

**BUDDHISM
AFTER
PATRIARCHY**

**A Feminist History, Analysis,
and Reconstruction
of Buddhism**

RITA M. GROSS

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To the memory of
HOWARD T. LUTZ

In gratitude
for loving and appreciative companionship

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Strategies for a Feminist Revalorization of Buddhism

This essay grows out of a complex, unique, and personal blending of three perspectives—the cross-cultural, comparative study of religion, feminism, and Buddhism. Though each perspective is well-known and widely used individually, they are not usually brought into conversation with each other. Even more rarely are they blended into one spiritual and scholarly outlook, as I have sought to do in my personal and academic life. Throughout these pages, I will illustrate the dense, mutually illuminating interplay of these three perspectives as they weave a coherent and uplifting vision. I could tell the story of how these three orientations became allies in my system of understanding and orientation. However, unlike Carol Christ and Christine Downing,¹ I choose not to focus directly on my story, on my personal intersection with these three perspectives, but on the sometimes tension-laden synthesis which I have conjured up out of my studies, my suffering, and my experience.

My primary task in this book is a feminist revalorization of Buddhism. In feminist theology in general, the task of “revalorization” involves working with the categories and concepts of a traditional religion in the light of feminist values. This task is double-edged, for, on the one hand, feminist analysis of any major world religion reveals massive undercurrents of sexism and prejudice against women, especially in realms of religious praxis. On the other hand, the very term “revalorization” contains an implicit judgment. To revalorize is to have determined that, however sexist a religious tradition may be, it is not irreparably so. Revalorizing is, in fact, doing that work of repairing the tradition, often bringing it much more into line with its own fundamental values and vision than was its patriarchal form.

My strategies for this revalorization involve first studying Buddhist history and then analyzing key concepts of the Buddhist worldview from a feminist point of view. Utilizing the results of those studies, I finally pursue a feminist reconstruction of Buddhism.

In the chapters on Buddhist history, I will survey the roles and images of women found in each of the three major periods of Buddhist intellectual

development—early Indian Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, and Indo-Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism. In addition to surveying roles and images of women, I will look for some of the most relevant and interesting stories about women found in each period. This survey has a dual purpose. First, someone who wishes to comment on Buddhism and feminism cannot meaningfully do so without some knowledge of the Buddhist record regarding images and roles of women commonly found in the Buddhist past. Second, out of this record of roles, images, and stories, we can search for a usable past, as defined by feminist historians.²

These chapters will be followed by chapters detailing a feminist analysis of key Buddhist concepts. Thus, I follow the distinction, often made by Christian feminist theologians, between historical context, which may well reflect very limited cultural conditions, and essential core teachings of the religious symbol system. Like most Christian feminist theologians, I am far more concerned about the gender implications of key Buddhist teachings than I am about inadequate models in the past. In the chapters of analysis, I will argue that the key concepts of Buddhism, in every period of Buddhist intellectual development, are incompatible with gender hierarchy and with discrimination against women (or against men).

In a certain sense, the chapters on history discuss the Buddhist past, how Buddhists have in fact dealt with women throughout time. The chapters of analysis, in a sense, deal with the Buddhist present, for though these key concepts were articulated in the past, they have *present* relevance for Buddhists in a way that historical materials do not. History is not revelatory or normative for Buddhists in the way that it is for some other traditions. Key Buddhist concepts, however, constitute what Buddhists currently believe and, therefore, must be taken very seriously. The chapters on reconstruction look toward the post-patriarchal future of Buddhism, using both the tools of traditional Buddhism and of feminist vision. These chapters explore the contradiction between the egalitarian concepts of Buddhism and its patriarchal history, seeking both to explain that contradiction historically and to rectify that situation in a future manifestation and form of Buddhism. As we shall see, such reconstructions take us beyond, not only the current institutional forms of Buddhism, but also beyond its present conceptual structure.

These sections of history, analysis, and reconstruction are set in the matrix of very specific, and somewhat idiosyncratic ways of thinking about religion and the study of religion, about feminism, and about Buddhism itself. Detailed discussion of these methodological issues and stances is found in the two appendices to the book. My method of dealing with complex issues regarding the interface between theology and the history of religions is dealt with in the

appendix titled "Religious Experience and the Study of Religion: The History of Religions." Definitions of feminism, critical for understanding my vision of *Buddhist* feminism, are found in the appendix titled "Here I Stand: Feminism as Academic Method and as Social Vision." This appendix is recommended especially for the reader who is unfamiliar with differing feminist methods and claims. My methods for studying Buddhism are discussed in the chapter immediately following. This chapter, on "Orientations to Buddhism," also serves as an introductory overview of Buddhism for the reader not familiar with Buddhism.

Regarding my methodology, in every case, I combine methods and approaches that most scholars separate. Thus, when thinking about religion and the study of religion, I combine the approaches of history of religions and of theology. When thinking about feminism, I see feminism as both academic method and as social vision. Finally, when studying Buddhism, I seek both the historically and sociologically accurate knowledge of Buddhology and the "insider's" understanding of a Buddhist. Thus, my method might be called a "method of inseparability," bringing to mind connotations of the inseparability of Wisdom and Compassion in some forms of Buddhism.

My method involves a further inseparability, in that all three perspectives—the cross-cultural, comparative study of religion, feminism, and Buddhism—are thoroughly intertwined in all my work, no matter which focus I might be concentrating upon in any given discussion. I am deeply committed to the cross-cultural, comparative study of religion, which for me includes the results of the social sciences, especially anthropology, as well as theology, broadly understood. This perspective, adequately and sensitively pursued, can be the most basic arbiter, judge, and peacemaker between divergent points of view about religion. It is the matrix and container within which any sane, reasonable, and humane religious or spiritual statement must be grounded today.³ I am equally deeply committed to the feminist perspective, which, in my experience radically changes one's ways of looking at almost every topic for research, as well as one's personal and political affirmations.⁴ Finally, for me Buddhism is not merely grist for the comparative mill but also personal perspective. I have invested as much training in Buddhism, utilizing traditional techniques of contemplative study and meditative practice, as I have in more conventional academic studies. Thus, I work simultaneously as a comparativist, as a feminist, and as a Buddhist "theologian"; I also work simultaneously both as an insider and an outsider. I see no conflict in this method; rather, it is a complete and well-rounded approach.

Orientation to Buddhism: Approaches, Basics, and Contours

A feminist history, analysis, and reconstruction of Buddhism draws upon two major bodies of theory—feminism and Buddhism. In addition to the lengthy definition of feminism as academic method and as social vision found in the first appendix, discussions of feminist method and theory regarding specific issues are found throughout this book. However, if one is reasonably unfamiliar with Buddhism, it is difficult to appreciate *feminist* analysis of Buddhist materials. It is very difficult to be introduced to a body of knowledge and to feminist commentary on that body of knowledge at the same time—an ongoing problem for teachers and scholars presenting the women studies perspective in all fields. One aspect of my solution to that problem is to give relatively complete discussions of those aspects of Buddhism upon which I will comment from a feminist point of view during my feminist discussion of them. But I am selecting from the Buddhist record, rather than discussing the entirety of Buddhism, which would be impossible for one author to do within one book. Therefore, the other aspect of my solution to the problem of simultaneous introduction to Buddhism and to feminist perspectives on Buddhism is to begin with an overview of Buddhism.

BUDDHISM: BASIC TEACHINGS

To beginners, Buddhism can seem like an incredibly complex and dense religion, but everything in Buddhism really does go back to a few basic teachings that really do encapsulate the entire tradition. Though simple, they often seem difficult to comprehend because they go against the grain of ordinary hopes and fears.

Buddhism is a non-theistic religion. Its central teachings point out to its adherents the cause of and the cure for human suffering, locating both within human attitudes towards life. Buddhism is non-theistic, or not concerned about the existence of a supreme being, because a supreme being would be unable to relieve human suffering, as it is defined by Buddhists. A supreme being cannot

cause human beings to give up the attitudes that produce suffering. Only human beings are capable of that feat.

The foundational spiritual and religious attitudes of Buddhism are summarized and communicated by the Four Noble Truths and their extensions and unfoldings into the teachings of the Mahayana and the Vajrayana.

According to Buddhism, the cause of misery is located in negative habitual patterns common to all unenlightened beings. Succinctly put, human beings suffer because while still unenlightened, all beings strive with all their energy for unattainable goals. Disliking boredom and discontent, they strive for perfect complete bliss. Disliking uncertainty, they strive for perfect complete security. And disliking death and finitude, they strive for complete perfect permanence in personal immortality. According to Buddhism, these desires are completely impossible to attain under any conditions; therefore, striving to attain them is counterproductive, and serves only to deepen the pain of inevitable failure. That is the bad news, traditionally communicated by Buddhism's first and second noble truths—the truth that conventional existence is pervaded with suffering, and the truth that the cause of suffering is desire rooted in ignorance.

The good news, according to Buddhism, is that human beings do not have to remain in such useless and counterproductive, desire-ridden states of being; they can lay down the burden and experience the calm and tranquillity of enlightenment. That is the third truth, the truth of the cessation of suffering. Many attempts have been made to define the essentially ineffable quality of the liberation sought by Buddhism. All such attempts ultimately fail because liberation is a matter of experience, not theory. Perhaps liberation, in Buddhist terms, is best defined as knowing how to untie the knot of existence. To be liberated is to know "things as they are," a classic Buddhist phrase, and to know how to live with those conditions freely and compassionately. The best news of all is that there is a simple and workable path that can be used to good effect by anyone who wants to diminish the burden of excessive desire and compulsion. Buddhism prescribes a clear path, a total lifestyle, that facilitates the achievement of such liberation. The lifestyle is defined in the fourth Noble Truth, the truth of the path. Though the path contains eight elements, it is conveniently condensed into three major disciplines—*shila*, *samadhi*, and *prajna*, or moral discipline, spiritual cultivation, and the pursuit of wisdom.

These basics, found in all variants of Buddhism, are extended and amplified in the other forms of Buddhism which developed out of this foundational worldview. Mahayana Buddhism, which had emerged by about 500 years after the origins of Buddhism, developed specific ways of discussing wisdom and compassion—as emptiness and as complete altruism. Still later, Vajrayana Buddhism developed many ritual and meditative techniques, known as skillful

means, that are said to make progress on the path toward enlightenment much more rapid.¹

BUDDHISM: GEOGRAPHICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTOURS

In addition to its doctrinal complexity, Buddhism involves significant historical and cultural complexities which can seem overwhelming to someone not already familiar with Buddhism. Nevertheless, a few basics can orient someone new to Buddhism sufficiently. This sketch of the historical and geographical contours of Buddhism will emphasize the role of women in each movement within Buddhism, so briefly surveyed.²

Buddhism began roughly 2,500 years ago in North India. It was founded by Siddhartha Gautama, an upper-caste male of royal status who abandoned his family, his social position, and his wealth to pursue spiritual liberation. Such actions were not unusual in India of that day; liberation was thought to be difficult or impossible to attain while one was involved in domestic and social activities. Therefore, many young (and older) men did as Siddhartha Gautama had done. Almost immediately after his enlightenment experience and his first sermon, several other male world-renouncers became his followers. The monastic community grew rapidly.

After some years, his aunt, Mahaprajapati, who had raised him from his birth, approached the Buddha and asked that she and her women companions also be allowed to shave their heads, to put on monastic robes, and to join the renunciate community. At first the request was refused but eventually the institution of the nuns' order was permitted. However, the nuns were required to accept eight special rules as a precondition for their admission to the order; these rules subordinated the nuns' order to the monks' order. Additionally, the comment was made that, since women had been permitted to join the order, the *dharma* (Buddhist teachings) would last only 500 years instead of 1,000 years.

Such restrictions and predictions did little to deter women from entering the renunciate *sangha* (Buddhist community) and had even less effect on their ability to gain the insights required for liberation from *samsara* (cyclic existence). Many women attained *nirvana*, the extinction of craving, which brought cessation of rebirths, the goal and ideal of early Buddhism. These women's moving stories, often in the form of eloquent poems in which the women express their realization and their penetrating insight, were collected as the *Therigatha*, the Songs of the Women Elders. The literature was preserved as part of the canon of Theravada Buddhism, the form of Buddhism found today in Southeast Asia.

However, historians of Buddhism generally conclude that some centuries after the death of the Buddha, attitudes hardened. The monastic *sangha* reserved

more and more power and respect for itself. Lay people were thought of *merely* as patrons; despite the *Therigatha*, the belief that women could not attain enlightenment grew popular. At the same time, however, new tendencies were developing. Within 500 years of the Buddha's death, full-blown Mahayana (larger vehicle) Buddhism emerged. In addition to significant philosophical differences with earlier Buddhism, nascent Mahayana Buddhism understood the *sangha*, or Buddhist community, differently. As the monastic *sangha* grew more self-aggrandizing, Mahayanists (*deliberately*) emphasized the larger *sangha*, including lay people and women. Therefore, many scholars include greater (or renewed) openness to women among the general characteristics of the Mahayana.

Indeed, many of the most famous and influential Mahayana texts explicitly take up the question of how much a woman can attain, concluding, in some significant cases, that women's abilities are unlimited and equal to men's. Often the Mahayana *sutra*-s (texts attributed to the Buddha) are staged as a debate between a highly developed female and a male representative of the older viewpoint. He is always astounded and disgruntled by the woman's intelligence. She always confounds him in debate. He always asks her why, if she is so realized, she is not a man. At this point two motifs end the story. In one variant, the female then magically transforms her body into a male body. In the other, she retains her female body, demonstrating by logic or magic the utter relativity and unimportance of sexual differentiation.

These narratives do not answer another important question: can a woman attain complete perfect enlightenment, or Buddhahood? One of the critical developments in Mahayana thinking was the Bodhisattva path toward complete enlightenment, recommended now for all serious practitioners. Instead of striving for individual *nirvana* bringing release from cyclic existence, Mahayana Buddhists were encouraged to take the Bodhisattva vow to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. Few doubted that women could achieve the inspiration to take the Bodhisattva vow, but some contended that at some point in the progression toward complete perfect enlightenment and Buddhahood, the future Buddha would stop being reborn as a female. Thus the Bodhisattva would repeat the pattern of the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama. Commonly, in the sequence of stories about his previous lives, he stopped being reborn as a female quite early, before he stopped being reborn as an animal. Many Mahayana texts simply saw womanhood and Buddhahood as antithetical to each other. But other texts state that Buddhahood is neither male nor female, beyond gender altogether, while a few texts may possibly portray a Buddha in female form.

Still later, Vajrayana or Tantric Buddhism, which is based on the Mahayana but also goes beyond it, developed in India and then spread to Tibet.

Vajrayana Buddhism is often regarded as the form of Buddhism that most radically includes women and the feminine. This form of Buddhism has been much maligned in Western scholarship and is also suspect in many Buddhist circles, precisely because of its appreciation of women and the feminine principle. In addition, its widespread use of sexual symbolism has frequently been misinterpreted as permission for wholesale and indiscriminate sexuality. Basic Vajrayana imagery portrays all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas as partners—male and female—in sexual union. The fundamental pair consists of discriminating awareness (*prajna*), which brings insightful liberation, and her partner, compassion (*karuna*). Though she represents the epitome of realization, she is not isolated, but is joined in male-female union with compassion, understood as activity to save all sentient beings. No wonder this version of Buddhism reveres many important female leaders and founders, especially in Tibet. No wonder the most popular figures in Tibetan devotional Buddhism include female figures. Nevertheless, women as a class, did not experience anything close to equality with men as a class, over time, even in Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism.

Southeast Asia received the older, Theravada form of Buddhism, often considered to be the most conservative towards women. Though the nuns' order was transmitted to Sri Lanka, and was once strong there, it has died out in all current forms of Theravada Buddhism. Contemporary attempts to revive nuns' ordination lineages are extremely controversial and are often met with extreme skepticism, or even hostility. Furthermore, in Theravada countries, the monastic-lay hierarchy is quite strong and lay Buddhists are not usually expected to be seriously involved in meditation or in philosophical studies of Buddhism. Thus, women's options are quite limited. Women can take on a renunciate's lifestyle, but usually they are not officially recognized as monastics and their status is much lower than that of the monks. The most common role for women is that of a pious, but largely invisible, lay donor. Furthermore, low evaluations of women's potential for Buddhist practice and realization are common. Nevertheless, strong movements for lay practice are springing up in some Theravada contexts and a few women have become well respected lay meditation teachers.

East Asian Buddhism, both in China and in Japan, presents a different and more complex picture. Though East Asian forms of Buddhism are institutionally male dominated, Buddhism did bring new options to women in these societies. Furthermore, in East Asian Buddhism, some aspects of Buddhism favorable to women are highlighted more than in other forms of Buddhism. The full ordination of nuns has been preserved in China and Korea. These lineages of ordination, unique in the Buddhist world, are critically important in contem-

porary Buddhism, for they will be the source for renewing nuns' ordination lineages in other parts of the Buddhist world. Today, the nuns' *sangha* is healthy and prosperous in both Korea and Taiwan, with many young, well-educated women joining the order.

Japanese forms of Buddhism do not generally practice the same kind of strict monasticism as is found in the rest of the Buddhist world. Though monks were once ordained according to Indian norms, the traditional nuns' ordination never occurred in Japan. Eventually the bodhisattva precepts replaced the monastic precepts and a married priesthood gradually became the norm for Japan. Contemporary Japanese nuns receive these precepts, but they practice a lifestyle that is actually very similar to that of ancient Indian nuns, since, unlike their male counterparts, they usually do not marry or drink alcohol. Sometimes, these nuns may also fill the role of "temple priest," carrying out leadership and liturgical functions in their communities. As in Tibet, popular devotional forms of Buddhism, both in China and in Japan, do give significant reverence to female mythical and iconographical representations of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

The most recent development in the long history of Buddhism is its transmission to the West, which began early in this century. Since the mid-sixties, many more Asian teachers have taught in the West and Buddhism has grown exponentially. Currently, all forms of Buddhism can be found in Western countries, not only among Asian immigrants, who maintain Buddhism as part of their ethnic tradition, but also as the religion of choice of an articulate, well-educated, and dedicated minority of Europeans and Americans of European descent. This event provides the greatest opportunity in Buddhist history for Buddhist institutions to manifest, rather than to contradict, Buddhism's worldview and vision regarding gender relations. In the West, currently, women are active and influential in all forms of Buddhism.³ It is too soon to tell whether women will continue their strong presence and influence in future generations of Western Buddhism. With neglect, with too much complacency about possible patriarchal backlash, this exemplary situation could be destroyed in subsequent generations, as has happened previously, not only in Buddhism, but also in other major religions.

BUDDHISM: AUTHOR'S APPROACHES

My feminist history, analysis, and reconstruction of Buddhism is a task not heretofore undertaken by Buddhists or by scholars of Buddhism. It is also a task that can be undertaken only by combining, without confusing, the "insider's" and the "outsider's" understandings of Buddhism. This task requires the outsider's Buddhological and feminist knowledge. Those lacking the outsider's academic accuracy often misrepresent and whitewash aspects of their tradition

that they find unpalatable. They also often lack historical accuracy and willingness to critically evaluate their tradition. As a practicing academician and comparative scholar of religion, I find such omissions unacceptable. As a feminist, I cannot simply accept what any tradition may say about the proper roles for women or the supposed inherent limits of being female. Therefore, all my skills and training as a historian of religions and as a feminist will be employed fully throughout this history, analysis, and reconstruction.

On the other hand, someone who is only an outsider would not take the risks involved in analyzing and reconstructing Buddhism from a feminist point of view, nor would such a scholar be interested in the kind of feminist history of Buddhism with which I am concerned. I care, not only about scholarly accuracy, but about Buddhism after patriarchy. My interests in Buddhism are not merely or purely academic. I have invested as much in Buddhism as I have in feminism and in the academic study of religions and I have utilized traditional Buddhist methods of training equally with more conventionally academic approaches. Therefore, I am not satisfied by accounts of Buddhism that are limited to technical expertise but lack depth of insight into the tradition. To me, such accounts of Buddhism misrepresent the tradition as much as do historically inaccurate or uncritical insider's accounts of the tradition.

In this task, I will use the tools of the history of religions and the values of feminism to look at Buddhism, working as a Buddhist "theologian," if that word can carry an extended connotation in this non-theistic case. In this work, I do not intend to function mainly as a reporter or commentator on the opinions and works of others, nor will I function only a replica of my Buddhist teachers, mimicking what they have said. I will work as a Buddhist engaged in world-construction, using all of the tools at my disposal. This stance is unusual for Western writers on Buddhist topics, some of whom claim that scholarship and world-construction are incompatible with each other. As I argue extensively in the appendix on the history of religions, such an attitude is riddled with contradictions and is outdated. To engage in such world-constructive work is a privilege long given to scholars writing about Christianity, Judaism, or even feminism, but long denied to Buddhist scholars. It is time to break this taboo.

Buddhism is too vast for one author or one book to be able to discuss all its variants. Though I attempt to be as broad and non-sectarian as possible, my feminist history, analysis, and reconstruction of Buddhism necessarily reflect my own orientations within Buddhism, as well as the limits of my academic training.

When I function as an outsider, I am much more a historian of religions or a comparativist than a Buddhologist or a philologist and translator. Further-

more, my academic and linguistic training is in South Asia, though I have also taught myself enough about East Asia to teach undergraduate courses.

As an insider, I am trained in Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism, and within that framework, in the Karma Kagyu school. As a result, I see Buddhism in the "three-yana" perspective. This perspective stresses stages of spiritual development from the foundation of the basic "hinayana," which *does not* refer to contemporary Theravada Buddhism, to the more encompassing "mahayana," and into the indestructible "vajrayana." I will use this framework for organizing both my comments on the history of the roles and images of women in Buddhism and my feminist analysis of key Buddhist teachings.

The historical chapters, on the roles and images of women in Buddhism, will be largely limited to Indian and Tibetan Buddhism, given my academic and my *dharmic* specializations. However, the analysis and reconstruction are not similarly limited, since almost all major Buddhist teachings of all forms of Buddhism developed in India. A feminist analysis of the basic concepts of Buddhism, found in early Indian Buddhism as well as in all other forms of Buddhism, is, by definition relevant for all forms of Buddhism. Likewise, a feminist analysis of Indian Mahayana Buddhist concepts is relevant for East Asian forms of Buddhism, since they are grouped within the Mahayana camp. A feminist analysis of Vajrayana concepts and imagery is, of course, most relevant for Vajrayanists, though in the modern Buddhist world, characterized by efficient communication and a lessening of sectarianism, other Buddhists may find relevance in Vajrayana materials. Clearly, the feminist reconstruction I propose, though it owes something to Vajrayana inspiration, is quite non-sectarian and relevant to Buddhists of all schools and persuasions.

Finally, in this book, Buddhism is discussed as a religious and spiritual system aiming toward liberation. Buddhism could also be studied as a philosophical system. While these materials are important, I will avoid more technical aspects of Buddhist philosophy because, in my view, philosophy is secondary in Buddhism, a teaching tool for spirituality and an *upaya* (skillfully used method) for fostering insight beyond words and concepts. It is not an end in itself and does not communicate the heart of the tradition. Alternatively, Buddhism could be discussed in terms of its social, economic, and political developments. While sometimes critical for understanding some developments within Buddhism, I do not regard social, economic, or political factors as sufficient to provide an understanding of Buddhism.

RD AN ACCURATE AND USABLE PAST:

A Feminist Sketch
of Buddhist History