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Matching Concepts, Transgressing Boundaries: Buddhist Transmission Strategies in the International Buddhist Women's Movement

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1. Introduction

One of the most striking features of the contemporary revitalization, transmission, and transformation of Buddhism is the prominent roles that women are playing, both locally and globally. Since 1987, Buddhist women from around the world have been uniting on a grassroots level and taking more active roles in working not only for the welfare of women, but for the welfare of human society writ large. Today, the Buddhist women's movement has become a highly dynamic forum representing the interests of somewhere between 300 and 600 million women, depending on who is compiling the statistics.[1] This movement is transgressive by its very nature, breaking through social, cultural, and conceptual boundaries and barriers in ways that were unimaginable just a few decades ago. Emerging from the margins to which women have historically been relegated and into the global spotlight, Buddhist women have become a powerful force for social change. Against all odds, Buddhist women have demonstrated how human beings can unite their talents, resources, and efforts to help change attitudes toward the members of a frequently marginalized, disregarded, and disparaged social category, and help reconfigure social and religious structures that disadvantage women.

This loosely organized, multi-cultural movement, which focuses on Buddhist women's issues and perspectives but embraces all living beings, is innovative in integrating scholarly perspectives, spiritual practices, grassroots activism, and the arts as equally valid dimensions of human experience. Creating a forum that unites women from a vast range of backgrounds and experiences is extremely challenging and yet, in attempting to implement Buddhist ideals of loving kindness and understanding, along with liberal doses of respect and mutual appreciation, this movement has exceeded all expectations to become a successful example of women's enormous potential for global transformation. This paper seeks to identify the key strategies that Buddhist women have developed and deployed to achieve their goal of an enlightened society.

1 These estimates are based on population statistics published in the *Oxford Atlas of the World* (Oxford University Press, 2018) multiplied by the percentage that is identified as Buddhist. The figures for China cannot be accurately determined.

2. Subverting gender inequality by matching ideals

When I began organizing the first international Buddhist women's gathering in 1987, I had no specific goal in mind and no idea what to expect. I was just beginning to notice the gender inequalities and injustices that I saw around me and trying to make sense of them. Isolated in a mud hut in a forest in the Indian Himalayas, I had little understanding of the feminist crosscurrents that were stirring conversations and beginning to change institutions around the world. Feminism and women's rights were considered dirty words or castigated as features of a "Western women's agenda," as they still are in many quarters. At the time, I did not understand why many monks seemed to regard a gathering of peaceful Buddhist women with such suspicion and animosity. I had no conceptual framework for analyzing the phenomenon and no vocabulary to articulate it, but quickly came to understand that some people saw gender equity as a threat to the status quo. To give women a seat at the table meant fewer seats for men, which seemed to cause visceral, instinctive reactions from vested interests within the male-dominated hierarchies that controlled the seating arrangements.

This sense of women as threatening to the gender-unequal status quo both explains and is a cause of the systematic exclusion and under-representation of women's voices from myriad forums, including religious structures, academic forums, social and political structures, casual conversations, and educational resources, to name a few critiques of Buddhist gender dystopia and women's perspectives are routinely dismissed as unworthy of consideration. In this paper, I would like to intentionally foreground gender inequities as what I have increasingly come to regard as the single most important challenge to contemporary Buddhists transnationally.

3. The "matching concepts" methodology

The theoretical framework that I apply in this analysis borrows from the historical experience of Chinese Buddhists. During the early centuries of the transmission of Buddhism to China, a system of "matching concepts" was used to translate Buddhist texts imported from India, rendering philosophical terms and concepts from Sanskrit and Central Asian languages into literary Chinese. The transmission of Buddhism to China occurred at a time when Daoist and Confucian thought and practice were widespread and well developed. In the indigenization of Buddhism in China, the technique of matching concepts to articulate the new religious worldview was very handy. Instead of having to create an entirely new vocabulary to convey Buddhist ideas, deploying Daoist and Confucian terms was a practical solution to the complex challenge of translating Buddhist texts and concepts into the local idiom. Unlike in eighth-century Tibet, where a new written language modeled on Sanskrit grammar and syntax was created to convey the Buddha's teachings, in fourth-century China, a fully developed written language was already in use among the literati.

Although the theory of matching concepts is disputed, certain terms used to convey Confucian and Daoist concepts were certainly employed to translate Buddhist ideas. The method of matching concepts lent a ring of familiarity that helped gain acceptance for a religion that was initially rejected by detractors as an unwanted, unneeded foreign interloper. On the other hand, Confucian and Daoist terms were often inadequate to express complex Buddhist philosophical constructs. Using terms borrowed from indigenous Chinese systems of thought could also result in oversimplification and misinterpretation. In this way, subtly and not so subtly, Buddhist thought in China took on Daoist and Confucian religious and philosophical overtones. These overtones influenced the selection of texts that were translated first, with resources allocated to the task, and also the ways in which Buddhism came to be interpreted and reinterpreted over time. The scholars who dedicated their lives to diligently translating Buddhist texts did their best to create Chinese renderings that were as accurate and lyrical as possible, without all the technologies that we take for granted in academia today. The efforts of these translators were richly rewarded by the immense popularity that Buddhist thought gained in China and the unique production of Buddhist culture that grew around it. At the same time, however, the practice of matching concepts inevitably changed the flavor and often the meaning and import of Buddhism in China. This can be seen especially in the distinctive flavor of the texts of the Chan and Huayan schools (for example, see Allen, 2010; Oh, 2000).

4. Matching concepts in the contemporary transmission of Buddhism

Using the notion of matching concepts as a theoretical construct for understanding twentieth-century Buddhist feminism is not a clean match. The analogy is not meant to be taken literally, but is simply an experiment in using a rhetorical device to help understand how Buddhism is being interpreted and applied in contemporary cultures and how specific terms and concepts derived from Western systems of thought are being deployed to convey an ancient religious tradition. Most significant for this discussion is how the concepts of liberty, equality, human dignity, justice, compassion, and wisdom are being deployed to interpret Buddhist thought through women's eyes. Here we will take these concepts one by one to gauge Buddhist women's progress.

Many changes for Buddhist women have come about in the past few decades. However, to claim that Buddhist women have consciously and systematically challenged gender discrimination would be to overstate the case. Most often, the strategies women have used to effect change have evolved gradually through a process of trial and error, resulting in disappointment as often as success. Changes have been incremental, often almost imperceptible, and yet over a relatively short span of time – a mere thirty years in some 2,500 years of Buddhist history – the cumula-

tive effect has been significant. Much remains to be accomplished before Buddhist feminist perspectives are commonly accepted, yet in perspective, keeping the dead weight of social inertia in mind, the changes have been immensely important.

The concept of women's liberation has been a subtext of the movement, but in Buddhist circles the word "liberation" traditionally refers to individual spiritual liberation rather than social liberation. The *modus operandi* that has covertly guided the Buddhist women's movement has been to work within extant Buddhist social systems rather than overtly challenge them. This strategy recognizes spiritual liberation as Buddhist women's ultimate goal and promotes gender parity in education and ordination as a means to get there. This strategy can rightly be critiqued as accommodationist, but it has proven to be quite effective. Over 2,000 nuns have taken full ordination in Sri Lanka, where previously there were none.[2]

Efforts to challenge gender inequalities through direct confrontation have generally not been successful, at least in Asia, where 99% of Buddhists live. Girls may be kept at home to work rather than being allowed to finish their schooling and may experience substantial pressure to marry, produce children, and care for aging parents. In one case I personally witnessed, a Himalayan woman's aspiration to become a nun was thwarted by her three brothers, who forbade her to live a monastic life. She counted herself fortunate in not being forced to marry and was willing to accept a life of unpaid domestic labor in exchange for the freedom to remain single and engage in religious practices at home. In other words, she wagered her social liberation in favor of the freedom to pursue spiritual liberation. Using the concept of spiritual liberation as their primary goal, Buddhist women have argued for social and religious equality as a means to achieving that goal.

The concept of equality, a widely proclaimed Western philosophical ideal, is unattainable in actual practice, since human beings will never literally be equal. The nearest Buddhist equivalent is the equal potential of all sentient beings to achieve liberation or awakening. This theoretical ideal translates well in the modern concept to justify improving conditions for women. If women have equal potential to achieve liberation or awakening, they can legitimately argue for equal opportunities to realize their potential. In challenging Buddhist patriarchy, however, the word "equality" has been deemed too threatening, so instead we have used the term "equity," with its ring of fairness and social justice. The serious inequities that exist in education, resources, and ordination opportunities for women automatically come into stark relief.

The closest Buddhist match for the Western philosophical concept of justice seems to be the law of karma, cause and effect, which extends to the actions of all sentient beings of all genders. Sadly, the preconception that being born in a female body is the result of bad karma is rife in Buddhist societies. This puts women at a congenital disadvantage, both in terms of social status and psychological well-be-

2 In an article written in 2–14, Susanne Mrozik estimated that there were between 1,000 and 2,000 *bhikkhunī*s in Sri Lanka. According to my informants, this number has increased consistently since then. Mrozik, 2014.

ing. The effects of racial, sexist, and other forms of discrimination on human development are now well-documented, and Buddhists have been very slow to recognize the debilitating effects of systemic violence perpetrated against girls and women solely on the basis of their sexual identity. Karma is ungendered, however, so by emphasizing the value of taking direct action to reverse stereotypes of women's inferiority, Buddhist feminists have capitalized on the egalitarian nature of the law of cause and effect, which is free from gender discrimination. Karmic justice is meted out equally to all. By becoming pro-active, Buddhist feminists (whether they identify with this community or not) have been able to ensure more and better opportunities for girls and women.

The concept of human dignity may be traced to the Hebrew Bible, with God's creation of human beings: "male and female he created them." The closest Buddhist equivalent is the intrinsic value of all sentient life, but this is not a clean match, since sentient life includes both human and non-human animals. Regardless, human life is privileged in the Buddhist worldview, because a human rebirth is seen as the optimum state in which to achieve awakening. As human beings, women are also privileged to be in a position to achieve awakening. All that remains is for them to clear away whatever obstacles stand in the way for women to realize their potential to reach that awakened state. By this logic, Buddhist feminists, female or male, can justify challenging patriarchy and gender discrimination and all the insidious injustices that result from it. The outrageous prevalence of sex trafficking and domestic violence in Buddhist societies can no longer be tolerated.

5. Human rights

Gender discrimination arises in large measure from essentializing the concepts of "male" and "female" along lines of difference, that is, asserting that male and female human beings belong to essentially different categories. This is reflected in popular culture, for example, in the quip that "men are from Mars and women are from Venus."[3] The idea that men and women are from separate planets and therefore think, feel, and communicate in different ways according to their sex seems to overlook the fact that human beings are human first, and male, female, or in-between second. One problem with the Mars/Venus analogy is that it essentializes the male-female binary distinction as normative. Not only does gender essentialism ignore sexual identities outside the male/female binary, a source of great misery for many human beings, but it also overlooks our common humanity. In patriarchal societies, essentializing sexual difference also normalizes gendered power structures, structures that generally privilege male human beings and disadvantage female human beings. These unequal power structures across societies have led to abuse, exploitation, and

3 The phrase was popularized by John Gray's book, *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus: The Classic Guide to Understanding the Opposite Sex* (1992). The author has written many follow-up books, most featuring the same Mars-Venus theme.

a multitude of injustices that have created enormous suffering for billions of girls, women, trans, and gender-nonconforming individuals across the globe, injustices that continue up to the present day. The imposition of normative gender roles and certain stereotypical ways of thinking and behavior from a young age may constrict women and limit the development of their full potential. As has been pointed out, gender essentialism also causes suffering for many male human beings, who may feel trapped by social assumptions about what being male is taken to mean and the types of thinking and behavior that are deemed necessary to prove one's masculinity. Buddhist texts generally accept the normative gender binary, reflecting the proscribed roles for women and men in Indian society at the time the Buddha lived. At the same time, Buddhist theories of personhood deconstruct the notion of an essentially or inherently existent person altogether, not to mention essentially or inherently existent male and female persons.

Human rights theory serves as a corrective to social injustices by seeking to guarantee that all human beings inherently have certain rights, "regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status," including "the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to work and education, and many more."[4] The theory that all human beings, without discrimination, have the right to these benefits and protections is a means to ensure the well-being of human society as a whole. The aspiration to ensure the well-being of human society dovetails well with the Buddhist ideal of freeing all sentient beings from suffering. This aspiration is illustrated by the practice of the four *brahmavihāra*s, "divine abodes" or "immeasurables": loving kindness, compassion, altruistic joy, and equanimity, "which are to be extended boundlessly to all sentient beings." (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2005, p. 154) The practice is to extend loving kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), altruistic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*) to all beings impartially, without discrimination, beyond distinctions of family, gender, race, nationality, or even species. The practice of imbuing one's mind with loving kindness, compassion, altruistic joy, and equanimity is regarded as a way to liberate the mind from all limitations. It is an exalted mind of abundance, without hostility or ill will toward any being (ibid., p. 178). It is not difficult to see how such an exalted state of mind, free of discrimination or ill will and wishing well to all beings, could transform the quality of human beings' social relationships, including gender relationships.

The aims of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights are consonant with the Buddhist objective to free all beings from suffering and help establish them in a state of well-being.[5] The Declaration of Human Rights is limited to human beings, however, whereas Buddhist texts speak about the wish to liberate sentient beings

4 The articles of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights can be found online at http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html, accessed 10 May 2018.

5 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, op cit.

of all kinds from suffering. In any case, liberating all human beings from suffering would be a good start. As the well-known *Mettā Sutta* states:

> Just as a mother protects with her life
> Her child, her only child,
> So with a boundless heart
> Should one cherish all living beings. (Gunaratana, 2017, p. 46)

It may be hoped that, motivated by loving kindness and compassion, beings who have liberated themselves from suffering will work to liberate others from oppressive systems and behaviors – emotional, verbal, physical, social, and political – or at least refrain from harming them, which will naturally help alleviate the suffering of living beings. It is said that the practice of loving kindness provides protection and that the Buddha taught the practice to monks to protect them from harmful forces (Blackburn, 1999). Human rights theory can be utilized in concert with teachings such as the four *brahmavihāra*s, combining the logic of both, to promote the welfare of women and protect them from harm.

6. Universalizing values

The virtues of love and compassion that are found in Buddhism can be seen as universal, explicitly taught in most religious and humanist systems of thought. Although women and men alike exhibit love and compassion, these values are universally associated with women, perhaps because women are conditioned from early childhood to serve and care for others. The values of love and compassion may be intrinsic to human beings – for example, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama believes that a newborn's instinctive affection for its mother is evidence that love is instinctive to human beings (see, for example, H. H. the Dalai Lama, 2011, p. 50). These values can also be taught, with great benefit to all. In the Buddhist teachings, loving kindness and compassion extend to all sentient beings and this broad application can be deployed to explicitly extend to sentient beings in female form, overtly or covertly calling out gender discrimination and those who perpetuate it as in violation of basic Buddhist principles. This strategy is transgressive in drawing attention to sexism in the Buddhist traditions and those who profit from it, but when applied with skillful means (*upāya*) reinforces Buddhism's own stated values.

The virtue of wisdom may also be seen as universal, but it can be interpreted in many different ways. The generic interpretation, the wisdom to make good decisions, is valuable in the Buddhist interpretation of cause and effect, because it leads to well-being. Deployed by Buddhist feminists, wisdom can be understood as skillful means to effect a transformation of attitudes and behaviors, developed through trial and error. For example, an early effort to force institutional change in Dharamsala by demanding that *bhikṣuṇī*s be included in the *bhikṣu*s' bi-monthly confession ritual failed. The initiative was seen by local Tibetan observers as arro-

gant, misinformed,[6] and confrontational, and therefore incompatible with Tibetan cultural norms, eroding efforts to win favor for *bhikṣuṇī* ordination in the Tibetan tradition. Taking incremental steps toward this goal has been more effective, if maddeningly slow. Developing the wisdom to wait for the right time and place to step forward, speak out, and work for greater inclusion has been key to transforming Buddhist attitudes and institutions, not only in Asia but also in the West. Wisdom as interpreted in the Buddhist traditions, as an understanding of the concept of no-self (*anātman*) or emptiness (*śūnyatā*), can also be useful. Understanding the true nature of the self as empty of independent existence helps free one from clinging to the illusion of a truly existent "I." Letting go of ego fixation in this way not only helps free the mind from partiality and other delusions, but also frees up tremendous energy for psychological and social transformation.

7. A critique of matching concepts

These examples highlight the ways in which women may employ Buddhist ideals to effect changes in gendered social expectations and gender oppression. They also illustrate how some feminist thinkers may regard Buddhist feminist strategies of resistance as accommodation and weakness. In the case of the Himalayan woman mentioned here, the woman was not successful in her first choice of life paths, in that she was not allowed by her brothers to become a nun. However, by citing the Buddhist ideal of renunciation, the traditionally sanctioned path to liberation, she was able to avoid her least-desired option, marriage. Not all women are equally successful. Countless women who wish to become ordained succumb to psychological pressure from their parents and communities, usually out of a sense of duty or gratitude, and agree to marry and reproduce. Other women, for example, in Taiwan, skillfully escape marriage by devotedly making themselves indispensable as caregivers until their parents pass away, at which point they may be free to make their own choices, though by that time they may be too old to become nuns. The monastic path to liberation is generally admired and encouraged for boys and young men, but depreciated and discouraged for girls and young women – a textbook example of the obstacles and double standards Buddhist women face.

Although Western women may have more access to teachers, training, and educational opportunities than many women in Asia, this is no cause for complacency or cultural arrogance. Asian women who dedicate themselves to a life of study and contemplation often face serious hardships and meet these struggles with great strength. Buddhist nuns in the West also struggle with feelings of isolation, gender discrimination, and a lack of community support.

Today, Buddhist women in cultures around the world are quietly implementing subversive strategies of resistance to male-domination, misogyny, ignorance, and

6 According to the *vinaya*, the *bhiksunī*s are required to hold their own confession ritual (*sojong*), separately from the *bhiksu*s.

exclusion. With better education, women are developing the confidence to create their own independent "sacred" spaces where they can live in accordance with Buddhist values. Although women have largely been missing from Buddhist historical narratives and excluded from Buddhist institutions, conditions have begun to change in significant ways, large and small. Women are gaining the education and training they need to protect their own interests, reshape political landscapes, and creatively express their spiritual and social aspirations.

We have little or no historical evidence to document what the Buddha thought about women. All we have are the received mythologies and the texts that were eventually transcribed from the memories of male monastics after having been transmitted orally for several centuries. The texts tell different stories and, over time, Buddhists have interpreted and retold these stories in varied ways. At this critical juncture in human history, it does not serve anyone's interests to cling to mythologies that disparage, neglect, or disempower women. On the contrary, Buddhists can legitimately argue that feminism is fully consonant with the democratic ideals and styles of communal governance of the early Buddhist communities in India, which provided opportunities to women and other oppressed groups. Contemporary Buddhist societies have everything to gain by living up to these original ideals. By highlighting the constructive aspects of Buddhist women's experience (Gross, 1993, p. 4), the tradition can mobilize its ample resources to support the well-being of women and their communities. A critique of discriminatory passages and institutions is also fully consonant with the Buddhist analytical approach.

In the dynamic unfolding and reimagining of this ancient wisdom tradition, the preservation and translation of key liberating concepts and practices are a major responsibility of the Buddhist traditions. Buddhist feminist insights can help ensure that interpretations of these concepts and practices match up to the lived experiences of women in constructive ways. As dedicated practitioners of these liberating values, Buddhist women have important roles to play in transmitting and transforming Buddhist societies in creative ways that build on the best of the tradition to promote a sustainable human ecology and global well-being.

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Prof. Dr. Jan-Ulrich Sobisch; Having studied tibetology, classical indology, and philosophy at the University of Hamburg, Jan-Ulrich Sobisch researched and published chiefly on indigenous Tibetan Buddhist traditions. Among his major publications are books on Tibetan theories of harmonizing the vows of sravakas, bodhisattvas and mantra adepts, historical documents describing the reception and transmission of teachings in Tibetan lineages, and a study of the Indian and Tibetan literary history of the Hevajra Tantra and the connected Path with Its

Fruits cycle. From the University of Munich, he moved on to Copenhagen University, where he received tenure in 2006, and began to focus on the early 'Bri gung bKa' brgyud pa tradition. In 2015, he discovered an exceptional manuscript of that tradition, carbon dated to 1267–1290. In 2016, he was granted the Humboldt Research Award in recognition of his achievements in research and returned to Germany. He presently works at the Centre for Religious Studies at Ruhr-University, Bochum.

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Prof. Dr. Alan B. Wallace, born in 1950, dynamic lecturer, progressive scholar, and one of the most prolific writers and translators of Tibetan Buddhism in the West, he, continually seeks innovative ways to integrate Buddhist contemplative practices with Western science to advance the study of the mind. Dr. Wallace, a scholar and practitioner of Buddhism since 1970, has taught Buddhist theory and meditation worldwide since 1976. Having devoted fourteen years to training as a Tibetan Buddhist monk, ordained by H. H. the Dalai Lama, he went on to earn an undergraduate degree in physics and the philosophy of science at Amherst College and a doctorate in religious studies at Stanford. With his unique background, Alan brings deep experience and applied skills to the challenge of integrating traditional Indo-Tibetan Buddhism with the modern world.

Prof. Dr. Wolfram Weisse, is Professor em. of Religious Education and International Theology at the University of Hamburg. He is the founding director of the Academy of World Religions of Hamburg University, directed it from 2010–2017 and continues there as senior research fellow. He was visiting professor at the University of Cape Town / South Africa and still is Associate Professor at the UNESCO Institute of the University of Bucharest /Romania. His fields of research are: Empirical and theoretical research in the field of intercultural and interreligious dialogue, Interreligious dialogue of stake-holders in a multicultural society and at school, Ecumenical and Dialogical Theology, Religion and Society in national and international contexts. He was the project leader of several international research projects, like the REDCo project (Religion in Education. A Contribution to Dialogue or a Factor of Conflict in transforming Soieties of European Countries) from 2006–2009, and the REDI project (Religion and Dialogue in Modern Societies. Interdisciplinary and Internationally Comparative Studies on the Possibilities and Limitations of Interreligious Dialogue) from 2013–2018. He moderated several public events of the Dalai Lama in Hamburg and had the chance of direct encounters and exchange with him, especially on interreligious dialogue (cf. Roloff, C, & Weisse, W. (Eds) (2015). *Dialogue and Buddhism and Hinduism. Public presentations of The 14th Dalai Lama, Sallie B. King, Anantanand Rambachan and Samdhong Rinpoche*, Münster – New York: Waxmann). His newest publication, edited together with J. Iprave, O. Leirvik and M. Tatari is on *Pluralisation of Theologies at European Universities*, Münster-New York: Waxmann, 2020.

Prof. Dr. Michael Zimmermann is a professor for Indian Buddhism at Hamburg University in Germany and co-directs the Numata Center for Buddhist Studies, an institutional forum promoting teaching, research, dialogue, academic exchange, and public outreach in Buddhist Studies (www.buddhismuskunde.uni-hamburg.de/en.html). His research focuses on Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism in all its forms of expression, but in particular, its textual history based on the canonical traditions in India, Tibet, and China. He also deals with questions of Buddhist ethics and the developments regarding contemporary Buddhism in East and West.