

## Strategies for a Feminist Revalorization of Buddhism

This essay grows out of a complex, unique, and personal blending of three perspectives—the cross-cultural, comparative study of religion, feminism, and Buddhism. Though each perspective is well-known and widely used individually, they are not usually brought into conversation with each other. Even more rarely are they blended into one spiritual and scholarly outlook, as I have sought to do in my personal and academic life. Throughout these pages, I will illustrate the dense, mutually illuminating interplay of these three perspectives as they weave a coherent and uplifting vision. I could tell the story of how these three orientations became allies in my system of understanding and orientation. However, unlike Carol Christ and Christine Downing,<sup>1</sup> I choose not to focus directly on my story, on my personal intersection with these three perspectives, but on the sometimes tension-laden synthesis which I have conjured up out of my studies, my suffering, and my experience.

My primary task in this book is a feminist revalorization of Buddhism. In feminist theology in general, the task of “revalorization” involves working with the categories and concepts of a traditional religion in the light of feminist values. This task is double-edged, for, on the one hand, feminist analysis of any major world religion reveals massive undercurrents of sexism and prejudice against women, especially in realms of religious praxis. On the other hand, the very term “revalorization” contains an implicit judgment. To revalorize is to have determined that, however sexist a religious tradition may be, it is not irreparably so. Revalorizing is, in fact, doing that work of repairing the tradition, often bringing it much more into line with its own fundamental values and vision than was its patriarchal form.

My strategies for this revalorization involve first studying Buddhist history and then analyzing key concepts of the Buddhist worldview from a feminist point of view. Utilizing the results of those studies, I finally pursue a feminist reconstruction of Buddhism.

In the chapters on Buddhist history, I will survey the roles and images of women found in each of the three major periods of Buddhist intellectual

development—early Indian Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, and Indo-Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism. In addition to surveying roles and images of women, I will look for some of the most relevant and interesting stories about women found in each period. This survey has a dual purpose. First, someone who wishes to comment on Buddhism and feminism cannot meaningfully do so without some knowledge of the Buddhist record regarding images and roles of women commonly found in the Buddhist past. Second, out of this record of roles, images, and stories, we can search for a usable past, as defined by feminist historians.<sup>2</sup>

These chapters will be followed by chapters detailing a feminist analysis of key Buddhist concepts. Thus, I follow the distinction, often made by Christian feminist theologians, between historical context, which may well reflect very limited cultural conditions, and essential core teachings of the religious symbol system. Like most Christian feminist theologians, I am far more concerned about the gender implications of key Buddhist teachings than I am about inadequate models in the past. In the chapters of analysis, I will argue that the key concepts of Buddhism, in every period of Buddhist intellectual development, are incompatible with gender hierarchy and with discrimination against women (or against men).

In a certain sense, the chapters on history discuss the Buddhist past, how Buddhists have in fact dealt with women throughout time. The chapters of analysis, in a sense, deal with the Buddhist present, for though these key concepts were articulated in the past, they have *present* relevance for Buddhists in a way that historical materials do not. History is not revelatory or normative for Buddhists in the way that it is for some other traditions. Key Buddhist concepts, however, constitute what Buddhists currently believe and, therefore, must be taken very seriously. The chapters on reconstruction look toward the post-patriarchal future of Buddhism, using both the tools of traditional Buddhism and of feminist vision. These chapters explore the contradiction between the egalitarian concepts of Buddhism and its patriarchal history, seeking both to explain that contradiction historically and to rectify that situation in a future manifestation and form of Buddhism. As we shall see, such reconstructions take us beyond, not only the current institutional forms of Buddhism, but also beyond its present conceptual structure.

These sections of history, analysis, and reconstruction are set in the matrix of very specific, and somewhat idiosyncratic ways of thinking about religion and the study of religion, about feminism, and about Buddhism itself. Detailed discussion of these methodological issues and stances is found in the two appendices to the book. My method of dealing with complex issues regarding the interface between theology and the history of religions is dealt with in the

appendix titled “Religious Experience and the Study of Religion: The History of Religions.” Definitions of feminism, critical for understanding my vision of *Buddhist* feminism, are found in the appendix titled “Here I Stand: Feminism as Academic Method and as Social Vision.” This appendix is recommended especially for the reader who is unfamiliar with differing feminist methods and claims. My methods for studying Buddhism are discussed in the chapter immediately following. This chapter, on “Orientations to Buddhism,” also serves as an introductory overview of Buddhism for the reader not familiar with Buddhism.

Regarding my methodology, in every case, I combine methods and approaches that most scholars separate. Thus, when thinking about religion and the study of religion, I combine the approaches of history of religions and of theology. When thinking about feminism, I see feminism as both academic method and as social vision. Finally, when studying Buddhism, I seek both the historically and sociologically accurate knowledge of Buddhology and the “insider’s” understanding of a Buddhist. Thus, my method might be called a “method of inseparability,” bringing to mind connotations of the inseparability of Wisdom and Compassion in some forms of Buddhism.

My method involves a further inseparability, in that all three perspectives—the cross-cultural, comparative study of religion, feminism, and Buddhism—are thoroughly intertwined in all my work, no matter which focus I might be concentrating upon in any given discussion. I am deeply committed to the cross-cultural, comparative study of religion, which for me includes the results of the social sciences, especially anthropology, as well as theology, broadly understood. This perspective, adequately and sensitively pursued, can be the most basic arbiter, judge, and peacemaker between divergent points of view about religion. It is the matrix and container within which any sane, reasonable, and humane religious or spiritual statement must be grounded today.<sup>3</sup> I am equally deeply committed to the feminist perspective, which, in my experience radically changes one’s ways of looking at almost every topic for research, as well as one’s personal and political affirmations.<sup>4</sup> Finally, for me Buddhism is not merely grist for the comparative mill but also personal perspective. I have invested as much training in Buddhism, utilizing traditional techniques of contemplative study and meditative practice, as I have in more conventional academic studies. Thus, I work simultaneously as a comparativist, as a feminist, and as a Buddhist “theologian”; I also work simultaneously both as an insider and an outsider. I see no conflict in this method; rather, it is a complete and well-rounded approach.