

Gender and Buddhism in Taiwan¹

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ABSTRACT :

Is Taiwan Buddhism part of the problem regarding gender equality, part of the solution, or some of both? Is Buddhism more, less, or equally progressive vis-à-vis gender? This paper explores the attitudes toward females as lay members or clerics in contemporary Taiwan Buddhism and the attitudes toward men and women in Taiwan society. It examines, inter alia, attitudes toward family and family relationships, the gender-based division of labour of members and clerics, leadership, and the effects on women in their everyday lives. It will also examine Taiwan Buddhism in the context of Taiwan society in general.

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台灣的性別議題與佛教¹

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摘要：

就性別平等的議題來說，台灣佛教是一個問題？是可能的解答？還是兩者皆是？佛教是更進步？更保守？還是差不多？本文探討台灣當今佛教信徒與法師對於女性的態度，檢驗的項目包括了他們對於家庭、家庭關係、信仰組織內的性別分工等等的看法，以及佛教對於女眾在日常活動中的可能作用。此外，本文亦將從台灣整體社會的脈絡來探究台灣佛教。

¹ 本人謹對以下單位深致謝忱：感謝主辦單位提供本文之寫作動機、感謝蔣經國國際學術交流基金會佛學研究計畫之財務資助、感謝中央研究院社會學研究所之支援，以及瞿海源教授之贊助與張之怡小姐之研究協助。

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The inferior position of both lay and cleric women in traditional Buddhism as well as in the societies in which it flourished is well known. Many who have written on the history of Buddhism or of women in Buddhism have argued that while the Buddha regarded men and women as equal, at least in their potential for enlightenment, in practice they were treated unequally and regarded as lesser beings than men (e.g. Findly 2000). This view, some note, closely reflects how women were regarded in the Indian society of the time and other societies to which Buddhism spread. Such ideas persist in some Buddhist societies, but in others, e.g. Taiwan, the profound social and cultural transformations that accompanied industrialisation and the introduction of a universal education system based on a post-scientific revolution curriculum have changed the status, roles, images and expectations of women.

This paper will examine the extent that these social changes are reflected in six of Taiwan's new Buddhist groups: Tzu Chi (慈濟), Foguangshan (佛光山), Dharma Drum (DDM, 法鼓山), Zhongtai Chansi (Zhongtai 中台禪寺), Lingjiushan (靈鷲山) and Fuzhi (福智). Given Taiwan's level of industrialisation and education, and the fact that among its Buddhist groups are several which follow in the modernising directions that Ven Taixu set in motion in the first half of the twentieth century, we might expect a high degree of gender equality in Taiwan Buddhism. In this paper I will argue that while women are very prominent in various Buddhist groups and have achieved a high level of equality in some areas, one still finds some quite conservative ideas which reflect a persistent high level of male chauvinism. Furthermore, these attitudes are much more a reflection of Han Chinese culture than of Buddhism itself.

The paper is based on secondary data as well as a research project started in 2004 to examine the extent to which participation in one of the above six Buddhist groups enhances social capital and citizen-level participation in Taiwan's democracy. Primary data from the project consists of the results of a stratified random survey covering the whole of Taiwan and in depth interviews, largely but not exclusively in Taipei, with monastics, lay cadres, and ordinary members in the groups. Statements below representing the stance of a group are from persons well-placed and senior enough to be able to speak for it.

The paper will begin with an overview of the status and treatment of women in traditional Buddhism which will establish a base of comparison with the present. It will then examine the perceptions and treatment of women as monastic or lay participants in Buddhist groups, the limitations on what they can do and the effects of participation on their lives, and Buddhist views on family and gender roles in the wider society.

Women and Buddhism in Pre-Modern Society

There were several views of women among Buddhists in the traditional period with regard to their spiritual potential and their status as nuns. There is little question that initially, women, like men, could become Buddhists, the Buddha's aunt/step-mother, Prajāpatī, and other women at court being prominent examples. However, there must have been some doubt about women and spirituality because the Buddha explicitly stated that women could achieve enlightenment—had there been none there would have been no reason to do so. This doubt may have been a hangover from Brahminism, the prevailing religion in the region where Buddhism arose, in which only men could become priests or merely reflected the status of women in the society of that time. Moreover, despite the Buddha's declaration, there was much reluctance to accept women's spiritual potential. Regarding their becoming nuns there is a commonly told sequence of events: Prajapati's desire to join the Buddhist order after her husband's death; the Buddha's reluctance to allow her to do so; Ananda's insistence; and the Buddha's reluctant acceptance only under the conditions of the Eight Strict Rules (八敬法), perhaps the most egregious of which subordinated all nuns to all monks, regardless of the experience or spiritual progress of either.

Regardless of the veracity of the above there is no question that women were strongly discriminated against not only in the traditional societies themselves but also, reflecting this discrimination, within Buddhism itself. As Faure puts it, 'Like most clerical discourses, Buddhism is indeed relentlessly misogynist' [though] as far as misogynist discourses go, it is one of the most flexible and open to multiplicity and contradiction' (2003:9). Sponberg enumerates this multiplicity, positing four different views toward women and the feminine in the period between the life of Gautama and the

Common Era:

- ◆ Soteriological Inclusiveness: the path to liberation is open to all regardless of caste, class or sex; but while there was widespread acceptance of the caste and class equality, after Gautama's death women were limited by their biologically innate differences from men and their gender roles (1985:8-12).
- ◆ Institutional Androcentrism: an attitude expressed especially in the Vinaya which probably developed later. It came about as the Buddhist monastic order was established and grew and is defined as 'the view that women indeed may pursue a full-time religious career, but only within a carefully regulated institutional structure that preserves and reinforces the conventionally accepted social standards of male authority and female subordination' (Sponberg 1985:13). Among the possible objections to nunneries were that the public would see nuns as consorts for monks, the unacceptability of a group of women living independently without male supervision, and concern with the safety and security of a group of women living without the protection of men. The result was that the position of nuns was gradually marginalized; by the Third Century CE, nuns had virtually disappeared from the official record in India, though they continued to exist for several more centuries (Sponberg 1985:13-18).
- ◆ Ascetic Misogyny: related to but more hostile than institutional androcentrism. This position stems from the notions that human society had degenerated to a lower realm of existence caused by desires of the flesh such as eating and sex; and that women are feckless, uncontrolled, unintelligent, greedy, envious and, worst of all, destructive, the source of temptation with the power to undermine male celibacy (1985:18-20). This view most strongly questions women's potential for spiritual progress and is probably responsible for the idea that to become arhats or, especially buddhas, women must become men through rebirth or transformation (化身), or in Chan Buddhism, developing the male qualities of the *da zhangfu* (大丈夫) (Levering 1985:138-42; see also Faure 2003:94-110).
- ◆ Soteriological Androgyny: derives from the Perfection of Wisdom literature and assumes that all beings 'manifest the full range of

characteristics conventionally identified as gender specific' (Sponberg 1985:25). This view developed later and was not fully articulated until the sixth and seventh centuries in the Vajrayāna texts.

Findly pinpoints the difficulties women faced from the more hostile of these views and lists four areas in which they were obstructed:

1. Religious practice: '...lifestyle customs, instructional opportunities, meditational forms, and institutional structures, many of which were routinely available to lay men and monks but are infrequently or never available to lay women or nuns. In spite of the misogynistic tone of some of their rhetoric, canonical texts clearly state that women can experience enlightenment as women. However, channels through which women can progress to this experience are often severely truncated';
2. Disciplinary rules, which make nuns 'second-class citizens *vis-à-vis* monks';
3. At times, denial that women could achieve enlightenment, despite scriptural evidence that they can;
4. At times, despite the large number of female donors, provision for female renunciants has been materially poor (Findly 2000:3).

In addition, women were generally regarded as polluted as a result of the blood spilt during menstruation and parturition, and as scheming. Regarding the latter, Faure cites the *Vijñapitmatratāsodhi-śāstra* (唯識論 or 成唯識論), where it is said that though a woman may look like a bodhisattva, 'in her heart she is like a yaksa' (2003:60). Nuns suffered from the Eight Strict Rules, and women in general from 1) the Five Obstacles or Hindrances (五障);¹ and 2) in addition to the forms of suffering men had to endure, in the *Samyutta-Nikāya* the Buddha enumerates five extra forms for women: menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, having to wait upon a man, and being subject to the authority of in-laws' (Faure 2003:79). Regarding the latter, there was a belief in Indic societies similar to the Three Obediences (三從) found in Chinese society. Women were also put into a 'Catch-22' bind, having a duty to bear children in order that the *sangha* be replenished but in

¹ the inability to become buddhas, Gramha-kings, Indras, Māra-kings, Cakravarti-kings or (佛, 輪王, 梵王, 鬼, 帝釋); (Soothill and Houdus 2005:129).

the process tying them to the cycle of birth and death.

Female monastic orders, though established in several Buddhist societies (Tibet and Thailand being exceptions), disappeared after invasions in India and Sri Lanka. Male orders were re-established after the invaders were quelled, but female orders were not. However, in both Sri Lanka and Thailand, there are significant numbers of women who seem half-way between lay and renounced. They 'leave home,' live communally by seeking alms, and do the work of the clergy, however they cannot be ordained because there are no female clerical orders there (Bartholomeusz 1985; Falk 2007).

Nuns fared better in China. The first Buddhist converts are recorded in the fourth century near Nanjing, and by ca. 800 CE, there were about 120,000 clerics in China, half of whom were women. The *Biqiuni Zhuan*, a volume compiled by the monk Baochang, documents the lives of 65 nuns, singling some out for excellence in ascetic life, meditation and contemplation, resolve to maintain chastity, and teaching. A later text, Peng Shaosheng's *Shan Nüren Zhuan*, paid honour to virtuous lay women who served the Buddha while continuing to carry out family obligations such as care and procreation. Because of their virtue Peng regarded these women as equal to men. Buddhism remained very popular through the Tang and Song, when it was not uncommon for daughters of the elite to renounce, however, with the rise of Neo-Confucianism in the later Song, Buddhism declined in status and popularity, and the numbers dropped (Faure 2003:28).

In Japan, there was relative equality between monks and nuns until around the Eight Century, after which male superiority increased generally in society. Japanese Pure Land Buddhism, while on one hand stating that women had to first become men to attain salvation, on the other states that Amida promised salvation to women first. Women could, by calling on the name of the Buddha, be transformed into men at death, thus escaping the cycle of rebirths (Faure 2003:110; Hooker 1996).

The discrimination against women in Buddhism and particularly the alleged role of the Buddha in it, is addressed in a variety of ways by contemporary believers and writers, many of whom are women or are men dedicated to non-discrimination and universalism. Some are apologists, who try to rationalise the supposed culpability of the Buddha and exonerate him

(e.g. Kurihara 2005). There are also those, probably mostly from the West, who 'reinvent' Buddhism like choosing what they want from a menu or ignoring aspects with which they disagree. For example, the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) promote a revised form of Buddhism in Britain and elsewhere which is strongly committed to gender equality.

*At the [heart] of the FWBO we therefore find a unified Order of women and men; everything in the Order is open to women and men; they take the **same ordination and vows**; they exercise the **same functions at public centers**; they practice the **same meditations**; study the **same texts**, and so on. In the FWBO we feel that no one should be excluded from the process of higher human development [Enlightenment], whether on grounds of sex, race, colour, level of education, or social position. (www.Faithnet, Teach Yourself Buddhism p.125; emphasis original).*

A more scholarly approach is to examine closely the scriptural justification for discrimination, the veracity of the account of Ananda, his pleas with the Buddha and the Buddha's response, and the idea that women are spiritually inferior to men and must become men to attain enlightenment. Both Sponberg (1985) and Faure (2003) are suspicious of the story of Ananda and the Buddha. Kabilsingh questions them more directly, arguing that at least four centuries passed between the time of the Buddha's death and the compilation of the Tripitaka, (not before 90 BCE), and that the monks who compiled it infused their own prejudices into it (1988:20-21). She further argues that the idea that women were unable to become Buddhas derives from a textual corruption which occurred during this gap in time, i.e. that the Buddha was transformed into a supernatural being and endowed with characteristics of great monarchs. One of these characteristics was that he 'must have his penis in a sheath,' i.e. 'covered, meaning that the Buddha had transcended sexual desire.' Subsequently this is corrupted to only 'having the penis,' which, of course, disqualified women. To accommodate worthy women the idea was then invented that they could be transformed in to males as an intermediate step (Kabilsingh 1998:53).

Chung also makes a direct and detailed attack. First, examining the Prātimoksa of Dharmaguptaka (波羅提木叉), she argues that the Vinaya rules

do not discriminate against nuns and that where monks and nuns are treated unequally, the aim is to protect the nuns. Second, she writes that the argument that the Buddha's discrimination against nuns was simply in keeping with his time is inconsistent with his rejection of Brahmanism, caste being the major social principle, and his egalitarian view of lay women. Third, she notes that the first of the Eight Strict Rules, commanding nuns always to defer to monks, though it appears in the above Chinese text which she used, does not appear in the Pali Bhiksuni Vinaya. She also cites Falk (1989) who states that the above Rules do not appear in the earliest Buddhist literature and that they may have been inserted later (1999).

These arguments questioning the veracity of the references which form the foundation of discrimination are quite convincing. First, why would the Buddha, having developed such a revolutionary notion as the rejection of caste, accept discrimination against half of the human race—or at least provide a much more detailed justification of it that was consistent with other major ideas of Buddhism? Second, why would a senior nun, whom it must be assumed had engaged in years of self-cultivation, defer to a just ordained monk? Third, why, in the spirit of monastic discipline, would nuns be forbidden to speak of the misdeeds of monks; if monks 'despised' women because women were a temptation to them, it makes no sense and is contrary to monastic discipline that nuns could not report misconduct on the part of monks.

Thus, the most plausible explanation for the discrimination against women in Buddhism, even by those who took on the responsibility of propagating it, is that the secular clashed with the sacred, and, since the monks were still 'attached to' the prevailing social attitudes, the secular won out. We shall now explore the extent to which the view of women in contemporary Taiwan Buddhism is in concert with the changed notions about women in present-day Taiwan society.

Women In Modern Taiwanese Buddhism

Since the 1960s women have become increasingly better educated, employed in higher status jobs, and more able to support themselves financially. Their progress in these areas has given them more influence in

society outside the home, including in voluntary associations such as religious groups. An important characteristic of Taiwan Buddhism is that both the cleric and the lay populations are very strongly female. The largest Buddhist group, Tzu Chi, was established by a young nun and was initially entirely female, only adding male members in an auxiliary status in the 1980s. However, in percentage terms all the major groups are about the same, seventy per cent female, thirty percent male. A Foguangshan abbess explained this as a result of women having a higher education level and being less restricted by society than in the past. Moreover, the relative prosperity of Taiwan allows women to have a fair amount of discretionary time, and, as many believe the times to be unstable, they feel that studying the Dharma lends stability to the family. By contrast, men often work very hard for long hours and are more concerned about their jobs and the economy.

In terms of clerics, Tzu Chi has only nuns, and according to a relatively senior member of its media wing who is also a fervent follower, it is almost inconceivable that Tzu Chi would add monks in the future. Tzu Chi does not encourage renouncing, preferring that adherents remain 'in the world' and serve there. Ratios in the other Buddhist groups range from close to even for Fuzhi, 3:1 for Foguangshan to 7:1 for Lingjiushan. The extent to which this high level of both lay and clerical participation, in combination with the changes in general gender relations in Taiwan is manifested below.

Buddhist Views of Women

The views that women are inferior because they are polluted, disastrous, temptresses, or are too dull or flighty to cultivate themselves and become arhats or enter Nirvana still exist in Chinese Buddhism. A Foguangshan nun said she had never heard any of these ideas in Taiwan and encountered them for the first time while accompanying Ven Xingyun to China in 2007 where he taught for a few weeks at a monastery near Guangzhou. She noticed that only monks attended his lectures, so she asked the abbot what curriculum the nuns studied. 'Study?' he asked, 'Study? Why do they need to study?' She asked again, didn't the nuns need to learn. 'Gardening is enough for them,' he replied. 'Growing vegetables and doing some good deeds.'

She also heard for the first time the notion of women being regarded as 'unclean.' Looking for a suitable person to conduct a meeting, she asked for someone who had a good sounding voice. A woman teacher was brought, and after speaking with her, the nun felt she would be quite satisfactory. But a few lay members came to her and said, 'You can't use her. She's pregnant.' The teacher then wanted to decline, humbly saying that was unclean. The nun assured her that she was not, and the teacher went on to conduct the meeting.²

However, although these notions have all but disappeared from contemporary Taiwan Buddhism, this disappearance is both relatively recent and by no means universal. As late as the 1960s Ven Guangqin (廣欽老和尚) declared that the kitchen was the best place for nuns to seek self-cultivation (Li 2003:286). He was, however, illiterate, had undergone many years of ascetic practice, and was already in his seventies at the time (Kan 1996). But Learman also found that, even in the present decade, many, Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, believed that women were evil by nature (2005:85). Moreover, while ideas about women being unclean during particular times in their lives are no longer part of official teachings and are rejected by clerics in the major Buddhist organisations, one still occasionally finds believers who are not yet clear about the differences between Buddhism as a religion in its own right and the Buddhism-Daoism-folk belief melange that has been widely practiced in Taiwan, and they still maintain the traditional avoidances during menstruation, pregnancy and confinement.

Contrary to Ven Guangqin, Ven Shengyan has criticised the old practice of having nuns do domestic work rather than become educated, and this is also the practice of Foguangshan, where Ven Xingyun believes very strongly in male-female equality and where all intending clerics undergo three gruelling years of study before they can take their vows. Moreover, the Buddhism seminaries run by both Foguangshan and Dharma Drum have

² It is unlikely that someone raised in Taiwan would not have heard about women being regarded as unclean at certain times, as this is a very common belief, but this particular nun, a Taiwanese, was raised in a Western country and, although is fluent in Mandarin and Taiwanese and literate in Chinese, she was not exposed to the Taiwanese folk tradition as someone raised in Taiwan would have been.

dharma study classes for *Srāmanera* (沙彌) and *Srāmanerikā* (沙彌尼) as well as lay members, and the former also runs adult education institutions which teach secular as well as religious subjects. Thus, both groups are highly committed to education for all, much of which is aimed at self-cultivation.

Closely related to these ideas about the character of women are the Eighty-four Actions (八十四態).³ These are acts, postures and gestures supposedly characteristic of women which stereotypes them as flirtations, vain, and frivolous and which nuns should avoid. The Buddhist groups accept the historical validity of the Eighty-four Actions and say that they are aimed at nuns or other women while engaged in worship. Failure to avoid them might be offensive to other worshippers and cause them to think that the offenders are not serious in their veneration of the Buddhas. Although several informants affirmed their belief that those Actions do, indeed, accurately portray some women (as watching several hours of Taiwan television dramas would attest), they reject any idea that all women are that way and strongly believe that persons must be judged as individuals rather than as categories.

Other traditional beliefs, that women bear a karmic burden, that being born a female is inferior to being born a male, and that the extra burdens imposed on and lesser abilities of women hindered their ability to cultivate themselves, and the above-mentioned Eight Strict Rules. Again, groups accept the historical validity of these and their being a part of Buddhist tradition, but their implementation or perceived applicability to present-day society varied widely. The notion of karmic burden was more likely to be accepted by lay persons rather than sangha representatives of the groups. For example, a Tzu Chi informant opined that he thought had a karmic burden because 'they tend to develop closer relationships than men and to be more emotional about them, which creates attachments (執著)'.⁴ However, he stated that this was his own belief rather than the position of Tzu Chi. Learman found that the notion that women 'bear a heavier karmic load' was common among her DDM informants (2005:85). However, a Foguangshan nun when asked about this said that in Mahāyāna, there is no male or female and the

³ The full name is 大愛道比丘尼經女人八十四態 the Eighty-Four Actions for Women of the Mahā Prajāpatī Sūtra for Nuns.

Buddha can assume different forms to save different people. Thus, it is a question individual karma rather than male or female.

Regarding the Eight Strict Rules, Ven Chao-huei has strongly critiqued articles in which Chan-ni (懺尼)⁴ calls on clerics to know and implement them (2001). The suggestions in the articles, calling on nuns to exhibit a much greater level of deference toward monks and thus strongly implying the kinds of inferiority found in the above notions, are both outrageous and ludicrous in a modern context and are highly unlikely to be widely accepted. Among the examined Buddhist groups Zhongtai applies them quite strictly as does Fuzhi, although its nunnery and monastery are over two hundred kilometres distant from each other and the monks and nuns rarely encounter each other. Other groups essentially ignore them. A Foguangshan nun said that she had heard of both and had studied the former while in seminary, but that

We just don't do that sort of thing in Foguangshan. No one bows down to anyone else here. That just isn't the way things are done. The Master has addressed this before, that there is a conservative element in every generation. It's easy to see that women are regarded as very lowly in India, and it must have been even worse 2500 years ago. Also, at that time it was very difficult to live a monastic's life, and there were undoubtedly many who felt that women needed to be protected. There would have been a great deal of difficulties for women. In our studies, we see the egalitarianism of the Buddha. We don't go into this much because the question of discrimination against women doesn't arise here. There are no Eight Strict Rules here. Once we've been ordained, we all have the same goals, to spread Buddhism and to render service to society.

Women's Roles in Contemporary Taiwanese Buddhist Groups: Nuns

By contrast to male and female roles in Buddhist organisations in the past or in places such as the Guangzhou monastery noted above, nuns play much more significant roles in contemporary Taiwanese Buddhist groups.

⁴ The name implies that the author is a nun, but it could be a pen name.

Foguangshan has a very strong stress on gender equality coming directly and emphatically from Ven Xingyun, so it is not surprising that nuns are found in key roles.

- They teach, both males and females, ordained and novices, in the Foguangshan Buddhist seminary, and there is no objection on the part of monks to be taught by nuns—or vice versa. Those who teach in the seminary are selected on the basis of their academic specialities, not on the basis of gender. They also lead chanting and meditation. The only function they do not perform is to lead a Water and Earth Dharma Meeting (水陸法會), not because they are unworthy but because it requires a great deal of physical strength and stamina. Nuns do assist, however.
- There is a significant number of abbesses in the various temples both in Taiwan and abroad. With the exception of the Foguangshan Temple itself where there are both monks and nuns but on different sides of the mountain, temples are staffed and managed by either monks or nuns, the leader of a temple must be of the same sex as the clerics there; there is no mixing.
- Nuns perform important roles at all levels in the organisation. In my own contacts with Foguangshan, with the exception of a discussion with Ven Xingyun himself, those I have met have all been nuns. They run the media and publication arms, they staff the temples I have visited,⁵ and in the visits I have made to the Foguangshan Temple itself with groups of Westerners, we have always been hosted and shown around by nuns.
- Foguangshan itself is run by a general affairs committee of nine persons, five of whom, at present, are nuns. They are chosen by an open, transparent, democratic vote by clerics above a certain level (over half the present clerics have the vote, and all witness the procedures), one-person one-vote; and given the numerical superiority of nuns over monks, which means that there is a larger pool of nuns to choose from, it is likely that the female majority will continue.⁶

⁵ Chung-tien in Brisbane and the Sungshan, Sanxia and Hualian temples in Taiwan.

⁶ This numerical superiority also means that there are more nuns' votes, and while, according to the principle of choosing the most capable and morally fit, (選賢與能), gender should not be the basis of selection, it is highly unlikely given the

- Because he is committed to gender equality Ven Xingyun ensured that nuns had a significant role in the publication of the Foguang Great Dictionary (佛光大辭典). He and the editor, Master Siyi, brought them into the project and they ended up as the majority. To ensure that their contribution would be known their names were recorded in a section at the back of the book. He also wants to compile a book on the historical contributions of nuns and lay women, with few exceptions largely neglected up to now, to Buddhism.
- Foguangshan is also playing a role in raising the status of women abroad. In the Foguang mission of bringing together Mahāyāna and Theravada, a Thai woman, Ven Miaoshen, has been educated and ordained at Foguangshan and now represents the organisation in Thailand where she has been given the special title of The First Nun. Because of this breakthrough and the acceptance of Miaoshen's ordination by many in the Thai sangha, there are now seventy other Thai monastics studying at Foguangshan.

In Tzu Chi, gender division of labour among clerics is not an issue because all clerics are nuns. However, Tzu Chi is a philanthropic rather than a religious group, despite its very heavy overlay of Buddhism, moreover, it emphasises action—carrying out philanthropic deeds and spreading love and compassion—as opposed to the more conventional Buddhist means of self-cultivation such as dharma study, sutra reading and chanting, and meditation. Moreover, from the beginning, Ven Zhengyan has strongly emphasised financial independence, i.e. that the group support itself through manufacture rather than charge for dharma services as was done by other groups. Thus, the nuns work do not work with the members as is common in Foguangshan or Dharma Drum, but either have functional roles in the Foundation or continue to work in the Quiet Abode making candles, cloth shoes, etc.

In Dharma Drum, nuns also play very important teaching and functional roles, moreover, they more readily receive permission for advanced study than do monks. However, although there are nuns in high positions in various areas, serving along with monks, Dharma Drum still operates on a principle of male

high level of education of the nuns, that Foguangshan will be controlled by monks.

superiority in that it does not contemplate ever having a nun at the head of the group, not does it accept that a nun could be considered in authority over a monk, e.g. a monk could have a nun as a meditation instructor, but she could never be his master. On an informal level, however, a lecturer at the Dharma Drum Buddhist Seminary said that nuns often hold sway in the running of the organisation, and another lecturer remarked that they are probably not concerned with becoming the titular head but are content to run things from behind the scene.

In Fuzhi, as well, clerics have a very limited role with the members. Fuzhi has a relatively small number of clerics, housed in a monastery near Xinzhu and a convent near Pingdong. Although both are open to visitors, they are not tourist attractions as are other Buddhist temples in Taiwan, and they exist to facilitate traditional monastic cultivation activities. Fuzhi itself, for both monastics and lay persons, is based on study of Tsong-kha-ba's (宗喀巴) Grand Compendium (菩提道次第廣論). Interested lay persons take classes on it at a Fuzhi branch, most often taught by another lay person. Students are asked to take refuge after they finish a course of study. Members continue study and also participate in various dharma functions held at Fuzhi facilities. Most of these activities are conducted by lay persons, and only occasionally do members have contact with a monastic.

In Lingjiushan, where nuns outnumber monks 7:1, although the sangha is managed by a group of senior clerics, mostly monks, appointed by the Master, nuns take very senior administrative roles in the organisation, including supervising the planning, displays and construction of its flagship Museum of World Religions. Even in Zhongtai, which is the most conservative group, nuns do much of the administrative work, staff most branches, and are prominent in roles which interact with the public.

Overall, nuns now enjoy, if not complete equality with monks, certainly very close to it. With few exceptions, they can aspire to any role in any organisation. In the larger organisations they also have opportunities for higher education, research and travel and residency abroad. Although they must accept the discipline of the Vinaya, they can avoid the entanglements and disappointments of family life, the drudgery of housework, which weighs much more heavily on wives than on husbands, and the anxiety over

fitting the stereotype of the physically attractive female. Given the increasing ambivalence toward matrimony by women in Taiwan, as evidenced by the inexorably increasing age at first marriage, for someone interested in Buddhism, a cleric's life may be an attractive alternative,⁷ and indeed, it seems to be so, particularly for more educated women. According to Ven Chao-huei, many who renounce have advanced degrees.⁸ It is thus likely that nuns are and will be increasingly better educated than monks, and this should tip the balance of power within the sangha of the various Buddhist groups even further toward the nuns.

Women's Roles in Contemporary Taiwanese Buddhist Groups: Laity

Given that they make up at least seventy percent of their memberships, lay women are absolutely crucial to Taiwan's Buddhist groups. Whether their roles are confined to donations and intra-group volunteering or to fund-raising, philanthropy and other service to society, the groups would be unrecognisable without them. Moreover, lay women themselves benefit greatly from participation. A Foguang nun, Taiwanese but raised in Perth, Australia, said that she decided to become a nun after seeing her mother, who had been a housewife and mother until her children had grown up, blossom after becoming involved in the local BLIA branch.

Her mother's experience is by no means unique. Through participation, many women who have lived the traditional Chinese woman's role of 'inside the home' have the opportunity develop themselves.⁹ They learn about Buddhism but they also, if they wish, about art, cooking and diet, the environment, and any other topics that local branch reading clubs may want to study. They can develop the talents to teach, administer, negotiate, cooperate, exchange views, occupy positions of leadership, deal with people, and other skills used in organisations. For many, their participation in the group gives them self-confidence, feelings of accomplishment and a chance fill their days with what they

⁷ heng states that earlier in the 20th century, *Zhaijiao* (齋教) provided a 'life outside the traditional and patriarchal social arrangements' (2003:41).

⁸ 7 January 2007.

⁹ See also Wei-yi Cheng, (2007)

regard as meaningful activity as their children become less dependent on them and leave home for study or work. Some, such as Tzu Chi volunteers, have the opportunity to travel abroad to disaster areas where Tzu Chi renders assistance. Finally, they can expand their view and knowledge of the world through the new things they are exposed to and their social networks and social capital through the people they meet and the friendships they make.

Perhaps to women brought up in urban areas, especially Taipei, and those under fifty, these will seem rather banal because they have been able to avail themselves chances to receive much higher educations than and work in jobs unavailable to their parents. But to older women and those who have spent their lives in rural areas, these opportunities would be unimaginable without the Buddhist groups or something very much like them.

Contemporary Taiwan Buddhism and Women in General

Above I have shown that cleric or lay women face few if any disadvantages and can gain much from activities in Buddhist groups. This section will present a case that the influence of contemporary Buddhism can have a limiting and negative affect on women in general. It does so through the views of Buddhist leaders on the roles of women in society and especially the family. These views are almost certainly their views as ethnic Chinese rather than scriptural Buddhist views as Buddhism has throughout most of its history focussed on individuals renouncing and not forming families rather than forming or giving instructions on family life. Learman notes that at a retreat on Buddhism and Marriage, one speaker and many of the attending nuns were puzzled about what the role of Buddhism was in marriage. However, given the very strong emphasis on the laity in engaged Buddhism (人間佛教) and the proclivity of lay members to seek out religious figures discuss family and other problems, it is not surprising that contemporary Taiwan Buddhism is now concerned with the family. Some groups, in fact, e.g. Dharma Drum, has created its own marriage ceremony in which couples take the Three Refuges (三皈) and are instructed to establish a Buddhist household (Learman 2005:164-65).

Although Buddhism itself may not be concerned with the family in a religious way, Taiwan Buddhism very strongly supports Confucian ethics (倫

理道德), especially as they deal with the family. According to the Foguangshan view of the family, Among the ethnicities and religions in the world, China advocates the Five Relationships (五倫) and the Ten Virtues (十義).¹⁰ Comparing Buddhism with other religions, Ven Xingyun states that the Jews' Ten Commandments call for filiality toward parents (要孝順父母), also for not lusting after another's wife or husband (不邪淫人妻; 偷戀人夫). Buddhism, from the teachings of the Buddha and found in the sutras, advocates a sound family (健全家庭) and a Pure Land on earth. Buddhism supports filiality, that children should see to the physical needs of their parents, also to ensure that they follow the true path (Xingyun 1999:106). This gives Buddhism a conservative, androcentric flavour and, just as the Chinese Buddhist tradition has historically been close to Chinese culture, Taiwan Buddhist leaders and adherents also manifest their Chineseness in many ways. What we find in Taiwanese Buddhism is a mixture of beliefs that includes ideas from Buddhism from Chinese tradition, and from present-day, modernised Taiwan society.

Compared with most Christian religions, including Roman Catholics, Taiwan Buddhist groups take an ambivalent view of marriage and family for single people. On one hand, the family is regarded as a basic social unit of society by Buddhist leaders such as Ven Zhengyan and Ven Shengyan, thus the integrity of the family is very important. In fact, Dharma Drum holds that the family comes first, Tzu Chi sacralises (宗教化) it (Lu 2003:223-23), and a Foguangshan abbess said that if it comes to a choice between belief in Buddhism or participating in Buddhist activities and the family, the choice must be the family.

However, this applies to already existing families and marriages. On the other hand, marriage is not regarded as essential for all secular persons. Ven Shengyan tells believers that marriage is not the only way, that it is difficult, 'like jumping into a fire pit,' and 'those who walk the bodhisattva path' avoid this and won't marry (Learman 2005:127). She found similar attitudes among Dharma Drum followers. Some believed that monastic life is superior to lay life and that only monastics are true Buddhists (Learman

¹⁰ According to the Book of Rites; they are: 父慈, 子孝, 兄良, 弟悌, 夫義, 婦聽, 長惠, 幼順, 君仁, 臣忠.

2005:164-65), and a single man, aged 40, stated,

If one can skip or get beyond (超越) marriage, one will have fewer troubles (困擾) in one's life. When one takes the Three Treasures to heart, one's intellect becomes ever more enlightened; one's feelings become ever more enriched (情感越來越豐富); and one's will becomes ever stronger. (2005:74)

Marriage is a choice for the individual. A Tzu Chi informant said that if a person has found someone s/he loves and wants to marry, that's fine. The group will bless their union and wish them all the best. But if one has no intended, that's okay, too, as it gives them the time and resources to help Tzu Chi in its work in society. Foguangshan informants said essentially the same thing (see also Xingyun 2006a), adding that such people may later desire to become *srāmanera* or *srāmanerikā* or perhaps even renounce.

Nor is it necessary for married women to have children. That, too, is a decision for the individuals involved, not something Buddhism or the group has a role in deciding. Buddhism is thus not pro-natalist as many Christian groups are, and one could say that it is ambivalent toward procreation. On one hand it would seem that procreation is necessary in order for those who still have some bad karma to get rid of to be reincarnated. On the other hand, Amarasingham argues that 'because women embody birth, they become a metaphor for the karmic energy that maintains suffering in the world' (1978:104)¹¹. Moreover, Buddhism is essentially oriented toward the individual and her or his quest for bodhisattvahood and Nirvana, and it extends to society through the compassion displayed by its followers.

Because of the importance of the family as a unit of society, divorce is strongly discouraged. Ven Shengyan has stated proudly that of the four hundred couples who married in the first Dharma Drum wedding ceremony nine years previously that only one had divorced (Learman 2005:17). Moreover, there is much alarm among Buddhists and the public in general about the level of divorce and the fertility crisis in Taiwan. However, Buddhism does permit it. Moreover, while there are certainly cultural notions

¹¹ Cited in Sponberg 1985:41.

which may make women may feel guilty about divorcing a husband,¹² there is no 'sin' component from Buddhism (indeed, the Western/Christian concept of sin has no resonance in Buddhism). Divorce is discouraged because it is bad for society; what may be negative about it from a Buddhist perspective is the harm done to individuals who are in a rancorous relationship and become angry with and perhaps violent toward each other. This, one could say, is the positive aspect of the Buddhist view of divorce for women.

Another positive element in contemporary Buddhism is that, because it has a calming effect on those who practice it, it changes people's outlooks and has positive effects on relationships. In in-depth interviews carried out in 2004-2006, a common story from many informants is that they had been very hot-tempered before becoming involved in a Buddhist group but that they changed significantly afterward, something their family members were quick to notice and very appreciative of. An abbess told of men bringing their wives to the temple for that precise purpose. Moreover, in some cases the changes were so profound that the husbands themselves began participating. Learman reports men ending relationships with paramours after becoming involved with Buddhism. She also found a gender difference in Dharma Drum, that women often became involved to improve their marriages while men did so to improve their health or to find more meaning in life after a career in business (2005:77). Serious involvement also helps in that it changes people's priorities; they see the cultivation through the dharma as more important than trying to improve a bad relationship.

There are negative aspects for women in contemporary Buddhism, however. First, while domestic violence or incompatibility are legitimate causes for divorce, adultery is not (Learman 2005:81, 127). Adultery is quite common, especially on the part of males in Taiwan, many of whom see nothing wrong with it so long as they take care of their families. In Buddhism, adultery is prohibited and is regarded as wrong by the Buddhist groups. However, both history and scripture display a tolerant attitude toward men—not

¹² Women may feel guilty because society has tended to blame them for divorce—had they been better wives and mothers the marriage would not have ended up in divorce. Men tend to feel more a loss of face than guilt from a divorce as it implies that they are not even man enough to control a woman.

women—having multiple sexual partners. Learman, who took classes on sutras with members during the course of her study of Buddhist marriage in Dharma Drum, states,

The Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Scripture, one of the most studied in lay reading groups while I was in Taipei, takes for granted that wealthy and powerful lay Buddhist men will have wives, concubines, and maids and will visit courtesans. The Buddha's father had more than one wife. At the Three Refuges ceremonies, Master Shengyan makes it clear that sexual intercourse outside of marriage (including premarital sex and adultery) is unBuddhist behavior. But in the context of Chinese tradition and Buddhist scriptural precedent, his printed word in an introductory pamphlet on Buddhist family life regarding the lay precept on sexuality (不邪淫) to “not go against social order (社會秩序) and popular morality (人間倫理) and to not harm the family or health” could be interpreted, if someone wanted to, as accepting the responsible handling of multiple sexual partners for lay men that this man espouses—until such time as one was ready to commit to greater restraint.¹³ (Learman 2005:75)

Moreover, one man told her 'if a man has three or four wives, it is not a big deal, as long as he is capable, his wife/s agree, and his love is great (愛情很偉大)!' But he added that it would not be right for a woman to have a lover (ibid.)

Perhaps it is this notion that a man may have more than one sexual partner that explains, despite the commandment, the less severe view of male adultery. Perhaps, mindful that it is so very common, if it were regarded as sufficient reason to divorce the divorce rate would be higher than it already is, and even more families would be broken up. Whichever the case, none of the three largest Buddhist groups considered adultery, in and of itself, reason enough to break up a marriage. The fact that it is overwhelmingly women who bear the disappointments of extramarital affairs means that they also

¹³ Master Shengyan, *A Guide for Buddhist Family Life* (佛化家庭的生活指南) (Taipei: Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Foundation [法鼓山佛教基金會], 2000 [1994]), 26. Learman's citation.

disproportionately bear the emotional pain. However, this is not all. The advice given by all three groups is for the woman first to look at herself¹⁴: what is she doing that might be a factor in her husband's behaviour, and what could she do to rescue the situation. Could she improve her own attitude, temper or behaviour? Could she do more for her husband, make him feel that the home is a more pleasant place or that she is concerned about him in positive rather than negative ways?¹⁵

Much as it appears to be so, this is more than simply blaming the victim. Ven Xingyun pointed out in a symposium on Buddhism and marriage that whatever the context no one is without fault and that we can all improve. He also recognises that the mundane, sometimes negative atmosphere in families formed for several years and the excitement and romance of a few stolen hours every so often with a lover are quite different, therefore the best thing a wife can do to win her husband's affection back is to make home as pleasant and welcoming as possible. Although this might not work, it is more likely to be effective than nagging and berating. (Xingyun 2006a).

A Foguang nun said that when women in this situation ask her for advice she tells them

this comes down to the notion of love. Someone else loves your husband. Does she love him more than you do? Can you bring him back by paying him more attention? We've had cases where this has worked, and the women are very happy. As for whether divorce would make their life better. I talk to them and tell them that this is a major decision, not one that can be taken at the spur of the moment. Marriage and divorce are more than just pieces of paper. You must think long and hard on this. This is something

¹⁴ This is not new. The Kuan-yin biographies (觀世音菩薩傳) in Taiwan temples gives advice on family and emotional problems, part of which 'discusses ways to transform one's attitudes and environment to bring about happiness' (Reed 1985:171).

¹⁵ Ven Xingyun, after advising a woman whose husband had a mistress to praise him, be considerate, cook his favourite foods, etc., said, 'and when you know that he is about to visit the vixen (狐狸精), quite deliberately give him money, get his shoes and clothes for him, before he goes out the door, urge him to take care of himself and not stay out too late (早一點回來)' (Xingyun 2006).

that will affect you and your children.

A Tzu Chi informant said that the one thing that a woman in this position should not do is to let anger, rage, hatred, thoughts of revenge consume her. First, Buddhism holds that the only person whose life one can control is one's own. There are no pretences that one can control another's. Second, being consumed with anger and hatred are not only unproductive but they also hinder the spiritual progress of the person feeling them.

Dharma Drum advice, that women should accept their husbands having affairs or mistresses, seems less sympathetic toward women. An interviewee woman in her fifties recounted telling Ven Shengyan that her husband, who had been running a business in Shanghai for several years, had a mistress there. Ven Shengyan told her that she should be grateful to the mistress for taking care of her husband while she could not be there with him. This sounds very chauvinistic on the surface, and it may be simply that. A more charitable view is that perhaps Shengyan realised there was nothing the woman could do about it and, rather than break up the family or worsen her relationship with her husband, putting a spin on it to make it more acceptable was the best course of action.

One of his disciples, however, takes a more blaming tack. Guo Guang, then supervisor of the Nung Chan Monastery, questions the basis of anger over affairs by questioning whether love and marriage should imply sexual fidelity—by implication it should not. This can lead to severe disappointment or even depression if one discovers that a spouse is having an affair. However, this suffering comes from one's own mind, and, rather than trying to take revenge, it is better to reconcile oneself to the situation and alleviate ill feelings through almsgiving or volunteer work. This will save the marriage and also teach forgiveness and selfless giving (Learman 2005:76).

Despite the above, Learman also found that Dharma Drum women do not accept that adultery. When the fact that the Buddha's father had more than one wife was brought up in a class, a lay woman answered back that doing so contravened Taiwan law. However, when a group of women came across a phrase from Ven Shengyan that possessions are only temporary, possessions, including house and wife, no one raised an objection to women being classed as chattel (2005:76).

Perhaps the most egregious stereotyping of women in contemporary Taiwan Buddhism is that they are still regarded as responsible for domestic labour and child-rearing, in fact although there is no objection to women having paid, outside work careers outside, their primary responsibility is the home. Ven Xingyun is the most 'modern' on this question (and most others) though depending on what one reads he can be inconsistent. For example, in a symposium on women and Buddhism he stated that if a woman works outside the home, her husband should help with the housework (2006a). However, in other places he seems to assume without question that women are full-time housewives and mothers, not differentiating between those and women who juggle job and family (2006b). Ven Shengyan, by contrast, regards childbearing, taking care of her husband and the household as the wife's responsibility, the 'outside world' as the husband's (Learman 2005:124). Ven Zhengyan also sees the housewife as keeper of the hearth the most important role in the home, and she complains that young women no longer master the traditional skills needed to manage a household and should be taught them before marriage (Zhengyan nd).

Ven Shengyan does not see this as onerous on women or as a removal of choice. He sees it as a sort of *yin-yang* (陰陽) equality, men and women are different but equal: both men and women have their own 'capital,' each being able to do things the other cannot, e.g. men, by nature, cannot bear children (Learman 2005:172-3). This is similar to a line Ven Jingkong takes, that Chinese society, rather than emphasising the male, emphasises the female (重女輕男) because the most important task in traditional Chinese society was teaching and raising children, which was what woman did.¹⁶ Ven Zhengyan feels that Taiwan needs to return to the traditional multi-generation family and the division of labour associated with it as well as to the virtues (美德) of past times.

Concluding Remarks and Speculations

Above I have examined women and Buddhism in contemporary Taiwan, looking at Buddhist perceptions of women in Buddhism and in general and

¹⁶ From a discussion with a follower.

gender equality and discrimination within Buddhist organisations. I have found that there is equality or something very close to it in Buddhist organisations and in general. Women are also free to choose their course in life—marriage, children, and career. However, if they choose marriage and family life, they will encounter pressures to think and behave in traditional ways which restricts their freedom and puts them at a disadvantageous and unequal position *vis-à-vis* men. Thus, contemporary Taiwan Buddhists practice gender equality to the treatment of women in Buddhist organisations. Why do they not, in the spirit of compassion to all beings, extend it to society as a whole?

First, the present restrictions do not reflect Buddhism per se; the androcentrism and misogyny of the past are no longer a part of contemporary Buddhism. Instead, the restrictions come from the fact that the Buddhist leaders are also ethnically Chinese, and in practicing Chinese Buddhism (漢傳佛教) they reflect their Chinese culture and that of their forebears. This seems to be the primary reason why women are not treated as the equals of men, free of traditional gender restrictions to choose their own paths.

Second, and I draw a long bow here, Buddhism tends to see things at the level of the individual. This is consistent with the notion of karma and the idea that we can only change ourselves—we can force ourselves to change but we cannot change others unless they are willing to be changed. These ideas arose in a time and place in history when societies were ruled by autocrats whose power was not checked and in which there were no concepts of natural or social justice. The idea of karma—that we create our own good and bad circumstances, if not in this life then in previous lives—was congruent with this sort of social circumstances because it offered an explanation of misfortune which might palliate the sufferer. The modern idea that misfortune may come from structural causes could not operate because the system of laws, rights and obligations to which all were subject did not exist.

Also consistent with conditions in times past is the idea that we cannot change others so we must accommodate ourselves to them. Governments in traditional societies were concerned only with three things: tax revenues,

secure national borders, and social order. So long as it did not result in social disruption, e.g. a rice riot, local bullies or elites could take advantage of others—as they often did—with no fear of punishment. Changing their behaviour was virtually hopeless.

Taiwan today is no longer that sort of society. It has laws based on justice which are generally enforced, and there is a widespread sense of fair play in society. Whereas in the past, Buddhist organisations were not in a strong position to fight to right social wrongs, that is arguably no longer the case. By accepting the unfairness that women still experience, it, or at least some who are influential in it, seems in some ways to be stuck in the past.

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