

Religious / Community Leaders

- The main task of the Buddhist monastic community is to be exemplars of the *Vinaya*, preserving and practicing the teachings of The Buddha and offering these teachings to the lay community.
- Fully ordained monks, nuns, and significant lay spiritual leaders are highly regarded by their communities and are called upon to teach the *Dharma* as well as to conduct funeral rites and memorial ceremonies, and to offer spiritual support to the sick and bereaved.

Monastic Life and Social Structures

In the beginning, Buddhism was not hierarchical or rigidly structured. At its root was a self-governing body of individuals, each of whom was theoretically equal and focused on his or her own salvation while compassionately mindful of human beings. The *sangha* has its origins in a group of followers/disciples who renounced their previous worldly life to wander with The Buddha and learn by listening to his teachings. After the Buddha's death, his disciples continued to live together, wandering from place to place, and living off the alms and food offered by the local community. Periodically, when there was a full and new moon (the *uposatha* days), the disciples gathered to reaffirm their sense of community and goals by reciting their foundational beliefs, such as the Threefold Refuge and the codes of conduct. The custom of spending the rainy season in one specific place in a study retreat (*vassa*) gradually led to the settling of the community.

As soon as Buddhist monks began to form into groups, there was a need for rules to be developed (as set out in the *Vinaya Pitaka*) and also for some form of hierarchy to keep order, to enforce the rules, and to maintain religious continuity within the community. This hierarchy was, and continues to be, largely based on seniority.

There is thus no single superior authority or leader in the Buddhist world. Each school has a leader or group of leaders who provide guidance to that specific community as a whole. The degree and nature of internal hierarchy varies significantly between schools and from country to country.

The community (*sangha*) is considered one of the “three jewels” of Buddhism. (The other two are Buddha's teachings [*dharma*] and Buddha himself.) Originally the *sangha* was a term describing the Buddhist monastic community, which traditionally was composed of monks, nuns, lay men, and lay women. Today, the term *sangha* now refers to the Buddhist community as a whole.

While there are significant differences between schools and countries—especially with respect to more recent sects and western Buddhist organizations—in more traditional or conservative schools of Buddhism,

and especially in Asia, there is generally a very distinct hierarchy in the Buddhist communities throughout world. At the top of this social hierarchy are Buddhist monks and ordained leaders and teachers. Usually, monks are the most respected, valued, and often venerated in the community. Monks tend to live together in Buddhist monasteries where they teach the students. At times they will travel to establish new communities and teach beyond the boundaries of their monasteries and countries. They are dedicated to teaching, meditation, and chanting prayers in the monastery and beyond at times.

The next strata in the traditional Buddhist social hierarchy, with a few exceptions, are the nuns who usually play secondary roles or are assistants to the monks. Traditionally, in most Buddhist sects, they tended to handle the less responsible jobs in the monastery or in their own nunneries; however, they too were dedicated to living a life of meditation and prayers. It is important to note that, as discussed in the previous section on women in Buddhism and the section later on in this resource on the ordination of monks and nuns, the role of women, especially in Western and modern Buddhist communities, is changing significantly. In some sects, there is little or no distinction between males and females in their roles as leaders and teachers within their organizations, congregations, and centres. As well, in Vajrayana and Theravada Buddhist sects where full ordination of nuns had disappeared, there is a trend towards revival of *bhikshunis* or fully ordained nuns.

The third layer in the hierarchy of traditional Buddhist sects and communities is the lay community. As lay, Buddhists hold jobs and seek ways of making a living in a variety of professions or vocations like any other community. While they learn about Buddhist principles and practices, they spend significantly less time in meditation and prayers. Also, while *nirvana* is possible for any person, in most, but not all, Buddhist sects, only monks are seen as being able to attempt to achieve *nirvana*. (Pure Land Buddhists schools are an example of a sect for which monasticism is not required to achieve *nirvana*.) Lay Buddhists are to strive instead for a higher existence in their next life. They still follow the Noble Eightfold Path and help others, in their efforts to accumulate good *karma*. In this sense, lay Buddhists are seen as working toward nirvana because they are on a path toward a future life in which they may be able to achieve *nirvana*.

Traditionally, Buddhist pilgrims are at the bottom of the social hierarchy. They are Buddhist believers from diverse places who travel to various places in search of knowledge. Their destinations include significant religious places such a Buddha's birthplace or the sites of famous stupas. The pilgrims who are travelling usually go to Buddhist monasteries where they may stay and learn about the Buddhist principles and the religion in greater depth.

There has always been a form of interdependence between monks and nuns, and the lay members of the community. The monastics depend on the lay community for material support, while the laity depends on monastics for religious instruction and guidance. In these roles, they are mutually interdependent and supportive and keep each other in check. The laity provide

the conditions that allow monks and nuns to stay pure because unless the monastics are regulated and pure, the laity's gifts will not provide good *karma*. In turn, monastics serve as mentors, teachers, and models for the lay community of what a religious life is and what is good and beneficial for the achievement of liberation from *samsara*.

As Buddhism developed and grew from groups of wandering ascetics to stable organizations and established physical structures, it was always integrally connected and shaped by the cultures and communities within which these organizations and structures were built. One of the earliest documented Buddhist activities that included lay participants were those that occurred at *stupas*. *Stupas* became sites for pilgrims to visit, and for celebratory events and festivals involving locals and visitors in multifaceted events that served to entertain, inform, and generate merit. Gradually, more and more monasteries were built, near the location of *stupa* but also in many other locations in South Asia. As Buddhism became established throughout Asia, the monastery became the fundamental institutional structure.

A Buddhist monastery provided many things to the local lay community. It provided the lay community with spiritual guidance, a place to worship, religious rituals, and a means of earning merit. Lay community members could also be active forming social clubs that planned and arranged pilgrimages, met to chant or copy *sutras*, or carried out projects for the benefit of the collective.

Buddhist monasteries also became a place to seek help and good fortune. People visited monasteries to ask for healing for family members, for help finding a marriage partner or a job, to ensure the birth of a healthy child or grandchild, or to ask for success in meeting life challenges or a range of other things that would benefit one's life.

Monasteries also served other social needs. They helped determine good dates for weddings, foretold fortunes, and, in some cases, provided political clout or mediation between locals and the government. In addition to sponsoring festivals, they also sometimes held large feasts to which all the locals were invited to participate, paying a donation only if they were able.

Monasteries became multifaceted providers of services and social and community centres. They sometimes served as hostels and inns, offering beds and meals for travelers and pilgrims. Others provided essential social services such as schools, orphanages, health care facilities, food and shelter for the homeless, facilities for the elderly, and even animal rescue. Some helped plan and undertake public works projects that improved the local community and infrastructure. These ranged from building roads and bridges, digging wells or creating reservoirs to provide communities with fresh water, deepening river channels, and planting trees in the community and along travel routes.

As Buddhism spread to other places and countries, it encountered other cultures and peoples affecting those cultures and in turn was affected and shaped by them. In general, there was limited conflict between Buddhism

and the local or indigenous religions or spiritual beliefs it encountered. This could be in part because of how Buddhism was transmitted or spread to new cultures and places by travellers and word of mouth instead of by military force or domination. Also, Buddhism was, and is generally, open to and accepting of other religions and spiritual traditions. This adaptation and merging of cultures and religious and spiritual practices by Buddhism was so successful that in China, for example, that Daoist and Confucian groups copied Buddhist institutional structures.

As Buddhism grew and spread, in some countries and in certain eras, Buddhism became the official state religion. In such situations, Buddhist leaders and monasteries conducted rituals on behalf of the state, such as seeking the powers of protective deities, and offering prayers to overcome invaders and hostile states during times of war. In China, monasteries were at times retreats for scholars and government officials. Also in China, at points when Buddhist monasteries were well supported and often quite wealthy, they sometimes became lending institutions, charging interest at market rates. In other cases, Buddhist monasteries became centres of opposition and the voice of the community, leading those who revolted against oppressive rulers or poor social and economic conditions.

In contemporary times, Buddhist monasteries take many forms and come in many sizes. Monasteries may be linked to specific families, neighbourhoods, villages, cities, or even nations. They continue to offer many of the range of sacred and secular services and opportunities that historically monasteries have offered in the past. These include Buddhist architecture and design of monastic complexes, which include buildings, statues, natural landscapes, and ritual spaces. They continue to be places where people gather in collective celebration with others, and are often the social centre of the Buddhist community.

Visitors to monasteries are expected to be respectful and follow some basic codes of conduct.

- Upon entering a temple or monastic building (and in most cases Buddhist homes) remove shoes and any head coverings.
- At monasteries, temples, and home shrines, Buddhists will usually bow three times before a statue of Buddha as a means of paying respect to the example of Buddha, to his teachings, and to the enlightened monks and nuns. **Non-Buddhists are not expected to bow.**
- Lay Buddhists will often bow to monks, nuns, and, in some cultures, to elders as a sign of their respect.
- In general, with some differences between schools and countries, Buddhist monks and nuns are not allowed to come into direct physical contact with members of the opposite gender.
- For some Theravada Buddhist monks and nuns, the shaking of hands is to be avoided. A common Buddhist way of greeting others is to put one's palms of the hands together and raise them to one's chin.

- Police and soldiers (or any other person) should not carry weapons into a Buddhist temple or monastery.
- In some traditions, pointing one's soles of their feet towards a statue of the Buddha, a shrine, monks, nuns, or any person in general, is considered to be extremely rude.
- Touching the head of another person is considered to be rude. The only exceptions relate to exceptional situations, such as to receive medical treatment.
- Buddhist monks and nuns may be addressed as Venerable, Roshi, Ajahn, Master, Bhante, or Sister, depending on their school and country.

Women in Buddhism

Contemporary concerns and perspectives with respect to human rights and gender equality, along with feminist scholars and movements, have drawn attention to the role and place of women in different world religions and faith groups, including Buddhism.

The question of gender equity and women's role in Buddhism has led to a great deal of reflection, study, and debate within Buddhist circles and across society in general. Some Buddhists downplay gender issues within Buddhism and others believe that there is a need to address inequities between the sexes historically and in the present.

The topic of the role and place of women in Buddhism is one that may be approached from diverse perspectives and viewpoints, including theological, historical, anthropological, and feminist perspectives. These lead to questions about the theological status of women, the treatment of women in Buddhist societies at home and in public, the history of women in Buddhism, and a comparison of the experiences of women across different forms of Buddhism. As may be expected, and similar to other religions, the roles and experiences of Buddhist women have varied considerably within different Buddhist societies, sects, and cultural contexts, as well as over time. Furthermore, teachings and texts may at times conflict or contradict one another.

Gautama Buddha and Women's Roles in the Sangha

At the time of Gautama Buddha's life, women were generally considered to be inferior to men and expected to be subservient to the men in their life: their fathers, husbands, and sons.

Some Buddhists argue that Buddhism does not consider women to be inferior to men, but they may have different roles. Buddhism, does recognize biological and physical differences between the two sexes, but considers both sexes to be equally useful to society.

Many Buddhists argue that Buddhism has long recognized women's need for educational opportunities and religious freedom. The Buddha accepted that both women and men were capable of realizing enlightenment and achieving *nirvana*. Gautama Buddha is believed to have not been in favour of allowing women into the monastic community he formed at first. But later he allowed the admission of women into the community and their full participation in it. Many Buddhists point to the radical nature of this development for that point in history and Indian society.

Others point to the inequity that existed from the beginning. As the *Vinaya-Pitaka* (Theravada) records, the original rules of discipline for monks and nuns were not the same. *Bhikkhunis* (nuns) are required to abide by several additional rules than those required of *bhikkhus* (monks). The most significant of these additional rules are called the *Eight Garudhammas* (heavy rules). These rules include first and foremost the total subordination of nuns to monks, including monks who had been ordained just one day.

Some scholars suggest that some of these rules were added much later. They point out discrepancies between the Pali *Bhikkuni Vinaya* (the section of the Pali Canon dealing with the rules for nuns) and other versions of the texts. This suggests that the more discriminatory rules were added after The Buddha's death. Regardless of their origins and when they were written, over the centuries, the application of these rules in many parts of Asia tended to discourage or prevent women from being ordained.

This led to most orders of nuns dying out centuries ago. For example, the rules that called for at least five ordained monks and five ordained nuns to be present at the ordination of new nuns made it difficult or impossible for women to be fully ordained. According to these rules, if there are no living ordained nuns, there can be no ordination of new nuns. Such rules essentially ended the full ordination of nuns in the Theravada orders of Southeast Asia. Women there could be only be novices until recently.

The *Vinaya* is the division of the Buddhist canon (*Tripitaka*) that sets the rules and procedures that govern the Buddhist monastic community, or *sangha*. There are three parallel *Vinaya* traditions that remain in use by modern monastic communities: the Theravada (Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia), Mulasarvastivada (Tibetan Buddhism and the Himalayan region) and Dharmaguptaka (East Asian Buddhism). Each *Vinaya* Tradition has different requirements for the ordination of monks and nuns.

In Tibetan Buddhism, while there have been female *tulkus* (reborn *lamas*), the ordination of monks and nuns follows *Mulasarvastivada Vinaya*, which has 253 rules for the *bhikkhus* and 364 rules for *bhikshunis*. However, in Tibet the full nun's lineage of the *Mulasarvastivada Vinaya* was never transmitted to Tibet and, therefore, traditionally Tibetan nuns were not fully ordained: they were novices or simply took eight or ten Precepts. According to Tibetan tradition, the ordination of a *bhikshunis* (nun) must be carried out by a *bhikshunis* preceptor, and since a *Mulasarvastivada bhikshunis* preceptor is not available, according to Tibetan tradition the full ordination of nuns stopped. While

nunneries existed throughout Tibet, they did not have the same respect and education as monks.

In the late 1980s, His Holiness the Dalai Lama stated that while full ordination of nuns was difficult to envisage in the Mulasarvastivada tradition, more could be done about their training and schools could start by granting nuns access to higher philosophical studies, training them as *geshema* (*geshe* is a Tibetan Buddhist academic degree previously reserved for monks). It was only on December 22, 2016, that 20 nuns, from six nunneries in India and Nepal, were finally awarded their *geshema* degree from the hands of the Dalai Lama. This event marks a new and historic chapter in Tibetan Buddhism.

Full ordination for nuns survived in only one of the Buddhist Vinaya traditions, that of the *Dharmaguptakas* in the Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese lineages.

In China and Taiwan, an order of Mahayana nuns can trace its lineage back to the first ordination of nuns. Some women have been ordained as Theravada nuns in the presence of these Mahayana nuns, although this is hugely controversial in some more traditional or conservative Theravada monastic orders.

Western nuns such as Freda Bedi and Tenzin Palm challenged the practice by being ordained in Hong Kong in 1973.

In 1971, Voramai Kabilsingh, a Thai woman and Theravada Buddhist, was ordained in Taiwan. She was the first woman in modern Buddhist history to take full ordination, and faced some stigma and rejection as a result.

There is disagreement between Buddhist scholars as to whether early Buddhism (Indian Buddhism) was misogynist at its core. On one side there is a belief that in early Buddhism women were considered to be inferior to men. On the other side, it is argued while there were a few misogynist aspects to ancient Indian Buddhism, this did not apply to Buddhism as a whole.

While there are statements in Buddhist scripture that depict women as obstructors of men's spiritual progress and ideas, and that suggest that being born female leaves one with less opportunity for spiritual progress and attainment, Buddhist texts record several eminent saintly and learned

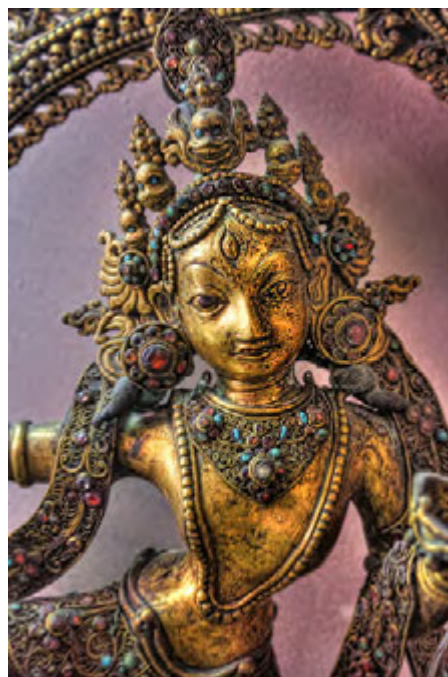


Figure 42: Bikaner IND—Ganga State Museum—Buddhist Goddess Tara 15–16th century

Tara or Arya Tara, also known as Jetsun Dolma in Tibetan Buddhism, is a female Bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism and is a female Buddha in Vajrayana Buddhism. She is known as the “mother of liberation,” and represents the virtues of success in work and achievements. In Japan she is known as Tara Bosatsu, and little-known as Duōluó Púsà in Chinese Buddhism.

Bhikkhunis. These women were leaders and experts in preaching the *Dhamma* and included *Dhammadinna*, *Khema*, and *Uppalavanna*.

Although, women have had a significant impact on Buddhism, the mix of positive attitudes to femininity with overtly negative statements has led many writers to characterize early Buddhism's attitude to women as deeply ambivalent.

Buddhahood and Women's Spiritual Attainment

Buddhist doctrines on the enlightenment of women are contradictory. As there is no one institutional authority that represents all Buddhism, the diverse schools and sects do not follow the same scriptures. Consequently, texts that are central to some schools are not recognized as authentic by others, and so the scriptures disagree.

For example, in Mahayana Buddhism, the *Sukhavati-vyuha Sutra* (or *Aparimitayur Sutra*) is one of three sutras that provide the doctrinal basis of the Pure Land School. This sutra contains a passage that is usually interpreted as meaning that women must be reborn as men before they can enter *nirvana*. This opinion shows up in other scriptures but not in the Pali Canon.

In contrast, the *Vimalakirti Sutra* teaches that maleness and femaleness, like other phenomenal distinctions, are essentially unreal. Therefore gender distinctions are not important. The *Vimalakirti* is an essential text in several Mahayana schools, including Tibetan and Zen Buddhism.

Early Buddhist texts, such as the *Cullavagga* section of the *Vinaya Pitaka* of the Pali Canon, contain statements from Gautama Buddha speaking to the fact that a woman can attain enlightenment. It is also clearly stated in the *Bahudhatukasutta* that there could never be a female Buddha. Buddhist perspectives on women and Buddhahood vary between the three major schools.

In Theravada Buddhism, achieving *buddhahood* is a rare event. The focus of Theravada practice is primarily on attaining *arhatship* and the Pali Canon has examples of both male and female *arhats* who attained *nirvana*. For example Yasodhara, the former wife of Buddha Shakyamuni and mother of Rahula, is said to have become an *arhat* after joining the *Bhikkhuni* order of Buddhist nuns.

In contrast, in Mahayana schools, *Buddhahood* is the universal goal for Mahayana practitioners. The Mahayana *sutras* maintain that a woman can become enlightened, but not in a female form. For example, the *Bodhisattvabhumi*, which dates to the fourth century, states that a woman about to attain enlightenment will be reborn as a male. Later Mahayana texts allow for the possibility of female Bodhisattvas.

Some Theravada *sutras* state that it is impossible for a woman to be a *Bodhisattva* (a person who is on their way to *Buddhahood* but has not yet attained it). Thus women should aspire to be reborn as male. They may do so

by moral actions and sincere aspiration to maleness. From this perspective, being born a female is a result of bad *karma*.

However, in the *Jataka* tales (stories of the Buddha's past lives as a *bodhisattva* within the Theravada canon) it states that The Buddha was a woman, a princess in one of his past lives. This directly contradicts the assertion that a *bodhisattva* cannot be born a female.

Female Buddhas and Bodhisattvas

In Vajrayana tradition, female Buddhas are commonly depicted in iconography. Sometimes they are the consorts of the main *yidam* (*deity*) of a meditation *mandala* but female Buddhas such as Vajrayogini, Tara, and Simhamukha appear as the central figures of tantric meditation on their own.

Buddhism also recognizes many female *yogini* practitioners as achieving the full enlightenment of a Buddha. Yeshe Tsogyal, one of the five tantric consorts of Padmasambhava is an example of a woman (*yogini*) recognized as a female Buddha in the Vajrayana tradition. According to Karmapa lineage, however, Tsogyel has attained *buddhahood* in that very life.

Important Women in Buddhist History

In spite of the barriers women faced in various Buddhist schools and sects throughout Buddhist history, many were able to achieve a high level of respect for their understanding of Buddhism and *dharma*.

In the early or pre-sectarian stages of Buddhism there were several women who had important roles in its development.

- Gautama Buddha's step-mother, Mahapajapati Gotami, was the first woman to seek ordination.
- Buddha's wife, Yasodharā, became a nun and an *arhat*.
- Sanghamitta, the daughter of emperor Ashoka, is believed to have brought Buddhism to Sri Lanka.
- The Buddhist nun, Buddhamitrā, lived in India during the first century and is known for having erected images of Buddha in three cities near the Ganges River.

These women also include several Zen Masters. During Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism's golden age (China, ca. 7th–9th centuries) women studied with male masters and teachers. A few eventually became *dharma* heirs and Ch'an masters. These include Liu Tiemo, called the "Iron Grindstone", Moshan, and Miaoxin. Moshan was a teacher to both monks and nuns.

Another well-known female Buddhist teacher, is Eihei Dogen (1200–1253) who introduced Soto Zen from China to Japan and, in the history of Zen, is one of the most revered masters. In a commentary called the *Raihai Tokuzui*, Dogen

said, “In acquiring the *dharma*, all acquire the *dharma* equally. All should pay homage to and hold in esteem one who has acquired the *dharma*. Do not make an issue of whether it is a man or a woman. This is the most wondrous law of the *Buddha-dharma*.”

Influential Buddhist Women

In this section, a selected list of women throughout history who have been influential in the development of Buddhism is provided.

Theravada

- **Dhammananda Bhikkhuni** is the first contemporary Thai woman to be fully ordained as a Theravada bhikkhuni and Abbess of Songdhammakalyani Monastery, the only temple in Thailand where there are nuns.
- **Ayya Khema**, a German American Buddhist teacher, is the first Western woman to become a Theravadin Buddhist nun. Ayya actively promoted the participation of women in Buddhist practice and founded several Buddhist centres around the world. She coordinated the first ever Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women.
- **Dipa Ma** is a prominent Indian meditation master of Theravada Buddhism in Asia and in the United States where she had significant influence on the American branch of the Vipassanā movement.
- **Upasika Kee Nanayon** (or Kor Khao-suan-luang) was a Thai Buddhist *upāsikā* (devout laywoman) from Thailand. In 1945, she turned her home into a meditation centre in collaboration with her aunt and uncle. Although, mostly self-taught, she read the Pali canon and other Buddhist literature. Her *dhamma* talks and poetry were widely circulated, and she became one of the most popular female meditation teachers in Thailand. Many of her talks have been translated into English by Thanissaro Bhikkhu.
- **Sharon Salzberg** is a New York Times bestselling author and teacher of Buddhist meditation practices in the West. In 1974, she co-founded the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. In her teachings she emphasizes *vipassanā* (insight) and *mettā* (loving-kindness) methods. Her books include *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness* (1995), *A Heart as Wide as the World* (1999), *Real Happiness—The Power of Meditation: A 28-Day Program* (2010), and the follow-up *Real Happiness at Work* (2013).
- **Mya Thwin**, known as Mother Sayamagyi, was a Theravada Buddhist teacher who established centres for *vipassana* meditation around the world. She was a senior disciple of Ba Khin, a *vipassana* master, and fulfilled his aspiration to teach Buddhist meditation in the West.
- **Ajahn Sundara and Ajahn Candasiri** are two western converts to Buddhism and are ordained as a ten-precept *sīladhārā*, (Theravada Buddhist female monastic in the tradition established by Ajahn Sumedho). Ten-precept

sīladhārā is the highest level that is allowed for women in the Thai Forest Tradition. *Sīladhārā* Ajan Canaisri is one of the senior monastics in western Theravada Buddhism. She trained alongside women who later became fully ordained *bhikkhunis* and abbesses of monasteries.

- **Sylvia Boorstein** is of Jewish-American origins and an author, psychotherapist, and Buddhist teacher. Boorstein studied with Dipa Ma and is a co-founding teacher at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, California and a senior teacher at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. She has written numerous books on Buddhism such as
 - *It's Easier Than You Think: The Buddhist Way to Happiness* (1995)
 - *That's Funny, You Don't Look Buddhist* (1996)
 - *Don't Just Do Something, Sit There: A Mindfulness Retreat with Sylvia Boorstein* (1996)
 - *Pay Attention, for Goodness' Sake: Practicing the Perfections of the Heart—The Buddhist Path of Kindness* (2002)
 - *Happiness Is an Inside Job: Practicing for a Joyful Life* (2007)
 - *The Courage to Be Happy* (2007)
 - *Solid Ground: Buddhist Wisdom for Difficult Times* (2011) with Norman Fischer and Tsoknyi Rinpoche

Women in East Asian Traditions

- **Wu Zetian** was a Chinese empress from the seventh and eighth centuries who supported Buddhism in China.
- **Prajnatara** (aka Keyur) was the twenty-seventh *Brahmin* leader of Indian Buddhism according to Chan Buddhism and the head of the Sarvastivada sect of early Buddhist schools. She helped spread Buddhism by her travels through East India preaching and is believed to have been Bodhidharma's teacher. (Bodhidharma is considered to be the founder of Chan Buddhism in China.)
- **Master Cheng Yen** is a Taiwanese Buddhist nun (*bhikkhuni*), teacher, and philanthropist. She was a student and follower of Master Ying Shun, a major figure in the development of Humanistic Buddhism in Taiwan. In 1966, Cheng Yen founded the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation with a group of 30 housewives. Tzu Chi later became one of the largest humanitarian organizations in the world and eventually became the largest Buddhist organization in Taiwan. She is considered to be one of the most influential figures in the development of modern Taiwanese Buddhism and she is popularly referred to as being one of the "Four Heavenly Kings" of Taiwanese Buddhism.
- **Chan Khong** was a Vietnamese born Buddhist nun and peace activist. She was ordained in 1966 as one of the first six members of the Order of Interbeing, sometimes called the Six Cedars. Following her ordination, she

was given the name Sister Chân Không, True Emptiness. She worked closely with Thích Nhất Hạnh in starting the Plum Village Tradition.

- **Daehaeng Kun Sunim** was a Korean Buddhist nun and Seon (Zen) master. She is known for having taught monks as well as nuns, and having helped to increase the participation of young people and men in Korean Buddhism. As well, she was also a major force for the advancement of *Bhikkunis* (nuns), heavily supporting traditional nuns' colleges as well as the modern Bhikkuni Council of Korea. She founded, Hanmaum Seon Center, which grew to have fifteen branches in Korea and a number of branches in other countries.
- **Houn Jiyu-Kennett** was a British *roshi* (a title given to senior Buddhist figures). She is best known for having been the first female to be sanctioned by the Soto School of Japan to teach in the West. She founded Shasta Abbey in Mt. Shasta, California.
- **Enkyo Pat O'Hara** is a Soto priest and teacher in the Harada-Yasutani lineage of Zen Buddhism. She is the abbot and founder of the Village Zendo in New York City.
- **Ruth Fuller Sasaki** was an important figure in the development of Buddhism in the United States of America. After moving to Koyoto, Japan she became the first foreigner to be a priest of a Rinzai Zen temple in 1958 and the only westerner and woman to be a priest of a Daitoku-ji.
- **Geshin Myoko Prabhasa Dharma Zenji** is a Zen master and lineage teacher of Japanese Rinzai and Vietnamese Lam Te (Linji) schools, and the founder of the International Zen Institute (IZI). She developed a form of Zen practice that draws on both Japanese and Vietnamese Zen traditions, but it's not bound by any specific culture or country.
- **Joko Beck**, or Charlotte Joko Beck, was an American Zen teacher, the founder of the Ordinary Mind Zen School, and the author of the books *Everyday Zen: Love and Work* and *Nothing Special: Living Zen*.
- **Merle Kodo Boyd** is the first African-American woman to have received Dharma transmission in Zen. She leads the Lincroft Zen Sangha in New Jersey.

Tertön

Is a Tibetan term used with respect to individuals who are believed to have advanced knowledge and insight. In Tibetan Buddhism, many believed, especially within the Nyingma school, that only a few chosen persons can receive *dharma* teachings mystically, non-physically, and be "dharma treasure revealers", or *tertöns*.

The number of *tertöns* that are thought to have lived throughout Buddhist history is not known. There are lists and it is believed that there were about 275 tertöns from the 11th to the 20th centuries.

Jetsun (aka *Jetsün* or *Jetsunma*) is a Tibetan title which means "venerable" or "reverend." It is a special term applied to especially revered teachers and practitioners of Vajrayana Buddhism.

Tibetan Traditions

- **Samding Dorje Phagmo**, the present (12th) Samding Dorje Pakmo Trülku, is Dechen Chökyi Drönma, who was born in 1938 or 1942. She was the highest female incarnation in Tibet and the third highest-ranking person in the hierarchy after the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama. Dechen Chökyi Drönma has been trained in the Bodongpa tradition and remains the head of the Samding Monastery. She also holds a post of a high government cadre in the Tibet Autonomous Region. As a result, she has been seen by many as “collaborating” with the Chinese.
- **Sera Khandro Kunzang Dekyong Wangmo** was a 19th Tibetan Buddhist teacher. She taught, among others, the First Adzom Drukpa Drodul Pawo Dorje (Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche, b.1938, is considered to be his immediate reincarnation). She was a teacher to many leading Nyingma lamas (Nyingma is the oldest of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism.), including Dudjom Jigdral Yeshe Dorje and Chatral Sangye Dorje.
- **Ayu Khandro or Ayu Khandro Dorje Paldrön** (1838–1953) was a renowned teacher of Dzogchen and Tantric Buddhism in East Tibet and a *tertön*. Many believed that Ayu Khandro was a reincarnation of Vajrayogini, a Tantric Buddhist female Buddha and a *dakini* (sacred female spirit). She spent years in dark retreat. She is also renowned for her extensive pilgrimages throughout Tibet.
- **Täre Lhamo** (1938–2002) was a Tibetan Buddhist tantric master, *tertön*, and religious author. She was recognized by Dudjom Rinpoche as the reincarnation of Sera Khandro and an emanation of Yeshe Tsogyal (Tibet’s best-known *dakini* and female master). She was wife of Namtrul Rinpoche (1944–2011). The couple were key figures in Tibetan Buddhism during the takeover of Tibet by China and the Cultural Revolution, and was instrumental in the revival of Tibetan Buddhism after the revolution. She and Namtrul Rinpoche led the rebuilding of Nyenlung monastery in Serta County and contributed to the rebuilding of other monasteries and religious buildings.
- **Jetsun Kushok Chimey Luding/Jetsun Trichen Rinpoche** (b. 1938) is one of the most respected female teachers of Tibetan Buddhism. She is the elder sister of the current head of the Sakya lineage. Following in her family’s tradition, she was ordained as a novice at seven years of age. In 1959, she left Tibet for India and eventually settled in Vancouver, Canada, in 1971, where she still lives. Sakya Trichen (Trizin) asked that she begin teaching, which she did in the early 1980s. Now she is a full-time *dharma* teacher and the founder of Sakya Tsechen Thubten Ling, a *dharma* centre in Vancouver, and Sakya Dechen Ling in Oakland, California. She is one of fewer than a dozen masters (and one of the three women in the history of Sakya) who are qualified to transmit the *Lam dré* or “The path and its results.” She is believed to be an emanation of Vajrayogini, the Tantric Buddhist female Buddha, and a *dakini*.

- **Mindrolling Jetsün Khandro Rinpoche** (b. 1967) is the daughter of Tibetan meditation master His Holiness Mindrolling Trichen. The Mindrolling lineage throughout its history has had many accomplished female masters. She was recognized at the age of two by His Holiness the 16th Karmapa as the reincarnation of the Great Dakini of Tsurphu, Khandro Ugyen Tsomo (one of the most renowned female masters of her time). Thus, Khandro Rinpoche holds the two lineages of Nyingma and Kagyu schools. She founded the Samten Tse Retreat Center in Mussoori, India, serves as the resident teacher of the Lotus Garden Center in rural Virginia, and is active with the Mindrolling Monastery in Dehra Dun, India. At present, she is one of the most renowned Tibetan teachers teaching in the West.
- **Karma Lekshe Tsomo** (b. 1944) is an American Buddhist nun, scholar, and social activist. She is a Professor of Buddhist Studies at the University of San Diego and the author of many books on women in Buddhism. She is also the founder of Jamyang Foundation and a founding member of Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women. The organization is dedicated to supporting the education of women and girls in the Himalayan region and the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh.
- **Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo** (b. 1943) was born in England but is now a Tibetan Buddhist nun, author, and teacher. She moved to India in 1964 to pursue Buddhist studies and, at 21 years of age, became one of the first Westerners to be ordained as a Tibetan Buddhist monastic. She spent twelve years living in a remote cave in the Himalayas, three of those years in a strict meditation retreat. She is the founder of the Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery in Himachal Pradesh, India.
- **Pema Chodron** (b. 1936) is an ordained American Tibetan Buddhist nun, author, and teacher. She is an ordained nun, *acharya* (senior teacher) and disciple of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. She is the principal teacher at the Gampo Abbey, a Buddhist monastery in the Shambhala tradition located in Nova Scotia, Canada.
- **Thubten Chodron** (b. 1950) is an American Tibetan Buddhist nun and a central figure in reinstating the Tibetan *Bhikshuni* (*Gelongma*) ordination of women. Abbess of Sravasti Abbey, the only Tibetan Buddhist training monastery for Western nuns and monks in the United States. She is a student of H. H. XIVth Dalai Lama, Tsenzhap Serkong Rinpoche, Thubten Zopa Rinpoche, and other Tibetan masters. She has authored several books on Buddhist philosophy and meditation, but is the only nun who has co-authored a book with the Dalai Lama, *Buddhism: One Teacher, Many Traditions*.
- **Robina Courtin** (b. 1944) is an Australian Buddhist nun in the Tibetan Buddhist Gelugpa tradition and lineage of Lama Thubten Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche and their organization, Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT). In 1996, she founded Liberation Prison Project, which she ran until 2009. She has taught at Buddhist temples and centres around the world.
- **Ani Choying Drolma** (b. 1971) is a Nepalese Buddhist nun and musician from the Nagi Gompa nunnery in Nepal. She has become famous in Nepal

and throughout the world for her musical talents and for bringing Tibetan Buddhist chants and feast songs to non-Buddhist audiences. She is also known for her dedication to philanthropic work and her appointment as Nepal's first UNICEF national ambassador.

- **Yeshe Kadro** was ordained as a Buddhist nun by the Dalai Lama at the age of 23. She has held various management and teaching roles for the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition (FPMT) centres around the world, including manager of Chenrezig Nuns' Community in Queensland, Australia. For many years she has been the director of Karuna Hospice in Brisbane, Australia.
- **Lama Tsultrim Allione** (b. 1947) is an author and teacher who has studied in Tibetan Buddhism's Karma Kagyu lineage. Tsultrim Allione has been recognized and enthroned as an emanation of the female Tibetan saint, the 11th century *dakini* Machik Labdrön. She traveled to India and Nepal to study Buddhism. In 1970, she became one of the first American nuns to be ordained in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. She later gave back her vows to raise a family and became a respected Buddhist teacher in the West. She is the founder and spiritual director of Tara Mandala retreat centre in Colorado, and author of the books *Women of Wisdom* and *Feeding Your Demons*. In 2009, she received the international Outstanding Woman in Buddhism Award.
- **Jetsunma Ahkon Lhamo**, born Alyce Louise Zeoli, is an enthroned *tulku* (reincarnated custodian of a specific lineage of teachings in Tibetan Buddhism) within the Palyul lineage of the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. She was the first Western woman to be named a reincarnated *lama*.
- **Sarah Harding** is a qualified *lama* (chief or high priest) and teacher in the Shangpa Kagyu tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. She is a former student and translator of Kalu Rinpoche (1905–1989).
- **Judith Simmer-Brown** is a professor of contemplative and religious studies at Naropa University. Judith is an expert in Tibetan Buddhism, women and Buddhism, Buddhist-Christian dialogue, Western Buddhism and contemplative education. She is a Shambhala Buddhist, an *acharya* (a senior Buddhist teacher), and was a former senior student of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche.
- **Jan Willis**, or Janice Dean Willis, is an Afro-American professor of religion at Wesleyan University and the author of books on Tibetan Buddhism, including the following:
 - *The Diamond Light: An Introduction to Tibetan Buddhist Meditation* (1972)
 - *On Knowing Reality: The Tattvartha Chapter of Asanga's Bodhisattvabhumi* (1979)
 - *Feminine Ground: Essays on Women and Tibet*, Editor, and contributor of two of six, essays (1989)

- Enlightened Beings: Life Stories from the Ganden Oral Tradition (1995)
- Dreaming Me: An African American Woman's Spiritual Journey (2001)
- **Vicki Mackenzie** is an English-born author and journalist who has written numerous books on Buddhism including the following:
 - Reincarnation: the Boy Lama (1988)
 - Reborn in the West: the Reincarnation Masters (1996)
 - Cave in the Snow: a Western Woman's Quest for Enlightenment (1999), a biography of Tenzin Palmo (also about Freda Bedi)
 - Why Buddhism?: Westerners in Search of Wisdom (2001)
 - Child of Tibet, co-authored with Soname Yangchen (2006)
 - The Revolutionary Life of Freda Bedi: British Feminist, Indian Nationalist, Buddhist Nun (2017)

Notes:

Further information on many of the Buddhist women that are discussed may be found on the web site of The Yogini project (<https://theyoginiproject.org/>). The Yogini Project is dedicated to sharing the inspirational stories of female Buddhist meditators and spiritual practitioners with people around the world. The intent is to inspire others and to raise awareness of the value and importance of women in Buddhist practice. They do this by making influential and gifted Buddhist women accessible to all through films, interviews, feature stories, and digital media.

For information on Buddhist women in Canada, Sakyadhita Canada (*Sakyadhita* means "Daughters of the Buddha") is a good resource. It is an official branch of Sakyadhita International (SI). SI was formed in 1987 with the primary purpose of promoting world peace through the practice of the Buddha's teachings. SI is an alliance whose goal it is to support the world's 300 million Buddhist women in working for peace and social justice and to advance their spiritual and secular lives. Sakyadhita Canada is an alliance of ordained and lay Buddhist women, whose website has information on events and various publications with a focus on women in Buddhism (see www.sakyadhitacanada.org/aboutus)

Contemporary Roles of Women

Today, Buddhist women in the West generally consider institutional sexism to be aspects of Asian culture that can be eliminated from dharma. In some

western monastic orders, men and women follow the same rules and are not separated.

In Asia, however, traditional views of women's roles in Buddhism are more entrenched. While Buddhists in many orders seek better conditions and education, in many countries, women continue to face considerable inequities.

As well, a Buddhist feminist movement has emerged that seeks to improve the religious, legal, and social status of women within Buddhism. It is a form of feminist theology which seeks to advance and understand the equality of men and women from a Buddhist perspective in various dimensions morally, socially, spiritually, and in leadership.

Centuries of male privilege and discrimination will take time to overcome, although it is important to recognize that equity will be more of a challenge in some schools and cultures than in others. Nevertheless, there has been a significant and promising shift toward equality.