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### Buddhist Women and Religious Leadership

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## BUDDHIST WOMEN AND RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP

**Karma Lekshe Tsomo**

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

### Early Buddhist Women Leaders

Historically, the earliest Buddhist women leaders were the first group of female practitioners to seek admission to the *sangha*, the monastic order, around the fifth century BCE (Wijayaratna 2010). The most esteemed among them was Mahaprajapati Gautami, who took the initiative in establishing an order for women equivalent to the order for men. As a queen and as the aunt and stepmother of Buddha Shakyamuni, she had considerable social status and presumably the confidence to request permission for women to join the *sangha*. When the Buddha hesitated and tried to dissuade her, she led a march of hundreds of aristocratic women to convince him (Tsomo 1999). Details of the story vary in different texts, but the *Gotami-apadana*, a second-century Pali text, chronicles how she successfully pressed for admission to the order and led 500 women on the path to liberation (Walters 1994). Through the mediation of Ananda, the Buddha’s relative and long-time attendant, her quest was successful. Mahaprajapati became the first *bhiksuni* (Pali: *bhikkhuni*) in history. Thus began what was perhaps the first order of women religious in the world.

The *bhiksuni sangha* (Pali: *bhikkhuni sangha*) was self-governing from the beginning. Nuns were required to involve monks in certain ritual procedures: ordination, reinstatement, and bi-monthly exhortations. Nuns were required to do their three-month rainy season retreat (*vassa*) in a place where a monk was in residence, presumably for the protection of the nuns. Apart from male involvement in these rituals, *bhiksuni* communities functioned independently and managed their own affairs – an option regarded by many of them as a highly liberating alternative to marriage, family, and domestic responsibilities (Blackstone 1998). Like the *bhiksu sangha*, the order of monks, the *bhiksuni sangha* is organized democratically, incorporating principles of seniority and merit. In decision making, “nuns as a group agree on an experienced and competent nun to preside over important decisions and transactions, and to facilitate the resolution of problems and questions” (Findly 2000). A young nun or aspirant has the freedom to

choose a teacher whom she trusted and admired, one who has the necessary knowledge and experience to guide her development as a renunciant and as a Dharma practitioner. Thousands of women became Buddhist nuns at the time of the Buddha and were respected as models of virtue, skilled meditators, and acclaimed teachers. By their example, they demonstrated that women were capable of achieving liberation (*nirvana*), the highest goal of the early Buddhist path (Murcott 1991).

### **Cultural Constructs of Religious Leadership**

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

For Buddhists, the ultimate goal is liberation or enlightenment. Overcoming lifetimes of attachment, aversion, and ignorance requires dedication and perseverance. Therefore, those who cultivate their minds with sincerity and diligence are respected as guides on the path. It is not necessary or even desirable to be recognized for one’s achievements. Therefore, for those who are determined to put an end to repeated rebirth in cyclic existence, involvement in the tasks of religious leadership mentioned above may be viewed as a diversion. Of course, creating spiritual communities is important for nurturing the spiritual life of sentient beings, but the tasks of running a monastery or retreat center can also entangle one in “the things of this world” and consume time better spent on awakening. A person engaged in intensive spiritual practice does not have time to be a religious leader. In a sense, religious leadership and awakening may be seen as contradictory. Truly enlightened leadership, from a Buddhist perspective, is eradicating the delusions of the mind. It may manifest as gentleness rather than power, loving kindness rather than competency, compassion rather than efficiency.

On one hand, it can be argued that inspiring women’s leadership is very important in Buddhism, because it will not only inspire women to realize the fruits of the path for themselves, but also because it will help them to inspire other women, in a constructive spiral. It will help bring women into the global ethic of human rights and women’s empowerment to help offset some of the hardships and disadvantages many Buddhist women face. On the other hand, it can be argued that inspiring women’s leadership is completely irrelevant, in that the practice will verify its own validity, whether one is a woman or a man, and that a sincere practitioner will naturally inspire others. Some will see taking a public role as the antithesis of Buddhist values of humility and spiritual values. The Buddha became a teacher because people came to him for leadership on the path to liberation and he simply responded to the realities of his time. He had no agenda beyond liberating living beings from suffering and his vision had no boundaries,

encompassing human beings without discrimination. Nonetheless, Buddhist history is replete with examples of Buddhist practitioners who have been both spiritual masters and religious leaders, mostly male. An exception is Samding Dorje, a lineage of female incarnations of Vajravahni (in Tibetan, Dorje Phagmo), a religious teacher with considerable political influence who also headed a religious institution (Diemberger 2007).

## **Contemporary Buddhist Women Leaders**

Traditionally in Buddhist cultures in Asia, religious leadership has been in the hands of ordained monks. Although there are lay teachers in all Buddhist cultures, it is presumed that ordained monastics are more suitable in leadership roles because they are fully devoted to religious practice and have more training and experience. Laypeople may be leaders in some religious organizations – for example, the World Fellowship of Buddhists – but few are recognized as “religious leaders.” Further, it is presumed that men are more suitable in roles of religious leadership than women, first, because they observe more monastic precepts and, second, because of social expectations that men are somehow more suited appropriate in public roles. There may also be a subtle assumption that men innately have more spiritual power than women and are therefore somehow uniquely suited for prominence.

In recent years, particularly in countries outside Asia, the presumption that the ideal religious leader is a male monastic has been tested. Just as the Catholic laity is currently pressing for greater participation in all aspects of religious life, laypeople are assuming more visible roles in Buddhist temples and Dharma centers in Australia, Europe, North America, and increasingly in Asia. For Buddhist women, that has not necessarily meant greater access to religious leadership, however. The shift from kitchen duties to administration has not been particularly difficult; as in many religious traditions, women’s efforts behind the scenes are welcome. When it comes to public roles, however, the limelight is still generally occupied by males, although that is gradually changing.

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

To be a Buddhist woman leader, it is not necessary to be eminent, innovative, or popular, however. The expectation that a religious or spiritual role model should have achieved perfection is also unrealistic and puts religious ideas out of reach for ordinary people. To be a great Buddhist leader, the most important qualities are wisdom, kindness, and compassion, rather than

power and authority. Stereotypical expectations for leaders are often derived from outdated models that have not always worked out well for human society. Women's leadership need not follow normative models. The fact that few women have a serious stake in current models or institutions gives them the freedom to innovate and create new definitions of leadership. Most Buddhist women are inexperienced and unaccustomed to roles of leadership, even though many have the personal qualities and potential to become leaders. These roles are typically occupied largely by men and women have been socialized to be humble and self-effacing, more comfortable in the background. When I went to India in the 1960s, I was also inexperienced and had no interest in leadership, administration, or governance. After I became a Buddhist nun in the 1970s, I dedicated myself to scholarship and practice in the Himalayas, as far from secular concerns as possible. As an American Buddhist nun practicing in the Tibetan tradition, I also had no opportunities and no ready models for women's religious leadership. Over the years, however, in the process of founding education programs for nuns in India and organizing international conferences, I gradually found myself in positions of responsibility and leadership. Based on years of experience, I recognize the many challenges that face the first generation of Buddhist women who redefine what it means to be a Buddhist, a woman, and a leader. Forging new paths in uncharted territory, especially when these paths cut sharply across deeply ingrained social norms, is can be terrifying and full of disappointments. Even so, and sometimes as a direct result of the obstacles, momentous changes may result from rethinking tradition, trying new ideas, and making mistakes that lead in unexpected directions. Words and actions that seemed insignificant at the time can bear fruit beyond one's imagination, especially when they are intended to benefit others.

Especially now, as Buddhism and feminism are converging, encouraging Buddhist women's leadership is vitally important. Many Buddhist women are reluctant to assume or even aspire to positions of leadership, though. Obstacles are sure to arise and worldly activities can get quite messy. The faint-hearted may be tempted to escape to the safety of familiar patterns and tasks. Many Buddhist women are socialized to group activity and have no experience taking decisions independently, so the fear of failure or rejection can be quite daunting. Breaking out of accustomed patterns requires becoming aware of the scripts women have been given and also the extent to which we script ourselves, which can be an uncomfortable process. At the same time, many of the qualities that are associated with good leadership – intelligence, good listening skills, shared governance, diligence, respect – are qualities that are expressed or implicit in the Buddhist teachings. And even when things get messy, obstacles and difficulties can become catalysts for awakening, provoking wise and compassionate responses, and sparking deeper awareness. And skillfully challenging social norms, particularly gender norms and expectations, may be necessary and useful for advancing the status of women – a skillful means (*upaya*), as Buddhists call it. Buddhist teachings and archetypes may also be skillfully employed in the process. For example, H. H. Dalai Lama regularly speaks about the love of the mother toward her children and the love babies instinctively express to their mothers to illustrate that compassion is innate to all human beings and is a common denominator of all human beings. Many Tibetan Buddhist teachers also talk about Tara, a bodhisattva in female form, as an enlightened archetype that can inspire all human beings toward virtuous activity.

Women have taken the lead in developing practice centers in North America. Examples include Jiyu-Kennett Roshi (Shasta Abbey), Sharon Salzberg (Insight Meditation Society), Maureen Stuart (Cambridge Buddhist Association), Geshin Prabhava Dharma (International Zen Institute), Bhiksuni Pema Chodron (Gampo Abbey), Joko Beck (Zen Center of San Diego), Sik Kuan Yen (Thousand Buddha Temple), Barbara Rhodes (Providence Zen Center), Tsultrim Allione (Tara Mandala), Joan Halifax (Upaya Zen Center), Marcia Rose (The Mountain Heritage), Pat Enkyo O'Hara (The Village Zendo), P'arang Geri Larkin (Still Point Zen Center),

Bhiksuni Thubten Chodron (Sravasti Abbey), Khenmo Drolma (Vajra Dakini Nunnery), Bhikkhuni Tathaaloka (Aranya Bodhi Hermitage), and many others.

For women to assume positions of religious leadership, they must have access to systematic education and training, and it is here that Buddhist women are often at a disadvantage. Since the 1980s, many changes have come about and women have far more opportunities than before. In 2012, representative of the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism met and agreed to allow women to receive the degrees in Buddhist studies that are offered in their lineages. Although not every Buddhist woman, not even every Buddhist nun, will opt to participate in rigorous Buddhist studies programs that qualify students to become authorized as teachers, the fact that women now have access to these degrees represents a significant breakthrough in working toward gender parity in the Tibetan tradition.

### **Future Directions**

The need for leadership training for women has been recognized by those who are steering the international Buddhist women's movement, especially members of Sakyadhita. The theme of the 12<sup>th</sup> Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women, held in Bangkok in June 2011, was "Leading to Liberation" and thousands of copies of the proceedings of the conference, in a variety of languages (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Thai, and Vietnamese) were distributed to individuals and Buddhist institutions following the conference. Leadership has also been the theme of panels and workshops at previous Sakyadhita conferences. The challenge is to adapt the concepts and the methods used in businesses and secular non-profits to meet the needs and interests of Buddhist women, whose values and objectives may be quite different. An even bigger challenge, which is in many ways prerequisite to leadership training, is gaining equitable access to education and training for Buddhist women.

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

A transnational model of leadership is a new concept for Buddhist women, but one that is full of potential. Whereas women previously tended to practice and teach in their own localities, often unknown except to their closest disciples and friends, now women are more frequently being included in international conferences and events that allow them to travel abroad. The experience of meeting like-minded sisters from many different countries and backgrounds is both affirming and inspiring, raising many new ideas and possibilities. For example, since 1987 Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women holds gatherings that have brought

thousands of women together from all parts of the globe for dialogue, meditation, and pilgrimage.

, based on collaboration rather than competition, shared governance rather than hierarchy

North American Buddhist women's experience is different in several specific ways. Some communities are remarkably egalitarian. In many American Zen communities, for example, work is equally distributed, without regard for stereotypical gender roles. Although it would be a fiction to imagine that such centers are totally gender blind,

Monasticism isn't going away, especially on the international level.

New categories of leadership, such as the term *lama*, which literally means teacher or *guru*, but can be used to designate a Buddhist scholar, a retreat master, or, in some localities, simply a monk. In this egalitarian climate of North America, women are being called upon to assume roles that were traditionally held mostly by men. Buddhist feminist thinking is not simply a question of Western feminists instigating changes, but a new international awareness that gender equity is a legitimate and necessary component of modernity, along with democracy, human rights, and other aspects of liberal thought. A curious facet of this new burgeoning of awareness is that women are more often invited to attend international events and are becoming much more visible and even sometimes asked to speak. This is an excellent opportunity for Buddhist women to get the message of gender equity out to a wider audience. Another factor is that, because women in positions of leadership are so few, they are quite visible. Women may be held to a higher standard than men, as in society generally, but to date there have been few, if any, scandals involving Buddhist women leaders and they are beginning to get a reputation as being "worthy of our confidence." Although women are not always invited, not always allowed to speak, not always heard, and rarely in positions of authority or decision making in international Buddhist organizations and forums, even in national bodies, things are beginning to shift.

## Summary

Although Buddhist societies and Buddhist scholars have been slow to acknowledge women as religious leaders, a significant result of the contemporary Buddhist women's movement has been to encourage and support the documentation of Buddhist women's religious history (Arai 1999; Cho 2011; DeVido 2010; Diemberger 2007; Falk 2007; Meeks 2010). The role of benefactor is highly prized in Buddhist societies and many women in both Asia and the West have taken leadership in the practice of generosity. One of the most renowned in this regard is Ashi Phuntsog.

Challenging the scripts that women have been given that limit their potential for growth and summoning the courage to move beyond imagined limitations.

Perhaps now is a good time to recover Buddhist women's theoretical equality and craft fresh, feminist interpretations of leadership.

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