

INTRODUCTION

Family, Monastery, and Gender Justice: Reenvisioning Buddhist Institutions

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Buddhist women have actively worked for more than two millennia to implement Buddhist social ideals, yet rarely have their stories been told. Through the tarnished lens of history, men's achievements have dominated the narrative of Buddhist scholarship and practice. Now, at long last, a new generation of scholars is turning its attention to the recovery of the neglected contributions made by Buddhist women.

During the past fifteen years, feminist ideas have been the source of some major shifts within Buddhism, and the dialogue between feminists and Buddhists is all the richer for the multiplicity of these feminist perspectives and the Buddhist traditions that have informed them. As Buddhist thought and practice continue to enter the mainstream, international attention is focused on a range of social issues that includes both a critical appraisal of Buddhist women's historical and contemporary experiences, as well as a feminist analysis of Buddhist texts. International conferences and symposia are frequently held to evaluate the extent to which Buddhist thought is liberating or limiting for women. Eminent Buddhist scholars, including His Holiness the Dalai Lama, have publicly expressed their support for the full ordination of women, yet there remains an enormous inertia and opposition from within traditional Buddhist societies, particularly those that lack lineages of full ordination for women. The increased awareness that has resulted from global networking has inspired an international Buddhist women's movement that is dedicated to bringing Buddhist social realities more closely in tune with Buddhist ideology.

The various Buddhist traditions present the goal of spiritual awakening (*nirvāṇa*) not simply as an abstraction, but as a concrete eventuality for all human beings. Buddha Śākyamuni is recorded as having explicitly affirmed the potential for women to achieve the highest spiritual goal, yet despite the rhetoric of spiritual equality in the Buddhist texts, women, in actual practice, continue to face many obstacles in their efforts to gain access to Buddhist education and full ordination. Women today have little, if any, voice in Buddhist institutions. The de facto exclusion of women from Buddhist institutions, whether conscious or unconscious, is surprising in view of Buddhist egalitarian theory. Women's theoretical equality can even be used to mask social inequities. For example, the oft-repeated claim that women are totally equal in Buddhism diverts attention from some very blatant inequalities that exist within the Buddhist community, such as the superior status, support, and opportunities that monks enjoy. The exclusion of women from positions of power within Buddhism is currently being challenged by a growing number of women and men from a wide range of Buddhist cultures and philosophical perspectives. Efforts are being directed toward research on Buddhist women's history, the creation of more opportunities for education, the acceptance of full ordination for women, and the full participation of women in both the practice and interpretation of the tradition.

BUDDHISM AND GENDER JUSTICE

Some people look upon gender discrimination as a problem that has already been solved. There are even some young Western women who declare that they have never experienced gender bias in their lives. This is doubtful, however, since sexism is prevalent in the media as well as in many other aspects of daily life. Gender-biased images stream from magazines, films, and the music and television industries. It is nearly impossible to avoid gender-biased images in the Western world, and these images have a powerful effect on the way women and men view themselves and each other.

In other parts of the world, some women are acutely aware of gender inequalities, some sense a problem they are unable to articulate, while others may be completely oblivious to the problem. In Asian societies, many women simply accept gender bias because they feel helpless

to change the situation. Not only is gender discrimination pervasive, but many women also feel they lack a support system or the skills necessary to effectively confront it.

This book examines gender attitudes in Buddhist societies and how these attitudes affect the lives of women, both lay and ordained. The chapters examine how gendered attitudes are learned and how they can be unlearned through the use of philosophical, historical, and biographical approaches, as well as hands-on practical applications. The goal of all these approaches is to examine issues of gender in Buddhist societies, to raise awareness of the gender bias that exists in Buddhist institutions, and to explore the implications of gender bias in society. The authors' conclusions suggest that, despite the gender bias in Buddhist texts and societies, the Buddha's teachings present a viable theoretical framework for spiritual and social transformation that not only empowers women, but also provides a useful perspective for addressing gender discrimination.

No matter what potential a person is born with, many human behaviors, both beneficial and harmful, are learned. Buddhism posits that if behavioral patterns are learned, they can be unlearned. Because consciousness by its very nature is impermanent, the mind is mutable and flexible, therefore unskillful behavior patterns such as aggression, attachment, and jealousy can be unlearned, and positive behavior patterns such as kindness, compassion, and wisdom can be learned. Until now, many societies have been operating on what Riane Eisler, in *The Chalice and the Blade*, calls the dominator/dominated model of human interaction.¹ The result is a world of conflict, exploitation, and injustice. By recognizing the problems inherent in this model of human interaction, human beings can create a new, more viable model based on shared responsibility and decision making. Emerging global programs for gender justice, human rights, and economic justice are evidence that this shift has already begun to occur, and it is important that a multiplicity of voices inform these initiatives.

Early Buddhist monastic communities were based on the ideals of shared responsibility and decision making. Women in Buddhist societies have generally had more freedom and independence than women in neighboring societies, but the structures of most families and institutions, especially—and ironically—Buddhist religious institutions, are distinctly patriarchal. These social and institutional realities contrast starkly with Buddhism's cherished ideals of equal access to spiritual

awakening for all sentient beings. This clash between ideals and actualities has become more obvious to both practitioners and observers as Buddhism continues to move westward. A new awareness of gender inequalities in Buddhism has occasioned a reexamination of old and valued traditions, and stimulated a reenvisioning of the tradition that is predicated on equal access.

GENDER RELATIONS IN BUDDHIST FAMILIES

In Buddhist societies, as in many Asian societies, expressing respect to parents, elders, teachers, and especially religious practitioners, is an integral and valued cultural norm. Specific patterns of expressing respect and deference to elders are taught to children starting at a young age. These patterns are reinforced in Buddhist societies by praise and admiration for people who are humble and polite. The high value placed on humility and polite conduct has given women a legitimate means of achieving social esteem, but it may also have conditioned them to be docile and subservient. Typically, the ideal woman is a loyal, chaste wife and mother rather than an active participant in the public sphere.

Learning and expressing respect in culturally appropriate ways to people in positions of authority and seniority is an integral aspect of life in Buddhist societies. It is difficult to determine how children in Asian societies learn gendered patterns of expressing respect from early childhood, but it has been my experience that Asian Buddhists express greater respect to men than to women. Although mothers, sisters, and daughters may be deeply loved and honored, a greater respect toward males is evident in families and in monasteries, where traditional values are most carefully maintained.

People's dissimilar behavior and attitudes toward women and men are often largely unconscious. My observation is that gendered patterns of behavior stem from early childhood acculturation in the family, where girls and boys are socialized differently in both subtle and overt ways. Although parents usually declare that they love their daughters and sons equally, girls are expected to shoulder a larger share of work responsibilities and receive fewer advantages than boys. Because daughters are seen as vulnerable to pregnancy and marriage outside the family, girls in many Buddhist cultures receive less encour-

agement to pursue higher studies and are unlikely to receive the same educational opportunities as their brothers. These gendered attitudes, learned in the family, are internalized and carried over into adulthood and into the monasteries.

Generally speaking, Buddhists do not intentionally behave differently or disrespectfully toward women, much less to nuns. Instead, different behavior toward female and male monastics appears to be largely unconscious and the result of gendered patterns of childhood socialization. People are often completely unaware that they behave differently toward nuns than they do toward monks, and would probably be surprised, even incredulous, if this was pointed out. When Buddhist nuns notice these inequalities, they generally ignore them, since it may be awkward or appear self-serving to point them out. Gendered behaviors are so common that many people fail to recognize them at all. Culturally appropriate training in gender awareness is therefore essential in Buddhist cultures, for both men and women. Women can take the lead by developing an awareness of their own gendered attitudes and behaviors and by devising ways to correct inequalities in Buddhist society.

To understand the underpinnings of gender inequality in Buddhism, it is necessary to examine not only the texts and structures of Buddhist institutions, but also the attitudes and patterns of socialization that have evolved within these institutions. I use the terms “gender imbalance” and “gender inequality” instead of “gender injustice” and “gender oppression” because, although gender injustice and oppression certainly occur in Buddhist societies, these terms imply conscious, intentional behavior, unlike gender imbalances and inequality, factors that unconsciously influence behavior, but are remediable through consciousness raising. Equally as important, gender imbalances and inequalities are often the basis for gender injustice and oppression, and therefore raising awareness of gender imbalances and inequalities may go a long way toward correcting injustice and oppression. For example, to my knowledge, most Buddhist associations in traditionally Buddhist societies are entirely male, yet few people have even noticed this fact, and many would even contest the assertion that gender discrimination exists within Buddhism. With the exception of a few Buddhist women’s organizations, most national or international Buddhist institutions have less than a fair representation of women members, or no women members at all, not to mention women in positions of authority. Women are underrepresented at national and international Buddhist conferences,

and even in countries where women are gaining admission to institutions of higher learning, they continue to be poorly represented in Buddhist institutions.

Buddhist women frequently express a lack of interest in power or status, and many women in developing countries are understandably more concerned about obtaining their basic requirements, such as adequate food, shelter, health care, and education, than about attending conferences. When women are not provided with their basic needs, their potential is squelched and they find themselves perpetually disempowered and subordinated. Some even argue that it is futile to struggle for equal representation in Buddhist institutions at all, since most are hierarchically organized and emblematic of male authority. Meeting the basic needs of women is obviously a priority, yet at the same time, I feel that women must begin to take positions of leadership and responsibility in Buddhist institutions soon, or else remain indefinitely on the margins of social transformation. Women must gain their voice and begin to help transform Buddhist institutions from within, lest gender inequalities become even more firmly inscribed. Gradually, as international awareness of women's issues heightens, a few nuns and laywomen are being included in some national and international Buddhist conferences. Although this token inclusion does not fairly represent women's voices, it is a step in the right direction since it does give women a voice for expressing concerns and pressing for changes within Buddhism.

BUDDHIST WOMEN IN MONASTIC LIFE

For over 2500 years, monasticism has been fundamental to Buddhist societies and religious institutions. Although women have not always had equal access to the benefits of monastic life, and nuns living a monastic life do not always have the same opportunities as monks, monastic life has been meaningful and beneficial for countless women. Monastic life offers women an alternative to marriage and procreation. It provides knowledge, independence, a sense of community, and the spiritual benefits of Buddhist practice—mental clarity, balance, inner peace, wisdom, and loving-kindness.

The role of monastic practitioners is a greatly valued one in Buddhist societies, and the highest expressions of respect are generally reserved for monastics, especially male monastics. My experience of

living in Buddhist cultures over a period of twenty years has taught me that, overall, there is a marked difference between the way people regard monks and nuns. Even among monastics themselves, the exemplars of cherished Buddhist values, disparities exist in attitudes toward nuns and monks. Many times I have observed that, when a visiting monk appears, Buddhists rise, hasten to receive him, arrange a comfortable seat, and offer tea, hospitality, and other services, yet when the visitor is a nun, these same behaviors are not generally applied. Instead, people, including women, generally do not rise, offer her a place to sit, serve her before themselves, or offer her the same courtesies that are commonly extended to monks. When people do show respect toward nuns, it is generally less deferential than the respect expressed to monks. In my opinion, these gendered patterns of behavior toward nuns both reflect and perpetuate the lower status of nuns—and, by extension, all women—in Buddhist societies.

Nuns receive material support at a subsistence level from the laity and enjoy the protection of the monastic precepts, which, according to Buddhist tradition, benefit them in both tangible and intangible ways. Tangibly, the precepts protect women against exploitation by providing both a strong foundation for ethical decision making as well as membership in a safe community of spiritual practitioners. Less tangibly, the precepts are thought to enhance concentration and discipline, and the mental stability developed during meditation increases alertness and sensitivity to the nuances of situations. The wisdom and loving-kindness developed through meditation practice help the practitioner to deal more skillfully with difficult life situations, and dealing with difficult situations skillfully is thought to engender greater wisdom and compassion. On a totally intangible level, the monastic precepts are believed to be meritorious and the source of protective power. When I survived a near-fatal viper bite in India some years ago, several Tibetan lamas said it was due to the power of the precepts.

This is not to say that Buddhist monastic life is always without problems. Just like people everywhere, monastics have different personalities, backgrounds, and expectations. Just like people in ordinary society, monastics can be temperamental, sluggish in their practice, or careless in their behavior. Monastic practice is designed to nurture enlightened character, but beginners (and we are all beginners) may exhibit jealousy, anger, attachment, greed, and all the usual

imperfections. Monastic life is a crucible for character development, not a panacea.

My experience of visiting and living in Asian Buddhist monasteries has given me some experience with monastic protocol. After receiving novice ordination in 1977, I studied for fifteen years in a Tibetan settlement in Dharamsala, India. In 1982, I received full ordination in Korea and then went to Taiwan for further monastic training. These experiences of monastic life in different countries have given me some insight into the lifestyle of Buddhist monastics in various traditions.

The tradition of showing respect to elders in the family is replicated in the monastery. Bowing to senior practitioners not only helps monastics express respect for one another, it also sets an example for the laity. The tradition of bowing establishes clear lines of seniority within the monastery and within the monastic order as a whole, whereas in the West structures of authority are often confused with authoritarianism and therefore rejected. Having clear lines of authority in a monastic setting can be extremely useful, not only for the functioning of the monastery, but also for maintaining discipline, harmony, and an environment that is favorable for Dharma practice.

My experiences in Asian monasteries over the years have been instrumental in shaping my understanding of gender in Buddhism. For example, in the Tibetan tradition it is rare to see anyone bow to a nun, perhaps because there are no fully ordained nuns. In the Korean tradition, by contrast, all junior nuns pay respect by bowing to senior nuns. There is a precise protocol for showing respect for those who are senior in ordination status. When a fully ordained nun (*bhikṣuṇī*) visits a monastery in Korea, junior nuns immediately gather and express their respect to her by bowing in the traditional way. In Taiwan, junior nuns express respect by bowing to senior nuns as soon as they enter a monastery, immediately after paying respect to the Buddha.

In the Buddhist traditions that offer full ordination for women, nuns are generally ordained by senior, fully ordained nuns. In traditions that lack full ordination for women, nuns are ordained by monks. This custom has been standard practice for centuries in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Tibet, and Sri Lanka. Many women also prefer to take ordination with respected monks, even when fully ordained nuns are available to ordain them. To receive ordination from a highly respected monk is regarded as a blessing.

In countries where there are no *bhikṣuṇīs* to perform the ordination of nuns, monks often take the responsibility. The monks are acting compassionately when they ordain nuns, since nuns in countries without *bhikṣuṇīs* could not become ordained without the monks' help. At the same time, if the monks ordain women without careful selection criteria, or without the provision of adequate training and education, the procedure can cause many problems in the nuns' communities—problems that are beyond their control. When monks ordain nuns, they effectively decide who will join the nuns' community, but they do not always know the applicants well and do not have a stake in the admission process since they live elsewhere. Because the monastic ideal is so highly valued, new candidates may be encouraged to join, but may not be temperamentally suited to monastic life. This openhearted attitude toward admissions becomes a problem for women's communities if sufficient care is not taken in the selection process. Nuns therefore need to think carefully about investing monks with the power to ordain nuns. Although their options are limited by the absence of *bhikṣuṇīs*, nuns literally become disempowered by relinquishing their monastic authority.

BUDDHIST RESPONSES TO GENDER IMBALANCE

Over the years, I have encountered a variety of different attitudes toward the gender imbalance in Buddhism. The most common attitude is to ignore the problem altogether, dismiss it, deny it, and trivialize it. On the other hand, there are people who have recognized the gender imbalance in Buddhism and have set about to redress it, often in very creative ways, and the result has been a resurgence of interest in Buddhist women's issues. However, there are still many challenges that lie ahead on the journey toward realizing true gender equality.

First, most people are blind to gender inequalities, just as I was when I began practicing Buddhism thirty-five years ago, even though such inequalities were strikingly evident. When I became an ordained Buddhist nun in 1977, I continued to be unaware of these inequalities, or even that I was entering a tradition in which women lacked the same opportunities for education and full ordination as men.

Second, people often dismiss the gender imbalance and say that gender equality is not necessary for Dharma practice. They may recognize

that there is a gender imbalance in Buddhism and acknowledge that monks have more opportunities than nuns, but believe that gender differences are irrelevant to achieving enlightenment. Even if there is gender discrimination in Buddhism, many claim it cannot prevent women from achieving *nirvāṇa*. Teachers in all the Buddhist traditions support this view by saying that women have the same spiritual potential as men. It is very easy to dismiss the problem by saying, “In Buddhism everyone can achieve enlightenment,” and go on to the next question.

Third, people may deny that there is a problem by asserting that no gender imbalance or discrimination exists in Buddhism, because women can do anything that men can do and women are able to achieve whatever goal they strive for. If women want enlightenment, they can get it, if they are determined and work hard. Nothing is preventing women from achieving enlightenment. Using this reasoning and substantiating it with actual examples of women who have achieved realization in the tradition, many people deny that there is a gender problem in Buddhism at all.

Fourth, some people may trivialize the problem and say, for example, “I am not interested in status, position, or fame. If someone is interested in becoming fully ordained, that is fine, but I am only interested in achieving *nirvāṇa*. If monks are regarded more highly than nuns, that is not a problem for me. Status is a worldly concern and has nothing to do with Dharma.” This attitude can be misleading and dangerous for women. Not only does it ignore gender discrimination, but it also distorts the issue by suggesting that gender equality is a worldly concern and has no significance for Buddhism. Moreover, this attitude casts aspersions on the sincerity and motivation of those who voice concerns about gender inequalities.

A fifth related attitude is to belittle the problem of gender imbalance in Buddhism in an attempt to silence dissent. Advocates of equal opportunities for women may be intimidated or discouraged from raising gender issues. Some segments of traditional societies are resistant to change and prefer to maintain the status quo, an attitude that cannot help but perceive advocates of social change as threatening, simply because they challenge the prevailing social norms. The changes that feminists propose, for example, threaten people in positions of power. When women call for change, many elites begin to cling to their power and advantages. These very obvious reasons are why there is often enormous inertia and resistance to social change.

Women who seek changes in the status quo or want to move beyond their allotted social sphere often find obstacles placed in their way. For example, many women who seek higher education or ordination may be discouraged from pursuing their aims. In one case in the 1980s, about a dozen Tibetan nuns sought the advice of a highly respected male teacher about applying for admission to the Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies in Sarnath. All of these nuns were told that they would face “obstacles” if they applied and should stay in the monastery instead. Three other nuns went to different teachers with the same question and were all told that it would be very beneficial for them to apply for higher studies. One nun in the latter group eventually earned a Master’s degree in Buddhist Studies and became qualified as a teacher.

When nuns approach their teachers for advice about receiving higher ordination, they are often told, “It is difficult enough to keep the ten precepts purely. Are you able to keep the ten precepts perfectly? Imagine how difficult it would be to keep more than three hundred precepts!” I have personally heard this response many times from different teachers. I have also heard many people, including monks, nuns, and laypeople, repeat it to novice nuns: “It is hard enough to keep the ten precepts. Why in the world would anyone want to take *bhikṣuṇī* ordination? Ten precepts are enough for nuns.” Such remarks discourage nuns, and not only erode their self-confidence, but also dissuade them from seeking full ordination, even when they are qualified and have the opportunity to do so. Such remarks also prevent Buddhist women from standing up for their rights. When women repeat these intimidating remarks to others without having critiqued their value, they disempower themselves and each other.

Occasionally women encounter outright denigration and humiliation. When I was studying in India, I often heard disparaging remarks about nuns. A classmate of mine, a monk ten years my junior, told me, in all seriousness, “Women are inferior to men in every way. Women are smaller and less capable. They are physically, mentally, and emotionally inferior to men.” It was quite shocking to encounter such an attitude, especially among young people. The case of this monk was particularly astonishing since he owed everything—his education and his very existence—to the kindness of women. We were studying logic at the time and learning to apply critical analysis to a wide range of Buddhist topics, but he seemed unable to apply logical reasoning to real life situations. Finally I presented him with the articles published in the

Times of India, with titles such as “Girls Score High in National Exam Results” and “Girls Outshine Boys Again,” which indicate that girl students consistently achieve higher marks than boy students. I argued that girls, when given equal educational opportunities, often do better than boys, but I remained unable to shake his conviction that women were innately inferior to men. The playing field is still not level, even in the United States, even in the twenty-first century. Although some biases are culture specific, gender bias seems to extend beyond cultural boundaries.

CHALLENGING AND CHANGING THE SYSTEM

His Holiness the Dalai Lama, one of Buddhism’s most highly respected leaders, frequently mentions the importance of challenging outmoded attitudes toward women. He repeatedly challenges women to correct the prevailing misconceptions about their abilities by striving for higher education and professional advancement, especially when it is for the service of society. He recommends that women set aside counterproductive emotions such as anger and resentment, and strive toward their goals with determination and perseverance.

According to the Buddha, all sentient beings have equal potential for enlightenment. The Buddha also taught his followers to use logical reasoning to test his teachings, just as they would test gold before purchasing it. Extending this logic to social analysis, it therefore stands to reason that the Buddhist teachings are inclusive in scope, and thus should be equally accessible to women and men. In my opinion, it is therefore the duty of thoughtful Buddhists to question the inequalities women have faced for centuries and to work to remove any limitations women face today in gaining access to their religious heritage.

Pointing out injustices in society has always carried risks, especially for disadvantaged sectors of society. Not only do social critics upset traditional apple carts, but women who seek changes may be disparaged or criticized for seeking their own advantage. In cultures where humility and self-effacement are highly valued—especially for women—speaking out takes courage. The situation of women in Buddhism is not unique, however, since anyone who works for social justice risks public censure. Fortunately, women in Buddhist cultures enjoy the freedom to express their views.

Education for women is essential to this process because educationally disadvantaged women lack the tools necessary to work for improvements

for themselves and their families. Buddhist women in developing countries often lack adequate education, so the first step is to insist on equal educational opportunities for girls from a young age. As women gain confidence and skills, they can more effectively express their needs and hopes.

Equal opportunities for education, ordination, and economic development will naturally bring many changes for women, including changes in Buddhist institutions. The same skills that are used to debate Buddhist philosophy can be used to press for social change. When nuns are told that ten precepts are enough for women, they can counter by asking why ten precepts are not enough for monks. They can reason that, if full ordination is meritorious for monks, it must be similarly meritorious for nuns. A friendly debate along these lines is a good way to bring gender issues into the open. Debates will encourage nuns, monks, and laypeople alike to think more critically about women's capabilities.

In addition to educational disparities, there is also a gap between generations that disproportionately affects Buddhist women. For example, women of different generations approach problems from vastly different perspectives, and today, due to the process of rapid social change occurring in societies around the world, the generation gap is widening. Differences of psychology, values, and life experiences remain greatest in developing countries, where large segments of the population are left behind by economic changes. While members of the younger generation are caught up in new technologies and values, members of the older generation struggle to preserve their traditional cultures. Since women are the most likely ones to be left behind during rapid economic changes, the gender imbalance in human society is paralleled by an ever-increasing communication gap between generations.

Redressing the gender imbalance requires skill and tenacity, especially in Asian societies, where direct confrontation is often the least effective tactic. Perhaps a more effective tactic is to respectfully ask questions to gain a clearer understanding of different viewpoints, to subtly open up new avenues of inquiry, and gradually explain why educated women are an asset to Buddhism, not a threat. Most dialogue partners are quick to recognize that, if Buddhist practice is beneficial for men, it must be equally beneficial for women. And, if Buddhist practice is beneficial, women deserve to have equal access to it.

Working with the Buddhist women's movement has been very refreshing. Because Buddhist traditions are founded on logical reasoning

and common sense, it is possible to engage in constructive dialogue and reach a deeper level of understanding, even about difficult issues. Over the past fifteen years, I have discussed gender issues with Burmese, Cambodian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Thai, Tibetan, and Vietnamese monks, nuns, and laypeople. These discussions have educated me, not only about monastic discipline and Buddhist philosophy, but also about how Buddhism can be adapted and applied in contemporary society. All parties to the discussion seem to come away with both a greater tolerance and awareness of Buddhism's usefulness, and a greater understanding about the importance of equal access for women within the tradition.

There are a number of reasons why I believe that attitudes toward gender can change in Buddhist cultures. First, Buddhist practice is concerned with the transformation of consciousness, and consciousness has no gender. Second, the Buddha affirmed that women are as capable of achieving enlightenment as are men, so discrimination against women is inconsistent with a fundamental Buddhist principle. Third, Buddhists, especially monks, want to make Buddhist practice accessible and they realize that gender discrimination is unacceptable in the modern world. If Buddhists are true to their stated principle of having compassion for all sentient beings, they must stand up for gender justice.

WOMEN AND ENDANGERED BUDDHIST CULTURES

When discussing the issue of women in Buddhism, it is also important to recognize that Buddhist cultures in general, and the Dharma teachings in particular, are in danger. Over the past fifty years, Buddhism has been nearly obliterated in Cambodia, China, Laos, Mongolia, Russia, Tibet, and Vietnam. It is also perilously close to extinction in regions of Bangladesh, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Korea, and Nepal due to politics, war, and increasing secularization. Buddhists are often among the poorest and most disadvantaged, and consequently are also often the most vulnerable to the aggressive conversion efforts of other religions. With so many ancient Buddhist cultures endangered, providing women with the resources they need to study and practice Buddhism will allow them to counter these destructive trends and share this traditional knowledge with others.

The benefits that Buddhist women can bring to society are obvious to anyone who visits Taiwan or Korea, two countries where Buddhist women and men have nearly equal opportunities to education, ordination, and facilities for religious practice. Although Buddhist women in Vietnam still face many difficulties by living in a communist regime, their courage and resoluteness in the face of adversity are also inspiring. To visit these countries and see thousands of well-educated, well-disciplined Buddhist women totally committed to working for the welfare of society makes it easy to understand the benefits that are derived from having a strong order of nuns (*Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha*) to teach and serve as spiritual guides, especially to women. In these countries, nuns are supported in their study and practice primarily by laywomen. With this support, they are then able share the benefits of their knowledge and encourage others. This sharing of knowledge and experience with others creates patterns of mutual benefit. For example, when monks realize the benefits that committed women practitioners can have for society, they generally become women's allies in the struggle for equal opportunities. And as stated before, in Buddhist societies, women are generally trained to be humble and self-effacing, but monks have the power and freedom to speak out and therefore can be great advocates on behalf of equal opportunities for them. While women must gain their own voices, monks can also be tremendously helpful in transforming societal attitudes toward women.

Among the greatest obstacles Buddhist women face today is their limited access to qualified teachers and adequate educational facilities. There are several reasons that help explain this limited access. First, there is a critical shortage of fully qualified Buddhist teachers in almost every tradition, often due to wars and Buddhist persecutions during the last fifty years. Second, male teachers who teach nuns may be suspected of having ulterior motives, so many male teachers hesitate to teach nuns for fear of gossip in the community. Since most qualified Buddhist teachers are male, women are at a disadvantage in getting a Buddhist education. Other practical considerations also work against women. Sometimes women's monasteries are situated in remote areas, far from teachers and facilities. In developing countries, women's monasteries are poorly supported and nuns may be expected to earn donations by doing time-consuming prayers and rituals. Monks are regarded as a superior "field of merit" and their needs are given priority over the

needs of women. Finally, there are many men and women who believe that women are incapable of and uninterested in higher studies. These combined obstacles put nuns at a serious disadvantage in gaining religious education.

While working to establish study programs for women in India over the past fifteen years, I have encountered all of these obstacles. It has been extremely difficult to find qualified teachers who are willing to teach women, especially in remote locations with poor living conditions. In one case, after searching for several years to find teachers for Himalayan nuns, I learned about a monk who had been meditating in a cave for many years, supported by the impoverished community nearby. After much persuasion, this humble monk agreed to teach the nuns. For a year, under this teacher's guidance, the nuns progressed steadily in their studies. Then, suddenly, one day a group of monks from his monastery appeared and insisted that he leave. These monks were not interested in studying themselves, but they insisted that he discontinue teaching the nuns. The teacher returned after several months, but again the monks from his monastery arrived in a jeep and insisted he leave. Finally the teacher made the decision to resign from his monastery and returned to teach the nuns, which he has kindly continued to do ever since. This incident is the most overt case of gender discrimination I have faced during twenty years of living in Buddhist societies.

Another similar incident occurred a few years later. At one of our projects, we were able to find a saintly, compassionate, and extremely knowledgeable teacher for the nuns. Similarly, in this case, the teacher was a humble, gentle monk who dedicated himself sincerely to teaching the nuns. The nuns progressed wonderfully under his tutelage. One day he received a letter from his home monastery that insisted that he leave the nuns' study program and go abroad. Feeling indebted to his monastery for his education there, he had no choice but to sadly agree. Fortunately, the teacher was able to find a temporary replacement, but the nuns miss their kind teacher and pray for his return.

Obtaining fully qualified teachers is the most serious challenge faced by women in many of the Buddhist traditions. To nurture a generation of fully qualified female Buddhist teachers, a systematic study program under qualified guidance is essential, and until women become qualified as teachers, they are dependent on the kindness of male teachers, when they can get them. The importance of women receiving equal educational opportunities cannot be overemphasized.

GENDER JUSTICE AS A PREREQUISITE TO PEACE

It is my belief that gender justice—social justice for all human beings, regardless of gender—is necessary if there is to be a genuine, lasting peace in human society. At first glance, it would appear that Buddhist societies belie this contention. With a few glaring exceptions, Buddhist societies have enjoyed more peace and suffered fewer armed conflicts than other societies, even though their social structures are patriarchal. But a peaceful veneer sometimes conceals underlying tensions and hypocrisies that are in urgent need of attention. Peace in any family requires effort, skill, and concessions, and peace in Buddhist societies has long rested on the efforts, skills, and concessions of women. The contributions of Buddhist women—whether subtle or exemplary—have largely gone unnoticed and unacknowledged, if not thwarted altogether. As long as women are excluded at any level of society, claims of justice and equality ring hollow.

All Buddhists need to take responsibility for achieving gender justice in Buddhism, but monastics have a special responsibility because of their expressed commitment to the spiritual pursuit. It could even be argued that monks have a greater responsibility than nuns to work for gender equity, since they have far more power within Buddhist institutions. Unfortunately, many monks feel that the welfare of Buddhist laywomen and nuns is not their responsibility.

Although the Buddhist women's movement is still very young, it enjoys several advantages. First, Buddhist feminist efforts rest on foundations of gender equality expressed by the Buddha himself. Second, these efforts profit from the experience of the broader feminist movement in terms of organization, communication, strategy, and networking. In just fifteen years, Buddhist women have joined forces and are becoming adept at shared decision making and at achieving consensus. Lay and ordained Buddhist women are collaborating with more experienced global women's networks in their struggle for gender justice.

As reflected in this book, the global Buddhist women's movement is an alliance of representatives from a remarkable variety of cultures, disciplines, and endeavors. In the first part of this volume, contributors explore the philosophical foundations for Buddhist women's empowerment or disempowerment, examining the ways in which feminist and Buddhist thought have become intertwined, and exploring the implications of these connections. Anne Carolyn Klein explores the topics of

subjectivity and embodiedness from Buddhist and Western perspectives as a philosophical basis for constructive social engagement in “Buddhist Understandings of Subjectivity.” In “Reflections on Buddhism, Gender, and Human Rights,” Lin Chew applies a Buddhist analysis to the universal principles of respect and dignity for all life, and relates them to constructions of gender identity as well as legal reforms, self-determination, and economic opportunity. Taking a textual approach, in “Is the Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya Sexist?” I investigate the codes of monastic conduct to see whether gender bias in Buddhist societies can be traced to gender inequalities in these ancient texts.

The next few chapters apply Buddhist psychology and social theory to explore Buddhist interpretations of nonviolence and ways in which this ideal can help uproot or alleviate the sufferings of social injustice. In “Transforming Conflict, Transforming Ourselves: Buddhism and Social Liberation,” Paula Green investigates the roots of conflict and how Buddhist teachings on mindfulness, wisdom, and compassion can help relieve human suffering through creative methods of peacebuilding. Meenakshi Chhabra, in her chapter “Redefining and Expanding the Self in Conflict Resolution,” takes an alternative approach to peacebuilding by examining Buddhist theories of the self in the *Lotus Sūtra* and relating them to the politics of identity. In “Integrating Feminist Theory and Engaged Buddhism: Counseling Women Survivors of Gender-based Violence,” Kathryn L. Norsworthy draws from both Buddhist and feminist psychological theory to discover practical means of healing the trauma of violence.

The most exhilarating way to document Buddhist women’s history is to record it as it unfolds. In “Reclaiming the Robe: Reviving the Bhikkhunī Order in Sri Lanka,” Ranjani de Silva tells the story of how the lineage of full ordination for women, lost for nearly a thousand years, is being recovered and revitalized in contemporary Sri Lanka. Sarah LeVine tells the equally compelling story of the resurgence of Theravāda Buddhist nuns in “Dharma Education for Women in the Theravāda Buddhist Community of Nepal.” The extent to which social structures affect the lives of women in Nepal is the theme of the next two chapters: David N. Gellner’s “Buddhism, Women, and Caste: The Case of the Newar Buddhists of the Kathmandu Valley,” and Khandu Lama’s “Trafficking in Buddhist Girls: Empowerment through Prevention.” Next, in “Khunying Kanitha: Thailand’s Advocate for Women,” I document the life of Khunying Kanitha and her struggle to provide shelters for

abused and abandoned women and to achieve educational opportunities and legal rights for Thailand's long-neglected nuns.

Shifting to a vastly different cultural and geographical setting, we find nuns in the Himalayas similarly struggling to gain equal educational opportunities. That story is told by Margaret Coberly in "Crisis as Opportunity: Nuns and Cultural Change in the Spiti Valley." Exploding the myth of Japanese Buddhist women's passivity and social irrelevance, Diana E. Wright documents the active roles that nuns played in the "divorce temples" of the Tokugawa Era in "Spiritual Piety, Social Activism, and Economic Realities: The Nuns of Mantokuji." In "The Infinite Worlds of Taiwan's Buddhist Nuns," Elise Anne DeVido tells the story of nuns in Taiwan, often considered the ultimate success story of Buddhist women. To conclude the volume, Caren I. Ohlson documents the international movement that has emerged to challenge male domination of Buddhist institutions in "Resistance without Borders: An Exploration of Buddhist Nuns across Cultures."

In a time of environmental and moral crisis, the world community needs to optimize all its human resources to ensure the survival of the species. Buddhists feel a special responsibility to promote peace, compassion, enlightenment, and justice for all living beings, regardless of gender. Consonant with the Buddhist concern for alleviating suffering and in view of the enormous suffering women often experience, the heroic stories of women's struggles in the face of adversity deserve to be told. Thus, it is imperative to document the lives of Buddhist women, whether ordinary or exemplary, before these stories are lost forever.

These stories could not have been told without the inspiration and sustained efforts of numerous mentors and friends. I am deeply grateful to the contributors for their commendable scholarship, amiable collaboration, and boundless patience. In equal measure, I offer heartfelt appreciation to Margaret Coberly, Jennifer Lane, Ellie Mennim, Rebecca Paxton, and Emily Mariko Sanders for their thoughtful reflections, challenging comments, and keen editorial vision. And for the cover artwork, which poignantly captures the paradox of Buddhist women and social justice, *me ke aloha* to Daphne Chu.

NOTE

1. Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).