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2010

### Women as Leaders in Buddhism

Karma Lekshe Tsomo PhD

University of San Diego, [tsomo@sandiego.edu](mailto:tsomo@sandiego.edu)

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“Women as Leaders in Buddhism.” *Gender and Women's Leadership: A Reference Handbook* (vol. 2). Edited by Natalie Green and Karen O'Connor. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2010, pp. 482–89.

## **WOMEN AS LEADERS IN BUDDHISM**

**Karma Lekshe Tsomo**

For Buddhists, the epitome of enlightened leadership is the Buddha himself. The Buddha, the “awakened one,” led by teaching a path to awakening that is open to all. The path to awakening – a process of purifying the mind of afflictions, such as greed, hatred, and ignorance – can be followed by women and men alike. Traditionally, however, the fact that the Buddha, the model of human perfection, was male seemed to imply to future generations that men were more somehow more capable of awakening than women. This impression was bolstered by the eight special rules attributed to the Buddha that assigned nuns a subordinate status within the Sangha (monastic order). As a consequence, it became customary in Buddhist societies to give greater opportunities to monks than to nuns, men than to women, and boys than to girls. Historically, monasteries for monks were the democratically organized training centers for Buddhist leadership and over the centuries most Buddhist leaders have been male. Nuns lived in separate monastic centers that were similarly organized, but because they depended on the monks for certain rituals, a gender hierarchy developed. However, the subordinate status of nuns is at odds with the Buddhist theory that mind has no intrinsic gender, hence there is no inherent impediment to women’s enlightenment. Women have equal potential for liberation and therefore should have equal access to Buddhist knowledge and training. Any impediments to women’s full participation in the tradition are impermanent and can be removed. Based on this logic, today Buddhist women are initiating widespread changes for women around the world.

In the Indian society into which the Buddha was born, leadership was caste-based. Men of the *brahmin* caste were groomed to be religious leaders and those of the *kshatriya* caste to be political and military leaders. People of various backgrounds could become wandering *yogis* or seekers, but only *brahmins* could become priests. Women largely played supportive, domestic roles, so models of women's leadership in the public sphere were lacking. The Buddha opened new pathways by declaring that nobility of heart was not restricted by caste or gender. In the system he taught, liberation was possible for everyone who diligently strived to achieve it. He comforted King Pasenadi, who was dismayed at the birth of a daughter, by saying that a girl child might turn out to be better than a boy, by becoming wise and virtuous (Harris, 1999, p. 55). He founded religious orders for both women and men. He broke with tradition by allowing people of all castes, men and women alike, to join the Sangha. Buddhist monasteries became centers for training in ethics, meditation, and wisdom. Those who progressed in this training became recognized and respected as leaders in society.

In traditional Buddhist societies, leadership is closely related to monastic ordination. There are many misconceptions about what Buddhist ordination is and what it signifies, but among Buddhists, the decision to enter monastic life and devote one's life to the goal of spiritual liberation is highly valued for both women and men. Historically, as Buddhism spread, the seeds of the tradition were carried by monastics, who become teachers and leaders for people in new locations. The Buddha's new paradigm of awakened consciousness was transmitted by monks and nuns to new communities. In essence, monastic ordination is a positive affirmation of an individual's highest human potential. Monasteries are single-sex communities where renunciants women and men can live in harmonious relationships with others who have committed their lives to realizing their enlightenment potential. Entering the Sangha not only empowers people and

helps them realize this potential, but it is also a means of transmitting leadership skills, authority, confidence, and energy that builds over generations. Some critics emphasize the privileges that monastic practitioners receive, without understanding that these privileges go hand in hand with special responsibilities. Traditionally in Asian Buddhist communities, laypeople respect monastics and are happy to provide them with food, clothes, and shelter, whether they stay in monasteries or in solitary retreat. The Sangha serves the laity by teaching, chanting, and providing other services, and is generally a source of pride to Buddhist communities.

Ultimately, the duty of the monastics is to help lead others to a whole new way of looking at the world – away from the entanglements and disappointments of worldly pursuits and toward the cultivation of enlightened awareness, which is free from attachments, delusions, and suffering. In turn, the lay community recognizes and supports the monastics' virtuous leadership. Supporting those who lead lives of renunciation and contemplation is understood to accrue merit, even if the highest goal of enlightenment is not achieved in this lifetime. In traditional Buddhist societies, the monastics were entrusted with spreading the Buddha's teachings and inspiring others on the path, both within their community and in the wider society. In this way, they led followers along the Eight-fold Noble Path of right views, right intention, right speech, right action, right effort, right livelihood, right mindfulness, right concentration. Not only did they convey the Buddha's teachings in words, but they also modeled the right path for others and thereby served as examples of positive leadership. By giving ordination to others, monastics passed on these teachings to successive generations, creating a lineage of exemplary leadership. This tradition of transmitting the teachings through outstanding exponents has helped create stable communities and prevented power struggles by placing those who were most highly qualified and respected in positions of leadership. This model of leadership has been quite

successful in Buddhist societies, among both male and female monastics. The Buddhist Sangha has lasted over 2,500 years in Asia and is said to be the world's oldest continuous organization.

### **The Qualities of Enlightened Leadership**

Buddhists value leaders who model exemplary moral conduct. Leadership qualities naturally vary from culture to culture, and although certain human values are nearly universal, concepts of exemplary conduct are formulated and transmitted differently in societies around the world. To take an example, the Buddha did not reject honestly gained material wealth, but taught his followers the importance of more lasting and satisfying values, such as ethical conduct and mental cultivation. Rather than issue commandments, the Buddha took a pragmatic approach. He explained the links between ethical conduct and human happiness, offered guidelines for living an ethical life, and illustrated the consequences of intentional actions, wholesome and unwholesome. He enjoined his followers to contemplate these ethical guidelines and to verify them through their own personal experience. Most importantly, he taught by modeling a high standard of ethical conduct himself.

For Buddhists, leadership is closely associated with education and training. In order to cultivate one's mind and travel the path to liberation, it is necessary to rely upon a teacher. The teacher, who may be female or male, serves as a guide on the path and thereby leads the way to enlightenment. The teacher's role is not only to impart knowledge, but to act as an exemplar of ethical values and to impart knowledge, wisdom, and guidance. From a Buddhist perspective, the quintessential leader is one who guides others on the path of virtue and acts as a spiritual friend (*kalyana mitra*). The teacher sows seeds of knowledge and wisdom among his or her students

and cares for them with loving kindness and compassion. Like fertile fields, the students receive the seeds of knowledge and wisdom with respect and humility, then nurture them with mindfulness and diligence.

From a Buddhist perspective, the qualities valued in an exemplary leader are none other than the qualities valued in an exemplary person. For example, one trains in the six perfections: generosity, ethical conduct, patience, joyful effort, concentration, and wisdom. Generosity means being generous with one's time, energy, and resources, which demonstrates one's own commitment and inspires others to be equally committed. Ethical conduct means being truthful in speech and honest in one's actions – accounting, for example – which inspires trust and encourages others to be truthful and honest, also. Patience means refraining from anger and aggression, even when provoked, which creates a peaceful, pleasant environment where people can work together in harmony. Joyful effort means diligence and perseverance, working with one's full energy, which inspires others to also do their best. Concentration means keeping one's attention fully on the task at hand and being mindful of one's thoughts, words, and actions. Wisdom means understanding and insight, which nurtures clear perception and skillful means in responding to complex situations in ways that are consistent with Buddhist values.

For Buddhists, wisdom is the ability to see things “as they are,” without bias or distortion. Wisdom acquired through study, mental cultivation, and experience is an essential quality of an exemplary leader. It arises from mental cultivation, which is the process of learning to control the mind and purifying it of the afflictive emotions. Through mental cultivation, one learns to concentrate the mind single-pointedly and develops insight. As wisdom increases, one understands one's own mind more clearly and makes wiser choices. One is able to assess and

handle problematic situations more skillfully. For these reasons, in Buddhist societies the quality of wisdom is highly prized and must be accompanied by loving kindness and compassion.

Useful qualities for an exemplary leader are the four “divine abidings”: loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. For Buddhists, loving kindness is the wish, “May all sentient beings be happy!” and compassion is the wish, “May all sentient beings be free from suffering!” By cultivating a heart of loving kindness and compassion, one learns to overcome self-cherishing and self-grasping. Gradually, one realizes that the benefit of the group, the benefit of humanity, and ultimately the benefit of all sentient beings (including animals) are greater than one’s own individual benefit. A person who is not limited by self-interest, but instead acts out of genuine concern for all, naturally gains the respect of others and becomes recognized as a good leader. Sympathetic joy, the third quality, is rejoicing in the virtues and good fortune of others. This attitude fosters an appreciation of the qualities and efforts of others and naturally helps diffuse feelings of jealousy and competition. Equanimity, the fourth quality, means developing a calm disposition and the ability to control strong emotional outbursts, even under stressful circumstances. Women who cultivate these four qualities naturally become respected and recognized as spiritual leaders, just as men are.

Wisdom and compassion are cultivated with an attitude of humility. The path to liberation is a path of constant learning. The Buddha’s own path reveals trial and error along the way. The Buddha was not born enlightened, but was a human being who lived a life of experimentation, reflection, and total dedication in a search for meaning that culminated in the highest goal of awakening. His example has lead others to cultivate compassion and insight in a spirit of continual training, making corrections along the way. Compassion toward oneself as well as toward others is a guiding principle of successful leadership.

Another early discussion of exemplary leadership in the Buddhist texts sets forth ten qualities that characterize a noble ruler (*cakravartin*): generosity, virtue, altruism, integrity, gentleness, self-sacrifice, non-anger, non-violence, patience, and liberality. These qualities of a noble ruler can be seen as setting a standard for leaders in Buddhist societies, whether female or male. Even today in Thailand, kings must train as monks and steep themselves in the highest Buddhist ideals to prepare for ruling civil society according to these values. Monastic discipline, such as learning to control desires and training in humility by going for alms each day, helps future leaders become honest, virtuous guides for civil society. The monastic virtues of decorum and discipline strongly influence Buddhist lay society and the standards of behavior people expect from their leaders. Buddhist women leaders are expected to live up to these same ideals.

Unlike conventional Euro-American histories that extol the military might of generals and accord leadership status to the victors, exemplary political leadership in the Buddhist understanding is not associated with aggression. On the contrary, a virtuous ruler is exhorted to be gentle, moderate, and restrained. At the same time, a ruler or political leader must be confident in standing up for principles and speaking out to defend what is right. Given these guidelines, it is clear that even a person who holds no formal rank or position may be regarded as an exemplary leader on the basis of his or her personal qualities and ethical integrity. An example is the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, who resigned from political office years ago, but remains one of the most trusted and respected leaders in the world. Even though he is stateless and finds himself on the wrong side of global power structures, he is recognized as a world leader because of his globally appreciated intelligence, compassion, and wisdom.

Another archetype of exemplary leadership is the *bodhisattva* who strives to liberate all beings from suffering. In fact, the *bodhisattva* may be a more apt model of leadership for women

than the ideal ruler. Although female rulers are largely absent in Buddhist texts, there are numerous examples of female *bodhisattvas* in Mahayana Buddhism. For example, Tara is revered as the embodiment of enlightened activity and Saraswati as the female archetype of learning. A *bodhisattva* is an altruistic being who wishes to free all beings from suffering and aspires to become a fully awakened Buddha in order to do so. The *bodhisattva* is the epitome of selflessness, being dedicated to the welfare of others and even willing to postpone his or her own liberation to help relieve the sufferings of others. Any human being can resolve to become a *bodhisattva* by generating this selfless aspiration.

There are said to be three types of *bodhisattvas*: like a shepherd, a ruler, or a ferryboat captain. The shepherd-like *bodhisattva* ushers others ahead and achieves liberation only after all others have safely reached the goal. The ruler-like *bodhisattva* leads others toward the goal by achieving liberation first and setting an example for others to follow. The captain-like *bodhisattva* travels toward the other shore of liberation along with others and reaches the destination together with them. By going ahead and setting an example for others, the ruler-like *bodhisattva* most closely resembles the stereotypical concept of a leader, but it is important to recognize that this is just one way of benefiting beings. It is also possible to lead by skillfully shepherding others ahead of oneself or by traveling and working together with them. For Buddhists, the essential element is the pure motivation to work for the happiness of others. By working for the benefit of others, we naturally achieve happiness ourselves.

The selfless example of the *bodhisattva* has had a far-reaching effect in Buddhist societies, serving as an ideal for both women and men. In India, the exemplar of compassion, Avalokitesvara, appears in male form, but in China, this *bodhisattva* gradually appears in Buddhist iconography as a woman, known as Guanyin. This female form of the *bodhisattva*

becomes immensely popular throughout East Asia and beyond (Yü, 2001). Although many Buddhists hold the qualities of loving kindness and compassion are beyond gender and can be developed by all those who set their mind to it, in Buddhist societies women continue to be associated with these nurturing qualities.

### **Buddhist Women as Leaders**

In the early Buddhist accounts, when questioned by his attendant Ananda, the Buddha affirmed women's potential to achieve the "fruits of the path," the stages of realization, on an equal par with men. He confirmed that women have the capacity to become a stream enterer, once-returner, non-returner, or *arhat* (liberated being), and thousands apparently did. These achievements reflect the highest levels of character development a human being can attain on the Buddhist path. The Buddha is shown publicly lauded women who demonstrated leadership during his lifetime. In these early accounts, he paid tribute to specific women for their exemplary achievements. Patacara was praised for her commendable monastic discipline, Khema for her remarkable insight, Dhammadinna for her preeminence in teaching, Sundari Nanda for her excellence in meditation. Sona was lauded for her admirable diligence, Bhadda Kapilani for her ability to recall past lives, Bhadda Kundalakesa for her intuition, Sakula for her heavenly visions, and Uppalavañña for her supernormal powers (Rhys Davids, 1913, 47-49). In the *Verses of the Elder Nuns (Therigatha)*, 70 eminent women of various backgrounds who achieved the liberated state of an *arhat* during the time of the Buddha express their awakening experience.

The most famous Buddhist woman at the time was Mahaprajapati, the Buddha's stepmother and aunt, who became the founder of the Bhiksuni Sangha (the order of Buddhist

nuns). Mahaprajapati's name means "leader of a large assembly" and her future leadership role was reportedly foretold by an astrologer at the time of her birth. According to the story, the Buddha's mother died shortly after his birth and he was raised in royal luxury by Mahaprajapati, his mother's sister, who became King Suddhodhana's queen. Some years after the Buddha's awakening, Mahaprajapati decided to enter religious life and requested admission into the Sangha. At first, the Buddha hesitated, perhaps fearing that a woman of aristocratic background, accustomed to the luxuries of palace life, would face too many difficulties living a renunciant lifestyle. To demonstrate her sincerity, Mahaprajapati shaved her head, dressed in robes, and with 500 other women walked to the town of Vaisali to request admission to the Sangha. According to the story, the Buddha consented after she agreed to observe eight "weighty" rules that subjected women to men's authority. This was the controversial (and contested) beginning of the Bhiksuni Sangha. Nevertheless, Mahaprajapati was widely admired for her leadership of the Bhiksuni Sangha and for her spiritual attainments. An exemplary leader to the end, she eventually achieved liberation (*nirvana*).

Another powerful woman leader in Buddhist history was Sanghamitra. According to early Buddhist accounts, she was born as the daughter of King Asoka of India during the third century BCE and became a nun when she was 18 years old. After achieving liberation, she was invited to Sri Lanka to conduct the ordination of Queen Anula and her retinue. Resolute despite her father's reluctance, she traveled to Sri Lanka accompanied by several nuns and carrying a sapling of the famed *bodhi* tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment. By conducting the ordination of Anula and several hundred other noble women, she initiated the Bhiksuni Sangha in Sri Lanka. She is honored in Sri Lanka to this day and Sanghamitra Day has become a national holiday.

During the centuries since these early pioneers, women have served as models of virtuous activity in Buddhist societies. Traditionally, women have quietly exercised leadership in their homes and communities by modeling Buddhist values, without seeking or desiring public recognition. Their role as educators of future generations and as compassionate caregivers of their families and communities is significant and should not be overlooked. Women's traditional roles in the family include domestic duties, fieldwork, and caring for children. The values assigned to women from a young age, are nurturing, humility, and selfless service. On one hand, it may be argued that self-effacement, in the sense of overcoming selfishness and putting others before oneself, are ideals for men as well as for women. In fact, because women in Buddhist societies are taught love and compassion from a young age and encouraged to express it, they are often equated with compassion, one of Buddhism's highest values. On the other hand, it may be argued that the emphasis on humility and self-effacement in early childhood development has not always worked to women's benefit, since it may contribute to their subordination.

Of course, taking on leadership responsibilities requires skills and confidence, both of which are typically acquired through education. As elsewhere, despite Buddhism's egalitarian ideals, it has been easier for men to develop as leaders in Buddhist societies, primarily because they have had access to more and better quality education. A lack of equal educational opportunities has indisputably limited Buddhist women's options and handicapped their leadership potential. Today, as women gain access to higher levels of education, the ceiling rises on their opportunities for growth and advancement in both secular and religious spheres and hence they are better able to develop their potential as leaders. As Buddhist women in Asia and elsewhere become better educated, they are increasingly taking leadership positions in business, government, education, and religion. The experience of being in high-profile leadership roles is

new for most women, but the same principles that have guided Buddhist women's personal lives for centuries are now being successfully applied to running companies, temples, and public agencies. Two and a half millennia after the Buddha, the six perfections – generosity, ethical conduct, patience, joyful effort, concentration, and wisdom – are still highly valued qualities in a leader. Culturally sanctioned values such as gentleness and humility, which some associate with weakness and subordination, may prove to be strengths in corporate management and other fields, creating new roles and possibilities for Buddhist women.

### **Contemporary Buddhist Women Leaders**

The story of Bhiksuni Dhammavati, a Theravada nun from the Newar community of Nepal, is an apt illustration of Buddhist leadership in recent history (LeVine, 2004, pp. 140-144). In 1950, as a young girl of 14, she ran away from home and found her way to Burma, where she studied Buddhism assiduously and achieved the highest degree. After returning to Nepal in 1963, she founded Dharmakirti Vihara in Kathmandu as a nuns' community and Buddhist learning center. The easily accessible learning materials she developed attracted hundreds and then thousands of students, especially women and children. In 1988, with encouragement from the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, she led a group of nuns to Los Angeles, where they received full ordination as *bhiksunis* (LeVine, 2000, pp. 13-29). Returning home, they faced opposition from many Nepalese monks, but were widely supported by the Buddhist laity, especially women. Ignoring the monks' opposition, Bhiksuni Dhammavati arranged for groups of nuns to receive full ordination in China in 1997 and in India in 1998. Eventually, these nuns will be able to organize *bhiksuni* ordinations of their own in Nepal, after a lapse of nearly a thousand years. Meanwhile,

Bhiksuni Dhammavati is widely respected as a pioneering leader in the Theravada Buddhist community of Nepal and has worked diligently for positive changes in the lives of countless women and children. In view of her valuable contributions, Bhiksuni Dhammavati could be compared to Mahaprajapati, the founder of the Bhiksuni Sangha. She has overcome many obstacles in the pursuit of Buddhist learning, broken new ground in receiving *bhiksuni* ordination, founded a respected community of nuns and laypeople, worked to educate generations of Nepalese Buddhists, and continues to lead her community on the path to liberation.

Buddhist ideals of leadership often entail breaking through boundaries in quiet ways. A classic example is Hyechun Sunim, a Korean nun who deftly and unpretentiously led nuns to national prominence in Korea. The daughter of a judge, she received a good education, but witnessed unimaginable misery after the outbreak of the Korean war. Fleeing south, her experiences awakened her to the truth of suffering taught by the Buddha and she made a decision to enter monastic life. Shortly thereafter, she endured many hardships in the freezing cold before the great meditation master Songchol agreed to teach a nun. After practicing Soen (Zen) intensively for many years, she became a meditation master and guide for others gaining renown for her diligence and determination. She established Bohyon Hermitage as the first Soen meditation center for nuns in Korea. In addition to her social welfare activities, Hyechun Sunim led the movement to create the Korean Bhikkhuni Association in 1985 and established a retreat center with a meditation hall for 300 nuns in 1992. She resolutely pioneered the participation of Korean nuns in the Sakyadhita International Conferences on Buddhist Women in Thailand in 1991 and in Sri Lanka in 1993. For her compassionate activities, she was recognized both by the Korean government and by the international Buddhist women's community.

An example of a Buddhist laywoman who embodies Buddhist ideals of leadership is Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma. The daughter of Burma's national hero Aung San, she is prominent democracy advocate. In 1988, she was elected general secretary of the newly formed National League for Democracy, but was placed under house arrest the following year, without due process. In 1990, her party won an overwhelming majority in the national elections, but the ruling military government refused to recognize the results. While living under house arrest for thirteen of the past twenty years, she has maintained Buddhist principles of nonviolence, continuing to call for dialogue and negotiation. Her continued detention called attention to political repression and human rights violations by the government, which renamed the country Myanmar. In 1991, she was awarded the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought and the Nobel Peace Prize. Her life is an expression of Buddhist values, sustained by the Buddha's teachings and meditation practice through years of confinement and disappointment. Her moral integrity has become an example for others, as she dedicates her life to work compassionately and nonviolently for the good of her people, despite countless hardships. Because she willingly shares the sufferings of the Burmese people in their struggle for self-determination, yet steadfastly upholds her nonviolent principles, she is renowned as a model of ethical leadership. During the 2007 demonstrations in Yangon, monks passed her home to honor her. She has inspired an international movement to secure human rights and democracy in Burma and continues to be honored as a symbol of hope and freedom for those living under political repression.

These women are just a few examples of Buddhist women leaders who have helped nurture the intellectual, moral, and social development of others. Their lives illustrate a regeneration of social activism among Buddhist women and give credence to the claim that Buddhist practice prepares people to become effective leaders. The results of this training are

pragmatic and visible. A person who trains in ethics is less vulnerable to corruption. One who trains in mindfulness has more energy and focus, and is therefore able to work more effectively. One who trains in loving kindness and compassion is more caring and attentive to the needs of others. A good leader empathizes with the sufferings of others and feels compelled to do something about it. The antiquated notion that women cannot be leaders, because they must take care of their families, is becoming obsolete. Women in Buddhist societies are becoming more active in civil society and proving their excellence. Still, there is much work to do to achieve true gender equity.

There are also many examples of Buddhist women leaders in western countries. Many have received training in Asian models of leadership and incorporate these traditional models into their organizational management styles. Many have also received training in new models of leadership, including feminist models and also incorporate these ideas. Women have been instrumental in establishing Buddhism in western countries – creating monasteries, Buddhist practice centers, retreat centers, hospices, and international organizations. Many western Buddhist women are leaders in social activism, working to support prison reform, gun reform, and nuclear disarmament, and to oppose racism, sex trafficking, and capital punishment. Buddhist women are taking new roles as authors, artists, academics, journalists, board members, researchers, and CEOs of international businesses and non-governmental organizations, implementing traditional Buddhist principles and practices in innovative ways.

### **Buddhist Women's Leadership: Integration and Transformation**

Presenting examples of exemplary women in early Buddhist history does not tell the whole story, because it does not explain the absence of women from leadership roles throughout much of Buddhist history. The exclusion of women from educational institutions is both the root cause and the expression of their subordinate value to society. Although Buddhist women may enjoy greater social freedom than their neighbors, they have not had equal access to the secular and religious knowledge that is fundamental to intellectual and spiritual development and hence have not had equal access to leadership. This is no longer acceptable. Full inclusion is fundamental and any analysis of women's potential for leadership in Buddhist institutions and societies in the future must acknowledge the importance of gender parity in education. In spite of the Buddhist recognition that women are fully human and therefore capable of achieving the highest spiritual goal, in theory, even today true gender equity remains elusive in many Buddhist cultures. Theoretical equality is not good enough. Women require more than verbal assurances; they need every opportunity to optimize their potential for awakening. If, as the Buddha taught, future happiness and unhappiness depend on the quality of actions created in the present, then Buddhists must act now to ensure that women are free of constraints – psychological, social, educational, or otherwise – on their paths to awakening. Liberation for Buddhist women must be personally, spiritually *and* socially liberating.

Leadership qualities can be developed through everyday experience, but the opportunity to receive leadership training undeniably enhances women's possibilities. Unfortunately, leadership training opportunities are few in Asia and have only recently become available. To address the pressing need to encourage women's leadership in Buddhist societies, an international association of Buddhist women called Sakyadhita ("Daughters of the Buddha") was founded in India in 1987. Since then, the movement to nurture women's leadership capacity has

spread throughout the world. Sakyadhita organizes international conferences at least every two years that bring together women from dozens of different countries to learn and encourage one another. The Sakyadhita movement publishes newsletters and books to document the overlooked contributions of Buddhist women throughout history. Sakyadhita gatherings around the world inspire women to create opportunities for other women to optimize their potential, including schools, shelters, retreat centers, orphanages, and healthcare centers.

### **Future Directions for Research**

Any attempt to formulate a Buddhist theory of leadership must take into account the rich diversity of Buddhist cultures and ideas, as well as the rapid changes taking place today in Buddhist communities throughout the world. Traditional concepts of leadership arose in a milieu where, despite democratic principles in the early Buddhist Sangha, hierarchical structures were typical in the surrounding society. Many ideas about leadership rested on assumptions about rebirth and spiritual liberation in societies that were far less complex than today, when material concerns tend to overshadow religious principles. At a time when human beings' desires and consequent dissatisfactions have proliferated, contemporary theories of leadership need to be supplemented by additional skills in guiding human development, relationships, and organizations. The experience and accumulated wisdom of Buddhist psychology and organizational structures that have survived for two and a half millennia have contributions to make to contemporary discussions on leadership. For instance, Buddhist meditation practices for developing concentration, generating loving kindness, and discovering inner peace can help people prevent burn-out, ego conflicts, and stress associated with the frenetic pace of modern life

and the pressures of community organizing. At the same time, Buddhists can benefit from learning new strategies and perspectives on organizational management that have developed in the west, including communications skills, systems theory, and assessment tools. In addition, traditional styles of management need to be assessed to see which practices are still relevant and which need to be modified or perhaps jettisoned altogether. Traditional values of respect for others and concern for the collective well-being are still relevant and needed, whereas hierarchical models of authority may give way to shared decision making and consensus.

The strength of traditional Buddhist models is a genuine concern for the benefit of all beings, motivated not by fame or gain, but to help guide humanity toward inner peace, world peace, and ultimately enlightenment. Buddhist psychology provides useful tools for understanding the mind and for dealing with human emotions such as fear, loss, distress, and other challenges of the human condition. Buddhist teachers strongly emphasize the preciousness of human existence. Their approach to time management is to use every moment of this brief human life span meaningfully to purify the mind and to help relieve the sufferings of living beings. The teachings on contentment can help us live more simply and also, instead of stressing out trying to make everything perfect, be satisfied doing the best we can. The Buddhist teachings on following a middle path between asceticism and indulgence and between eternalism and nihilism are helpful for learning to balance openheartedness and flexibility with firm ethical principles. The teachings on meditation are helpful for developing a clear and quiet mind that can handle the vicissitudes of daily life with ease.

The value of traditional models of leadership should not be overlooked or underestimated. Buddhist monastics have preserved a way of life that has guided human beings on the path of peace for millennia and still play significant roles today. Ordained nuns and

monks, being free of family obligations, have plenty of time both for spiritual practice and for benefiting society. Nuns, in particular, excel at social welfare activities throughout Asia and beyond, creating schools, dialysis centers, hospitals, hospices, and cultural centers to benefit women, children, and men alike. The more education and training these nuns get, the more benefit they are able to bring to society. The current movement to guarantee access to full ordination for women signals a new aspiration for equal leadership in Buddhist institutions. Even if only a few women wish to become nuns, achieving equal access to opportunities for monastic training and leadership is one measure of gender equity in society overall. Buddhist laywomen are taking new leadership roles and many are emerging as respected teachers, especially in western societies

## **Summary and Conclusion**

In recent times, renewed attention is being given to women's roles in all Buddhist traditions. Nuns and laywomen alike are achieving prominence in all aspects of life and many are dedicating their efforts to benefit others. Sirimavo Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka became the world's first woman prime minister in 1960 and nuns have been leaders of political protest in Tibet, especially since the 1980s (Barnett, 2005). Yet the challenges are many. Traditionally Buddhist countries like Burma, Cambodia, China, India, Laos, Mongolia, Tibet, and Vietnam have faced devastating political upheavals in recent decades that have killed millions of people and rent the social fabric. Putting the pieces back together again and creating a more sane and peaceful world requires the efforts of all women and men, lay and ordained. It requires giving special care and attention to women who have experienced trauma and loss or who have little faith in their own

capabilities. If working for peace is a good thing, then having twice as many people working for peace is even better. For these reasons, Buddhists have nothing to lose and everything to gain by fostering women's leadership – in the monastery, family, government, and the workplace.

Working actively together and creatively adapting the model of enlightened leadership that the Buddha taught, women are poised to play significant roles in transforming Buddhist societies. By challenging outmoded perceptions of women and reawakening women to their highest human potential, Buddhist women have much to contribute to the spiritual dimension of global dialogue in helping create a new consciousness for a new era.

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**Karma Lekshe Tsomo** is an associate professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of San Diego, where she teaches Buddhism, World Religions, and Comparative Religious Ethics. In 2000, she received a doctorate in Philosophy from the University of Hawai'i at Manoa, with research on death and identity in China and Tibet. She is president of Sakyadhita: International Association of Buddhist Women and has co-coordinated eleven international conferences on Buddhist women. She is director of Jamyang Foundation, an educational initiative for girls and women in developing countries. She is the editor of *Buddhist Women Across Cultures: Realizations*; *Innovative Buddhist Women: Swimming Against the Stream*; and *Buddhist Women and Social Justice: Ideals, Challenges, and Achievements*; and the author of *Sisters in Solitude: Two Traditions of Monastic Ethics for Women*.