

The **BOISI CENTER** *for*

RELIGION *and* AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

Symposium on Religion and Politics

WOMEN IN RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP

**“Buddhism & The Ordination of
Women”**

Reading Packet 5

2016



BOSTON COLLEGE

BOISI CENTER
FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

Symposium on Religion and Politics

WOMEN IN RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP

“Buddhism & The Ordination of Women”

Table of Contents:

Ed. Leona M. Anderson and Pamela Dickey Young, *Women and Religious Traditions*, (Oxford University Press, 2004)

“Women in the Buddhist Traditions” by Eva K. Neumaier 1

Ed. Catherine Wessinger, *Women’s Leadership in Marginal Religions: Explorations Outside the Mainstream*, (University of Illinois Press , 1993)

“Woman Guru, Woman Roshi: The Legitimation of Female Religious Leadership in Hindu and Buddhist Groups in America” by Catherine Wessinger 15

Ed. Sharon Henderson Callahan, *Religious Leadership: A Reference Handbook*, (SAGE Publications, Inc, 2013).

“Buddhist Women and Religious Leadership” by Karma Lekshe Tsomo 37

Denis D. Gray, “‘Rebel’ Female Buddhist Monks Challenge Thailand’s Religious Status Quo,” *The Big Story AP*, September 12, 2015 43



WOMEN IN THE BUDDHIST TRADITIONS

Eva K. Neumaier

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Buddhism is a religion with a 2,500-year history; its sacred texts number in the tens of thousands and are preserved in numerous classical languages of Asia, ranging from Pāli and Sanskrit to Chinese, Tibetan, and less known languages such as Khotanese. Since the end of the nineteenth century, non-Asian people in Europe and North America have gradually adopted Buddhism, and in the West today, Buddhism is the fastest growing of all religions. In absolute numbers, however, it is still a minority religion. Buddhism has played a part in a vast array of societies, cultures, and historical periods, ranging from Iron Age India to contemporary California.

What follows is a modest attempt to lay a historical background, including the most important facts and documents pertinent to the status and roles of women during the early period of Buddhism in India (c. 400–200 BCE). The emphasis is on how various Buddhist traditions reacted to woman as a social being but also to woman as a symbol representing specific 'feminine' values and traits. We focus on how women were represented within the life story of the Buddha; analyze the poems left behind by the first Buddhist nuns; reflect on the rules specific to the nuns; and discuss how the earliest extant texts in Pāli represent the Buddhist laywoman, comparing the textual testimonies with contemporary inscriptions. While women were quite visible in the early historical documents of Buddhism, later (approximately from the second century BCE on) they seem to fade into the background. Around the fifth century CE, they vanish completely from the historical records. Though women in mainstream Buddhist traditions tend to be absent, there are a few documents emphasizing the presence of the Buddhist woman during the pre-modern era. This chapter provides readers with the historical and cultural information necessary to develop an informed opinion, and endeavours to engage readers in theoretical reflections permitting a critical assessment that recognizes the vast diversity characteristic of the Buddhist traditions.

THE ORIGIN OF BUDDHISM

The religious traditions that the modern world knows as Buddhism originated in India around the middle of the last millennium, prior to the inception of the Common Era. Buddhism thus arose at about the same time as thinkers in ancient Greece were trying to base their understanding of the world on reason rather than on myth, and as, in China, Confucius was teaching nobility as a moral value and not as a privilege of birth. The Buddhist movement began as an ascetic but also rebellious movement of members of the social elite. Its founder, a prince named Siddhartha Gautama, who later became known as Buddha, the Enlightened One, was born into a noble family that ruled over a small principality in an area that is now on the Indian-Nepalese border.

Although he was brought up in the luxury common to his class, Siddhartha nevertheless experienced a yearning for a state of mind beyond suffering and beyond death. At age 29 he left his family and noble surroundings in order to pursue the life of an ascetic wanderer in search of enlightenment. After several years of arduous striving under the guidance of different teachers who taught various systems of yoga, Siddhartha faced a personal crisis. With great vigour he had followed the time-honoured rules of asceticism, but to no avail. Close to death by starvation, he made one final attempt to seek that coveted spiritual breakthrough. The following night, meditating under a fig tree, he gained insight into the law of *karma* (that is, he realized that past activities determine the present situation and that this life is only one in an endless chain of re-embodiments). Furthermore, he realized the so-called four-fold noble truth: that life is inevitably saturated with suffering (birth, sickness, old age, and death); that desire and yearning is the cause of suffering; that the end of yearning implies the end of suffering, which is *nirvana*; and that there is a path toward realizing nirvana (consisting of wisdom, morality, and contemplation). Only through moral and mental discipline and a ruthless inquiry into the true nature of things would one gain nirvana; no gods or spirits, no magic could be of any help in this endeavour.

When the morning dawned, Siddhartha had reached the inner assurance that now suffering had come to an end and that nirvana, a state beyond any description or words, had been achieved. Siddhartha had become an Enlightened One, a Buddha. After some reluctance to share his insight with others, he wandered over the dusty roads of the eastern Ganges Valley for more than 40 years. He shared his experience and his insight with those who were eager to hear it. During these four decades a large and diverse following began to assemble around him. The teaching of the four-fold noble truth was complemented with the teaching of interdependent origination, illuminating how all phases of life are interconnected and depend on each other. He also taught

an elaborate system of meditation that would lead to the realization of nirvana. Similar to his contemporaries in ancient Greece or China, Buddha criticized the belief in the potency of gods and demons; he emphasized that nobility means nobility of character, and that this can be achieved only through strenuous self-discipline, never by birthright. In the ascetic-spiritual view of the Buddha, there is no room for an omniscient and almighty god, male or female, or for a concept similar to the Christian concept of sin or hell. One's present deeds determine one's future according to the rule of karma, which cannot be altered, not by any god or Buddha. Based on textual studies, early modern scholars considered Buddhism a form of moral humanism rather than a religion. Later scholars argued that this approach that reduced a living faith to a moral philosophy disregarded the living expressions of practising Buddhists.

Soon after Buddha had realized enlightenment, fellow ascetics and yogis were drawn to him. Although he never encouraged anyone to follow him, or to abandon their families, a following of men and women began to form. Among them were aristocrats, wealthy guild masters, artisans, tradespeople, courtesans, and ordinary folks, as well as beggars and even criminals. They were drawn to the Buddha in the expectation that they too would be able to attain a state of being beyond suffering where they could see 'things as they are', a state described as *arhantship* as long as the person was alive, and as nirvana, once the person passed away. They would then be cleansed of the distorted vision of reality, of all forms of yearning and desire, as well as of all forms of rejection and hatred.

Judging from extant literary sources, it seems that at first Buddha's followers lived by simply imitating their master's way of life, a life of utmost simplicity. But when society took issue with some of the habits of this new community—such as former spouses wandering together through the countryside as fellow ascetics—the need for 'rules' emerged. Each of the monastic rules ascribed to Buddha (and there are several hundreds) is introduced by a story that recounts the circumstances that necessitated its proclamation. A number of these rules deal with how women should behave within this newly founded ascetic community and how they should interact with laypeople, male and female. Some rules regulate sexual and erotic activities. There are two sets of rules, one for monks and one for nuns. The monks' rules certainly predate the formulation of the nuns' rules and serve as the template for the latter. A thorough discussion of these rules provides insight into how women were seen by the early Buddhist community.

The place of women in Buddhism has to be seen against the background of general social organization in India at that time. Unlike ethnic religions such as Hinduism or Judaism, religions that originate with a historical founder, such

as Confucianism or Islam, always present themselves in dialogue, and often in contrast to an existing socio-religious situation. This is the case with Buddhism. Many of its doctrines contested general views and beliefs held in high esteem by Indians at that time. The status and roles of women in early Buddhist communities are defined and circumscribed by the mainly non-Buddhist society of early India. Pre-Buddhist India recognized woman mainly for her reproductive capabilities, whereby the delivery of sons was of great economic and ritual significance. Not long before the rise of Buddhism, Indian society underwent a transition from being a mainly pastoral and semi-agricultural, village-based society to an urban one typified by labour diversification, a rise in mercantilism, and artistic accomplishments. This urban climate provided women of the upper classes with opportunities to unfold their intellectual and artistic talents. Thus, I.B. Horner wrote:

The birth of girl-children was no longer met with open-eyed and loud-voiced despair, for girls had ceased to be despised and looked upon as encumbrances. They were now allowed a good deal of liberty. Matrimony was not held before them as the end and aim of their existence, and they were not regarded as shameful if they did not marry; but if they did, they were neither hastened off to an early child-marriage, nor bound to accept the man of their parents' selection. Princesses and ladies of high degree seem to have had some voice in the matter of choosing their husband. As wife a woman was no mere household drudge, but she had considerable authority in the home, ranked as her husband's helpmate, companion and guardian, and in matters both temporal and spiritual were regarded as his equal and worthy of respect. . . . Under Buddhism, more than ever before, she was an individual in command of her own life until the dissolution of the body, and less of a chattel to be only respected if she lived through and on a man. (Horner 1930: 3)

Despite a general improvement of women's status, the early Buddhist community certainly challenged the social mores of Indian society when it began to accept women as wandering ascetics side-by-side with men. This novelty must have stirred some emotions among the general Indian populace. Many of the rules specific to the nuns' order were obviously designed to minimize society's discomfort with independent women, exempt from the reproductive routine and male supervision and outside the range of domestic duties, roaming the country. While women of the elite certainly enjoyed not only the privileges of their class but also a modest participation in such male-dominated fields as philosophical debating and governance (only in the absence of a male heir), it was unheard of that they would join migratory ascetic groups in pursuit of mystical experiences. Given the circumstances of its beginning, the

Buddhist traditions had the opportunity to include women more than did any other religious group emerging at that time.

WOMEN'S OFFICIAL AND UNOFFICIAL ROLES AND BACKLASH

Throughout history Buddhist women participated in the practice of their faith. However, when reflecting on past periods we can judge women's roles only on the basis of historical evidence, which are either inscriptions on stone or copper tables or textual evidence. Thus, the picture we gain based on these sources is necessarily incomplete as it treats unrecorded events with silence. We gain some information about women by examining the female characters in Buddha's life story and by studying the records of Buddhist nuns.

Women in Buddha's Life Story

Women figure in the Buddhist literature from early on. However, the historic accuracy of these accounts remains in most cases questionable. A major crux is that 'the word of the Buddha', which makes up the core of the Buddhist scriptures, was not put to writing before the last or second-last century BCE, 200 to 300 years after the founder's death.

First, let us examine how women were represented in Buddha's own life stories. In a text from the first century CE, Buddha's conception and birth are praised in the flowery language of court poetry:

This ruler of men, with his queen, enjoyed, as it were, the sovereign of Vaiśravaṇa. Then without defilement she received the fruit of the womb, just as knowledge united with mental concentration bears fruit.

Before she conceived, she saw in her sleep a white lord of elephant entering her body, yet she felt thereby no pain.

Māyā, the queen of that god-like king, bore in her womb the glory of her race and, being in her purity free from weariness, sorrow and illusion, she set her mind on the sin-free forest.

....

Then as soon as Puṣya became propitious, from the side of the queen, who was hallowed by her vows, a son was born for the weal of the world, without her suffering either pain or illness. (Aśvaghōṣa tr. by Johnston: 2–3)

While these verses hardly render a historical account, they speak articulately of the devotion that faithful Buddhists must have felt regarding Buddha's birth. As in similar accounts of a religion's founder, Māyā, Buddha's mother, is praised for her purity, and the conception happens 'without defilement'. The birth itself

is miraculous as the future Buddha enters the world through an opening in his mother's waist. Needless to say, the child is precocious. Idyllic as these accounts are, they nevertheless cannot conceal the impression that the woman here is seen only as a means to the end—that is, to glorify the founder's birth as a unique event. Buddha's mother is said to have died soon after his birth, and her sister, Prajāpati, became his wet nurse and nanny. She will be reintroduced in several texts as the first woman that Buddha formally ordained as a nun. In accord with the custom of his time and class, while still at home the adolescent Buddha got married and lived a life of luxury and splendour, surrounded by numerous concubines and female entertainers. Buddha's wife, Yaśodharā, a maiden and 'of widespread renown, virtuous and endowed with beauty, modesty and gentle bearing' (Johnston 1978: 25), is introduced as the mother of his only son, whom he called aptly Rahula, which means 'fetter'. Seeing as abject his wife as well as the numerous courtesans and female servants surrounding him, Prince Siddhartha left his palace in search of enlightenment. Later monk authors used this episode to indulge in rhetoric that vilifies women as seductresses and as beings of low morality, disinclined to philosophical inquiries. But there is also a text (see the section Marginal Voices) that speaks with a very different voice and that tries to affirm Yaśodharā's role in his achieving enlightenment.

During the years in which Siddhartha travelled with groups of male ascetics and yogis, no encounter with a woman is recorded. However, when he was near death due to extreme fasting, Siddhartha met a woman who offered him a savoury rice dish. Desperate to experience a breakthrough in his spiritual search, he accepted the dish and regained his strength. And in fact, Siddhartha experienced in the following night a cataclysmic mystical ecstasy, his enlightenment. In this episode, the woman who offered him food is an embodiment of female compassion and exhibits the traditional virtue of generosity vis-à-vis mendicant yogis. Once Siddhartha was recognized as Buddha and when a following had gathered around him, he again encountered women eager to become his followers, some as laypeople, others as ascetics or nuns (*bhikṣuṇī*). Buddha addressed women affected by typical 'female' worries and sufferings, such as the premature death of a beloved husband or the death of a child, with empathy and compassion, but his interaction with them was not noticeably different from his interaction with men regarding their worries and sufferings. While one cannot observe expressions of distinct misogyny in Buddha's life story, there is also no affirmation of women as persons of intellectual and spiritual potency equal to that of men.

In contrast to the rather ancillary roles of women in Buddha's life story, numerous men are mentioned who exercised decisive influence on the prince's life: his father, his teachers of yoga and Upanishadic philosophy, his fellow

ascetics, and finally his fellow monks. Among the monks, his cousin Ānanda stands out as Buddha's loyal attendant who never left his side; Śāriputra, Maudgalyāyana, and Kāśyapa are depicted as pillars of the early community; and kings, noble men, and wealthy merchants and artisans are described as his patrons. Among the nuns, only Prajāpatī, Siddhartha's former nanny, occupies a special position as she is credited with convincing Ānanda, who in turn persuades Buddha, that the creation of a nuns' order is desirable. Among the laywomen, Ambapālī, a wealthy courtesan, is mentioned as a devoted lay patron.

Nuns in the Early Sangha

We have no historical documents concerning those laywomen who are mentioned in Buddha's life story, but we have a collection of 73 poems ascribed to some of the nuns who were among Buddha's personal disciples; some of them are mentioned in utterances attributed to the Buddha. This collection is known as *Therīgāthā*, the Songs of the Elder [Nuns] (Norman 1983: 75–7). It is questionable whether all the poems in this collection date back to the time of the Buddha. Some poems seem to have been composed later and retroactively assigned to some famous names. However, scholars agree that some of the poems may very well contain phrases and expressions of the early nuns. Some of the nuns refer to themselves as 'daughter(s) of the Buddha, born from his mouth' (Horner 1930: 171). The same phrase is used by the early monks, contemporary with the nuns discussed here, who also left behind a collection of poems expressing their religious experiences. This phrase means that its author sees him or herself as being reborn from the teaching of the Buddha (that is, through his mouth) and therefore, rightly his son or daughter. The gender difference is erased here in the light of the spiritual experience. An even stronger statement to this effect is attributed to the nun Soma:

What should the woman's nature signify
When consciousness is tense and firmly set,
When knowledge rolleth ever on, when she
By insight rightly comprehends the Norm? (Samyutta Nikāya V, para 2)

Reading the Songs of the Elder Nuns one cannot help but have the impression that, at the beginning of the Buddhist traditions, Buddhist nuns saw themselves to a large degree as equal to the monks. While the biological difference in sex could not be erased, the culturally determined gender difference became for them negligible in the light of their firm ascetic commitment and their spiritual achievements. What mattered for the early Buddhists was obviously the individual's progress on the path toward enlightenment and not the individual's gender. Enlightenment was available to both genders.

In their poems, the nuns state as reasons for entering the monastic life their desire for freedom from the burden of lay life, but also the yearning to transcend the endless cycle of rebirth and to attain arhantship. Others tried to find ways to cope with what seemed arbitrary torment inflicted on them, such as the loss of a child.

The Buddhist monastic order was open to people from all walks of life. However, the majority of nuns mentioned in the Songs belonged to the upper castes (royalty and nobility, wealthy merchants, prominent Brahmins). Only two nuns were reported to have come from poor Brahmin castes, and four were courtesans. In the Songs, some nuns are identified by their outstanding talents or achievements, including great wisdom (Khemā, former consort of King Bimbisāra), articulation in preaching the Buddhist religion (Dhammānā, from a wealthy merchant family), expertise in the monastic rules and regulations (Paṭācārā, also from a wealthy merchant family), paranormal insight (Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā, a convert from Jainism), memories of her former lives (Bhaddā, from the Kāpila Brahmin caste), and so on. The latter was also known as very articulate and fluent in religious discourses, while others were renowned speakers and excelled in religious debates with followers of other religious traditions (Horner 1930: 168–72). The early nuns were full members of the monastic order and were recognized for their extraordinary intellectual and spiritual talents and accomplishments. They were thus not much different from the monks. Even a few centuries later we read in some inscriptions—stone or copper tablets attached to ancient Buddhist buildings and which record the donor's name and often the purpose of the donation—of nuns who carried the title 'expert in the *Tripitaka*' (the three collections of early Buddhist scriptures). However, soon after that period this title became the exclusive domain of monks (Schopen 1997: 31).

Married as well as unmarried women entered the order, but among the authors of the Songs, the unmarried nuns outnumbered the ones who had been married or widowed. This fact permits the conclusion that, at the time of the Buddha, marriage was not mandatory for women as it had been in earlier and again in later times. As was the case for the monks, women who wanted to enter the order had to obtain their parents' consent and be free of debt and social bondage. In a few cases, women wanting to join the Order asked their husbands for approval, which in most cases was given without hesitation. Thus, one may conclude that at the time it was seen as within the boundaries of normalcy for a woman to leave family and household life to join the mendicant Order of the Buddha. On occasion, husband and wife decided to join the Order together. Some women are recorded as joining the Order not because of spiritual motivation but because relatives and friends had done so.

Entering the Order did not imply that the Buddhist woman had to be either a virgin or denounce the experiences of her previous life in the world.

To the contrary, nuns often maintained some contact with their families. Despite restrictive contacts with men, the rules permitted nuns to care for their own male children up to the time of puberty (Hüsken 1997: 470). Donative inscriptions dating from the first centuries of Buddhist history substantiate this claim that nuns maintained on occasion close contacts with their families. Some nuns are recorded to have made significant donations to an existing monastery (for instance, an elaborate masonry gate or wall) for the benefit of their deceased parents. Such inscriptions document first, that nuns maintained emotional and economic ties with their families; second, that there was a belief that making donations would positively affect the fate of deceased parents; and third, that these nuns had control over substantial material wealth (Schopen, 1997: 30–43, 56–67).

The Monastic Order and Its Rules

The Buddhist monastic order, or *Sangha*, is a self-governing body based on consensual decisions of the local monastic community. Men and women form independent communities and monasteries. Each local community that has its base in a monastery elects its own leader (Pāli: *thera*; Sanskrit: *sthavira*—both meaning ‘elder’) for a certain period of time. Textual and epigraphic evidence suggest that during the first 200 years of Buddhism the difference between the nuns’ and monks’ Orders was insignificant. Local communities were independent, as there was no countrywide or even global hierarchy overseeing them. In the twentieth century Western scholars predicted the demise of Buddhism due to this lack of a hierarchical structure, but history has proven them wrong on this point. Thus to speak of a ‘Buddhist pope’, whether with regard to the past or present, is wrong.

These egalitarian and democratically organized communities of monks and nuns were subject to subsequent and irreversible changes that altered the situation of the Buddhist nuns forever. In contradiction to the original rule that members of the *Sangha* had to keep distant from the ruler and the court system, a few centuries after Buddha’s death (usually dated 480 BCE), the political system and its functionaries took, to some extent, control of the monastic system and used it often to their own advantages. Thus the independent and egalitarian nature of the Buddhist monastic system was undermined when kings and emperors meddled in monastic affairs. They tried to prevent dissent among its members or they called upon some monks to serve as advisors or court officials. For instance, in India, Emperor Ashoka (ruled 269–232 BCE), a devout Buddhist monarch who transformed the local Buddhist movement into a world religion, convened a council to resolve a schism within the Buddhist *Sangha*. To this council, he called only monks. In China, some T’ang emperors appointed Buddhist monks as advisors and bestowed on them ranks

including that of court official. In Tibet, King Ral-pa-can (ruled 815–36) appointed not only a monk as minister of religious affairs but also put the monks’ *Sangha* in charge of overseeing the Lower Assembly (Dargyay 1991: 124 ff.). In these and many more cases, only monks were called to the court, and this situation pushed the Buddhist nuns more and more into the background. While some of the monks’ monasteries gained political influence, status, and significant wealth, nuns’ monasteries remained dependent on the laity’s voluntary contributions. This decreased their status in the light of the growing prestige associated with the monks.

The reasons for this dramatic change in the position of the Buddhist nuns vis-à-vis the Buddhist monks has to be seen in the gender preferences and restrictions governing the court culture of the time. Women were permitted at the court as mothers, wives, and concubines of the ruler, or as musicians and dancers (who were also available to the ruler for sexual enjoyment). The court protocol left no room for independent and celibate women—that is, nuns. They were left out of the political process and were excluded from those monastic institutions that garnered the most economic support and that enjoyed the most significant political power. Even today, the Tibetan monastery of Labrang Tashikyil, located in Gansu Province, China, which housed in 1995 about 1,600 monks, enjoys government patronage by being designated as a national heritage site. It is the destination of large tour groups and receives significant public funds. Its spiritual leader has his residence in the provincial capital of Lanchou and enjoys the privileges of a government official. However, three small nunneries next to the famous Labrang monastery exist in abhorrent poverty and deprivation. They receive no support from the government or from the rich monks’ monastery.

When monks became advisors to emperors and kings, the construction of monasteries on palace lands and under the jurisdiction of the court was a frequent result (for example, Tendai temple in Japan; rNam-rgyal monastery as well as Sera, Drepung, and Gaden monasteries in Tibet). The senior monks of these monasteries often enjoyed royal privileges and luxury as well as significant political influence. Yet their control over other monasteries was at best limited, if not altogether absent. Being part of the power structure, these monastic institutions and their members became in all regularity defenders of the status quo and obstructed change and innovation. Two examples may suffice. The first illustrates the general resistance to modernization put up by politically entrenched monastic institutions; the second exemplifies the resistance to improving the nuns’ status mounted by influential monks of some traditions.

First, in the aftermath of the British invasion of Tibet in 1904, some secular cabinet ministers urged a general modernization of the Tibetan socio-political system. The Three Monastic Seats of the state-funded large monasteries,

Sera, Ganden, and Drepung, all with enormous political influence, objected vigorously to any plans that would alter their privileged status. M. Goldstein summarizes the situation: '[The] Three monastic Seats . . . believed that they represented the fundamental interests of Buddhism and were obligated to preserve the religious values of the state. Thus, monasteries worked in the government to prevent modernization, which they believed to be detrimental to both the economic base of monasticism and the "value" monopoly of Tibetan Buddhism' (Goldstein 1989: 816).

Second, when in the late 1980s nuns from several Buddhist traditions (especially the *Theravāda* and Tibetan traditions) pushed for a reinstatement of full ordination for nuns, powerful monks of these traditions delayed the process indefinitely by insisting on a strict literal interpretation of the pertinent monastic rules (Tsomo 1988: 236–57). The issue of full ordination for Buddhist nuns and its absence in many traditions will be discussed in more detail later on under Social Change in the Wake of Colonialism.

The vast majority of the hundreds of monastic rules are the same for monks and nuns. Theirs is a life of simplicity and renunciation whose sole objective is to cultivate conditions leading toward enlightenment, or so is the ideal. Monks and nuns have their heads shaved and wear in most cases similar robes. Thus, outwardly there are almost no differences. However, tradition has it that the Buddha was reluctant to create a nuns' order parallel to the monks' order. He agreed to do so only if the nuns were willing to accept the eight chief rules: (1) every nun, regardless of her seniority, is junior to even the youngest monk; (2) nuns cannot spend the rainy season in a place where no monk is available (in order to instruct them in the monastic discipline); (3) nuns ought to ask the monks for setting the day of the confession ceremony and providing exhortations to them; (4) after the rainy season, the nun has to inquire before the monks' and the nuns' Sangha whether any fault can be laid to her charges; (5) a nun found guilty of serious offence has to undergo discipline before both Sanghas; (6) a woman who has completed the two years novitiate must ask the monks' Sangha for full initiation; (7) a nun must never revile or abuse a monk; (8) nuns cannot reprimand monks for violation of monastic rules and proper conduct, but monks can reprimand nuns. In practice these rules were modified so that the interactions and contacts between nuns and monks were closely regulated and minimized. However, every nun, even the most senior and respected one, had to consider every monk as senior regardless of how junior a rank in the Sangha he held. This rule can be observed today in every Buddhist country where in the streets nuns bow to passing monks and make room for them while the monks do not return these gestures of courtesy and reverence. Another aspect of the eight rules having an impact on the nuns' lives and resulting from the eight weighty rules is that the nuns' Sangha is under the jurisdiction of the

local monks' Sangha, and that implies that nuns' ordination requires the presence not only of fully ordained nuns but also of fully ordained monks.

Despite some rhetoric to the opposite effect, in reality Buddhist men quite often seem to be unaware of Buddhist nuns living within their neighbourhood or of the existence of significant nunneries. For instance, a recent article describing and discussing the monastic communities in a remote valley of the Himalayas does not mention one of the six or seven nunneries also in that valley (Crook and Shakya 1994: 559–600). This is all the more regrettable as one of the nunneries dates back to at least the twelfth century and houses artwork from that period. Another anthropologist observes the following with regard to an adjacent area: 'The villagers assume an ambivalent attitude towards nuns. On the one hand, devotion to religion is to be considered in a positive sense, but on the other hand, not one of the women I met, not even the older ones, aspired to entering a monastery. Children will sometimes use the word *nun* as an abusive word' (Reis 1983: 224). The author observes that the primary definition of womanhood is reproduction, a fact that makes a nun appear to be 'deficient'—very much like a barren woman or a widow, traditionally pitied and derided (Reis 1983: 228).

The subordinate and economically as well as politically deprived status of nuns resulted in the formation of alternative organizations in some countries, a fact that will be further discussed under Social Change.

The Buddhist Laywoman

The Buddhist laywoman stands in the shadow of the renunciant male, the monk. She provides him with food when he comes begging for alms to her door. She is praised for her generosity, patience, and self-effacing attitude as mother and wife. If she displays piety and devotion for the faith, society heaps praise on her.

I.B. Horner, a pioneering British scholar of the early twentieth century, gave a detailed discussion of the literary sources pertinent to women during the early centuries of Buddhism in her book *Women under Primitive Buddhism: Laywomen and Almswomen*, first published in 1930 and later many times reprinted. It is still a valid and indispensable source of information. Horner arranged the material in two sections, 'The Laywomen' and 'The Almswomen'. The part dealing with the sources pertinent to laywomen categorizes women according to their social position as mother, daughter, wife, widow, and woman worker. This procedure highlights Horner's approach as mainly descriptive and informative rather than theoretical and analytical. Horner rightly points to the fact that a woman's life in pre-Buddhist India was measured according to how useful and valuable it was to her father, brother, husband, or son. A woman independent from a male relative or husband had no place in society;

she was an abnormality. But once her vital ties with a male relative were affirmed, and if she fulfilled her obligations, such as deference to her mother-in-law, adoring her husband like a god, and, above all, bearing sons, she became an honoured and respected member of society. In contrast to this rather restricted situation, Horner points out, within the early Buddhist communities a woman gained acceptance and status in her own right despite some lingering tendencies to hold on to some pre-Buddhist ideas with regard to the proper place of women in society.

The improved status of women within Buddhist communities becomes apparent with regard to inheritance practices. For instance, Bhaddā Kāpilānī, although married, appears to have been the sole owner of her property: For it is said that when she renounced the world, 'she handed over her great wealth to her kinsfolk' (Horner 1930: 54 quoting the Pāli commentary on *Therīgāthā*: 37). In another case, also reported in the commentary on the *Therīgāthā*, a father upon entering the monastic order bestowed his entire inheritance on his daughter (Horner 1930: 54f.). Epigraphic documents from about the same period substantiate the impression received from the textual sources that women owned property and could decide how dispose of it. Inscriptions from the ancient Buddhist site of Bhārhut, which date from 120 to 80 BCE, illustrate this point by preserving 14 inscriptions identifying nuns as major donors in contrast to 24 inscriptions of monks (Schopen 1997: 30). Moreover, Horner draws our attention to the fact that with very few exceptions it was the usage of the time to speak of 'mother and father' (Pāli *mātāpitaro*) when mentioning one's parents (Horner 1930: 5f.). This widespread convention may be seen as reflecting the social status of women at that time, which finds further support in the contemporary custom that men identified themselves by their mother's clan name. For instance, Buddha's own mother belonged to the clan of Gotama and he was known accordingly as Siddhartha (his personal name) Gautama (the adjective form of his mother's clan name). Interestingly, in later Buddhist texts (roughly from the beginning of the Common Era on) Buddha is known as Śākyamuni, 'the wise of the Śākya,' whereby Śākya was his father's clan name, while the custom to name him according to his mother's clan name became obsolete. Does this change in naming convention signal a change in the social status of women? Possibly, if we consider, for instance, a passage found in the *Milindapañha*, a text probably dating from the second century BCE. Here, Nāgasena, a senior Buddhist monk, advises King Milinda (Pāli for the Greek Menandros) as follows:

There are, O king, these ten sorts of individuals who are despised and condemned [sic] in the world, thought shameful, looked down upon, held blame-worthy, treated with contumely, not loved. And what are the ten? A woman

without a husband, O King, and a weak creature, and one without friends or relatives . . . (Horner 1930: 26)

This passage follows the same line of thinking as *The Laws of Manu*, where the possibility of a woman living in independence was strictly ruled out. The widow, who had neither father, nor husband or son to rely on, was seen as a social outcaste and the carrier of ill fortune. There are about 200 years between the conception of the earliest Buddhist texts and the *Milindapañha*. Would socio-cultural changes during this period permit speculations about the causes leading to the change in women's social position? Due to the dearth of socio-historical sources in ancient India, we can only speculate what causes may have lead to these changes in women's status and position.

Even today, Buddhist laywomen are hardly visible within the hierarchy. Individual women, often educated in the West, have gained certain notoriety through publications and public speaking. However, the monastic institution, which is the main voice of Buddhism, often refuses to recognize these women. As in the past, the laywoman is seen mainly as a person who quietly affirms the main concepts of Buddhism (generosity, compassion, patience, humility), supports the monks with food donations, and creates within her family an atmosphere conducive to the practice of Buddhism. Certainly, Buddhist women practised their faith throughout history but they had, with very few exceptions, no public influence or visibility.

UNIQUE FEATURE: THE DISAPPEARANCE OF BUDDHIST WOMEN

Scholars have taken opposite views as to when and under what traditions of Buddhism women were more integrated into the monastic hierarchy, and when they came to be seen in a more positive light. I.B. Horner (1930) has provided evidence that in the early days of Buddhism, women were integrated into the monastic system and advanced—like their male counterparts—to arhanthood, or sainthood. She advocates that Buddhism significantly improved the status of women:

Thus, amid many currents, intricate but potent, the tide turned; and in its flow the position of women, as manifested in secular affairs, became one which was no longer intolerable and degraded; women were acknowledged at last to be capable of working as a constructive force in the society of the day. (Horner 1930: 2)

In contrast to Horner, Diana Paul (1979: 303) argues that the Mahāyāna movement provided women with a better chance to become recognized and

valued as integral members of the Buddhist communities. She stresses that because of the Mahāyāna emphasis on generosity and compassion, this movement saw the Buddhist layperson as equal if not superior to the monk or nun. Furthermore, within the Mahāyāna tradition a plethora of female deities embody the major soteriological and ethical concepts of Buddhism, which, Paul insists, points toward a valorization of women in general.

Recently, M. Shaw tried to establish evidence that Vajrayāna, or tantric Buddhism, as the 'crowning cultural achievement of the Pāla period' (1994: 20), propelled the female practitioner to the forefront. While it is undeniable that women continued to be Buddhist practitioners throughout the centuries, the question that needs to be asked is this: Did Buddhist women, monastic as well as laywomen, have status and power equal to Buddhist men? The clear answer applying to all Buddhist countries and periods of Buddhism's long history is no. Further, it remains an enigma that among the vast Buddhist literature preserved in many of the major Asian languages, there is not one text (with the exception of some parts of the *Therīgāthā*) that can be attributed with certainty to a female author. If tantric women were so learned, as Shaw believes, why did they leave no texts behind while their male partners did so? Why do all tantric lineages comprise men and have only male founders?

The only exception, which is usually referred to when one wants to make the case of women's presence in Buddhist traditions, is the role Ma-gcig Lab-sgron (b. 1055) played in the establishment of a particular tantric tradition in Tibet. Jérôme Edou says of her, 'She is woman and mother, but she is also *ḍākinī* and deity, legitimized as such by being an emanation of the "Great Mother of Wisdom", Yum Chenmo, as well as of Ārya Tārā, who transmitted to her teachings and initiations. In this way she becomes an equal of the greatest Tibetan masters of her time' (Edou 1996: 6). But he also admits that the only source containing information about her life is her biography, which 'is far from being a historical work in the modern sense. Like most Tibetan sacred biographies, Machig's life introduces us to the magico-spiritual universe where the marvelous occupies center stage and the historical facts often recede into the background' (Edou 1996: 3). It says a lot about the self-definition of contemporary Buddhist women in Tibet when the twentieth century reincarnation of Ma-gcig Lab-sgron, Rig-'dzin Chos-nyid bZang-mo (1852–1953), pledged to be reborn as a man. This is in line with a common Tibetan prayer that is practised in particular by laypeople. It addresses Buddha Amitābha in order to realize a rebirth in his Buddha realm *Sukhāvatī*. A key sentence says, 'may I not be reborn as a woman'.

To sum up, one can say that while Buddhist renunciant women were almost equal to their male peers during the first few centuries of Buddhist history, the status and power of Buddhist nuns, not to mention that of Buddhist

laywomen, began to decline thereafter. The causes for this decline are only partially known. Not before the collapse of the colonial powers in Asia did the issue of the status and power of Buddhist renunciant women surface again.

FEMININE SYMBOLIZATION IN LATER BUDDHIST THOUGHT

The symbolization of woman, apparent in various goddesses and symbols of feminine nature and values, occurs within a broader framework of religious and philosophical theorizing. The status of women as well as the symbolization of the feminine were significantly influenced by the two major developments within Buddhism—that is, the rise of Mahāyāna, the Great Vehicle, and of Vajrayāna, tantric Buddhism.

Mahāyāna Philosophy

Around the beginning of the Common Era, a new thinking took hold of the Buddhist communities in India. It became known as Mahāyāna, the Great Vehicle, indicating its more inclusive nature than the preceding Vehicles, which became derogatorily named Hīnayāna, Lower Vehicles. The main ideas propagated by Mahāyāna can be summarized as follows: (1) The spiritual goal was redefined from arhantship to buddhahood. While the pre-Mahāyāna traditions emphasized that enlightenment consisted of the elimination of desire, aversion, and ignorance, the Mahāyāna claimed that enlightenment means buddhahood, that is, omniscience and limitless compassion in addition to the elimination of desire, aversion, and ignorance. (2) The path toward enlightenment was not so much anymore the eight-fold noble path, but ten stages that a Buddha-to-be, or *Bodhisattva*, had to master in the course of numerous lifetimes. The key elements were to develop consummate wisdom, which entailed a pledge not to realize nirvana until all sentient beings of the entire universe would also be able to do so, and to cultivate an empathy that would embrace every living creature in love and respect 'like one's own mother'. (3) The ideal of the solitary monk entranced in meditation while sitting under a tree was often mocked in favour of the ideal of the Bodhisattva who lived in the world and activated his or her compassion and love within it. The Bodhisattva was in most cases a layperson, and in a few cases female. Several Mahāyāna texts develop an image of the feminine and paint a picture of Buddhist women. Diana Paul extracts two conflicting ideas of the feminine from these texts:

The first is the notion that the feminine is mysterious, sensual, destructive, elusive, and closer to nature. Association with this nether world may be polluting and deadly for the male and therefore must be suppressed, controlled,

and conquered by the male in the name of culture, society and religion. Female sexuality as a threat to culture and society provides religion with a rationale for relegating women to a marginal existence. (Paul 1985: xxiv)

A good example of this attitude is provided in the origin myths of the Tibetan people as it is told in Buddhist texts: A female Rock Demon was infatuated with a male monkey, who in reality was a Bodhisattva. When she tried to seduce him, the monkey referred to his religious vows of chastity and declined her invitations. In response the Rock Demon indicated that she was consumed by passion and lust and that if he was not willing to comply, a male Rock Demon would certainly do so; and this would result in populating the world with many little demons and create havoc. In the end, the male Bodhisattva monkey gives in 'for the benefit of all sentient beings'. In this narrative, the female is wild, cannibalistic, and destructive while the male is tame, celibate, pious, and compassionate (Stein 1972: 37–9). Paul presents the second ideal as follows:

The second theme is the notion that the feminine is wise, maternal, creative, gentle, and compassionate. Association with this affective, emotional, transcendent realm is necessary for the male's fulfillment of his religious goals and for his release from suffering. Sexuality may be either controlled or denied in the feminine as sacred. (Paul 1985: xxv)

This second aspect, the feminine as sacred, finds its most salient manifestation in the ideal of the Perfection of Wisdom, symbolized as a female and called 'the mother of all Buddhas'. While this phrase received wide circulation and approval among Buddhist traditions in China, Japan, Vietnam, Tibet, and Mongolia, it is questionable whether it had any positive effect on the status and roles of women as members of society. Ursula King (1995: 16) observes that the 'symbolic ascendancy of the feminine often goes with a social denigration and low status of women in everyday life', and that one must distinguish 'between the place given to women in the world of religious imagination and that accorded to them in the actual world of religious life'.¹ King expresses here a fact that can be observed in various cultures and periods, from Confucian China with its cult of the Queen of Heaven to medieval Europe with its cult of Mary, mother of Jesus. The female that is feared by the male as a personal threat and as a threat to culture and religion is transformed into a symbol of sanctity and thereby neutralized. Thus prodigiously worshipping the feminine as sacred (as defined by males) permits control and subjugation of women as social beings. This flip-over mechanism is a way in which cultures deal with individuals or institutions that are experienced as threatening.

Therefore, it is a gross mistake to assume that women enjoyed status and prestige similar to men whenever the feminine was extolled as a supreme symbol of sanctity.

A few Mahāyāna texts, however, advocate that gender differences are as empty as all other distinctions. Some of these texts, such as the *Teachings of Vimalakirti*, are humorous in that they make fun of the self-righteousness of monks and ordinary people (Paul 1985: 220–32). Did this and similar texts influence Buddhist societies so that they would rethink the position and status of women? No substantive evidence is available to support this.

Vajrayāna

After Mahāyāna took hold of the Buddhist communities in India, another wave of new ideas spilled over the Buddhist communities around the middle of the first millennium. This new tradition became known as Vajrayāna, the Diamond Vehicle, often referred to as tantric Buddhism. It adopted Mahāyāna philosophy but integrated it with an elaborate system of rituals and symbols. Unlike the preceding Buddhist traditions, Vajrayāna Buddhism viewed sexuality as an instrument to realize the enlightened state. However, the use of sexuality was highly circumscribed and regulated. Intercourse had to be carried out without seeking or experiencing desire or pleasure; the male had to prevent ejaculation by absorbing the semen into the spinal pathway. Women became essential participants in these sexual rites. D. Snellgrove argues that these female partners, as well as the tantric deities, were never more than handmaidens of the male masters and male deities (Snellgrove 1987: 150), while M. Shaw argues that '[t]he presence of women and women's teachings, as well as affirmations of female energy and spiritual capacities, are distinct features of tantric religiosity. When one considers the historical position of Tantra, an influx of feminine elements and insights is consistent with the social inclusiveness of the movement and its receptivity to symbols, practices, and insights from new quarters' (Shaw 1994: 205).

Perhaps the most significant difficulty in deciding this issue is the fact that Buddhist tantric texts rarely distinguish in an unmistakable way between earthly human beings and symbolizations of them. For instance, the concept of *dākinī* oscillates between real women (most of low castes or tribal background) and various degrees of abstract symbolizations. The Buddhist *dākinī* shares this grey space between reality and religious fantasy with witches and fairies and similar nocturnal creatures. Another issue aggravating any decision on this thorny question is the fact that pre-modern India did not keep records of historical and social situations and their changes over time. Tantric practice was always considered a secret activity that sought to avoid the daylight and public scrutiny. Its social influence remains therefore unknown.

Tibetan tradition is the sole Buddhist tradition that has embraced tantric Buddhism without reservations. Tibetan monks who have become experts in tantric practice emphatically insist that all texts describing sexual practices have to be understood as allegories and that they should never be enacted literally. Tibetan commentaries support this interpretation by, for instance, understanding the term for *semen* as a cipher for the enlightened mind, or the term for *vulva* as a cipher for wisdom. If the only tradition that practises tantric Buddhism insists on its pure symbolic allegory, how can Western scholars argue otherwise? However, none would deny that occasional misuse of symbolic meaning and a literal interpretation of texts to cover personal licentiousness has occurred. Could it be that while Westerners questioned their inherited dualistic mind-body concept, they projected a desired solution to this dilemma onto tantric Buddhism?

MARGINAL VOICES: TEXTS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Buddhism, like many other religions, was founded by a man; his main followers were men; men occupy the decision-making institutions and form the hierarchy; men have written the normative texts; and men speak publicly for the religion. Women never enjoyed equal status with men; however, in the early centuries Buddhist women were closer to equality than they were later on. Despite this situation, there are some textual testimonies that speak—from the margin—with what is now called ‘a woman’s voice’. These texts are not necessarily written by women but they express views that do not support the ubiquitous assumption that men are the primary human beings. A few selected texts document this situation.

A Sanskrit text found in the mountainous area of Gilgit describes the two key events of Buddha’s life, his leaving of home and family and his enlightenment, in a way that strays significantly from the common narrative (Strong 1995: 9–18). The common narrative says that Buddha’s father tried to prevent the fulfillment of the prophecy that his son would become either a universal ruler or a Buddha by surrounding his son with beautiful women and grand luxury and by confining him to the palace grounds. At an outing, the future Buddha became aware of the suffering inherent in sickness, old age, death, and birth. He reacted with disgust to the seductiveness and youthful beauty of the palace women. Seeing his wife and his newborn son as nothing but a fetter that would chain him to this life of suffering, he secretly left his wife, parents, and palace to become a mendicant ascetic. Thus, the common narrative does not indicate that the future Buddha felt any remorse for leaving his wife and newborn son or that he had any concern for their future life. Feminist scholars have pointed out that there is a systemic misogyny represented here.

However, this Sanskrit text found in Gilgit renders a different account, although it retains some elements of the common narrative, such as the father’s intent to ensure that his son would not become an ascetic by immersing him in sensual pleasures. The night before his departure the future Buddha reminded himself of his filial duties to ensure the continuation of his lineage, and he had intercourse with Yaśodharā, his main wife, who became pregnant with their first and only son. But the future Buddha had dreams announcing his impending enlightenment, while Yaśodharā had dreams foreshadowing her husband’s departure. When the future Buddha realized the sadness his wife felt, he attempted to convince her that these dreams were ‘nothing but dreams’. When she begged him to take her along, he responded, ‘So be it; where I am going, I will take you’. His quest for enlightenment by fasting finds a parallel in Yaśodharā’s health. When he got thin, she lost weight, and when finally the Buddha realized enlightenment, her son was born. The text constructs this parallel by insisting that Yaśodharā’s pregnancy lasted for six years due to her fasting. While the common story interprets the son’s name, Rāhula, as ‘fetter’, this alternative story treats the name as deriving from Rāhu, the divinity of the lunar eclipse, thus pointing to the lunar eclipse that happened at the moment of the son’s birth while at the same moment his father, Buddha, eclipsed the sun as the Enlightened One. This narrative seems to present the son as the fruit of enlightenment, who could only be born into this world when his father realized enlightenment. One may ask, what made this text marginal and the other account so common? In its denial of family bonds, we may assume, the common story affirmed ideas and sentiments harboured by many young men who were about to leave their families to join the Sangha. The rejection of family bonds and responsibilities integral to the Buddhist view of a spiritual life contained the possibility to denigrate women because of their seminal role in any concept of family (reproduction, food preparation, homemaker). This may have enticed some monks to fall into a misogynist attitude, which found its expression in the texts revised or composed by them. Thus, all Buddhist texts should be read with a sense of suspicion and not be taken as the literal ‘word of the Buddha’.

Another text that challenges the common gender perception embedded in Buddhist texts is the *Teachings of Vimalakīrti* (Thurman 1976). Here, the highly respected monk Śāriputra meets a fairy in Vimalakīrti’s house who engages him in a philosophical yet witty debate. Within the context of exploring the ineffable nature of reality, Śāriputra asks the fairy why she would not change her female sex—endorsing the common opinion that the female sex is less desirable than the male one. The fairy retorts as follows: ‘I have been here 12 years and have looked for the innate characteristics of the female sex and haven’t been able to find them. How can I change them? Just as a magician creates an

illusion of a woman, if someone asks why don't you change your female sex, what is he asking?' (Paul 1985: 230). When the monk continues to pressure the fairy on the issue of innate characteristics, she transforms the monk into her own female body, and transforms her own body into that of the monk. Śāriputra is confounded by this transformation, while the fairy declares 'if you can change into a female form, then all women [in mental state] can also change. Just as you are not really a woman but appear to be female in form, all women also only appear to be female in form but are not really women. Therefore, the Buddha said all are not really men or women' (Paul 1985: 230). This text argues that sex and gender distinctions are as 'void of inherent existence' as all other phenomena. Thus, had this text affected the monastic system, one might argue, the inferior position of nuns would have been untenable.

Another group of texts is sometimes viewed as documenting the supposed important position of women within the Buddhist traditions. Most of these texts are so-called hagiographies, quasi-biographical accounts of saintly persons. The objective of these accounts is to glorify a particular person as a religious role model rather than to account for historical and social facts. Tsultrim Allione has collected six such stories, some of which were transmitted in writing while others were transmitted as oral accounts only. In her introduction she states: '[T]he feminine took on a profoundly more important role than it had in primitive Buddhism' (Allione 1984: 12). These stories tell us about the lives of women who gained some repute within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Male teachers instructed all these women, and they, in turn, had male disciples. The male hierarchy of various monastic institutions assessed the spiritual authenticity of these women. The photographs added by the author portray women in two roles only: as nuns in a group, or as wives of male practitioners. It is hard to see how this amounts to a 'profoundly more important role' in comparison to early Buddhism when nuns achieved the rank of Master of the *Tripitaka* and were in control of substantial material resources used for donations (Schopen 1997: 31). The six stories about women who are noticed by the Tibetan Buddhist traditions stand in stark contrast to the hundreds, if not thousands, of hagiographies glorifying Tibetan monks or pious male practitioners.

Kathryn Ann Tsai has translated biographies of eminent Chinese nuns (Tsai 1994), *Lives of the Nuns*, and notes rightly that the nuns' convents were subject not only to interference from the state, the emperor, and the aristocracy, but also from the monks' Sangha. Unlike the monks, nuns were prevented from setting up convents outside the boundaries of cities and other settlements, which would have provided a situation less prone to interference. The Chinese text preserves information of a total of 65 nuns from the fourth to the sixth centuries CE, while the contemporary *Kao seng Chuan* (*Lives of Eminent Monks*)

'consists of 257 major biographies and a number of sub-biographies' (Tsai 1994: 107). This testifies to the fact that there were significantly fewer nuns than monks who were found worthy of a biography. Although the collection *Lives of the Nuns* does indicate that a few nuns achieved fame and influence, the text was compiled by a monk using older sources. Why did no woman, nun or otherwise, edit the collection?

In summary we can say that while there are scattered testimonies of Buddhist nuns who gained some form of fame and influence during their time, they are a very slim minority in comparison to the number of famous and influential Buddhist monks. Despite the increasing disappearance of the Buddhist nuns from written historical records, however, women continued to be Buddhist practitioners. And we must ask this: Who shaped the prominent strands of Buddhist philosophy, who occupied the decision-making ranks within the monastic institution, who controlled the economic resources of the Buddhist institutions, who had access to its educational offerings and, finally, who composed the most common texts and for whom were they composed? By pondering the answers to these questions, one comes to understand the gender imbalance within all aspects of the Buddhist institutions and organizations. The voices from the margin, however, could prove seminal in fostering social change.

SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE WAKE OF COLONIALISM

The fate of the various Buddhist traditions and institutions in Asia was connected with the political and economic history of each country. In general, Buddhist monasticism was the sole voice for all followers of the faith and it was closely tied to the individual monarchies of these countries. The role of the Buddhist laity was mainly to provide the monks, and to a much lesser degree the nuns, with subsistence (robes, food, medicine, and shelter). In the course of time, monastic institutions received huge donations in the form of land and bonded labourers so that they often formed states within the state. The Chinese Imperial Court, for example, was continuously concerned with the independent state of Buddhist monasteries, and in Tibet the great monasteries absorbed much of the state's revenue and enjoyed extraordinary political power.

The interlocking of monarchy and Buddhist institutions came to an abrupt end with the incursion of European colonial powers. Local monarchs were deposed and, as a consequence, the Buddhist institutions lost not only their most affluent donors and sources of income, but also their basis of political influence and prestige. To the colonial powers, the Buddhist monks were often nothing more than soothsayers, steeped in superstition, who kept the population in ignorance and dependence. Missionary schools were set up to

improve education but also to spread European and Christian ideas in Asian societies and make the Asians more inclined to accept the superiority of their colonial masters. Better education with improved social status led Buddhist women to strive to improve the situation of Buddhist nuns, for whom, by the nineteenth century, full ordination was unavailable in all of South and Southeast Asia as well as in Tibet, the Buddhist Himalayan kingdoms, and Mongolia. The transmission of full ordination for women had ceased in India around the fifth or sixth century and in Southeast Asia by not later than the tenth century, with the consequence that only the rank of novice was open to women who sought the life of a Buddhist renunciant. Destitute women, rather than women seeking enlightenment, turned to becoming nuns, and this situation further undermined the nuns' status in the eye of the public.

Two responses to this state of affairs can be distinguished: The first was an attempt to improve the behaviour and comportment of the novice nuns. They turned now to providing social services in health and education while reserving time for meditation and studies. In Sri Lanka this resulted in the movement of the *Dasasila Mata*, Mothers of the Ten Precepts. The *Dasasila Mata* now enjoys a better public reputation than that of the fully ordained monks because its members are not involved in politics and are not tainted by the largesse of government support (Barnes 1996: 262–7). The second strategy was to reinstate full ordination of nuns. However, this proved to be a thorny issue. Traditionalists point to the rules governing the ordination of nuns that say that the presence of five fully ordained monks and five fully ordained nuns is necessary to bestow full ordination upon a female novice. As there are no fully ordained nuns anymore, no female novice can be fully ordained, so they argue. Proponents of this view conveniently forget that their own traditions take the liberty of interpreting many of the rules in a more liberal way whenever it suits their interests. To complicate the situation further, the rules of ordination require that all monks and nuns bestowing full ordination belong to the same *Vinaya* tradition.² While the full ordination for nuns according to the pre-Mahāyāna tradition ceased throughout the world many centuries ago, it continued within the transmission of the Mahāyāna *Vinaya*. Thus, Theravāda and Tibetan nuns seeking full ordination have often received it in China or Vietnam under the Mahāyāna *Vinaya* transmission. But they encounter opposition of various intensities from their own (male) Sangha, which does not recognize legitimacy of this ordination.

Traditionalists of both camps claim that the issue of full ordination is one promoted by Western feminists and that it is, therefore, alien to the Asian context. For instance, at the 1993 conference of Sakyādhī, the international organization of Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka, the Ministry of Buddhist Affairs offered its support to the conference on the condition that the reintroduction

of full ordination for nuns would not be a topic to be discussed (www.sakyadhita.org/newsletters/5-2.htm#Report). Recent research by Wijayasundara and Malalsekara into the various lineages of the Buddhist Vinaya and the transmission of ordination resulted in their statement that according to the authoritative texts a reinstatement of the full ordination for women is possible and legitimate (Wurst 2001: 133 n.1). Proponents of reinstating the full ordination point also to the *Mahāparinibbāna sutta*, where the Buddha authorized the ordination of nuns through monks alone and, further, point to the fact that minor rules can be and often are suspended, and that this could be applied to this issue (Wurst 2001: 130–3).

During the colonial domination, most Buddhist Sanghas declined in vigour, education, and in the impact they exerted on society. Sporadic attempts to revive the Buddhist tradition focused now on strengthening the role of the laity. In Vietnam, educated Buddhist laypeople showed leadership in breaking down the barriers that kept the various sects apart. In Taiwan in the 1950s, Master Hsin Yun created Fo Kuan Shan, a movement that complemented traditional Buddhist contemplative training with social work. The organization provides seniors' homes, mobile health-care facilities, schools, and orphanages beside the traditional monasteries. There, monks and nuns live and practise together, and in the rituals and ceremonies, monks and nuns file into the main temple hall side-by-side. Nuns are the heads of many of the movement's North American temples. They teach and conduct meditation sessions and are the superiors of other ordained members of the movement. Despite strong patriarchal tendencies in Chinese culture, Buddhist nuns and nunneries in China seem to enjoy more respect and support than they do elsewhere in Asia. In general one can say that improving the nuns' education and status meets the strongest opposition within those traditions where monasticism and government are closely intertwined (such as Tibetan-speaking areas, Thailand, Sri Lanka). Nevertheless, within these traditions some open-minded monks are working to provide nuns with access to levels of Buddhist learning from which they were previously barred, that is, mainly the philosophical and theoretical study of Buddhism.

Buddhism became known as a religion in the West from the late-nineteenth century on, and soon people from Europe and North America began to practise Buddhism. At first, the revised or 'Protestant' Buddhism as propagated by the English-educated elite from Sri Lanka gained much attention. After the end of World War II, all forms of Buddhism produced shoots in the West. Soon Buddhism in its ancient Asian garb encountered the new intellectual movements of the West, among them feminism, Beatniks, and the gay-rights movement. In particular, American feminism began to challenge the ingrained gender bias obvious in so many Buddhist traditions. Women

demanded access to the training as Zen priests and, eventually, succeeded after overcoming many obstacles (Boucher 1988: 133–44). Western women became Buddhist nuns and spearheaded the reintroduction of full ordination within traditions where it had ceased long ago. At Bodhgaya, India, in 1987, nuns formed the international association of Sakyādhītā, which organizes annual meetings to discuss the situation of Buddhist nuns around the world. The organization has as its objective to improve the education and the status of nuns, and foremost to bring back full ordination.

The Beat movement introduced Buddhism to American pop culture and the drug culture to Buddhism, often creating the misconception that the drug culture and Buddhism are synonymous. Beat poets such as Jack Kerouac wove Buddhist ideas into their novels and poetry articulating feelings and anxieties of a generation that protested against the Vietnam War. The artistic creations of the Beat generation functioned as a conduit that made Buddhism part of pop culture. The gay-rights movement confronted some Buddhist assumptions about the right use of sexuality. The rules of ordination for both monks' and nuns' orders prohibit ordination of gays or lesbians. A few years ago, the Dalai Lama affirmed this position at an interview in California. At a press conference in June 1997 he stated that from a Buddhist point of view lesbian and gay sex is generally considered sexual misconduct. However, this belief is not based on the partners being of the same gender, he asserts. In fact, in his book *Beyond Dogma*, he has written that 'homosexuality, whether it is between men or between women, is not improper in itself. What is improper is the use of organs already defined as inappropriate for sexual contact' (quoted from http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_budd.htm). Similar to what happened in other religions, gays and lesbians formed their own groups within different Buddhist traditions. Very active groups exist in New York, Boston, and San Francisco, among other places, while Buddhist groups in Toronto welcome gays and lesbians; Buddhist groups for gays and lesbians exist also in Norway, Great Britain, and the Netherlands, and Chinese Buddhist gays and lesbians held a national conference in Hong Kong in 1996. Historically, male homosexuality was at least tolerated if not openly accepted within certain Sanghas (such as in Tibet), while some traditions, such as Shingon Buddhism in Japan, even considered male same-sex love as a means toward realizing enlightenment. Perhaps not surprisingly, female same-sex relations were harshly punished in India as well as in Tibet (which otherwise was very tolerant vis-à-vis sexual activities) and are hardly ever documented (with the exception of the *Kāmasūtra*).

Due to the demographic composition of the North American public, Buddhist communities are often divided into 'ethnic Buddhist' communities and those that are predominantly composed of non-ethnic converts. The latter

groups are more open to cultural and social change than the ethnic groups, which are more concerned with preserving their cultural heritage by hedging against too much 'Western' influence.

SUMMARY

While the Buddhist doctrine insists that men and women have the same potential to achieve the spiritual goal of nirvana or enlightenment, Buddhist cultures throughout their long and diverse history often adopted strong gender biases. During the early centuries of Buddhist history, Buddhist nuns could achieve ranks, such as Master of the *Tripiṭaka*, which signified utmost competence in the Buddhist scriptures, and they controlled large financial or material resources. Given the emphasis Buddhism puts on monasticism and a life of renunciation, laypeople, men as well as women, were not visible in the literary tradition of Buddhism. Their main role was, and to a large degree still is, to support the monk population and their monasteries. A few centuries after Buddha's nirvana (480 BCE), Buddhist monasticism was co-opted by the political powers of the time, which eroded the position of Buddhist nuns. Later the status and socio-cultural impact of Buddhist nuns began to decline, until, in some areas, they had become nothing more than servants. Monks, not nuns, compiled or composed Buddhist scriptures and other authoritative texts, thus effectively excluding the experience and views of Buddhist women. This is true despite a few singular texts that seem to affirm women's experiences and that call the gender bias into question. The intrusion of colonial powers broke up the linkage between monasticism and monarchy, which resulted in a challenging of Buddhist institutions and eventually a process of renewal and innovation (Queen and King 1996). From the late-nineteenth century on, an increasing number of people who were not born into a Buddhist society have adopted this religion, resulting in a heightened awareness of the situation of Buddhist nuns, the lack of full ordination within some Sanghas, and the general gender imbalance. Buddhism in the West is adopting many of the cultural and social characteristics of the modern Western world (such as feminism, gay rights, social concerns for the deprived, democracy, individualism, concern for the environment), thus leading to a new form of Buddhism that eventually will claim its own position within the wide spectrum of Buddhisms shaped by individual cultures and societies (Queen 2000).

NOTES

1. I owe this reference to Danielle Lefebvre, graduate student of Religious Studies at the University of Alberta.

2. There are two main Vinaya transmissions: one accepted by the Sangha of all Theravāda traditions and by the Tibetan and Mongolian Sangha, based on pre-Mahāyāna thinking and a second one accepted by some communities in China, Japan, and Vietnam, based on Mahāyāna thinking.

REFERENCES

- Allione, Tsultrim. 1984. *Women of Wisdom*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Barnes, Nancy J. 1996. 'Buddhist Women and the Nuns' Order in Asia'. *Engaged Buddhism. Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*. Eds Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press: 259–94.
- Boucher, Sandy. 1988. *Turning the Wheel. American Women Creating the New Buddhism*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Crook, John and Tsering Shakya. 1994. 'Monastic Communities in Zangskar: Location, Function and Organisation'. *Himalayan Buddhist Villages. Environment, Resources, Society and Religious Life in Zangskar, Ladakh*. Eds. John Crook and Henry Osmaston. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass: 559–600.
- Dargyay, E.K., 1991. *Sangha and State in Imperial Tibet, Tibetan History and Language. Studies Dedicated to Uray Gêza on his Seventieth Birthday* (Wiener Studien zur Tibetologie und Buddhismuskunde Heft 26). Ed. E. Steinkellner. Wien: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studies, Universität Wien: 111–27.
- Edou, Jérôme. 1996. *Machig Labdrön and the Foundations of Chöd*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications.
- Goldstein, Melvyn C. 1993. *A History of Modern Tibet, 1913–1952. The Demise of the Lamaist State*. 1989. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers.
- Horner, I.B. 1990. *Women under Primitive Buddhism: Laywomen and Almswomen* (1930). Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.
- Hüsken, Ute. 1997. *Die Vorschriften für die Buddhistische Nonnengemeinde im Vinaya-Pitaka der Theravādin*. (Monographien zur indischen Archeologie, Kunst und Philologie. Ed. Marianne Yaldiz. vol. 11). Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag.
- Johnston, E.H., trans. 1972. *The Buddhacarita or Acts of the Buddha*. 1936. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- King, Ursula, ed. 1995. *Religion and Gender*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Norman, K.R. 1983. *Pāli Literature Including the Canonical Literature in Prakrit and Sanskrit of all the Hinayāna Schools of Buddhism* (A History of Indian Literature. Ed. Jan Gonda, vol. VII, 2). Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.
- Paul, Diana Y. 1985. *Women in Buddhism. Images of the Feminine in Mahāyāna Tradition*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Queen, Christopher S., ed. 2000. *Engaged Buddhism in the West*. Boston, Mass.: Wisdom Publications.
- Queen, Christopher S., and Sallie B. King, eds. 1996. *Engaged Buddhism. Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.
- Reis, Ria. 1983. 'Reproduction or Retreat: The position of Buddhist Women in Ladakh'. *Recent Research on Ladakh. History, Culture, Sociology, Ecology* (Schriftenreihe Internationales Asienforum). Eds. D. Kantowsky and A. Graf von Waldenburg-Zeil. Munich: Weltforum Verlag: 217–29.
- Schopen, Gregory. 1997. *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks. Collected Papers on the Archeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Stein, R.A. 1972. *Tibetan Civilization*. Trans. J.E. Stapleton Driver. London: Faber and Faber.
- Strong, John S. 1995. *The Experience of Buddhism. Sources and Interpretations*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Thurman, Robert A.F. 1976. *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Tsai, Kathryn Ann. 1994. *Lives of the Nuns. Biographies of Chinese Buddhist Nuns from the Fourth to Sixth Centuries*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Tsomo, Karma Lekshe. 1988. 'Prospects for an International Bhiksuni Sangha'. *Sakyādhītā Daughters of the Buddha*. Ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo. Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications: 236–57.
- Wurst, Rotraut. 2001. *Identität im Exil. Tibetisch-Buddhistische Nonnen und das Netzwerk Sakyādhītā*. (Marburger Studien zur Afrika- und Asienkunde, Series C, vol. 6). Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag.

FURTHER READING

- Cabezón, José Ignacio, ed. *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992.
- Gross, Rita M. *Buddhism after Patriarchy. A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993.
- Horner, I.B. *Women under Primitive Buddhism: Laywomen and Almswomen* (1930). Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1990.
- Paul, Diana. *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in Mahāyāna Tradition*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979.
- Queen, Christopher S. and Sallie B. King, eds. *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996.
- Tsomo, Karma Lekshe, ed. *Sakyādhītā: Daughters of the Buddha*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1988.

Woman Guru, Woman Roshi: The Legitimation of Female Religious Leadership in Hindu and Buddhist Groups in America



Catherine Wessinger

The various Hindu and Buddhist groups in the United States have proved to have a significant attraction for American women who choose to step outside the religious mainstream. Some of these groups are noteworthy in that they give women the opportunity to function in important leadership roles. This inquiry will focus on the Hindu sect known as Siddha Yoga, and a comparison will be made with the International Society for Krishna Consciousness and the varieties of American Buddhism. It will be shown that women religious leaders are prominent in those groups in which the male divine is de-emphasized. The group that is strongly focused on a male deity has limited leadership roles for its women members. When an imported Asian conception of God, which de-emphasizes the masculine in some manner, meets with the growing Western expectation of the equality of women, opportunities to become religious specialists begin to open for women, and the Hindu and Buddhist attitudes that blame women for the human condition begin to fall away.

Siddha Yoga

Siddha Yoga was first brought to the United States by Swami Muktananda, who reported he was doing so at the command of his own guru. Muktananda (1908–82) made his first visit to the United States in 1970, and he made two more world tours 1974–76, and 1979–81, which included the U.S. Siddha Yoga Dham of America (SYDA) Foundation was incorporated in the United States in 1974, and acts on behalf of Muktananda's original organization, Shree Gurudev Siddha Peeth, located in Ganeshpuri, India.¹

Before his death in 1982, Muktananda designated two successors, a sister and brother (Indians), to his position as guru. After taking vows of

sannyasa (renunciation), the sister became known as Swami Chidvilasananda (1954–), and the brother became known as Swami Nityananda (1962–). They ruled as co-gurus until Swami Nityananda was compelled to withdraw from the position in 1985 due to charges that he had repeatedly broken his vow of celibacy. Thus Swami Chidvilasananda, who is affectionately known as “Gurumayi” (one who is of the form of the guru) to her devotees, was left as the sole guru in the Siddha Yoga movement.²

The primary ashram (hermitage or retreat center) of Siddha Yoga in the United States is in South Fallsburg, New York, and the second major American ashram is located in Oakland, California. Ganeshpuri, India, remains the home base and primary pilgrimage site for Siddha Yoga devotees. Gurumayi Chidvilasananda divides her time between these locations, where devotees come to see her, in addition to traveling worldwide.

Siddha Yoga is a *sadhana* (spiritual path) that is focused on the guru, who is considered to be a *siddha* (a Master or “one who is perfected”). The goal of Siddha Yoga practice is to have a direct perception of a divine monistic universe.

Siddha methods include meditation, chanting of mantras, and *seva* (service to the guru). Siddha Yoga includes *jnana* (knowledge) since it is possible for the devotee to study the various Hindu scriptures and commentaries on which the Siddha faith is based. But Siddha Yoga is primarily a path of *guru-bhakti*, intense devotion to the guru. In meditation, one should either focus on a mantra consisting of the names of God, or on the form of the guru, and seek to become identified with her/his state. Mantras are also chanted congregationally, and the mantra is believed to be a vibrational manifestation of the unity between the devotee, the guru, and God. There is no difference between the guru and God, because the guru has the perception of unity with all things. The guru’s grace causes the mantra to be effective for meditation. *Seva*, service in the ashram or in the outside world, should be done with the attitude that the guru is doing the work, not the devotee. Work done in this manner promotes constant remembrance of the guru, and a loss of the limited sense of individuality. A text known as the “Guru Gita” is chanted every morning in Siddha ashrams, and this practice further reinforces devotion to the guru.

Siddha Yoga teaches that one cannot attain the highest realization without the *kripa* (grace) of the guru. A guru is defined as a person who has the ability to transmit grace directly to the devotee and cause the experience of divine unity. This transmission, known as *shaktipat*, is described as the awakening of *shakti* (the divine power of consciousness) within the devotee. *Shaktipat* is believed to be transmitted by the guru in a

variety of ways, including touch, look, or thought. The immediate proximity of the guru is not a requirement. So in Siddha Yoga, the guru is the means. The devotee seeks to surrender completely to the guru and obey her every command. The intent of this methodology is that the devotee learn to give up the limited ego to come to the experience of universal unity.³

Much of the Hindu tradition has been sexist, with women forbidden to study or even hear the Vedas (sacred scriptures). It has been commonly assumed that birth as a female is the result of past bad karma (actions). Women have often been considered incompetent to achieve the ultimate goal of *moksha* (release from rebirth). A woman should follow her *stridharma*, or wifely duty, and be obedient and attentive to her husband, and produce many sons. Women saints are usually found in the *bhakti* (devotional) traditions, which have been more accessible to women.⁴ Women saints are seen as exceptional, and they are not regarded as models for the good Hindu wife to emulate. In modern India, it is slowly becoming more acceptable for a woman to become a *sannyasin* (renunciant) in order to pursue the spiritual goal, but this has normally been a path deemed appropriate for men.⁵ Institutional religious authority has likewise been the province of men.

Gurumayi Chidvilasananda's current position is remarkable in that she combines the charisma of her ecstatic love for God (this is apparent when she chants the names of God) with the institutional authority of having been initiated as a *sannyasin* and of having been designated guru in a *parampara* (lineage of gurus). The spiritual power of her guru is believed to have been transferred to her. The institutional authority was transferred to Chidvilasananda in rituals in which women normally have no part.⁶ Chidvilasananda's authority has been increased by her obvious dedication to her work, and to the power (*shakti*) that her followers perceive to emanate from her.⁷

The Siddha Yoga movement has secondary ministers in other persons who have taken the vows of *sannyasa*, and who are known by the title swami (lord). The swamis provide important teaching, counseling, and administrative services to the movement. The position of swami is open to women, although the men seem to outnumber the women.⁸

Siddha Yoga is attractive to a wide variety of people in the professions, including women. At the South Fallsburg ashram during the summer of 1989, I encountered women who were in such diverse fields as writing, medicine, law, finance, chemical engineering, psychotherapy, education, and film. At many of the congregational functions of the ashram, women outnumber men by four (or more) to one. The prominent role of women in Siddha Yoga and the equality afforded to women in the

movement can be directly related to the philosophy of Siddha Yoga, which to a great extent is derived from Kashmir Shaivism. Kashmir Shaivism is a Hindu Tantric philosophy that stresses the unity of a universal “masculine” principle of spirit and a creative “feminine” principle of energy, which gives rise to the world.

Siddha Yoga and the Status of Women

Siddha Yoga is able to draw on traditional Hindu concepts, which when combined with the growing Western conviction of the equality of women, tend to promote the religious leadership of women. In the Hindu tradition, as in the Christian, there is a strong tendency to blame the limitations of the human condition on women. Traditional Hindu language on this issue is carried over into Siddha Yoga since Siddha Yoga is not explicitly feminist. Although in Siddha Yoga, male God-language is most often used, the philosophy of Kashmir Shaivism de-emphasizes male divinity in such a way that it posits the equality of the female on the divine level as well as the human. This latter influence on Siddha Yoga tends to outweigh the continued use of old Hindu language that depicts women as the cause of human suffering.

The egalitarian philosophy of Kashmir Shaivism, when combined with modern expectations of equality, opens the way for women as well as men to pursue the ultimate goal. Thus, in Siddha Yoga, women who feel called to a life-style of renunciation have the option of becoming swamis just like the men. The swamis function as the ministers of the organization, with the guru being the chief of these. In Siddha Yoga, “ordination” in the sense of an elite group of religious specialists is opened to women.⁹ Although Siddha Yoga has no explicit teachings on the proper social role of women, the egalitarian relationship of the divine masculine and feminine in its philosophy, as well as the presence of women as religious specialists, strongly implies an acceptance of women in roles not confined to the domestic sphere. This is affirmed in practice by the presence of so many women professionals in the movement.

Beginning in the foundational texts known as the Upanishads, the Hindu tradition has commonly regarded the material world as *maya*. Depending on the philosophical context, *maya* can be translated as “illusion,” “magic power,” or “God’s creative power.” Whether the material world is regarded as real or illusion, the designation “*maya*” always points to the impermanence of material reality and its power to confound. The impermanent nature of *maya* is the source of human suffering. Ignorant identification with the material realm is seen as the cause of entrapment in the continual round of rebirth. *Maya* is a feminine word,

and throughout the Hindu tradition, women have been identified with the temptations of *maya*. Women and *maya* have been seen as one and the same, seductive temptresses, that cause the true Self (often referred to as masculine) to forget its (his) true nature.

Since the Siddha Yoga movement has faithfully transmitted to the United States many ideas and attitudes drawn from the diverse Hindu traditions, sometimes language equating women with *maya*, the source of human suffering, is used. When a swami was making an announcement concerning an upcoming course on Vedanta, he stated that the course would be about *maya*, and "how we are trapped in her, and how we can escape her." Even the guru reflects her Hindu upbringing by her occasional language in this area. In a talk on July 4, 1989, in South Fallsburg, she quoted unidentified saints as saying: "One should beware of three things: women, gold, and land. These things are fickle."¹⁰ This Hindu tendency to identify women with material objects and their fleeting pleasures, however, is tempered and outweighed in Siddha Yoga by the teaching of the absolute equality and identity of the divine masculine and feminine.

In the Siddha Yoga movement, masculine God-language is most often used. God is usually referred to as "He" or "Lord." This is an accurate reflection of the Kashmir Shaivite philosophy in which God is Shiva.¹¹ Shiva is at once personal and the impersonal ground of the universe. Called Paramashiva (the highest Shiva) his nature is consciousness, and he is the "Self of All."¹² The masculine aspect of the divine, Shiva, denotes the mode of God that is permanent and unchanging, which is immanent in the material world.

He is both transcendent and immanent, the totality of the bliss of Consciousness, the constant Knower. Paramashiva is self-luminous and is the root cause of the universe. Out of His own being, He manifests this universe full of multiplicity and countless forms, yet remains the embodiment of Consciousness. He is the foundation of the world. Although the manifold universe issues forth from Shiva, His true nature undergoes no change. It neither decreases nor increases. He is supremely pure.¹³

Kashmir Shaivism and Siddha Yoga use female imagery to refer to the creative mode of God. Shakti, a feminine word, which can be translated as "power," is personified as the various Hindu goddesses. While the masculine mode of God is passive and unchanging, the feminine mode is dynamic and creative. Parashakti (the highest shakti) is the power that creates the material world. Parashakti is *chiti* (consciousness) which has the nature of *prakasha* (light). Movement of *chiti* is a contraction of Shakti

whereby consciousness is limited, producing the material world and the sense of individuality. *Samsara*, the round of rebirth with its concomitant suffering, then, is the “play of consciousness.” All “this” is present simply as the sport or play of Shakti.¹⁴ Swami Muktananda quoted a Kashmir Shaivite text as saying: “The entire world is the play of the Universal Consciousness. One who sees it in this way becomes liberated while in the body.”¹⁵ The importance of this key concept, that the world is the play of consciousness, is reflected in the Hindi title of Muktananda’s spiritual autobiography, *Chitshakti Vilas*, “the play of the power of consciousness.”¹⁶ This is further reiterated in Chidvilasananda’s name, which means “one who has the bliss of the play of consciousness.”

Chit-shakti, the power of consciousness, is manifested in all things, and it is found in the human organism as the kundalini, “the serpent energy” that lies dormant at the base of the spine in the subtle body. The kundalini must be awakened so that the awareness of the universal play of consciousness may be achieved. The awakened kundalini is described as rising through a channel in the subtle body that roughly corresponds to the spine. As it rises, various chakras or energy centers are activated. When the kundalini reaches the chakra at the top of the head, Shakti is said to have joined with Shiva in the body, and the awareness of unity is achieved.¹⁷

Chanting of mantras is important in Siddha practice, because the vibration of *chiti* is described as manifesting first as *nada* (sound), which consists of the *matrikas* (“mothers” or deities) of the sounds of the Sanskrit alphabet. The alphabet gives rise to language, and language produces the universe of distinctions. In order to return to the perception of the primal unity, one must still the modifications of the mind. By repeating the mantra silently or by chanting outloud, one is using a thought to focus the mind and eliminate all other thoughts. Since the mantra consists of the names of God, and the sound vibration of God’s name and God are seen as identical, the mantra is the perfect vehicle to carry the practitioner to the perception of unity.¹⁸ Muktananda asserted that there is “no difference between the seeker, the mantra, and the deity of the mantra,”¹⁹ so the mantra is considered a natural tool to lead one to the perception of unity.

In Siddha Yoga, the ultimate way that the activation of the kundalini is achieved is through *shaktipat*, the transmission of shakti to the devotee by the guru. The devotee must make strenuous effort to achieve the goal through chanting, meditation, and *seva*, but the ultimate realization will come through the guru’s *kripa* (grace).²⁰ The Siddha Yoga congregational chanting sessions start out at a slow pace, build to a crescendo, and then slow to a pace that leads naturally to a period of quiet meditation. This

would seem to generate an openness to the reception of *shaktipat*. Chanting and meditation in the guru's presence is considered to be especially efficacious, but is not necessary for the receipt of *shaktipat*.

The ultimate goal of the Siddha path is the ending of the perception of duality. In the monistic perception, the material world is divinized and affirmed. Love for all beings and things is the natural accompaniment of the awareness of unity. A person who gains this perception is aware that there is no difference between Shiva and Shakti.²¹

According to Shaivism, the universe is the form of Shakti, the Supreme Principle. Shiva and Shakti are one; they are not separate. A yogi who attains *sahajavidya* [natural awareness] considers the universe to be the light of his own Self, like the light produced by a flame. The knowledge of one's own true nature (*aham*, "I") and the knowledge of the universe (*idam*, "this") merge into the all-pervasive unity. This is the understanding one should have. The knowledge of "I" is like a flame, and the knowledge of "this" is like its light, which spreads everywhere equally.²²

So the primary tendency of Siddha Yoga is to value all of creation as the divine play of consciousness. Muktananda called the monistic perception the "awareness of equality."²³ In this awareness, all persons are seen as being the same Self, so there can be no discrimination.²⁴ *Sannyasins*, who lead lives of renunciation, hold a place of respect in Siddha Yoga, but the life-style of the person in the world is highly respected as well. If the world is the divine play of consciousness, there is no need to try to escape the material world. Indeed, in the United States, many of the Siddha Yoga devotees seem to be doing very well in the material world.²⁵

The presence of female conceptions of God in Hinduism has not been enough to ensure equality for women in the Hindu tradition. The concepts of Shakti and the goddesses are ancient, and so are the sexist attitudes cited earlier. But given a social environment in which it is accepted that women have access to education and economic independence (work outside the home), a philosophy such as that provided in Siddha Yoga can prove very attractive to women who are active outside the home.

Siddha Yoga affirms that the divine feminine and masculine are one and the same, that women are competent to achieve the ultimate goal and serve as religious specialists. Thus Siddha Yoga is very attractive to American women in all walks of life. Anyone, female or male, can achieve the perception of unity. Siddha devotees explain that since the universal Self is without sex, and that since this Self is in everyone, it makes no difference whether the guru is female or male. Yet if the dynamic power of

the universe is considered female, it seems especially appropriate that her wielder and channeller, the guru, is female.

The Power of Gurumayi Chidvilasananda

As early as the Upanishads, the indispensability of the guru in attaining the ultimate goal has been acknowledged in India. The guru is regarded as having the power to make the disciple like himself.²⁶ A strong love-bond has normally been the basis of the guru-student relationship. The student/disciple should serve the guru wholeheartedly, and, in turn, the guru will bestow his grace upon the disciple. The grace that is received from the guru is seen as being the grace of God.²⁷ The disciple is encouraged to meditate either upon the guru or God, "for this purpose they are interchangeable."²⁸

Siddha Yoga is in continuity with this Hindu emphasis on the overriding power of the guru, who is seen as being able to bestow *shaktipat*. A favorite Siddha hymn implores the guru (in translation):

Light my lamp from your lamp, O Sadguru;
light my lamp from your lamp.
Remove the darkness covering my heart;
O Sadguru, light my lamp from your lamp.²⁹

While the stress on intellectual comprehension (*jnana*) that is present in some guru lineages in India is not absent in Siddha Yoga, the primary stress is on absolute love (*bhakti*) for and surrender to the guru. This surrender is expressed in obedience to the guru's command, meditation, acts of worship, and the performing of all actions as service (*seva*) to the guru. All Siddha practice is centered on the guru, who is considered equivalent to God. The "Guru Gita," a text which should be chanted in Sanskrit every morning by a good Siddha practitioner, states:

76. The root of meditation is the Guru's form. The root of worship is the Guru's feet. The root of mantra is the Guru's word. The root of liberation is the Guru's grace.

77. Salutations to Shri Guru. The Guru is the beginning (of all, but) he is without a beginning. The Guru is the supreme deity. There is nothing higher than the Guru.³⁰

Every Siddha Yoga congregational program includes testimonies from devotees about their experiences of the miraculous working of the guru's grace in their lives. From these testimonies, it is apparent that Gurumayi Chidvilasananda, as the current master in the Siddha lineage, is regarded as being at one with God, and, as such, she is believed to possess

superhuman powers. Her every word and gesture, no matter how mundane, are fraught with significance for her devotees. Gurumayi is regarded as being in touch with the powers of nature, even to the extent of being able to control the weather.

Devotees attribute all sorts of miracles to their guru. Examples include the conception of a child, salvation from an armed thief, protection in the 1985 Mexico City earthquake,³¹ and escape from severe car accidents. The primary miracle reported by devotees is the experience of being loved unconditionally. One person relates this experience as follows:

The Intensive started bringing up old and deep feelings of unworthiness. I cried all through the chant, and when I went up on the darshan line, tears were streaming down my face. Gurumayi turned to me with a smile, but when she saw my tears, her look changed to one of compassion. * Later, a hall monitor came over and said, "You are to come and sit beside Gurumayi for the final meditation." My heart soared. I couldn't believe that such grace was being bestowed on me. * I went to the front, and I sat beside her. I was nervous and excited, thinking, *This is it! I can't believe this!* The lights went down, and Gurumayi was holding out her hand, beckoning me toward her. It wasn't a long distance, so I crawled over to her. She took my hand in hers and looked into my eyes. She was chanting, and I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do, so I just chanted and looked at her, saying to myself, *I can't believe this.* * Then she reached over to a bowl of water, dipped her fingers in it and started gently stroking my face. My eyes were closed. She did it again. Then I felt a towel softly drying my face! She took white ash and rubbed it on my forehead, and I exploded inside. All my feelings of unworthiness were completely dissolved. There was so much love and compassion in what she did, and how she did it, that I knew that she loved me unconditionally, and also that most of all she wanted me to love myself.³²

The presence of the goddesses in the Hindu tradition helps to legitimate the religious leadership of Gurumayi Chidvilasananda. In the past, the Hindu goddesses have often been subordinated to their husbands, the gods, or the strong goddesses have not translated into models of independence for women. But with the modern expectation that women are equal to men and are competent to achieve the religious goal, the goddesses become a factor supportive of the equality of women. In the South Fallsburg ashram, pictures of Lakshmi, goddess of wealth and good fortune, are prominently displayed. It does not seem to be accidental that this particular rendering of Lakshmi bears a strong resemblance to Gurumayi

Chidvilasananda. The temple at the South Fallsburg ashram dedicated to Muktananda's guru contains images of deities, of which the female outnumber the male. These deities are: Lakshmi; the divine couple, Shiva and Parvati (Shakti); Saraswati, goddess of learning and the arts; and the elephant-headed male god, Ganesha. Siddha women often prefer to use the mantra that invokes two very powerful goddesses, Kali and Durga. One woman recounted that she used this mantra while running the Boston marathon and was rewarded with a vision of Gurumayi beckoning her to the finish line. Another woman related that while in Ganeshpuri, she enjoyed doing her hatha yoga postures near the statue of Kali. Although the presence of goddesses in the Hindu tradition is not in and of itself a sufficient factor to promote equality of women, the goddesses become a strong support for the equality of women when the patriarchal structures begin to loosen and women are acknowledged as being capable of achieving important goals outside the domestic sphere, including the religious goal.

A systematic study of the types of persons who are attracted to Siddha Yoga remains to be done.³³ My observations reveal that people are attracted to Siddha Yoga primarily for the experience that it offers. Siddha devotees are serious mystics, who are looking for the very deep meditative experiences, which are described as including visions, lights and sounds, and prophetic dreams. Many experience meditation for the first time when they encounter Siddha Yoga, but many were long-time spiritual seekers before coming to the Siddha guru. The intense inner experience that is believed to be generated by the guru is the main reason that Siddha devotees return to the guru's presence again and again. Siddha devotees also reveal themselves to be highly self-disciplined. Just partially keeping the ashram schedule³⁴ and bringing some of these practices into one's worldly life requires a great deal of self-discipline. Finally, of course, the Siddha devotee will be a devotional type of person, willing to abandon herself or himself to the power of the congregational chanting, and ultimately to surrender totally to the guru.

Siddha devotees seem to come from all age groups and walks of life, but with a strong tendency to be upwardly mobile. It does seem that Siddha Yoga is attractive to people from a Jewish or Roman Catholic background. One Jewish woman, a physician, said that she was interested in the Jewish mystical tradition but felt excluded from it due to Orthodox attitudes toward women. She felt the need to find an alternative ancient tradition, which she believed she had found in Hinduism. Roman Catholics coming to Siddha Yoga will find much that is familiar to them: the veneration of saints in images; the use of a rosary (*mala*) in repeating mantras; celibate ministers who wear distinctive (orange) robes; uplifting

congregational singing; elaborate and beautiful worship and places of worship; and, finally, a strong authority figure, who is more accessible than the pope,³⁵ and who devotees believe is able to perform miracles in response to needs. The Catholic connection is emphasized by the presence of many Mexican Catholic devotees, who regard Gurumayi as the Virgin.

The feminist observer asks whether it is mature to submit so totally to patriarchal authority, even when it is being exercised by a woman. The Siddha devotee replies that surrender to the guru is really the surrender to one's highest Self, which is the universal Self.

The International Society for Krishna Consciousness

Another Hindu sect that is now international in scope and has a significant following in America is The International Society for Krishna Consciousness. It is a faith focused on the worship of the personal male God, Krishna, and it was brought to the U.S. by its elderly guru, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (1896–1977), in 1965. When Bhaktivedanta first arrived, his attitudes toward women reflected his traditional background, but he quickly found that in the American context, modification of teachings concerning women was necessary.

The ISKCON faith is also a *bhakti* faith, but in this case, the devotion and surrender are directed toward Lord Krishna. The guru is an important figure in ISKCON, but he (now they) is significant to the extent to which he is an exemplary devotee. The guru is the “model, preceptor, and guide,” leading one to complete devotion to Krishna. “One’s immediate surrender is to the guru, and through him, to God.”³⁶

The faith of ISKCON is typical of much of the Hindu *bhakti* tradition in that God is seen as a male person to whom human souls relate as females. Thus, both male and female devotees cultivate an attitude of intense love, surrender, and obedience to Lord Krishna.³⁷ Despite the fact that *bhakti* has been a tradition that is more open to women’s participation and it often consciously seeks to cultivate “feminine” modes of thought, Bhaktivedanta initially evinced typically Hindu sexist attitudes. While teaching that the soul is spirit and all are equal on the level of spirit, since human bodies are distinguished by sex, each has different roles. Reflecting the dictums of the Hindu law codes, he taught that women are “emotionally sensual creatures” who “need to be guarded from abuse by opportunistic males.”³⁸ Thus it is inappropriate for women to exist independent from the control and protection of men.

The normal role for women in ISKCON is the traditional one of wife and mother. Girls and boys in the ISKCON *gurukulas* (schools) receive

the same education until about eleven or twelve, when the girls are directed toward the homemaking arts and the boys continue to study the sacred texts.³⁹

Many ISKCON women appreciate the security and respect given to the traditional female roles,⁴⁰ yet members of ISKCON note the challenge posed to this traditional scheme by the changing values of Western society. In response, it has been accepted that a woman may have a career outside the home if she chooses.⁴¹ ISKCON women can serve the movement in a variety of capacities, including functioning as missionaries and ministering to the spiritual needs of ISKCON women and children. According to Kim Knott, birth into a female body is not seen as an indication of low spiritual evolution, and women are seen as being just as capable of salvation as men.⁴² Yet in ISKCON, women do not become *sannyasins*. Women's renunciation is informal rather than formal. Women are not gurus, temple presidents, or members of the Governing Body Commission.⁴³ Kim Knott suggests that there is no philosophical barrier to women moving into these roles, but perhaps the strong focus on a male deity reinforces prohibition of women's access to authoritative positions in the ISKCON movement. A recent issue of the ISKCON magazine, *Back to Godhead*, contains thoughtful statements by devotee women on their roles in the movement.⁴⁴ If women begin to move into more prominent leadership positions, Krishna's consort, Radha, may prove to be a significant theological resource for them.

American Women Buddhists

In recent books, Lenore Friedman and Sandy Boucher⁴⁵ maintain that, in contrast to women in Siddha Yoga and ISKCON, American women who become Buddhists are more consciously feminist. They are acutely aware of the opportunities women have in Buddhism for personal growth, as well as the disabilities under which women have suffered and continue to suffer. American women have great respect for the Asian Buddhist men who have come to this country as teachers, but they conclude that sometimes Asian sexist forms are being imported along with the religious teachings. Therefore, these women see themselves as being in the vanguard of the creation of an egalitarian American Buddhism.⁴⁶

The Buddhist scriptures recount that when Gautama Buddha first founded the monastic community, only men were admitted. Five years after he began preaching, a large group of women led by Mahaprajapati, the Buddha's aunt and foster mother, applied for admission. Mahaprajapati requested three times that women be admitted into the monastic community, and each time the Buddha refused. The Buddha overcame his reluctance

only when the case of the women was taken up by his close male disciple, Ananda. The Buddha admitted to Ananda that women were capable of achieving the goal of nirvana (elimination of desire that ends suffering and rebirth). The Buddha stipulated that upon entering monastic life women must agree to follow eight special rules. The cumulative effect of these Chief Eight Rules was to subordinate Buddhist nuns to the monks. Nuns must seek ordination into the monastic life from monks; they must always be supervised by monks; they must never criticize a monk; and finally, a nun, no matter how senior, must always bow to a monk, no matter how junior. This story concludes with the Buddha stating that if women had not joined the monastic order, his teachings would have stood firm for one thousand years. Since women had been admitted, he predicted that the pure religion would only last for five hundred years.⁴⁷

Despite the limitations imposed by the monastic rules, large numbers of women joined the Buddhist monastic order. Buddhism is significant in that the admission is present from its beginning that women are competent to achieve the religious goal. Buddhist monasticism offered an alternative life-style to the traditional roles of wife and mother.

Buddhist nuns, however, never received the same degree of support—emotional and financial—as the monks. The nuns' order in India experienced serious decline after the third century C.E., whereas the monks' order in India flourished until the twelfth century C.E.⁴⁸ Women who currently follow the monastic life-style in the Theravadin countries (Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Sri Lanka) do not have access to full ordination as nuns and are not considered full-fledged members of the Buddhist monastic order.⁴⁹ Before 1959, Tibetan women who wished to pursue the religious goal could follow a religious life-style as independent practitioners (*yogini*),⁵⁰ or live in a monastic setting as novices. Full ordination into the monastic order has not been available to Tibetan women due to the requirement that twelve fully ordained nuns be present at the ordination in addition to ten monks. Full ordination has not been available to Tibetan women because they lacked the requisite number of fully ordained nuns to give ordination. Beginning in 1984, a few Tibetan women (refugees in India) have begun to travel to Hong Kong to receive full ordination.⁵¹ In Japan, nuns in the Zen, Tendai, Nichiren, Shingon, and Pure Land schools are not fully ordained. They preserve the celibate monastic life-style, while most Japanese "monks," or more accurately, priests, are married. There are also a number of women priests who are married.⁵² Full ordination into the women's monastic order is available in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Korea, and Vietnam, and the nun's order is reviving in mainland China.⁵³

While part of the Buddhist tradition has acknowledged that women are

capable of achieving the religious goal, a significant portion of the tradition has viewed women as sexual temptresses who embody "the limitations of the human condition, which is a continual process of suffering and rebirth."⁵⁴ The story is told that in an attempt to prevent the Buddha's enlightenment, Mara, the ruler of the realm of desires, sent his three daughters, the personifications of Lust, Aversion, and Craving, to tempt the Buddha. Women were seen by some monks as a threat to their attempt to eliminate desire, and so were identified as being the source of evil and the cause of male bondage to *samsara*.⁵⁵ A common Buddhist attitude has been that birth into a female body is the result of bad karma.

American women who become Buddhists are aware of the negative aspects of the tradition for them, yet in Buddhism they find a variety of understandings of human nature and cosmology that they find meaningful. In the various Buddhist traditions, the male divine has been de-emphasized in a number of ways. In Theravada Buddhism, there is such an emphasis on impermanence that traditional concepts of God disappear. Due to impermanence, there can be no eternal ground of being nor a permanent human self. Mahayana Buddhism contains diverse teachings on these issues, and they can be understood in a variety of ways by Western women. One example is Roshi Jiyu Kennett, a British woman who has founded a monastery known as Shasta Abbey at Mount Shasta, California. Roshi Kennett has said that "we're part, if you like, of a great central ego. We all have a spark of the Eternal." She is convinced that issues concerning the equality of women are about the acknowledgment that women have souls. She asserts that no woman will be certain she is equal "until she knows with the certainty that I know, that her own Buddha-nature, or her own soul, exists."⁵⁶ Reflecting a common Hindu/Buddhist Tantric heritage, Tibetan or Vajrayana Buddhism is most like Siddha Yoga in its androgynous depictions of the divine. Whereas in Hindu Tantra, the female principle is dynamic and the male principle is static, in Tibetan Buddhism, *Upaya* (skill in means) is dynamic and male, and *Prajna* (wisdom or profound cognition) is female, static, and associated with emptiness (*shunyata*).⁵⁷ *Prajnaparamita* (the perfection of wisdom) is described as the wisdom that is the Mother of all the Buddhas. *Prajnaparamita* as the Mother of Creation is the primordial basic ground that is neither male nor female, but is regarded as feminine for its creative potentiality.⁵⁸ Tibetan Buddhism also contains a host of female deities known as *dakinis* (Tibetan *khadro*, "sky-goer"), who represent "the everchanging flow of energy with which the yogic practitioner must work in order to become realized."⁵⁹

Thus, the varieties of American Buddhism de-emphasize male deity so that the role of female religious specialist becomes a possibility. American Buddhism marks the meeting point of recent Western conceptions of the

equality of the sexes and ancient Buddhist egalitarianism. At this conjunction, it is assumed that women can have roles other than wife and mother, and the old Buddhist identification of women with the source of evil begins to fall away. As in Siddha Yoga, the ordained religious leadership begins to become inclusive of women.

American Buddhist women exercise religious leadership in many ways. Some are informal teachers in centers; some are legitimated by the full authority of their respective traditions. Some wear the robes that denote their position as religious leader, such as Roshi Kennett; Maurine Myoon Stuart Roshi of the Cambridge Buddhist Association; Venerable Karuna Dharma, nun in the Vietnamese tradition and head of the International Buddhist Meditation Center in Los Angeles; and Bhikshuni Pema Chodron, founder of the Gampo Abbey in Nova Scotia. Some Buddhist women are authoritative teachers who do not wear special robes, sit in a special seat, or require bowing or prostrations. Examples of these types of teachers are Toni Packer of Springwater Center, New York; Joko Beck of the Zen Center, San Diego; Yvonne Rand of Green Gulch Farm in Marin County; and Annick Mahieu (Sunanda) of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts.⁶⁰ Whether robed or not, these women have grappled deeply with the issue of religious authority, and have concluded that a superhuman status should not be accorded to the teacher. Maurine Stuart, Roshi, says: "People have to realize that their *practice* is their teacher. As I've said, when you depend on a person for your practice, it's not true practice. This help from a teacher is fine, and we all need one another as helpers. Everybody's a teacher, *you're* my teacher. But to put one person on a pedestal is very dangerous."⁶¹

Boucher reports that this examination of the dangers of religious authoritarianism has been due to revelation of the sexual activities of a number of male Buddhist teachers in America (either married *roshis* or supposedly celibate monks).⁶² As a result, many American Buddhist women have turned to women teachers to avoid exploitation. An issue for these women to consider is whether they can assume that there will never be a woman religious leader who exploits her followers.

Conclusion

This examination of Siddha Yoga, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and Buddhist groups in America indicates that a tempering of the male God-concept can assist in the validation of women in positions of religious leadership. The history of Hinduism and Buddhism demonstrates that androgynous, neuter, or female conceptions of the divine are not sufficient in and of themselves to promote equality for

women. But once there is a social expectation of the equality of women, conceptions of the divine that de-emphasize the masculine prove attractive to women and support them in legitimating their presence in religious leadership roles. Whereas in a number of other marginal groups in America, female religious leadership is affirmed in such a way that the need for an ordained clergy is denied, Siddha Yoga and Buddhism in America suggest that given the two factors cited above, specialized religious positions begin to open for women. Thus, Siddha Yoga and Buddhism have proved attractive to women who are moving into the professions, whether or not they are consciously feminist. In Siddha Yoga and American Buddhism, it is assumed that women's roles are not limited to those of wife and mother. Hindu and Buddhist ideas concerning the identification of women with the fallenness of the human condition are being abandoned. Buddhist women are consciously confronting and rejecting those texts that blame women for the human condition. The Siddha organization has not yet directly dealt with this issue since it is not an explicitly feminist movement. Yet the pressure to drop these conceptions can be seen in the fact that Chidvilasananda prefaced her July 4, 1989, remark on the deluding qualities of women, gold, and land with profuse apologies and a warning that no one should take the statement personally.

It is interesting to note that in the imported Asian religion that is strongly focused on a male deity, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, women are totally absent in higher leadership positions. Thus this survey of female religious leadership in religions imported into the U.S. may have implications concerning the reason for the continued exclusion of women from ministry in certain Western religions, and what theological changes can be expected in those groups that do include women in ministry.

The comparison of the Siddha Yoga case and Buddhist groups in America shows that the de-emphasis of the male divine can support the religious leadership of women in both authoritarian and antiauthoritarian modes.

NOTES

An earlier version of this essay appeared in *Gender in World Religions* 2 (1991): 37-68. In the current essay, Sanskrit words that are names or that are well known in the English-speaking world are not italicized. Diacritical marks are omitted.

1. Gene R. Thursby, "Siddha Yoga: Swami Muktananda and the Seat of Power," in *When Prophets Die: The Postcharismatic Fate of New Religions*, ed. Timothy Miller (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

2. Gene Thursby's article cited above is an excellent analysis of the issues

involved in the succession controversy. This chapter will limit its scope to Chidvilasananda's religious leadership and the factors within Siddha Yoga that help legitimate a woman as guru. For the events concerning the succession, see the June/July 1982 and Dec./Jan. 1983 issues of *Siddha Path*, a magazine that has been discontinued by Gurudev Siddha Peeth, Ganeshpuri, India. See the following articles about the demotion of Gurudev Nityananda: "What Was Two Is Now One; Siddha Yoga Co-Guru Steps Down," *Hinduism Today* 8 (Jan. 1986): 1, 19; "Muktananda's Successors Embroiled in Bitter Conflict," *Hinduism Today* 8 (May 1986): 1, 10-11.

3. The foregoing doctrines are elucidated by Swami Muktananda in his book *Siddha Meditation: Commentaries on the Shivasutras and Other Sacred Texts*, 2d ed. (Ganeshpuri: Gurudev Siddhapeeth, 1982). See particularly pp. 30, 42-46, 48, 56, 90, 92-93, 102-3, 107, 110-11, 115-17.

4. Katherine Young gives an excellent description of *stridharma* in her chapter "Hinduism," in *Women in World Religions*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 59-103. The Tenth Anniversary Issue (Nos. 50, 51, 52, 1989) of a feminist magazine published out of New Delhi, *Manushi*, is devoted to women *bhakti* saints. This collection of articles makes the interesting point that women saints have found that love of husband and love of God were not compatible. Their families usually saw their single-minded devotion to God as distracting them from the devotion that should have been directed to their husbands. Usually women saints have had to escape their family ties in some way. For them, the personal male God is their husband, and they can have no other husband. Conversely, male saints often have the support of their wives in their pursuit of the pious life.

5. Ursula King, "The Effect of Social Change on Religious Self Understanding: Women Ascetics in Modern Hinduism," in *Changing South Asia: Religion and Society*, ed. Kenneth Ballhatchet and David Taylor (Hong Kong: Asian Research Service, 1984), 69-83.

6. See the *Siddha Path* issues cited above.

7. "Muktananda's Successors Embroiled in Bitter Conflict," 19.

8. Exact statistics on the Siddha Yoga swamis were not forthcoming from the S.Y.D.A. Foundation. A very rough count of the swamis at the South Fallsburg ashram during the summer 1989 revealed ten men and five women. Gene Thursby reports that the organization has lost quite a few swamis because of the succession dispute. About six dozen swamis were initiated into the Saraswati order during the years when Muktananda was first bringing Siddha Yoga to the West. During the transition period after Muktananda's death, about one-half of the swamis left.

9. When there is a need for Hindu rituals, traditional Brahman priests are employed, all of whom are Indian males with the requisite training and ritual purity.

10. Ruth Vanita notes that Eknath and Tukaram, two Maharashtran male saints who have influenced the Siddha Yoga movement, were particularly emphatic that women be equated with *maya* and should be avoided since they arouse worldly

attachment. Ruth Vanita, "Three Women Sants of Maharashtra: Muktabai, Janabai, Bahinabai," *Manushi* 50, 51, 52 (Jan.-June 1989): 49.

11. The pan-Hindu character of Siddha Yoga is revealed by the fact that the most commonly chanted mantras include not only their primary mantra containing the name of the Lord Shiva but also mantras that recite the various names of Vishnu and Krishna. I have heard only one mantra that calls on the goddesses Kali and Durga.

12. Swami Muktananda, *Secrets of the Siddhas*, trans. Swami Chidvilasananda (South Fallsburg: S.Y.D.A. Foundation, 1980), 100.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

14. Muktananda, *Secrets of the Siddhas*, 10, 28, 59, 76, 79, 102-3, 131, 137, 154-56, 164, 166, 177-79, 183, 189, 198, 208; Swami Muktananda, *Siddha Meditation: Commentaries on the Shivasutras and Other Sacred Texts*, 2d ed. (Ganeshpuri: Gurudev Siddhateeth, 1977), 62-67; Swami Muktananda, *Meditate* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980), 36; For an excellent scholarly examination of the history and texts of Kashmir Shaivism, see Mark S. G. Dyczkowski, *The Doctrine of Vibration: An Analysis of the Doctrines of Kashmir Shaivism*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).

15. Muktananda, *Secrets of the Siddhas*, 199.

16. Swami Muktananda, *Play of Consciousness*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978).

17. Muktananda, *Secrets of the Siddhas*, 9, 12-13, 180; Muktananda, *Siddha Meditation*, 77-79.

18. Muktananda, *Secrets of the Siddhas*, 75-76, 92, 103, 169, 194-96; Muktananda, *Siddha Meditation*, 42-44, 82-83.

19. Muktananda, *Secrets of the Siddhas*, 82.

20. *Ibid.*, 13-15, 84, 176, 189; Muktananda, *Siddha Meditation*, 114.

21. Muktananda, *Secrets of the Siddhas*, 2, 38-39, 71, 75, 166, 181.

22. *Ibid.*, 91.

23. *Ibid.*, 39.

24. Muktananda, *Meditate*, 46.

25. *Ibid.*, 6.

26. Masculine language is used here since the guru has normally been male in the Hindu tradition. See William Cenkner, *A Tradition of Teachers: Sankara and the Jagadgurus Today*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983), 5-6, 38. In the Sanskrit language, which has masculine, feminine, and neuter nouns, there is no word that means "woman-guru." See Catherine Clementin-Ojha, "The Tradition of Female Gurus," *Manushi: A Journal About Women in Society* 31 (Nov.-Dec. 1985): 2-8.

27. Cenkner, *A Tradition of Teachers*, 10, 18-19, 27-28.

28. *Ibid.*, 18.

29. "Jyota Se Jyota," in *The Nectar of Chanting*, 3d ed. (South Fallsburg, N.Y.: S.Y.D.A. Foundation, 1984), p. 65.

30. "Sri Guru Gita, Song of the Guru," in *The Nectar of Chanting*, 28.

31. *Transformation: On Tour with Gurumayi Chidvilasananda*, vol. 2 (N.p.: S.Y.D.A. Foundation, 1986), 2, 30, 41, 50, 74-75.

32. Ibid., 104–5.

33. A study of the personality types drawn to Siddha Yoga such as the one done by Tommy H. Poling and J. Frank Kenney using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator with the Hare Krishnas would be most interesting. Siddha Yoga devotees display personality characteristics similar to, but not identical with, the sensate personality that is drawn to the Hare Krishnas. See Tommy H. Poling and J. Frank Kenney, *The Hare Krishna Character Type: A Study of the Sensate Personality*, (Lewiston, N.Y.: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1986).

34. The typical ashram schedule during the summer of 1989 is given below:

3:30–5:15 A.M.	Meditation.
5:15 A.M.	Tea.
5:45–7:15 A.M.	Chanting of “Guru Gita.”
7:00–8:00 A.M.	Breakfast.
8:15–11:00 A.M.	<i>Seva</i> .
11:00–12:15	Chanting in the Temple.
12:00–12:30 P.M.	Noon chant (different location).
12:30–1:15 P.M.	Lunch.
2:00–4:00 P.M.	<i>Seva</i> .
5:30 P.M.	Evening Program, concluded by <i>darshan</i> (viewing of the guru). Dinner following <i>darshan</i> .
8:30 P.M.	Evening worship in the Temple.

35. Every program at which Gurumayi Chidvilasananda is present concludes with *darshan*, the “viewing or sight” of the guru. Gurumayi shows great stamina in being able to sit for extended periods of time while her devotees come before her and bow down. She bestows a blessing by brushing them with a wand of peacock feathers. This is when the devotees may take the opportunity to say a few words to their guru and perhaps ask a question.

36. “Interview with Larry D. Shinn,” in *Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna: Five Distinguished Scholars on the Krishna Movement in the West*, ed. Steven J. Gelberg (New York: Grove Press, 1983), pp. 78–79.

37. Kim Knott, “Men and Women, or Devotees? Krishna Consciousness and the Role of Women,” in *Women in the World’s Religions, Past and Present*, ed. Ursula King (New York: Paragon House, 1987), 112, 116.

38. Larry Shinn, *The Dark Lord: Cult Images and the Hare Krishnas in America* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987), 114.

39. Ibid., 115.

40. Rochford notes that ISKCON offers affirmation of traditional values during a time of disruption and confusion concerning gender roles in the West. Friendships in the Krishna women’s community are an important factor in the conversion of women to ISKCON. See E. Burke Rochford, Jr., *Hare Krishna in America*, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1985), pp. 125–37.

41. Knott, “Men and Women, or Devotees,” 119.

42. Ibid., 122. This assertion by Knott is contradicted by data gathered by Susan J. Palmer in Montreal, and reported in Palmer’s article, “Moon Sisters,

Rajneesh Lovers, Krishna Mothers: Women's Roles in New Religious Movements," *Gender in World Religions* 1 (1990): 19–58. Palmer interviewed a woman named Mother Patjabali who made remarks indicating that men are spiritually superior to women and that birth into a male body is necessary for salvation. Mother Patjabali's remarks reflected traditional Hindu conceptions of the importance of the retention of semen for a man's spiritual development. Women's bodies, lacking this substance, are not as fine instruments for Krishna Consciousness. This casts light on why only celibate men, sannyasins, are found in positions of higher leadership in ISKCON. Concerning the desirability of being reborn a man, Mother Patjabali remarked: "If a man becomes too attached to his wife, or too interested in women, he is in danger of coming back in the body of a woman. Women are often men who were attached to women in their last life. It is the opposite for a woman. The more attached she is to her husband, the more devoted she is to him, the more likely she is to advance spiritually and be reborn a man" (31).

43. Ibid., p. 125. See Knott's note 23 re *sannyasa*.

44. ISKCON Community Discussion, "The Role of Women Today in the Hare Kṛṣṇa Movement," *Back to Godhead* 25, no. 1 (Jan./Feb. 1991): 40–47.

45. Lenore Friedman, *Meetings with Remarkable Women: Buddhist Teachers in America*, (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1987); Sandy Boucher, *Turning the Wheel: American Women Creating the New Buddhism*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988). It is not accurate to say that all of these women are American in their origins. Quite a few were born in Europe and now either live in the U.S. or have close teaching ties with the U.S.

46. For instance, see Rita M. Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

47. Friedman, *Meetings with Remarkable Women*, 7–10. See also the following important discussions of women in Buddhism. Nancy Schuster Barnes, "Buddhism," in *Women in World Religions*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987); Nancy Auer Falk, "The Case of the Vanishing Nuns: The Fruits of Ambivalence in Ancient Indian Buddhism," in *Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives*, ed. Nancy Auer Falk and Rita M. Gross (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1989); Janice D. Willis, "Nuns and Benefactresses: The Role of Women in the Development of Buddhism," in *Women, Religion, and Social Change*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Ellison Banks Findly (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985).

48. Falk, "The Case of the Vanishing Nuns," 155–57.

49. Karma Lekshe Tsomo, ed., *Sakyadhita: Daughters of the Buddha* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 1988), 105–6, 239. Other relevant chapters in *Sakyadhita* include Abaya Weerakoon, "Nuns of Sri Lanka," 140–44; Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, "Nuns of Thailand," 145–49; Daw Su Su Sein, "Nuns of Burma," 109–11.

In Thailand, women wishing to live a monastic life-style wear white and are known as *maejis*. They take vows but are considered laywomen. They have

extremely low social status and education. They must support themselves or receive support from their families. Some are allowed to live in the temples, where they are seen as nuisances by the monks. One woman who has received full ordination in Taiwan, the Venerable Voramai Kabilsingh, is attempting to introduce the nuns' order into Thailand. See Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, "The Future of the Bhikkhuni Samgha in Thailand," in *Speaking of Faith: Global Perspectives on Women, Religion and Social Change*, ed. Diana L. Eck and Devaki Jain (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1987), 148–58.

50. Tsultrim Allione's book, *Women of Wisdom*, (New York: Arkana, 1986), describes the difficulty with which Tibetan women disentangled themselves from their duties as wives and mothers to become independent practitioners.

51. Karma Lekshe Tsomo, "Tibetan Nuns and Nunneries," in *Feminine Ground: Essays on Women and Tibet*, ed. Janice D. Willis (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 1989), 120–21. The Tibetan tradition permits a minimum of six nuns and five monks for the ordination of a nun to take place, but apparently even that minimal number of nuns was not available. Needless to say, the presence of nuns is not required for the ordination of monks. See note 7 on p. 257 of *Sakyadhita*.

Karma Lekshe Tsomo is an American woman who is a fully ordained Tibetan nun who has lived with the Tibetan community in India. She was one of the organizers of the first International Conference on Buddhist Nuns in 1987 at Bodhgaya, India. See the film *In Search of a Holy Man* by Hartley Film Foundation. An American woman, Ane Pema Chodron, helped to lead the way in making full ordination available to women in the Tibetan tradition by making the trip to Hong Kong in 1980. See Friedman, *Meetings with Remarkable Women*, 21–22, 93–110. A new international organization, Sakyadhita (daughters of the Buddha), seeks to improve conditions for Buddhist nuns. For more information, one may write to: Sakyadhita, 400 Hobron Lane #2615, Honolulu, HI 96815.

52. Tsomo, *Sakyadhita*, 106. Other relevant chapters in *Sakyadhita* include Rev. Tessho Kondo, "Nuns of Japan, Part I," 124–26; Bhiksuni Karma Lekshe Tsomo, "Nuns of Japan: Part II," 127–30. In the Soto Zen sect, the celibate life-style of nuns contrasts with the married life-style of the priests. Yet the nuns have had to struggle to gain rights to higher education, to equal authority in the transmission lineages, and to become priests. See Kumiko Uchino, "The Status Elevation Process of Soto Sect Nuns in Modern Japan," in *Speaking of Faith*.

53. Tsomo, *Sakyadhita*, 106–7. Other relevant chapters in *Sakyadhita* include Hema Goonatilake, "Nuns of China: Part I—The Mainland," 112–18; Bhiksuni Shih Yung Kai, "Nuns in China: Part II—Taiwan," 119–23; Bhiksuni Karma Lekshe Tsomo, "Nuns in Korea," 131–37; Bhiksuni Dr. Karuna Dharma, "Nuns of Vietnam," 154–59.

54. Diana Y. Paul, *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in the Mahayana Tradition*, 2d ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 3.

55. Ibid., 3–59; Nancy Falk, "An Image of Woman in Old Buddhist Literature: The Daughters of Mara," in *Women and Religion: Papers of the Working Group on*

Women and Religion 1972–73, ed. Judith Plaskow and Joan Arnold Romero (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1974), 105–12.

56. Friedman, *Meetings with Remarkable Women*, 170, 174.

57. Allione, *Women of Wisdom*, 10.

58. Ibid., pp. 21–24. See also Joanna Rodgers Macy, “Perfection of Wisdom: Mother of All Buddhas,” in *Beyond Androcentrism: New Essays on Women and Religion*, ed. Rita M. Gross (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1977), pp. 315–33.

59. Allione, *Women of Wisdom*, 25.

60. Friedman, *Meetings with Remarkable Women*, 39–133, 161–91, 193–211, 249–53; Boucher, *Turning the Wheel*, 93–99, 133–44, 151–61, 194–202.

61. Boucher, *Turning the Wheel*, 201.

62. Boucher makes the important point that secrecy in an attempt to cover up a teacher’s improprieties is an expression of and perpetuates the patriarchal system. Boucher, *Turning the Wheel*, 24, 213, 225. The Buddhist improprieties are similar to the situation with the Siddha gurus. In the case of Gurudev Nityananda, he was removed from his position as guru. Similar accusations have been made in connection with Swami Muktananda, which have not been addressed. See William Rodarmor, “The Secret Life of Swami Muktananda,” *Co-Evolution Quarterly* 40 (Winter 1983): 104–11.

BUDDHIST WOMEN AND RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP

KARMA LEKSHE TSOMO

University of San Diego

Throughout Buddhist history, women practitioners have been models of leadership in virtuous conduct, meditation, discipline, teaching, spiritual experience, and other religious achievements. The roles women have played were not necessarily in line with contemporary expectations of religious leadership, however. Most did not hold office, give public teachings, lead religious ceremonies, or publish extensively. Most were not prominent in temple building, institutional administration, or educational leadership. Almost none of them held positions in religious institutions and only a few were recognized for their achievements. In fact, women's most visible religious activities often centered around supporting the religious practice of other practitioners, mostly male. In doing so, these women followed the model of Visakha, a prominent Buddhist laywomen during the Buddha's time who was renowned and highly respected for her honesty and her generosity toward the monastic community. By putting into practice some of the key values the Buddha taught—generosity, loving kindness, compassion, honesty, diligence, and humility—these women followed the Buddha's own model of religious leadership (Tsomo, 2010).

Early Buddhist Women Leaders

Historically, the earliest Buddhist women leaders were the first group of female practitioners to seek admission to the *sangha*, the monastic order, around the 5th century BCE (Wijayaratna, 2010). The most esteemed among them was Mahaprajapati Gautami, who took the initiative in establishing an order for women equivalent to the order for men.

As a queen and as the aunt and stepmother of Buddha Shakyamuni, she had considerable social status and presumably the confidence to request permission for women to join the *sangha*. When the Buddha hesitated and tried to dissuade her, she led a march of hundreds of aristocratic women to convince him (Tsomo, 1999b). Details of the story vary in different texts, but the *Gotami-apadana*, a 2nd-century Pali text, chronicles how she successfully pressed for admission to the order and led 500 women on the path to liberation (Walters, 1994). Through the mediation of Ananda, the Buddha's relative and long-time attendant, her quest was successful. Mahaprajapati became the first *bhikshuni* (Pali: *bhikkhuni*) in history. Thus began what was perhaps the first order of women religious in recorded history.

The *bhikshuni sangha* (Pali: *bhikkhuni sangha*) was self-governing from the beginning. Nuns were required to involve monks in certain ritual procedures: ordination, reinstatement, and bi-monthly exhortations. Nuns were required to do their three-month rainy season retreat (*vassa*) in a place where a monk was in residence, presumably for the protection of the nuns. Apart from male involvement in these rituals, *bhikshuni* communities functioned independently and managed their own affairs—an option regarded by many of them as a highly liberating alternative to marriage, family, and domestic responsibilities (Blackstone, 1998). Like the *bhikshu sangha*, the order of monks, the *bhikshuni sangha* is organized democratically, incorporating principles of seniority and merit. In decision making, “nuns as a group agree on an experienced and competent nun to preside over important decisions and transactions, and to facilitate the resolution of

problems and questions" (Findly, 2000). A young nun or aspirant had the freedom to choose a teacher whom she trusted and admired, one with the necessary knowledge and experience to guide her development as a renunciant and as a Dharma practitioner. Thousands of women became Buddhist nuns at the time of the Buddha and were respected as models of virtue, skilled meditators, and acclaimed teachers. By their example, they demonstrated that women were capable of achieving liberation (*nirvana*), the highest goal of the early Buddhist path (Murcott, 1991).

Cultural Constructs of Religious Leadership

At this juncture, it is important to assess what we mean by leadership in the Buddhist context. Ellison Findlay identifies three qualities necessary for religious leadership from a Buddhist perspective: "experience, competence, and the ability to inspire confidence" (Findly, 2000). The epithet "worthy of my confidence" was used to designate such a person, implying integrity and mentorship. Being a leading religious teacher or practitioner is not the same as being a religious leader, however. In fact, in some ways the two concepts may be considered diametric opposites. A person who is the leader of a monastery or Dharma center has many mundane responsibilities. She must manage the facilities, resources, and personnel; meet with visitors, donors, and potential donors; make decisions about admitting new candidates, mentor junior nuns, and care for elderly nuns. She may also be expected to lead ceremonies, speak at events, and give good counsel. Religious leaders may become so busy attending to these secular activities that they do not have much time left over for study and contemplation—what Buddhists call "practice" (*bhavana*). Since, as the Buddhists frame it, life is short and uncertain, and worldly work is never done, for this reason, it is not easy to find people who are willing to fill positions of religious leadership. Especially among nuns and monks, the meaning and objective of religious life is renunciation. What is the purpose of entering a monastery simply to replicate all the ordinary activities of lay life, plus more?

For Buddhists, the ultimate goal is liberation or enlightenment. Overcoming lifetimes of attachment, aversion, and ignorance requires dedication and perseverance. Therefore, those who cultivate their minds with sincerity and diligence are respected as guides on the path. It is not necessary or even desirable to be recognized for one's achievements. For those who are determined to put an end to repeated rebirth in cyclic existence, involvement in the tasks of religious leadership mentioned above may be viewed as a diversion. Of course, creating spiritual communities is important for nurturing the spiritual life of sentient beings, but the tasks of running a monastery or retreat center can also entangle one in "the things of

this world" and consume time better spent on awakening. A person engaged in intensive spiritual practice does not have time to be a religious leader. In a sense, religious leadership and awakening may be seen as contradictory. Truly enlightened leadership, from a Buddhist perspective, is eradicating the delusions of the mind. It may manifest as gentleness rather than power, loving kindness rather than competency, compassion rather than efficiency.

On one hand, it can be argued that inspiring women's leadership is very important in Buddhism because it will not only inspire women to realize the fruits of the path for themselves, but also because it will help them to inspire other women, in a constructive spiral. It will help bring women into the global ethic of human rights and women's empowerment to help offset some of the hardships and disadvantages many Buddhist women face. On the other hand, it can be argued that inspiring women's leadership is completely irrelevant, in that the practice will verify its own validity, whether one is a woman or a man, and that a sincere practitioner will naturally inspire others. Some will see taking a public role as the antithesis of Buddhist values of humility and spiritual values. The Buddha became a teacher because people came to him for leadership on the path to liberation and he simply responded to the realities of his time. He had no agenda beyond liberating living beings from suffering and his vision had no boundaries, encompassing human beings without discrimination. Nonetheless, Buddhist history is replete with examples of Buddhist practitioners who have been both spiritual masters and religious leaders, mostly male. An exception is Samding Dorje, a lineage of female incarnations of Vajravarahi (in Tibetan, Dorje Phagmo), a religious teacher with considerable political influence who also headed a religious institution (Diemberger, 2007).

Contemporary Buddhist Women Leaders

Traditionally in Buddhist cultures in Asia, religious leadership has been in the hands of ordained monks. Although there are lay teachers in all Buddhist cultures, it is presumed that ordained monastics are more suitable in leadership roles because they are fully devoted to religious practice and have more training and experience. Laypeople may be leaders in some religious organizations—for example, the World Fellowship of Buddhists—but they are not generally recognized as "religious leaders." Further, it is presumed that male monastics are more suitable in roles of religious leadership than female monastics, first, because it is assumed that they have more spiritual power and are therefore more worthy objects of merit, and, second, because of social expectations that men are somehow more appropriate in public roles. There may also be a subtle assumption that men innately have more spiritual power than women and are therefore somehow uniquely suited for prominent roles.

In recent years, particularly in countries outside Asia, the presumption that the ideal religious leader is a male monastic has been tested. Just as the Catholic laity is currently pressing for greater participation in all aspects of religious life, laypeople are also assuming more visible roles in Buddhist temples and Dharma centers in Australia, Europe, North America, and increasingly in Asia. The shift from kitchen duties to administration has not been particularly difficult; as in many religious traditions, women's efforts behind the scenes are welcome. The role of benefactor is highly prized in Buddhist societies and many women in both Asia and the West have taken leadership in the practice of generosity. A renowned contemporary example is Ashi Phuntsog of Bhutan. When it comes to public roles, the limelight is still generally occupied by males, but that is gradually changing.

The current prominence of women in the world's Buddhist traditions, especially in countries like the United States, is unique in Buddhist history. Although eminent Buddhist women are mentioned in the histories of Buddhist countries, it is often because they were the wives of kings, even when they were recognized for their virtue and worked to establish or spread Buddhism. Today, by contrast, Buddhist women are demonstrating their leadership capabilities on their own terms. Among many examples, Bhikshuni Shig Hiu Wan combined religious leadership as an exemplary Buddhist teacher and practitioner and secular leadership as a painter and founder of the first Buddhist university in Taiwan. Aung San Suu Kyi is unique in being both a political leader in Myanmar (Burma) and a Buddhist meditator who articulates her values within a Buddhist framework (McCarthy, 2004). Daehaeng Sunim and Hyecheon Sunim are exemplary nuns who successfully combined religious and administrative leadership. Bhikshuni Pema Chodron, an American nun, is internationally respected as a Buddhist teacher and as the founder of Gampo Abbey in Canada. Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, a British nun, is both an internationally acclaimed Buddhist teacher and founder of Dongyu Gatsal Ling monastery in India. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda is at once a scholar, translator, abbess, and leader in the movement for full ordination of women in Thailand. These and many other eminent Buddhist women have worked tirelessly in forging new paths in adapting an ancient wisdom tradition for modern society. The contributions of these pioneering Buddhist women leaders transformed the lives of countless people (Tsomo, 2000, 2004).

To be a Buddhist woman leader, it is not necessary to be eminent, innovative, or popular. The expectation that a religious or spiritual role model should have achieved perfection is also unrealistic and puts religious ideas out of reach for ordinary people. To be a great Buddhist leader, it is more important to be kind and compassionate than to be powerful and authoritative. Expectations for leaders often derive from outdated models that have not always worked out well in human society. Women's leadership also need not follow normative models. Few women have a serious

stake in current models or institutions, which gives them the freedom to embrace new standards and create new definitions of leadership. Although most Buddhist women are inexperienced and unaccustomed to roles of leadership, since those roles have been occupied largely by men, many women have the personal qualities and potential to become leaders. When I went to India in the 1960s, I was also inexperienced and had no interest in leadership or secular types of activities. As an American Buddhist nun practicing in the Tibetan tradition, I also had no opportunities and no ready models for women's religious leadership. In the process of founding education programs for nuns in India and organizing international conferences, however, I gradually found myself in positions of responsibility and leadership. Based on my experience, I recognize the many challenges that face the first generation of Buddhist women who break through preconceived categories such as "Buddhist," "woman," and "leader." Forging new pathways in uncharted territory, especially when these paths cut across deeply ingrained social norms, is not easy. Even so, and sometimes as a direct result of these obstacles, momentous changes can result from rethinking tradition, asking questions, and exploring ideas that lead in new and unexpected directions. For example, when women began to notice gender inequalities in the Buddhist traditions in the 1980s and gathered together to discuss and question them, a new international Buddhist women's movement began that has given rise to many new projects and institutions. Leadership requires one to be willing to innovate and even to make mistakes. Words and actions that seem insignificant at the time can grow beyond our imagination, especially when they are intended to benefit others. The enlightened thought of wishing to achieve awakening in order to benefit living beings and to alleviate their sufferings is called *bodhicitta*, a guiding principle for many Buddhist leaders.

This pure *bodhicitta* motivation is one of many qualities that are valued in a Buddhist leader. Other important qualities are honesty, knowledge, compassion, good listening skills, fairness, and openmindedness, as well as intelligence, courage, humility, confidence, diligence, reliability, and equanimity. A good leader has the ability to inspire and empower others and is willing to take personal risks for the greater good. These valuable qualities apply equally to women and men, though men in Buddhist societies generally get more opportunities and encouragement to develop them.

To become leaders, Buddhist women need to become aware of social conditioning (such as the belief that women have bad karma) and social expectations (such as women's subservience) that may limit them, as well as any limitations that they may have internalized or imposed on themselves. Now that leadership opportunities are opening up for Buddhist women, some find that they are being thrust into leadership roles without any formal training or psychological preparation. Even when they have a passion to accomplish certain objectives, they may doubt their capacity to accomplish their goals and need tools and guidance

to help overcome feelings of self-doubt and discouragement. Women may also be reluctant to take risks, knowing that society often holds women to higher standards than men. For women to overcome challenges requires confidence and experience, as well as education and training, which may be very limited in Buddhist communities.

For women to assume positions of religious leadership, they must have access to systematic education and training, and it is here that Buddhist women are often at a disadvantage. Since the 1980s, many positive changes have occurred and women have far more opportunities than before. In the late 1990s, Mahaprajapati College, the first institution of higher learning for Buddhist women, was established in Thailand, and the lineage of full ordination for women was restored in Sri Lanka. In 2012, representatives of the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism agreed to award women the highest degrees available in Buddhist studies. These are just a few examples of the momentous changes that have helped transform women's status in Buddhist societies in recent years. Although not every Buddhist woman, not even every Buddhist nun, will wish to pursue Buddhist studies programs or higher ordination, the fact that women now have access to higher degrees and ordination represents a significant breakthrough in working toward gender parity and in helping women become qualified teachers and leaders.

To realize these goals, however, the internal obstacles to women's leadership need to be better understood. Personal relationships and worldly activities can get quite messy. The faint-hearted may be tempted to escape to the safety of familiar patterns and activities. Many women are socialized to group activity and have no experience making decisions independently, so the fear of failure or rejection can be quite daunting, even debilitating. But obstacles and difficulties may also become catalysts for awakening, provoking wise and compassionate responses, and catapulting one's social and spiritual awareness beyond accustomed boundaries. Skillfully challenging social norms, particularly gender norms and expectations, may also be necessary and useful for advancing the status of women—an example of what Buddhists call skillful means (*upaya*). Deploying appropriate gender symbols can be very skillful. For example, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama frequently speaks about the love of mothers toward their children and uses the love that babies instinctively express toward their mothers to illustrate that compassion is innate to all human beings. Tibetan Buddhists also use the image of Tara, a *bodhisattva* in female form, as an enlightened archetype of virtuous activity to inspire all human beings. Buddhists in East Asian societies use the image of Guanyin, another *bodhisattva* in female form, to inspire compassion.

These archetypes have little meaning, though, unless they are embodied in living, breathing human women. For this reason, the examples of illustrious Buddhist women practitioners are instrumental. Women have taken the lead in developing practice centers not only in Asia, but also in

North America. Examples include Jiyu-Kennett Roshi (Shasta Abbey), Sharon Salzberg (Insight Meditation Society), Maureen Stuart (Cambridge Buddhist Association), Gesshin Prabhava Dharma (International Zen Institute), Bhikshuni Pema Chodron (Gampo Abbey), Joko Beck (Zen Center of San Diego), Sik Kuan Yen (Thousand Buddha Temple), Barbara Rhodes (Providence Zen Center), Tsultrim Allione (Tara Mandala), Joan Halifax (Upaya Zen Center), Marcia Rose (The Mountain Heritage), Pat Enkyo O'Hara (The Village Zendo), P'arang Geri Larkin (Still Point Zen Center), Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron (Sravasti Abbey), Khenmo Drolma (Vajra Dakini Nunnery), Bhikkhuni Tathaalka (Aranya Bodhi Hermitage), and many others. These living examples demonstrate the fruition of women's potential.

Future Directions

The importance of Buddhist women's leadership and the need for leadership training has been a central theme of the international Buddhist women's movement. The theme of the 12th Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women, held in Bangkok in June 2011, was "Leading to Liberation," and thousands of copies of the proceedings of the conference were distributed in Mandarin, English, Japanese, Korean, Thai, and Vietnamese following the conference. The challenge is to adapt the concepts and methods used in business and secular nonprofit management to meet the needs and interests of Buddhist women, whose values and objectives may be quite different. An even bigger challenge, which may be considered a prerequisite to leadership training, is gaining equitable access to education and training for Buddhist women, especially in developing countries.

Without formal education, it is difficult for women to gain the confidence and skills needed to assert effective leadership. The first task for Buddhist women is to find ways to improve standards of education for women and girls, beginning with literacy. Government schools are frequently lacking or inadequate in rural areas, and families may give preferential support to education for boys. Primary education is now much more widely available in developing countries than before, but these programs neglect adult women, many of whom have not had opportunities for formal secular education or for religious education. Since current educational models do not always have girls and women in mind and many societies give priority to boys and men, this often means establishing institutes and study programs for women from scratch. The problems faced in this task are formidable, since few Buddhist women have the opportunity or training to take on such an enormous task and women also have fewer resources than men to accomplish it. Despite these obstacles, women throughout the Buddhist world, especially nuns, have forged ahead with determination and overcome great odds to establish education, training, retreat centers, women's

shelters, and other facilities for women. Meeting basic educational needs is imperative for nurturing a new generation of dedicated, fully competent Buddhist women community leaders.

A transnational model of leadership is a novel concept for Buddhist women, but one that is full of potential and gaining traction. Whereas women previously tended to practice and teach in their own localities, often unknown except to their closest disciples and friends, now women are more frequently being included in international forums that enable them to travel abroad. The experience of meeting like-minded women from many different countries and backgrounds is both affirming and inspiring, engendering many new ideas and possibilities. The Sakyadhita gatherings that have brought thousands of women together from all parts of the globe for dialogue, meditation, and pilgrimage since 1987 illustrate the new global thinking that is uniting Buddhist women.

North American Buddhist women's experience is different in several specific ways. First, some American communities are remarkably egalitarian, with work distributed equally, regardless of stereotypical gender roles. Although these centers may not be totally gender blind, women often have more opportunities to take leadership and teaching roles in these communities than in Asian Buddhist societies. Second, although monasticism still has appeal as an ideal environment for Buddhist practice, North American Buddhist centers and communities are more lay oriented than traditional Buddhist temples, with leadership opportunities open to both lay and ordained practitioners. Third, new categories of leadership have been introduced; for example, the terms *roshi* and *lama* refer to teachers or spiritual guides, though these terms are more frequently applied to men than to women. Nonetheless, in the more egalitarian climate of North America, women often assume roles that were traditionally held mostly by men.

Buddhist feminist thinking is not simply a question of Western feminists instigating changes, however. It is a product of a new international awareness that gender inequity is outdated and that gender justice is a legitimate and necessary component of modernity, along with democracy, human rights, and other aspects of liberal thought. One facet of this new burgeoning of awareness is that women are more often invited to attend international events and

are becoming much more visible, and are even sometimes asked to speak at the events or conferences. This is an excellent opportunity for Buddhist women to get the message of gender equality out to a wider audience. Another factor is that, because women in positions of leadership are so few, they are quite visible. Women may be held to a higher standard than men, as in society generally, but to date there have been few, if any, scandals involving Buddhist women leaders and they are beginning to get a reputation as being "worthy of our confidence." Although women are not always invited, not always allowed to speak, not always heard, and rarely in positions of authority or decision making in international Buddhist organizations and forums, even in national bodies, things are beginning to shift.

Conclusion

Buddhist societies and Buddhist scholars have been slow to acknowledge women as religious leaders, but a significant result of the contemporary Buddhist women's movement has been to encourage Buddhist women's leadership and documentation of women's significant contributions throughout Buddhist history (Arai, 1999; Cho, 2011; DeVido, 2010; Diemberger, 2007; Falk, 2007; Meeks, 2010; Tsomo, 1999). Buddhists acknowledge that women and men alike have the potential to develop the qualities that are valued in a religious leader: honesty, compassion, wisdom, diligence, and so on. Leadership roles entail many mundane institutional and public responsibilities that are sometimes problematic, and traditionally women have not been trained or encouraged to assume these roles. The assumption that women are not suited for religious leadership has begun to change in recent years, however, as a result of global strategies for women's empowerment and a burgeoning Buddhist women's movement. Today, Buddhist women are recovering exemplary models within their own histories, challenging the scripts that women have been given which limit their potential for growth, and summoning the courage to move beyond imagined limitations. The present moment seems to be a good time to assert Buddhist women's equality and craft fresh, feminist interpretations of leadership.

References and Further Readings

- Arai, P. (1999). *Women living Zen: Japanese Soto Buddhist nuns*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Barnes, N. S. (1996). Buddhist women and the nuns' order in Asia. In C. S. Queen & S. B. King (Eds.), *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist liberation movements in Asia* (pp. 259-294). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Blackstone, K. (1998). *Women in the footsteps of the Buddha: Struggle for liberation in the Therghth*. Surrey, England: Curzon Press.
- Bode, M. (1893). The woman leaders of the Buddhist reformation. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, pp. 517-566, 763-798.
- Boucher, S. (1988). *Turning the wheel: American women changing Buddhism*. San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row.
- Cho, E. (2011). *Korean Buddhist nuns and laywomen: Hidden histories, enduring vitality*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- DeVido, E. A. (2010). *Taiwan's Buddhist nuns*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

- Diemberger, H. (2007). *When a woman becomes a religious dynasty: The Samding Dorje Phagmo of Tibet*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Falk, M. L. (2007). *Making fields of merit: Buddhist female ascetics and gendered orders in Thailand*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Falk, N. A. (1980). The case of the vanishing nuns: The fruits of ambivalence in ancient Buddhism. In N. A. Falk & R. Gross (Eds.), *Unspoken worlds: Women's religious lives in non-Western cultures*. New York, NY: Harper and Row.
- Fenn, M. L., & Koppedrayar, K. (2008). Sakyadhita: A transnational gathering place for Buddhist women. *Journal of Global Buddhism*, 9, 45–79.
- Findly, E. B. (2000). Women teachers of women: Early nuns "worthy of my confidence." In E. B. Findly (Ed.), *Women's Buddhism, Buddhism's women: Tradition, revision, renewal*. Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications.
- Friedman, L. (1987). *Meetings with remarkable women: Buddhist teachers in America*. Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications.
- Gross, R. M. (1993). *Buddhism after patriarchy: A feminist history, analysis, and reconstruction of Buddhism*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Horner, I. B. (1930). *Women under primitive Buddhism: Laywomen and almswomen*. London, England: G. Routledge & Sons. (Reprinted by Asia Book Corp. of America, 1990)
- Martin, D. (2005). The woman illusion? Research into the lives of spiritually accomplished women leaders of the 11th and 12th centuries. In J. Gyatso & H. Havnevik (Eds.), *Women in Tibet* (pp. 49–82). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- McCarthy, S. (2004). The Buddhist political rhetoric of Aung San Suu Kyi. *Contemporary Buddhism*, 5(2), 67–81.
- Meeks, L. R. (2010). *Hokkeji and the reemergence of female monastic orders in premodern Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Murcott, S. (1991). *The first Buddhist women: Translations and commentaries on the Therigatha*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press.
- Tsomo, K. L. (1999a). *Buddhist women across cultures: Realizations*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Tsomo, K. L. (1999b). Mahaprajapati's legacy: The Buddhist women's movement. In K. L. Tsomo (Ed.), *Buddhist women across cultures: Realizations* (pp. 1–44). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Tsomo, K. L. (2000). *Innovative Buddhist women: Swimming against the stream*. Surrey, England: Curzon Press.
- Tsomo, K. L. (2004). *Buddhist women and social justice: Ideals, challenges, and achievements*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Tsomo, K. L. (2010). Women as leaders in Buddhism. In N. Green & K. O'Connor (Eds.), *Gender and women's leadership* (pp. 482–489). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Walters, J. S. (1994). A voice from the silence: The Buddha's mother's story. *History of Religions*, 33, 358–379.
- Wessinger, C. (1993). Woman guru, woman roshi: The legitimation of female religious leadership in Hindu and Buddhist groups in America. In C. Wessinger (Ed.), *Women's leadership in marginal religions: Explorations outside the mainstream* (pp. 125–146). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Wijayaratna, M. (2010). *Buddhist nuns: The birth and development of a women's monastic order*. Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society.

'Rebel' female Buddhist monks challenge Thailand status quo

By [DENIS D. GRAY](#)

Sep. 12, 2015 1:53 AM EDT
0

15 photos



NAKHON PATHOM, Thailand (AP) — On a rural road just after daybreak, villagers young and old kneel reverently before a single file of ochre-robed women, filling their bowls with rice, curries, fruits and sweets. In this country, it's a rare sight.

Thailand's top Buddhist authority bars women from becoming monks. They can only become white-cloaked nuns, who are routinely treated as domestic servants. Many here

believe women are inferior beings who had better perform plenty of good deeds to ensure they will be reborn as men in their future lives.

Yet with the religion beset by lurid scandals, female monastics or "bhikkhunis" are emerging as a force for reform, not unlike activists in the Christian world seeking gender equality including ordination of women as priests in the Catholic Church. They are growing in numbers and appear to be making headway.

Thailand has some 100 bhikkhunis who were ordained in Sri Lanka, where women are allowed to become monks. They and their monasteries are not legally recognized in Thailand, and don't enjoy state funding and other support the country's 200,000 male monks are granted.

Living spartan lives, the women are governed by 311 precepts from celibacy and poverty to archaic ones like having to confess after eating garlic. Their ranks and those of hundreds of aspirants — there are five stages before ordination — include a former Google executive, a Harvard graduate, journalists and doctors, as well as village noodle vendors.

"It is our right, our heritage, to lead a fully monastic life. We are on the right side of history," says Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, an author, former university professor and the first bhikkhuni in Thailand from the Theravada branch of Buddhism, which is dominant in Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka. Using her religious name of Venerable Dhammananda, she contends that the Buddha 2,500 years ago built the religion as a four-legged stool — monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen — but "we are now sitting on just three legs."

The male-dominated religion has been blighted in recent years by crimes and gross violations of vows, just as widespread sex abuse and Vatican financial scandals have damaged the Roman Catholic Church.

Monks in Thailand have been convicted of everything from murder to wildlife trafficking. Sexual depravity is frequently reported. One former abbot, fugitive Wirapol Sukphol, faces charges of drug use, money laundering, fathering a child by an underage woman and illegally amassing millions of dollars. A photograph shows him seated in a private jet wearing aviator sunglasses.

The Supreme Sangha Council, the religion's ruling body, is under fire over the mishandling of corruption allegations against prominent abbots, including one of its own members. The allegations include embezzling funds intended for the cremation of an

abbot's predecessor and the investment of \$1.2 million from donations into the stock market.

With Buddhism so intimately tied to Thai identity — more than 90 percent adhere to the faith — these misdeeds and what is termed "checkbook Buddhism" have spurred calls in Parliament for curbing the almost total authority the council wields over the clergy and the corruption-stoking \$4 billion in annual donations to monasteries. A proposed Patronage and Protection of the Clergy Bill would impose stiff penalties for those who break the religion's cardinal rules and set up a panel to monitor donations. Corruption within Buddhism may also be dealt with in Thailand's next constitution, now being drafted.

The role of women in Buddhism has also aroused national-level debate.

The Sangha council has urged the government to ban Sri Lankan clergy from coming into the country following what Dhammananda calls a "rebel ordination" in Thailand of eight bhikkhunis last November by Sri Lankans. That drew broad criticism of the council itself.

"The clergy can no longer insist on operating in a closed, feudal system that violates universal norms and values," said an editorial in the English-language Bangkok Post. Instead of trying to crush women's aspirations, it said the "clergy should concentrate on cleaning up its own house to restore declining public faith."

No scandal has emerged among Thailand's female clergy. Dhammananda said she has seen no misbehavior in her monastery beyond a few nuns who had used their mobile telephones to excess.

"I think that many nuns see themselves as exemplary. They are, and they're carving a new role for themselves that didn't exist," said Julianne Schober, an expert on Southeast Asian Buddhism at Arizona State University. "That that puts pressure on the Sangha doesn't surprise me."

Women clergy interviewed at three monasteries said it was essential to maintain a high moral ground so as not to give opponents an excuse to stop their movement. Some cast them as Western-educated feminists out to undermine traditional Buddhism.

"They can be a force for change in Buddhism," said Phramaha Boonchuay Doojai, a leading activist monk at Chiang Mai Buddhist College.

"If everything is in the hands of men, it is as if Buddhism was just the way of a father, not mother. But you need both," he said. "Mothers have some unique feelings that men do not share. They may have more loving kindness."

Proponents of ordination like Boonchuay say bhikkhunis originated with Buddha himself; the first was an aunt who raised him. Opponents argue that the lineage of the Theravada bhikkhuni order, under which women could be ordained, died out long ago and cannot be restored. The Mahayana branch of Buddhism practiced in East Asia has historically ordained women.

"We simply follow the rules. The ordination of female monks was allowed in the Lord Buddha's time. But as time passed, the lineage of bhikkhuni disappeared," Phra Tepvisutthikawee of the Buddhism Protection Center has said.

Despite conservative opposition, bhikkhunis are gaining ground with the general public in Thailand.

"It is a movement now. When I was struggling by myself it was just this crazy woman who wanted to be a monk," says Dhammananda, who was ordained in 2003. "Now people don't feel strange when they see a female monk in the streets. We don't have problems with people, with society."

Aside from spiritual pursuits, the 15 monastics at her Songdhammakalyani Monastery visit prisoners, aid the poor and infirm and maintain other links with the surrounding community near Nakhon Pathom in central Thailand. Regularly they make alms rounds, a timeless tradition of food offerings by the faithful who are then blessed by the monks.

To the north, in the shadows of the country's highest mountain, hundreds of civil servants, businessmen, villagers and others regularly flock to an idyllic monastery to hear talks by Venerable Nandanyani, a bhikkhuni and onetime mathematician. Families attend a weekend religion "camp" on the monastery grounds. A bhikkhuni leads a group of men and women in the slow motions of walking meditation.

Seated below a statue of the Buddha, the abbess energetically explains why ordination of women is vital, punctuating her words with thumbs-up gestures. It enables individuals to probe Buddhism's depths and live the full monastic life, she says, and also allows intimate communication between female clergy and laywomen unhindered by the barriers of sex and traditional propriety between women and monks.

"We must wait," she says. "Slowly but surely it will come."