

Introduction

Conceptualizing Buddhist Feminisms and Images of the Feminine

KARMA LEKSHE TSOMO

This volume began with a propitious accident. When the Buddhism section of the American Academy of Religion solicited suggestions for topics, I chimed in with the idea of Buddhist feminisms. The following week, when the ideas went out over the internet, I was surprised to see a call for papers on Buddhist femininities, a topic that made no sense to me at the time, so I quickly changed it to Buddhist feminism(s). To my further surprise, waves of innovative proposals poured in on both topics, enough for two conference panels and more. The present collection grew from this felicitous misunderstanding.

The question of Buddhist feminisms and femininities is not a simple philosophical query, or simply a matter of women's personal and social self-perceptions. The question has profound implications for social justice—in the home, monastery, workplace, social structures, body politic, and environment. Buddhist feminisms emerge within specific cultural contexts, influenced by unique and diverse social and philosophical factors. It would be a travesty to flatten or distort them to match preconceptions about how feminism can or should be done. While the rich models of feminist thinking that have developed in other texts and contexts are clearly relevant in many ways, such as prompting us to consider the links between economic, environmental, political, and gender justice—the models that have emerged in Western societies may or may not be useful for an analysis

of Buddhist societies. For example, a Buddhist feminism based on the notion of individual rights may not hold up to scrutiny since, in Buddhist thought, there is no source or bestower and no concrete self on whom to bestow the rights.¹

The alternative taxonomies of feminism proposed thus far, liberal as well as radical, are largely products of Western women's experiences and may or may not be useful for Buddhist feminist thinking.

The study of women and gender is now a familiar component of liberal arts education in Europe and North American universities, but it is well to remember that higher education is still limited to privileged elites in much of the world, especially for women. Even if university-educated Buddhist women take an interest in gender issues and are curious to understand how feminist thinking emerged and where it is going, it is unrealistic to expect Buddhist feminisms to be like or look like theories developed in the West. Naturally, Buddhist feminisms, emerging from entirely different cultural, social, and historical contexts, will take their own unique forms. Western feminist thinking may seem tiresomely analytical and largely irrelevant to women struggling for survival and, although it would be foolish to ignore decades of extraordinary reflection, the rejection of feminist ideas remains quite strong in Buddhist societies. If people have even heard of it, feminism is often viewed as an unnecessary and undesirable imposition of foreign cultural mores. The task of exploring Buddhist feminisms is therefore fraught from the onset.

A Buddhist deconstruction of feminism is not a dismissal of the extraordinary scholarly work that feminists have done, nor is it a rejection of critical inquiry. It is simply an attempt to develop different, culturally attuned ways of thinking about gender that do not rely on hyper-analysis and "perpetual reflexivity."² Taking a cue from black feminist thinking, Buddhist feminists are likely to question the arbitrary dichotomy between theory and experience, as bell hooks enjoins.³ The point is not how Buddhist women understand the varieties of feminism that have developed in Western philosophies and cultures, but how feminist thinking and sensibilities are emerging unscripted in Buddhist communities, imagining and creating equitable spaces for women within traditionally patriarchal Buddhist philosophies and cultures. To apply alien, standardized feminist frameworks to women's diverse experiences may be as patronizing, misleading, and repressive as imposing patriarchal frameworks has been. Perhaps it would be best to begin afresh and allow the questions and categories to emerge on their own among women in other parts

of the world. It has been suggested that a sort of “protofeminism” can be discerned in Asian women’s histories and biographies,⁴ but the record is mixed, with realized Buddhist women decrying their female rebirth and praying to be reborn in a male body.⁵ A range of attitudes toward women can be found in Buddhist literature—valorizing, denigrating, and often profoundly ambivalent—attitudes still evident in Buddhist societies up to today, internalized by women and men alike. The chapters in this volume will engage with these attitudes in representative feminist histories and narratives from Asia. Our hope is that these writings can help us understand Buddhist influences on attitudes toward women and also introduce original expressions of feminist thinking in different parts of the world in ways that may constructively inform contemporary feminist discussions.

Buddhist feminism and notions of femininity are evolving spontaneously and creatively as traditional cultural values are being re-evaluated, rejected, revalued, and re-envisioned. The geographical and ethnic diversity of women in Buddhist societies, from the tropics of Southeast Asia to the steppes of Siberia, argues against a uniform method or process. The enormous variations in Buddhist societies over space and time are daunting, and enliven the conversation. Whatever can be said of one can surely be refuted by evidence from another. The landscape expands as we move through time and the rapid changes that are occurring in Buddhist societies today and in Buddhist communities around the globe. In every corner of the world, preconceptions about what women value and how they would like to live their lives are shaped both by traditional cultural values and by ideas of democracy, human rights, capitalism, scientism, and consumerism. Contemporary culture adds a whole new set of trends being disseminated through social media. The diversity of Buddhist women around the world and across generations is staggering. If Buddhist feminists appear somewhat naïve in avoiding overt intellectualization, the counternarratives they present are original and exciting.

The chapters in this book speak to themes and elements of the feminist conversation, including new orientations to the phenomenology of Buddhist women’s communities and new theoretical approaches to understanding Buddhist texts and practices in a new, feminist hermeneutics. From a variety of perspectives and in different cultural contexts, the writers approach the sticky issues implicit in the term “Buddhist feminism.” Coming from diverse backgrounds and disciplines, and speaking from different points in their careers, they approach the topic using a broad range of methodologies. The

chapters are linked by a common interest in the relationship between texts and communities, culture and context. Each writer contributes unique understandings of Buddhist thought and culture as sources for feminist reflection and social action.

Questioning the Constructs

The English term “feminism” is a construction of Western culture that has many definitions and interpretations. Recitals of the typographies, arguments, and critiques of each iteration have already been published. As myriad scholars have noted, much feminist thinking to date has tended to universalize “women’s experience” and has been based largely on the experiences of privileged women facing gender-based inequalities in society. In reality, however, even for Western women, women’s experiences differ enormously in relation to class, ethnicity, physical appearance, vocation, ability, and numerous other social markers. The central takeaway of feminist literature to date is that we must be careful to distinguish between collective representations of “women” (“woman,” “the female,” “the feminine”) and the living, breathing variety of human beings who identify as women. Rather than measure Buddhist women’s experiences against a standardized alien grid, the aim of this volume is to understand Buddhist perspectives and images of women on their own terms. This is enormously challenging, due to the vast diversity of Buddhist cultures, but in this volume we shall make a start.

As Chandra Talpade Mohanty and other scholars have demonstrated, the representation of feminism as “Western” in its authentic form is deeply problematic, and perpetuates imperialistic agendas in its flattening of non-Western women’s agency.⁶ Women’s movements in Japan, Korea, and China are often associated with the introduction of Western education in these cultures and may ignore indigenous social histories and philosophies, including Buddhism, in the development of local feminist thinking. Historians and sociologists of Asia may also ignore the experiences of ethnic minority women in documenting social and political movements with feminist goals. The writings included here seek to explore new understandings of women and gender in Buddhist communities—their lives, ideas, aspirations, self-perceptions, and relationships to power—contributing to the growing body of literature, critical analysis, and alternative ways of thinking about the world’s women.

Buddhist women's experience validates many of the insights that have been elucidated by pioneering Asian and transnational feminists. As Kumari Jayawardena points out, elite feminisms are worlds away from most ordinary women's experiences and may represent only a small fraction of them. Significantly, she also points out that those who wish to keep women subordinate "find it convenient to dismiss feminism as a foreign ideology."⁷ She admirably analyzes feminist movements in Asia in relation to nationalist struggles and modernization. While it is true that the evolution of women's feminist awareness cannot be understood apart from the particular cultural, social, and political context of their experience, it is impossible to generalize the experiences of Buddhist women, which vary in different societies and strata of society. While Buddhist feminism may appear to be relatively unsophisticated or even naïve from a highly intellectual Western perspective, it is growing organically from Buddhist women's own authentic perspectives. The literature criticizing elitism is itself elitist and that criticizing colonialism is itself colonialist. The hyper-intellectualism of much feminist literature appears pretentious and weird to many indigenous women. The heart of the Buddha's teachings is to see things "as they are," without mental fabrications; the ultimate experience of awakening is to be free from conceptualization altogether.

If gender were a fixed concept, it would be immutable, but from a Buddhist perspective, no concept is immutable. All compounded phenomena are impermanent, contingent, and interdependent. Changing sex is not taboo in Buddhist texts; in fact, it is mentioned as a fact of life.⁸ Sex change was natural—"a rather ordinary thing"⁹—and nonreprehensible. The impermanent, transmutable nature of genitalia seems taken for granted in commentaries on the monastic codes. In the *Kṣudrakavastu*, a Sanskrit *vinaya* commentary, a revered monk named Upali asked the Buddha:

"Venerable, if a *bhikṣuṇī* changes sex, what should be done with regard to her?" and the Lord replied, "Upali, place that one at the same age among the *bhikṣus*. Moreover, that becomes full ordination and *bhikṣu*-hood."¹⁰

The representations of sex change in the *vinaya* texts reflect the interdependent nature of things and show that there cannot be something essentially unique to either gender. All that changes are the genitals.¹¹ When a nun takes the features of a male, he is fully accepted as a member of the order of monks, without having to reordain, and

is exempted from rules pertaining to nuns; when a monk takes the features of a female, she is fully accepted as a member of the order of nuns and is exempted from rules pertaining to monks.¹² These references to gender fluidity in the texts call into question definitive notions of masculine and feminine. Still, although passages describing sex change are included in the *vinaya*, admission into the monasteries is restricted to the normative categories of male and female, and biological sex is the chief determinant of gender assignment; people with both female and male sexual characteristics are not admitted. However, as the *vinaya* texts cited above indicate, the male/female dichotomy is not absolute. Genitalia may change, and therefore gender identities are transmutable, not intrinsic. As we conceptualize what form(s) Buddhist feminism may take, the flexible, even ineffable nature of gender distinctions should be kept in mind. On one hand, the generic nature of the monastic robes obviates sex distinctions; on the other hand, gendered monastic restrictions designed to enforce celibacy reinscribe the male/female binary.

In her work on Theravāda Buddhist texts and traditions, Kate Crosby notes several examples of male-female sex distinctions. First, there are whole genres of canonical texts that are gender specific, for example, the codes of monastic discipline for monks and nuns (*Bhikkhu* and *Bhikkhunī Pāṭimokkha* and their corresponding *vibhaṅga*) and the *Therīgāthā* and *Therīgāthā* (Verses of the Elders, male and female). Second, in postcanonical texts, she notes the use of gendered complementary pairs of beings in *samsāra*—male and female *brahmins*, male and female renunciants, male and female beggars, ordinary men and women, and so on. Only the high status positions of minister, general, viceroy, or watchman have no female complement.¹³ Crosby surmises that both of these examples could be taken as examples of either gender inclusivity or gender essentializing. A third example, however, veers decidedly toward essentializing gender characteristics. The *Dhammasaṅgaṇi*, the first text of *Abhidhamma*, describes “two faculties of sex, the faculty of femininity (*itthindriya*) and the faculty of masculinity (*purisaindriya*). These faculties define physical appearance, marks, traits, and deportment peculiar to the state of femininity (*itthibhāva*) and the state of masculinity (*purisabhāva*), respectively.”¹⁴ A fifth-century commentary takes the bifurcation further, stating that the two faculties do not simply define female and male appearance and so forth, but are *causes* of it. To what extent these essentialized notions of gender were known outside a small set of male Buddhist monastic scholars is unknown. The idea that male and female sen-

tient beings are inherently different by virtue of possessing these two distinct faculties that define their appearance and deportment seems very much at odds with Buddhist philosophical rejections of essentializing phenomena. Nevertheless, it is possible that this Abhidhamma bifurcation of masculinity and femininity influenced attitudes toward sex and gender in Buddhist societies.

A key concept of Buddhist philosophy is the acknowledgment that sentient existence entails dissatisfactions, frustrations, and sufferings, caused by ignorance, desire, and assorted mental afflictions. Through awareness and insight into the true nature of things, it is possible to awaken and become liberated from these afflictions and live a contented, happy life. As illustrated in Buddhist legends and histories, awareness and insight are accessible to all, regardless of race, class, gender, or other variables, so it follows that women can achieve the ultimate goal of awakening. Buddhist feminists point out that Buddhist and feminist articulations of liberation are compatible, and may even be mutually entailing. Buddhist feminists confront some major challenges, however. First, they need to reconcile the sufferings of women with the theory of *karma* (cause and effect). This theory of actions and their consequences, extending over lifetimes, has traditionally led to the assumption that women have bad *karma* and to the preconception that a female body is less fortunate than a male body. As a consequence, many Buddhists aspire for a male rebirth and devalue or even despise a female rebirth, leading to gender inequities and amalgamations of male power in Buddhist societies.

Second, Mahāyāna teachings on Buddha nature and emptiness—that all sentient beings have the potential for awakening and that all phenomena, including sex and gender, are empty of intrinsic existence—have been deployed to try to salvage the situation, but these teachings do not adequately explain, justify, or serve to correct the blatant gender inequalities in Buddhist societies that are the source of many miseries. To correct these inequalities, Buddhists must reconcile the long-term goal of spiritual liberation with the immediate need for social solutions to gender violence, exploitation, and inequality, in addition to racism, poverty, and other injustices. One unique contribution of Buddhist feminism is its emphasis on generating impartial loving kindness equally to all sentient beings, rehearsed in meditation and practiced in every aspect of everyday life. Among other practical tools, loving kindness is a useful antidote to rage.

It is commonly said that in Buddhism “there is no male, no female” and that “enlightenment is beyond gender.”¹⁵ These statements

can be taken at face value or can mean that enlightened beings are beyond attachment to gender concepts, since ultimately, like all existent phenomena, gender distinctions are empty of true existence. Buddhist texts do not deny sex or gender distinctions; in fact, Buddhist texts are full of references to sex and gender. For example, the ideal Buddhist society is comprised of male and female householders and male and female renunciants. Buddhist householders avoid sexual misconduct; Buddhist renunciants avoid sex altogether. These designations and countless other references in the texts, while heteronormative, are gender-specific, so it cannot be said that Buddhism denies sex or gender distinctions. This misconception derives primarily from misinterpretations of the concept of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). The Mahāyāna Buddhist assertion that all phenomena are empty of true, inherent, or independent existence does not mean that all phenomena are nonexistent, which is belied by our own experience. Nor does it mean there are no distinctions among phenomena, a misconception also contradicted by everyday experience. Things exist on the conventional level; most human beings can easily verify distinctions between heat and cold, night and day, far and near, fast and slow, and so on. These distinctions are relative, though, which is why conventional truth is also sometimes called relative truth.

The assertion that perfect awakening is beyond gender is a philosophical claim, not an observation of social realities.¹⁶ Although the claim could be deployed in an apologetics to excuse gender discrimination, and sometimes is, perfect awakening is defined as a state of enlightened awareness utterly free of destructive emotions, misconceptions, and, in fact, all conceptualization whatsoever. All of these ideas have much to contribute to burgeoning Buddhist feminist thinking, but are inadequate to define it. They are important for illuminating the complex influences of politics, economics, bioethics, and colonialism on the lives of women, but are inadequate to address what the powerful ideal of the *bodhisattva* or the concept of spiritual liberation means for women. The religious dimension of women's experience is often overlooked in Western conceptualization of women's concerns.

Buddhism and Gender Identity: Texts, Theory, and Social Realities

From a Buddhist perspective, the ultimate purpose of life is to wake up from the illusions we have about ourselves and the world. Human

beings are not created in the image of God; in fact, they are not created at all. Instead, sentient beings evolve due to causes and conditions, taking a variety of forms in successive states of existence. All beings with consciousness have the potential for awakening, regardless of sexual characteristics or gender identity. Sentient beings (beings with consciousness) take rebirth in different states of existence with different identities from one lifetime to the next—visible, invisible, human, nonhuman, female, male, and so on. Rebirth as a human being is regarded as the optimal state of existence for making progress on the spiritual path and achieving liberation from delusions and suffering. The primary delusions, which include attachment, aversion, and ignorance, are problematic because they give rise to unskillful actions that in turn give rise to suffering and dissatisfaction. For example, attachment to a particular gender identity can become a source of suffering if one is unable to satisfactorily embody that identity.

Records tell us that Buddha Śākyamuni affirmed women's capacity to achieve spiritual liberation and, indeed, countless women became *arhatīs* (female liberated beings) at the time of the Buddha. The *Therīgāthā* (Verses of "Elder Nuns") includes seventy-three verses of liberation, recorded in Pāli, that recount the distinctive qualities of pre-eminent nuns by name. These verses, which are the earliest recorded poetic expressions by women, have inspired Buddhist women and men for generations.¹⁷

For Buddhists, the question of identity begins with a consideration of what constitutes a person, as distinct from other types of phenomena. In other words, we need to get an overview of the general category "human being" before we get down to specifics, such as "male" and "female." From an Indian Buddhist philosophical perspective, the first cut is to distinguish between existent phenomena and nonexistent phenomena. Among existent phenomena, we can distinguish between animate phenomena and inanimate phenomena. Among animate phenomena, we can distinguish between sentient and nonsentient phenomena, those with consciousness and those without. From there, things become a bit more complicated, as there are said to be six states of existence that sentient beings may inhabit in the realm of desire, and many more in the form and formless realms. The Buddha explained personal identity as something imputed by terms and concepts on the basis of the five aggregates (*skandhas*) that comprise a person: form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. Sexual characteristics pertain to the first aggregate, form, and allude to the body. Gender identities, as social constructs, pertain

to the third aggregate: perceptions, recognitions, or discriminations. Like all compounded phenomena, which are dependent on constituent factors and perceptions, constructions of gender lack independent existence or essence.

Many early Buddhist texts reflect remarkably positive images of women as respected members of society at the time of the Buddha. Relative to many other societies, women in Buddhist societies generally enjoyed considerable independence and authority in the family, were free to marry or not, not obligated to produce a dowry, free to divorce and remarry, and assured of their potential to attain the fruits of the spiritual path.¹⁸ Unlike in many societies even today, women in Buddhist societies had options other than marriage and family: they could refuse marriage, engage in business, or live a spiritual life, either at home or in a monastery.

At the time of the Buddha, numerous women achieved prominence in his newly founded religious community. Dhammadinnā and Sukkha were renowned for their teaching skills, Mahāprajāpatī for her leadership skills, Khemā for her exalted wisdom, Patācārā for her impeccable discipline, Nandā for her meditative attainments, Kuṇḍalakesā for her debating skills, Uppalavanā for her supernormal powers, and Somā for her joyful, energetic effort. The Buddha publicly lauded the achievements of these eminent women disciples. To refute the notion that women are incapable of spiritual realization, the Buddha encouraged Mahāprajāpatī to demonstrate her supernormal powers, which she did, dispelling onlookers' doubts about women's capabilities.¹⁹

The verses of realization preserved in the *Therīgāthā* are said to be the earliest recorded examples of poetry composed by women. The seventy-three verses in this collection are songs of liberation from the bondage of cyclic existence, including mental delusions and social expectations, often related to gender. These nuns challenged the prevailing preconception that women lack intelligence. When she was a laywoman, a *bhikkhunī* named Somā had been castigated by her husband for her "two-finger wisdom," deriding her as unable to judge whether rice was cooked without testing it between two fingers. In response, she declared that for women of knowledge and insight, gender is irrelevant.²⁰ Contrary to the prevailing perception in India at the time that women were intellectually deficient, Somā retorted that one who is concerned with gender distinctions is deluded and easily distracted from the path. The texts make it clear that, like Somā, many women gained realizations through hearing, contemplating,

and practicing the Buddha's teachings, and many became fully liberated *arhatīs*.

The majority of these illustrious women were nuns, but the Buddha also praised outstanding laywomen for their special qualities.²¹ Viśākhā, the devout daughter of a wealthy family, was praised for her integrity and generosity to the *saṅgha*. Khujjuttarā was lauded for her knowledge, Sāmāvātī for her kindness, Uttarā for her prowess in meditation, Suppiyā for nursing the ill, Kātiyānī for her loyalty, Kālī for her faith, and so on. In all likelihood, the first person to take refuge in the Buddha's teachings, the signifier of a Buddhist follower, was the laywoman Sujātā, who famously offered the milk rice that ended the Buddha's six years of austerities. Overall, women at the time of the Buddha made a very good showing indeed, with countless women attaining the highest goal of liberation (*nirvāna*) and the other fruits of the path. Inevitably, some women also failed to make the mark. The most notorious of these was Thullanandā, who regularly stirred up mischief and, along with her followers, was castigated for her rather outlandish behavior.²²

Buddhist Images and Representations of Women

Although we lack historical records to document the lives of the early Buddhists, we are fortunate to have texts that describe their lives. The Indian reciters of oral texts during the early centuries of Buddhist history had prodigious memories, though it must be noted that the reciters were monks and that orally transmitted literature is liable to error. Scholars note that the details, tone, and even the identities of characters in the narratives sometimes vary in different accounts over time.²³ Insofar as Buddhist tradition regards these figures as having been real people, however, their lives are significant. Even if the narratives do not accurately describe the lives of historical figures—and we will never know with certainty whether they lived or not—the extant biographies are significant for what they tell us about Buddhist historical memory regarding nuns and the issues that women, particularly renunciant women, have faced. Although it would be difficult to rely on the Buddhist texts as a source of history, in comparison with contemporaneous literature from other cultures, these texts are rich in detail about the daily life experiences of Indian women during the early years of Buddhist development.²⁴ Both Collett and Bhikkhu Anālayo notice that attitudes toward nuns do change over time, usually

to the nuns' detriment, with the canon generally "more favourable towards women than the commentaries."²⁵

The portraits or snapshots of Buddhist women that we find in texts and popular media, including village dramas and modern-day films, are not reality. The literary images, of unknown origin, were recounted orally by male redactors for hundreds of years before being committed to writing. Today, visual and digital images are proliferated with good will but with little semblance of historical accuracy. The shape-shifting nature of these literary and visual portraits should not be a source of great surprise or consternation to Buddhists. The unreliable and contested distinction between image and reality, conventional appearance and ultimate truth, is a staple of Buddhist thought, reflected throughout culture in myriad ways. The classic Chan vignette of the finger pointing to the moon alludes to the distinction between the textual teachings and ultimate realization. Literary and cinematic images of a falling cherry blossom wordlessly convey the impermanent nature of life. The tendency of human beings to embroider, misapprehend, and distort perceptions is a staple of Buddhist psychology. If all perceptions are mistaken and fleeting, then it goes without saying that perceptions of gender are subject to misconception.

For many Buddhist scholars and practitioners alike, the topic of gender is a source of confusion. Many writers use terms such as "woman," "femininity," and "feminism" without adequately defining them or exploring their many layers of meaning or their intersectionality. These oversights have led to many facile assumptions, denials, and oversimplifications; the claim, "In Buddhism, men and women are equal," comes to mind. These problems are compounded by ignoring the diverse social and historical contexts in which the terms may be applied. The tools of feminist analysis developed in recent decades can now be used to re-examine feminine imagery in Buddhist texts, gendered representations, and philosophical analysis of gender, but with careful precautions, taking into account the limitations of pre-packaged theoretical paradigms. A thorough investigation of Buddhist femininities comparable to John Powers's groundbreaking work on Buddhist masculinities has yet to appear.²⁶ This is not that work, but we hope the chapters included here help encourage and anticipate a similarly significant exploration. For starters, we need to investigate how Buddhist concepts of self and no-self intersect with contemporary concepts of identity, especially gender identity and especially for women. Further, we need to examine how the female body, sexuality, and femininity are constructed, construed, and contested in diverse

Buddhist cultures. Placing Buddhist insights and understandings of gender identity alongside insights and understandings from other cultures—on an equal footing—will facilitate informed analysis and help avoid both cultural imperialism and bland, misinformed expediency.

Buddhist Feminism(s): Texts and Communities

This collection explores representations of “the feminine” and the enduring questions of female renunciant identity from multiple Buddhist perspectives. The chapters traverse many disciplines, drawing on philosophy, history, anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies to investigate understandings of femininity and gender construction in a variety of Buddhist contexts. The chapters of the book are organized into two parts. Part I explores the question of whether and how Buddhist feminism(s) can be articulated. Part II examines the question of femininity in diverse Buddhist contexts.

The first chapter, Karen Lang’s “Reimagining Buddhist Women in India,” sets the stage by surveying the images of women that appear in the Pāli canon, which includes some of the earliest texts ever committed to writing. To do this, Lang takes a textual approach that reorients this ancient archive, discussing ways to re-read classical Buddhist materials—oral, written, official, and unofficial—employing a feminist hermeneutic. Her explicit aim is to locate constructive representations of feminine beauty and the female body in literature and visual culture. Looking beyond images of women as vain and narcissistic snares and seducers, the chapter reassesses a common theme—the rejection of the female form—by analyzing representations of women’s bodies in the early Buddhist narratives. In this endeavor, she proposes a fresh epistemological stance, exploring the potential for awakening in a female body.

In chapter 2, “Women Who Did Not Follow the Rules: The Religious Piety of Buddhist Women in Chosŏn Korea,” Eun-su Cho documents historical changes that profoundly affected women’s religious lives and awareness over many centuries in Korea. During the Three Kingdoms Period (57 BCE–668 CE) and Koryŏ Dynasty (918–1392), Buddhism took root and flourished in Korea, and women were actively engaged in spiritual pursuits. During the Chosŏn Dynasty (1392–1897), however, the government became dominated by Neo-Confucian norms and policies that were oppressive to both Buddhists and women. Cho documents the strategies that Buddhist

women devised to subvert the system and protect their religious identity and interests in ways that were “often surprisingly bold and defiant.” Working from historical records, she recounts how women defied legal prohibitions and risked public censure to enter Buddhist temples and seek ordination as nuns, providing a valuable account of how women resisted efforts to suppress women and prevent them from exercising their religious choices.

Women’s experiences in Buddhist temples and their resistance to societal norms take varied forms in different parts of the world. In chapter 3, “Raichō Hiratsuka and Socially Engaged Buddhism,” Christine A. James tells the story of a key figure in the feminist history of modern Japan who led a sexually and spiritually daring life. The Meiji Era was a time of great intellectual ferment accompanied by an awakening of feminist awareness among educated Japanese women. Just at that historical moment, the unconventional Raichō Hiratsuka combined her interests in Western literature and Zen Buddhist practice to produce *Seitō* (Bluestocking), a feminist literary magazine and forum that challenged the gender expectations and limitations of her day. Setting aside the negative views of women inscribed in some traditional Buddhist texts, she embraced the egalitarian rhetoric of Zen nondualism and achieved *kenshō*, a glimpse of enlightenment that may have spurred her feminist insights and activities.

Ching-ning Wang explores the nondualistic rhetoric of Chan/Zen further in “A Great ‘Man’ is No Longer Gendered: Chan Nuns’ Gender Identity and Practice in Contemporary Taiwan,” taking up the frequently heard claim that enlightenment is beyond gender. Focusing on a community of Chan Buddhist nuns in contemporary Taiwan, she discusses a radical nondual form of gender identity that is beyond male and female, self and no-self, in a “pedagogy of *prajña*,” or wisdom. This rejection of gender essentialism stands against the traditional Chan Buddhist identification of a *da zhangfu* (great person) as male. Unsatisfied by a simple rejection of the term *da zhangfu* as androcentric, patriarchal, or dualistic, this community embraces the concept of nondual gender identity. The nuns’ insights contribute to the genealogy of Asian feminist movements through a discussion of their community’s experience of how to read Buddhist practice in a feminist way.

In chapter 5, “*Sikkhamat*: The Aesthetics of Asoke Ascetics,” Robekkah Ritchie explores the aesthetic dimensions of female renunciant identity, taking as an example the unique redefinition of femininity among nuns in the politically controversial Santi Asoke movement in Thailand. Originating in Thailand in the 1970s, this new order of

female renunciants is distinct from the far more numerous white-robed Thai *mae chee* who observe eight precepts, as the Santi Asoke *sikkhamats* very strictly observe ten precepts. Even though the quota on their numbers is limited to a fraction of the number of monks, these nuns occupy respected positions and wield considerable influence in their communities. After their founder was expelled from the Thai *sangha* and the monastics were jailed for contravening institutional norms, the *sikkhamats* began wearing brown and gray robes. The renunciant identity of the Asoke *sikkhamats* is thus signaled by the unique style of their robes, which distinguishes them both from mainstream female renunciants and the monks of their own communities. By creating an alternative renunciant identity and a new visual representation of female monasticism, these nuns have redefined the landscape of Buddhist ordination options for women in Thailand and reimagined what a nun can and should wear. Their choices thus raise issues of feminine identity as related to political experience and the challenges that female renunciants pose, both to secular society and to Buddhist institutional stagnation.

In the last chapter in this section, “New Buddhist Women across Borders: Buddhist Influences and Interactions in Alternative Histories of Global Feminisms,” Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa traces feminist histories from across Asia to identify Buddhist influences in twentieth-century feminist initiatives. Rejecting imperialistic agendas that ignore the influence of indigenous religious and cultural systems such as Buddhism, she explores the genealogies of Asian feminist movements. Further, she proposes tools for thinking about the relationship between feminism and local Buddhist communities, with the aim of developing a critical history of Buddhist feminisms.

Buddhist Femininities: Demystifying the Essential Feminine

The second part of the book explores concepts of femininity in Buddhist cultures and what these concepts have meant for women at critical junctures in history, up to today. In chapter 7, “Only Skin Deep? Female Embodiment and the Paradox of Beauty in Indian Buddhism,” Lisa J. Battaglia proposes a new archive in which Buddhist scriptures be re-examined with reference to living, breathing women in order to answer questions about beauty, ugliness, and plainness in assessing a woman’s appearance. Who sets the standards? Battaglia is

especially concerned to locate positive images of women and female beauty in Indian Buddhist literature and art, and to question whether and how virtue and beauty may coexist. In numerous Buddhist texts, vanity and attachment to sense pleasures are castigated as hindrances to the cultivation of renunciation and liberation, and female beauty is often portrayed as seductive and dangerous, at least to monks. Although women in Indian society are frequently described as paragons of beauty, they are also seen as potential lures; the female body is cast as the very emblem of sense desires that delude and distract the seeker. To forestall desire and overcome attachment to sense pleasures, the Buddha instructed his followers to meditate on the foulness of rotting corpses at the charnel ground. When speaking to monks, his main audience, he recommended contemplating the rotting corpses of decaying women. If his audience had been nuns rather than monks, he might have recommended the decaying corpses of men, instead. Out of context, however, the listener is left with the impression that female bodies are foul. Over generations, such descriptions have no doubt affected attitudes toward women's bodies negatively, including women's attitudes toward their own bodies. The Buddhist prescription for liberation from desire is the exemplary model of enlightenment, but that model is typically male, which has been interpreted to mean that women must divest themselves not only of their femininity, but also of their female identity.

Chapter 8, Matthew Mitchell's "Conflicts and Compromises: The Relationship between the Nuns of Daihongan and the Monks of Daikanjin within the Zenkoji Temple Complex" looks at an understudied form of Buddhist femininity in early modern and modern Japan through social and legal lenses. From the middle of the seventeenth century until the middle of the twentieth century, the nuns of Daihongan engaged in sporadic lawsuits against the monks of the Daikanjin Monastery over administrative and ritual rights. These disputes between the Daihongan Convent and the Daikanjin Monastery provide nuance to understandings of the relationship between male and female monastic communities in Japan and how those relationships were mediated legally, not just through Buddhist doctrine or practice. Just as important, however, is that these suits provide a window into the ways that the monks and others viewed the nuns and the ways that the nuns deployed precedent and convent legends in an attempt to counter these views and maintain (or regain) their place in the temple complex. In these lawsuits, we can see the nuns enacting a legally savvy Buddhist femininity that expands our understanding of what it meant to be a female monastic.

In chapter 9, “Gendered Hagiography in Tibet: Comparing Clerical Representations of the Female Visionary, Khandro Tāre Lhamo,” Holly Gayley recounts the story of nonmonastic Buddhist practitioners living in a vastly different social and cultural sphere. Her study chronicles the religious partnership of a renowned tantric couple who lived and practiced in the remote Golok region of Tibet during the twentieth century. The “shared destiny” of this tantric couple over lifetimes culminates in a relationship to heal both the personal and collective cultural trauma sustained by the people of Tibet. Taking rebirth in the physical body of a woman to benefit sentient beings, Khandro Tāre Lhamo manifests the “*ḍākinī* principle” to activate spiritual evolution in the material world. This form of practice demonstrates the transformative power of tantric practice by linking the erotic and the revelatory, the exotic and the ordinary, throughout many different lifetimes and gender identities.

In chapter 10, “Feminine Identities in Buddhist *Chöd*,” Michelle J. Sorensen discusses the sense of identification nuns feel with wisdom *ḍākinīs*, feminine embodiments of enlightenment, in the Tibetan tradition. She explains how, in contrast to nuns in earlier Buddhist cultures, the renunciant identity of nuns in two Himalayan communities (in Pharping, Nepal, and Dharamsala, India) is signaled by their practice of *chöd*. This Tibetan Buddhist recitation and visualization practice derives from Machik Labdrön, a female adept whose life spanned the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Although the practice is accessible to both women and men, it is especially popular among women, many of whom draw inspiration from female enlightened embodiments such as the *ḍākinī* Thröma Nagmo. This chapter raises issues about the social implications of feminine religious imagery and, more broadly, about gendered paradigms of enlightenment. In exploring contemplative practices, it addresses the spiritual dimensions of women’s experience.

Chapter 11, Jeff Wilson’s “Mindfully Feminine, Mindfully Masculine: Meditation and the Marketing of Gendered Lifestyles,” shifts focus from the Himalayas to North America and from the eleventh century to the present day. Wilson considers the gendered ways in which mindful lifestyles are marketed to women in the contemporary West. Three case studies that investigate both text and visual representations illustrate how trendy constructions of feminine identity at different stages of life are used to promote, and in turn are promoted by, appeals to a fulfilling, mindful lifestyle. From “mindful extravagance” to “mindful motherhood,” both mindful awareness and quasi-Buddhist femininities have become commodities designed and sold

as the answer to a woman's every dilemma. This trend adds another layer of confusion to the demystification of Buddhist femininities.

The Questions Raised and Remaining

The topic of Buddhist femininities raises many important methodological issues, especially questions of epistemology and representation, or what is sometimes called "feminist standpoint theory." Setting diverse approaches to Buddhist feminine identity side by side clearly illustrates the constructed nature of gender and enables a Buddhist critique of fixed notions of self and their gendered manifestations. From monastery to mindfulness-based motherhood, each of the writers presents a fresh approach to a Buddhist analysis of gender, and they all suggest potential directions for the deployment of theoretical engagement with gender identities.

In recent years, especially amidst the debate that besieges full ordination for Buddhist women, non-Asian women stand accused, because of their "feminist agendas," of trying to talk Asian nuns into seeking higher status. This critique seems to assume that feminism is an invention of the West and a contrivance to manipulate hapless Asian women to feminist ways of thinking against their will. While this "critique of the feminist perspective" presumably aims to encourage indigenous voices, it also seems to imply that Asian women have failed to recognize gender inequities or to resist oppression on their own. The cross-cultural feminist conversation is richly complicated by a panoply of perspectives, including those of Western-educated Asian women, Asian-educated Western women, monks, nuns, laywomen, and laymen, feminist and otherwise. A close reading of Buddhist women's history and the burgeoning Buddhist feminist movement exposes many ironies. Building on the work of Kumari Jayawardena, Inderpal Grewal, and others, the papers in this volume examine elements of national and transnational feminist discourse to assess the usefulness of poststructuralist theory for understanding the contemporary Buddhist feminist movement, both in Asia and globally. The aim here is not simply to commemorate exceptional women, but also to investigate the claim that Buddhist feminism is a Western imposition and to examine indigenous Buddhist women's initiatives on their own terms.

Buddhist feminist theories share commonalities with Western feminist theories.²⁷ For example, passages in both early and late Buddhist texts speak about women as if they had a specific nature

identifiable on the basis of their physical and/or psychological characteristics. Followers of Sarvāstivāda, an early school of Buddhism that developed in India, asserted that phenomena exist as they appear to exist. This type of thinking veers toward essentialism in that it is liable to concretize phenomena; in that sense, it is similar to the gender essentialism described by Simone de Beauvoir, bell hooks, and others. Many Buddhist feminists accept the theory that gender characteristics are social constructions. At the same time, it is clear that social constructions affect the ways women perceive themselves and each other, and lead to assumptions about “the way women are” and “what women like.”

From a Buddhist perspective, human identity is contingent on the five aggregates mentioned above, and also on the five elements: earth, water, fire, air, and ether. Beyond these constitutive components, human beings have no enduring essence, independently existent self, or soul. Like all compounded phenomena, the identities of sentient beings are impermanent and fluid. The contingent nature of identity, including all our identities and all aspects of our identities, implied by the concept of *anātman*, or absence of inherent or independent existence. As one component of identity, gender identities are also impermanent, changing from lifetime to lifetime, and contingent on physical characteristics, inclinations, and social constructions of gender. Human beings commonly buy into the constructs they have been raised to accept and unthinkingly adopt the gender categories proffered by the communities of their birth, blithely assuming the standard definitions, depictions, and stereotypes they learn in the process of socialization. Assumptions about gender identities have enormous consequences for human beings’ psychological and spiritual health and development. Consider how many women have been inducted into the commodification of women, reducing themselves and other women primarily to their physical attributes, thus becoming complicit in their own subjugation by assuming stereotypical attitudes and behaviors. Breast implants and facelifts come to mind.

In an analysis strikingly similar to modern theories of gender fluidity, Buddhist thinkers assert that human beings’ identities are constantly in flux. In line with the fundamental assertion that all compounded phenomena change from moment to moment, gender identities are also mutable. Not only are gender categories fluid—as seen in the *vinaya* texts where males become females and vice versa—but sentient beings may also assume different gender identities as their impermanent streams of consciousness continue through successive

existences or lifetimes.²⁸ This is not as farfetched as it may seem. We can confirm the notion of changing identity by considering, for example, that individuals change constantly, both on the molecular level and over time, from conception to birth, childhood, youth, adulthood, and throughout the process of aging, until the end of their lives. Gender categories, like all composite phenomena, also inevitably change in accordance with causes and conditions, as do social and psychological constructions of gender. This is especially evident in the vast array of Buddhist cultures that have developed over the past 2,500 years. Buddhists are as diverse as the Shan and Mon populations of Burma, the Chakma and Marma of Bangladesh, the Buryats and Kalmyks of Russia, the Newars and Sherpas of Nepal, the Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Mongolian, Sinhalese, Thai, Vietnamese, and so on. Perceptions of women and gender overall have also changed over the course of history, during various dynasties and eras of Buddhist history, up to the present. As Buddhism was gradually adopted in new lands, it adapted to the indigenous cultures of the people. This process of Buddhist cultural adaptation continues today in places as diverse as New York, New Zealand, Brazil, and Uganda.

From a Buddhist perspective, the obvious physical differences exhibited by sentient beings are not nearly as important as their similarity in possessing consciousness. When gazing into the eyes of an animal, it becomes difficult to deny the common link of consciousness. In a Buddhist theory of human evolution, consciousness, defined as knowing and awareness, holds primary importance and overshadows the other aspects of personhood, because it is through consciousness that a human being is able to recognize suffering and its causes, and cultivate the wholesome mental factors and actions that lead to liberation from suffering. It is through the refinement of consciousness that a person can achieve mastery over unwholesome mental attitudes and habitual tendencies. This assertion rests on a number of assumptions imbedded in the Buddhist teachings—namely, that actions have consequences in accordance with the law of *karma*, cause and effect, and that through the cultivation of consciousness human beings can achieve a positive evolution, free from harm to oneself and others.

Every woman's experience is unique, yet stereotypes of women abound. We often hear Buddhists, women included, exclaim that Buddhist women are not oppressed, not in need of social liberation, and only need be concerned about liberation from cyclic existence (*samsāra*). Many strongly believe that Buddhists need not speak up about the sexist oppression they experience because, as frequently