

## Standing Outside the Door

Red-robed young women, their heads shaved, their faces eager, animate the slides projected in the darkened hall. Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, the british-born Tibetan Buddhist nun who lived for twelve years in a cave in the Himalayas, describes the nunnery in northern India that she has created for these novitiate nuns. In Tibetan Buddhism, Jetsunma says, nuns are ordained only as novices. Someone asks what that means. “The novice ordination,” she explains, “allows you to come and stand outside the door.”

And what is “inside the door?”

“Full ordination,” Tenzin tells us, which brings with it physical support, education, spiritual training and full responsibility as religious officiants and teachers—opportunities for development and maturity of spiritual attainment that are now available only to men.

Young women who have given their lives to the Dharma wait outside the door as the years and decades pass, until they are old women and die still wearing the novice robes, still treated as beginners. With the exception of three Mahayana traditions—the Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese—that offer women full ordination, thousands of Buddhist nuns are relegated to this limbo. This includes the Theravada renunciants in their white robes, pink robes, almost never the brown of the Buddha robe worn by the fully ordained.

Is it because I am an American that this image causes me almost physical pain? Didn't we in the United States enforce the same inequality for generations, preventing women from walking through the door to full citizenship? Only after eight decades of determined struggle by a dedicated movement of women and men did our government finally give women the right to vote. That happened in 1920, less than a hundred years ago.

When I think of the female novices still standing outside the door in India, in Tibet, in Thailand, in Burma, I remember a young woman from Mongolia whom I noticed at a Buddhist women's conference. Beautiful, with lustrous black hair down her back and shining eyes, she was dressed in an ankle-length red robe. Not able to speak any of the languages used at the conference, she remained mute and marginal, a figure at the edge of the proceedings. I had noticed her, wondered how she had managed to get there and what kind of experience she was having.

When I think of her now, she serves as a messenger, helping me recognize my complicity in the traditions that repress women like this. For thirty years I have participated in Theravada Buddhism, doing my vipassana practice. Because in this country many of us have stepped away from the traditional Theravada perspective to create the "vipassana movement," we don't often look toward the East. Now and then our centers host a famous monk from Asia or ask us to support Western monks creating a males-only monastery in California—but our women teachers tend to be Western, with the privilege and self-assurance of Westerners. In our palace of denial, we are comfortable and protected, as the young Shakyamuni was in his castle, from seeing the conditions that prevail in the larger Buddhist world. Few look toward the suffering of Buddhist women in Asia, nor do we think of the Asian nuns as sisters whose fate intertwines with our own.

Many among us Western practitioners protest the suppression of democracy and abuse of Buddhist monks in Burma, many of us participate in actions to preserve the spiritual tradition of Chinese-dominated Tibet. How many of us feel as passionately about the plight of women in our spiritual tradition, or look at the suffering within the Buddhist world that is caused by myopia, rigidity, misogyny, the societal view of women as lesser beings and the traditional institutions' resistance to change? Who is the divine messenger who will return us to the spirit of our path, where all are equally blessed with Buddhature and have equal rights to training that brings spiritual fulfillment?

After years of knowing about Sakyadhita, the International Association of Buddhist Women, in 2006 I decided to attend its conference in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. In the echoing halls and conference rooms of a majestic Chinese Buddhist temple outside the city, I spent five days with women from twenty countries. It was here that I first saw the Mongolian nun and began to be fascinated by her. People like her, I realized, Asian Buddhist women, with the support of their Western sisters, are creating a movement to open the door to the equality of women in Buddhism.

Being in the presence of these women made it clear to me that the denial of full ordination has wide-reaching consequences in the lives of millions of women and girls in the developing world. In Thailand, for instance—where the vast majority of citizens adhere to Theravada Buddhism, the Buddhist establishment has tremendous influence over the people, and the government supports the religion—the status of Thai women in robes matches the low status of women in the larger society. The maechees (Thai women renunciants) are usually housed in monasteries, but many essentially function as cooks and servants while monks are supported and venerated.

Thailand, a developing country, is racked by the social ills of prostitution, sex trafficking, the rapid spread of AIDS/HIV and child sexual slavery. Poverty plus the lesser valuation of women push many into prostitution. Fully ordained and educated nuns could change the lives of multitudes of women by sheltering them from harm and training them for vocations other than the sex trade. But as it is, the female renunciants, denied full ordination and given only minimal lay and government support, remain disempowered.

So what is this Sakyadhita that offers such a crucial forum for these women? In 1987, Sakyadhita's founders, among them Karma Lekshe Tsomo, an American woman in Tibetan Buddhist robes, and Ayya Khema, a German-born woman in Theravada Buddhist robes, seeing that their chosen traditions denied ordination to

women, reached out to Buddhist women throughout the world to create an organization to address this inequality. They knew that the Buddha himself had ordained women, and so they called their organization Sakyadhita, which means “Daughters of the Buddha.”

The first Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist women took place that same year in Bodhgaya, India. The Dalai Lama spoke at this first gathering and gave his blessing to the newly created organization. Every two years since then, a Sakyadhita conference has been held in an Asian country to unite Buddhist women worldwide and to work toward gender equity in the Buddhist traditions.

Women from over twenty countries, including Nepal, Bangladesh, Tibet, Bhutan, Korea, Sri Lanka, India, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, Mongolia, Germany, the United States and Canada, attended the conference in Kuala Lumpur. One young Thai scholar from Chiang Mai, Kulavir P. Pipat, mapped out the obstacles to the full ordination of women in Thailand, emphasizing the “closed-mindedness of conservative Thai Buddhists,” which includes beliefs that women are “polluted and inferior beings who cannot attain enlightenment.” She described the 1928 law passed by the Supreme Sangha Council under the National Bureau of Buddhism that forbids any monk to ordain a woman as a nun or a novice nun.

Pipat ended her talk with a message to us all. She called for action, asking people to challenge the “hierarchy and patriarchy” in Thai Buddhism. Both visible and invisible obstacles barring Buddhist women from spiritual development in Thai Buddhism, she urged, should be reviewed, adjusted and/or eliminated. She called for a policy that integrates education, social action and public policy reform and rallied Buddhist women “to organize themselves to empower and support each other.”

Efforts at such organization and empowerment have been going on for twenty years, spearheaded by two extraordinary divine messengers. Karma Lekshe

Tsomo, the prime mover in Sakyadhita, works to benefit Tibetan novices in India and Tibet, establishing nunneries, teaching the young women to read, and raising money to support them. She has authored and edited a small shelf of books drawing together the thinking of female Buddhist scholars and activists throughout the world on issues affecting Buddhist women.

Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, at Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery near Dharamsala, India, labors to equip her fifty novices for full participation in Tibetan Buddhist life. Given a firm grounding in traditional practices and texts, they practice the art of debating—a staple among monks but not previously undertaken by women. They study Tibetan and English, and, when ready, they enter the years-long retreats that offer the depth of awareness that distinguishes solid practitioners.

While powerful forces stand firm against the change, it seems clear that the full ordination of women will one day be accepted throughout Asia. It will be difficult to hold back the growing population of fully matured women practitioners. The struggle to ordain women in Theravada Buddhist Sri Lanka took many years and was finally successful, not only because of the efforts of women but because some courageous monks were willing to risk their own positions in the hierarchy by giving full ordination to nuns. There are now several hundred ordained nuns and novices in Sri Lanka. Thailand, with only about twenty at this point, looks to Sri Lanka as a model.

I think back to the final night of the conference in Malaysia. At 4:00 a.m. I got up to pack to be ready for a dawn bus to the airport. In a large shadowy room, 150 women were sleeping on mats on the floor. I went to a corner in the half-dark to pack up my things, stuffing my bag full of the gifts people had generously showered on me—a plaque, an ornamental tea holder, packets of Malaysian coffee. But as I pulled the zipper closed, my bag gave way, opening like a wide mouth, and out spilled my gifts.

Oh no, what was I to do, here in the dead of night in a roomful of sleeping women, with no access to anything to fix the bag? As I stared at the mess on the floor before me, I felt like crying.

Then, out from the shadows appeared the young Mongolian woman in her red robe. Without a word, she squatted before me on the other side of the bag, and the two of us struggled with bits of string, tape and a length of rope she produced to pull the bag back together.

She worked with great concentration as her fingers and mine cooperated in pulling, tightening, tying. When we had finished, she sat back on her heels and gave me a gentle satisfied smile. I smiled back, touched by her efforts to shore me up, to join with me in rebinding my bag, to help me salvage my gifts. Putting my hands together, I bowed in gratitude to her. Then she stood and melted back into the shadows. Appreciating the competence and sense of hope she had offered, I reflected on her and the other novice nuns. If allowed to fully enter the door, my Mongolian friend and her sisters would surely continue to practice such kindness, to help preserve the gifts of our traditions and pass them on, to bring inspiration as divine messengers to many generations to come.

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