A dramatic increase of interest in the topic of women in Buddhism has generated a wave of new scholarship. While some studies focus on women in specific cultures or eras, this is the first comprehensive introduction to Buddhist women overall. Tracing the path of Buddhism’s historical and cultural development, the book first discusses women who feature in the life of the Buddha in India—his mother, stepmother, former wife, and earliest female disciples—then introduces the lives, challenges, and achievements of women around the world at key moments in Buddhist history. In recounting the stories of the struggles and achievements of realized and ordinary women, this book explores the ways in which Buddhism has been liberating for women, even as it has often been used to reinforce women’s subordination within patriarchal social and institutional structures. Buddha Śākyamuni taught a path of purification and mental transformation for all sentient beings but Buddhist women’s experiences have often been overlooked and women’s access to the Buddha’s teachings has been limited. Today, Buddhist scholars and practitioners are rethinking the interconnections between religion, culture, and society from women’s perspectives. They are raising new questions about the status of women in Buddhist institutions and recapturing Buddhist women’s stories as models for spiritual and social liberation. This book illuminates their journeys, full of challenges and promise.
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INTRODUCTION

Why Study Women in the Buddhist Traditions?

This introduction explains the complexity of the topic of women in the world’s Buddhist traditions and women’s many diverse roles in these traditions. From India to Japan, Sri Lanka to Russia, each Buddhist tradition has its unique history, culture, religious life, social mores, and gender conventions. Recent interest in Buddhism globally has brought increased scrutiny of gender inequalities in Buddhist societies and institutions, and given rise to a transnational movement advocating gender equity in education, monastic ordination, and society. Scholars and practitioners are uncovering the history of women in Buddhism and critically analyzing the texts and unexamined assumptions that perpetuate myths of women’s inferiority. Originating in India, diverse Buddhist traditions have developed over a period of twenty-five centuries, with branches extending to almost every corner of the globe and evolving in response to multiple social, political, and religious influences. Tracing Buddhism’s unique cultural adaptations from women’s perspectives is a central objective of the book.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

• Why is it important to study about women in the Buddhist traditions?

• How do the various traditions within Buddhism define “liberation” and “the full awakening of a Buddha” differently? Are these goals defined in terms of gender? If so, in what way does this affect women?

• Is gender relevant to awakening? Why or why not?
CHAPTER ONE

Women in Early Indian Buddhism

This chapter discusses scriptural accounts of the Buddha’s life, including his birth, renunciation, awakening, and many years of teaching, highlighting the prominent roles that women have played at every stage. Key among these is the story of Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī, the Buddha’s aunt and foster mother, who organized hundreds of women wishing to follow the Buddha’s example and boldly put forward her request to join the monastic order. The Buddha’s initial reluctance to admit her to the order, the eight special rules he imposed upon her, and the predictions he made about the potentially damaging consequences of admitting women to the order were to have a long-lasting impact on the subsequent development of Buddhist women’s history, even though these passages were almost certainly later accretions. Another key narrative is the account of King Aśoka’s daughter Bhikkhunī Saṅghamittā, who traveled from India to Sri Lanka to transmit the lineage of full ordination—a lineage that would later be further transmitted to East Asia.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

• What are some possible reasons the Buddha is said to have hesitated in admitting women to the saṅgha? Why did he eventually agree?

• Who are the major female figures, and what roles do they play?

• What are some of the ways women are portrayed in the texts of various Buddhist traditions?

• What patterns of representation of women seem to be common in these texts, and how do they play out in the lives of Buddhist women in the past and today?

• Do you think that women’s historical exclusion from Buddhist institutions has led women to primarily focus on contemplative practices, or are women naturally more inclined to contemplative practices?

• What can be learned from Bhikkhu Anālayo’s analysis of the various narratives of the founding of the bhikkhunī saṅgha and the report that the Buddha required nuns to adhere to the eight weighty rules (gurudharmas)?

• How do notions of gender affect the practice, participation, and achievements of Buddhist women?

• How is the notion of gender fluidity understood and represented in Buddhist scriptures?
CHAPTER TWO
Buddhist Women in South and Southeast Asia

As followers of the Theravāda branch of Buddhism, women in South and Southeast Asian Buddhist societies have much in common. Yet, due to their varied cultural, social, and political histories, the experiences of women in Theravāda Buddhist communities in Bangladesh, Burma, Cambodia, India, Laos, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Vietnam are all distinct. The story begins with Sanghamittā’s transmission of the bhikkhunī lineage of full ordination for women from India to Sri Lanka in the third century BCE, and continues to the present day, with controversies over the legitimacy of contemporary bhikkhunī ordinations. Sri Lanka made history by reintroducing the bhikkhunī lineage after an absence of almost a thousand years and, although the lineage is not officially recognized, the bhikkunīs are widely appreciated. This courageous initiative has set a precedent for other Theravāda aspirants.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

• What are some distinctive features and common themes about Buddhist women’s practice in South and Southeast Asian societies?

• In what ways are women neglected or subordinated in the particular Buddhist traditions they practice? In what ways do women consider themselves fortunate?

• What are some of the major challenges that face women in South and Southeast Asian Buddhist societies?

• How have conditions changed for Buddhist women in Sri Lanka? What factors may help explain these changes? What obstacles remain?
CHAPTER THREE
Buddhist Women in East Asia

When Buddhism was introduced to China in the early centuries BCE, women were among its earliest and most devout followers. Some women opted to become nuns even before the arrival of the texts of monastic discipline (vinaya) that described the ordination procedures and the codes of conduct they were expected to observe. As the nuns gained access to these texts, they realized that the ordination procedure for nuns mentioned bhikkhunī preceptors. Bhikkhunīs were invited from Sri Lanka and arrived in southern China in the fifth century to conduct the first bhikkhunī ordination. Thereafter, nuns became a vibrant sector of Chinese Buddhist society. Gradually, this bhikkhunī lineage was transmitted to Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, and other countries, where it has continued to flourish to the present day, benefitting Buddhist devotees in myriad ways.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
• How did full ordination for women develop in China?
• What are some unifying features of Buddhist women’s experience in East Asia?
• In what ways are the experiences of women distinct in China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan? What social and cultural factors help explain these distinctions?
CHAPTER FOUR

Buddhist Women in Inner Asia

Buddhism traveled to Tibet over the Himalayas in the seventh century, and was subsequently transmitted to Bhutan, Mongolia, and Russia. During a process of transmission and adaptation that lasted centuries, women became devout practitioners of Buddhism and actively supported its development. The texts that were integral to this process of transmission include many images of awakening in female form that inspired women to achieve liberation and numerous biographies record the achievements of eminent female practitioners. Although historically women were excluded from formal Buddhist education, in recent decades in Tibet and the Tibetan diaspora, increasing numbers of nuns and laywomen have gained access to philosophical and contemplative studies. In 2017, after decades of intensive study, a group of twenty nuns in India were the first ever to obtain the prestigious geshe degree, the highest level of scholarly achievement in philosophy. Despite their achievements, although opportunities for Buddhist studies and meditation practice have expanded significantly, women in the Tibetan tradition still lack access to full ordination—an imbalance that is mirrored in other social inequalities.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

• What is the function of the images of awakened women in the Vajrayāna Buddhist tradition?

• How can idealized images of enlightened female figures be reconciled with the social reality of gender bias in Buddhist societies?

• What historical and political developments distinguish the lives of Buddhist women in Tibet and Mongolia from the lives of Buddhist women in Bhutan and the Indian Himalayas?

• What is the status of women in the Buddhist republics of Russia?
CHAPTER FIVE

Buddhist Women in the West

In recent history, as Buddhism has spread to regions outside of Asia, women have played significant roles as organizers, teachers, and translators in the process of interpreting Buddhism in non-Asian societies. Buddhism is notable for historically adapting to local customs and worldviews and now, similarly, the teachings are being transmitted in a complex process of acculturation to contemporary Western cultural environments. One question that arises in these new landscapes is the relevance of celibate monasticism, for although monasteries were crucibles for the scholarship and dedicated practice that were integral to preserving Buddhist traditions, these typically male-dominated institutions may seem anachronistic today. Another key question is the relevance of preserving traditions that are decidedly patriarchal and hierarchical, in contrast both to the egalitarian foundations of the Buddhist traditions and to contemporary democratic ideals. To address these questions, researchers and practitioners are turning an analytical lens on Buddhist history, philosophy, and sociology using contemporary methodologies, including feminist theory.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

• How are Western women participating in and contributing to the global transmission and transformation of Buddhism?

• How are Western women interpreting and practicing Buddhism differently than women in Asian societies?

• Can current concerns about the subordinate status of women in Buddhism be interpreted as a colonialist project, a “women’s rights agenda,” or a “Western imposition”? Why or why not?

• What efforts are being made to create global solidarity among Buddhist women?
CHAPTER SIX

Women’s Ordination across Cultures

Opportunities for the ordination of women have understandably become a conspicuous issue in contemporary discussions of Buddhism and gender in both Asia and the West. The ordination question is complex, requiring textual analysis and attention to diverse interpretations of monastic law (vinaya) and history. The lineage of full ordination for women continues and is experiencing a revival in Mahāyāna communities in China, South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, and Vietnam, but was never officially established in Tibet, Bhutan, or Mongolia. In the Theravāda traditions of South and Southeast Asia, where the bhikkhunī lineage no longer exists, nuns may hold eight, nine, or ten precepts, are not considered members of the saṅgha, and receive less support than monks. Opinion is divided about whether and how to establish the bhikkhunī lineage and the reasons for either position are often culture-specific and privately expressed.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

• Why is a life of renunciation attractive to some women in Buddhist societies? What are the advantages and disadvantages of monastic life from different Asian women’s perspectives? Does the same logic apply to women in Western societies?

• Why is access to full ordination for women considered important for Buddhist women?

• Why do some Buddhists, including some nuns, regard full ordination as unimportant?

• Why is full ordination as a bhikkhunī available in some Buddhist traditions and not available in others? What are some reasons opponents of the full ordination of women give for opposing it? What are some of the arguments proposed in support of full ordination of women?

• How was full ordination brought to Buddhist nuns in Nepal? Who were the major figures?

• How was full ordination brought to Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka? Who were the major figures?

• What important work is being done by mae cheeses in Thailand, and who are some prominent mae cheeses?

• Why was Australian monk Ajahn Brahm dismissed from his Thai order for giving full ordination to four nuns in Australia?
• What is the ordination situation of Mahāyāna Buddhist nuns in China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and Vietnam? What are the advantages of women’s access to full ordination in these traditions?

• What has been the situation of nuns in the Tibetan Buddhist traditions, and how is it changing?
CHAPTER SEVEN
Grassroots Revolution: Buddhist Women and Social Activism

Buddhists has been active in addressing issues of social concern at least from the time of King Aśoka (third century BCE) and arguably since the time of the Buddha. A new wave of more visible social activism, dubbed Socially Engaged Buddhism, has become popular throughout the world. Belying the preconception that Buddhist practice is simply a solitary contemplative endeavor, many Buddhists today recognize that enlightened platitudes are insufficient to tackle the enormous challenges facing society today and hence have made efforts to apply Buddhist teachings to alleviate social sufferings on a practical level. Efforts include, for example, teaching meditation in prisons, implementing solutions to poverty and homelessness, and creating education programs, hospice programs, nonviolence training programs, and women’s shelters. Buddhist women have been leading supporters of social welfare efforts for decades and are increasingly becoming outspoken proponents of strategies to correct social injustices on a structural level as well.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

• Why do some Buddhists feel that social activism is incompatible with the Buddhist goal of awakening whereas others believe it is compatible?

• Who are some of the most famous social activists among Buddhist women?

• To what extent is the movement for more active social engagement of women in the Buddhist world helping raise their profile?

• What role does education play in improving conditions for Buddhist women? What kinds of education would be most helpful for transforming women’s roles in society?
CONCLUSION

In recent decades, the emergence of a vibrant global Buddhist women’s movement has resulted in remarkable changes for women in Buddhist societies. Despite opposition among conservatives, calls for the full and equitable participation of women in all aspects of Buddhism have led to a rethinking of patriarchal structures and reams of new research into the history and contributions of women in Buddhist cultures. The project of advancing Buddhist women’s welfare is multidimensional, ongoing, and often uphill, but has yielded many tangible benefits for women, including improved education, greater representation, higher social status, and the establishment of bhikkhuni saṅghas in Indonesia, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Further critical reflection is needed to understand fully the ramifications of gender inequalities in Buddhist structures of power and authority, but the progress women have made to date is heartening. Creating solidarity among Buddhist women internationally has linked scholars, practitioners, artists, and activists across cultures and around the globe for cooperation and mutual benefit. Convergences of Buddhist and feminist streams of thought and action are increasingly bearing fruit.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

• In what ways can Buddhism be socially or spiritually liberating for women, and in what ways could it be limiting or potentially oppressive?

• Are women and men equal in Buddhism? Considering the rhetoric of equality in Buddhist discourse, are women equitably represented?

• Compare and contrast the roles and potential of women in the Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions today. In what ways are women’s experiences similar in these traditions, and in what ways are they different?
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karma Lekshe Tsomo is Professor of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of San Diego and editor of Buddhist Feminisms and Femininities and the author of Into the Jaws of Yama, Lord of Death: Buddhism, Bioethics, and Death.