women could also develop wisdom and attain Buddhahood. The Buddha had faith in equality and stressed harmonious relations between men and women. His goal was to establish a civilized society where all beings could live with dignity and respect, where everyone had the right to live with goodwill. His purpose was to eliminate suffering and cultivate wisdom in human society.

The Saddharmapundarika Sūtra mentions that women have the full right to realize the truth and can attain the ultimate goal of *nirvāna*. A civilized society can only be established when there is equality between men and women. The Buddha imparted the teachings of the Dharma to both men and women, and within Buddhism, women had full rights over their own lives.

Based on the available facts, it can be said that the Buddha made efforts to empower women. Although the term "women's empowerment" is a modern concept, the foundation of the Buddha's teachings was non-violence and compassion towards all living beings, which improved the status of women. The Buddha was undoubtedly a proponent of new ideas concerning women in his time. Centuries later, the women's empowerment movement began, symbolizing the inspiration and hope for women. The Buddha worked towards the upliftment and dignity of women, which had been lost in the post-Vedic period.

Can the *bhikkhunī saṅgha* of the Buddha's era be viewed in the context of the modern women's discourse movement? To address this point, we need to conduct a comparative study of the status of women in Buddha's time and in Western societies.

The status of women in Buddha's time was not as dire as in Western societies. While the condition of women in Indian society deteriorated over time, during the Buddha's era, their status was not as deplorable as in Western societies.

Another major difference was that the female community in Buddha's time was not opposed to the male-dominated society, unlike in Western civilizations. In Western societies, women were widely opposed to the male-dominated systems because they had no social, political, economic, or legal rights. In contrast, the female community in Buddha's time did not face such issues. For example, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, after the death of her husband, chose to leave her royal palace to achieve spiritual advancement. Through her relentless efforts and struggle, she opened the door of the *saṅgha* for women, allowing them to pursue spiritual progress as nuns.

There are some similarities between the modern women's discourse movement and the *bhikkhunī* movement, such as the absence of gender discrimination in the quest for *nirvāna*. Just as the women's discourse movement advocates for gender equality, the *bhikkhunī saṅgha* allowed both men and women equal opportunities to achieve the ultimate goal of *nirvāna* without gender bias.

Some critics argue that the Buddha imposed stricter rules on nuns compared to monks, which might suggest gender discrimination. However, the rules set by the Buddha were intended to ensure the safety and protection of women, not to discriminate against them.

Just as the women's discourse movement emphasizes compassion and confidence in women's capabilities, the Buddha had faith in the potential of women, granting them leadership roles within the *sangha*. Some aspects of the women's discourse movement were present in the *bhikkhunī saṅgha* . However, it would not be entirely accurate to equate the *bhikkhunī saṅgha* with the modern women's discourse movement. The women's discourse movement is a product of contemporary society, which includes struggles for modern rights like voting rights and equal wages – issues that were not present in Buddha's time. The establishment of the *bhikkhunī saṅgha* during the Buddha's era was more of an awakening of women's consciousness, rather than a movement akin to modern Western women's discourse. Women developed an awareness that they too could attain *nirvāna* by following the path of virtue, concentration, and wisdom, thereby overcoming their mental afflictions.

Voices of Healing: How Self-Talk Bridges Modern Women's Psychology and Buddhist Principles

Le Thi Kim Ngan

In today's fast-paced world, women are expected to juggle multiple roles, such as being successful professionals, nurturing caregivers, and active members of their communities. These demands often lead to heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion. A research paper of the American Psychological Association (APA) shows that women are affected by mental health challenges such as depression and anxiety compared to men, primarily due to a combination of societal expectations, hormonal factors, and cultural influences (APA, 2019).

In response to these pressures, self-talk has emerged as a transformative psychological tool. Self-talk is the internal dialogue that individuals have with themselves, encompassing both conscious and subconscious thoughts. This dialogue can be positive or negative and influences emotional well-being and self-esteem. Positive self-talk promotes resilience and boosts confidence, while negative self-talk can lead to self-doubt and a negative self-image. Psychological research highlights the effectiveness of self-talk as a cognitive-behavioral strategy. Recognizing and altering negative thought patterns enables individuals to create a more supportive internal narrative.

Defined as the internal dialogue individuals have with themselves, self-talk has been extensively studied in cognitive-behavioral psychology for its impact on mental health and behavior. Positive self-talk has been found to improve emotional regulation, reduce anxiety, and enhance self-esteem (Beck, 1995). For modern women, who often face unique challenges in balancing external expectations with internal aspirations, self-talk provides a means to reclaim control over their thoughts and emotions. Parallel to the rise of psychological interventions, ancient Buddhist philosophy offers a timeless framework for personal growth and healing.

Concepts such as mindfulness, self-awareness, and compassion align with the principles of positive self-talk. Buddhist teachings emphasize the importance of observing thoughts without judgment and cultivating a kind, understanding attitude toward oneself – practices that resemble the psychological process of self-talk (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). This article examines the intersection of modern women's psychology and Buddhist principles, focusing on how self-talk serves as a bridge between these two domains. Integrating psychological insights with Buddhist teachings, we can better understand how women can navigate life's complexities, foster resilience, and embrace their authentic selves.

The Context of Modern Women's Psychology

Modern women face a unique set of psychological challenges shaped by societal expectations, cultural norms, and the rapid pace of contemporary life. The pressures to balance professional success, family responsibilities, and personal aspirations often create a heavy emotional and mental burden. These challenges are compounded by societal messaging that emphasizes perfectionism, multitasking, and self-sacrifice – values that can lead to chronic stress, burnout, and diminished self-esteem (Flett and Hewitt, 2014).

Studies indicate that women are significantly more likely to experience anxiety and depression than men. World Health Organization (WHO, 2021), women are twice as likely as men to be diagnosed with major depressive disorders and anxiety-related conditions. These disparities stem from various factors, including biological differences, societal expectations, and

the disproportionate caregiving and emotional labor burdens placed on women. A 2019 report by APA found that women experience higher levels of stress related to financial instability, work-life balance, and caregiving responsibilities compared to their male counterparts.

Societal expectations play a critical role in shaping women's mental health. The pressure to meet idealized standards of beauty, success, and motherhood often leads to feelings of inadequacy and guilt. Hochschild and Machung (2012) describe the "second shift," where women are expected to take on most household and caregiving duties after a full day of professional work. This dual role creates a mental load that can result in exhaustion, resentment, and self-doubt.

The rise of social media has exacerbated these pressures. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok often present curated, idealized versions of life, promoting unattainable standards of perfection. Research shows that women who engage with social media are more likely to compare themselves negatively to others, leading to decreased self-esteem and increased anxiety (Fardouly et al., 2015). This phenomenon is particularly pronounced among young women, who face additional pressures related to body image and self-presentation.

Women are also more likely than men to engage in rumination – a repetitive focus on negative thoughts and emotions – which is strongly linked to depression and anxiety (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000). This is negative self-talk being repeated. While rumination can arise from biological predispositions, societal messaging that encourages women to "be perfect" and "do it all" exacerbates this pattern. Such cognitive tendencies, coupled with external pressures, can lead to a negative cycle of self-criticism and low self-worth.

Fortunately, there has been a growing recognition of the importance of addressing women's mental health. Feminist psychology has played a pivotal role in challenging traditional approaches that pathologized women's experiences without considering the impact of gendered societal structures (Brown, 2009). Today, therapeutic models such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and mindfulness-based interventions are increasingly tailored to meet the unique needs of women. These approaches aim to empower women to challenge negative self-talk, build resilience, and develop healthier ways of coping with stress.

Self-Talk as a Tool for Modern Women

Amid these challenges, positive self-talk has emerged as a powerful technique for addressing the psychological struggles that women face. Negative self-talk – often influenced by internalized societal expectations – can perpetuate feelings of inadequacy and failure. However, its recognizing and reframing these patterns, women can create a more supportive and compassionate inner dialogue. For instance, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy that uses self-talk as a cornerstone of treatment, encouraging individuals to identify and reframe distorted thoughts that contribute to negative emotions (Beck, 1995). This technique is particularly relevant for women, as it aligns with their natural tendencies toward verbal and emotional processing. Through integrating positive self-talk into daily life, women can counteract the negative mental habits that arise from external pressures and internalized beliefs.

Understanding the psychological context of modern women is essential for developing effective tools and strategies to support their well-being. Women's mental health challenges are intertwined with societal norms, cultural expectations, and cognitive patterns, making it vital to address these factors holistically. The practice of positive self-talk, grounded in evidence-based psychological approaches, offers a promising pathway for women to navigate these complexities,

reclaim their emotional resilience, and foster self-compassion. For women facing unique challenges in developing a positive self-image amidst societal expectations, positive self-talk becomes an essential tool for fostering self-acceptance and mental well-being.

Practical Techniques for Self-Talk

Self-talk serves as a vital mechanism for emotional regulation. Women who are practicing positive self-talk can help women manage stress and anxiety, leading to improved mental health outcomes. When replacing negative thoughts with positive affirmations, women can develop a more resilient mindset. In therapeutic settings, self-talk is often employed to challenge cognitive distortions. For instance, a woman who feels overwhelmed might engage in negative self-talk, thinking, "I can't handle this." By taking this thought and reframing it to, "I am capable, and I can take things one step at a time" – she can cultivate a more balanced perspective.
Four tools can be used to practice self-talk: journaling, mindfulness, meditation, affirmations, and visualization.

1. *Journaling*

Journaling serves as a modern method of cultivating mindfulness and self-awareness, reflecting the teachings found in the *Satipatthana Sutta* (Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness). In this scripture, the Buddha encourages observation of thoughts and mental patterns without judgment, a practice known as *cittanupassana* (mindfulness of the mind). When writing down thoughts and emotions, women can identify negative self-talk patterns and examine them with detachment. This process mirrors the Buddhist principle of observing mental formations (*sankhara*), allowing insight to arise. As these patterns are recognized, women can create positive affirmations grounded in compassion, echoing the practice of *Metta* (loving-kindness), to counteract negative beliefs and cultivate a more wholesome inner dialogue.

2. *Mindfulness Meditation*

Mindfulness meditation, central to Buddhist practice, enhances awareness of self-talk by encouraging practitioners to observe thoughts without attachment or aversion. The *Dhammapada* states, "The mind is difficult to control; swift and alighting wherever it desires. A tamed mind brings happiness" (*Dhammapada*, Verse 35). Through meditation, women can become aware of their inner dialogue, gently replacing unwholesome negative self-talk with compassionate and constructive messages. This practice aligns with *Right Effort* in the Noble Eightfold Path, where one abandons unskillful thoughts and cultivates skillful ones. Over time, this mindful awareness transforms negative narratives into empowering messages that reflect self-compassion and resilience.

3. *Affirmations*

Developing and reciting positive affirmations is a modern equivalent of Buddhist chanting and reflective contemplation. The Buddha emphasized the transformative power of repeating wholesome thoughts in the *Karaniya Metta Sutta* (Discourse on Loving-Kindness), which encourages practitioners to develop boundless goodwill toward themselves and others. Affirmations such as "I am worthy of love and respect" or "I am capable of overcoming challenges" mirror the loving-kindness meditation practice of wishing oneself well. When reciting these affirmations daily reinforces a positive self-image and helps overcome the habitual patterns of self-doubt and negativity.

4. *Visualization*

Visualization, as a mental rehearsal of positive scenarios, aligns with the Buddhist concept of

samadhi (concentration) and the cultivation of skillful intentions (*kusala cetana*). In the *Vitakkasanthana Sutta* (Discourse on the Removal of Distracting Thoughts), the Buddha describes replacing unwholesome thoughts with skillful ones through deliberate focus. Visualization allows women to create mental images of successful outcomes, fostering a sense of empowerment and confidence. This technique helps reframe limiting beliefs, echoing the Buddhist practice of mentally cultivating wholesome qualities, such as generosity, compassion, and strength.

These practices – journaling, mindfulness meditation, affirmations, and visualization – when integrated with Buddhist principles, offer profound tools for self-healing and empowerment. They provide women with practical strategies to address negative self-talk while fostering self-awareness, compassion, and resilience, rooted in ancient wisdom. Anh is a thirty-five-year-old female marketing executive who struggled with anxiety due to work pressures. After recognizing her negative self-talk, she began journaling her thoughts. This practice helped her identify patterns of self-doubt. She is replacing these thoughts with positive affirmations – "I am competent, and I can manage my workload" – Anh experienced a significant reduction in anxiety and an increase in her overall well-being. Tram, a single mother, felt overwhelmed by her responsibilities. After attending a mindfulness workshop, she learned to observe her thoughts without judgment. Tram is practicing self-compassion, she transformed her self-talk from "I am not doing enough" to "I am doing my best." This shift helped her cultivate a greater sense of acceptance and peace in her daily life. These examples highlight the practical applications of self-talk in real-life scenarios, demonstrating its effectiveness in promoting emotional healing and resilience.

The intersection of modern women's psychology and Buddhist principles through the practice of self-talk offers a profound avenue for healing and personal growth. As women navigate the complexities of contemporary life, integrating mindfulness and self-compassion into their self-talk can empower them to challenge negative thoughts, enhance their emotional well-being, and cultivate a deeper sense of self-acceptance. The integration of modern psychology and Buddhist principles offers a comprehensive approach to healing. By utilizing self-talk within the framework of mindfulness and compassion, women can create a powerful tool for personal transformation. Buddhism, with its emphasis on mindfulness, compassion, and self-awareness, provides valuable tools for self-healing.

Mindfulness encourages individuals to be present in the moment, observing thoughts and feelings without judgment. This practice helps women become more aware of their self-talk, allowing them to identify and transform negative patterns into constructive ones. Central to Buddhist philosophy is the concept of compassion – both for oneself and for others. Self-compassion involves treating oneself with kindness, understanding, and acceptance, particularly during difficult times. This principle closely aligns with the goals of self-talk, as both encourage nurturing a positive inner dialogue. By recognizing the impact of self-talk and embracing the wisdom of Buddhism, women can embark on transformative journeys toward healing. This approach not only addresses mental health challenges but also fosters resilience, compassion, and empowerment in a world that often demands more than it gives. As we continue to explore the depths of women's psychology and the richness of Buddhist philosophy, the voices of healing through self-talk will resonate, guiding women toward a brighter, more fulfilling future.

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*Bhikkhunī*s' Roles at Sakyadhita Meditation Centre for Empowering Women

Bhikkhuni Madulle Vijithananda

This study examines the multifaceted role of *bhikkhunī*s at the Sakyadhita Meditation Center in empowering women. It highlights their contributions to promoting mental peace, positive thinking, ordination rites, family harmony, education, and social welfare. *Bhikkhunī*s, as central figures in the Buddhist monastic tradition, transcend spiritual guidance to engage in transformative practices that help women address personal and societal challenges with resilience. Through meditation and mindfulness, *Bhikkhunī*s enable women to develop mental tranquillity, emotional resilience, and constructive mindsets, equipping them to face life's adversities with clarity and composure. They also play a critical role in family conflict resolution by providing counseling and practical wisdom to restore harmony.

This research further explores the efforts of *bhikkhunī*s in socio-economic empowerment, including educational programs and entrepreneurial support, fostering autonomy and self-reliance. Additionally, *bhikkhunī*s contribute significantly to social welfare by distributing essential resources such as food, books, and financial aid to disadvantaged women and children. Using qualitative methods like interviews, focus groups, and participant observation, the study captures the experiences of women directly impacted by *bhikkhunī*-led initiatives. It provides actionable recommendations to enhance their support systems, particularly for marginalized populations. Ultimately, the research underscores the *bhikkhunī*s' profound role in fostering holistic empowerment, advancing social justice, and enhancing women's well-being in contemporary society.

Changes and Challenges

In today's fast-paced and often stressful world, many women face emotional, psychological, and social challenges that affect their overall well-being. These challenges can become even more pronounced during significant life transitions, such as pregnancy, a time marked by profound physical and emotional changes. Addressing women's mental health, physical well-being, and social empowerment is essential for improving their quality of life, fostering healthy families, and enhancing their contributions to society.

In this context, *bhikkhunī*s – women fully ordained in the Buddhist monastic tradition – have long played a vital role in empowering women and fostering their holistic development. Traditionally, *bhikkhunī*s have been respected for their spiritual teachings, meditation practices, and compassionate engagement with their communities. In modern times, their responsibilities have expanded to include initiatives in social welfare, education, and empowerment, helping women navigate the multifaceted challenges of contemporary life. Through their work,*bhikkhunī*s offer meditation guidance, counseling, essential resources such as books and food, and educational opportunities that enable women to acquire skills, pursue entrepreneurship, and lead more empowered lives.

This study aims to examine the critical role *bhikkhunī*s play in empowering women through their activities at the Sakyadhita Meditation Center. It will explore how their teachings and practices address key areas of women's lives, including promoting mental peace through meditation, cultivating positive thinking, fostering family harmony, and providing educational and social welfare support. The study will also analyze their contributions to conflict resolution,

entrepreneurship development, and charitable initiatives for disadvantaged communities. By showcasing the multifaceted efforts of *bhikkhunī*s, this research seeks to highlight their significant impact on empowering women and enhancing their ability to thrive in an increasingly complex world.

As *bhikkhunī*s, our role at the Sakyadhita Meditation Center in Sri Lanka is both profound andmultifaceted, particularly in empowering women to lead successful and fulfilling lives. We provide guidance to women in attaining mental peace, enhancing both physical and mental well-being, cultivating positive thinking patterns, and fostering entrepreneurial skills that empower them to establish their own businesses. The following outlines the key ways in which we offer support and assistance to women across these dimensions.

Promoting Mental Health and Peaceful Mind through Meditation and Mindfulness

At the heart of our guidance is meditation, which is central to Buddhist practice. We offer women a space where they can cultivate mindfulness, inner peace, and emotional balance through meditation. Meditation techniques, such as mindfulness meditation and loving-kindness meditation (*metta*), help women to:

Reduce Stress. Through meditation, women can release stress and anxiety, allowing them to handle life's challenges with a calm and centered mind.

Increase Emotional Resilience. Regular practice helps women manage difficult emotions such as anger, fear, and sadness, leading to a more balanced emotional state.

Develop a Peaceful Mind. By focusing on the present moment and observing their thoughts without attachment, women can cultivate a peaceful, stable mind, free from distractions and mental unrest.

Cultivating Positive Thinking Patterns

In our teachings, we emphasize the importance of right thinking (one of the elements of the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path) to transform negative thought patterns into positive ones. We guide women to:

Reframe Negative Thoughts. We help women recognize negative self-talk and replace it with compassionate and empowering thoughts. By practicing gratitude and focusing on what is good in life, women can shift their mindset toward positivity.

Develop Self-Worth and Confidence. Many women struggle with feelings of inadequacy or low self-esteem. By promoting self-compassion and showing women that they are inherently worthy and capable, we help them develop the confidence needed to pursue their dreams and aspirations

Focus on Solutions, Not Problems. We teach women to focus on solutions rather than problems. By adopting a problem-solving mindset, women feel more empowered and proactive in addressing life's challenges.

Supporting Physical and Mental Health

Mental and physical health are deeply interconnected. As *bhikkhunī*s, we encourage a holistic approach to well-being by emphasizing both physical and mental health practices:

Mindful Living for Better Health. Through the practice of mindfulness, women are taught

to make healthier lifestyle choices, such as eating balanced meals, exercising regularly, and getting enough rest. Being present with their bodies helps women become more aware of their physical needs and care for their health.

Stress Reduction Techniques. Meditation and mindful breathing exercises are also effective for reducing the physical symptoms of stress, such as tension and headaches. We help women cultivate self-awareness, which can lead to better self-care practices.

Holistic Healing. For women dealing with physical or emotional pain, we offer gentle guidance on healing practices, including Buddhist healing rituals, mindfulness-based therapies, and emotional release techniques. This holistic approach nurtures both the body and the mind.

Family Support and Conflict Resolution

A crucial aspect of supporting women's lives is assisting them in managing family life, particularly in addressing marital or parental difficulties:

Family Counselling. *Bhikkhunī*s often provide counseling for women facing challenges in family life, such as marital conflict or communication issues with children. We use Buddhist principles such as compassion, non-attachment, and right speech to guide women in resolving conflicts and finding peaceful solutions.

Promoting Compassionate Relationships. We encourage women to practice compassion within their families, showing empathy, understanding, and patience in their relationships. This approach fosters healthier family dynamics, reduces tension, and enhances emotional connections.

Encouraging Emotional Boundaries. We also guide women on how to set healthy emotional boundaries, which is crucial for maintaining their well-being and preventing burnout from excessive caregiving or emotional exhaustion.

Empowering Women to Develop Their Own Businesses

One of the most powerful ways to help women lead successful lives is by empowering them to become financially independent and self-sufficient. As *bhikkhunī*s, we play a supportive role in this area by:

Providing Guidance on Entrepreneurship. We offer advice on business ideas, including how to identify opportunities that align with women's skills and passions. Through meditation and mindfulness, women can connect with their inner wisdom, which helps them make informed decisions about business ventures.

Training and Education. We may organize or facilitate educational programs or workshops that teach business skills, including finance management, marketing, and communication. Empowering women with these practical skills can help them start and grow their businesses successfully.

Encouraging Risk-Taking and Perseverance. Starting a business requires courage, and we encourage women to step out of their comfort zones. We guide them in overcoming fear of failure and uncertainty, emphasizing the importance of perseverance, patience, and a positive mindset.

Mentorship and Support Networks. *Bhikkhunī*s often serve as mentors to women interested in entrepreneurship. By sharing our own experiences and providing ongoing support,

we help women navigate the challenges of building their businesses, stay motivated, and remain focused on their goals.

Providing Social Services and Welfare

In addition to mental and spiritual guidance, *bhikkhunī*s often provide practical support for women who are struggling financially or socially:

Food and Resources for Women in Need. *Bhikkhunī*s often run charitable initiatives to provide food, clothing, and other essential resources to impoverished women and their families. By addressing immediate material needs, women can focus on improving their mental and physical health, which is essential for their long-term success.

Distributing Books and Educational Materials. We also provide books, educational materials, and spiritual teachings to women who may not have access to these resources. Education is a key to empowerment, and access to learning materials can help women develop skills and knowledge that contribute to their personal and professional success.

Creating a Supportive Community. By fostering a sense of community within the temple, *bhikkhunī*s create a space where women can connect, share experiences, and support one another. This sense of belonging is vital for women's mental health and confidence, and it helps them stay motivated on their paths toward success.

Motivating Women to Live Purposeful, Successful Lives

Ultimately, our goal as *bhikkhunī*s is to inspire women to live lives filled with purpose, peace, and joy. We help women:

Discover Their Life Purpose. Through meditation and reflection, we help women connect with their inner values and discover their life's purpose. Having a sense of direction is vital for achieving success and fulfilment in life.

Stay Focused on Their Goals. We help women develop focus, resilience, and determination. By teaching mindfulness, we enable them to stay present and overcome distractions that might hinder their success.

Embrace Self-Love a\nd Compassion. A key element of success is cultivating self-love. We encourage women to believe in their own worth and abilities, helping them to cultivate confidence and trust in themselves.

Expected Contributions

This research aims to contribute to the understanding of how *bhikkhunī*s support the empowerment of women through meditation, positive thinking, education, and social welfare. By documenting their roles in promoting mental health, resolving family problems, and facilitating economic empowerment, the research will shed light on the significant contributions of *bhikkhunī*s to the well-being of women and their families.

In addition, the study will offer recommendations on how *bhikkhunī*s can further expand their impact in these areas, particularly in supporting marginalized women and pregnant women who may face unique challenges. The findings of this study will be valuable for policymakers, practitioners, and other organizations seeking to empower women in various contexts.

Conclusion

This research highlights the crucial role of *bhikkhunī*s at the Sakyadhita Meditation Centre in empowering women and children. Their support goes beyond spiritual guidance, offering a holistic approach that fosters mental peace, emotional resilience, and practical life skills. Through meditation, positive thinking, and entrepreneurship, *bhikkhunī*s help women build personal and professional growth. They also provide resources like education, mentorship, and social welfare, enabling women to achieve financial independence and fulfilment. *Bhikkhunī*s guide women in navigating family challenges and pursuing aspirations, promoting overall well-being and happiness. Their work inspires transformative change, advancing empowerment, social equity, and a peaceful, successful society.

I extend my deepest gratitude to all those who supported me throughout my research on the role of *bhikkhunī*s at the Sakyadhita Meditation Centre. Special thanks go to the *bhikkhunī*s whose wisdom and dedication to empowering women shaped this study. I also thank the women who shared their personal experiences, offering invaluable insights. My spiritual mentors and senior *bhikkhunī*s enriched both the academic and spiritual aspects of this work, and the Buddhist monastic communities provided essential resources. Lastly, I am grateful to my fellow *bhikkhunī*s, friends, and family for their unwavering support. This research reflects the collective wisdom and impact of *bhikkhunī*s at the Sakyadhita Meditation Centre.

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