RELIGIOUS STUDIES/WOMEN'S STUDIES

Buddhist Women Across Cultures
Realizations

Karma Lekshe Tsomo, editor

"The topics of women and feminist interpretation have become very important in many academic fields in the humanities and social sciences. Buddhist studies is no exception. Indeed, the feminine, women, sexuality, and gender have virtually become a subfield in Buddhist studies. So, the topic of this book is important in its own right but also for what it contributes to other fields. What strikes me as especially valuable about this volume is its relatively synoptic/inclusive nature, thereby giving it a very timely role in the current literature on Buddhism, women, and sexuality."

—Donald K. Swearer, author of *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia*

Scholars and practitioners from a variety of Buddhist cultures, philosophical traditions, and academic disciplines analyze important dimensions of the new cross-cultural Buddhist women's movement: the status and experiences of women in Buddhist societies, feminist interpretation of Buddhist tenets, and the relationship of women to Buddhist institutions. *Buddhist Women Across Cultures* documents both women's struggle for religious equality in Asian Buddhist cultures as well as the process of creating Buddhist feminist identity across national and ethnic boundaries as Buddhism gains attention in the West. The book contributes significantly to an understanding of women and religion in both Western and non-Western cultures.

"What I like most about this book is the scope—feminism/Buddhism—in cross-cultural contexts. There is no other book like it. *Buddhist Women Across Cultures* articulates vital strands of the process which the author so aptly terms the 'feminization of Buddhism.'

"This is the only anthology that really works with these issues from cross-cultural and feminist perspectives. This insight makes the anthology stand out in the rapidly growing area of Buddhism/feminism—perhaps the key book to reconfigure the field at present and for some time to come."

—Jeffner Allen, State University of New York at Binghamton

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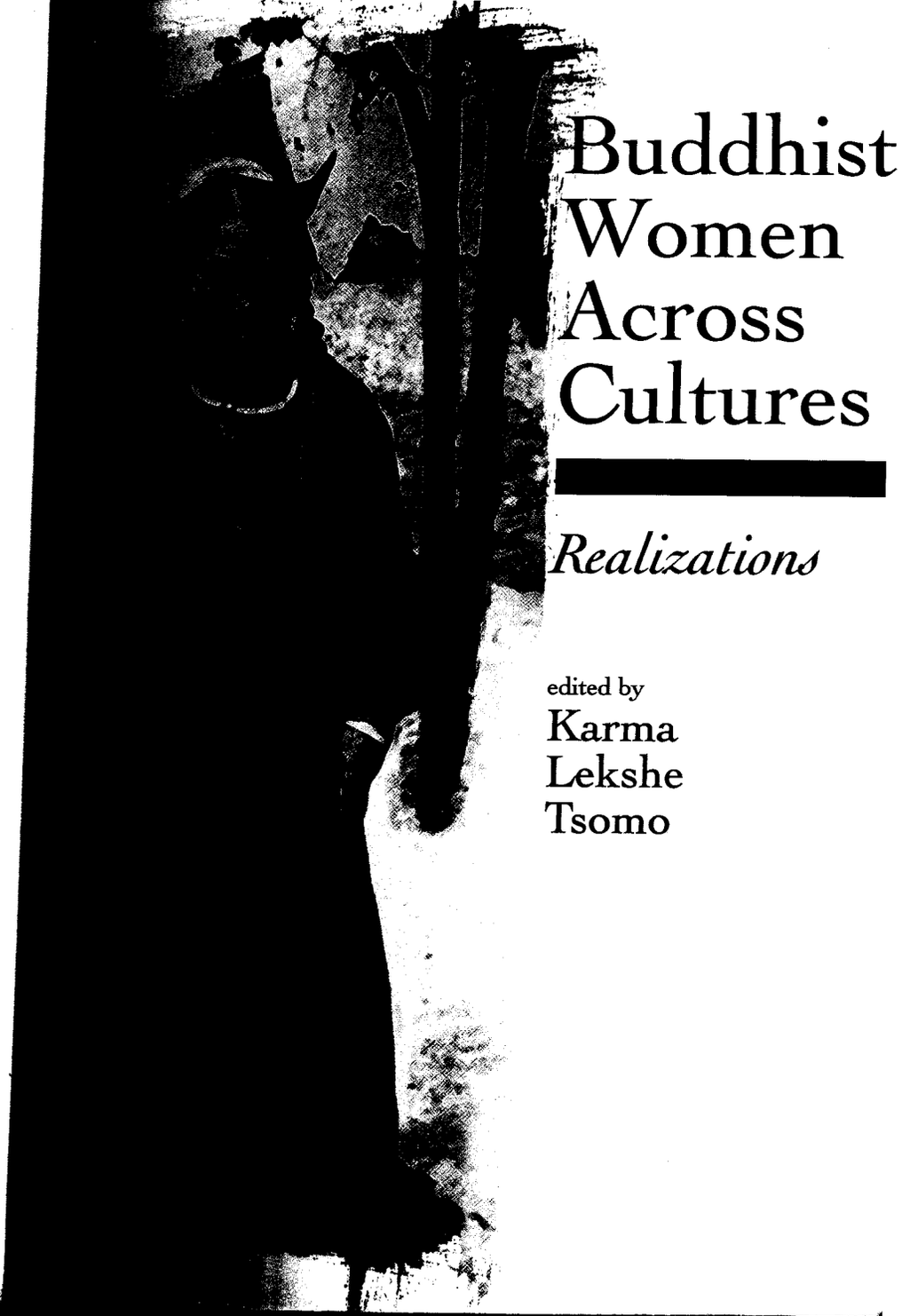
A volume in the SUNY series in Feminist Philosophy
Jeffner Allen, editor

State University of New York Press
Visit our web site at http://www.sunypress.edu

ISBN 0-7914-4138-5
EAN 9 780791 441381 90000



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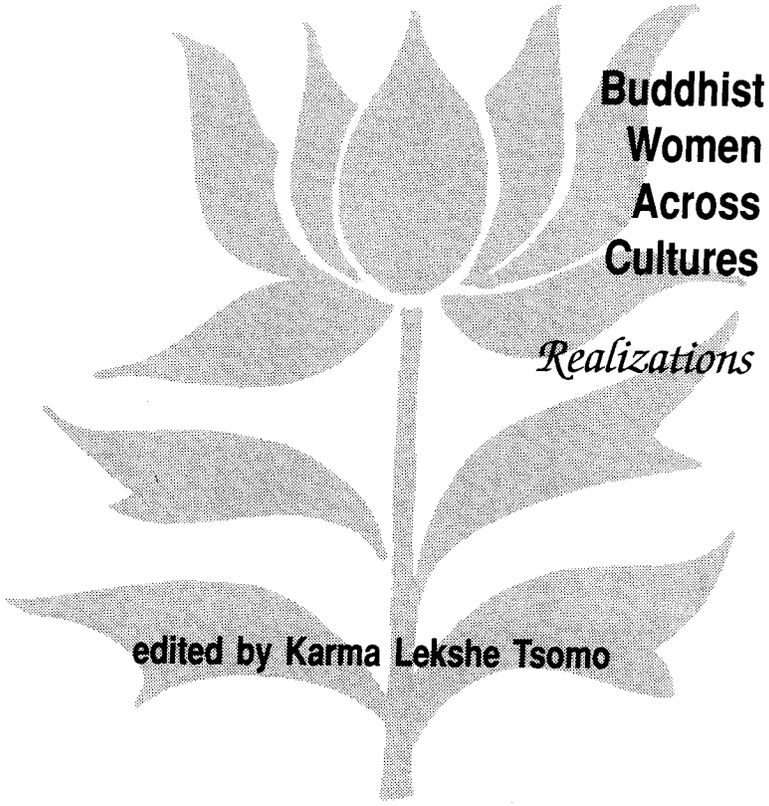

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State University of New York Press

Published by
State University of New York Press

Printed in the United States of America

For information, address State University of New York Press,
State University Plaza, Albany, N.Y., 12246

Production by Marilyn P. Semerad
Marketing by Dana E. Yanulavich

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Bhikṣuṇī, 1944–
Buddhist women across cultures : realizations / Karma Lekshe Tsomo.
p. cm. — (SUNY series, feminist philosophy)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-7914-4137-7 (hardcover : alk. paper). — ISBN 0-7914-4138-5
1. Women in Buddhism. 2. Woman (Buddhism) 3. Buddhist women. 4. Feminism—Religious aspects—Buddhism. I. Title. II. Series.
BQ4570.W6K34 1999
294.3'082—dc21 98-34325
CIP

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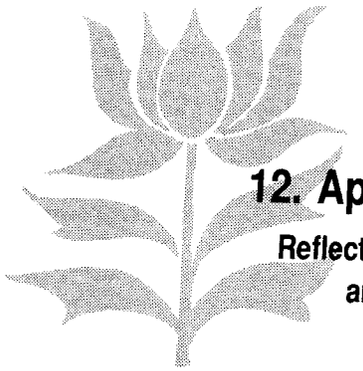
Preface

The creation of this book has spanned many years and represents the dedication of hundreds of women, and men, from many cultures. The initial impetus grew from a dream spun by Ayya Khema, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, and myself, in 1986. Over the years the dream has become tangible through the efforts of the women who worked to inspire and organize the Sakyadhita conferences throughout Asia, particularly Bhikṣuṇī Ayya Khema; Chatsumarn Kabilsingh of Sakyadhita Thailand; Ranjani de Silva and Bhikṣuṇī Kusuma Devendra of Sakyadhita Sri Lanka; Wendy Barzetovic of Sakyadhita U.K.; Rani Sarla Chhewang, Eshey Angmo, and Tashi Yangskit of Sakyadhita Ladakh; and Ok-sun An, Margaret Coberly, Karla Kral, and Bhikṣuṇī Tian Chang (Meihuang Lee) of Sakyadhita Hawai'i.

For their valuable editorial suggestions while compiling this diverse collection of ideas, I am deeply grateful to Donna Marie Anderson, Nancy Branch, Margaret Coberly, Donnë Florence, Ephrosine Danggelis, Rebecca French (for literally cutting and pasting my introduction onto twenty-six sheets of paper on the floor), Ramdas Lamb (my computer guru, for tirelessly illuminating the mysteries of technology), my daughter, Emily Mariko, Patricia Masters, Śrāmaṇerikā Nyuyet Thanh Minh (Lorena Cassady), Nikko Odiseos, Sharon Rowe, Śrāmaṇerikā Damcho Thinley (Jackie Minari, for also cheerfully retyping the Sakyadhita mailing list in Bodhgaya), and Alison Williams. For administrative assistance far beyond the call of duty, I sincerely thank Betty Chinn, Sandy Ozaki, June Sakaba, Hanna Santos, and Anna Tanaka of the East-West Center in Honolulu. For their research on Vinaya and the vital issue of full ordination for Buddhist women, I appreciate the pioneering scholarship of Kusuma Devendra, Friedgard Lotermoser, Geshe Thubten Ngawang, and Bhikṣuṇī Jampa Tsedroen. For being crucial catalysts for ideas and inspiration, I am indebted to many spiritual sisters, including Bhīkṣuṇī Thubten Chodron, Sierra Crawford, Bhikṣuṇī Sungak, Emila Heller, Gabriele Küstermann, Bhikṣuṇī Tenzin Palmo, and Yvonne Vaucher, without whose kindhearted support and encouragement, I would have been tempted to go meditate in a cave.



Sara Shneiderman

12. Appropriate Treasure?

Reflections on Women, Buddhism, and Cross-Cultural Exchange

As Buddhism solidifies its foothold both in the West and in myself, both my own and the Western world's initial wide-eyed fascination with Buddhist philosophies and cultures so different from our own has quieted. Now, many of Buddhism's age-old values have begun to penetrate and grate gently against the Western cultural identity that both I, and my society as a whole, have grown up with. One of the most provocative, promising, and precarious areas of discussion within this larger cross-cultural dialogue between Eastern and Western philosophies and cultural values arises when we turn our attention to questions about women in Buddhism. For young Western women such as myself, who have come of age in a cultural environment generated by feminism's third wave—one that emphasizes individualistic self-development and an unassailable right to choose our own destinies—Buddhism's cultural trappings and practices that work toward deconstructing subjectivity may challenge the very basis of our feminist self-understanding and development. At the same time, however, they may offer an enticingly different path to positive self-realization.[1]

Over the last few years, a number of works have been published that discuss Western women's encounters with Buddhism from a variety of theoretical and personal angles. Among these are Anne Klein's *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, which juxtaposes Buddhism, feminism, and the author's personal experience to discuss the "art of the self"; Miranda Shaw's *Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism*, an historiographic review of women's roles in newly reinterpreted Tantric texts; and *Pure Heart, Enlightened Mind: The Zen Journal and Letters of Maura "Soshin" O'Halloran*, the posthumously published personal journal of a contemporary Irish American woman's years of Zen training in Japan.

The intensity of connection that I feel with these women and their work is encouraging, as it offers a realm of positive approaches to Buddhism for me as a Western woman. However, I cannot help but feeling that, as much as these discussions have opened up exciting new ways of examining and experiencing female identity within Buddhism from Western perspectives, they seem to have neglected a crucial set of actors in the East meets West/feminism meets Buddhism equation: our non-Western Buddhist sisters.[2] Although Klein, Shaw, and O'Halloran all give voice to others or act themselves as female exemplars for Western Buddhist women, in all of these writers' accounts, contemporary Asian Buddhist women remain mute, or at best anomalous participants in what, from one perspective, can be seen as primarily male-dominated religious power structures.

As we shall see here, advancing a moralistic brand of Western feminism that criticizes traditional Buddhist institutions as monolithically oppressive to women is only one of many possible viewpoints, and it can be highly problematic. However, as the construct upon which much of both younger Western women's self-understanding and much of contemporary academic discourse is premised, Western-centered feminism cannot be dismissed without comment. Instead, it must be reevaluated and perhaps refashioned to give expression to voices, both Eastern and Western, that may have not been heard previously within the feminist discussion.

Along these lines, Anne Klein repeatedly states that her work is oriented toward reworking Western feminism and Western women's relationships to Buddhism. But for many legitimate reasons, her current agenda consciously excludes an exploration of Eastern women's potentially divergent experiences:

> The conversation between Buddhist and feminist voices necessarily takes place across several crucial divides, all of which are formidable. It moves not only between East and West but between secular and religious, male and female, traditional and modern. Though difficult to negotiate, these divides are well worth exploring, for they reveal the diverse perspectives at play in the *identities of many contemporary Western women*.[3]

Shaw's subjects, although spiritually potent Indian and Tibetan women, are removed from the flow of cultural time and exalted as examples for Western women; Shaw does not offer an explicit examination of these historical figures' relationship to the lives of their indigenous female descendants. As a personal account, O'Halloran's journals necessarily focus on her own spiritual development as a Western woman in a Japanese environment, and not on Japanese women's engagement with Buddhism.

These observations are not intended as criticisms of any of these women's works in themselves. All of these books have been published in the last few years; it is clearly a privilege to have any access at all to women's descriptions of their personal and academic experiences within Buddhist traditions. Each author mentioned delineates a specific niche for herself and explores it eloquently; none of them fails to achieve her objectives, since none of them claims to articulate the position of contemporary Asian Buddhist women. Because these authors are at the forefront of a highly charged cross-cultural discussion, it may, in fact, be essential that they begin with discussions of their own subjective experiences (explicit in O'Halloran's journal, implicit in Klein's and Shaw's approaches and commitment to their theoretical and historical material) in order to claim some authority. Perhaps it is presumptuous to suggest that Klein, Shaw, O'Halloran, or I, could even begin to address the diverse situations of modern Tibetan, Indian, Japanese, and other Asian Buddhist women, much less constructively engage them with our own.

However, I cannot ignore the curious internal emptiness that I feel at the silence from sisters on the other side of Klein's cultural divide; I cannot see how we, as Western Buddhist women, can compassionately cross it only for ourselves, without exploring indigenous Buddhist women's often very different, culturally constructed subjective experiences within our shared tradition. I would like to redefine the divide that Klein so elegantly navigates so that the pass can be crossed from both directions; if Asian Buddhist women so desire, they may be able to gain as much from our Western feminist history as we do from their Buddhist tradition. Even if they are not interested in explicitly feminist ideas, Buddhist women from diverse cultures should be able to meet and share respect, understanding, and spiritual and cultural goals.

Over many trips to Nepal and India, I have had the opportunity to meet and work with many communities of both indigenous and Western Buddhist women. At times, I have engaged with both groups of women in my capacity as an anthropologist conducting fieldwork. At other times, we interacted as fellow Buddhist practitioners without any explicitly defined academic roles governing our relationships. Drawing from my experiences with both roles, the ideas outlined here are inherently an encounter between Self and Other, East and West, since I, as observer and writer, was and continue to be a Western woman traveling in foreign, traditionally Buddhist cultures. Each concrete, momentary encounter between Asia and Western women that I shall describe alludes to more enduring theoretical questions about these cross-cultural relationships. By retroactively placing my own

observations and perceptions within the discursive context broadly defined by the three works that have been introduced, I can create three different, yet interconnected narratives: First, I can trace my own spiritual and personal growth as a young Western woman shaped from a young age by feminist thought and practice and now interested in Buddhist thought and practice; second, I can broaden the conversation begun by Klein, Shaw, and O'Halloran by offering perspectives on the interaction between contemporary Asian and Western Buddhist women in Nepal; and third, I can analytically apply what I have learned from these three authors to the collage of Himalayan experiences that I describe.

Interconnected Narratives

All too often, Westerners who have been studying Buddhism in their own countries travel to Kathmandu or Dharamsala expecting to see the form of their personal practice replicated in the monasteries or nunneries that they visit or live in. Coming from all points along the spectrum of Buddhist experience, such Westerners may experience a cultural discordance that leads them to denigrate what may be more traditional structures of Buddhist learning and living than those that have been adopted and adapted in the West. Similarly, among Western scholars of Buddhism and Western Buddhist practitioners, one finds an emphasis upon textually based, institutionally oriented forms of Buddhism as the most fully "developed"—and therefore acceptable—ones. Anthropologist Charles Ramble, who has worked extensively in Nepal's Buddhist Himalayas, explains that visiting Western scholars of Buddhism or Tibetan culture often ask, "Why do you want to go to the mountains? Tibetan culture is dead. It exists only in their books."[4] Perhaps not coincidentally, the textually embedded, institutional aspects of Buddhism respected as primary by scholars such as the one Ramble quotes are the aspects (of Mahāyāna Buddhism in particular) that have been most effectively transmitted to the often highly literate West. This preference for the textually preserved aspects of Buddhist traditions tends to exclude those who participate in Buddhism from nontextual or noninstitutional perspectives. Often, these people are indigenous Asian women.[5]

The characterization of certain indigenous Buddhist lifestyles as somehow less appropriate than those familiar in the West was reflected in encounters I had with Western practitioners residing at monasteries in Kathmandu. For example, from a Western perspective, the local toilets and other facilities were unacceptable because they

were different and not up to their own hygienic standards. For this and other reasons, they maintained their own separate residences and spent most of their time among the resident Western community without interacting in depth with the ethnically Tibetan monastics. From this trivial example, we can gain some initial insight into the difficulties at hand in creating the most basic conditions for cross-cultural communication and shared understanding between Western and Asian Buddhists.

Speaking more specifically about differences among Asian and Western Buddhist women, I recall the subtle but potent cultural and gender dynamics that functioned in the relationship between a small community of Western nuns and a far larger community of ethnically Tibetan nuns affiliated with the same monastery. In the course of many conversations with Western and ethnically Tibetan nuns in residence there, I pieced together a general understanding of the ever-evolving relationship between the two groups of women. Although these examples are taken from one specific monastic community, these observations on the divergences and points of connection between Asian and Western women may prove relevant in other, increasingly multicultural communities throughout the ethnically Tibetan diasporic belt.

In general, the Western nuns and female lay practitioners in residence live in special quarters at the main monastery, which is also inhabited by about two hundred monks. All the lamas (teachers) and other dignitaries also stay in these quarters when in residence or visiting the monastery. The ethnically Tibetan nuns live in separate quarters that have recently been constructed about ten minutes' walk away from the monastic center of activity. These nuns do not have their own teachers in residence, but trek up and down the hill between their rooms and the monastery every day to receive teachings.

Although the monks and nuns ostensibly have equal accommodations and education, most of the nuns are far behind their male counterparts in their academic accomplishments. There are twenty-two-year-old monks who have finished their course of study, whereas many twenty-eight- and thirty-year-old nuns still lag far behind. This disparity is apparently due to historical inequalities that are now being rectified; in the past, nuns had been used for maintenance purposes, left illiterate, and otherwise neglected, but now there is a new movement afoot to bring their living and educational standards up to par with the monks'. Unlike most monks, who begin memorizing Tibetan Buddhist texts as children, many of the women join the nunnery at a much older age and being, for the most part, unable to read, have much catching up to do.

As one Western nun put it, "They can't do the fancy things [like sand mandalas and lama dances] yet—they're still learning their ABCs." She clearly did not consider herself one of "them," despite her shared identity with them as a Buddhist nun. Western nuns seem to be in a strange meditating position—they are often as educated and proficient in their practice as many Tibetan monks, or more so, yet they are still women who theoretically belong in the nunnery, where nuns generally receive fewer privileges than monks. The nun quoted above, like other female Western practitioners, both monastic and lay, lives in the monastery compound instead of with the nuns. She seems to feel compassion for the Tibetan nuns and is pleased that their conditions are improving, but seems to consider herself at a very different level of Buddhist practice and achievement.

Initially, I was disturbed by the lack of connection and shared community between this nun and the ethnically Tibetan nuns. In my naiveté, I expected a greater sense of solidarity between Western and ethnically Tibetan Buddhist women. But, although she appreciated and deeply supported the ethnically Tibetan nuns' efforts, this nun seemed concerned that I distinguish her from the ethnically Tibetan women who were, in her perception, on a different spiritual plane. At the time, I was disturbed by the sense that this nun, and others like her, had appropriated traditions that should have been, but were not, equally accessible to the ethnically Tibetan women themselves. It seemed that they had extracted these traditions to fit their own educated, Western context, without fully considering the implications that this appropriation might have for their indigenous ethnically Tibetan counterparts.

"Appropriation" is the key word here. By my definition, the word suggests lifting a treasure out of one cultural context and inserting it into another without attending to the well-being and needs of its original keepers.[6] While setting out her book's objectives, Klein hints at the unbalanced power dynamic that may be represented by such attitudes of Western women as just described:

> By understanding the different ways in which North American and Tibetan cultures construct persons as connected or separate, we can better understand what a Western woman can appropriate from Buddhist traditions, how she might change or contribute to those traditions, and what limitations there might be in using them as a resource.[7]

Klein is aware of the process of appropriation occurring as Western women adopt Buddhist traditions, aware that in order to be used effectively in tandem with Western women's uniquely independent

notions of selfhood, Buddhist concepts must be distinguished from their traditional contexts and recalibrated to link up with our already constructed systems of cultural identity. Klein does not see this process as an inherently problematic one, nor do I. Western women have been attracted to Buddhist traditions, have begun to pick and choose from among these traditions using criteria different than those indigenous Buddhist women and men might employ, and have initiated anew in the West the process of syncretic adaptation that Buddhism has historically undergone during each of its geographic transitions. There is nothing in this current process of change that differentiates it fundamentally from the others that Buddhism has weathered, and in that sense, it should not bother me that Western women are able to alter Buddhist traditions to their own taste.

But the matter may not be so simple. As Western women of my generation begin to participate in this process of appropriation, it may be precisely our independence and self-confidence, inculcated in many from a young age, that allow us to adopt Buddhist traditions as positive, empowering ones. In part, Western women are able to thrive and cultivate themselves within Buddhist religious traditions that are at some level hierarchically structured, male-dominated, and that often exclude their own women, precisely because we have learned to ignore such institutional barriers and to see our individualistic desires as ultimately attainable. Coming from cultures that do not encourage such values, young women such as the ethnically Tibetan nuns at the Himalayan monastery and the Japanese women that, as we shall see, Maura O'Halloran has trouble identifying with, may not have the same freedom and ease of access from which to build a relationship with Buddhist traditions on their own terms. This is not to suggest that Western individualistic or feminist ideals are necessarily better than the complex cultural webs that create Asian women's lives. In fact, it can be argued that the concept of patriarchy and its associated power structures are inherently Western constructions—that women from other cultures have vastly different, but essentially positive worldviews and roles within the systems to which they belong. Nevertheless, Western women possess a different set of internalized cultural resources, which may allow them more individual and institutional agency to effect change within the Buddhist traditions that they have adopted.

Both Shaw and Klein highlight these cultural differences in self-conception as crucial components in our understanding of the relationships between Buddhism and feminism. Shaw refutes more traditional Western scholars' claims that women in Tantric relationships were only objectified tools for men by offering a different interpretation of Tantric Buddhist women's concepts of selfhood:

> A situation is postulated in which women are depersonalized and exploited. The postulated depersonalization of the women is predicated upon their possession of an individual self as it is constructed in the mainstream of Western thought. . . . This commodified self is at variance with traditional Indian and Buddhist understandings of personhood.[8]

Laying out the key differences in Western and Tibetan conceptions of the self as she illuminates experiences unique to Western women engaged in Buddhism, Klein makes a related point:

> To sum up, in the West, "individuation" has by and large meant the emergence of consciously chosen activities and attitudes. . . . The road to adulthood and personhood is marked by a range of choices unknown in traditional societies, and the individual's responsibility for those choices is great. . . . The challenges and definitions of Tibetan personhood are very different, and yet they also suggest a dialogue between separation and connectedness. The personal boundaries that result from Tibet's cultural dialogue are formed through an amalgamation of its people's attitudes regarding their relationship to society, natural environment, and the cosmos, and to the privileged authority of the past.[9]

Both scholars argue that Western culture tends to focus on the development of the individual self, praising separation and "special," "unique" qualities as legitimating personhood, while Tibetan Buddhist thought posits the self as a fluid, only tentatively boundaried component of a larger, cosmically interconnected reality.

The implications that these different notions of selfhood have for contemporary Asian and Western Buddhist women are great. The formative emphasis placed on individual self-development for Western women may be precisely what draws us to Buddhist practice, as a means of deconstructing our painfully "independent" Western selves and cultivating a compassionate connectedness within ourselves and with others that our culture does not encourage. However, it is precisely the independence and separateness that we so desperately want to transcend that enables us to engage with Buddhism on the level that we desire. We may gain access to male-dominated enclaves of spiritual authority precisely *because* we are perceived to have a sense of individual authority, self-confidence, and societal power generally associated with men, rather than the immanent, undefined, and potentially impotent "self" often assigned to women in both our own and other cultures.

In a sense, we become honorary men in these Buddhist cultures. O'Halloran takes pride in feeling like "one of the lads,"[10] although she

is initially aware of being "the only woman and only foreigner studying here."[11] As we have seen, Western nuns in the Tibetan tradition often choose to live and practice with the resident monks rather than their Asian monastic sisters. In terms of spiritual and intellectual achievement, they may feel far more comfortable with men who have pursued similar studies and practices than with women who lag far behind. For women like Maura and the Western Tibetan Buddhist nun mentioned above, the identities of "foreigner" and "female" become conflated into something altogether Other. Their status as "foreigner" overrides that of "female," allowing them to dissociate themselves from both the internal and external restrictions encountered by indigenous women attempting to practice at the same level. As Klein says of her own experience, "I studied in much the same way as the [male] Tibetans themselves did . . . owing to my 'importance' as a Westerner and the irrelevance in that context of my being a woman."[12]

O'Halloran is painfully aware of the cultural distinctions between herself and the Japanese women with whom she comes in contact:

> Women are really repressed here, forced into the mold of a giggling innocent. At first I rather enjoyed the surprise and admiration with which I was treated. Now I feel its oppressiveness, for it's only because I'm female. My heart went out to Kobai-san. She wished she could sit as freely and naturally as I, but couldn't. Such a simple thing. Always raised to sit like a lady, she was too self-conscious to be merely comfortable.[13]

O'Halloran's status as a woman does factor into others' perceptions of her and win her the mixed blessing of extra attention, but as a Western woman, confidently grounded in herself, she is able to rise above these petty sexisms and legitimize herself beyond all expectations through her remarkably deep practice. Many Japanese women, like Kobai-san, however, are not. As O'Halloran explains, her Japanese counterpart is unable to break either the internal or external bonds of her culture's sexism. She cannot practice freely because she is too self-conscious of both the immediate "unlady-like" act of sitting quietly with herself in a roomful of intimidating male practitioners and of the more general "unlady-like" connotations that serious Buddhist practice has in her culture. O'Halloran is compassionate toward women like Kobai-san because she, in her own way, has experienced the hardship of being a woman in a predominantly male religious community, but her compassion can only go so far. Ultimately, she accepts the honorary male privilege that being a foreigner confers, and practices as such, leaving her Japanese sisters to work with their own cultural limitations.

Of course, not all Japanese women appear as weak characters in O'Halloran's journals; she greatly admires the enlightenment she recognizes as immanent in many older women's daily lives:

> Then I saw her—skinny, 70, down on the floor vigorously scrubbing the already gleaming wood with such earnestness she didn't even hear my call. I felt ashamed. She trundled into the garden and dug me up *kiku* from the ends of the rows she'd already neatly trimmed, thinned, and transplanted. . . . She was off about her work. Ashamed, thoroughly ashamed, I bought an ice-cream and pushed my barrow past the rice fields with the radios, the many bent bodies at their jobs. I wondered what they thought about, if they thought at all. Were they all like so many Zen masters, living their koans—digging and digging and only digging?[14]

and:

> The woman twinkled, dimpled, wiping her hands on her apron, smoothing it across her sparse hips. She made *mat-cha* [tea] for us, a long ritual of wiping and whirling the universe into a bowl. She knelt by the fire, dipping water from the soot-encrusted cauldron. Slowly, almost caressing her utensils, she poured. Her features were dim in the soft light of the room, but one side glowed colours thrown up by the fire. I was drawn into her every movement.[15]

These women demonstrate their commitment to the Dharma though the minute movements of their daily lives, within the constraints of traditional Japanese women's roles. As far as we know, they have not undergone formal Zen training in the way that O'Halloran has; they are not Zen masters in any institutionally defined sense. However, as O'Halloran describes, they have mastered the small slice of reality in which they so mindfully live. The institutionalized Zen practice that O'Halloran undertakes is not the only means of working toward enlightenment—these laywomen, too, have attained a deep awareness and clarity through the intricacies of their lives as they are.

In this way, it is clear that although hierarchical exclusion from monastic institutions may unfairly limit Asian women's modes of spiritual praxis, these women may possess their own modes of practice. Often unnoticed by Western women, rich daily rituals such as those O'Halloran describes may be equally valid ways of working toward enlightenment. The women that appear in O'Halloran's journals, like many women with a minimum of formal education throughout the ethnically Tibetan cultural world and other parts of Asia, have cultivated themselves within the confines of their social roles as laywomen, rather than within the male-dominated monastic mainstream. This is not to suggest that the male mainstream is intrinsically a superior mode of practice; nevertheless, it is from this monastic tradition that most Western practitioners, male and female, learn. Although there are many forms of *upāya*, or skillful means, very few Western women or men would willingly take on the role of an uneducated housewife as their Dharma practice; instead, they would probably prefer to use their privileged foreign identity to enter traditionally male enclaves of institutional religious practice.

But perhaps this is simply a culturally constructed projection of the roles that Asian women play. Independently of the academic works by Western Buddhist women that I have been discussing, there is also a large and growing body of literature in which Asian female practitioners discuss their experiences within various Buddhist traditions.[16] A thorough comparison of these works with those like Klein's and O'Halloran's and further interpersonal dialogue would be valuable for illuminating Buddhist women's experiences on both sides of the fence.

Creating this kind of dialogue between Asian and Western Buddhist women will be a delicate process, as was evident during and after the Fourth International Conference on Buddhist Women in Ladakh. Asking whether Western Buddhist women should feel an especially compassionate bond with Asian Buddhist women due to their shared status as women opens up a heated theoretical debate from both feminist and Buddhist perspectives. In the context of feminist discourse, arguing that they should connect with each other as "women," regardless of their other life circumstances, suggests an essentialist position in which, regardless of cultural, religious, racial, economic, and other differences, *all* women share a universal understanding based on their membership in the category of "women." Poststructuralists and others criticize this view as a white, Western, middle-class construction that does not adequately acknowledge the diverse experiences and needs that constitute the varied realities women around the world are living; from this point of view, Western women must acknowledge that we cannot necessarily know how any other women feel and that we cannot claim any kind of privileged connection to Tibetan, Japanese, or other women simply because we share the same gender characteristics and the same religious tradition. It may be necessary instead to construct our individual identities and operate without any particular allegiance to other women.

From an essentialist perspective, women like O'Halloran and Western nuns living in Asia would be expected to attach themselves to the women in the cultures they encounter, either taking on the characteristics assigned to the category of "woman" in their host cultures or attempting to alter indigenous women's religious status to

bring it closer to their own. Either way, it is somehow inappropriate for them to accept privileges denied to their indigenous sisters simply by emphasizing the "Western" component of their identity over the "female" component. If, however, their desire to engage in Buddhist practice has nothing to do with their gender or any other distinguishing feature of their identities, then the treatment of other women, Asian or Western, is largely irrelevant to their individual pursuit of enlightenment.

Bringing this debate into a Buddhist context, Klein argues for a middle way between these two theoretical extremes, which I also find most appropriate:

> The central dilemma is clear: how can we suggest a female sense of self that is neither overly essentialized nor so contingently constructed that its existence is in question? It is in reframing this oppositional relationship that Buddhist perspectives seem most useful for contemporary feminist debates and women's lives.[17]

The concept that women can connect with each other simply on the basis of their femininity is attractive, but at the same time, it is important to respect our own and others' unique cultural, religious, and personal identities, comprised of our individual narrative histories. Klein suggests that Buddhist philosophy can help mediate between these two approaches: Buddhism questions the construction of individual selves, emphasizing an understanding of universal selflessness, and simultaneously emphasizes the realization of this truth through cultivating the individual self.

The constructivist argument parallels one that is often offered as a typically Buddhist one in answer to questions about women's status in traditional Buddhist cultures. It defers to Buddhism's metaphysical concepts of nonduality, claiming that dualistic distinctions like male and female, Eastern and Western are simply descriptive categories that we use to make sense of the phenomenal world, but that are empty in the absolute. Through Buddhist practice, all selves can ultimately be deconstructed and thus move beyond phenomenal gender and culture distinctions. In some sense, Maura O'Halloran exemplifies this ideal, transcending sexism and other social boundaries to achieve the luminescent enlightenment that speaks so clearly from her journal's pages. As already noted, the troubling thing is that, in part, Maura is able to become a successful, full-fledged practitioner because she has begun with a different set of cultural assumptions than her Japanese companions.

Asserting that gender and other distinctions are irrelevant in light of Buddhism's egalitarian philosophy does not acknowledge the cultural realities that often prohibit or deter women from practicing in the first place. Quoting Klein, "We cannot say precisely where and how religious egalitarianism fails to translate into social egalitarianism, but clearly the amalgamation of social, political, and economic power is an obstacle."[18] Although Buddhism's religious egalitarianism is a large part of its drawing power for many Western practitioners, we must not allow ourselves, whether women or men, to use it as a smokescreen to hide social realities around us that do not parse. Nonduality and nondiscrimination are ideals to work toward, both internally and externally, not manifest realities that allow us to excuse or ignore difficult phenomenal truths. As Klein says, we cannot know why or how our philosophical expectations of Buddhism do not match up with the lived realities that we observe. Sadly, it appears that very few Western Buddhist women want to describe what they see in contemporary Asian women's realities because, ironically, fully acknowledging women's different and often unequal roles in Asian Buddhist traditions may appear to challenge Buddhism's egalitarian potential in the West.

Tranformative Encounters, Intangible Bonds

I felt that there was a very strong and positive sense of self within the communities of ethnically Tibetan women, both monastic and lay, with whom I engaged in Nepal. My bonds with both nuns and laywomen were generally very different—warmer and friendlier—than the relations I was able to forge with monks. Although most of the textual and philosophical Buddhist teachings I received came from men, simply being with Buddhist women brought me into the indigenous tradition in a uniquely immanent and embodied way. I often felt an intangible common bond with these women, perhaps because I was looking for it, but more likely because the atmosphere they created and warmly invited me into was premised on a different mode of relationship than that I experienced with monks. The contrast between the male and female monastic communities seems embedded in the different histories of their respective members: monks often join the monastery or are placed in it by their parents for the highly valued purpose of textual study and practice, while nuns often join seeking an alternative to the marriage and family commitments otherwise compulsory for ethnically Tibetan women. The religious life may serve more as a source of positive communal relationship than as a path toward individual enlightenment or intellectual development. In a society that possesses strong gender divisions and few empowering

options for women beyond marriage and motherhood, becoming a nun may allow a woman to develop herself personally, forge relationships with other women, create a self-defined community, and fulfill a unique social role in traditional Tibetan societies.[19]

Because these more concrete objectives may often be ethnically Tibetan nuns' primary focus, rather than philosophically motivated enlightenment, Western nuns' choices to practice and study with monks rather than nuns may appear justified. Western women may choose to focus on their own practice in the potentially more "serious" spiritual environment that a monks' monastery offers and be ambivalent about constructing a community based only on an ostensibly shared understanding of womanhood. Instead, they may wish to further their own meditative development in the most rigorous setting, regardless of whether they live and work with women or men, indigenous or not.

However, it seems that these two goals—maintaining Buddhist practice and establishing sisterhood—should be complementary, rather than mutually exclusive. Both Western and Asian women should find ways to practice fully that do not require becoming honorary men. Ideally, we should be able to integrate both halves of our dual identities as both women and Buddhist practitioners, rather than feeling compelled to disavow one in favor of the other. Of course, the missing piece in this identity configuration for Western Buddhist women is our identity as Westerners. Western women may assume that they can create equal relationships with indigenous Buddhist women based on their common identity as "women," transcending perceptions of cultural difference and identifying themselves in an essentialist fashion as simply "women."

However, this manipulation of identity may not be concretely feasible, for each individual lives as a complete whole. Aspects of a complex identity—gender, nationality, class—cannot be easily erased, so, cognizant of them, each must practice her own humanness as honestly as possible. However, no individual will be free until all sentient beings are free to do this; we cannot rest completely in our own practice while we know that there are women, born into the very tradition we have appropriated, who are unable to explore their own inner landscape due to gender distinctions. Buddhist practice itself may be our primary means of effecting change in both the internal and external worlds, but since the forms of our practice are located in the hierarchical entity we wish to alter, it may be necessary to either remove our practice from that framework or work to alter the framework itself through creative, nontraditional means.

Miranda Shaw's historical examination of women in Tantric Buddhism presents an alternative model for a vital, Buddhist women's spiritual community. Shaw also attempts to transform modern Western Buddhism's attitudes toward women through her academic discovery and promotion of a hitherto hidden history of spiritually potent Buddhist women. The Tantric *yoginīs* that Shaw describes are generally not nuns, but wandering, wild women who come together to hold all-female forest revels:

> One Tantric practitioner . . . reported how he fortuitously discovered a yogini assembly. . . . At nightfall he saw many women enter the temple courtyard bearing flowers and preparations for a feast. Their nocturnal ritual preparations and their crowns, elaborate jewelry, and rainbow-colored dresses signaled to him that they were yoginis.[20]
>
> Instead of practices to which women might on occasion hope to be omitted, the feast in its classical form appears to be a ritual performed either exclusively by women or communally by men and women, as a matter of course. Women gathering in circles to feast, perform rituals, teach, and inspire one another constitutes a practice that also appears in the secular literature of the period.[21]

This suggests a vastly different model for Buddhist women's spirituality than the traditional monastic environment. These divergent structures (lay and monastic) and images are conjoined only by the fact that they involve Buddhist women, without any other necessary connection. This discontinuity is disturbing, especially as it relates to the disparities between contemporary Eastern and Western Buddhist women outlined above. Although Shaw presents an exciting picture of independently potent, spiritually liberated medieval Tantric women who are free of hierarchical constraints, this historically constructed image diverges greatly from the realities that most indigenous Buddhist women live today, whether in monastic or lay environments.

Shaw's work may appeal to Western women because it presents an ideal we may wish to emulate—an ideal that may influence the ways in which we adapt Buddhism in the West. Western Buddhists have the unique chance to influence a religion in its transformative stages—to constructively assimilate Buddhist cultural and philosophical traditions with Western feminism—especially when scholars like Shaw demonstrate the basis for that integration in traditional Buddhist texts. However, the problem remains that although Shaw and other Western women can appropriate a lost historical equality by reconstituting Buddhist traditions around feminist and other Western values, indigenous Buddhist women may not be privy to these images and texts that have such liberating and transformative potency or to the feminist self-understanding that makes these images of women so potent for Westerners.

Once again, the frustrating concept of appropriation comes into play. After reading Shaw's work, I had the sense of handling a treasure

that had fallen by chance into my hands, one that should be returned to its rightful owners. Shaw has begun this process by unearthing these texts and distilling them into a coherent set of positive images reflecting women's spiritual potentiality. However, creating the circumstances on our side of the cultural divide that would encourage modern ethnically Tibetan women to rediscover these texts and continue their spiritual foremothers' legacy needs to be done in ways that avoid culturally imperialistic power dynamics.

In order to avoid such dynamics, perhaps Western women simply need to develop their own interpretation of Buddhist philosophy and practice along their own unique cultural lines and leave others' experiences of it alone. But that answer is not satisfactory either, since both Western and Eastern women are very much engaged with Buddhism as a historical and cultural entity that does not always offer women the same spiritual opportunities as men. There are as yet no concrete solutions for this dilemma, but it is crucial that the matter be placed on the table as this nascent cross-cultural discussion develops between practitioners East and West, female and male.

Another challenge in the process of adapting Buddhism to the West lies in diffusing the sexisms inherent in our own societies. Western feminism developed in response to the abuses of a largely patriarchal religious and cultural system, and it is inappropriate to assume that these inequalities have already been completely erased. An experience at a Dharma teaching in Kathmandu demonstrates how insidious Western sexism can be, especially when coupled with assumptions that Buddhist teachings spring from a pure and unchallengeable source.

Reading the dedication of merit after a Dharma teaching, an entire Western congregation read lines from a chant book that referred to "the Buddha and his sons." A number of Western women and I were disturbed about this and approached the lama to ask about its source. Attention drawn to the incriminating line, the lama chuckled and told us that "sons" was a mistaken translation, that the original Tibetan term—"children" of the Buddha—was nongendered. The lama was happy to change the translation for future sessions but his Western male translator, surprisingly, was not. He was not immediately convinced that the inclusive translation was appropriate and, even if it were, he was very reluctant to use it. Hence, we see that the problem goes both ways. We may construct Buddhism as we see fit in the West, but no matter how much we may think that we are exempt from the embedded sexist realities that exist for Tibetan and other indigenous women, sexism is also part and parcel of our own cultural tradition.

The questions discussed here are enormous and all-encompassing, and even after many months of working with ethnically Tibetan Buddhist women in Nepal and several years of serious consideration, I feel no closer to the resolutions that I seek. Even as my understanding of the issues has become more subtle, the questions themselves continue to expand as I delve more deeply into them. Advancing concrete answers at this stage might stifle potentially fruitful discussion; instead, I seek to generate conversation by offering these open-ended thoughts for consideration.

Notes

1. Extensive thanks to Mark Unno, Karma Lekshe Tsomo, and all of the participants of the 1995 Sakyadhita Conference on Women and Buddhism for helping me think, rethink, and revise the ideas contained within this paper.

2. Some may question the use of the word "sister" as one that assumes an essential relationship between Western and Eastern women that may not genuinely exist. Here I use the term in the sense that it is used throughout Asia as an identifying title; among both friends and strangers, both men and women may address a women as "sister."

3. Anne C. Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen: Buddhism, Feminism and the Art of the Self* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p. xviii. Italics mine.

4. Charles Ramble, "The Founding of a Tibetan Village: The Popular Transformation of History," *Kailash* 10.1 (1983): 267–90, at p. 267.

5. This is not to suggest that all Asian Buddhist women are nonliterate; such an assertion would be inaccurate and offensive. However, in my area of experience—the Nepali Buddhist Himalayas—the majority of Tibetan Buddhist women are not literate in Tibetan, the language in which their Buddhist philosophy and history is encoded. Ironically, as more and more women in this region gain literacy in Nepali (which serves as a trade and business language), fewer and fewer women become literate in the traditional Tibetan liturgical language. I am currently conducting research on this trend.

6. Donald Lopez uses a similar metaphor to discuss Western scholars' appropriation of Buddhist texts: "These were texts that were seen as cultural artifacts of modern Asian societies, but from an earlier time, a classical period, that modern Asians had long forgotten and thereby forfeited any rights to: those responsible for the decay could not be trusted with the treasures." From "Foreigner at the Lama's Feet," *Curators of the Buddha* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995), p. 284.

7. Klein, *Great Bliss Queen*, p. 12.

8. Miranda Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1994), p. 10.

9. Klein, *Great Bliss Queen*, p. 37.

10. Maura, O'Halloran, *Pure Heart, Enlightened Mind: The Zen Journal and Letters of Maura "Soshin" O'Halloran* (Boston: Charles E. Tuttle, 1994), p. 17.

11. Ibid., p. 23.

12. Klein, *Great Bliss Queen*, p. xiv.

13. O'Halloran, *Pure Heart*, p. 108.

14. Ibid., p. 197.

15. Ibid., p. 222.

16. See, for example, the stories told by Songgyong Sunim, Aoyama Sensei, Maechee Pathomwan, Hiuwan Fashih, and others in Martine Batchelor's *Walking on Lotus Flowers: Buddhist Women Living, Loving and Meditating* (London: Thorsons, 1996); also Jamyang Sakya and Julie Emery, *Princess in the Land of Snows: The Life of Jamyang Sakya in Tibet* (Boston: Shambhala, 1988).

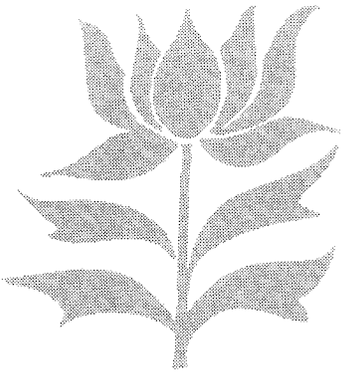
17. Klein, *Great Bliss Queen*, pp. 9–10.

18. Ibid., p. 53.

19. See Hanna Havnevik, *Tibetan Buddhist Nuns* (Oslo: Norwegian University, 1989), or Anna Grimshaw, *Servants of the Buddha* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994).

20. Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment*, p. 82.

21. Ibid., p. 83.



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