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North American Buddhist Women in the International Context

Karma Lekshe Tsomo PhD

University of San Diego, tsomo@sandiego.edu

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Tsomo, Karma Lekshe PhD, "North American Buddhist Women in the International Context" (2007).

Theology and Religious Studies: Faculty Scholarship. 23.

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WOMEN PRACTICING BUDDHISM

AMERICAN EXPERIENCES



Edited by Peter N. Gregory
and Susanne Mrozik



WISDOM PUBLICATIONS • BOSTON

Wisdom Publications, Inc.
199 Elm Street
Somerville MA 02144 USA
www.wisdompubs.org

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"Just Power" by Helen Tworkov first published in *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*,
vol. 15, no. 2 (winter 2005), pp. 58–61, 116–17.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Women practicing Buddhism : American experiences / edited by Peter N. Gregory and Susanne Mrozik.

p. cm.

Based on presentations at a conference held at Smith College in Northampton, Mass., Ap. 7-10, 2005.

What does Buddhist practice mean to American women? / Susanne Mrozik—North American Buddhist women in the international context / Karma Lekshe Tsomo—Moving beyond gender / Bell Hooks—Buddhism and Creativity / Jane Hirshfield, Meredith Monk, Pat Enkyo O'Hara (moderator)—Women changing Buddhism : feminist perspectives / Bell Hooks, Sharon Suh, Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Susanne Mrozik (moderator)—Just power / Helen Tworkov—Engaged Buddhism / Virginia Straus Benson, Diana Lion, Eve Marko, Hilda Ryumon Gutiérrez Baldoquín (moderator)—A Jewish woman and Buddhism / Sheila Peltz Weinberg—Race, ethnicity, and class / Hilda Ryumon Gutiérrez Baldoquín, Sharon Suh, Arinna Weisman, Carolyn Jacobs (moderator)—Fashioning new selves : the experiences of Taiwanese Buddhist women / Carolyn Chen—Growing up Buddhist / Alice Urno—Women dharma teachers' forum / Thubten Chodron, Pat Enkyo O'Hara, Yifa, Carol Wilson.

ISBN 0-86171-539-X (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Buddhist women—Religious life—United States—Congresses. I. Gregory, Peter N., 1945- II. Mrozik, Susanne.

BQ5450.W63 2007

294.3082'0973—dc22

2007036420

12 11 10 09 08

5 4 3 2 1

Cover and interior design by Gopa & Tedz, Inc. Set in Palatino 10.25/15.4.

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Printed in the United States of America



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Since 1987 Buddhist women from around the world have begun to unite on a grassroots level and assume leadership in working for the welfare of human society. Now, two decades after the founding of Sakyadhita ("Daughters of the Buddha"): International Association of Buddhist Women, the Buddhist women's movement is recognized as a highly dynamic forum representing some 300 million women worldwide. This movement, emerging from the margins into the international spotlight as a force for social change, is an example of how women can unite their resources and talents, work in harmony, and make significant contributions to global understanding. This innovative movement, while focusing on Buddhist women's issues and perspectives, embraces all living beings. It is innovative in incorporating scholarly perspectives, spiritual practice, grassroots activism, and cultural performance as equally valid dimensions of women's experience. Creating a forum that unites women from such a rich variety of backgrounds, disciplines, and perspectives with respect and appreciation is an expression of women's enormous potential for global transformation.

—Karma Lekshe Tsomo 2005



This book is dedicated to Karma Lekshe Tsomo in gratitude for her work on behalf of the Buddhist women of the world.

North American Buddhist Women in the International Context



Karma Lekshe Tsomo

UNDERSTANDING North American Buddhist Women from a global perspective is a daunting task because of the enormous diversity of both North American and Asian Buddhist women. The first question is, What does it mean to be a Buddhist? For some, to be a Buddhist means formally going for refuge in the Buddha, dharma, sangha. In other cases, a person is born Buddhist and lives her whole life as a Buddhist, without any special ceremony. Differences like these make it impossible to generalize about Buddhist women's experiences.

When we talk about American Buddhist women, for example, are we talking about the thirty-year-old white Harvard graduate who sits once a week at her local dharma center? Are we talking about the Laotian Buddhist woman who is an engineer at the naval base in San Diego and offers *dāna* to the monks at her local temple on new moon and full moon days? When we talk about international Buddhist women, are we talking about the Korean bhikṣuṇī professor who has a Ph.D., teaches Buddhist studies, and is a national advocate for organ donations among Buddhists? Are we talking about the Tibetan nun who is serving a fifteen-year sentence in Drapchi prison for harboring a photo

of the Dalai Lama? Or are we talking about the Thai office clerk who spends her vacations sitting *vipassanā* retreats? Clearly, Buddhist women's experiences are vastly different, both in North America and internationally.

To compound the complexity, there are no statistics even on the numbers of Buddhist women in the world, much less about their educational backgrounds, economic circumstances, Buddhist affiliations, or spiritual practice. I estimate that there are 300 million Buddhist women worldwide. In some places it's very difficult to get even a rough idea of the numbers. In China, for example, many people are Buddhists at heart but may hesitate to publicly identify themselves as Buddhists. It is even more difficult to calculate the exact number of Buddhist nuns in the world. We know that there are more than ten thousand nuns in Korea, more than ten thousand in Taiwan, more than seven thousand in Vietnam, and roughly one hundred thousand Buddhist nuns in Burma, but it is difficult to precisely document these numbers. After living and traveling in Asia for forty years, I conclude that women hold up roughly half of the Buddhist sky.

I became a Buddhist as a child, because my family name was Zenn, a German name apparently misspelled at Immigration. Little kids used to tease my brother and me about being Zen Buddhists, so I went to the public library and found two books on Buddhism, D.T. Suzuki's *Zen Buddhism* and Alan Watts' *The Way of Zen*. I read them from cover to cover and announced to my Southern Baptist Fundamentalist mother, "Mommy, I'm a Buddhist." She was horrified, of course, because according to her belief system that doomed me to eternal hell-fire. That was the beginning of my own personal experience of inter-faith dialogue.

During the past twenty-eight years as a Buddhist nun, I've been fortunate to stay in many different monasteries in India, Japan, Taiwan, and other parts of Asia. That has been a marvelous opportunity to experience traditional monastic practice, day by day. Over the past thirty years, I've also been very fortunate to be involved in the early stages of establishing Buddhist temples and dharma centers in the

United States, mostly in Hawaii and California, and to experience the ways in which women practice and support these centers. Here we can distinguish between the experiences of Asian Buddhists, Asian American Buddhists, and non-Asian American Buddhists. Not only that, but we can also distinguish between the experiences of lay Buddhists, ordained Buddhists, and a new category in the United States, known as neither lay nor ordained, as Suzuki Rōshi characterized the lifestyle of his American Zen students. Then we can distinguish between rich and poor Buddhists, scholars and meditators, and among the adherents of many different Buddhist traditions.

North American Buddhist women also have different levels of commitment to Buddhism. For some, Buddhism is one interest among many. Some people have a dharma book by their bed, which they read before dropping off to sleep at night. The term "night-stand Buddhists" has been used derogatorily, but to read ten pages of a dharma book every evening is a wonderful way to increase understanding of the Buddhist teachings. There are some people who don't belong to any center but would put "Buddhist" if forced to designate a religious affiliation or if they had to choose someone to officiate at their funeral. In addition, there are serious meditators, serious scholars, and others who simply try to live their lives according to Buddhist principles. These categories are not mutually exclusive. There is considerable crossover among them, and some people find themselves in several different categories. There are Buddhists who have a regular daily practice and those who don't. There are Buddhists who go for intensive retreats for specific lengths of time every year and those who don't. There are those who put Buddhism somewhere on a long list of interests in life, and there are those who value dharma above everything else in life. These differences contribute to the rich variety of Buddhist experience in North America.

We can also distinguish between the experiences of Buddhist laywomen and nuns. Buddhist laypeople can be quite invisible in American society, but it's quite another thing to be very obviously a Buddhist, by wearing traditional robes, for example. A couple of weeks

ago as I just walked into the bank, a woman holding a child looked at me and gasped, "Oh, my God!" So, I just gave her a big smile. Another time a woman at the post office asked, "What are you?" And I thought, Well, let's see, a human..., but I said, "I'm a Buddhist." And she said, "Oh, no. We had those in China." Of course, this can play both ways. Some people smile and put their palms together with respect. Others treat us as if we were the Antichrist. Some people think we are absolutely mad. Others immediately gravitate to us and pour out their spiritual life. Some view monastics as a welcome alternative to the consumerism and violence of contemporary society, while others view us as a threat to their values and their chosen lifestyle. Some regard us as a blessing, representing peace and compassion, while others see us quite literally as a curse. In Hong Kong, among gamblers, it's considered inauspicious to see a monk or a nun before the race begins. Once I was living in a monastery in Happy Valley in Hong Kong, right near the racetrack, and in the morning the gamblers would cover their eyes because if they saw me it would bring them bad luck.

❖ *Expanding Our Worldviews*

The issue of American Buddhist women in the international context also immediately raises gender issues that are sensitive and potentially explosive. Here I assume we can speak freely, without surveillance from Homeland Security or the Bhikkhu Sangha police, but we need to acknowledge that raising questions of gender inequality immediately stirs the waters and makes some people feel very uncomfortable. Let us assume that this applies only to Asia, let me assure you that sexism is alive and well in American Buddhism not only among men but also among women. Admittedly, gender issues are important for Western women, but many American women assume that gender equity is something that has already been achieved. They still begin conversations by saying, "Well, I'm not a feminist, but..." The point of Buddhism is to be mindful, and if our eyes are open, we cannot help but see the sexism that's all around us. The leading example of a Buddhist

feminist activist is not American but Taiwanese. Ven. Chao Hui, a Taiwanese bhikṣuṇī teacher, scholar, and writer, is little known outside of Taiwan, but she should be. She is not only the leading animal rights activist in Taiwan, but she is also a leading activist for women's rights. She very publicly protested the eight special rules that subordinate nuns to monks in traditional Buddhist cultures and influence attitudes toward women throughout the Buddhist world. In 2002, in anticipation of His Holiness the Dalai Lama's visit, the Venerable Chao Hui and eight Buddhist nuns, monks, and laypersons held a nationally televised press conference in Taipei where they ripped posters inscribed with the eight special rules off the wall. The fact that His Holiness the Dalai Lama was scheduled to arrive at Chiang Kai Shek International Airport for his second-only visit to Taiwan did not go unnoticed. The Tibetans have yet to approve the full ordination of women. It's now been twenty-five years since the Tibetan sangha first began researching the complex legal issues involved in establishing a Tibetan bhikṣuṇī lineage.

I may disagree with Ven. Chao Hui's methods, but I certainly admire her work. And I mention it to alert us to the comfortable assumptions we may make about our own level of awareness and the level of feminist awareness among Asian Buddhist women. We need to recognize the misconception that gender discrimination is a problem that exists in Asia and other parts of the world but has already been solved in the egalitarian haven of North America. The technical term is "failing to recognize one's own oppression." We need to be aware of projecting backward in time, too, and realize that advances for women in North America have been made only very recently and remain quite uncertain. We still have a lot of work to do and, in certain respects, we seem to be regressing. For example, 190 nations have signed the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Women; the United States is the only country that has not yet signed. So far 172 nations have signed the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of the Child, but the United States is not among them, which is shameful and shocking. We need only look at the halls of government to see that women are by no means fairly represented

in those bastions of power. We need to be aware that the stereotypes and preconceptions we may harbor about the lives and attitudes of Western and Asian Buddhist women may be unfounded.

We need only look to Burma, where a 4' 10" Buddhist laywoman, Aung San Suu Kyi, continues to risk her life to challenge one of the world's most brutal military dictatorships, protesting its illegitimacy by remaining under house arrest for nearly twenty years now. She is the democratically elected head of state, but she has not been allowed to take her rightful position. And Ven. Saccawati, a young Burmese bhikkhunī (a Theravada nun) ordained in Sri Lanka, has the entire Bhikkhu Sangha with their robes in knots because she dared to challenge the Burmese Buddhist establishment on the issue of full ordination for women. The monks cannot cope with this tiny nun's assertion of her right to be fully a nun, which they somehow regard as threatening to their authority. They claim that the bhikkhunī lineage has died out and seem oblivious to the fact that there are tens of thousands of bhikṣuṇīs (Mahayana nuns) in Taiwan, Korea, and Vietnam. Most monks are unaware that the bhikkhunī/ bhikṣuṇī ordination has nothing to do with Mahāyāna Buddhism, which they imagine will engulf their country as soon as nuns become ordained. They fail to recognize that, at the time of the Buddha himself, the decision to ordain women was considered a fairly radical move; it threatened the prevailing patriarchal society, which was preventing women from realizing their full spiritual potential. At the present time, Ven. Saccawati has been detained by the government, her passport has been confiscated, and it is unclear what her fate will be. She is the first fully ordained nun who has dared to go back to Burma. The international community needs to be alert to such dramas unfolding on the other side of the globe. After the first group of ten bhikkhunis from Sri Lanka received full ordination in Sarnath in 1996, they stayed for a year in India because they were afraid of what might happen upon their return to Sri Lanka. But when they eventually arrived at Colombo Airport a year later, instead of a hostile reception, there were thousands of people gathered to welcome them. The astonished nuns were greeted with

a golden parasol and led in procession. This was a truly auspicious gathering—welcoming the bhikkhuni lineage back to Sri Lanka after almost a thousand years.

❖ *Understanding North American Buddhist Women*

To understand women's experiences of Buddhism in North America, I would like to introduce the three communities of North American Buddhists I mentioned earlier—Asian, Asian American, and non-Asian American Buddhists—and the issues that each of these groups are primarily concerned with, as I understand them. The first group, Asian Buddhists, consists of immigrants from Burma, Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, India, Korea, Laos, Mongolia, Nepal, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, Tibet, and Vietnam. This is an immensely rich and diverse group of Buddhists, most of whom have immigrated to the United States since the 1970s. In addition to survival, Asian Buddhists in the United States are primarily concerned with cultural preservation, cultural identity, cultural continuity, and service to the community of immigrants from their homeland. They celebrate Buddhist festivals, invite monks to teach and support them, create a supportive community, and help resolve problems that arise in their communities. The temples serve a social as well as a religious function in the lives of the people. The laypeople create merit by supporting the temple, and the monastics serve the lay community by teaching, chanting sūtras and prayers, counseling, presiding at ceremonies, and serving as a focal point for community life. The major challenges facing Asian Buddhist communities are raising funds to build temples, getting permits to build temples, and issues of cultural adaptation, particularly racism, poverty, dealing with government agencies, and raising their children to understand and respect the Buddhist values they cherish.

The second group, Asian American Buddhists, dates back to the late 1800s, with the establishment of traditional Chinese and Japanese temples in California and Hawaii. These Buddhist temples served the same

functions and struggled with more or less the same issues that more recent Buddhist immigrant communities face. Issues of racism, poverty, and cultural alienation were even more acute in those early years. The Jōdo Shinshū tradition is a prime example of cultural survival and adaptation: pews replaced *tatami*, hymnals replaced sūtra scrolls, and married ministers replaced monks. When I first visited a Buddhist temple in Los Angeles in 1962, I found the children singing "Buddha loves me, this I know, for the sūtras tell me so." At the Buddha Day celebration in Honolulu in 1995, the Hawaii Buddhist Council, which is entirely Japanese American, passed out rulers to the participants inscribed with "Buddha ♥ Me." Although these examples of cultural adaptation may strike us as slightly amusing today, I think it is extremely important to appreciate the hardships and discrimination that Buddhists endured in the early years, and still do, if we are to understand the experiences of North American Buddhist women as a whole; after all, these were some of the early pioneers of Buddhism in North America.

The third group, non-Asian American Buddhists, has grown especially in the last fifty years. This is a catch-all category that includes Buddhists who do not identify themselves as part of either of the first two groups. They are concerned with accessing Buddhist teachings, translating and interpreting them, and reinterpreting them in light of their own experience. These Buddhists come from a wide variety of ethnic, cultural, educational, social, and economic backgrounds. They may be Euro-American, African American, Latina American, Samoan American, or multicultural; rich or poor; with different family histories, and different sexual orientations. Primarily, however, they are white, middle class, and university educated. They belong to a variety of Buddhist traditions—Zen, Tibetan, Vipassanā, Pure Land, Soka Gakkai, and so forth—and are involved in a variety of practices, especially meditation, chanting, social service, and social activism.

❖ *Creating a Sense of Solidarity*

The question is how we can create a sense of community among Buddhist women that extends beyond identifications and allegiances to particular traditions, ethnicities, lifestyles, teachers, or whatever. Solidarity is typically reached in the face of a common threat or enemy—invaders, terrorists, other communities, infidels, foreigners, and so on. Buddhist men are certainly not the enemy. They, too, are victims of gender inequalities, though usually not in the same ways or to the same extent as women. Buddhist women need to create an alternative way of fashioning a sense of solidarity, a way that does not alienate others or create enemies. To my mind, this will come from recognizing that Buddhist women have common goals and also experience similar difficulties. Understanding this commonality of experiences and difficulties will help us generate a stronger sense of social justice that will spur us to action.

Despite our common goals and experiences, until recently Buddhist women have been divided by differences of language, social class, economics, culture, Buddhist tradition, and styles of practice. For some women, Buddhism is about meditation, or merit-making, or Buddhist studies. For some, Buddhism is social activism, whereas for others social activism is the very antithesis of Buddhist practice. Some Buddhist women live lives of destitution or sexual servitude, while others live lives of luxury and freedom. But we all have a common ancestor—Mahāprajāpati, the Buddha's stepmother and auntie, who was the first Buddhist nun and a real pioneer. She showed tremendous courage in transgressing social boundaries to become a nun, and we owe her our gratitude. And we all have a common ally in Ānanda, arguably the first male Buddhist feminist, who pleaded women's case for inclusion in the early sangha; we are also indebted to him. These pioneers started a social movement that opened the way for women to gain full inclusion and equal access to the Buddha's teachings, but progress on the path has not always been easy. If we care about human suffering, we must be aware of the contradictions that exist between theory and practice

in the Buddhist world. Although the Buddha's teachings tell us that enlightenment has no gender, glaring gender inequalities still exist in all Buddhist societies. This is just one of the issues in the Buddhist closet that requires openness and honesty.

❖ *Recognizing Buddhist Ethnocentrism*

To get a sense of the inequalities that exist, we need to move out of our comfort zone and learn more about "the other," in this case, other Buddhists. The three categories of Buddhists in North America distinguished earlier—Asian, Asian American, and non-Asian American—are an imperfect taxonomy, but they give us some insight into the rich diversity and complexity of North American Buddhism. Within each category, there are many groups and subgroups. These different Buddhist groups have much in common, but they are also different in some very fundamental ways, in terms of history, sociology, doctrine, language, food preferences, rituals, and other practices. I remember one time I was invited to speak at a Sōtō Zen temple on Oahu, and afterward they invited me for a lunch of teriyaki beef and beer. This is just one example of cultural differences. Although the majority of the estimated three million Buddhists in the United States are Asian, in attending a conference on American Buddhist women, it is doubtful that many people anticipated associating with Burmese, Thai, Cambodian, or Korean Buddhist women. Oddly, despite the fact that most American Buddhists are very liberal in their attitudes toward race, class, and gender, they still tend to hang out with people just like themselves and have very little knowledge of or interest in the lives of Asian or Asian American Buddhists.

The best way to overcome this tacit, unconscious ethnocentrism is to acquaint ourselves with other Buddhists—other types of Buddhists. Not everyone is fortunate enough to travel to Asia and live in a Buddhist monastery, but anyone can visit Asian Buddhist centers right here in North America. Every semester, my students at the University of San Diego visit Buddhist temples of two different traditions, and they

always find these experiences enriching. Often they find the ethnically Asian Buddhist temples especially interesting and welcoming. In some ways these temples may be more traditional than their counterparts in Asia. For example, walking into Wat Boubpharam in San Diego is like stepping into a Buddhist temple in Vientiane, Laos, only more so. The people in San Diego may offer Fritos and Coca-Cola as *dāna* to the monks, but they wear traditional dress, practice ancient Buddhist traditions, and preserve Laotian customs that are being eclipsed by the tentacles of globalization in much of Asia. As it happens, the people in Laos may also offer Fritos and Coca-Cola as *dāna* to the monks.

❖ *How Can I Help?*

Discrimination against Buddhist women is often simply a matter of ignorance. As a nun, I am often ignored and seated behind monks and laypeople or shooed off to serve myself lunch in the kitchen of an Anglo-American dharma center, while the monks are served in royal style with crystal and silver. This is not an act of intentional cruelty. It simply displays ignorance of the fact that women have equal potential for enlightenment and that nuns have the same practice, the same discipline, the same precepts—often more—than the monks. When Buddhist conferences and publications give primary attention to the activities and ideas of men, this is also simply a lack of awareness, something that needs to be corrected.

Addressing gender discrimination is a matter of education that requires attention and activism on the part of Buddhist women and men. Many women in North American Buddhism are still playing supportive roles to men's activities—mostly very worthwhile activities, to be sure—but without recognizing their own lack of empowerment, still under the illusion that they are already fully liberated and that, therefore, gender equality is a non-issue. Many North American women are also blissfully unaware of the needs of Buddhist women in other countries. For this reason, since its inception the international Buddhist women's movement, under the umbrella of Sakyadhita: International

Association of Buddhist Women, focuses especially on calling attention to the potential of Buddhist women. In particular, Sakyadhita is concerned with bringing about changes for the 99 percent of the world's Buddhist women who live in Asia—most without adequate nutrition, education, or health care.

Sakyadhita's work in bringing to light the glaring inequalities that exist in Buddhist societies, in direct contradiction to the Buddha's own socially liberating teachings, has been highly successful in raising uncomfortable questions about the gender imbalance that exists in Buddhist societies. Remarkably, we've been able to do this without arousing the ire of the monks, at least overtly. In many cases, we intentionally create allies among men, both monks and laymen, which has been a very effective way of strategizing. The first step toward correcting the gender imbalance in Buddhism is recognizing it—considering derogatory references to women in the Buddhist texts and looking at the discriminatory attitudes toward Buddhist women in Buddhist temples and dharma centers. The international Buddhist women's movement that was ignited by the Sakyadhita conference in Bodhgaya in 1987 has brought together thousands of Buddhist women from all around the world and spawned an international network for research, publications, retreat facilities, and a variety of social action projects. This movement has drawn attention to the embarrassing fact that until recently women have had virtually no voice in Buddhist institutions, and that the lives of many Buddhist women are filled with poverty, inequality, and many kinds of suffering.

Despite its meager resources, the international Buddhist women's movement is a pioneering effort in cross-cultural understanding and one of the most far-reaching grassroots movements in the world. Today there is a group of Buddhist women superstars, and each one of them is bringing something very special to this movement—some in quiet ways, some more publicly. This international movement is a genuinely participatory alliance that can help create a vibrant future for Buddhist women. To benefit from this exchange, we need to be openhearted, sincere, and keen to learn. We need to be sensitive to the fact that Buddhist

women in Asia and the West are often coming from very different places with different interests and priorities. Even though Buddhist women in traditional Asian cultures have rarely played roles of religious leadership, they have great respect for the dharma. It is the center of their lives. Their primary concerns are survival, education, health care, and caring for others. Buddhist women in Western cultures, especially non-Asian women, are generally new to Buddhism; they are busy learning, interpreting, and figuring out how to adapt the teachings in new cultural settings. They are concerned with meditation, psychology, sexuality, and personal development. By joining together, women in Asia and the West can learn from each other and enhance the tremendous potential for good that Buddhist women embody.

The international Buddhist women's movement deserves support especially for the work it has done to inspire change and improve conditions for the world's disadvantaged Buddhist women. And we need to do more. Sakyadhita gets invitations to attend international conferences, prayer breakfasts, interfaith dialogues, contemplative gatherings, panel discussions, and peace marches, and we need to make time to participate in these events. The world is in such a mess; Buddhist women need to become more active as a force for change both nationally and internationally. There is no time to carve out one's own private domain, whether in the monastery, the studio, or the university. The American mantra of taking care of oneself contradicts the Buddhist mantra of caring for others. If we hope to rescue humanity from the collision course we are on, we desperately need to work together. We need to reach beyond our individual affiliations to speak with united voices on issues of Buddhist practice and social justice. We need to ask: Where are the Buddhist Mother Teresas? Where are the American Aung San Suu Kyis?

Buddhist women need to create solidarity not only to benefit Buddhist women but because Buddhist women have so much to share with the world. We need to create solidarity to be able to speak out effectively against social injustices and to advocate on behalf of the millions of Buddhist women who have no voice, many of whom live under

oppressive family or political structures. By educating ourselves, we gain a greater understanding of each other and find common ground to stand up for our values, in a spirit of peace and loving-kindness. In a sense, every Buddhist center is a peace center—or should be.

❖ *Together on Common Ground*

In some ways Buddhists in Asia and the West are coming from very different places on far more than gender issues. As the anthropologist Melford Spiro observed, Buddhists in Asia generally approach Buddhism either as a means of merit-making toward a better rebirth, as a source of protection and blessing, or as a means to achieve liberation. By contrast, Buddhists in the West tend to approach Buddhism either as philosophy, psychotherapy, or as a spur to activism toward building a more enlightened society. These distinctive foci are merely tendencies, but the varied approaches reflect the different cultural backgrounds of Buddhists in Asia and the West.

The Western therapeutic approach is nothing to be trivialized, of course. The Buddha's teachings can legitimately be called psychology. Lama Thubten Yeshe used to say, "We are all in Lord Buddha's mental hospital." This may explain why hundreds of psychologists, psychiatrists, and psychotherapists in North America are borrowing from the Buddhist teachings in their writings and practices, though often without acknowledging their sources. Nor is a focus on merit-making something to be trivialized, since in the Buddha's own words the achievement of liberation, whether in this lifetime or in the future, depends on the accumulation of merit. From a traditional perspective, as valuable as Buddhism is for coping with the difficulties of life, this focus does not, technically speaking, qualify as dharma, since true dharma practice is not concerned with the things of this life. To truly be dharma, our practice must be concerned with issues of the highest concern: loving-kindness, compassion, and the development of wisdom. So how do we justify a concern with gender issues? By understanding that gender discrimination is a problem for Buddhist women

and an impediment to dharma practice for both women and men. It is a source of great suffering. Since loving-kindness, compassion, and wisdom are the issues of highest concern, we must practice these virtues to resolve the sufferings that result from gender discrimination.

Buddhist women in Asia and the West share much in common and also have much to learn from each other. At first glance our situations appear vastly different, but when we look more closely, we find that things are not as different as they may seem. Buddhist women everywhere share common values and are concerned about the welfare of society. There are many exemplary women in Asia, such as Ven. Zhengyan in Taiwan, who have made great contributions to disaster relief, elder care, hospice care, medical care, and relieving the miseries of the poor; they are also renowned for their contributions to monastic life, contemplation, publishing, teaching, Buddhist studies programs, and children's programs. In this connection, we cannot ignore the value of having a dedicated group of monastic women whose time and energies are 100 percent committed to working full-time for the dharma. In the twentieth century in Western countries, social welfare was the responsibility of government, but that is rapidly changing under uncompassionate neoconservatism, so Buddhist women cannot afford to be complacent. We need to be aware that many aspects of liberal democracy are threatened today in the United States and that this could spell trouble for Buddhists and pacifists.

Buddhist women have demonstrated their compassion for the needy, their organizational abilities, and their dedication to social activism in a wide range of areas. In Asia, those in Taiwan and Korea are especially active. Buddhist women in North America have been active in establishing and maintaining Buddhist centers and in social welfare activities, though generally under the leadership of men. Their unique contributions have been in the areas of nonprofit organization, peace activism, antinuclear demonstrations, prison ministry, hospice programs, and environmental activism. In the field of education, Western women currently enjoy educational opportunities roughly equal to men, including higher education, whereas the fortunes of

women in Buddhist societies vary widely. For example, many Buddhist women in Cambodia, India, Laos, Mongolia, Nepal, and Tibet lack access to Buddhist education or even to general education, sometimes even to basic literacy. Buddhist women in Taiwan, Korea, and Malaysia, by contrast, are leaders of Buddhist education programs for adults, children, and college students, all generously funded by Buddhist laypeople.

Buddhist women's experiences in Asia and the West are remarkably diverse, but there are common threads: Buddhist institutions are still largely patriarchal, with women generally in supportive roles. Financial and sexual exploitation occur, and there is little transparency and few channels for redress, so sexual predators may continue unchecked, some in the role of dharma teachers. Many Buddhist women still deny that they are feminists, and so there is a critical need for greater awareness. As awareness increases, women are quietly challenging patriarchy, unequal power structures, and the assumption that women should play subordinate roles in Buddhism. As women begin to work for change, they will significantly influence the way Buddhism is understood and practiced in North America and internationally.

At this point, I would like to issue a call to action on the part of North American Buddhists to work for social justice, beginning with support for Buddhist women's aspirations to achieve equal opportunities for secular and religious education, ordination, health care, and economic self-sufficiency. We still need to confront some uncomfortable issues. What are Buddhist women doing to combat sex trafficking? Even one woman or child trafficked is too many. Sexual slavery afflicts Buddhist women far out of proportion to our numbers, as we see in Nepal, a Hindu kingdom, where 75 percent of the women trafficked are Buddhists. What are Buddhists doing to contest the Patriot Act, which threatens all minorities, including religious minorities? How are our local dharma centers helping young people prepare their cases for conscientious objector status? Unfortunately, the young people in our lives

may need these files sooner than we imagine. To those of you who are already working to address these significant issues, I would like to offer my heartfelt admiration and gratitude.