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Mahāprajāpatī's Legacy: The Buddhist Women's Movement

An Introduction

Buddhist women first began networking globally in 1987, providing a forum for the special meeting of Buddhist and feminist ideas. In that year, along with Ven. Ayya Khema, Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, and others, I organized the first International Conference on Buddhist Nuns in Bodhgaya, India, the first Buddhist conference ever to address the problems faced by Buddhist women.¹ The inaugural address by H. H. Dalai Lama, which emphasized the equal spiritual potential of women and men, was attended by over fifteen hundred people. Women from twenty-seven countries—and also a few monks and laymen—gathered to discuss the potentialities and actual conditions of women in Buddhist countries. For one week, issues such as education for Buddhist women, the role of Buddhist women in social welfare, living by the Vinaya (monastic codes) in the present day, creating opportunities for full ordination for women, livelihood for Saṅgha (the monastic community), and living as a nun in the West were discussed. Participants sought to understand not only how Buddhist societies have traditionally viewed women and how Buddhist women view themselves, but also what role women have traditionally played in the secular and religious life of Buddhist societies, and how that role might be expanded or changed. The articles presented here, first enthusiastically shared in oral form at these conferences, grew out of the research and experiences of women who are both scholars and practitioners of Buddhism. The book's methodology is to document Buddhist women's actual involvement, including their self-reflection, interactions, and interpretations of the tradition. The book is therefore itself part of the ongoing process of women transforming, and being transformed by, the tradition.

At the conclusion of this gathering, an International Association of Buddhist Women called Sakyadhita, "Daughters of the Buddha," was

established. Sakyadhita's focus is fourfold: (1) to create a network of communications among the Buddhist women of the world, (2) to educate women as teachers of Buddhism, (3) to conduct research on women in Buddhism, and (4) to work for the establishment of the Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha (order of fully ordained nuns) where it does not currently exist. In November 1991, Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, Professor of Philosophy at Thammasat University, organized the second International Conference on Buddhist Women in Bangkok. Since the Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha does not exist in Southeast Asia, and there is considerable opposition to its establishment, locating this conference on Buddhist women in Thailand was a significant indication that changes are afoot. The presence of highly educated and respected *bhikṣuṇīs* from Taiwan, Korea, Vietnam, and the West eroded the common Thai misconception that "There are no *bhikṣuṇīs*." By bringing into the open the subordinate status of women in Buddhism and particularly the ambiguous status of nuns in Thailand, the conference stimulated efforts to improve religious education and to develop meditation-training centers for women.

In 1993, a third Sakyadhita conference, on the theme "Buddhist Women in Modern Society," was held in Colombo. Although the Ministry for Buddhist Affairs had warned the organizers against discussing the issue of *bhikṣuṇī* ordination, the topic could not be suppressed. A significant number of Sri Lankan women are determined to reestablish the Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha in Sri Lanka, not only to recover a lost part of their Buddhist heritage but also to affirm their personal heritage as women. Ayya Khema, an internationally recognized meditation teacher of German Jewish descent, was a significant force in encouraging Buddhist women's practice in Sri Lanka and founded Parapaduwa Nuns' Island in Dodanaduwa. Although she was unable to attend the Conference in Colombo, her presence was strongly felt as the English-educated Sri Lankan elite and their humble forest-dwelling renunciant sisters began forging alliances to work toward reinstating the Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha in their country. Many Sri Lankans view the eventual reestablishment of an order of fully ordained nuns as inevitable and have begun eliciting support from young, educated Sri Lankan *bhikṣus* to make it happen.

The fourth international conference, "Women and the Power of Compassion: Survival in the 21st Century," took place in Ladakh, northern India, in August 1995. Over 108 delegates from abroad formed bonds of solidarity with hundreds of Buddhist women from Ladakh, Tibet, Bhutan, Nepal, and other Himalayan areas, women who have otherwise had little contact with contemporary women's movements. Despite their disparate lifestyles, these women found their practical

needs and spiritual aspirations to be remarkably in tune. Global networking of people who are actively concerned about the role of women in both the past and future of Buddhism is ending centuries of Buddhist women's isolation. By uniting and offering mutual support, Buddhist women have begun taking leadership roles in new fields: health, education, communications, ecology, and cultural preservation. Inspired by these exchanges, Buddhist women have initiated projects to research their own social and religious history and to publish biographies of eminent Buddhist women.

Each Sakyadhita conference has been a landmark in galvanizing the energies of the world's Buddhist women. Each gathering is truly international in character, highlighting a wide range of Buddhist cultural expressions, but each also has the distinctive flavor of the host country, whose women usually benefit the most. Lay and ordained, young and old, women and men, dressed in saffron, maroon, pink, brown, white, gray, black, and flowered prints, all mingle, meditate, chant, chat, envision their future, and enjoy the moment in harmony and friendship. Without windy speeches or fatuous pomp and ceremony, they cut directly to their core concerns, integrating academic research, spiritual practice, and social action without hesitation or disjunction. Working on the principle that Asian and Western women have much to learn from one another, Sakyadhita promotes unity among diverse schools of Buddhist thought and practice.

The fifth Sakyadhita conference in Cambodia at the end of 1997 took the discussion in new directions, using diversity—of views, practices, lifestyles, and experiences—as a theme. More than 150 people from twenty-four countries gathered at Wat Onnalom, Cambodia's most sacred temple in Phnom Penh, a temple that is normally reserved for the bi-monthly *uposadha* ritual of Cambodia's leading monks. Discussions covered a wide range of topics: rediscovering Cambodian Buddhist women's past, Buddhism and human rights, Buddhist laywomen in the New World, women and celibacy, inaccuracies in Buddhist women's history, Buddhist women and the media, women's role in creating a culture of nonviolence, growing up as a Buddhist woman, nunneries in contemporary China, engaged Buddhism, the revival of the Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha in Sri Lanka, sexual conduct and misconduct, and inner transformation for world peace. Incorporating panel discussions, meditations, group discussions, videos, stories, and movement, the conference was a lively and creative forum for diverse views, spiritual practices, and approaches to social action.

In June, 1997, a North American Conference on Buddhist Women in Claremont, California, was sponsored jointly by Sakyadhita and the Claremont Colleges. The aim was to bring together scholars and

practitioners in North America to encourage dialogue on issues of social, cultural, and personal concern to Buddhist women. Meditation was a primary focus, with opportunities to learn from Buddhist women teachers from three different traditions each day. In the process of discussions, it became clear that the issues for Buddhist women in North America are quite different than in Asia. In North America, the prominent issues seem to be sexualities, environment, race, sexual exploitation, and social engagement, whether through the performing arts, writing, or direct action. In Asia, by contrast, the major issues are survival, education, training, and ordination. It emerged that the task of creating bridges of understanding—among Buddhists and non-Buddhists of many races, cultures, and sexualities, women and men, advantaged and disadvantaged—is just beginning. By foregrounding rather than stashing issues that many find uncomfortable, and exploring methodologies for processing those issues both individually and in groups, the gathering proved that Buddhist women and their friends are willing to take practical and constructive steps toward social reconciliation.

The dialogue is continuing and the circle is growing. The sixth Sakyadhita conference in Lumbini, Nepal, in 2000 will move discussions ahead in important directions. One direction is pushing forward the frontiers of research on Buddhist women—compiling individual and collective histories, and encouraging cooperative research projects. Another direction is direct, compassionate social action at the grassroots level that will implement changes for women in specific constructive and culturally appropriate ways, particularly education and training in leadership, meditation, languages, counselling, and human rights. As the circle grows and the vision expands, it is obvious that institutional structures and economic resources need to expand, not as ends in themselves, but as a means to make it all possible. In this, Sakyadhita is playing a crucial role in bringing together people and ideas to accomplish goals, both spiritual and mundane. The colorful Sakyadhita gatherings of cultures and traditions have accented women's innovative role in revitalizing and reenvisioning Buddhism toward the goal of personal and global transformation.

Buddhist Women Face Their History

Several centuries before the Christian era began, an aristocratic woman by the name of Mahāprajāpatī began a spiritual and social revolution in northern India. After trudging several hundred miles barefoot across the dusty plains to make her point, she lobbied Śākyamuni Buddha,

who was both her nephew and stepson, for an order of women renunciants.² Due to her courageous agitation for equal opportunity, the Buddha affirmed the equal potential of women to achieve spiritual enlightenment and recognized their right to wear the robes of a Buddhist mendicant. The Buddha was unable to ensure the total reformation of patriarchal Indian society, however. After the Buddha's death, earlier modes of gender relations gradually reasserted themselves. The positive attitude toward women evident among the early Buddhists seems to have declined sharply around the time written Buddhist literature began to appear. These texts contain contradictory statements on women, who are portrayed as capable of enlightenment on par with men and also as sirens luring men from the spiritual path. These ambivalent attitudes toward women persist today in the minds and institutions of Buddhist Asia.

As we read through studies on the interrelationship between Buddhism and political power in Asia over the past two and a half millennia, we are struck by the conspicuous lack of information on women. We encounter a few scattered references to prostitutes or beggars in the garb of nuns, yet women are rarely mentioned as playing a role in either religion or politics, two of society's most important spheres of activity. Ample attention is given to the monks' order, the *Bhikṣu Saṅgha*, and its role in religion and politics. Clearly this sector of society is a force to be reckoned with in any analysis of the region. Throughout history, the support of the *Saṅgha* has been actively sought as a means of legitimation by those wishing to gain and maintain positions of political power in Buddhist countries.³ When we look closely, however, we find that in certain Buddhist countries—Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka, and Thailand—women are categorically denied admission to the *Saṅgha*, Buddhism's most fundamental institution.

However egalitarian the Buddha's original teachings may have been, today preconceptions about the inferiority of women prevail in Buddhist cultures. Although these attitudes may trace to patriarchal social mores with no verifiable connection to Buddhist tenets, women have consistently been excluded from religious structures. They certainly are not barred from commerce or agriculture—where there is profit to be gained from her endeavors, a woman is given free rein. In many cultures, she is in control of affairs within the family, such as the keys, the finances, the children, and decisions of major importance. In the realm of the unseen or transcendent, however, she is thwarted, as if the spiritual potential within and among women posed a threat greater than financial control. This suggests that the issue of gender in religion is an issue of power politics at a very fundamental level.

The history of women in Buddhism dates to even before the Buddha's enlightenment.⁴ After realizing that physical austerities do not lead to liberation, Siddhartha Gautama is said to have accepted an offering of rice pudding from a village woman named Sujātā and regained strength to become enlightened. Thus, since the very earliest days, women have been credited as nurturers and supporters of the tradition, symbolized by Sujātā reviving Siddhartha's physical strength at a juncture critical to his ultimate achievement. Although his cohorts mocked him for this perceived weakness, the Buddha continued to instruct and counsel women throughout his fifty-year-long teaching career. With Siddhartha's step-mother Mahāprajāpatī in the vanguard, women began to create their own communities and the order of women renunciants, the Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha, has continued to thrive up to the present day. Women throughout India and later abroad became renowned for their spiritual achievements—the depth of their realizations, their talent as teachers, and their miraculous powers. This spiritual legacy has inspired women for centuries.

The Buddha allegedly hesitated to admit women to the Saṅgha, and several theories have been put forward to explain why. First, it is obvious that close proximity between an order of celibate women and an order of celibate men could lead to sexual temptations. There are statements attributed to the Buddha warning monks to be wary of contact with women as a distraction from spiritual pursuits. There are no records to prove it, but the Buddha may have similarly warned nuns against close contact with men. Human beings do not necessarily eradicate desire by living a celibate lifestyle; close relations between ordained men and women can easily lead to infatuations and eventually to disrobing. A second theory about the Buddha's hesitation to admit women to the Saṅgha attributes it to the Indian cultural context. In ancient Indian society, women's ideal role was in the family. Allowing a woman to leave her family and roam about unprotected was considered both dangerous for women and a threat to family life, the bedrock of society.

A third theory about the Buddha's hesitation to admit women to the Saṅgha concerns the organizational difficulties that might arise in monastic institutions that include members of both genders. The *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs* had to develop systems for effectively organizing practical matters, such as housing, seating, ritual activities, and communications. The systems that evolved are evident in the regulatory monastic codes of the two orders. With parallel orders of women and men, the Saṅgha could potentially double in size. The difficulty of ensuring the smooth functioning of such a large monastic institution may have been another consideration in the Buddha's hesitation.

A fourth theory, which is whispered but rarely articulated, claims that monks saw nuns as unwanted competition, both for limited

material resources and for spiritual achievement. The two are interrelated, since spiritual prowess attracts donations from the laity. If nuns were perceived as competition and a threat to the material welfare of the monks, and it was monks who transcribed the scriptures, this could explain certain misogynist statements that appear in the texts, including certain discriminatory statements attributed to the Buddha.

In some cases, negative stereotypes of women prevalent in Buddhist societies actually derive from Brahmanical, Confucian, or other sources, yet some are also found in both Theravāda and Mahāyāna texts. Whether these passages are the authentic words of the Buddha and his disciples or not, they are often used to legitimize negative type-casting of women. Interpretations of these passages vary, but they are difficult to justify or ignore. To repudiate the canonical texts altogether is problematic for Buddhists. Not only is it an affront to the sensibilities of orthodox adherents, but it also calls into question the validity of the texts as a whole. Even a revisionist view ruffles feathers among the orthodox, yet a reevaluation of the texts is essential if women in Buddhism are to meaningfully apply and actualize the teachings the texts contain.

In the earliest stratum of *sūtras*, the Buddha affirms women's capacity to achieve liberation and, from among the thousands of women who achieved *nirvāṇa* at that time, names many individually for their exceptional qualities. The Mahāyāna *sūtras*, which appeared several hundred years later, symbolize wisdom as female and inclusively address the "sons and daughters of good family." Along with accounts of the virtuous lives and spiritual achievements of women, however, we encounter repeated warnings against the temptations of women and a prophecy (as yet unfulfilled) warning that women's admission to the order would shorten the life of the Dharma.⁵ The images of women are thus equivocal and often confusing.⁶ An extreme example occurs in the *Upāyakaśalya Sūtra*, where the girl Dakṣiṇottarā sets herself on fire out of frustrated desire for the bodhisattva Priyaṃkara and achieves the fortunate result of birth as a male in paradise surrounded by fourteen thousand celestial females.⁷ Even though the girl compounds lust with a horrifying suicide, her meritorious act of generosity to a (male) bodhisattva results in a heavenly (male) rebirth. Another perplexing example is the *Tathāgataguhyā Sūtra*, where innumerable beings are cured of all diseases and afflictions by consummating union with the bodhisattva Vaidyārāja manifesting the form of a girl.⁸ In the early Mahāyāna *sūtras*, a woman transforms herself into a male body upon enlightenment; in others, she achieves enlightenment in a female body. All these conflicting images make the study of women in Buddhism complex and intriguing; there are prob-

lems both in authenticating allusions to women in the texts and in discounting the texts altogether.

Throughout most of Buddhist history, the socially approved roles available to women were those of wife and mother. In these roles, laywomen accumulated merit by tending to the family shrine, making offerings to the Saṅgha, giving charity to the needy, transmitting the Buddhist teachings to children, keeping precepts, promoting ethical principles in the household, chanting the *sūtras*, and meditating. The most famous laywoman in the Buddha's day was Visākhā, who regularly fed two thousand monks at her home and was often called upon to mediate disputes.⁹ The spiritual achievements of laywomen are described in a number of texts, such as the *Saddharma Ratnāvaliyya*, where Subhadra and her younger sister achieve the state of a Stream-enterer (*sotāpanna*) and Sumanā attains the stage of a Once-Returner (*sakadāgāmi*).¹⁰ Laywomen are portrayed as having more flexibility in Buddhist societies than previously; women had the right to divorce, remarry, inherit, and the freedom to practice religion without depending on men. Women gain inspiration from the Buddhist teachings on loving kindness and compassion, which use as their primary example the tremendous kindness and compassion that mothers have for their children. The central role of the mother in ensuring the happiness and harmony of the family is a common theme.

To exploit physical beauty and lead the life of a courtesan was one alternative lifestyle for women, and to renounce physical beauty and lead the life of a nun was another. For a woman, to renounce the pleasures of worldly life and become a nun represented the most radical departure from social expectations. In the *Therīgāthā*, we have the stories of dozens of women who achieved the final stage of liberation and became *arhats*. A number of these women, such as Kisāgotamī¹¹ and Vāsiṭṭī,¹² turned to intensive spiritual practice due to intense grief at the loss of a child. The story of Paṭācārā,¹³ who became deranged after her husband died of snake bite and her two children were carried off by wild animals, is particularly poignant. After recovering her sanity, she became an *arhat* and, by explaining the sufferings of birth and death, became a source of consolation and inspiration to other women. Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā rejected lay life after being duped and almost killed by a lover she saved from execution, then went on to become the *bhikṣuṇī* most skilled in philosophical debate. The decision to shave the head and don shapeless robes powerfully symbolized a rejection of the expected reproductive and familial roles, and asserted a new, independent identity as a full-time religious practitioner.

Religious leadership in Buddhist countries is traditionally in the hands of fully ordained monks (Sanskrit: *bhikṣu*, Pāli: *bhikkhu*).¹⁴ The

monks are revered as the ideal model for human development and are financially supported by devout members of the lay community, primarily women. Around the eleventh century, the Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha died out in India and Sri Lanka,¹⁵ and as far as is known, was never officially established in Cambodia, Japan, Laos, Mongolia, Thailand, or Tibet. In the fifth century C.E., the lineage of fully ordained nuns was transmitted from Sri Lanka to China¹⁶ and subsequently to Korea and Vietnam. The lineage of full ordination for women has flourished in these countries uninterruptedly to the present day.

The status of nuns within the Buddhist traditions seems to correlate with ordination status. Coincidentally or not, where full ordination as a *bhikṣuṇī* is available, the nuns' level of education and status within the society also tend to be high. Where novice ordination as a *śrāmaṇerikā* is available to nuns, women are recognized as members of the Saṅgha (the monastic order), even though they are not afforded equal treatment. Without access to full ordination or even novice ordination, women in such Theravādin countries as Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka, and Thailand are in a secondary and often subservient role, relative to the monks, in the religious sphere. The subordinate position of women in Buddhism does not derive solely from the lack of higher ordination, however, for even those women who have access to some level of ordination are sometimes marginalized and their needs ignored. For example, although women in the Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese traditions enjoy parity in being fully ordained, they hold a clearly subordinate position in the religious power structures of their traditions. Certain wealthy women have exerted influence from behind the scenes, but most women over the centuries have typically lacked both a voice and power in Buddhist institutions. Today they are gaining courage and beginning to speak out. The following sections provide a brief glance at the current conditions of Buddhist women in Asian and Western cultures.

Meditation Allowed: Buddhist Women of Burma (Myanmar)

In the Theravāda countries of South and Southeast Asia at present, conditions for religious practice among Burmese women are relatively favorable. Educational standards have improved considerably since Marie Byles, a barrister resident in Burma in 1962, observed: "The village boys still go to the monastery schools and learn to read and write. The girls have no school and do not learn to read and write."¹⁷

Yet even today, there is evidence of gender discrimination, particularly in the sphere of religion. Rites of passage clearly indicate the different expectations of the sexes: at the same age that little boys become novice monks, little girls have their ears pierced. Although women retain their own names after marriage, supervise their husbands' earnings, and excel in business management, often heading large trading enterprises, a pollution stigma still attaches to them. Menstrual taboos underlie prohibitions that prevent women from entering many Buddhist shrines in Burma.¹⁸ The desire to be reborn as a man is pervasive among women.¹⁹

Men are reluctant to seek women as teachers and most monks strongly oppose any change in the system of nuns' ordination. There is evidence that women has opportunities to become fully ordained *bhikṣuṇīs* in the Pyu kingdom in southern Burma in the eleventh century,²⁰ but today nuns who take ten precepts are not accorded recognition as *śrāmaṇerikās* (novices); instead they are known as *tila shin* (possessors of morality).²¹ As in Sri Lanka and Thailand, the estimated sixty thousand nuns in Burma are not considered full-fledged members of the monastic community.

Burmese women have access to meditation facilities and Buddhist education, and most are content with their lot, but they are barred from the Saṅgha, considered the highest calling in Buddhist societies, and do not enjoy equal status or opportunities. As an educated (male) merchant informed an Australian (female) attorney during her stay in Burma in 1962, it is common to hear discriminatory statements such as "Of course men are superior to women because only men can don the yellow robe, and that is the most superior of all!"²² The yellow robe, thought to be imbued with power and protective magic,²³ is revered as a symbol of moral purity and is worn only by the Bhikṣu Saṅgha. In contradistinction to the monks, nuns wear pale pink garments,²⁴ including a blouse with an uncomfortably high neck and tight sleeves. Whereas a deceased monk will be embalmed and left undisturbed for several days, a nun must be buried the same day of her death.²⁵ Even in death, there is discrimination.

From one point of view, the eight- and ten-precept nuns of the Theravāda tradition enjoy greater freedom than monks, since they are not formally constrained by as many Prātimokṣa²⁶ precepts as monks. Although the full ordination (*upasampadā*) and precepts of a *bhikṣuṇī* are not currently available to them, these nuns generally follow the discipline of a fully ordained nun strictly anyway. One visible difference is that nuns must prepare their own food, since by custom they are offered only uncooked rice and foodstuffs. Those who do not receive support from family members must go to neighboring villages

for alms twice a week or travel long distance twice a year to their home villages to collect donations of rice, which they carry in huge bundles on their heads. Most telling of all, when monetary donations are distributed, nuns generally receive only a fraction of what the monks are offered: "Ten kyats are given to a monk when only one will be given to a nun. It is our Burmese custom."²⁷ Since it is supposed that not much merit derives from offering to nuns, there is a noticeable difference in their standards of living.²⁸ Although the nuns do not seem to resent it, their humble dwellings stand in marked contrast to the monks' palatial quarters. In religious terms, the humility of Burmese women is a virtue, yet in political terms, it keeps them consigned to a second-rate religious status.

The Ordination Crisis: Buddhist Women in Sri Lanka

From the eleventh century, when the bhikṣuṇī order died out in Sri Lanka, until a young Sinhalese woman named Catherine de Alvis returned from a trip to Burma in 1905, there were few opportunities for Sinhalese women to live a celibate religious life.²⁹ For nearly nine hundred years, monastic life had been the purview of *bhikṣus* alone; the only women in robes were reportedly some ragged old beggars in white. Even after Catherine returned as Sister Sudharmācari and established Lady Blake's Ārāma in 1907, it took many years before the idea of women as renunciants became acceptable; in fact, the struggle for equal recognition continues to this day.

Many of the wealthy urban women who have supported the nuns (called *dasasilmātās*, or "ten-precept mothers")³⁰ in recent times have envisioned a social service role for them. But the majority of the *dasasilmātās* themselves, typically from poor rural backgrounds, are interested only in spiritual pursuits and have thwarted attempts to shunt them into activities such as hospital work and handicrafts. They feel that their objective is Dharma practice, not spinning and weaving, and if they had wanted to do hospital work, they need not have become nuns. With the advent of more frequent, open communications, their supporters are coming to more fully appreciate the sincere religious orientation of the nuns, and the nuns are coming to more fully appreciate the value of social service activities.

Another shift in perspectives is occurring among the nuns themselves. As the laity begin to develop greater respect for the religious practice of almswomen, the nuns are beginning to develop greater

respect for themselves and each other. Fortuitously, an upsurge of interest in meditation practice, particularly the technique imported from Burma known as *vipassana*, has resulted in the construction all over Sri Lanka of new meditation centers that are enthusiastically patronized by women. This phenomenon has resulted in strong bonds between serious meditators, both lay and ordained. The spiritual communication and mutual encouragement that take place at these centers are advantageous to both groups—an overall positive development for women. It is widely believed that eventually, from among these meditators, more highly educated women will begin to take robes, which will lead to a revival of the *bhikṣuṇī* order, despite the widespread opposition of conservative monks.

The controversy over full ordination for women in Sri Lanka is heated. There is increasingly strong support for the idea, particularly among the English-educated elite, and there is equally strong opposition among conservative monks. The conservatives include some of the highest ecclesiastical officials in the land, such as Madihee Paññasiha Mahāthero, head of Amarapura Nikāya, one of the three major monastic orders in Sri Lanka. Instead of lending support to the first international Buddhist women's gathering ever held in Sri Lanka, he asked the conveners of the third Sakyadhita conference in Colombo to pledge in writing that the *bhikṣuṇī* issue would not be discussed at the conference. Progressives and conservatives spar vociferously over the issue and controversy flares recurrently in the press.

Ironically, those least affected by this media controversy are the nuns it most concerns. In predominantly Buddhist Sri Lanka, many of the nuns are poor, untrained, uneducated, and neglected, living with a companion or two in tiny rooms without adequate sanitation. For most of them, there are more pressing matters to attend to than demands for higher ordination. Disempowered as they are, their primary energies are directed toward spiritual practices designed to liberate them from the cycle of rebirth. Even some of the most respected female meditation masters, such as Sudharma Māniyo, disavow interest in receiving higher ordination, possibly for fear of alienating conservatives among the monks. They tend to accept the opinion of conservative monks that the *Bhikṣuṇī* Saṅgha cannot be revived until the coming of Maitreya Buddha thousands of years hence and that the ordinations received by nuns in Mahāyāna countries are not authentic from a Theravāda point of view, despite the fact that the *bhikṣuṇī* lineage in China traces its roots to Sri Lanka.

Nevertheless, a delegation of ten Sri Lankan nuns traveled to the United States in 1988 to receive *bhikṣuṇī* ordination in the Chinese

tradition at Hsi Lai Temple, a mammoth Taiwan-funded monastery in Hacienda Heights, California. Unable to adjust to the climate and the rigorous discipline, five of the group left without receiving the precepts and the remaining five who received the full ordination have kept a low profile since returning to Sri Lanka. In December 1996, another delegation of ten nuns traveled to Sarnath, India, site of the first ordination of monks during the Buddha's time, to receive a *bhikṣuṇī* ordination in the Korean tradition organized by monks associated with the Mahabodhi Society in India. Kusuma Devendra, a well-known Pāli scholar, teacher of Buddhism, and one of the founders of Sakyadhita, took the lead in what is considered a daring step. The ordination of such a highly educated and widely respected woman as a *bhikṣuṇī* in the face of widespread opposition is important in gaining support for the restoration of the *Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha*. The Sarnath *bhikṣuṇī* ordination has been denounced by many leading monks in Sri Lanka and the ten newly ordained *bhikṣuṇīs* plan to stay in India for three years until the controversy, hopefully, cools down.

Meanwhile another event transpired that took the *bhikṣuṇī* movement further than anyone dared imagine during the first Sakyadhita conference just eleven years before. This was an International Full Ordination Ceremony held in Bodhgaya in February, 1998, sponsored and organized by Fo Kuang Shan, Taiwan's largest monastery. At this weeklong ceremony 132 nuns were fully ordained as *bhikṣuṇīs*, including fifty nuns from the Theravāda tradition. Among them were twenty candidates from Sri Lanka who had been carefully selected by a group of prominent Sri Lankan monks at the request of *bhikṣuṇīs* from Fo Kuang Shan. Prior to receiving *bhikṣuṇī* ordination, the candidates, most of them well-educated heads of temples, had received the *śrāmaṇerikā* precepts from *bhikṣus* in Sri Lanka, a pioneering step in itself, and special training in preparation for the rigorous discipline to be expected at the ceremony. Because a few vocal opponents to the full ordination of women remain, the new *bhikṣuṇīs* felt somewhat apprehensive about their future. But when they returned to Sri Lanka, they were greeted by joyful crowds of supporters and led from the airport in procession. Not only did this historical event evoke the image of Sanghamitra arriving from India to transmit the *bhikṣuṇī* lineage to Sri Lanka in the third century B.C.E., it represented a triumphant culmination of efforts to restore the lineage from China. Sri Lanka *bhikṣus* lost no time in taking matters one step further. On March 12, 1998, along with the Sri Lankan *bhikṣuṇīs* just ordained in Bodhgaya, they conferred the higher ordination on twenty-two nuns at Dambulla. After a lapse of some nine centuries, the *Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha* had returned to Sri Lankan soil.

Seen but Not Heard: Buddhist Women of Thailand

Women have been an important force in the recent economic development of Thailand. They make up approximately one half of the total workforce, participating in agriculture, commerce, manufacturing, education, and health services. Their participation cannot be said to be on an equal footing with men, however, since they have few opportunities for government or management positions. Women's largest roles are in agricultural production, fishing, petty trade, domestic labor, food services, and manufacturing—all lower-paid jobs, if they are paid at all. The most respected profession, the Saṅgha, is off-limits. When a woman does elect a religious vocation, she usually observes five or eight precepts and becomes a *maeji* ("mother ascetic").³¹ The estimated ten thousand *maejis* in Thailand currently wear the white robes of a layperson, receive little support, and enjoy little prestige.³² Among the several alternative movements of nuns that exist are the *sikkhamats* of Santi Asoke, who are vegetarian and strictly observe the ten precepts under the guidance of Bodhirak.³³

One of the most common reasons a Thai woman becomes a nun is to fulfill a vow. She vows to become a nun for some specified period of time if her wish, such as recovery from an illness or respite from some personal difficulty, is fulfilled.³⁴ Many of these women do not stay in robes for long, nor do they necessarily exhibit a strong interest in Dharma practice. This is not surprising; since opportunities for women to study Buddhism are limited and the status of nuns is low, the vocation generally does not attract Thailand's most talented, educated women. Furthermore, there is little or no material support for women in robes, so once their savings are exhausted, nuns often have no choice but to revert to lay life.

Lest we imagine that women enjoy great opportunities in the worldly sphere, however, we are reminded that between seven hundred thousand and one million women support themselves as prostitutes in Thailand, more than double the number of monks.³⁵ This would indicate a certain lack of other lucrative career opportunities for women. Frustrated in their attempts at worldly success as well as their spiritual aspirations, women until now have had few viable alternatives. A woman's best hope and highest meaning is thought to be bearing children and enhancing the family income through productive activities. Her most acceptable religious role is one of nurturing: conscientiously supporting the male Saṅgha and mothering a son who will become a monk. Despite their best efforts, women

continue to be excluded from positions of power both in worldly life and in religious life.

Lands in Turmoil: Buddhist Women of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam

Buddhism in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam has been seriously threatened and very nearly obliterated by war and political unrest in recent years. Not only have indigenous Buddhist institutions been severely disrupted, but the survival of Buddhist culture itself has been uncertain. By 1978, sixty-five thousand monks had been killed in Cambodia as the result of war and political purges, and the Buddhist fabric of Cambodian society had been torn asunder. Amidst this ten-year debacle, women struggled against all odds to maintain their families and their mental health. A few hundred nuns escaped or became ordained after migrating to camps on the Thai border, and nunhood became regarded as a sage refuge for older women. Like other refugees, many of these nuns have been traumatized by their wartime experiences.

Most Cambodian nuns hold eight precepts and become nuns after raising families, but as Buddhism revives, some younger women are becoming nuns and receiving ten precepts. Like Thai nuns, Cambodian and Laotian nuns³⁶ occupy a subordinate, ambiguous status in society. Since domestic violence, suicide, rape, and severe depression are common consequences of war and refugee life, women often turn to these nuns with their problems. Yet the nuns, trained only in the devotional aspects of Buddhism, are ill-equipped to handle psychological disorders, family crisis, and other problems of this dimension. Their religious status is marginal; without full ordination, they are ineligible to engage in many aspects of religious life, yet their shaven heads and robes disengage them from worldly life. Neither Saṅgha nor lay, lacking education and financial support themselves, they have little consolation to offer their sisters.

Buddhism in Vietnam has endured, miraculously, despite the massive destruction of war and the oppression suffered under both Christian and communist governments. Although the early history of the *bhikṣuṇī* order in Vietnam remains shrouded in uncertainty,³⁷ nuns have worked enthusiastically to promote the Dharma in Vietnam, building temples, teaching, and establishing the *bhikṣuṇī* order. Laboring always under the patriarchal legacy of Confucian social structures and values, women did not gain positions in either the religious or

secular spheres, but nevertheless played an important role in inculcating Buddhist values and transmitting devotional practices.

Many Vietnamese women are convinced that it is through the women that Buddhism is transmitted from generation to generation. A Vietnamese refugee, who is now a lay leader of a temple in the United States, told me that everything she knows about Buddhism she learned from her grandmother. Although most Vietnamese women were previously illiterate (in the vernacular, not to mention the classical Chinese of the Buddhist scriptures), they had a good grasp of basic Buddhist principles, and it was they who imparted these principles to the younger generation, especially through the medium of stories. The men of the village, she said, worshipped at the small temple where Confucius and other deities were enshrined, while the women all went to the pagoda, located at the respected "head" direction of the village, to worship the Buddha. When questioned, "Why, then, do men hold the top Buddhist positions?" she responded that it is due to Confucian attitudes toward gender, which dictate a quiet, unobtrusive role for wives and daughters. Women are never to put themselves forward or hold public positions, since it is considered inappropriate behavior for them; instead, they voice their ideas through their husbands. The informant's husband confirmed this, venturing that ninety percent of the real power was in women's hands.

Religion has begun to flourish in Vietnam in the last few years, with women as powerful participants in the process. Of the thousands of nuns that existed prior to 1962, many were killed during the war or disrobed in its aftermath. The decade following the fall of Saigon was one of dislocation and deprivation; the future of Buddhism appeared very uncertain. Recently, however, there has been a resurgence of interest in religious life, with women entering the order in far greater numbers than men. Unlike the precommunist era, nuns and monks now depend primarily on their own agricultural production for a livelihood. With limited time and few opportunities for religious instruction, it is unclear exactly what institutional role nuns will play in future, yet numbers alone indicate that they will be a force in Vietnamese Buddhism that will lead to a change in the status of women within the religious order.

Quiet Voices: Buddhist Women in Japan

Even if they have rarely captured the limelight, Buddhist women have contributed significantly to the history of Japanese Buddhism. According to the Genkoji chronicles, the first persons to become fully ordained in Japan were three nuns named Zenshin, Zenzo, and Kenzen.³⁸

They traveled by ship to Korea and received the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination in the kingdom of Paekche in 590 C.E., considerably earlier than the Chinese master Chien-chen (Jpn: Ganjin) who reached Japan in 754 by invitation of the imperial court at Nara to initiate an authentic lineage of ordination for monks. The three nuns failed to establish a Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha in Japan, however, since five or more *bhikṣuṇīs* are needed to preside over a valid ordination procedure. We have no way of knowing why more nuns did not go to Paekche to receive the ordination or why Korean *bhikṣuṇīs* were not invited to Japan.

It is also unclear whether women after this time received the ten precepts of a novice nun, the bodhisattva precepts, or were self-ordained,³⁹ but in any case, nuns figure prominently in the early literature of Japan. Their renunciation follows a standard scenario: an abandoned lady at court, realizing the transience of life and the futility of worldly involvements through her disappointment in love, cuts her hair and retires to a secluded hermitage for the rest of her life. Some, as related in the *Genji Monogatari* and other works of the Heian period, managed to exert considerable influence at court despite their seclusion.

Although in Japanese Buddhism the monastic model of practice has largely been superseded by lay models, communities of well-disciplined nuns continue their ancient traditions even today and many are also innovators⁴⁰ in their own way. Whereas male religious specialists in Japan typically marry and raise families, passing their temples to a son (or occasionally a daughter), most nuns live a celibate, reclusive, and traditional lifestyle. A few Japanese masters, notably Dogen (1200–1253) and Nichiren (1222–1282), publicly affirmed women's enlightenment potential, but women in Japan have typically assumed a subservient position in the sphere of religion.

No doubt the most well-known nun in Japan today is Setouchi Jakucho, an extremely popular novelist who was ordained on Mt. Tendai after a full and cosmopolitan life. In a private conversation with her in Kyoto in 1990, she related to me that, while women can receive ordination equally with men and be assigned to take charge of temples, they do not receive sufficient support from the laity to adequately maintain the temples and many are therefore forced to abandon the religious life. This lack of support for women results from a belief found lurking in many Buddhist cultures— that women's spiritual practice is somehow less potent or creates less karmic benefit than that of men. Such beliefs permeate the culture, often in subtle ways, and make it difficult for women to improve their status or even survive as female religious specialists. Economic factors and the onslaught of modern materialist values seem to be responsible for a declining number of female religious specialists in Japan.

The largest community of nuns in Japan today is the Aichi Semmon Nisodo, a convent in Nagoya.⁴¹ This convent belongs to the Sōtō Zen school, which is said to have about a thousand nuns altogether, and provides thorough training in meditation and the traditional arts such as tea and flower arrangement (*ikebana*). Another well-known convent is Jakko-in, located in Kyoto and headed by Chikō Komatsu.⁴² In recent decades, there has also been a move to ordain the wives of priests after a short period of religious training, according them a status parallel to that of noncelibate male priests. In some cases, these women are known as nuns (*nisō*) and included in nuns' associations. Although they may shave their heads once during their training, they ordinarily do not shave them afterwards or wear robes, except perhaps on ceremonial occasions. They serve primarily in a supportive role to their husbands, making arrangements for ceremonies, offering words of advice to parishioners, and fulfilling all the duties necessary for maintaining a temple, in addition to their own personal family responsibilities. Though their efforts are essential for the smooth functioning of the temple, such women are often overworked and underacknowledged, and one may question whether their accommodation to the status quo will significantly improve conditions for women in religion.

Powerfully Isolated: Buddhist Women of Korea

Buddhism was integral to Korean national identity and culture, flourishing in both the cities and countryside until the Choson dynasty (1392–1910), when it suffered persecution due to the government's preference for Neo-Confucian ideology. Then, under Japanese colonization (1910–45), Korea was subjected to intensive missionary activities by mostly lay Japanese Buddhist denominations, which challenged the celibate monastic orientation of the traditional Korean schools. Although politics and human frailty swayed some male religious specialists away from their celibate lifestyle, most nuns managed to preserve their commitment to monastic celibacy throughout this period of hardship. Unable to adequately voice their concerns within the established, male-dominated Chogye monastic order, Bhikṣuṇī Eunyeong Sunim founded Pumun-Jong, an independent order of nuns.⁴³ Even though this movement is no longer a force in Korea today, there are several thousand *bhikṣuṇīs* united through the Korean Bhikṣuṇī Association begun under the leadership of Bhikṣuṇī Hyechun

Sunim, as well as several thousand female novices (*śrāmaṇerikā*) in training for full ordination.⁴⁴

Seeing Buddhism as a political threat, successive regimes have attempted to isolate it in the countryside, which has suited the meditation-minded monastics. Yet recently Buddhism has begun losing large numbers of followers both to Christianity and secular pursuits. To reverse this trend, efforts are now being made to reach out and serve the needs of increasingly urban Korean society. In response to improved standards of secular education, greater opportunities for religious education are becoming available to both women and men. Efforts are also being made to instill Buddhist values in the younger generation through activities such as Sunday school classes and other programs along the lines of the Christian model. Korean women, especially the nuns, are taking an active role in efforts to disseminate Buddhism in urban centers, particularly among the youth.⁴⁵

Partially in response to limited options in the political sphere, large numbers of young people today continue to be attracted to monastic life. Several hundred take vows annually. Women in recent years, sparked by religious aims and a concern for the social good, have begun seeking ordination in even greater numbers than men. Although positions of power and responsibility in the Buddhist world are almost totally controlled by men, Korean nuns have gained the respect of the laity through their moral integrity, hard work, and dedicated social service. Some have opted out of the existing religious orders and created independent organizational structures, an interesting model for women in general to explore.

The Success Story: Buddhist Women of Taiwan

In all of East Asia, no place can boast a resurgence of Buddhism equal to that of Taiwan, nor a Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha as strong. Chinese Buddhist women have as role models the female saints who figure prominently in the *sūtras*, such as the laywoman Queen Śrīmālā, whose depth of realization is attested by the Buddha who predicts her perfect enlightenment in the form of the Buddha Universal Light.⁴⁶ The Chinese also have several prominent female cultural heroes, such as the legendary Miao-shan, the devout Buddhist princess who was almost martyred for her chastity, and Kuan Yin, the bodhisattva of compassion, who in China typically appears in female form. Laywomen throughout generations have organized Buddhist vegetarian societies and sponsored

innumerable Dharma activities (*fa-hui*).⁴⁷ Many among them have chosen a life of renunciation, most commonly as a *bhikṣuṇī*, but also sometimes as a laywomen with bodhisattva precepts living and helping in a temple. It is estimated that at certain times during the T'ang dynasty Chinese *bhikṣuṇīs* numbered five hundred thousand.⁴⁸ Today, in Taiwan alone, there are an estimated five thousand Chinese nuns engaged in studies, teaching, meditation, and social service.

When refugee monks fled mainland China after the Communist victory in the early 1950s, a hardworking core of dedicated Taiwanese nuns helped them establish temples, schools, and a foundation of lay support that made possible a spirited revival of Buddhist thought and practice in the Republic of China. Quietly and relentlessly challenging Confucian preconceptions of the servile wife and daughter, Chinese women in Taiwan have proved their strength in business, government, education, and religion. Although still underrepresented in the male-dominated bastions of ecclesiastical power, Buddhist women in Taiwan exert their influence through material generosity and sheer numbers. A significant number have rejected marriage in favor of ordination as Buddhist nuns. Women entering monastic life outnumber men more than five to one; on the whole they are better educated, more active, and younger than male candidates, entering the order as a first option, rather than after another career.

In addition to traditional temple activities, nuns have gained fame in education, the arts, activism, and social service. *Bhikṣuṇī* Shig Hiu Wan, an artist, educator, and meditation master from Guangzhou Province who taught for many years at the Chinese Cultural University in Taipei, established a monastic training center for nuns, and at the age of seventy-six established Hua Fan University, where she hopes to create a meditation hall for four hundred.⁴⁹ As the present generation of male Buddhist scholars passes away, women teachers will hopefully take leadership roles, despite the prevalent tendency to place men in positions of power. *Bhikṣuṇī* Heng-ching Shih, trained at the University of Wisconsin and now professor of philosophy at National Taiwan University, became the first ordained practitioner to teach at the university level in Taiwan. Young nuns and laywomen currently taking advanced degrees in Japanese, American, and British universities in preparation for scholarly careers will bring fresh perspectives to Buddhist theory and practice. Presumably, through demonstrating their academic and personal merit, these women will gradually help correct the gender imbalance in the upper echelons of Chinese Buddhism.

Perhaps the most remarkable example of Buddhist social service in the world is Ciji, the Buddhist Compassion Relief Foundation, founded by Bhikṣuṇī Zhengyan after she saw a young woman refused medical care because she was unable to pay.⁵⁰ Since 1966, Ciji has evolved into the largest civic organization in Taiwan, distributing 20 million dollars annually to relieve sufferings caused by poverty and natural disasters.⁵¹ Ciji's four million members, 80 percent of them women, are motivated by the bodhisattva ideal to extend the values of loving kindness and compassion beyond home and family to the world at large. Emphasizing social service activities more than meditation or ritual practices, and fully acknowledging women's leadership capabilities, Ciji offers a new model of women's participation in Buddhist organizations.

Minority Buddhist Women: Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines

Indonesia, Malaysia, the Phillipines, Singapore, and Thailand have significant ethnic Chinese populations engaged primarily in business, including a significant proportion of Buddhists. Within these cultural enclaves, ethnic Chinese nuns have established temples and conscientiously devote themselves to chanting *sūtras*, performing rituals for lay devotees, and supervising the upkeep of the temples. Some of these nuns have traveled abroad, primarily to Taiwan and Hong Kong, for Buddhist studies and training in monastic discipline. Those who are highly motivated and have the financial means aspire to participate in a monthlong Triple Platform Ordination,⁵² held annually in Taiwan, with its exemplary standards of discipline and quality instruction.

As members of a frequently persecuted minority, sometimes even denied citizenship on the basis of race, these Chinese nuns keep a very low profile. Confucian societal mores and politics conspire to keep them silent and in the shadows. Many of these nuns have no formal schooling; they may be unable to speak the national or regional language, or even Mandarin, serving their temple's following entirely in their own Chinese dialect. Disenfranchised, extremely isolated, and generally unaware of any larger role they might play, these nuns typify a cultural pattern for women's behavior that appears antiquated when viewed from a Western perspective, yet serves the valuable purpose of maintaining cultural cohesion and providing female spiritual leadership within the local Chinese community.

A Tragic Case: Tibet

Throughout centuries of Tibetan Buddhist history, women have distinguished themselves in spiritual practice time and again. The Vajrayāna or Secret Mantra teachings, which thrive in the Tibetan milieu, guarantee women the possibility of enlightenment “in this very life, in this very body.”⁵³ Although the lineage of full ordination for women apparently was not transmitted from India to Tibet, both laywomen and nuns became famous for their spiritual achievements.⁵⁴ Among those who availed themselves of this precious opportunity, perhaps the most famous is Machig Labdronma (1055–1149 C.E.), whose heroic example has inspired generations of Tibetan women. The twentieth century has also produced exemplars, such as Samding Dorje Palmo and Shungseb Jetsun Lochan Rinpoche, both of whom are said to have reached high levels of spiritual realization.⁵⁵

Unfortunately, social and political factors have intruded and perforce compromised many ordinary women’s spiritual potential. Mundane realities have mitigated against large numbers of women being recognized for their religious attainments: for example, societal expectations of women’s roles, the time-consuming duties of family life, and in recent years, the takeover of the Tibetan homeland by an uncompromising Communist regime. The potential to manifest enlightened female meditational deities such as Tārā, Vajrayoginī, Saraswatī, and Prajñāpāramitā is ever present; the mystique of legendary female spiritual masters such as Gelongma Palmo, Yeshe Tsogyal, Mandarava, Niguma, and others, remains to inspire women on the path. In actual fact, however, most Tibetan women see their chances for immanent enlightenment as somewhat remote. Many are content to simply pray to be reborn as a male and indeed, for most, Buddhist practice consists of doing their best in everyday life situations.

Still, there are improvements that would enhance Tibetan women’s spiritual well-being. Fundamental ones are greater literacy, greater educational opportunities at all levels, both secular and religious, and better facilities for religious study and practice for both lay and ordained women. Most crucial to the process of improving women’s spiritual well-being is an improved image of the feminine—a bridging of the gap between theoretical possibilities and limited everyday realities.

An Order of Nuns Is Born: Mongolia

After its introduction in Tibet, Buddhism naturally spread north to Mongolia, in the form of the Gelugpa tradition pioneered by the

Tibetan reformer and scholar Tsongkhapa (1357–1419). Tsongkhapa's emphasis on monastic discipline and moral purity nurtured within the Gelugpa tradition what was probably the world's largest monastic order prior to 1950, with one-fifth of the male population of Tibet becoming monks. The Mūlasarvāstivādin lineage of *bhikṣu* ordination, transmitted to Tibet from India, was subsequently transmitted to Mongolia, and the steppes beyond. But since the *bhikṣuṇī* lineage had not been transmitted from India to Tibet, there was nothing to pass on to Mongolia. Apparently the Tibetan custom of ordaining nuns with the ten novice precepts did not take hold in Mongolia; consequently, until recently Mongolia was bereft of nuns.

This is not to say that Mongolian women were not ardent supporters of the faith; as in all Buddhist countries, they have been enthusiastic and generous devotees for centuries. Despite this, as in other Buddhist countries without a *bhikṣuṇī* order, they have been considered ineligible for admission to the Saṅgha. Rumors of devout women who wished to practice as nuns began circulating soon after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and in 1992 eight Mongolian women received the *śrāmaṇerikā* precepts from Ven. Bakula Rinpoche, a respected Ladakhi lama who have been instrumental in reviving monastic discipline during his tenure as Indian Ambassador to Mongolia (1989–99).⁵⁶ Most of these nuns are now studying in India and Nepal.⁵⁷

There are currently four communities of female practitioners in Mongolia, with a core of ten to thirty-five women at each, situated in and around the capital, Ulaan Bataar. Their members are principally laywomen with the five lay precepts (*upāsikā*)⁵⁸ who live at home and gather daily to recite or support the recitation of texts. Although some have received private tutoring in Buddhist doctrine, there is as yet no formal study program available for women in Mongolia. It is hoped that the nuns now studying in India and Nepal will gain the expertise needed to become leaders and teachers in Mongolian Buddhist women's communities. The Mongolia Buddhist Women's Association, located near Ganden Thekchokling, the largest monk's monastery, is headed by a laywoman named Natsagdorjiin Gantumur who is actively promoting women's religious welfare. Another nearby women's community, well known for performing rituals of Vajrayoginī, is headed by a young laywoman named Basup who established a pilot Buddhist studies program for women in 1997. A third community, situated just outside of Ulaan Bataar and led by a laywoman named Batan Han, specializes in practices of the female bodhisattva Tārā. The fourth, a residential community housed in two small tents in Chingoltei, a half-hour drive from the capitol, is the only one headed by a nun. The members of these communities are girls and young women, all of

whom are receiving a secondary education in public schools. Many would like to become nuns, but are unable to get their parents' permission. Lacking historical precedents for such matters as dress and education, these communities are influenced both by egalitarian socialist ideology as well as by ancient Mongolian Buddhist traditions very similar in style to the Tibetan traditions from which they derive.

The resurgence of interest in Buddhism in Mongolia is strongly linked with national and cultural identity. After seventy years of Communist rule, a sense of both spiritual and political urgency is apparent in attempts to revive it. Since 1989, Christian evangelists have been flooding in with Bibles to fill the spiritual vacuum created by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the long stretch of religious repression. Economically strapped, distressed by rapid social changes, and bereft of Buddhist literature in the vernacular, many Mongolians have been converted to Christianity. The Buddhist tradition has survived in Mongolia in monasteries where rituals are performed in Tibetan and are thus incomprehensible to all but learned scholars and religious specialists. Elements of the Buddhist teachings are embedded in popular folk beliefs and practices, but due to a dearth of accessible teachers and texts, the tradition remains somewhat distant from many people's everyday lives and has thus failed to meet their immediate psychological needs. As women gain opportunities for study and practice, they are beginning to play vital roles in the resuscitation of a culture.

Buddhism Moves West

The importation of Buddhist traditions to Western countries has occasioned a ripening of feminist awareness by bringing traditional Asian patterns of patriarchy to the attention of Western Buddhist practitioners who have then questioned these patterns and attitudes within their own cultures.⁵⁹ Not only are most Buddhist teachers male, and the leaders of most Buddhist institutions male, but the authority for all Buddhist rites of passage—becoming a Buddhist by going for refuge, becoming a Buddhist lay follower by receiving five precepts, becoming a nun or a monk, receiving instructions and empowerments for practice—rests almost entirely in male hands.

In the modern world, especially in Western countries, the Buddhist tradition has come under scrutiny in the light of various feminist ideas. Four major issues are being examined: (1) the inferior status of women in Buddhist societies, (2) sexist interpretations of Buddhist texts and tenets, (3) male domination of Buddhist institutions, and

(4) the authoritarian role of religious teachers. The growth of feminist awareness globally has been simultaneous with a general increase of awareness of Buddhist techniques for personal and spiritual growth. The intellectual coincidence of Buddhist and feminist ideas constitutes a fertile matrix for thought, not only in North America, but across cultures. For the first time in history, Buddhists in different cultures—from Japan to Peru, from Norway to Cambodia—are exchanging ideas on a daily basis. For the first time in history, women can be equal players in this philosophical exchange.

The social and cultural factors that affect the future of Western Buddhist women are quite different from those that affect Asian women, however. As Anne Klein has pointed out, "Western feminism and Buddhism are starting from very different cultural and philosophical understandings of personhood."⁶⁰ Although Western women comprise only a small minority of the world's Buddhist women—perhaps one percent of an estimated 300 million—the factors that affect both their assimilation and their practice of Buddhism warrant consideration. The same cultural assumptions Western people bring to Buddhism will increasingly apply to Asian societies influenced by Western values: feminist ideologies, individualism, scientific rationalism, egalitarianism, Western psychological theories, anti-authoritarianism, consumerism, changes in attitudes toward family and gender, and certainly not least, materialism. Buddhists and contemporary feminists are similar in their concern for constructions of personal identity, issues of social justice, and awareness of both the rational and affective dimensions of human experience. At the same time, there are great differences in the assumptions underlying Buddhist and feminist systems of thought. For example, in contrast to the traditional Buddhist emphasis on suffering, impermanence, enlightenment, and happiness in future lives, popular American culture stresses sense pleasures, worldly achievements, immediate gratification, and happiness in this life. American culture encourages self-esteem, self-fulfillment, and self-worth, whereas most Buddhists view an essentialist concept of self as the root of innumerable problems. As Buddhism gains popularity in the West, an exploration of the tensions between Buddhist and Western cultural assumptions becomes crucial for Western practitioners. The process by which Buddhist women evaluate these various viewpoints—rejecting, reshaping, or assimilating them—will be both a struggle and an opportunity for meaningful and creative crosscultural dialogue.⁶¹

Applying feminist analysis to religious studies presupposes an attitude of respect for woman's spiritual potential, recognizes the worth of women's spiritual endeavors, demands equal opportunities for

ordination and religious leadership, promotes equal participation and the use of inclusive language in liturgical practice, and encourages the exploration of topics such as sexuality, family life, intuition, and emotion. Applying this type of analysis to Buddhism gives women an unprecedented opportunity to influence the direction the Buddhist tradition(s) will take, especially in Western countries.⁶² Many of the most devoted, capable, and committed students in Western Buddhist centers are women. The spiritual teachers are generally Asian men and, because they are usually kind and generous in providing teachings and spiritual guidance, women students serve these male teachers as cooks, secretaries, translators, publicists, drivers, administrative assistants, personal assistants, janitors, editors, cultural interpreters, and confidants. Since the teachers are often totally dependent on them, these women have the power to influence their thinking on gender issues enormously. On the other hand, if women become emotionally dependent or simply perpetuate the myth of male superiority, the relationship may become a lost opportunity or an emotional liability on both sides.

Patriarchy or Social Equality?

Although some writers have argued to the contrary, historical records paint a fairly dismal picture of Indian women's lot prior to the advent of the Buddha.⁶³ When the Buddha recognized the equal spiritual potential of women, it represented a significant departure from prevailing views that defined women almost entirely in terms of their biological function and their capacity for productive labor. Significant as it was, this recognition alone was not sufficient to transform the gender stereotypes of entire cultures. Despite the fact that the Buddha established a female mendicant order, along with regulations to ensure its continuous, harmonious, functioning, the male order has remained dominant throughout history. Male dominance in institutional structures persisted as Buddhism spread abroad, along with a pattern of affirming the equal enlightenment potential of women in theory, while assuming that they are less capable of actualizing that potential in actuality. The assumption of women's spiritual inferiority and the neglect it engenders characterize most of Buddhist history.

A glance at Buddhist history reveals that Asian males have dominated Buddhist traditions for two and a half millennia. Until now, despite theoretical equality, the two genders have been trained differently in the Buddhist traditions: men are educated to become scholars and teachers: women are trained to nurture and support them.