

# Is the Glass Half-empty or Half-full?

— A Feminist Assessment of Buddhism at the  
Beginning of the Twenty-first Century

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## ABSTRACT:

This paper discusses the disconnect between Buddhism's gender neutral ideology and its highly gendered and male-dominant institutions. The traditional solution to this disconnect was to promise "deserving women" future rebirth as a man, a solution that most feminists would find unacceptable. My analysis uses the famous Tibetan story of Tara's vow always to be reborn as a woman as the framework for analyzing how Buddhists could have been so inconsistent and how Buddhist thought could justify a different social order. The high points of that analysis is found in the following paragraphs.

The primary purpose of Buddhist discipline and practice is to eliminate suffering,<sup>1</sup> so if it is determined that something causes suffering, Buddhists should try to overcome that obstacle. That is why Buddhists held out the promise of rebirth as men to women suffering under male dominance. Traditional Buddhists could not imagine what contemporary feminists do—a society and Buddhist institutions that are not male dominated. To them, it

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<sup>1</sup> One of the most persistent misunderstandings of Buddhism is that it regards suffering as inevitable and intractable, probably because its first two Noble Truths are about suffering and the cause of suffering. The third truth, however, is about the cessation of suffering. The second truth claims that suffering is caused by attachment and the third that when the cause of suffering — attachment — is renounced, suffering ceases. That is to say, in enlightenment, things don't change; *our attitudes* change and that makes all the difference between confusion and enlightenment.

seemed easier and more possible to turn women into men, which indicates that many of the things that made female rebirth seem woeful were, at that time, deemed intractable. But if things changed, so that women's lives were no longer governed by those same factors, there would be no Buddhist grounds for continuing male dominance. According to Buddhism, male dominance is grounded in karma, cause and effect, or historical circumstances, not women's inherent nature, the will of God, or cosmic necessity. If the karma, the historical conditions change, the situation of women not only can change; it will.

So the question becomes: have conditions changed sufficiently to undo male dominance, both in society and in Buddhist institutions? In my analyses, I have always attributed historical male dominance less to the inherent nastiness of men and more to the material circumstances, technology, and medical knowledge of the times. I would agree with the assessment that women's lives were woeful in the circumstances that prevailed when Buddhists offered rebirth as a man as the only solution to male dominance. I certainly would not want to be a woman subject to the conditions most (Buddhist) women have endured throughout most of history. In fact, I spent much of my youth dreading growing up to be a woman. I would also suggest that two fragile, but real contemporary circumstances that can change women's lives drastically and dramatically. They are reproductive freedom and the ability to make personal, individual choices about one's life. These conditions are far from securely or widely available. But they are definitely possible and offer a far more adequate way to undo the disconnect between Buddhism's gender-neutral and gender-free vision and its male dominant institutions than offering "deserving women" future rebirth as a male.

The paper then moves into some description of what has happened in the Buddhist world in the last thirty years to give women (and men) better prospects than future rebirth as a male.

## 望空興歎或滿懷希望？

——在新世紀初評估佛教女性主義之發展前景

Rita M. Gross\*

### 摘要：

佛教教義主張性別平等，但在佛門之中，卻強調男尊女卑，由男性主導一切，本文即在討論此二者間的不一致。傳統上，佛教徒總是以「善女人」來世一定可以轉為男身的許諾，來解釋這種矛盾現象，但大多數女性主義者無法接受這樣的說辭。本文使用藏傳佛教中一個家喻戶曉的故事——「綠度母（Tara）誓願生生世世為女身」為分析架構，藉此說明佛教徒何以能如此不一致，以及佛教思想如何為一個與眾不同的社會秩序（a different social order）作辯護，本文的分析重點簡述如下：

「滅苦」<sup>1</sup>是佛教訓練與修行的主要目的，因此，佛教徒一旦確認了「致苦」的因素，之後就應該努力加以克服。正因如此，所以對於那些在男性統治之下飽受痛苦的女性們，佛教徒便作出了「來世轉為

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<sup>1</sup> 或許源自四聖諦中的前二諦：「苦」「集」，一般對佛法有一個根深蒂固的誤解，即將「苦」視為不可避免及不可化解的。「集」諦在說明造成「苦」的原因，第三諦是「滅」諦，即在說明當造成「苦」的原因不再，「苦」也就止息了，這也即是說，當達到解脫時，外在並沒有改變，而是我們的心態改變，也說明迷惑與解脫的差別，是來自我們的心態。

男身」的許諾。當代女性主義者致力於建構一個非男性為主導的社會和佛教體制，而這些舉措卻是傳統佛教徒所無法想像的，因為對他們來說，「來世轉為男身」似乎比改變現狀來得容易和可行。在佛陀時代，由於許多主、客觀因素的限制，才使得「轉生為女性」成為悲慘之事，而傳統佛教徒的保守觀念即在表明，當初這些因素是很頑強難化的。

然而，如果形勢轉變了，使女人的生活不再受制於這些因素，那麼佛教也就沒有立場繼續維持男尊女卑的傳統。根據佛教的說法，男尊女卑源於業因果報，也就是歷史的因緣條件，而非女性本有的質素、神的旨意，或宇宙的必然性，因此，一旦業因或歷史的條件發生改變，女性的處境不僅是「可能」改變，而且是「必然」改變。果真如此，隨之而來的問題是：因緣條件的變化動能，是否已經強到足以鬆動社會與佛教體制中男尊女卑的態勢？在我的分析裡，我比較傾向將歷史上的男性優勢，歸因於當時的物質環境、科技及醫療知識，而非男性天生的敗德因子。

面對男尊女卑的佛教傳統，假使佛教徒總是以「來世轉為男身」做為解決問題的唯一方式，此時，我就會同意「轉生為女性，處境甚悲慘」這種評價。翻開大部份的人類歷史，多數（佛教）女性都是一直在忍受許多不利的因緣條件，目睹此情此景，我當然不會想要成為一個受制於這些條件的女人，事實上，在我的年少歲月裡，我常常害怕自己長大成為一個女人。

另外，我也要在這指出兩個現代形勢，它們看似脆弱，卻很真實，可以為女性的生活帶來急遽和戲劇性的改變。這兩個形勢分別是：「生育的自由」（reproductive freedom）；以及「選擇個人要過什麼生活

的能力」。這兩個形勢雖然尚未穩固，也未蔚然成風，不過，它們卻是落實佛教性別平等理念的兩大利器，可以解決目前佛教男尊女卑的矛盾現象，而且這種作法絕對比傳統佛教徒所提出的「善女人」來世一定可以轉為男身的許諾，更可行、更適切。

之後，本文將進一步敘述，佛教界在過去三十年來所發生的變化，以便為佛教女眾（以及男眾）提供一些比「來世轉為男身」更美好的前景。

Even relatively casual observers of Buddhism often note that doctrinally, Buddhism is free of the myths and symbols that make some other religions so intractable to feminist reforms. There is no Ultimate Reality spoken of as a male, no Ultimate Father or Male Savior; there is no myth of a rebellious female starting the world on its downward spiral. Those same observers also comment that, nevertheless, Buddhism and Roman Catholicism or Eastern Orthodox look quite similar; many men in elaborate costumes in positions of authority, with very few women to be seen. Why? What is being done about this contradiction at the heart of Buddhism?

In less than thirty years, we have gone from a situation in which almost nothing had been written about Buddhist women for many years to a situation in which books and articles appear regularly. In 1979, Diana Paul published her helpful and well-annotated collection of texts, *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in Mahayana Buddhism*.<sup>1</sup> In 1980, I gave my first talk<sup>2</sup> (and probably *the* first talk) on Buddhism and feminism at an international conference on Buddhist-Christian dialogue, to the bemusement of some Japanese delegates who couldn't understand how there could be a feminist critique of Buddhism. After all, they said, Buddhists had taken care of all those issues long ago by re-assuring everyone that "deserving women would be reborn as men." In the mid nineteen-eighties, Sandy Boucher was conducting the interviews that led to her book *Turning the Wheel: American Women Creating the New Buddhism*.<sup>3</sup> In 1987, Karma Lekshe Tsomo organized the first of many Sakyadhita conferences, which led to the first of many publications emanating from those conferences.<sup>4</sup> *Buddhism after Patriarchy: a Feminist*

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<sup>1</sup> Diana W. Paul, *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in Mahayana Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> Rita M. Gross, "Feminism from the Perspective of Buddhist Practice", *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 1 (1981), pp.72-82.

<sup>3</sup> Sandy Boucher, *Turning the Wheel: American Women Creating the New Buddhism* (Boston: Beacon Press, Updated and Expanded Edition, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Karma Lekshe Tsomo, an American nun who practices in the Tibetan tradition, lived and studied for many years in Asia before she earned a Ph. D. and began university level teaching. She founded is president of Sakyadhita, an international organization for Buddhist women. In that capacity, she has organized many

*History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*, the first somewhat complete feminist survey of Buddhism, was published in 1993.<sup>5</sup> There is now a world-wide Buddhist women's movement, many women Buddhist teachers, at least in North America, and a growing consensus that the traditional male dominance of Buddhism is a problem, though I would argue that institutional changes are still very slow.

So is the glass half full? Are we well on the way to recasting Buddhism in ways that make it more adequate for its female followers? Perhaps, if burnout, backlash, and complacency do not take too high a toll. Is the glass half empty? Is Buddhism still a religion that works better for men than for women, despite the changes of the past thirty years? Many coffee table picture books about Buddhism would certainly give that appearance. And certainly the glass is half empty and leaking the rest of its contents if premature self-congratulations lead to complacency.

A colleague and friend once commented to me that in its philosophical views and its meditation practices, Buddhism has tremendous potential for deconstructing gender, but all that potential has led to very few results. In looking at the half-full, half-empty glass, I will consider three topics: first, Buddhism's potential for deconstructing gender, second, some reasons why this potential did not come to fruition historically, and third, some of the changing situations in the contemporary Buddhist world, both Asian and Western.

### **Tara's vow: Gender and Dharma in Buddhism**

One of my favorite stories for illustrating many of the points that need to be made when discussing Buddhism and gender are found in a seventeenth century Tibetan text that narrates how Tara, one of the favorite Tibetan female meditation deities came into existence. Like all the exalted beings in Buddhist mythological universes, she was at one time a human being engaged in the

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conferences on women and Buddhism, most of them held in Asia. At this point, these conferences are held every two years. For information about these conferences, see the website <http://www.sakyadhita.org>.

<sup>5</sup> Rita M. Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1993).

same meditation practices we do. After much practice, she finally experienced awakened mind. The monks around her suggested that she could (and should) now take on a male rebirth. Instead of doing so, she told them, “In this life, there is no such distinction as ‘male’ and ‘female’...and therefore, attachment to ideas of ‘male’ and ‘female’ is quite worthless. Weak-minded worldlings are always deluded by this.” She then vowed to take female form continuously through her long career as an advanced Bodhisattva,<sup>6</sup> what some would call a female Buddha.

This story illustrates all the issues. The distinctions, the labels “male” and “female” are declared to be quite worthless. They are declared worthless by a female who becomes enlightened, proving her very point, and the point made by all Buddhist teachers: enlightened mind is beyond gender, cannot be labeled “male” or “female.” Therefore, it makes no sense to claim that females can’t attain enlightenment. Nevertheless, people do become attached to those labels and give more value to the label “male,” as is shown by her attending monks, who expect that now she would take on male form. Tara has to point out to them that “weak-minded worldlings are always deluded by this.” She is heroic and extremely unusual in her resolve to remain in a female body throughout her entire Bodhisattva career of endless lifetimes spent working for the well-being of all. It is also worth pointing out that Tara, who presumably had been a student of the monks who advise her to transform into a man, is wiser than her teachers and has to correct them. I make this point because at this time in the Buddhist world, actual critiques of Buddhist male dominance are more likely to come from students than from teachers, even though all the teachers would say that enlightened mind has no gender, and that gender has no ultimate reality.

It is also important to remember that this story and the concerns expressed in it are not the product of Western feminism. To claim that feminism is a Western concern artificially imposed on Buddha dharma simply will not hold. Texts from every period of Buddhist history and every school indicate that Buddhists have always thought about the disconnect between their gender free and gender neutral teachings and the male dominant world in which they lived.

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<sup>6</sup> Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy*, p.110.

## **“The Dharma is neither male nor female”: why Buddhists should not be sexists**

Without exception, Buddhist teachings and teachers are insistent and consistent that at the ultimate level, gender is irrelevant. It may be the only religion which makes this claim so unambiguously and with such force. This is a very strong, but accurate statement.

It is important to understand why, whenever the matter is subjected to rigorous analysis, Buddhists agree that gender has no ultimate significance or reality. What is that tremendous potential for deconstructing gender, noticed even by casual observers of Buddhism? The recognition that gender is irrelevant and cannot be used to make any meaningful distinctions among people is built into the very fabric of Buddhism’s most fundamental and basic insights and teachings. Buddhist teachings on interdependence, egolessness, and emptiness mean that nothing exists by itself or has inherent, independent reality, which is what Buddhists mean when we claim that things are illusory and dreamlike. Buddhist analysis is first deconstructive. We take things that we assume to be real and subject them to analysis. When we do that, we find that what we take to be permanently existing entities actually are infinitesimally brief constellations of components that come together and fall apart, propelled by causes and conditions. Therefore, there is no enduring phenomenon to be clung to and such clinging will produce nothing but sorrow. Therefore, gender has no real existence; it is illusory and dreamlike. Logically, gender cannot be excepted from the reality that pertains to everything else. That is the basis for Tara’s claim that there is “no such thing as ‘male’ and ‘female.’”

Though the analysis is blindingly clear, the implications of interdependence, egolessness, and emptiness for our lives are not easily wrapped up in a few words and communicated to the outsider, or even to aspiring Buddhists. On the other hand, the matter is utterly simply. Find something that exists apart from causes and conditions. You won’t. That’s interdependence. Find an aspect of yourself (something that is really you, not something abstract and imaginary that you call your “soul”) that has never changed, that endures through all changes, and that is independent rather than interdependent. You won’t. That’s egolessness. Extend that search. Find an aspect of the world,

of your environment, that is not subject to causes and conditions, that is unchanging, and that is unrelated to its matrix. You won't. That's emptiness.

The seemingly nihilistic connotations of the words "egolessness" and "emptiness" have thrown off many Western commentators, but most Western commentators work from a spiritual framework that assumes ultimate duality; Buddhists do not. "Egolessness" and "emptiness" are not negative terms, and certainly are not nihilistic in their meanings. Rather, though this point can be difficult to grasp, things can exist (in the relative sense, of course) only because they lack inherent, unchanging, independent, uncaused being. Such inherent, permanent existence would prevent life, which is nothing if it is not dynamic and fluid. Egolessness and emptiness are simply descriptive of reality, of "things as they are," to quote a favorite Buddhist phrase.

However, out of that description of reality flow many implications, including the fact that there is "no such thing as 'male' and 'female.'" It is impossible, if one understands the basics of Buddhism, to attribute anything intrinsic, invariant, or essential to maleness or femaleness. As is often said, such labels are convenient designations, agreed upon names, but to attribute any reality to them, or to require people to conform to what has been defined as "male" or "female" is to completely miss the point. When we do, we become, as Tara puts it, "weak worldlings who are always deluded by this."

### **How "weak worldlings" become deluded**

Most Buddhists know about teachings such as interdependence, egolessness, and emptiness, but many of them still attribute reality to gender, become attached to conventional implications of gender, and become defensive and uncomfortable when the reality of gender is challenged. In effect, both Buddhist individuals and Buddhist institutions seem to operate by the slogan, "Of course there is no ego, but gender is real." Or put even more illogically and starkly: "There is no ego, but egolessness is gendered." Why does that happen? This question can be answered on many levels.

Buddhist teachings must not only point to the truth and reality of interdependence, egolessness, and emptiness, but also explain how people so often miss those realities and instead cling to an illusory world of seemingly real

entities, including illusory maleness and femaleness, assumed to exist inherently. At rock bottom, people miss interdependence, egolessness, and emptiness not because they are abstract and remote, but because these basic realities are so simple, so easy to access, and so near at hand. Buddhist teachings never talk about nirvana or enlightenment as being somewhere else, far away or in the distant future. Enlightenment is here and now—if we don't miss it. This also means that enlightenment is fundamentally a change of attitude, a deeper insight. The world does not especially change for enlightened beings; rather their attitude towards it and methods of dealing with it change. People would not become sexless, they would still look the same, but we would no longer fixate on or limit ourselves or others by the gender labels we use in conventional communication.

How we stray from that primordial brilliance moment by moment is one of the great mysteries, according to Buddhism, perhaps the only real mystery. There is no absolute beginning point. Analysis starts in the present, in which confusion is rampant, in which “weak worldlings” have already become deluded. The strong tendency to reify things, including ideas about what gender means, and then to cling to these ideas, is often called “habitual patterns.” Habits, as is well-known, are nearly impervious to change. According to Buddhism, the habits of reifying things, believing in self-existence, and dividing people into male and female are incredibly deep-seated and have been reinforced by countless lifetimes spent making those mistakes over and over again—millions and millions of moments in which, instead of recognizing the boundless space of unfabricated freedom, we clung to a bit of illusory, self-created identity, thus reinforcing that habit and making it even stronger. One the greatest problems with habits is that after a time, it no longer seems possible that things could be any other way; we simply define ourselves as someone who has a certain good or bad habit, as if it were an unalterable part of our essential being. That is how the meanings we attach to gender identity become so strong and why gender roles and gender norms seem “normal,” seem to be part of reality itself.

One of the strongest and most persistent habitual patterns is to attribute invariant and fixed meaning to gender. In fact, this habitual tendency is so deep that even though many Buddhists are aware that belief in permanent, independent ego is a problem that causes them great suffering and even

though they try to undermine their stubborn belief in self-existence, nevertheless, it rarely, if ever, occurs to them that a large part of this troublesome ego is their gender identity, or that attributing significance to gender or clinging to gender identity is causing them suffering. Attributing importance or invariant meaning to gender must be located either in the ego or in the fundamental egoless nature. No Buddhist teacher would locate gender identity in the realm of egolessness, which means the gender identity must be an aspect of ego. Though teachings about ego and egolessness are constant, staple fare in Buddhist education, teachers very rarely discuss gender when they teach about ego and egolessness. In some cases, I fear that may be because they still attribute significance to gender themselves, like the monks attending Tara when she definitively uncovered egolessness.

As least as strong as the habitual tendency to fixate on gender identity is the habitual pattern of evaluating men as superior to and more important than women, which is the basis for setting up social and religious institutions that favor men over women, and the basis for describing the world from the point of view of their experience while ignoring the experiences of women, defined as inferior, and also uninteresting. It takes no imagination at all to realize that this habitual pattern is alive and exceedingly healthy in the Buddhist world. It endures from the narrative relating the Buddha's reluctance to allow women to join the monastic community to the assumption that the newest Tibetan *tulku* or reborn teacher would, of course, be a boy. In-between, all nuns were defined as inferior to even the newest and youngest monks, and had to sit behind them at all assemblies. Though the Buddha did not honor the caste hierarchy that prevailed in the India of his day, he did retain its gender hierarchy, setting up rules of monastic discipline that clearly made nuns dependent on monks in many ways. (Other rules did protect nuns, however. For example, nuns could not be asked to cook or sew for the monks.) Nuns were often educated much more poorly than monks and large segments of the Buddhist world allowed the nuns' order to die out completely. Being reborn as a woman was said to be the result of negative karma and countless thousands of women prayed and did practices to help them attain a male rebirth. Seeing this picture, it is understandable why feminists would ask why any woman

would ever chose to be a Buddhist. How could a religion that has such a clear understanding of non-duality, such a strong realization that gender is illusory and unreal, get things so completely wrong on the ground, in the everyday world, and in its institutional life?

It is fair and reasonable to point out that, regarding gender, Buddhists did things more or less like all other religions and cultures, despite holding ultimate views that completely undercut such practices. Furthermore, Buddhists themselves long ago noticed this disconnect, as the story of Tara and many other texts point out. Is there something about the relative world that constrains us into fixed gender roles and gender hierarchy, even when we know better? For Buddhists, giving an accurate account of the relative world is also important.

Buddhists accounted for the gender disparities so evident in the relative world by appealing to karma, a notion so basic to the Indian worldview that even the Buddha accepted it without question. “Karma” refers to the fact that any action produces an appropriate reaction, both physically and morally. Thus, karma can refer to both cause and effect. An action sets something in motion; in that sense karma is a cause. But what results, an effect, is also called karma. Everything experienced in the relative world is the result of karma, or causes and conditions. That does not, however, mean that everything is foreordained or fated, as many Westerners often assume. The *present* constellation of events is the result of past actions; it cannot be changed. However, *how one deals with the present is not predetermined; choice is involved at that point.* Those choices are important because *present choices* determine *future outcomes.* The only caveat that must be interjected here is the reminder that habitual patterns, especially ones of which one is not even aware, can drastically limit the arena of choice. The prison of gender roles<sup>7</sup> perpetuates itself so easily because living in it is one of those largely unconscious habitual patterns for most people.

To illustrate these points, let us use as an example the subject of this

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<sup>7</sup> I have long defined the goal of feminism as “freedom from the prison of gender roles” because I think that prescribed gender roles are themselves the problem. This problem cannot be alleviated by coming up with a more equal set of gender roles, or by attributing greater value to women’s assigned genders. If there are gender roles, there will be suffering caused by the constraints of being hammered into a role that does not fit. This definition of feminism is as relevant for men as it is for women, one of its many virtues.

paper. Because of past karma, I was reborn a woman in this life. I have no idea what that karma was, and there is no reason to try to figure out why I was reborn as a woman in this life. The present is what makes a difference. What I do with my female rebirth is up to me. I could follow the gender norms of my culture unquestioningly, or I could write *Buddhism after Patriarchy*. I received a great deal of pressure to fall into the female gender role, and no support for becoming the person who would write *Buddhism after Patriarchy*. Which of those choices I make determines a great deal about my future and also has an impact on the world around me. Though I suppose some traditional Buddhists might disagree, I assume that writing *Buddhism after Patriarchy* results in better karma for the future than willingly following repressive gender norms.

The traditional Buddhist account of women's situation in a male dominant world must be phrased correctly and understood precisely. Starting in the present, as does all Buddhist analysis, Buddhists looked around themselves and saw that most women were living in undesirable, unpleasant situations. They were subject to the authority of others, usually men, had little or no independence, usually had little opportunity for study and practice, experienced heavy reproductive demands with no fertility control, frequent deaths in childbirth, frequent loss of infants and children, faced demands for heavy physical labor in addition to their reproductive difficulties, and often had to endure having co-wives as well. Who would choose or want such a life? The only logical conclusion was that these beings were suffering from the results of unfortunate choices in the past. The only compassionate response was to offer ways them ways to change their situation positively in the future. This is why female rebirth is said to be unfortunate or woeful, the result of unfortunate karma, and why women are told to aspire to become men in the future.

Western women usually experience these teachings as extremely hurtful, but there is more to them than is evident at first glance. Because Westerners have such different metaphysical assumptions from Buddhists, they usually hear in these statements things that are not really part of their message. Westerners tend to hear these teaching as saying that women *are* bad, but that is not at all what Buddhists are saying. Buddhists would not say that women *are* bad, but only

that they *carry* unfortunate karma in their karmic continua. Carrying unfortunate karmic seeds is completely different from having a defective or an evil nature, something often attributed to women in many other religious traditions. For one thing, negative karmic seeds work themselves out or are burned up; they are not an enduring intractable part of one's nature. One is not defined or constituted by these negative seeds; they are adventitious, temporarily obscuring something more basic.

Second, because unlike much Western discourse, Buddhists are not talking about an enduring essence or nature; not all women are necessarily conditioned or constrained by the situation in which most women find themselves. There are no metaphysical barriers to women doing anything or taking on any role. It would not occur to Buddhists to say that women's nature prevents them from becoming ritual leaders or teachers, which is quite different from the position of many Christians, who see women as metaphysically, inherently incapable of being priests. Another important implication of the fact that Buddhists are not attributing women's woes to an intractable, enduring nature, but to karmic, historical factors is that gender roles are not divinely or cosmically ordained. One of the most imprisoning doctrines, found in many religions, is that current gender roles are necessary, inevitable, and unchangeable because of divine command or cosmic requirements. Buddhists could say that not only are women's woes the result of unfortunate karma, but also that our current system of gender roles is nothing but the result of an impermanent nexus of cause and effect. There is nothing inevitable about it; it is only maintained by force of habit. Even deep-seated habits are not binding or inevitable in the ways that a divine command, a cosmic law, or an immutable, eternal nature would be.

Finally, behind the unpalatable suggestion that women solve their problems by becoming men and the equally unpalatable claim, made anonymously to me in 1980, that feminism is irrelevant to Buddhism because "deserving women are reborn as men" lurks a remarkable admission. To be a woman in a male-dominated *is* unfortunate and painful! Buddhists admitted that long ago, defining the woes of female rebirth as, among other things, being subject to male authorities and having to work hard taking care

of their husbands.<sup>8</sup> Buddhists do not ask us to try to believe that male domination is good for everyone or that everyone should be happy under its aegis. They know better than to claim that male dominance actually benefits women or that women should be happy and grateful that men have authority over them. One of the key elements of feminism has been admitted by Buddhists for a long time. If only we could get contemporary societies and people to arrive at a similar consensus that male dominance is painful for women and for human beings in general!

The primary purpose of Buddhist discipline and practice is to eliminate suffering,<sup>9</sup> so if it is determined that something causes suffering, Buddhists should try to overcome that obstacle. That is why Buddhists held out the promise of rebirth as men to women suffering under male dominance. Traditional Buddhists could not imagine what contemporary feminists do—a society and Buddhist institutions that are not male dominated. To them, it seemed easier and more possible to turn women into men, which indicates that many of the things that made female rebirth seem woeful were, at that

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<sup>8</sup> Buddhists catalogue what makes a woman's life miserable. One list is called the "five woes": menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, having to leave one's parental home at marriage to live with the husband's family and having to work hard taking care of one's husband and his family. Feminists would point out that three of these are male evaluations of female biology; women might well not share this assessment. The other two are social expectations that are part of the "prison of gender roles." The other major catalogue is called the "three subserviences." They are the need for women always to be under the authority of some male: in youth the father, in mid-life the husband, and in old age, the son. Obviously, these are also part of the "prison of gender roles," which I am claiming is a deep-seeded karmic habit rather than anything given in the nature of "things as they are."

<sup>9</sup> One of the most persistent misunderstandings of Buddhism is that it regards suffering as inevitable and intractable, probably because its first two Noble Truths are about suffering and the cause of suffering. The third truth, however, is about the cessation of suffering. The second truth claims that suffering is caused by attachment and the third that when the cause of suffering—attachment—is renounced, suffering ceases. That is to say, in enlightenment, things don't change; *our attitudes* change and that makes all the difference between confusion and enlightenment.

time, deemed intractable. But if things changed, so that women's lives were no longer governed by those same factors, there would be no Buddhist grounds for continuing male dominance. According to Buddhism, male dominance is grounded in karma, cause and effect, or historical circumstances, not women's inherent nature, the will of God, or cosmic necessity. If the karma, the historical conditions change, the situation of women not only can change; it will.

So the question becomes: have conditions changed sufficiently to undo male dominance, both in society and in Buddhist institutions? In my analyses, I have always attributed historical male dominance less to the inherent nastiness of men and more to the material circumstances, technology, and medical knowledge of the times. I would agree with the assessment that women's lives *were* woeful in the circumstances that prevailed when Buddhists offered rebirth as a man as the only solution to male dominance. I certainly would not want to be a woman subject to the conditions most (Buddhist) women have endured throughout most of history. In fact, I spent much of my youth dreading growing up to be a woman. I would also suggest that two fragile, but real contemporary circumstances can change women's lives drastically and dramatically. They are reproductive freedom and the ability to make personal, individual choices about one's life. These conditions are far from securely or widely available. But they are definitely possible and offer a far more adequate way to undo the disconnect between Buddhism's gender-neutral and gender-free vision and its male dominant institutions than offering "deserving women" future rebirth as a male.

### **Undoing the delusion**

The first step in undoing the delusions of "weak-minded worldlings" regarding gender is more consistent, more honest, and better teaching concerning gender. Paradoxically, Buddhism's exemplary views on gender sometimes short-circuit real awareness of the problems caused by traditional male dominance in Buddhist institutions. For example, though the story of Tara is known to every Tibetan Buddhist teacher, few respond to students' persistent questions about male dominance in Buddhism with the insights promoted in this story. Traditional teachers simply dismiss feminist criticisms and questions with the statement that enlightened mind is utterly beyond any conventional qualities and dichotomies, including that of male

and female. That is true, of course, but the real questions “Why is Buddhism so male dominated?” and “What can be done about it?” have not been answered. Thus, instead of transcending gender, which is what the teacher intends to do, the reality of gender and the suffering caused by it is simply ignored.

Furthermore, the way teachers work with students who question Buddhist male dominance often includes a hidden, or even an overt rebuke to the student for even asking such questions, for having such concerns. The teacher does not say, “Yes, you are right. Weak worldlings *are* always deluded by these things, but don’t let their mistakes become an obstacle in your path.” Instead, their answers imply that because, ultimately gender has no relevance, it is shortsighted to be concerned about how gender works in the relative world. There can be a subtle insinuation that students who brings up such questions are lacking in sincerity and devotion. They are chided for being “too sensitive” and told to “practice more” because being angry and upset are not conducive to enlightenment. (That very last snippet of the advice is correct.) The teacher’s response may be even more abrupt—something like “Aren’t you over that yet?” “Why are you still asking these questions?” In other words, many times, teachers’ responses to these questions are seriously lacking in the skillful means that is supposed to be the specialty of a good teacher.

Sometimes, accusations go further, claiming that the student who is concerned about gender inequities in the world of Buddhist institutions is the one who is “genderizing the dharma,” thus implying that male dominant institutions would, in fact, be gender neutral and gender inclusive if only those pesky feminists would stop noticing and making a fuss about male dominance. Then followed the opinion that people who “genderize the dharma” should not be allowed to publish or teach about those concerns. This has happened to me, though this rather extreme and angry comment came from another student, not a teacher. One can only reply that dharma is genderized by those who create and maintain male dominant institutions, not by those who *notice and point out* those male dominant institutions. Buddhism is about overcoming ignorance, not about promoting the status quo by encouraging ignorance of it.

In the past thirty years, around the world, Buddhists have been breaking

down the prison of gender roles, undoing the delusion of “weak worldlings” that gender means anything ultimate or has any great significance for how one lives one’s life.

For many Asian Buddhists, the dichotomy between monastics and laypeople is at least as pronounced the male-female distinction. For them, a key issue has been restoring or upgrading the nuns’ order.<sup>10</sup> Because of the prestige accorded to monastics in Asian Buddhism, it would be difficult for any other issue to upstage that of nuns’ existence and status. Nothing could more forcefully demonstrate male dominance in Buddhist institutional life than the loss of the nuns’ order in some parts of the Asian Buddhist world and its degradation in other parts of the Asian Buddhist world.

For the Theravada Buddhist world, which had initially transmitted nuns’ ordination to Mahayana Buddhists but then lost that lineage themselves, restoring the nuns’ order was a difficult and controversial issue. Many opposed it on many grounds. Some claimed that, though Theravadins had originally transmitted the lineage to Mahayanists, the purity of that lineage could no longer be trusted because its transmission among Theravadins had been lost. Apparently, Mahayanists were not considered to be capable of transmitting monastic standards from generation to generation because of doctrinal innovations of which Theravadins did not approve. Others claimed that women themselves did not want to be ordained as nuns. Throughout Theravadin countries, women did take informal ordination and lead a renunciant lifestyle. Though they had very low status and lacked many of the privileges accorded to monastics, they were self-governing, largely because they were not considered to be genuine monastics. Some claimed that these women did not want to be ordained as nuns because then, as nuns, they would be subject to the authority of monks, as monastic codes specified. However, it is hard to understand how these low status, informal nuns could have been independent, in any meaningful sense of that word, in a situation in which monastics were so

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<sup>10</sup> For historical information on Buddhist nuns, see Nancy Auer Falk, “The Case of the Vanishing Nuns: The Fruits of Ambivalence in Ancient Indian Buddhism”, in N. A. Falk and R. M. Gross (eds.), *Unspoken Worlds: Women’s Religious Lives* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. 2001). For contemporary information, see Karma Lekshe Tsomo, ed., *Sakyadhita: Daughters of the Buddha* (Ithica, NY: Snow Lion, 1988).

highly revered but these “nuns” were not considered to be real monastics by most. In any case, some Buddhists have taken matters into their own hands. The first nuns’ ordination held in a Theravadin Buddhist country in over a thousand years took place in Sri Lanka in 1998 and more have followed. Most reports indicate that, whatever the opinion of monastic authorities about their ordinations, Theravada nuns are being accepted in many Theravada contexts.

In other Asian contexts in which nuns, whether fully ordained or not, were more common and more accepted, the main issue was about their education. In Korea, Taiwan and other parts of the Chinese diaspora, and in parts of Vietnam, the nuns’ ordination lineage had not been lost. Obviously, there could be no controversy about whether or not there should even be nuns in these contexts, as there was in the Theravada countries. Nuns were an accepted part of the Buddhist institutional world and thus were in a much better position to take advantage of economic and educational opportunities that became available in the late twentieth century. In East Asia, as the economy boomed, nuns benefited in many ways. In Asian cultures, rich laypeople have always wanted to patronize religious enunciates as a way to make merit for themselves, and also to ensure their continuity prosperity. (In many Asian contexts, it is believed that stinginess leads to poverty while generosity leads to wealth. A rich person who is not generous is despised.) Thus, a great deal of money was available to religious institutions, but, rather suddenly, the numbers of monks began to decline and the number of nuns to rise, so that today, by most estimates, there are six nuns for every monk. It is easy to imagine why this imbalance has happened; the secular economy affords great opportunities for men but many fewer for women. Women seek out the nuns’ lifestyle for the same reasons they always have: because of genuine spiritual vocation, to avoid patriarchal marriages, and to receive an education, which might not otherwise be available to girls. With plentiful economic resources, the nuns are flourishing. Their monastic institutions are not second class imitations of the monks’ institutions, as they have often been, and nuns receive a complete classical Buddhist education in both philosophy and meditation. In addition, many of them receive doctoral degrees from Western institutions while being supported by their home monasteries. Probably this

combination of generous economic support and many nuns receiving such support has never before occurred in Buddhist history. Most of the time, there were plenty of monks, and, because it is thought that the merit earned by giving donations depends in part on the virtue of the recipient, monks, by definition more worthy than nuns, always received the lions' share of donations. I have visited nunneries in both Korea and Taiwan. I was very impressed with the feistiness, dignity, and self-confidence of the nuns, as well as by their well-equipped facilities.

Tibetan Buddhism presents yet another picture. (When discussing Tibetan Buddhism, it must always be remembered that this tradition was severely disrupted when Tibetans lost their homeland to the Chinese in 1959. Contemporary Tibetan Buddhism is known mainly from its refugee communities in India.) Nuns' novice ordination was transmitted to Tibet, but, if the full ordination lineages made it into Tibet, it did not survive there. However, among Tibetan Buddhists, both novices and fully ordained monastics wear the same maroon robes and live very similar lifestyles, so the lack of the full ordination did not hamper Tibetan nuns as much as it hampered the informal Theravada "nuns," who could not wear robes of the monastic color to indicate their lack of true monastic status. In fact, in some Theravada countries, especially Thailand, it is extremely controversial, even dangerous, for nuns who have received full, final ordination to wear monastic robes of the traditional color. What hampered Tibetan nuns was the familiar lack of economic support, leading to limited educations and meager institutions. In addition, the belief that female rebirth is much inferior to male rebirth was (and probably still is) quite robust in popular Tibetan Buddhist culture. On the other hand, both historically and in the present, Tibetan Buddhists also did recognize some extraordinary women as great practitioners and teachers; such women are very highly regarded.

For the Tibetan situation specifically, and probably to some extent for Asian Buddhism in general, a detailed, poignant account of historical difficulties and current changes is found in the well-researched and well-written book *Being a Buddhist Nun: the Struggle for Enlightenment in the Himalayas*,<sup>11</sup> which is the result of many years of fieldwork living among Ladakhi nuns. At the

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<sup>11</sup> Kim Gutschow, *Being a Buddhist Nun: The Struggle for Enlightenment in the Himalayas* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2004).

beginning of her research, Gutschow found that all women and men, without exception, regarded female rebirth as a liability, as something negative and to be avoided. The local nuns were few, and had to struggle economically, often having to hire themselves out to do housework or heavy labor to earn enough funds for the years' supplies, or to slowly build their monastery. Many of the nuns had completed the required preliminary meditation practices. Still, they were not allowed to perform the more advanced aspects of their cycle of practices, despite the fact that the main meditation deity of their cycle of practices is Vajrayogini, one of the foremost female meditation deities of Tibetan Buddhism. In the 1990's, as the area opened up more to modern and outside influences, things began to change. An aristocratic local woman became a nun—something that aristocrats, especially women, rarely did. Tsering Palmo studied medicine in Dharamsala and began to study and practice Buddhism seriously. She became the foremost local leader for change in the treatment of nuns. In 1995, a Sakyadhita conference<sup>12</sup> was held in Ladakh, attended by Buddhist nuns and laywomen from all over the world, electrifying “local audiences with their deportment and teachings.”<sup>13</sup> The Dalai Lama did not attend, but sent a message commending Buddhist women for “casting off traditional and outmoded restraints to dedicating themselves to implementing and promoting Buddhist practice.”<sup>14</sup> In the years that followed, local people both sought to upgrade the situation of the nuns and opposed Tsering Palmo's work because they were fearful of what would happen if they subverted the monks' privileged status. Finally, in 1998, the Dalai Lama accepted her invitation to give a public talk on women and spoke to a “thronged audience about how men and women have an equal capacity for enlightenment.”<sup>15</sup> After that, local attitudes changed, though certain difficulties still persisted. As in East Asia, the number of monks is dropping and the number of nuns is growing.

This narrative includes elements found in many accounts of Asian Buddhist women in the twentieth century. The nuns' order was non-existent

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<sup>12</sup> See fn. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Gutschow, p.239.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.242.

or severely curtailed by the monks' order. (This was less so in East Asia). International education and an international Buddhist women's movement brought new awareness to local women about the problems with their situation and about potentials for improvement, whether full ordination, better education, better facilities, or better economic support were needed. Many local people, both men and women, both lay and monastic were opposed to, or at least uneasy about upgrading the nuns' situation. Usually, powerful Asian Buddhist leaders, (males by definition) but not always from the local region, gave their support to the women and nuns, which usually aided the women and the nuns greatly. Change is slow, but it also seems inevitable that Asian Buddhist women's and nuns' situations will continue to improve. Obviously, these changes are the result of a complex blend of Asian and Western influences and female and male leadership. It is not necessary to sort out these influences further.

If the story about Asian Buddhist women is mainly the story of nuns, the story of Western Buddhist women is mainly the story of laypeople and their concerns,<sup>16</sup> whether the Buddhists are converts or Asian Americans. Outside of Asia, there is no economic basis for the monastic institutions that were always thought to be essential to Buddhism by Asian Buddhists. There simply are not enough rich lay Buddhists to support monastic institutions in the West and many more people who want to practice meditation seriously than can be supported by donations to Buddhist institutions. While more traditional Buddhists might find this situation untenable, many commentators see this new development of lay Buddhists who are also serious meditators as exciting and promising. What would Buddhism be like if serious practitioners of meditation also had jobs and families? Throughout most of its history, Buddhism had promoted a division of labor: monastics pursued the accumulation of wisdom by engaging in meditation and philosophical studies; laypeople pursued the accumulation of merit by supporting them, but were not expected to be able to engage in serious study and practice because of time constraints. Western

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<sup>16</sup> For a fuller account of Western Buddhist women, see Rita M. Gross, "Women's Issues in Contemporary North American Buddhism" in R. Keller and R. R. Ruether (eds.) *The Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006) pp.1207-14.

convert Buddhists are attempting to undo this neat division of labor.

Western Buddhism is a complex phenomenon. The majority of Buddhists in Western countries, especially the United States and Canada are Asian Americans, some of whom have been in the west for generations and many more of whom are recent immigrants. But the Western Buddhists who get the most attention are the converts, in part because they are the most recent converts to one of the world's most successful missionary religions, and in part because they are extremely articulate and have already made many contributions to Buddhism worldwide.

Beginning in the late 1960's and increasing exponentially in the 1970's, Asian teachers from some of the major Buddhist denominations began teaching in North America and North Americans, mainly well-educated Caucasians, began practicing meditation and converting to Buddhism in large numbers. Many Asian meditation teachers, frustrated with the relative lack of interest in serious meditation practice in their home countries, were happy to teach these eager new meditators, about half of whom were women. For men and women to be engaging in intensive practice together as lay practitioners was an innovation. It led to significant developments.

One development involved what happened to Buddhist meditation centers when these young converts married and began to have children. Before they had families and careers, the long retreats common in forms of Buddhism that emphasize meditation were not a problem, assuming that somehow the economics of the situation could be worked out, and in the early days, creative financing was common in convert Western Buddhism. But by the middle 1980's, these converts began to have children. That would have been un-notable, except for the fact that half the convert students were women who were not willing to retire from their lives as serious students of Buddhadharma to take sole responsibility for childcare.

Instead, they asked for at least two things. First, meditation centers should provide child care, so that parents of young children could participate in the programs. This was unheard of in traditional meditation centers that cater mainly to monastics, childless by definition. Slowly, with many false starts, meditation did begin to offer childcare programs. They are now a

standard part of many meditation centers and many programs.

These convert Buddhist parents also wanted something more subtle. They wanted to hear teachings on how childcare and livelihood could be experienced as extensions of their meditation practice, rather than as distractions from it. After all, classic Buddhist texts talked about the identity of *samsāra* or confused existence and *nirvāṇa*, enlightenment, and about how bodhisattvas took on all worldly situations to help beings. Buddhist literature contains stories about people who attained had enlightenment while engaged in mundane activities, including stories about women whose families would not let them engage in formal practices, who then used their housework as an object of mindfulness meditation and attained realization by those methods.

So what about a layperson making a living and rearing children? Zen Buddhists, though not most other forms of Buddhism, already had some insight into regarding work as part of formal spiritual discipline. One of the great innovations of Chinese Ch'an (Zen) Buddhists had been requiring monastics to do daily work, growing their own vegetables. Mindfulness could be cultivated along with the vegetables. Zen literature also included great classics on cooking and a meditator aspiring to become a major teacher was required to take a turn as head cook as part of that journey. Zen Buddhist centers in North America under the leadership of the great Suzuki Roshi became famous for their organic gardens, the vegetarian restaurant, Greens, which they founded in San Francisco, and their sulfur hot springs resort, Tassahara, a desirable resort that serves gourmet vegetarian food during the summer and becomes a meditation center for intensive practice during the winter. Students who work at the resort in the summer earn credits to stay at the monastery for the winter retreats, which are otherwise quite expensive. Other North American Buddhist groups have also adopted the practice of requiring manual and service work during meditation programs. Partly this is done for economic reasons, to make the programs more affordable, but partly it is done to teach people how to carry mindfulness into everyday life. I consider that the many hours I have spent chopping vegetables in kitchens at practice centers were just as important as the hours I spend in formal meditation and in listening to talks about meditation. The issues involved in developing similar practices regarding jobs in the secular world are more difficult, of course. But there is great possibility for further

development in this area, and Buddhists would only be adding to commentary on the category “Right Livelihood,” which is the fifth element of the eightfold path Buddhism’s fourth Noble Truth, goes back to the origins of Buddhism.

Regarding motherhood and parenting as a form of meditation practice has been more difficult. In many a classic Buddhist tale, women lament that they cannot follow their heart’s desire to do intensive practice because they have to take care of their children. Monks, who wrote virtually all the major Buddhist literature, simply did not encounter the need to combine childrearing with their lives as meditators. Monks may have learned how to cultivate mindfulness with their vegetables, but there were no young children at monasteries. Monasteries often served as orphanages, but the young boys in them were ordained as monks and expected to follow the monastic routine. I am familiar with one nunnery in India that includes many young girls. But there are no infants; all the girls are old enough to be in classes, so the nunnery is more like a boarding school than a day care center. A few women who are also regarded as great meditators and teachers did have children,<sup>17</sup> but they left no reminiscences about combining formal meditation with motherhood. When North American Buddhists, both women and men, who had spent years moving from meditation center to meditation center, began to have children, a huge outcry went out. Where was the Buddhist literature discussing parenthood as path, the teachings on how to practice mindfulness in the midst of dirty diapers and screaming children? By the late 1980’s some literature dealing with this question began to appear<sup>18</sup> and recently, a Zen Buddhist woman has written a book specifically on motherhood as path.<sup>19</sup> As the first generation of children born to convert Buddhist parents has grown to young adulthood, they have also to record their experiences, so that in the future, others will be able to find out about what it was like to be a first generation Buddhist child in the Western

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<sup>17</sup> Machig Labdron, a great female teacher of eleventh century Tibet did have several children. For her traditional biography, see Jerome Edou, *Machig Labdron and the Foundations of Chod* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> Sandy Eastoak, ed. *Dharma Family Treasures: Sharing Buddhism with Children* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1994).

<sup>19</sup> Karen Miller, *Momma Zen: Walking The Crooked Path of Motherhood* (Boston: Shambhala, 2006).

world.<sup>20</sup>

Whether for Asian or for Western Buddhists, however, the most significant step in undoing the delusions of “weak worldlings” regarding gender is empowering and honoring women as teachers. My most persistent and consistent feminist critique of Buddhism is that throughout Buddhist history, and even in the contemporary world, most teachers are men. The most honored and important role in the Buddhist world is that of the teacher, guru, Rinpoche, Roshi, or whatever other title may be used. Yet throughout Buddhist history, and even in the contemporary world, it has been very difficult for women to attain any of those titles. Why is this a problem? Isn’t dharma the same whether taught by a man or a woman? That challenge has been thrown at me many times. But for many reasons, it matters whether or not women are teachers. For one thing, Buddhist texts and institutions would probably not exhibit such a pervasive preference for men and maleness if more women could have become revered teachers. For another, women would have had role models, something that all educators agree is important for students. Most important, the experiences of women would not have been lost to the tradition if women had been teachers and had written about their practice, as male teachers have always done.<sup>21</sup> Had that happened, we might not have encountered the situation of Western practitioners asking desperately for meditation instruction on parenting as path and as part of their spiritual discipline. But most important, Buddhism’s exemplary views regarding the irrelevance of gender are rendered completely meaningless if all or most of those teaching that exemplary view have male bodies.

As we move into the twenty-first century and Buddhism’s twenty-sixth century, the situation is changing. For one thing, persistent historical explorations, largely undertaken by Western students, have uncovered more female teachers and role models than were commonly known about earlier. The *therīgāthā* (Songs of the Female Elders),<sup>22</sup> barely known to earlier

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<sup>20</sup> Sumi Loundon, ed. *Blue Jean Buddha: Voices of Young Buddhists* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001).

<sup>21</sup> Gross, “Buddhist Women as Leaders and Teachers: Gender Bias and Democratization,” in Karma Lekshe Tsomo, ed. *Out of the Shadows: Socially Engaged Buddhist Women* (Delhi, India: Sri Satguru, 2006), pp.356-62.

<sup>22</sup> Mrs. C. A. F. Rhys Davids and K. R. Norman, trs., *Poems of Early Buddhist Nuns*

students of Buddhism has become well-known. More Tibetan female teachers are being discovered all the time. Zen students have painstakingly brought to light a hidden record of female lineage ancestors.

More important, currently women teachers are being recognized and authorized to teach much more regularly. Among Tibetan teachers, Venerable Khandro Rinpoche,<sup>1</sup> who was recognized as a *tulku* and trained from an early age, is teaching publicly in a way that is unprecedented for an Asian female teacher. She has many Western students and a center in North America. She also heads a nunnery in India and plays a large role in the day to day operations of Mindrolling monastery, her father's monastery and one of the great Tibetan monasteries in exile. However, Asian women teachers, especially those who travel and teach in the West, are still relatively rare.

Many Western converts to Buddhism now have been practicing and studying for thirty or more years and have begun to teach. In Zen and Vipassana lineages, women have been given full transmission and permission to teach as independent teachers. In the Tibetan lineages, almost no Westerners, men or women, have been given such teaching authority. Nevertheless, even in centers that follow some form of Tibetan Buddhism, Westerners do a great deal of the teaching. From the beginning, about half of these Western teachers of the dharma have been women. These were the same women who began preparing for that role, probably without intending to, when they sat with the men at the feet of Asian dharma teachers in the 1960's and 70's, instead of confining themselves to preparing food and cleaning up afterward, as their mothers would have done in the 1950's. Some of these women are now among the best-known and most highly respected Western dharma teachers. This development—the percentage of dharma teachers who are women, the independence with which some of them teach, and the respect they receive—is an unprecedented, momentous development for Buddhism, which hopefully will change Buddhism forever. I have often commented about the extreme good fortune that, for various historical reasons, Asian Buddhist meditation masters began to teach Western students in large numbers in the late 1960's and in the 1970's—at exactly the same time that the second wave of feminism was

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(*Therigatha*) (Oxford: The Pali Text Society, 1989). Her web site is <http://www.vkr.org>.

transforming Western society to its core. Some people might be inclined to see this as a mere random happenstance, but Buddhists affirm that things do not happen by chance. They happen because of karma, because of causes and conditions. When two lines of cause and effect come together in ways that are mutually beneficial, Tibetan Buddhists refer to that as *tendrel*, auspicious coincidence. This term is often used to name the meeting of teacher and student, the most important event in the life of a student. Similarly, I have long claimed that the coincidence of Buddhism and feminism was auspicious, extremely auspicious for both. Surely Tara would regard this meeting as very helpful to overcoming the delusions of “weak worldlings.”

