NORTH AMERICAN BUDDHIST WOMEN IN THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

Karma Lekshe Tsomo

Understanding North American Buddhist Women from a global perspective is a daunting task, because of the enormous diversity of both North American and Asian Buddhist women. The first question is, “What does it mean to be a Buddhist?” For some, to be a Buddhist means formally going for refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, Sangha. In other cases, a person is born Buddhist and lives her whole life as a Buddhist, without any special ceremony. Differences like these make it impossible to generalize about Buddhist women’s experiences.

When we talk about American Buddhist women, for example, are we talking about the 30-year-old white Harvard graduate who sits once a week at her local Dharma center? Are we talking about the Laotian Buddhist woman who is an engineer at the naval base in San Diego and offers dana to the monks at her local temple on new moon and full moon days? When we talk about international Buddhist women, are we talking about the Korean bhikkhuni professor who has a PhD, teaches Buddhist studies, and is a national advocate for organ donations among Buddhists? Are we talking about the Tibetan nun who is serving a 15-year sentence in Drapchi prison for harboring a photo of the Dalai Lama? Or are we talking about the Thai office clerk who spends her vacations sitting vipassana retreats? Clearly, Buddhist women’s experiences are vastly different, both in North American and internationally.

To compound the complexity, there are no statistics even on the numbers of Buddhist women in the world, much less about their educational backgrounds, economic circumstances, Buddhist affiliations, or spiritual practice. I calculated that there are 300 million Buddhist women worldwide by adding up the populations of Buddhist countries and dividing by two. In some places it’s very difficult to get even a rough idea of the numbers. In China, for example, many people are Buddhists at heart, but may hesitate to publicly identify themselves as Buddhists. It is even more difficult to calculate the exact number of Buddhist nuns in the world. We know that there are more than 10,000 nuns in Korea, more than 10,000 in Taiwan, more than 7,000 in Vietnam, and roughly 100,000 Buddhist nuns in Burma, but it is difficult to precisely document these numbers. After living and traveling in Asia for 40 years, I conclude that women hold up roughly half the Buddhist sky.

In 1964, at the age of 19, I took my 9' 2” Jacob’s balsa board and went by ship to Japan to go surfing. When it got cold and snowy, I went to a Buddhist monastery. I became a Buddhist as a child, because my family name was Zenn, a German name apparently misspelled at Immigration. Little kids used tease my brother and me about being Zen Buddhists, so I went to the public library and found two books on Buddhism, D.T. Suzuki’s Zen Buddhism and Allen Watts’ The Way of Zen. I read them from cover to cover and announced to my Southern Baptist Fundamentalist mother, “Mommy, I’m a Buddhist.” She was horrified, of course, because according to her belief system that doomed me to eternal hellfire. That was the beginning of my own personal experience of interfaith dialogue.

During the past 28 years as a Buddhist nun, I’ve been fortunate to stay in many different monasteries in India, Japan, Taiwan, and other parts of Asia. That has been a marvelous opportunity to experience traditional monastic practice, day by day. Over the past 30 years, I’ve
also been very fortunate to be involved in the early stages of establishing Buddhist temples and Dharma centers in the United States, mostly in Hawai‘i and California, and to experience the ways that women practice and support these centers. Here we can distinguish between the experiences of Asian Buddhists, Asian American Buddhists, and non-Asian American Buddhists. Not only that, but we can also distinguish between the experiences of lay Buddhists, ordained Buddhists, and a new category in the United States, known as neither lay nor ordained. Then we can distinguish between rich and poor Buddhists, scholars and meditators, and between the adherents of many different Buddhist traditions.

North American Buddhist women also have different levels of commitment to Buddhism. For some, Buddhism is one interest among many. Some people have a Dharma book by their bed, which they read before dropping off to sleep at night. The term “night stand Buddhists” has been used derogatorily, but to read ten pages of a Dharma book every evening is a wonderful way to increase understanding of the Buddhist teachings. There are some people who don’t belong to any center, but would put “Buddhist” if forced to designate a religious affiliation or had to choose someone to officiate at their funeral. In addition, there are serious meditators, serious scholars, and others who simply try to live their lives according to Buddhist principles. These categories are not mutually exclusive. There is considerable crossover among these categories and some people find themselves in many different categories. There are Buddhists who have a regular daily practice and those who don’t. There are Buddhists who go for intensive retreats for specific lengths of time every year and those who don’t. There are those who put Buddhism somewhere on a long list of interests in life and there are those who value Dharma above everything else in life. These differences contribute to the rich variety of Buddhist experience in North America.

We can also distinguish between the experiences of Buddhist laywomen and nuns. Buddhist laypeople can be quite invisible in American society, but it’s quite another thing to be very obviously a Buddhist, by wearing traditional robes for example. Being a Buddhist in the United States means being specially selected for random searches at airports with surprising frequency. A couple of weeks ago as I just walked into the bank, a woman holding a child and looked at me and gasped, “Oh, my God!” So, I just gave her a big smile. Another time a woman at the post office asked, “What are you?” And I thought, ‘Well, let’s see, a human...?,’ but I said, “I’m a Buddhist.” And she said, “Oh, no. We had those in China.” Of course, this can play both ways. Some people smile and put their palms together with respect. Others treat us as if we were the anti-Christ. Some people think we are absolutely mad. Others immediately gravitate to us and pour out their spiritual life. Some view monastics as a welcome alternative to the consumerism and violence of contemporary society, while others view us as a threat to their values and their chosen lifestyle. Some regard us as a blessing, representing peace and compassion, while others see us quite literally as a curse. In Hong Kong, among gamblers, it’s considered inauspicious to see a monk or a nun before the race begins. Once I was living in a monastery in Happy Valley in Hong Kong, right near the race track, and in the morning the gamblers would cover their eyes, because if they saw me it would bring them bad luck.

Expanding Our Worldviews

The issue of American Buddhist women in the international context also immediately raises gender issues that are sensitive and potentially explosive. Here I assume we can speak
freely, without surveillance from Homeland Security or the Bhikkhu Sangha police, but we need to acknowledge that raising questions of gender inequality immediately stirs the waters and makes some people feel very uncomfortable. Lest we assume that this applies only to Asia, let me assure you that sexism is alive and well in American Buddhism, not only among men but also among women. Admittedly, gender issues are important for Western women, but many American women assume that gender equity is something that has already been handled. Many American women still begin conversations by saying, “Well, I’m not a feminist, but....” The point of Buddhism is to be mindful, and if our eyes are open, we cannot help but see the sexism that’s all around us. The leading example of a Buddhist feminist activist is not American, but Taiwanese. Ven. Chao Hui, a Taiwanese bhikkhuni teacher, scholar, and writer, is little known outside of Taiwan, but she should be. She is not only the leading animal rights activist in Taiwan, but she is also a leading activist for women’s rights. She very publicly protested the eight special rules that subordinate nuns to monks in traditional Buddhist cultures and influence attitudes toward women throughout the Buddhist world. In 2002, in a nationally televised press conference in Taipei, Ven. Chao Hui had eight Buddhist nuns, monks, laywomen, and laymen literally ripped posters inscribed with the eight special rules off the wall. The fact that H.H. the Dalai Lama was scheduled to arrive at Chiang Kai Shek International Airport for his second-only visit to Taiwan did not go unnoticed. The Tibetans still have yet to approve the full ordination of women. For 25 years, they have been researching the topic.

I may disagree with Ven. Chao Hui’s methods, but I certainly admire her work. And I mention it to alert us to the comfortable assumptions we may make about our own level of awareness and the level of feminist awareness among Asian Buddhist women. We need to recognize the misconception that gender discrimination is a problem that exists in Asia and other parts of the world, but has already been solved in the egalitarian haven of North America. The technical term is “failing to recognize one’s own oppression.” We need to be aware of projecting backwards in time, too, and realize that advances for women in North America have been made only very recently and are still quite uncertain. We still have a lot of work to do and, in certain respects, we seem to be going backwards. For example, 190 nations have signed the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Women; the United States is the only country that has not yet signed. So far 172 nations have signed the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of the Child, but the United States is not among them, which is shameful and shocking. We need only look at the halls of government to see that women are by no means fairly represented in those bastions of power. We need to be aware that the stereotypes and preconceptions we may shelter about the lives and attitudes of western and Asian Buddhist women may be unfounded.

We need only look to Burma, where a 4’10” Buddhist laywoman, Aung San Suu Kyi, continues to risk her life to challenge one of the world’s most brutal military dictatorships, protesting its illegitimacy by remaining under house arrest for nearly 20 years now. She is the democratically elected head of state, but she has not been allowed to take her rightful position. And now Ven. Saccawati, a young Burmese bhikkhuni ordained in Sri Lanka has the entire Bhikkhu Sangha with their robes in knots because she dared to challenge the Burmese Buddhist establishment on the issue of full ordination for women. The monks cannot cope with this tiny nun’s act of claiming her right to be fully a nun, which they somehow see as so threatening to their authority. Most of these monks claim that the bhikkhuni lineage has died out and do not seem to realize that there are tens of thousands of bhikkhunis in Taiwan, Korea, and Vietnam. Most monks do not know that the bhikkhuni ordination has nothing to do with Mahayana
Buddhism, which they imagine will engulf their country as soon as nuns become ordained. They fail to recognize that, at the time of the Buddha himself, the decision to ordain women was considered a fairly radical move, something that threatened the patriarchal society of his day, which was preventing women from realizing their full spiritual potential. Ven. Saccawati has been detained by the government, her passport has been confiscated, and it is unclear what her fate will be. She is the first fully ordained nun who has dared to go back to Burma. The international community needs to be alert to this drama unfolding on the other side of the globe. After the first group of ten fully ordained bhikkhnis from Sri Lanka were ordained in Sarnath in 1996, they stayed for a year in India because they were afraid what might happen when they returned to Sri Lanka. But when they arrived at Colombo Airport a year later, instead of being greeted with tomatoes and rotten eggs, they were amazed to see thousands of people gathered to welcome them. People greeted them holding a golden parasol and led them in procession. This was a truly auspicious gathering…welcoming the bhikkhnis lineage back to Sri Lanka after almost a thousand years.

**Understanding North American Buddhist Women**

To understand women’s experiences of Buddhism in North America, I would like to introduce the three communities of North American Buddhists I mentioned earlier – Asian, Asian American, and non-Asian American Buddhists – and the issues that each of these groups are primarily concerned with, as I understand them. The first group, Asian Buddhists, consists of immigrants from Burma, Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, India, Korean, Laos, Mongolia, Nepal, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, Tibet, and Vietnam. This is also an immensely rich and diverse group of Buddhists, most of whom have immigrated to the United States since the 1970s. In addition to survival, Asian Buddhists in the United States are primarily concerned with cultural preservation, cultural identity, cultural continuity, and service to the community of immigrants from their homeland. They celebrate Buddhist festivals, invite monks to teach and support them, create a supportive community, and help resolve problems that arise in their communities. The temples serve a social as well as a religious function in the lives of the people. The laypeople create merit by supporting the temple and the monastics serve the lay community by teaching, chanting sutras and prayers, counseling, presiding at ceremonies, and serving as a focal point for community life. The major challenges facing Asian Buddhist communities are raising funds to build temples, getting permits to build temples, and issues of cultural adaptation: particularly racism, poverty, dealing with government agencies, and raising their children to understand and respect the Buddhist values they cherish.

The second group, Asian American Buddhists, dates back to the late 1800s, with the establishment of traditional Chinese and Japanese temples in California and Hawai`i. These Buddhist temples served the same functions and struggled with more or less the same issues that more recent Buddhist immigrant communities face. Issues of racism, poverty, and cultural alienation were even more acute in these early years. The Jodo Shinshu tradition is a prime example of cultural survival and adaptation: pews replaced tatami, hymnals replaced sutra scrolls, and married ministers replaced monks. When I first visited a Buddhist temple in Los Angeles in 1962, I found the children singing “Buddha loves me, this I know, for the sutras tell me so.” At the Buddha Day celebration in Honolulu in 1995, the Hawai`i Buddhist Council, which is entirely Japanese American, passed out rulers to the participants inscribed with “Buddha
Although these examples of cultural adaptation may strike us as slightly amusing today, I think it is extremely important to appreciate the hardships and discrimination that Buddhists experienced in the early years and still experience, if we are to understand the experiences of North American Buddhist women as a whole, because these were some of the early pioneers of Buddhism in North America.

The third group, non-Asian American Buddhists, has grown especially in the last 50 years. This is a catch-all category that includes Buddhists who do not identify themselves as part of either of the first two groups. This group is concerned with accessing Buddhist teachings, translating them, interpreting them, and reinterpreting them in light of their own experience. Buddhists in this group come from a wide variety of different ethnic, cultural, educational, social, and economic backgrounds – Euroamerican, African American, Latina American, Asian American, Samoan American, and multicultural. They come from a variety of social and economic strata, rich and poor, of all family and sexual orientations, but are primarily white, middle-class, and university educated. They belong to a variety of different Buddhist traditions – Zen, Tibetan, Vipassana, Pure Land, Soka Gakkai and so forth – and are involved in a variety of different practices, especially meditation, chanting, social service, and social activism.

**Creating a Sense of Solidarity**

The question is how we can create a sense of community among Buddhist women that extends beyond identifications and allegiances to particular traditions, ethnicities, lifestyles, teachers, or whatever. Solidarity is typically reached in the face of a common threat or enemy – invaders, terrorists, other communities, infidels, foreigners, and so on. Buddhist men are certainly not the enemy. They are as much victims of gender inequalities as women are, though they usually do not suffer from gender inequities in the same ways or to the same extent as women do. Buddhist women need to create an alternative way of fashioning a sense of solidarity, a way that does not alienate others or create enemies. To my mind, this will come from recognizing that Buddhist women have common goals and also experience similar difficulties. Understanding the experiences and the difficulties we have in common will help us generate a stronger sense of social justice that will spur us to action.

Despite our common goals and experiences, until recently Buddhist women have been divided by differences of language, social class, economics, culture, Buddhist tradition, and styles of practice. For some women, Buddhism is about meditation, or merit-making, or Buddhist studies. For some, Buddhism is social activism, whereas for others social activism is the very antithesis of Buddhist practice. Some Buddhist women live lives of destitution or sexual servitude, while others live lives of luxury and freedom. But we all have a common ancestor, and that is Mahaprajapati, the Buddha’s stepmother and auntie, who was the first Buddhist nun and a real pioneer. She showed tremendous courage in transgressing social boundaries to become a nun and we owe her our gratitude. And we all have a common ally in Ananda, arguably the first male Buddhist feminist, who pleaded women’s case for inclusion in the early Sangha. We also owe him a debt of gratitude. These pioneers started a social movement that opened the way for women to gain full inclusion and equal access to the Buddha’s teachings, but progress on the path has not always been easy. If we care about human suffering, we must be aware of the contradictions between theory and practice that exist in the Buddhist world. Although the Buddha’s teachings tell us that enlightenment has no gender, glaring gender inequalities still
exist in all Buddhist societies. This is just one of the issues in the Buddhist closet that requires openness and honesty.

**Recognizing Buddhist Ethnocentrism**

To get a sense of the inequalities that exist, we need to move out of our comfort zone and learn more about “the other,” in this case, other Buddhists. The three categories of Buddhists in North America distinguished earlier – Asian, Asian American, and non-Asian American – are an imperfect taxonomy, but they give us some insight into the rich diversity and complexity of North American Buddhism. Within each category, there are many groups and subgroups. These different Buddhist groups have much in common, but they are also different in some very fundamental ways, in terms of history, sociology, doctrine, language, food preferences, rituals, and other practices. I remember one time I was invited to speak at a Soto Zen temple on Oahu and afterwards they invited me for a lunch of teriyaki beef and beer. This is just one example of cultural differences. Although the majority of the estimated three million Buddhists in the United States are Asian, in attending a conference on American Buddhist women, it is doubtful that many people anticipated associating with Burmese, Thai, Cambodian, or Korean Buddhist women. Oddly, despite the fact that most American Buddhists are very liberal in their attitudes toward race, class, and gender, they still tend to hang out with people just like themselves and have very little knowledge or interest in the lives of Asian or Asian American Buddhists.

The best way to overcome this tacit, unconscious ethnocentrism is to acquaint ourselves with other Buddhists – other types of Buddhists. Not everyone is fortunate enough to travel to Asia and to live in a Buddhist monastery, but anyone can visit Asian Buddhist centers right here in North America. Every semester, my students at the University of San Diego visit Buddhist temples of two different traditions and they always find these experiences enriching. Often they find the ethnically Asian Buddhist temples especially interesting and welcoming. In some ways these temples may be more traditional than their counterparts in Asia. For example, walking into Wat Boubpharam in San Diego is like stepping into a Buddhist temple in Vietiene, Laos, only more so. The people in San Diego may offer Fritos and Coca-Cola as *dana* to the monks, but they wear traditional dress, practice ancient Buddhist traditions, and preserve Laotian customs that are being eclipsed by the tenacles of globalization in much of Asia. As it happens, the people in Laos may also offer Fritos and Coca-cola as *dana* to the monks.

**How Can I Help?**

Discrimination against Buddhist women is often simply a matter of ignorance. As a nun, I am often ignored and seated behind monks and laypeople or shooed off to serve myself lunch in the kitchen of an Anglo-American Dharma center, while the monks are served in royal style with crystal and silver. This is not an act of intentional cruelty. It simply displays ignorance of the fact that women have equal potential for enlightenment and that nuns have the same practice, the same discipline, the same precepts – often more – than the monks. When Buddhist conferences and publications give primary attention to the activities and ideas of men, this is also simply a lack of awareness, something that need to be corrected.

Addressing gender discrimination is a matter of education that require attention and activism on the part of Buddhist women and men. Many women in North American Buddhism
are still playing supportive roles to men’s activities – mostly very worthwhile activities, to be
sure – but without recognizing their own lack of empowerment, still under the illusion that they
are already fully liberated and gender equality is a non-issue. Many North American women are
also blissfully unaware of the needs of Buddhist women in other countries. For this reason, since
its inception the international Buddhist women’s movement, under the umbrella of Sakyadhita,
the International Association of Buddhist Women, focuses especially on calling attention to the
potential of Buddhist women, especially bringing about changes for the 99% of the world’s
Buddhist women who live in Asia – most without adequate nutrition, education, or health care.

Sakyadhita’s work in bringing to light the glaring inequalities that exist in Buddhist
societies, in direct contradiction to the Buddha’s own socially liberating teachings, has been
amazingly successful in raising uncomfortable questions about issues of gender and the gender
imbalance that exists in Buddhist societies. Remarkably, we’ve been able to do this without
arousing the ire of the monks, at least overtly. In many cases, we intentionally create allies among
men, both monks and laymen, which has been a very effective way of strategizing. The first step
toward correcting the gender imbalance in Buddhism is recognizing it – considering derogatory
references to women in the Buddhist texts, and looking at the discriminatory attitudes toward
Buddhist women in Buddhist temples and Dharma centers. The international Buddhist women’s
movement that was ignited by the Sakyadhita conference in Bodhgaya in 1987 has brought
together thousands of Buddhist women from all around the world, and spawned an international
network for research, publications, retreat facilities, and a variety of social action projects. This
movement has drawn attention to the embarrassing fact that until recently women have had
virtually no voice in Buddhist institutions, and that the lives of many Buddhist women are filled
with poverty, inequality, and many kinds of suffering.

Despite its meager resources, the international Buddhist women’s movement is a
pioneering effort in crosscultural understanding and one of the most far-reaching grassroots
movements in the world. Today there is a group of Buddhist women superstars and each one of
them is bringing something very special to this movement – some in quiet ways, some in more
public ways. This international movement is a genuinely participatory alliance that can help
create a vibrant future for Buddhist women. To benefit from this exchange, we need to be
openhearted, sincere, and keen to learn. We need to be sensitive to the fact that Asian and
Western Buddhist women are often coming from very different places with different interests and
priorities. Even though Buddhist women in traditional Asian cultures have rarely played roles of
religious leadership, they have great respect for the Dharma. It is the center of their lives. Their
primary concerns are survival, education, healthcare, and caring for others. Women in Western
cultures are generally new to Buddhism; they are busy learning, interpreting, and figuring out
how to adapt the teachings in new cultural settings. They are concerned with meditation,
psychology, sexuality, and personal development. By joining together, Asian and Western
women can learn from each other and enhance the tremendous potential for good that Buddhist
women embody.

The international Buddhist women’s movement deserves support especially for the work
it has done to inspire change and improve conditions for the world’s disadvantaged Buddhist
women. And we need to do more. Sakyadhita gets invitations to attend international conferences,
prayer breakfasts, interfaith dialogues, contemplative gatherings, panel discussions, and peace
marches, and we need to make time to participate in these events. The world is in such a mess,
Buddhist women need to become more active as a force for change both nationally and
internationally. There is no time to carve out one’s own private domain, whether in the monastery, the studio, or the university. The American mantra of taking care of oneself contradicts the Buddhist mantra of caring for others. If we hope to rescue humanity from the collision course we are on, we desperately need to work together. We need to reach beyond our individual affiliations to speak with united voices on issues of Buddhist practice and social justice. We need to ask: Where are the Buddhist Mother Teresas? Where are the American Aung San Suu Kyis?

Buddhist women need to create solidarity, not only to benefit Buddhist women, but because Buddhist women have so much to share with the world. We need to create solidarity to be able to speak out effectively against social injustices and to advocate on behalf of the millions of Buddhist women who have no voice, many of whom live under oppressive family or political structures. By educating ourselves, we gain a greater understanding of each other and find common ground to stand up for our values, in a spirit of peace and loving kindness. In a sense, every Buddhist center is a peace center – or should be.

Together on Common Ground

In some ways Asian and Western Buddhists are coming from very different places on far more than gender issues. As the anthropologist Melford Spiro says, Asian adherents generally approach Buddhism either as a means of merit-making toward a better rebirth, as a source of protection and blessing, or as a means to achieve liberation. By contrast, western adherents tend to approach Buddhism either as philosophy, psychotherapy, or as a spur to activism toward building a more enlightened society. These distinctive foci are merely tendencies, but these varied approaches reflect the different cultural backgrounds of Asian and western Buddhists.

The western therapeutic approach is nothing to be trivialized, of course. The Buddha’s teachings can legitimately be called psychology. Lama Thubten Yeshe used to say, “We are all in Lord Buddha’s mental hospital.” This may explain why hundreds of psychologists, psychiatrists, and psychotherapists in North America are borrowing from the Buddhist teachings in their writings and practices, though often without acknowledging their sources. Nor is a focus on merit-making something to be trivialized, since in the Buddhist’s own words the achievement of liberation, whether in this lifetime or in the future, depends on the accumulation of merit. From a traditional perspective, as valuable as Buddhism is for coping with the difficulties of life, this focus does not, technically speaking, qualify as Dharma, since true Dharma practice is not concerned with the things of this life. To truly Dharma, our practice must be concerned with issues of the highest concern: loving kindness, compassion, and the development of wisdom. So how do we justify a concern with gender issues? Because gender discrimination is a problem for Buddhist women and an impediment to Dharma practice for both women and men. It is a source of great suffering. Since loving kindness, compassion, and wisdom are the issues of highest concern, we must practice these virtues to resolve the sufferings that result from gender discrimination.

Asian and western Buddhist women share much in common and also have much to learn from each other. At first glance our situations appear vastly different, but when we look more closely, we find that things are not as different as they may seem. Buddhist women everywhere share common values and are concerned about the welfare of society. There are many exemplary women in Asia, such as Ven. Zhengyen in Taiwan, who have made great contributions to disaster
relief, elder care, hospice care, medical care, and relieving the miseries of the poor. In this connection, we cannot ignore the value of having a dedicated group of monastic women whose time and energies are 100% committed to working full-time for the Dharma. In the 20th century in western countries, social welfare was the responsibility of government, but that is rapidly changing under uncompassionate neoconservatism, so Buddhist women cannot afford to be complacent. We need to be aware that many aspects of liberal democracy are being threatened in the United States today that could spell trouble for Buddhists and passivists.

Buddhist women have demonstrated their compassion for the needy, their organizational abilities, and their dedication to social activism, in a wide range of areas. Buddhist nuns and laywomen in Asia are renowned for their contributions to monastic life, contemplation, publishing, teaching, Buddhist studies programs, children’s programs, healthcare, elder care, and hospice work. Buddhist women in Taiwan and Korea are especially active. Buddhist women in North America have been active in establishing and maintaining Buddhist centers and in social welfare activities, though generally under the leadership of men. Their unique contributions have been in the areas of non-profit organization, peace activism, anti-nuclear demonstrations, prison ministry, hospice programs, and environmental activism. In the field of education, western women currently enjoy educational opportunities roughly equal to men, including higher education, whereas the fortunes of women in Buddhist societies vary widely. For example, many Buddhist women in Cambodia, India, Laos, Mongolia, Nepal, and Tibet lack access to Buddhist education or even to general education, sometimes even to basic literacy. Buddhist women in Taiwan, Korea, and Malaysia, by contrast, are leaders of Buddhist education programs for adults, children, and college students, all generously funded by Buddhist laypeople.

Buddhist women’s experiences in Asia and the West are remarkably diverse, but there are common threads: Buddhist institutions are still largely patriarchal, with women largely in supportive roles. Financial and sexual exploitation occur, and there is little transparency or channel for redress, so sexual predators still continue unchecked, some in the role of Dharma teachers. Many Buddhist women still deny that they are feminists, and so there is a critical need for greater awareness. As awareness increases, women are quietly challenging patriarchy, unequal power structures, and the assumption that women should play subordinate roles in Buddhism. As women begin to work for change, they will significantly influence the way Buddhism is understood and practiced in North America and internationally.

At this point, I would like to issue a call to action on the part of North American Buddhists to work for social justice, beginning with support for Buddhist women’s aspirations to achieve equal opportunities for secular and religious education, ordination, healthcare, and economic self-sufficiency. We still need to confront some uncomfortable issues. What are Buddhist women doing to combat sex trafficking? Even one woman or child trafficked is too many. Sexual slavery afflicts Buddhist women far out of proportion to our numbers, as we see in Nepal, a Hindu kingdom, where 75 percent of the women trafficked are Buddhists. What are Buddhists doing to contest the Patriot Act, which threatens all minorities, including religious minorities? We need to reflect carefully on the dangers of relinquishing constitution rights, before the IRS comes after our non-profits. How are our local Dharma centers helping young people prepare their cases for conscientious objector status? Unfortunately, the young people in our lives may need these files sooner than we imagine. To those of you who are already working to address these significant issues, I would like to offer my heartfelt admiration and gratitude.