

Buddhism, Equality, and Feminism: Embodied Practices

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Not every Buddhist who supports *bhikkhuni* ordination would identify as a feminist, but there are those who do, both in the Asian and Western contexts. This paper focuses on these individuals in the Thai and Malaysian contexts, because they provide a window to understand the framing of those who support the full ordination of women both using the language of equality and rights *and* as a way of following in the footsteps of the Buddha. The paper argues that debating and framing the question in the language of equality and/or rights reflects that these discourses are not alien to the Asian context; in fact, such a framing is a reflection of Asian countries as modern nation states with their own constitutions that enshrine these ideals. Simultaneously, it challenges the patriarchal framing of the discourse of rights and equality as being inauthentic to Asian cultures or a cultural imposition of Western liberal feminism. The language of rights and equality is particularly familiar to social activists whose advocacy ranges from housing, education, and civil rights to women's rights. In fact, there is an Asian Human Rights Charter, also known as the People's Charter, promulgated in 1998, that addresses the oppressive or discriminatory conditions that still afflict Asian societies in the post-colonial era.¹

Intertwined in discussions about the legitimacy of *bhikkhuni* ordination are contested conceptions of a Buddhist woman's selfhood and spirituality. For example: Is a female birth inferior? Is it excusable for a woman to be subjected to domestic violence? Can a woman attain Buddhahood? Addressing these issues illustrates how religion can be used either to challenge, resist, and transform unjust gender relations or to perpetuate violence against women. Zine's proposal of a critical faith-centered framework is adopted here, because it recognizes the multi-faceted ways in which spirituality can be a site of either resistance or oppression.² Buddhist women's articulations of their spirituality attest to the tradition's transformative potential, embodied in a unique understanding of a gendered spiritual self. Significantly, the first issue to discuss is the debate over whether there is gender equality in Buddhism.

Debates On Signifiers of Gender Equality in Buddhism: Attainment of Enlightenment and *Bhikkhuni* Ordination

Records of women's spiritual attainment in the *Samyutta Nikaya Sutta*³ and *Therīgāthā*⁴ are spiritually affirming for Buddhist women. In fact, scholars have described women's ability to attain *nibbāna* as evidence of men and women having "equal spiritual potential"⁵ and to conclude that there is gender equality in Buddhism because a woman can be enlightened in her own body without transforming to a male body first.⁶ Although Alan Sponberg concurred with other scholars that soteriologically women can reach *nirvāna*, he emphatically underlined that this does not indicate sexual egalitarianism, but rather soteriological inclusiveness.⁷ Significantly, he explained the critical difference in his choice of the term "inclusiveness" rather than equality or equivalence. For him, inclusiveness does not connote sameness, as equality does, and does not signify a lack of hierarchical differentiation, as equivalence does.

Paradoxically, Sponberg failed to note that what he terms soteriological inclusiveness challenges discriminatory ideas and practices with regards to the inferiority of women. While certain sections of the Buddhist community have regarded women as inferior and their bodies as impure and incapable of Buddhahood, clearly the philosophy of emptiness and non-duality dispels unequal, hierarchical, and non-equivalent notions about Buddhist women and related practices. According to Ueki, the *Sūrangama-samādhi-sūtra* (Sutra of Concentration of the Heroic March) explained that if "the differences between

men and women are not essential, they are non-dual (Advāita) and void (Śūnya), then there should be no distinction between men's and women's ability to attain enlightenment."⁸ Furthermore, "in the mind which seeks enlightenment, there is no difference between men and women."⁹ Although Sponberg insists on using the term inclusiveness in a way that does not denote sameness or lack of hierarchical differentiation, the term is used in diversity training in the workplace to signify the intent of a company to address discrimination and ensure that people of different races, genders, ages, and sexual orientations are treated the same, without any hierarchical differentiation.¹⁰

The question of whether there is gender equality in Buddhism finds resonance in the discussion about reviving *bhikkhuni* ordination. Those who support this initiative in Thailand have described the ideal in Buddhist society as one in which women and men are on an equal footing.¹¹ Allowing Buddhist women to be ordained is described as confirmation of the principle of equality held in the past. In Sri Lanka, advocates of *bhikkhuni* ordination have framed the ideal as "the principle of equality which the Buddha gave to woman"¹² The concurrent adoption of the eight *garudhammas* that subordinates the *bhikkhuni sangha* to the *bhikkhu sangha* has been explained as a tactical move to facilitate the acceptance of the female monastic order, given the social conventions at the time.¹³ The Buddha has been described as a feminist by those supportive of *bhikkhuni* ordination.¹⁴ Proponents of *bhikkhuni* ordination have framed it as a heritage or ancient mandate from the Buddha¹⁵ and have provided alternative hermeneutical interpretations of the *vinaya* to support its reestablishment.¹⁶

The Thai Context: Reclaiming the Embodiment of Female Spirituality

Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (Bhikkhuni Dhammananda) grew up in a temple where her mother, Voramai Kabilsingh, had renounced worldly life to become a nun. As a young girl, her Buddhist faith took root as she followed the schedules and activities of the monastery. A feminist Buddhist, she reflects that Buddhism offers a way for self-examination and teaches compassion to deal with her critics, while feminism allows her to merge her personal practice and academic life and be socially engaged.¹⁷

Bhikkhuni Dhammananda articulates her support for *bhikkhuni* ordination by deploying the discourse of rights and equality.¹⁸ While detractors of *bhikkhuni* ordination have criticized the discourse of rights and equality as Western and thus un-Thai, this ignores the fact that various clauses of the Thai Constitution uses the language of equality and rights. The Thai Government is also a signator to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and has engaged with the United Nations in the discourse of equality and rights.¹⁹ Among other statutes, Section 30 of the 1997 and 2007 Thai Constitutions states, "All persons are equal before the law and shall enjoy equal protection under the law. Men and women shall enjoy equal rights."²⁰ Furthermore, the Asian Human Rights Charter, endorsed by some Thai non-governmental organizations, is written in the discourse of rights. Belittling the discourse of rights and equality as an imposition of Western feminism or as un-Thai is a tactic to silent those who support *bhikkhuni* ordination while being conveniently blind to the fact that, as a modern nation state, the Thai Constitution is itself rights-based. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda has also deployed the discourse of duty and responsibility in support of *bhikkhuni* ordination.²¹ In both cases, she situates the matter within the larger framework of following the Buddhist tradition.

Impressed by Bhikkhuni Dhammananda's decision to reclaim Buddhist female spirituality and transform the normative understanding of *sangha* as off-limits to Thai women,²² I carried out ethnographic fieldwork at Songdhammakalyani Monastery near Bangkok for periods of a few weeks to a few months between 2006 and 2014. While I was there, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda demonstrated her knowledge of Buddhist herstory and corrected erroneous understandings of a female birth as inferior

due to *kamma* and pollution of the sacred robe due to menstruation. She also stressed the importance of practice. Mindfulness is embodied as part of everyday practice, as female monastics go on their alms round, during chanting, and so on.²³ The nuns go for alms as a spiritual practice, walking mindfully every step of the way, aware of each movement of the body. They do not walk too fast or absentmindedly step on the person in front them. They are mindful of not swinging their hands or turning their heads this way and that, like a tourist. As a feminist Buddhist, Bhikkhuni Dhammananda's ultimate path is *nibbāna*.

As Jasmin Zine observes, a critical approach is apt, since "although religion and spirituality can be sites or sources of oppression, they also offer powerful spaces of resistance to injustice and provide avenues for critical contestation and knowledge."²⁴ This is exemplified by Bhikkhuni Dhammananda and Dhammanataya, a feminist who has become more inclined toward spiritual development as a result of *vipassanā* meditation practice. Dhammanataya, who received temporary ordination at Songdhammakalyani Monastery in December 2010, observes, "I have a good relationship with the Buddha and his teachings, but not with Thai patriarchal Theravāda teachings, beliefs, and practices. Looking at the teachings of the Buddha, I found that it was against all kinds of oppression."²⁵

Another advocate of *bhikkhuni* ordination is Ouyporn Khuankaew, who works with the Buddhist Education for Social Transformation Program²⁶ and identifies as a Buddhist feminist. Her life story highlights the importance of reclaiming embodied spirituality in everyday life. She grew up in a violent household, where her father, a devout Buddhist, was abusive toward her mother and siblings.²⁷ She observed that the issue of domestic violence was invisible to most people in her rural Buddhist community, including the local abbot, who visited the poor and the sick, but did not step in to protect her family. This personal experience nurtured her affinity and commitment to feminism and non-violence initiatives. Only after acquiring increased feminist awareness was she able to explore what Buddhism has to offer. She recognized that an inaccurate understanding of the Buddhist concept of *kamma* is used to normalize violence against women and to justify it as the result of women's own actions in a past life.²⁸ This Buddhist cultural and religious construct operates when women are not allowed to be ordained as *bhikkhunis* and are told by monks that it is due to their *kamma* of being born a woman.²⁹ Khuankaew and Bhikkhuni Dhammananda's reclaiming of embodied female spirituality is particularly significant, because despite Buddhism's immense impact on people's lives in Thailand, very few feminists are interested in addressing the use of religion as a tool of oppression. The Buddhist doctrine of right understanding has been subverted and used to perpetuate the unjust treatment of women.

The Malaysian Context: Women Can Attain Buddhahood!

In her book, *Cave In The Snow*, Bhikkhuni Tenzin Palmo powerfully illustrates what a woman can do if she sets her heart and mind to it, living alone for 12 years in the Himalayas in her quest for enlightenment. One striking sentence in the book challenges the assumption that Buddhahood can only be attained in the male form: "I have made a vow to attain Enlightenment in the female form – no matter how many lifetimes it takes."³⁰

The discourse of women's inferiority still persists today among Malaysian Buddhists and is articulated by women themselves. One common assertion is that only a man can attain Buddhahood. If one asserts otherwise or starts to question the statement, several outcomes are possible. Monks may explain that a woman can be an *arabant*, but never a Buddha. The fact that the statement is uttered by a monk lends it credence and authority. One who questions the statement may also be chided for raising the issue. These are clear attempts to silence those who may question authority. Fortunately, the *Kalama*

Sutta encourages Buddhists to question rather than accept blindly what is passed on as tradition, so this text can always be used to explain one's stance. A knowledge of this *sutta* and related works is empowering to women spiritually, providing a counter-narrative to challenge the authoritative patriarchal interpretations as the only legitimate epistemic reading.

Nonetheless, since the 9th Sakyadhiha International Conference on Buddhist Women was held in Kuala Lumpur in 2006, progress has been made. Malaysian monks and monks who are based in Malaysia, such as Bhikkhus Saddhasiri, Anandajoti, Saranankara, and Dr. Dhammapala, have stepped up to support *bhikkhuni* ordination. Malaysian nuns based in Malaysia include Bhikkhuni Sumangala, president of the Ariya Vihara Buddhist Society in Selangor and one of the spiritual advisors of Gotami Vihara, and Bhikkhuni Dhammadinna, also based in Selangor. Women now have more opportunities to intensify their practice. For example, in 2014 in Malaysia, the First Theravada Buddhist Nuns Novitiate Program was organized by the Subang Jaya Buddhist Association in collaboration with Buddhist organizations from other countries.³¹ Altogether 24 participants from Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia, and China had a chance to experience the life of a *samaneri* (ordained novice nun). In describing her experience of this spiritually fulfilling path to inner peace, a participant named Jayanti said, "In this noviate programme, I learnt to be mindful and graceful in my actions and reminded myself that I was leading a different way of life."³²

More Buddhist organizations have come to the fore to support *bhikkhuni*-related activities. An example is Gotami Vihara, which has as its mission "to provide support to Buddhist female renunciants so that they can actualize their aspirations of walking the Path of Enlightenment as set out by the Buddha." This mission statement acknowledges the difficulties and lack of support that female renunciants face in devoting themselves to the Buddha Sāsana, in comparison to the established structures to support male monastics in the Theravāda Buddhist tradition in Malaysia. It also recognises women's spiritual potential and not just as a "curative" project. Due to relatively favorable economic circumstances, Malaysian Buddhists have contributed generously to Buddhist temples, monasteries, nuns' projects, and for recovery efforts and disaster relief in less affluent Buddhist communities in Sri Lanka, Ladakh, India, Nepal, and Bhutan.

As a pro-tem committee member and current president of Gotami Vihara Society, what drives my support for *bhikkhuni* ordination is my feminist and Buddhist understanding of the Buddha's heritage and Dhamma.³³ I embrace feminism because it speaks to me. While the term may be of Western origin, what it signifies, women speaking out and defending their own interests, is a human trait.³⁴ I disagree with the Chinese Confucianist practice that favors sons over daughters to pass on the family name and that also causes other wide-ranging discrimination against daughters. As a gender specialist, I use the discourse of equality and rights in the courses I teach, both in Malay and English. Similar to Thailand, the ideals of gender equality are enshrined in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia.³⁵ In a globalized world where homogenization, indigenization, and diversity contend in both the economy and culture, it is more and more difficult to differentiate between Asian and Western social values. In the current globalized context, the widespread Buddhist understanding that women can attain liberation is encouraging.

NOTES

¹ "Asian Human Rights Charter," <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/452678304.pdf>. Accessed May 28, 2017.

- ² Jasmin Zine, “Creating a Critical Faith-Centered Space for Anti-racist Feminism: Reflections of a Muslim Scholar-Activist,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20:2(2004) 185.
- ³ “Discourses of the Ancient Nuns,” <http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/bl143.html>. Accessed May 28, 2017.
- ⁴ “Therīgāthā: Verses of the Elder Nuns,” <http://www.accesstoinight.org/tipitaka/kn/thig/> Accessed May, 28, 2017.
- ⁵ Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, *Thai Women in Buddhism* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991), 33.
- ⁶ See Masatoshi Ueki, *Gender Equality in Buddhism* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 94; and Kajiyama quoted in Kabilsingh, *Thai Women in Buddhism*, 27.
- ⁷ Alan Sponberg, “Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism,” in *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, ed. Jose I. Cabezon (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1992), 8–13.
- ⁸ Ueki, *Gender Equality in Buddhism*, 70.
- ⁹ See the chapter, “Receiving the Prediction of a Woman Named Jewel Brocade in the Sāgara-nāgarāja-paripaccha,” quoted in *Ibid.*, 94.
- ¹⁰ See for examples “What is Inclusiveness Training,” <http://www.nonprofitinclusiveness.org/what-inclusiveness-training> (accessed May, 28, 2017); “Inclusion and Diversity,” <https://www.accenture.com/ca-en/company-diversity>. Accessed May, 28, 2017; and “Diversity and Inclusion,” <http://www.aperianglobal.com/leaders-diversity-inclusion-5-lessons-top-global-companies>. Accessed May, 28, 2017.
- ¹¹ Varaporn Chamsanit, “Settling the Debate On *Bhikkhuni* Ordination in Thailand: Why Is It Difficult?” *Out Of the Shadows: Socially Engaged Buddhist Women*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 2006), 302.
- ¹² Hema Goonatilake, “Women Regaining A Lost Legacy: The Restoration of *Bhikkhuni* Order in Sri Lanka.” *Ibid.*, 43.
- ¹³ Kabilsingh, *Thai Women in Buddhism*,” 28–29.
- ¹⁴ Barbara Yen, “Joy and Challenges of Forming Gotami Vihara Society,” Presentation at the First ASEAN Buddhist Conference, Bangkok, September 2016.
- ¹⁵ Goonatilake, “Women Regaining A Lost Legacy,” 42; Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Revival of Bhikkhuni Ordination in The Theravada Tradition* (Penang: Inward Path, 2009), 15, 21–23; and Suat Yan Lai, “Engendering Buddhism: Female Ordination and Women’s Voices in Thailand,” doctoral thesis, Claremont Graduate University, 2011, 149, 151.
- ¹⁶ For details of hermeneutics in support of *bhikkhuni* ordination, see Bodhi, “The Revival of Bhikkhuni Ordination.”

- ¹⁷ Rebecca Warner and Holly Gayley, "From Buddhism to Feminism: Case Study on Chatsumarn Kabilsingh," *Yasodhara* 57 (October-December 1998): 9–10.
- ¹⁸ Lai, "Engendering Buddhism," 149–50.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 152–4.
- ²⁰ For the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand, see: <http://www.asianlii.org/th/legis/const/1997/> (accessed May, 28, 2017); and for Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand 2007, see: <http://www.asianlii.org/th/legis/const/2007/1.html> Accessed May 28, 2017.
- ²¹ Lai, "Engendering Buddhism," 150–51.
- ²² See for example: Charles F. Keyes, "Mother or Mistress but Never a Monk: Buddhist Notions of Female Gender in Rural Thailand," *American Ethnologist* 11:2(May 1984) 223–41.
- ²³ Lai, "Engendering Buddhism," 184–202.
- ²⁴ Zine, "Creating a Critical Faith-Centered Space," 185.
- ²⁵ Email correspondence with Dhammanataya, June 11, 2011.
- ²⁶ "Buddhist Education for Social Transformation," <http://womenforpeaceandjustice.org/courses-we-offer/best/> Accessed May 28, 2017.
- ²⁷ Ouyporn Khuankaew, "Buddhism and Domestic Violence," *A Collation Of Articles on Thai Women and Buddhism*, ed. Virada Somswasdi and Alycia Nicholas (Chiang Mai: Women's Studies Center, Chiang Mai University, and FORWARD, 2002), 63.
- ²⁸ Maia Duerr, "Can Religion Be A Force of Transformation," <https://www.opendemocracy.net/transformation/maia-duerr/can-religion-be-force-for-transformation>. Accessed May, 28, 2017.
- ²⁹ Khuankaew, "Buddhism and Domestic Violence," 65.
- ³⁰ Vicki Mackenzie, *Cave In the Snow* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 1998), 5.
- ³¹ "First Buddhist Nun's Novitiate Program held at Subang Jaya Buddhist Association," <http://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=56,12074,0,0,1,0#.WTFIcuuGPIU>. Accessed May, 28, 2017; and "First Buddhist Nun's Novitiate Program in Theravada Tradition," <https://snfwrenms.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/a5-bnnp-booklet-24oct-final-print.pdf>. Accessed May, 28, 2017. Subsequently, the second nuns' novitiate program was organized in 2016 with 33 participants in Malaysia. Nonetheless, according to an informant from Melaka, there may have been another nuns' novitiate program held before this in the past in Malaysia.

³² Samaneri Sumangala, “Long Live the Buddha Dhamma and Buddha Sāsana,” <https://snfwrenms.wordpress.com/page/3>. Accessed May 28, 2017.

³³ Barbara Yen is another person on the Gotami Vihara Society Executive Committee who identifies as both a Buddhist and feminist.

³⁴ For a more detailed explanation of why feminism was not a Western imposition on the Third World, see Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 1994), 2–3.

³⁵ Art. 8 (1) of the Federal Constitution reads, “All persons are equal before the law and entitled to equal protection of the law.”