

DHARMA WORLD

For Living Buddhism and Interfaith Dialogue

CONTENTS

Religion and the Power of Women

Photo: Isamu Maruyama

Cover photos: Women religious leaders attend the Women's Assembly held before the Eighth World Assembly of the World Conference of Religions for Peace, in August 2006 in Kyoto. Cover design by Abinitio Design.

DHARMA WORLD presents Buddhism as a practical living religion and promotes interreligious dialogue for world peace. It espouses views that emphasize the dignity of life, seeks to rediscover our inner nature and bring our lives more in accord with it, and investigates causes of human suffering. It tries to show how religious principles help solve problems in daily life and how the least application of such principles has wholesome effects on the world around us. It seeks to demonstrate truths that are fundamental to all religions, truths on which all people can act.

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Women in Religion
and in Buddhism 3

Religions for Peace 27

Religion and Women 32

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Women and Nonviolence 35

Women in Religion and in Buddhism *by Gene Reeves* 3The Future of Women in Buddhism
by Karma Lekshe Tsomo 8Women Building a Just Society *by Sharon D. Welch* 12Being a North American Buddhist Woman:
Reflections of a Feminist Pioneer *by Rita M. Gross* 14Islam and the Status of Women *by Yoshiaki Sanada* 17Japan's Traditional Buddhism and the Gender Issue
by Noriko Kawahashi 20Religion and the Power of Women as Agents of Peace
by Lilian J. Sison 23Religions for Peace: Promoting the Roles of
Women of Faith in Peace Building *by Jackie Ogega* 27Religion and Women:
"Empower Women—Empower the Future"
by Johanna Boeke 32Empower Women through Faithful Connections
Around the World *by Barbara Kres Beach* 34

Dialogue

Women and Nonviolence—Clearing a Path for the Future
*The Twenty-seventh Niwano Peace Prize Commemorative
Dialogue between Ms. Ela Ramesh Bhatt
and Rev. Nichiko Niwano* 35

Reflections

Like a Mother's Love *by Nichiko Niwano* 39

The Threefold Lotus Sutra: A Modern Commentary (104)

The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law
Chapter 17: Discrimination of Merits (2) *by Nikkyo Niwano* 40

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Women in Religion and in Buddhism

by Gene Reeves

It can be argued that subjugation and subordination of women does not come so much from Buddhist teachings as from the customs of societies in which Buddhism exists.

In Islamabad, Pakistan, on January 4, the governor of the Punjab was assassinated because he opposed a death sentence for a Christian woman convicted of blasphemy. He was gunned down for speaking out in support of a religious woman. She had allegedly criticized the prophet Muhammad. The assassination was, of course, widely seen as an act of religious intolerance, which it was. But it is no accident that at the heart of the matter was a woman, a woman who pushed against religious conventions.

It is no secret that the world is faced with severe problems, so severe that many believe that the very survival of humanity is at risk. Among the challenges facing us are:

- Global warming
- Proliferation of nuclear weapons and likelihood of nuclear war
- Widespread poverty
- Breakdown of communications between children and adults
- Religious intolerance
- Destruction of the natural environment—oceans, lakes, rivers, mountains, forests, and farmlands
- Inadequate educational facilities and methods in much of the world

The list could easily be expanded.

More than half of humanity is women. It is very difficult even to imagine making much headway on any of these issues without the active participation of women. And it is difficult to imagine the active participation of women without a worldwide movement toward gender equality. If we had to pick only one, in my view, discrimination against women is the most important issue facing the world today. It is most important because it impacts nearly everyone and because it is key to so much else.

Poverty

Take, for example, poverty. Of course, more than enough men in this world are impoverished, and in some parts of

the world malnourished and starving. But the overwhelming majority of those who are seriously impoverished are women and children. This means, among other things, that a huge percentage of the next generation of humanity will lack adequate natal care, adequate nurture, adequate diet, and, perhaps most important, hope or vision for themselves. They will have no interest in such matters as nuclear disarmament. What difference does it make to me if the world is blown up by nuclear weapons if I am about to starve to death?

A simple logic is involved: If women are poor, children will be poor; if children are poor, they will likely be poor as adults. A vicious cycle of poverty leading to poverty leading to still more poverty ensues.

And with poverty comes disease; not only is AIDS rampant, but older controllable diseases such as tuberculosis and malaria are becoming more prevalent. With poverty also comes economic stagnation, especially in rural areas, which leads to greater poverty.

In September of 2010 the UN Summit on the Millennium Development Goals concluded with the adoption of a global

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action plan to achieve eight antipoverty goals by 2015. First on the list is ending extreme poverty and hunger. Others include combating HIV/AIDS, universal education, and child health. These goals are wonderful, but the truth is that with the worldwide economic slowdown, fewer jobs are available and more people are pushed into work that is not economically viable. Can you guess who are the first to be pushed out of work or into marginal work? Of course it is women.

While in some parts of the world girls are not even allowed access to education, in most of the world poverty creates a barrier to their education. Poverty will not be overcome, or even significantly ameliorated, without improved education for girls and improved work conditions for women.

And poverty is only one example. It's obvious that universal education cannot be achieved apart from the education of girls and women. It's obvious that child health will lag so long as women suffer both economic and educational deprivation.

Religion and Gender Equality

Many religious people and organizations profess an interest in such things as world peace, human happiness, and the common good. But almost nowhere do we find religious leaders and organizations promoting gender equality.

In fact, the opposite is the norm: when it comes to rights of women, religions most often are much more a part of the problem than they are of any solution. Thus, to the extent that they proclaim themselves interested in curing or saving the world, they practically guarantee their own failure.

There are exceptions. Though I am not personally familiar with them, some religious institutions and leaders express no interest at all in such ideals as world peace or human happiness. For them, religion is an individual, personal matter, completely separate from political, social, or macroeconomic concerns. In the face of global issues, they urge passivity and irrelevance. In failing to promote the advancement of women, at least they are consistent.

Gender Equality

Gender equality does not mean eradication of gender differences or even of role differences. Giving birth is the prerogative of women, but the nurture of children is in no way limited to women. Some tasks, at work or at home, may require the greater strength of men, but cooking and housecleaning certainly do not. To claim that equality entails such ridiculous outcomes as unisex toilets and locker rooms and the abolition of bras is an attempt to turn a most serious matter into a joke, so that it can be ignored.

We probably don't know the limits of gender equality. No doubt there will be differences in different cultural situations. But if religious leaders could challenge us to take the goal of gender equality and the abolition of discrimination against women seriously, I am confident that we would find ways to increase human flourishing and gradually find appropriate

ways to achieve something much closer to gender equality.

Growing up, I served as the sexton and acolyte at a small, working-class Episcopal church in New Hampshire. If I remember correctly, women were allowed to clean the church but not the area behind the altar rail, in the holiest part of the church. Women could buy wine for use in communion but could not serve it during a communion service. Only priests and acolytes, all male, were allowed to do that. Women could receive "holy communion" but not serve it, the province of priests. Women could draw the water for baptism but not touch the water once it was blessed. Again, only male priests and acolytes were allowed even to pour surplus holy water into the earth. Women could repair ceremonial vest-

Novice nuns study Buddhist teachings at Ze Thein Gyi temple in Mandalay, Myanmar, in 1998.

ments but never wear them. Women could elect to become the "wife" of a "man" in a religious ceremony, but they could not pronounce any couple to be husband and wife. Women taught church school, but none served on the board of trustees of the church.

The entire system, whether by intentional design or some more accidental set of circumstances, clearly served to put women down, to make it clear to adults and children that women were inferior and subordinate to men, and somehow even less clean than men and boys.

Perhaps other traditions, even other Christian traditions, were not as blatant in their subordination of women. But some were far worse. And to the best of my knowledge, none tried to take a leadership role in improving the situation.

Largely as a consequence of the women's liberation movement, the situation is better today, you might think. And in many places it is. In the United States well over half of main-line Protestant clergy and seminary students are women.

Some even worry that the Protestant ministry will follow the example of primary and secondary schoolteaching, which began the nineteenth century with nearly all public schoolteachers' being male and ended with nearly all being female. Of course, in both cases, declining salaries are a part of the change. So, while the change is not simple improvement, it does bring women's voices into the mix of religious leadership.

Buddhism?

If religions in general are a part of the problem of the subordination of women to men, what about Buddhism? Does not its insistence on the lack of ultimate difference between male and female, or on the inherent buddha-nature of all living beings, make Buddhism an exception? Hardly!

In Theravadin Buddhist countries and communities, until very recently no women monastics were recognized by the male monastic communities. In some they still aren't. But now, Dhammananda, formerly sociology professor Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, has founded Wat Songdharmakalyani in an attempt to restart the Thai women's monastic community. All the way she has been opposed and harassed by the official, male, monastic order. But now there are some twenty nuns, most ordained in Sri Lanka, where there are now about six hundred ordained nuns. And even in Thailand, the status of nuns is beginning to rise.

The situation has been somewhat better in Mahayana Buddhist countries, especially perhaps Taiwan, where nuns do play a leading role. At what can be said to be the largest Buddhist temple in the West, the Hsi Lai Temple in Los Angeles, a branch of Taiwan's Fo Guang Shan, leadership has been almost entirely in the hands of nuns, as is true for most Fo Guang Shan temples and administrative offices. This is not because the founder, Master Hsing Yun, a strong advocate of so-called humanistic Buddhism, was especially interested in promoting feminism but results, rather, from a simple recognition of the superior numbers and competence of nuns in Taiwan, where many of the brightest and most motivated women are attracted to serving society as monastics.

At the Tzu Chi Foundation, the situation is somewhat different. It is a huge worldwide relief organization founded by the nun Master Cheng Yen. But very little of its operations are overseen by its small coterie of nuns. Rather, its operations are often organized by Buddhist laywomen. To the best of my knowledge, in that organization there are no monks at all.

This is consistent with the situation in China itself. There are a few, very few, women's temples in China, for example in Hong Kong, Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Wutai-shan. Like all legal religious institutions in China, such temples in mainland China to some degree are under control of both the local and national Chinese Buddhist associations and ultimately of the Chinese government, both of which are largely run by men, especially the national Buddhist Association of China, whose top leaders are all monks. But when it comes

to both religious and social services, temples in China operate quite independently of government interference. Thus women's temples are controlled by women monastics, and the number of nuns is on the rise.

Unlike in Taiwan and China, in Japan unmarried nuns seem to be in decline. It is widely said that their numbers are diminishing. In my experience they are generally treated as inferior to male priests especially by Buddhist organizations. The situation for ordained and married women, so-called priests wives, remains one in which they are automatically treated as supportive of and subordinate to the work of their husbands.

Not only in Japan but even in Taiwan and in East Asian Buddhism in general, because ancient rules for monastics are adhered to, the most accomplished or highly placed nun is subordinate to the youngest and least accomplished monk. And it is also the case that in the context of traditional temples, laypeople are often regarded as inferior and subordinate to monastics; laywomen naturally come at the bottom of the hierarchy of monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen. Exceptions will be made if a woman happens to be highly successful in secular life and or has acquired considerable wealth. The irony is that in typical Buddhist temples everywhere, just as in typical Christian churches, the vast bulk of the work—attending to the altars, the incense burners, the candle holders, the cleaning, cooking, tea-making, serving of guests, and so on—is almost wholly done by women.

Women in Lay Buddhism

What about situations that are not as strictly bound by ancient rules and customs? It is true that lay Buddhist organizations, in both ancient and more recent times, have practiced greater gender equality than their monastic counterparts.

Though the White Lotus Rebellion against the Qing dynasty at the end of the eighteenth century is probably the most famous uprising, at least since the thirteenth century so-called White Lotus societies or White Lotus teachings have sprung up from time to time in China. Mainly peasant revolts against tyrannical rulers and landowners, including Buddhist temples, they were often inspired by a mixture of Taoist and shamanistic ideas and practices as well as Buddhist ones. Though primarily Pure Land movements, their central religious inspiration was usually, if not always, the Lotus Sutra. And they were vigorously criticized and usually suppressed for being antielite and antimonastic, often for having the audacity of being led by women. At times they were ridiculed and persecuted for including men and women indiscriminately.

Unfortunately we don't know much about the thinking of these groups, basically because they were made up of uneducated, illiterate peasants. They didn't write. And all we know of them was written by men who despised them, typically government officials and high-level monks.

Western scholarship on Asian Buddhism points to the close association of Buddhism with governments and those

who are closely associated with established political power. But this is true only if we entirely neglect such enormously important Buddhist movements as Guanyin devotion and White Lotus societies. Though texts are enormously important in the tradition, Buddhism is much more than monks writing about texts. It involves women and men being devoted to the female and male bodhisattva Guanyin, or Kannon.

Similarly, while today the most vital, energetic, and socially engaged Buddhism in Japan is found largely in lay Buddhist organizations, the term *Japanese Buddhism* is often used by scholars in ways that suggest that the only Buddhism in Japan is found in traditional temples and their headquarters, as though Rissho Kosei-kai and Soka Gakkai, for example, didn't even exist or were not Buddhist. If one ignores the existence of lay Buddhist movements in Japan, probably the significant involvement of women in Japanese Buddhism will be ignored as well.

In China there are also lay Buddhist organizations, one of the largest and most impressive being in the coastal city of Ningbo, the traditional place of departure to Putuo-shan, the island home of Guanyin Bodhisattva. The president of this Ningbo Lay Buddhist Gathering is a laywoman, a highly educated and accomplished woman originally from Shanghai. On mornings when she is speaking, it is nearly impossible to get in or even near this place, as so many want to hear her. While its membership is predominantly female, it is by no means an exclusively women's organization, but it is one that is proud of being entirely independent of monks.

It can be argued, correctly I think, that subjugation and subordination of women does not come so much from Buddhist teachings as it does from the customs of societies in which Buddhism exists. This may be especially true in East Asia, where Confucian ideas and ideals can easily be associated with subordination of women. A woman, after all, should first be obedient to her father, then to her brothers, then to her husband, and finally to her sons. But to the extent that Buddhists seek to improve the human condition, ameliorate the world's ills, create world peace, or establish this world as a pure land in fact, such Buddhists have an obligation to work to overcome inherited prejudices and dysfunctional customs. And when it comes to gender equality or gender justice, that is something we find very little of in East Asia today.

If one wants to excuse the religious institutions, one can always blame the injustice on God or karma! At the Parliament of the World's Religions in Melbourne in 2009, a Roman Catholic bishop informed the audience, in effect, that "since God has not told us to ordain women, we haven't, and we won't." The church, he seemed to suggest, is not the responsibility of the men who run it but only of God. A Buddhist monk was hardly better. He said that the reason women are subordinate to men and that nuns are therefore not the equal of monks is because of their karma, because of the things they had done in previous lives. Progress lies,

Buddhist nuns lead lay Buddhist women seated behind them in meditation at a nunnery attached to Yuan Kwang temple in Zhongli City, near Taipei, in 2002.

he said, not in changing customs and rules on earth but in women's being subservient enough to become eligible for rebirth as men, and then as men who become monks!

Sakyadhita

Discussion of women in Buddhism today would not be complete without a mention of Sakyadhita (daughters of the Buddha), the International Association of Buddhist Women. Founded in 1986 by the American university professor and Tibetan Buddhist nun Karma Lekshe Tsomo and others, it has been gaining momentum ever since, holding conferences in several countries, linking Buddhist women, nuns, and laywomen of many different Buddhist cultures and traditions, and giving voice, basically for the first time, to Buddhist women, on the one hand raising awareness of their special struggles and suffering and on the other hand creating awareness of their enormous potential to benefit society as a whole.

In a world in which there has been all too little religious leadership for gender equality, I think this is a very promising development. But men also need to be engaged in the struggle for gender equality by learning greater appreciation for women and their abilities. In the process they may find that treating women as partners is liberating for them.

What Is to Be Done?

Perhaps those of us who are Buddhists, especially "humanistic Buddhists" and "socially engaged Buddhists," should begin by examining ourselves and the organizations of which we are a part. Most such organizations have boards of trustees or something similar, a group that largely controls the organization. How many members of that group are women? In the bureaucracy that runs the organization, what percent of the

highest levels of administrative leadership is female? What percent of our clergy, or what functions as clergy, is female? If the spiritual leadership of the organization is hereditary, as it often is in Japan, how possible is it for a woman to succeed to the top leadership role? In ordinary administrative offices, in the context of everyday work, to what extent are women consistently and routinely put in subordinate roles?

Perhaps those of us who try to be Buddhist scholars could bring to the fore elements in our traditions that can be used to support strengthening the position of women in our organizations and in society at large.

The Lotus Sutra

The Lotus Sutra, which is widely adored, recited, and studied in all of East Asia and is the primary text for the vast majority of lay Buddhists in Japan, is hardly perfect when it comes to gender equality. But in both its teachings and its stories has been found inspiration for women to follow the bodhisattva way to liberation and buddhahood.

Among the most famous of the stories is one in which a young dragon princess becomes a buddha immediately, before the eyes of men who think a woman's body is too filthy to receive the Dharma, let alone become a buddha. Some modern readers complain that in the process of becoming a buddha the girl's female body is transformed into that of a male. That the body of a buddha is normatively male was simply assumed throughout Buddhism until the tenth century. But the point of the story is clear: at least with respect to the ability to become a buddha, a woman is at least as eligible or capable as a man. And, in fact, for centuries this story inspired countless women.

Chapter 10 of the Lotus Sutra, "Teachers of the Dharma," is also significant in this regard. Breaking through in principle the common Buddhist hierarchies of monk-nun-layman-laywoman and buddha-bodhisattva-pratyekabuddha-shravaka, it basically says that anyone can be a Dharma teacher, women as well as men. "Any good son or good daughter," the text says, who privately explains even a phrase of the sutra to a single person is a messenger of the Buddha, one who does the Buddha's work. The phrase "any good son or good daughter" is used consistently throughout the chapter, making it clear that women as well as men can be teachers of the Dharma.

We also find in chapter 24, "Wonderful Voice Bodhisattva," and chapter 25, "The Universal Gateway of the Bodhisattva Regarder of the Cries of the World," a translation of Guanshiyin, or Kannon. In both of these chapters it is said that when needed the bodhisattva can take on any of more than thirty different forms in order to help someone, and many of these forms are female. It's not at all clear how much influence the Lotus Sutra had on the development of Guanyin devotion in tenth-century China, but the transformation of that male bodhisattva into one who is both bodhisattva and buddha, at least for many, and both male and female, is one of the most significant developments in Asian Buddhism. It

is a kind of recognition of the female in the bodhisattva but also in the Buddha and in ourselves.

These and other parts of the Lotus Sutra can be used to support the liberation of women from oppressive rules and customs both within monastic communities and in the world at large. They can be used to encourage women to take up their rightful roles, both in religious communities and in societies.

Other Buddhist communities, those that are not especially related to the Lotus Sutra, can draw on it to inspire their own communities. But scholars in those traditions can also seek out the resources, literary and otherwise, that can be used to support gender equality in their own communities.

Reasons for Encouragement

It is sometimes said that the reason so many people have abandoned religious institutions in the modern world is that people, especially young people, find them irrelevant to the issues and aspirations of secular people. But I think the situation is actually worse than that. I think that religious institutions all too often support regressive, unjust, and harmful social customs and practices, especially the subordination and subjugation of women.

In Western Europe today, though many continue to embrace certain Christian beliefs and sentiments, the vast majority of people no longer support Christian institutions at all. Without the support of governments and the luxury of inherited properties and wealth, almost no churches would survive. To a lesser extent, and though the religious background is very different, something similar is true in Japan, where the number of temples and shrines appears to be declining every year. Could this be because when it comes to important social issues many ordinary people find them to be not merely irrelevant but even counterproductive?

Today in China, Buddhism is undergoing an enormous resurgence following the horrors of the Cultural Revolution. Temples are being reconstructed or renewed all over the country, and both male and female monastic communities are growing rapidly. Might it be possible that this growth is not only because of Buddhism's counterpoint to rampant consumerism but also because contemporary Chinese Buddhism has been influenced by Marxism, such that traditional Confucian-based subordination of women is mitigated? Research will be needed to address this question adequately. China is hardly a utopia for women, but on the whole it is probably more egalitarian than almost any other country in the world, at least with respect to everyday life and work. It certainly would be interesting if it turned out that Chinese Buddhism was not just reacting against such cultural change but even supporting the liberation of women, and in that process the liberation of men as well.

So, while progress is slow, there are reasons to be encouraged, even to think that it may be Buddhist women who will lead the way toward universal recognition of the value inherent in all human beings equally. □

The Future of Women in Buddhism

by Karma Lekshe Tsomo

*We can no longer afford to squander half of our precious human resources
by ignoring or devaluing women's spiritual potential. Nowhere
do the Buddhist texts say that teachers need to be male.*

The future of humanity relies on the procreative power of women, since the future of the human species literally depends on women's special power to give birth to children. Yet women's procreative potential is not the only reason to believe that women hold the key to the future. In addition to our biological gifts, we women have many other skills and talents to offer humanity. And Buddhist women have unique strengths and potential to succor our crisis-ridden planet.

In recent decades, attention to the topic of women in Buddhism has expanded dramatically. Since the 1960s, interest in Buddhism has grown exponentially throughout the world, facilitated by great Buddhist teachers, new research and publications on Buddhism in modern languages, the Internet, the growth of outstanding Buddhist educational centers, and an abundance of vibrant Buddhist social service activities. Especially in Western countries, the Buddha's teachings on peace, compassion, ethics, and human psychology have had a significant impact. Buddhist thought and culture have permeated Western culture to a remarkable degree, from religion to politics, the arts, and the marketplace. This new wave of interest in Buddhism has coincided with new educational and professional opportunities for women and an increasing awareness of women's capabilities and potential. Yet, unfortunately, women do not always have access to Buddhist education, nor are they equally represented in Buddhist institutions. Although the Buddha taught a path to liberation for the benefit of all beings, full recognition and equal opportunity do not extend to women in many Buddhist traditions. If the Buddha's teachings are liberating, shouldn't they be equally liberating for both women and men?

The answer to this question is fairly obvious. The Buddhist teachings speak about the nature of the mind and how to purify the mind of the delusions that cloud it in order to achieve lasting peace and happiness. The nature of the mind, which is pure awareness, is identical for women and men. The human potential to dispel delusion and realize perfect happiness is also identical for women and men. This

means that the Buddha's teachings are equally liberating for both women and men. So why is it that most of the stories of realized beings in Buddhist history speak about men? If all human beings can practice the Buddha's teachings and become free of greed, hatred, and ignorance, why don't we have more stories about realized women? If all living beings have the potential to become free from suffering, why don't we hear more about women achieving liberation?

In recent years, these questions have led to serious reflection and research among Buddhist scholars and practitioners about women's roles and potential in Buddhism. Many new books have appeared about women in Buddhist history and in contemporary Buddhist traditions. Many books have been written by women authors about their practice and insight into the teachings of the Buddha. The American Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön, one of the most popular Buddhist writers today, has been featured in a wide range of media, from *Newsweek* magazine to *The Oprah Winfrey Show* on television. Her books have become influential among people of

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all religious backgrounds and no religious background. Many studies document how women are taking new roles in Buddhist organizations and becoming highly respected as Buddhist teachers, especially in Western countries. The only remaining question is: What is holding Buddhist women back?

Before we tackle that question, perhaps we need to locate the question within present global realities. As the world becomes more advanced scientifically and technologically, it is painfully obvious that many areas of human development have not kept pace. We can now communicate to any precise point on the planet in a fraction of a second and disseminate information to millions of people with the click of a mouse, yet human beings are still enslaved to the same old negative emotions that have plagued humanity for millions of years. Wars and corruption continue to rage. Greed and hatred spin out brutish strategies to control others and their resources. Sadly, we have become more skilled at killing and cheating greater numbers of people with far less effort than ever before. Today, more human beings live in slavery than ever in human history. Children as young as six years old are sold into the sex trade, including many Buddhist children. Shortages of basic necessities like food and water affect millions of people, while a tiny fraction amass obscene wealth. Even in the so-called developed countries, our food, air, and water have become contaminated to a frightening degree. Virtues like loving-kindness and compassion seem to be in short supply.

For thoughtful Buddhists, the answer is easy. As the Buddha taught, we need to recognize and eliminate the sources of human suffering: greed, hatred, and ignorance. If we can address the root causes of these problems, both as individuals and as a society, we have a good chance of transforming the world and changing the course of human history. But greed, hatred, and ignorance will not go away without effort. That means that we need to study and practice the Buddhist teachings sincerely and intensively in order to really change things. We need the teachings and we need teachers to explain them, but perhaps more important, we need living examples of people who model Buddhist values and can serve as sources of inspiration to others. We need qualified Buddhist teachers who have developed a heart of compassion, sufficient wisdom, and skillful teaching methods to motivate others on the path. Sad to say, there seems to be a shortage of inspiring teachers in the world today.

The Buddha set a great example and continues to inspire millions of people even today. By leaving his luxurious life in the palace and setting off to discover the meaning of human existence, he demonstrated the importance of making life meaningful. Making a living and taking care of our young are very important, but they are not the ultimate purpose of human existence. Other animals—even ants and honeybees—also make a living and take care of their young, and some seem to do a better job of it than human animals do. What sets human beings apart from other animals is our

higher intelligence and our special capacity for spiritual practice. We have the capacity to unlock the secret and discover the meaning of life. By avoiding unwholesome actions and doing good deeds, we can achieve happiness in this life, higher rebirth in the next, or, if we really get to work, even perfect enlightenment. But we need teachers and we need role models to help us on the path.

This is where Buddhist women come in. If humanity is going to survive, we need all the help we can get. We can no longer afford to squander half of our precious human resources by ignoring or devaluing women's spiritual potential. Nowhere do the Buddhist texts say that teachers need to be male. Nowhere does the Buddha say that being a woman is the result of bad karma, though this rumor continues to circulate in Buddhist societies. In fact, when King Pasanadi bemoaned the birth of a daughter, the Buddha said that a girl child may turn out to be better than a son. When the Buddha's stepmother asked to join the Buddhist order, he confirmed that women have equal potential to achieve the fruits of the path, including liberation. Therefore, there should be nothing stopping women from practicing the Buddha's teachings, achieving realizations, and becoming the inspiring role models that humanity so badly needs. In fact, if a woman sets her mind to it, she may turn out to be a better practitioner than a man. By practicing the Six Perfections—generosity, ethical conduct, patience, joyful effort, concentration, and wisdom—women can proceed directly to buddhahood. By developing loving-kindness, compassion, and wisdom, women can awaken and help lead sentient beings out of suffering.

Since women make up half the world's population, we need to do our part to help address the serious problems that affect humanity today. Women already do more than our share in raising ethical, compassionate children, which is the key to humanity's future. Whatever gender we may happen to be in this lifetime, we need to set aside any misconceptions we may have about women's capabilities and encourage women to become the role models we wish to see in the world. We need to cut through any false thinking we may have about women's limitations and realize that all human beings have equal potential for awakening. Spiritually speaking, there are really no limitations. If we set our mind to it, we can purify the delusions that make us unhappy and, in their place, generate limitless love for all living beings. In a mind of pure love, no darkness can exist. If we cultivate patience, loving-kindness, contentment, and wisdom, then anger, hatred, greed, jealousy, attachment, pride, and negativity can no longer afflict us. A heart of pure compassion is happy, contented, and a source of happiness for others.

Of course, we cannot purify the mind all at once. We need to be constantly alert and mindful, moment to moment. With daily practice, conflicting emotions will have less and less power over us, freeing up tremendous energy that we can use to help alleviate the sufferings of living beings. A person with a pure and loving mind can bring limitless good to

our suffering world. As half the population here on planet Earth, women share the responsibility for global transformation equally with men. With full access to the Buddha's liberating teachings, women can shoulder our responsibility and work to benefit the world by embodying the values of peace and love that he taught. There is no aspect of contemporary life that would not benefit from Buddhist values.

If Buddhist women understand the logic of this proposition, then we must take our responsibility seriously. To work toward liberation for the benefit of the world is the highest meaning we can give our lives. The bodhisattva commitment to work toward becoming a perfectly enlightened being in order to liberate all beings from suffering is called *bodhicitta*. Once we generate this pure and perfect aspiration, we begin working step-by-step toward the goal of buddhahood. According to the Mahayana teachings, all sentient beings have this excellent potential. Women and men alike have the seed of awakening within, waiting to take root. Not only *can* all sentient beings become perfectly enlightened, they *definitely will* realize their potential and become buddhas; it is just a matter of time. One of my Tibetan teachers said: "The

only difference between us and Buddha Shakyamuni is that we are lazy." Isn't it time for us to get down to the hard work of purifying our minds and realizing that potential?

The first step toward freeing ourselves is to disengage from fruitless activities and eliminate the conflicting emotions that are causing us problems and sapping our energy. We can accomplish this by being vigilant in recognizing and dispelling negative emotions as soon as they arise. Destructive emotions are our worst enemies, more dangerous than any external enemy. For example, when anger arises, there is a danger that we may act on it, speak hurtful words, or do something to harm ourselves or others. If we allow anger to rage unchecked, we may lose control and strike out or even kill someone. We need to stay alert and catch anger as it arises. Even anger's subtler cousin, irritation, can be remedied with the application of patience.

To take another example, when desire arises, there is a danger that we may act on it. We may wish to buy consumer items that we do not need, contributing to the depletion of the earth's resources and cluttering up our homes and our minds. Attraction to physical beauty and the enchantment

Photo: Marlies Bosch

A commemorative photo of the participants at the eleventh Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women held in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, from December 28, 2009, to January 3, 2010. Every two years an international conference is held to bring laywomen and nuns from different countries and traditions together to share their experiences and encourage projects to improve conditions for Buddhist women, especially in developing countries. The twelfth Sakyadhita Conference will be held June 12–18 in Bangkok, Thailand.

One of the plenary sessions at the eleventh Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women.

of desire may get us into some sticky situations. It can lead us into unsuitable partnerships, causing great confusion and suffering to ourselves and others. We need to be mindful and catch desire as it arises. By recognizing the mind's tricks, we can avoid getting ensnared in unwholesome, complicated situations. As the Buddha said, "Contentment is the greatest wealth."

The second step toward freeing ourselves is to put the Buddha's teachings into action in our everyday lives. Reciting the sutras and reflecting on loving-kindness are no longer enough. Isn't it time to actively engage in relieving the sufferings of the world? This begins in our own family, neighborhood, and workplace and gradually extends to benefiting needy beings wherever they may be. Buddhist social activism can take many forms, from family counseling to international relief work. We may volunteer in a hospice, a hospital ward, or a prison ward. We may make contributions to education projects or hurricane relief. Whatever forms our activism may take, it is clear that Buddhists need to become more socially engaged in alleviating the daunting problems that beset the human family today. We can practice the virtue of generosity by giving our time and resources and also enhance our minds through the practice of compassion. This is a win-win situation.

Do women have greater potential for the inner work of purifying the mind and a greater responsibility for the outer work of compassionate social action? I believe that all human beings have equal potential and share equal responsibility. Yet women seem to work especially hard. The United Nations has documented that 60 percent of the world's work is done by women, though they are often not compensated. History has shown that women are exemplary caretakers for beings in need, yet their loving-kindness and generosity are

Participants actively take part in a workshop at the eleventh Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women.

often undervalued. Many women skillfully alleviate the day-to-day sufferings of those who are ill, weak, or unable to take care of themselves, yet their compassionate contributions may be overlooked or overshadowed by other people's wishes and expectations. Women often set aside their own spiritual development in order to care for others, leaving little time for formal Dharma practice. How do we resolve this dilemma?

One solution is to transform caregiving into a bodhisattva practice. If we are able to generate the bodhisattva attitude, every compassionate action can become a bodhisattva practice. But caring for others does not mean that we need to put our spiritual development on hold. We need to balance our time between spiritual practice and service. Understanding when, where, how, and how much to practice and how to serve requires wisdom, personal honesty, and sometimes courage. Developing wisdom requires educating ourselves to continually deepen our understanding of the Buddha's teachings.

The Buddha's teachings are a treasure trove. They are not simply to be chanted. We need to put them into action. Women are developing the confidence to learn and apply these teachings here and now. We have a special responsibility to awaken our wisdom and compassion and apply these priceless values. We can take inspiration from great practitioners, past and present, both women and men. Today a global movement, led by the Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women, is inspiring and encouraging Buddhist women to work together and optimize our potential for enlightenment.

Human life is precious and fleeting. By making the most of every moment and working together, the future can be very bright. Women definitely have the power to transform the world. □

Women Building a Just Society

by Sharon D. Welch

"The ennobling truths are not just challenges to act with wisdom and compassion but challenges to act with creativity and aesthetic awareness. . . . The human world is like a vast musical instrument on which we simultaneously play our part while listening to the compositions of others. The creation of ourself in the image of awakening is not a subjective but an intersubjective process. We cannot choose *whether* to engage with the world, only *how* to."

—Stephen Batchelor, *Buddhism Without Beliefs:
A Contemporary Guide to Awakening*

When I first became director of women's studies at the University of Missouri, I genuinely believed that women were morally superior to men and that we would inevitably and inexorably use power in ways that were fundamentally just, liberative, and transformative. Imagine my shock and dismay when I discovered that we were as likely to abuse power as men—albeit often in culturally gender-specific ways—isolating those who did not share the same strategies for social change, scapegoating and shaming publicly those who explicitly expressed the racism, homophobia, or classism that we all feared still remained deep in our habits of seeing and acting. So intense was the desire to be right, to create the ideal feminist social order, that any difference in strategy or analysis was interpreted as betrayal, any failure interpreted as not being the behavior of a real feminist.

While it is true that we can only see the nature of a social

system by taking into full account its impact on the lives of those who are ignored, marginalized, and exploited, this does not mean that there is any multitude, any group, less likely than others to abuse power—as the twentieth-century theorist of anticolonial struggles, Frantz Fanon, knew quite well, and as revolutionaries of all sorts forget to our peril.

As we take up the challenge of a revised moral imagination that reckons honestly with our own failings, I find the early work of the feminist theologian Mary Daly to be compelling and thought-provoking. In 1975, in her groundbreaking work, *Beyond God the Father*, Mary Daly provided a devastating indictment of the systemic misogyny of Western religions and philosophical thought. In this same work we find another challenge, equally provocative, but unaddressed by Daly, or by many of us who have continued the project of feminist theology. Daly argues that once we stop the projection of evil, fallibility, and finitude on women, we may finally confront the real mystery and nature of human evil and limitations.

Given the successes of first- and second-wave feminism in much of the world, we have the opportunity, in our current theological and political milieu, of taking up this unfinished task, a task essential to the opportunities of our current moment of political change. In many parts of the world, we are in a third wave of revolutionary activism. The first wave was the disclosure of the humanly constructed nature of social hierarchies that had, for millennia, seemed natural, or the divine order of things: the secondary status of women, slavery, the exploitation of the working class. The second wave was the work of identity politics, the forceful declaration of our complex identities, acknowledging the differences among women because of race, class, and sexual orientation, celebrating the full humanity of people whose identities have too long been ignored or denigrated—people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender; people with disabilities; people of a multitude of ethnic and racial back-

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grounds. Once, however, we know what is unjust, once we know whose voices need to be included as full participants in social and political life, what next?

As an activist, I have seen the impact of speaking truth to power: the inspiration and sense of identity evoked by clarification denunciations of injustice and faithful witness to ideals of justice and peace. As we take up the task of using power truthfully, however, we recognize that the work is not done when the protests are heard. Rather it is here, it is now, that another type of work begins. And this work is as daunting for workers as for owners, for people of color as for people who are white. It is as difficult for women as it is for men.

When I began work as director of women's studies, I was surprised by the depth of the challenge of giving sustainable material shape to revolutionary aspirations, even when those goals are genuinely shared. I was shocked to see the folly, delusion, and cruelty that marred our efforts to implement our feminist ideals. I did not know at that time what I have

ment shared goals, we, like the oppressor whose actions we so rightly denounced, are also subject to ego-driven conflicts, and decisions based more on fear than trust and hope.

One of the early projects of feminist activists was the creation of microtopias, spaces of justice and freedom founded on the exercise of "power-with" rather than "power-over." Drawing on the work of the early twentieth-century management theorist Mary Parker Follett, we claimed that power did not have to be antagonistic, but our power could empower others, that we could find ways in which co-creativity emerged from eliciting the best in others, as in ourselves. This is the creative energy of jazz improvisation, and it is being given concrete forms in some of the most compelling contemporary models of business leadership. This feminist vision of "power with" is now shared by many men, as well as women. Bill Joiner and Stephen Josephs, for example, describe the shift from the "heroic leadership" of the expert and achiever, individuals who impose their will on others, to the "post-heroic leadership" of the catalyst, co-creator, and synergist—individuals who help a group elicit the best insights and skills from all members, and, furthermore, align those insights and skills with the greater opportunities of the world around us for justice, well-being, and flourishing.

Feminists have easily welcomed and extolled the ideals of "power-with," yet its exercise in daily life is as daunting for us, as it is for men. The challenges of fully embodying the exercise of "power-with" are twofold:

1. We cannot know in advance which visions will spark the imaginations of others, nor which plans will be seen as plausible and energizing.
2. We can neither predict nor control the actual impact of our efforts.

While certainty may at times be a creative delusion, uncertainty is the inescapable matrix of all our problem-solving efforts. It is crucial that we remember that any situation is intrinsically fluid, pregnant with multiple and unpredictable possibilities. Good and ill may emerge from the same action. Even our commitment to justice and peace through the exercise of skillful means may lead in directions and result in consequences we can neither predict nor control.

Our role, as men, as women, as mindful participants in an emerging global culture, is not simply to denounce the real and announce the ideal. Our role is to be catalysts of justice, and of flourishing, tilling this soil, nurturing these roots, not for a distant future, but for this time, this place, for these companions who seek together to live deeply and well. □

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"There are multiple and mutually exclusive 'bests,' and we cannot implement all plausible solutions at a given time."

learned since. The move from knowing what should be done, to actually getting it done, is as great a shift, ethically and philosophically, as the move from "is" to "ought."

For here, as we move from "ought" to "how," we encounter a paradox.

We may critique alone and we may even envision alone, but to implement that vision, to build on that critique, requires the cooperation of other people—other people to actually carry out the work on a daily basis, other people to judge, refine, and critique new systems and processes. And, as you may have noticed, other people tend to have different ideas—not only different ideas of how to meet shared goals, but possibly better ideas about the most fitting, concrete ways to administer health care, or to support ecologically sustainable forms of energy production.

Pragmatists encourage us to seek the best in any given situation. The reality, however, is that there are multiple and mutually exclusive "bests," and we cannot implement all plausible solutions at a given time. And, as we seek to imple-

Being a North American Buddhist Woman: Reflections of a Feminist Pioneer

by Rita M. Gross

The process of contemplating and the encouragement to investigate for oneself mean that Buddhism is alive and that its insights can be applied to any situation or problem one might encounter.

In this informal essay, I would like to reminisce about some of my key experiences and insights as a North American Buddhist woman and scholar-practitioner. How did I become a Buddhist in the first place? What was it like thirty years ago to be both a Buddhist and a feminist? Why do I think that Buddhists still need to be feminists? What has been most important to me about being a Buddhist? I would also like to reflect on what I have always considered the most important topic for Buddhist women—the presence of women teachers.

One may well wonder, given Buddhism's dismal record on equity and equality for women, why a Western woman already well grounded in feminism would choose to become a Buddhist. Indeed, after I began serious Buddhist practice in 1976 and took refuge in the Three Jewels in 1977, most of my feminist friends and colleagues were totally mystified. They could understand Jewish and Christian feminists who would decide to work for change within their inherited traditions, but they could not understand why someone would convert to a foreign tradition not known for its support of women's equality.

Buddhism caught up with me in the fall of 1973. I was teaching a college-level survey course on Buddhism for the second time, struggling to understand its basic doctrines more adequately. I was also extremely unhappy. I had just moved to Eau Claire, Wisconsin, where I have now lived for almost forty years, and had quickly realized it was going to be a very lonely place for me. I was also mourning the terminal illness of my lover, whom I had seen for what I knew would be the last time just days earlier. As I walked to my class on a beautiful fall day, trying to better understand the Four Noble Truths, I longed only to be able to appreciate the beauty of that day unburdened by my misery. Suddenly things became very clear. I could not appreciate the beauty of my immediate surroundings because I so desperately wanted things I could not have. Buddhism's second noble truth, that desire is the

cause of suffering, became completely clear. I did not need to be convinced of the first noble truth, that suffering pervades conventional life. But the third noble truth, that suffering ceases when its cause—attachment—is given up, also became utterly clear in a vivid instant of complete detachment and openness. I stood still and said to myself, "The Four Noble Truths are true!" Unlike most academics, who might hold ideas philosophically without taking their practical consequences to heart, I immediately thought that if the first three truths were actually true, then the fourth truth, which details Buddhism's specific path, must also be true. That would mean that I should learn to meditate, something not easily accomplished in northern Wisconsin in 1973.

I did find a way to learn to meditate, and several years later, in 1977, I finally found my way to one of the major centers for Buddhism in North America—Boulder, Colorado—to receive deeper training in meditation. I had decided before I left Wisconsin that, while meditation was valuable, I would

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not become a Buddhist. The main reason was that I had already been through two sexist religions (Christianity and Judaism) and didn't need a third trip through a religion that preferred men to women and limited women severely. So what happened? I can only say that the experience of living in a Buddhist environment thoroughly captivated me. I remember crying as I decided that Buddhism was simply too profound to let the patriarchs have it without protest. But I went into Buddhism with my eyes wide open. I knew that taking refuge in the Three Jewels meant that I would also be writing *Buddhism after Patriarchy*.

It was not easy then, nor is it especially easy now, to be both a Buddhist and a feminist. Many seem to believe that a white North American cannot authentically be a Buddhist, a viewpoint my Tibetan woman teacher scorns. Buddhists generally are not very sympathetic to feminism. Many North American Buddhists, having little knowledge of Buddhist history or of Asian Buddhism, deny that Buddhism has any patriarchal baggage, citing the usual naive claim, "I've never experienced any discrimination." To them, somehow this claim seems to prove that male dominance has never existed in the past or the present. In addition, Buddhists have problems with "causes," especially when they are voiced in an aggressive manner that suggests self-clinging and attachment. However, issues of equity for women and women's equality are especially avoided. Even the engaged Buddhist movement, which self-consciously takes up contemporary political, economic, and social issues, almost never concerns itself with gender analysis or women's issues.

Sometimes people try to corner me into declaring a primary loyalty. But to me, the Buddhist way of hyphenating its most profound wordings about reality solves that dilemma. Rather than prioritizing deep insights, Buddhists usually claim that, though different, they are of equal value. Thus, we talk of the inseparability of form and emptiness as emptiness-luminosity. Neither word by itself really captures what Buddhists say about the ultimate nature of our experience, and both are necessary. But the hyphen makes them, in a sense, one word. I would say the same of Buddhism-feminism. When both are properly understood, there can be no hostility or division between them.

Having taught and written about Buddhism so much for so many years, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what about Buddhism makes me so committed and enthusiastic. It would be easy to say, as do so many Western Buddhists, that Buddhist meditation practices are what make Buddhism so appealing. A meditation practice involving silent sitting for considerable periods of time was the completely new ingredient in our lives. Early on, it was meditation that made all the difference. It had a profound effect on me in only a few years, making my rage over sexist injustice unworkable. But one doesn't really have to be a Buddhist to practice the basic discipline of mindfulness-awareness, or *samatha* meditation. Many Christians also practice that form of medita-

tion, which was common in India before the Buddha's time.

In the long run what brings joy to me and what keeps me in Buddhist orbit is what is unique to Buddhism—*vipashyana*. This term is impossible to translate accurately, though "special insight" is a common translation. For most people, Special Insight does not occur without the formal meditation practice of *samatha*, without the many types of mindfulness-awareness practice, but Special Insight is not limited to times of formal meditation. The experience that first turned me to Buddhism was an experience of Special Insight, a penetrating and clarifying breakthrough to a different level of understanding. For me, a verbal person, those experiences cry out to be put into words, but the pith of Special Insight is always beyond words and concepts, which is not to say that verbal, conceptual formulations are useless. Buddhism has an immense repertoire of verbal, conceptual modes of pointing to the contents of Special Insight, all of which delight me because of their profundity and the way they point to what really does matter, what really is real. Initially, the Buddhist view illumined my suffering, an experience that is not an unusual route into Buddhist practice. Along the way, it provided a great deal of insight into how to think about gender issues effectively. Now it provides me with cogent ways to think about one of the pressing issues of our time, religious diversity. In all cases, the words and concepts that can be so helpful arise out of experiences of utter stillness and equanimity that are so central to Buddhist sensibilities. This process—the insights that arise when one practices Buddhist disciplines and the way these insights illumine core issues of human existence—is, for me, the enduring delight of being a Buddhist.

That enduring delight, however, comes from something quite different from the sheer intellectual agility that dominates many academic contexts. Verbalizations of Special Insight are not quite the same as debating points, nor is their purpose to solve intellectual puzzles in which one is not personally invested. Rather, they are the tradition's best distillation of the experiences of its best minds—to be contemplated and investigated thoroughly, until one knows for sure, for oneself, whether they ring true or not. The process of contemplating and the encouragement to investigate for oneself mean that Buddhism is alive and that its insights can be applied to any situation or problem one might encounter. Thus, as I intimated earlier, I find Buddhist teachings too profound for me to be deterred by Buddhism's historical male dominance. And in the long run, it has always been the Buddhist view that compels me to continue the journey, whatever other frustrations, especially reluctance even to acknowledge that Buddhism has gender issues, may continue to accompany me on my path.

In authentic Buddhism, that profound view and the accompanying practices are transmitted by a teacher. Nowadays, most or all of these teachings and practices are also available in books, but without personal instruction from a teacher, it

is difficult to grasp these teachings at a deep level. Like many other wisdom traditions, Buddhism doubts the ability of written materials, by themselves, to convey deep insights and does not give final authority to texts. They are too easily perverted by the self-interest of the naive reader, as any consideration of the religious fundamentalisms common today in religions that give ultimate authority to a text should quickly indicate. Relying on their texts, religious leaders claim to have direct access to the mind of God and seek to dominate all people on the basis of their conviction that they have the truth for everyone. Buddhist teachers do not operate in this manner.

Buddhist teachers, including myself, often say that Buddhist teachings are extremely simple and basic—so simple that they are easily missed. Thus, it is as difficult to overestimate the importance of teachers in Buddhism as it is to overestimate the importance of personal verification of the relevance of what one has been taught. Though Buddhists regard teachers very highly, the purpose of a teacher is to help one discover what one is unlikely to discover on one's own, not to provide beliefs or ideologies for the student. Without personal verification through examining one's own experiences, any profound teachings remain fundamentally irrelevant to the student. Thus, in Buddhism, as in many religious traditions that emphasize personal transformation through spiritual practices, the teacher-student relationship is subtle and profound. It is up to the student to discern that the teacher is trustworthy, not a spiritual fraud, and then to practice assigned disciplines seriously. The teacher has the responsibility to discern the student's needs accurately and not to be gratifying her or his own ego needs through having disciples.

In my work as a Buddhist feminist, I have always emphasized the importance of women teachers, for many reasons. I have argued many times in the past and I would still argue today that the most serious indicator of male dominance in Buddhism historically has been the relative absence of female teachers. I would also argue, as strongly as possible, that the bottom line determining whether or not Buddhism has overcome its patriarchal tendencies is the presence of female teachers. It has been argued that because the Dharma is beyond gender, it doesn't matter whether women or men are the teachers of that timeless, genderless Dharma; the message would be the same in any case. But I would argue that because the Dharma is beyond gender, therefore, one should expect that there would be about equal numbers of women and men Dharma teachers unless humanly constructed social barriers are placed in the paths of women (or men). No other manifestation of the claim that Dharma is beyond gender makes sense. Why would there be more men than women teachers of the timeless Dharma that is beyond gender? Yet throughout Buddhist history, women Dharma teachers have been relatively rare, though in contemporary North American Buddhism about half the teachers of Buddhism are women.

In my own life as a Buddhist practitioner, I have worked with both women and men teachers, though early in my practice life, my primary teacher was a man whose activities were problematic to many women, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche. My own position has always been that, while theoretically, I would like to work with a woman teacher, ideology does not determine my choice of teachers. I would always become a student of the teacher with whom I felt the closest relationship, the teacher who I felt offered the clearest and most profound instruction in Dharma, rather than seeking out a woman teacher simply because she was a woman.

Nevertheless, I was curious about the few women who did teach in the Tibetan tradition, and I made an extra effort to meet them. Contrary to ideology, but consistent with good sense about Dharma, I did not feel especially compelled by these women *as* teachers. This pattern persisted even when I met the woman who is now my principal teacher, and for whom I now function as a senior teacher, Jetsun Khandro Rinpoche. Eventually many things converged, and somewhat against my earlier expectations, I began to realize how much I had learned from Khandro Rinpoche, how much major issues had been transmuted, and how much I was really in her world. At that point I began to consider her my primary teacher, though my other teachers also remain important. Now my relationship with her fits the classic description of the teacher-student relationship in Tibetan Buddhism, and I am very happy about this development, which really did not occur with either of my primary male teachers, despite years of serious study and practice.

But despite my feminist viewpoint that the presence or absence of women teachers determines whether Buddhism is overcoming its heritage of male dominance, I am not convinced that my relationship with Khandro Rinpoche developed *because* she is a woman but, rather, because she *is* the teacher that she is, as well as because of an apparent karmic link between us. That is as it should be. I think that this whole process is highly instructive regarding the actual relationship between ideology and authentic experience. It was good for me to learn that whatever my belief system might be, I could regard a male teacher as my primary teacher even when a female teacher was also present. It is also good to know that when I came to regard Khandro Rinpoche as my primary teacher, it was because of her being the teacher she is, not because she is a woman. I am also delighted finally to have the kind of relationship with an authentic teacher for which I had always longed.

In sum, what is it about being a Buddhist that delights me so much? The profundity of its view, the transformative power of its spiritual disciplines, and the results—real change, a transformation from unhappiness to contentment. On the one hand, Buddhist disciplines bring taming of ideology and anger, and on the other hand, they bring a deepening of nonfixated passion for liberation—at all levels. Who could ask for more? □

Islam and the Status of Women

by Yoshiaki Sanada

Islamic teaching itself is not the source of discrimination against women, this writer argues. There are no expressions of sexual discrimination, such as that women were created from men, in Islamic human creationism.

At the moment, the specter of intolerance is sweeping through the Western world. In the local communities of Christian countries, a backlash has emerged against local Muslims and their Muslim communities, whose presence is being more strongly felt due to their population growth. Suspicion and mistrust are rampant. That intolerance merely breeds intolerance on the other side, regardless of time or place, is a universal truth that can be learned from history. As numerous tragic situations have taught us, attempting to protect tolerance with intolerance brings about hatred and enmity, destruction, and slaughter.

Banning the Wearing of the *Burqa* and *Niqab*

The anti-Islamic adverse reaction that can be observed in Christian countries is not just negative responses simply to physical facilities such as new mosques or minaret construction; it reaches into the personal lives of Islamic women, their customs and manners. Already, in the Netherlands, Belgium, France, and Spain, women are prohibited by law or ordinance from wearing the *burqa* or *niqab*.

The donning of veils such as the *burqa* or *niqab* that the

anti-Islamic bloc criticizes loudly as a symbol of discrimination against women actually just follows the admonition in the Qur'an for women to be discreet and cover important parts of the body for the sake of modesty. "And tell believing women to cast down their eyes and guard their private parts and not show their finery, except the outward part of it. And let them drape their bosoms with their veils and not show their finery except to their husbands, their fathers" (24:31).

In the Islamic world, the social function and role of females wearing the veil have changed over time and also change with different peoples and regions. Yet the wearing of the veil, if we follow the basic principles of Islamic teaching, has always been to show that women have taken their honor to heart with modesty, grace, and discretion; it is not evidence of anything other than this. Seeing the veil as a symbol of backwardness is a Eurocentric point of view that thinks of Western dress as the universal global standard.

Islam and the Position of Women in the Islamic World

I believe that the image that women have become subservient to male control through the institution of segregating women (*purdah*) and the "four wives system" (whereby a Muslim man may have up to four wives) is what is behind the anti-Islamic movement in the Christian world, where some countries have prohibited even the personal customs of native dress of women. To be sure, the Islamic world, as with other cultures, has had various community traditions of discrimination against women that have been deep-rooted in the past and that exist even today. But should we view Islamic teaching itself as the source of such discrimination against women?

As far as reading the original Islamic texts, Islamic teaching itself is not the source of discrimination against women. Muhammad Asad, who at one time was called "the ambassador of Islam" by the international community, sounded the alarm to Muslims, as a Muslim, in *The Road to Mecca*. "It was not the Muslims that had made Islam great: it was Islam that had made the Muslims great." "The decline of the Muslims

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was not due to any shortcomings in Islam but rather in their own failure to live up to it." Needless to say, with any religion, it is necessary to carefully compare the religious doctrines underlying a certain custom with the actual reality of the custom in the society in which it exists.

Islam as the Religion of *Tawhīd*

Islam is said to be the teaching of *tawhīd*. *Tawhīd* means the reduction of all phenomena to One, in other words, unification. When this principle of unification is applied to the existence of an Absolute God, the result is "the one and only God"; this applies to all monotheistic faiths. For that reason, the revealed religions of Judaism and Christianity are also *tawhīd* faiths. Why, then, is Islam said to be more of a *tawhīd* faith than the others?

An intrinsic feature of Islam is that it does not restrict this principle to God alone but applies it to the existence of all of God's creations in the universe and even the social behavior within that existence. In the case of social behavior, all are ranked equally as one indivisible whole—the sacred and the profane, individuals and the community, the spirit and the flesh, the present world and the world to come. As to all Creation, because the Creator is entirely the source of all things in nature, humans, the earth, animals, plants, and minerals are all God's creations and in their existence they all have equal value, even if they have differing and disparate natures, faculties, or functions.

Tawhīd strongly denies that any existence or being holds

a higher or lower place in a vertical hierarchy and places all of these in horizontal relationships that are equal. The life principle of equality can be derived from this *tawhīd* ontology and its thoroughly horizontal treatment, which on the other hand also attaches great importance to the fact that there is disparity between separate existences as they stand, and respects the identity inherent in that disparity.

The Androgynous Nature of Human Creation in the Qur'an

In the Qur'an the following words of God are written: "O people, fear your Lord who created you from a single soul, and from it He created its mate, and from both He scattered abroad many men and women" (4:1).

The distinctive thing about this revelation of human creation is the androgyny or asexuality of Creation. What is first created is neither male nor female, but a single soul (*nafs wāḥidah*), and from that soul a mate (*zawj*) is created. Both *nafs* and *zawj* are terms that are either androgynous, indicating both male and female characteristics, or asexual, indicating neither characteristic. It is only after this soul obtains a mate that, for the first time and from that entity, specific men (*rijāl*) and women (*nisā'*) appear on the scene.

There are no expressions of sexual discrimination, such as that women were created from men, in Islamic human creationism. First, a soul (*nafs* also can mean "person" in English) was created, followed by the creation of a mate, after which these souls (human beings) came to possess the inherent sex-

A woman reads campaign posters for a female city council candidate before the December 2006 elections in Tehran.

ual roles of male and female. This signifies that it is human nature that essentially provides what a human is and that the distinction between male and female is merely attributive.

This Islamic understanding of people leads, by necessity, to a disavowal of such things as racial discrimination, discrimination based on family background or wealth, and gender discrimination. The clearest expression of this is in "the Last Sermon of the Holy Prophet of Islam" given by the prophet Muhammad shortly before his death. After saying, "O mankind, We have created you male and female and made you nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another" (49:13), he elaborates, "There is no superiority for an Arab over a non-Arab and for non-Arab over an Arab, nor for the white over the black nor for the black over the white except in God-consciousness. All mankind is the progeny of Adam, and Adam was fashioned out of clay. Behold, every claim of privilege whether that of blood or property is under my heels."

The Essential Equality of the Sexes and the Division of Roles

This sermon forcefully proclaims that all humans are equal, regardless of lineage, skin color, disparity in wealth, or gender, and that their relative merit as humans will be decided by their devoutness. Islam firmly rejects sexual discrimination wherein women are treated as inferior to men. "As to the believers, males and females, they are friends of one another. They enjoy what is good and forbid what is evil, perform the prayers, give the alms and obey Allah and His Apostle. It is those on whom Allah will have mercy" (9:71).

Humans are social beings, however, and it is impossible for them to exist without social relationships. Men are men, and likewise, women are women. Specifically, men are husbands, fathers, and sons, and women are wives, mothers, and daughters, and they each assume their social roles.

In the worldview of Islam's *tawhīd*, while men and women are perceived as being essentially equal, differences between men and women are directly acknowledged, and in light of those differences men and women help each other in a mutually complementary status. "[The All-Mighty, the All-Knowing] created all the pairs" (43:12). "They are a raiment for you, and you are a raiment for them" (2:187). Here, men and women (husbands and wives) differ from each other but protect and complete each other like clothing that fits perfectly; both are considered the "pairs" that become the basic units of society.

Equality of Men and Women in Social Life and Women's Social Participation

It is well known from the *ḥadīth* that in early Muslim societal tradition women participated in the collective obligations of the public life of society, including jihad for defense, as well as discussing, deciding, and managing public affairs. Muslims, men and women alike, are expected to fulfill their collective responsibilities toward the Muslim community and exert themselves so that the community will thrive. There is no disparity between men and women in the public sector of a society that requires joint effort.

Indeed, there are those who assert that Islam discriminates against women, citing the passages from the Qur'an that state, "Women have rights equal to what is incumbent upon them according to what is just, although men are one degree above them" (2:228), and "Men are in charge of women, because Allah has made some of them excel the others, and because they spend some of their wealth" (4:34). But the problematic parts—"just one degree above" and "some of them excel the others"—must not be interpreted alone without their overall context. These words refer to nothing more than the financial matters having to do with support, and have no relevance to other matters. Indeed, men are in a better position than women to bear the responsibilities of supporting and maintaining the material aspects of the life of a family, but nothing more than that. Take away the one matter of supporting the family, and a husband has no more power or authority than a wife.

The Path to Tolerance

Emotionally charged tales about the position of women in Islam are rampant, tales that never seem to change and that are based on prejudice and misunderstanding. There is all the more reason now, when cultural friction has intensified and the spirit of tolerance is being lost, to call for a close understanding based on Islamic teaching and for reliable observations made in the context of the actual conditions of life, and most of all for fair and objective introspection that is not caught up with irresponsible tales. □

All quotations from the Qur'an in this essay are from *The Qur'an: A Modern English Version*, trans. Majid Fakhry (Reading: Garnet Publishing, 1997).

Japan's Traditional Buddhism and the Gender Issue

by Noriko Kawahashi

Inherently, the teachings of Buddhism point the way to equality among all human beings. We must not lose sight of the fact that the Buddha did not discriminate among human beings by their birth regardless of race, ethnic group, gender, or anything else.

In any discussion of Buddhism in modern Japan, one must confront the fact that it is common for monks to marry. Japanese Buddhism is made exceptional by this phenomenon of clerical marriage and by the resulting spread of hereditary succession in Buddhism. In such a country as Bhutan, where Mahayana Buddhism is the state religion, monks do not marry. They follow the practice of renouncing secular life and living communally in monasteries and convents. Yoshiro Imaeda, an authority on Bhutanese Buddhism, relates a question he was asked in Bhutan about Japanese monks: "If they have a wife and children, how are they any different from ordinary lay believers?" (*Butan bukkyo kara mita Nihon bukkyo* [Japanese Buddhism Seen from Bhutanese Buddhism], [Tokyo: Japan Broadcast Publishing Co., 2005]). As Bhutanese see it, if you have a family, you are not a monk.

Inherently, it should not be possible to separate clerical marriage from questions about how marriage comes to be

reflected in one's discipline as a monk and one's personal life. Strictly interpreted, although modern Japanese seem scarcely aware of it, Buddhist precepts prevent anyone who becomes a monk from entering into a sexual relationship and leading a married life. Secular Japanese law permits marriage, although this also is exceptional in the world history of Buddhism. During the Meiji era (1868–1912), a government decree of 1872 allowed monks to take wives, and nuns became able to take husbands in 1873. Surprising as it may be, however, even today almost all traditional Japanese Buddhist orders (with the exception of the lay school of Jodo Shin) portray themselves as so-called renunciate orders, upholding the ideal that monks renounce secular life. The fact is that these orders have not given official recognition to the marriage of monks as one aspect of their religious activities. The reality of the married life of monks has been hidden behind a claim of strict adherence to religious doctrine. I refer to this as the fictitious principle of priestly renunciation of secular life, or fictitious celibacy ("Feminist Buddhism as Praxis: Women in Traditional Buddhism," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 30, nos. 3–4 [2003]).

In the actual world, of course, it is taken for granted that priests of Japanese temples have wives. Commonly referred to as temple wives, they are shown in movies and other media sweeping temple grounds with bamboo brooms and serving tea to entertain temple patrons, thereby adding a special touch to the scene. That is by no means all that is done by these priests' wives, who are not supposed to even exist according to official doctrine. In addition to performing household chores and raising children, they act as all-around caretakers who carry out various duties in the work of temple management. In almost all of the orders, the wife is expected to bear and bring up the successor to the chief priest and serve as assistant to the chief priest in the temple's administration. Furthermore, it is implicitly assumed that only male priests can serve as instructors and that their wives (and

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women in general) can only be recipients of instruction. In short, gender roles are assigned virtually uniformly to men and women in a dichotomy where men serve as teachers and women as the recipients of teaching.

This division of labor by gender is similar to the role sharing between male ministers and their wives in most Christian denominations. In general, it is assumed that the minister's wife will act as an assistant in the church school; take care of cleaning, cooking, and other chores; serve as receptionist and hostess; and perform such office tasks as printing materials for distribution. Sociologist of religion Toshinori Kawamata, who has researched the life histories of ministers' wives, reports that while some have the credentials to offer religious instruction, even those who do not are regarded as being special. Although they ought to be seen as just one of the ordinary worshippers, many members of the congregation do not regard them that way, gazing on them instead as the wife in what is presumed to be the minister's model family. The heavy pressure from this expectation causes some ministers' wives to suffer psychologically ("Kirisuto kyokai o tsugu mono no kataru" [Narrative Accounts of Successors to Christian Churches], in *Raifu hisutori no shukyo shakaigaku* [The Religious Sociology of Life Histories], ed. Toshinori Kawamata et al. [Tokyo: Harvest-sha, 2006]).

When one compares the wives of Japanese Buddhist priests with the wives of Christian ministers, one encounters such questions as whether priests' wives are merely parishioners who happen to live in temples or whether they are instructors working together with the priests, albeit instructors who do not enjoy equal standing. In the case of the minister's wife, it will be expected that she share her husband's sense of being called to a religious career, his vocation. She faces tacit pressure to devote herself to her husband's work with selfless dedication, as if being told, "This is something only you, the minister's wife, can do." The male priests I am acquainted with rarely exhibit such a sense of vocation and mission in life, as most of them attained their position merely by inheriting the family's temple. But it is not unusual for the wives of these priests to be expected to work for the temple with selfless devotion, conforming to the ideal of the order. Because wives who had a career before they married are asked to give up their work and remain constantly on hand in the temple, one of my friends was forced to step down from her position as an elected member of a municipal assembly. The temple is a living space that, like the rectory of a church, blurs the distinction between public and private. "Within the temple compound with its broad main sanctuary," a priest's wife is apt to lament, "there is no place I can feel at home."

Such feelings among wives are not limited to the closed world of the temple; they have points in common with a problem sensed by many women in society in general. The roles assigned to temple women, such as handling the temple's daily chores as assistant to the priest and rearing the successor to the priest, are of the same nature as the unpaid

work undertaken by women in general, who raise children, look after the elderly, and perform countless other household tasks. Perhaps the only difference is that whereas temple women are called on to do this unpaid work in the name of faith, wives in ordinary families are expected to undertake it out of a sense of love and affection. Just as temple wives who raise objections, complaining about or questioning the roles assigned to them, will be accused of a lack of faith, wives in ordinary families, for their own support in their unpaid labor, are called on to strengthen their feelings of devotion. Both are being told, in short, that if their faith or their love is sufficient, such things as gender imbalance ought not to bother them. The sanctification of unpaid labor in the name of faith or love obstructs women's natural aspiration to find a sensible balance between family life and social life, and as a result, it narrows the choices among diverse lifestyles. In this sense, the issues temple women confront clearly intersect with the issues faced by women in general.

The various gender-equality movements in modern Japanese society normally have only a very thin religious dimension. Phenomena of bickering in temples may seem at first glance a trifling problem, but if we understood that they have the same roots as the gender issues structurally embedded in Japanese society, would it not become possible for temple women and other women to join forces and march toward gender equality together?

Inherently, the teachings of Buddhism point the way to equality among all human beings. We must not lose sight of the fact that the Buddha did not discriminate among human beings by their birth regardless of race, ethnic group, gender, or anything else. Furthermore, Buddhism emphasizes the importance of relying on one's own self and Buddhist Dharma in the conduct of life. This should make it an encouraging message for modern women in general, who aspire to live as independent beings. But in the real world we also come across male priests who endorse the anachronistic pronouncements often bandied about in backlash fashion, loudly proclaiming, for instance, "The world of Buddhism must not tolerate the use of separate surnames by a married couple." If these men are unable to perceive the various difficulties modern women find themselves struggling with, and if they cannot even understand that the social environment surrounding their orders is in the process of change, that is most regrettable.

At the same time, the women in the Buddhist world need to give much more thought to what is necessary to make the Sangha, the community of Buddhist followers, open to a broader spectrum of people. When the Japan Buddhist Women's Federation, for instance, expresses the ideals behind its activities, it frequently draws on the "mother" metaphor. If you visit its Web site or browse through its literature, you will come across numerous uses of the phrase "we, the mothers of the temple" and encounter much talk about how only women, who bring life into being and raise

children, could possibly undertake such activities. Certainly the altruistic activities of these women are highly valuable, but might they not be robbing their well-meant endeavors of meaning if their manner of expression has the effect of alienating and excluding women who do not have children?

In addition, men and women both need to look more closely at the harsh realities confronting unmarried nuns. Japan's nuns are aging, and their numbers are on the decline in traditional Buddhist orders. The main reason for this lies in the inferior place accorded to nuns relative to male priests

Kokoro-yasuragu "bukkyo joshi" nyumon [An Introduction to Restful Buddhism for Women] [Tokyo: Yosensha, 2010]; a volume compiled by female office workers). But I would also hope that young women would acquaint themselves with the real world of actual nuns. Knowing about the discrimination nuns must put up with in the Buddhist community would, I imagine, disillusion many of them.

Another noteworthy recent development is the sight of young monks who are calling for the creation of new temples open to society and eagerly engaging in activities to make social contributions. Unfortunately, most of them appear to have little interest in the problems of discrimination and gender imbalance or inequality in society and Buddhist orders. Among these male priests, some declare that their first duty as a priest is to guide their wife to true Buddhist faith. One comes across couples in which the spouse seems to have been indoctrinated in the belief that her role in life is to protect and care for her husband as the priest. Such couples have engaged in no rethinking of the gender roles separating the instructors from the instructed. What sort of social contributions can we anticipate from practice that preserves this imbalanced structure and lacks a gender perspective? It is as if the priest has declared, "You must take care of affairs in the temple, because I must go out to battle for social justice." If male priests brag about how they are going to contribute to society while their eyes are closed to the gender issues immediately before them, never doubting the male supremacy in their orders, will not their contributions come to naught?

The way of education that permeates the training system of the traditional Buddhist community and its young people's associations has a firmly embedded structure of vertical relationships. In the more democratic orders of the new schools of lay Buddhism, however, the situation is quite different. I would further emphasize that even in traditional Buddhism, a variety of activities are under way to refashion Buddhism from the perspective of women. The goal of the women involved is to transform modern Buddhism so as to make it compatible with gender equality (see my "Feminist Buddhism as Praxis" cited above). By acting and speaking on their own initiative in this way, these women may be able to open the eyes of male priests and harness energy for traditional Buddhism's rebirth. The young male priests who have thrown themselves into social activities, taking up such causes as providing aid for the self-reliance of women in developing countries, are sometimes quite oblivious of problems in their immediate vicinity, such as domestic violence in nearby temples. As temple women have already been sensitized to the existence of the socially weak, are they not in a good position to alert these male priests to the suffering of weak people near at hand, motivating them to try to improve the situation? Driven not by an urge to make some magnificent social contribution but by necessity arising from their own experience, Buddhist women have begun to speak out from their vantage point of being socially weak themselves, and they, too, have their sights set on changing society. □

A priest leads women experiencing for one day what it is like to be Buddhist nuns, at Ryugenji temple in Kyoto on June 17, 2007.

in the structure of their orders. Apart from the financial difficulties convents find themselves in, nuns suffer from inferior treatment. It is taken for granted that even older nuns with many years of training will sit in lower-ranking seats, below those for monks much younger than they. In the performance of rites, even today there has been little change in the limitation of nuns to auxiliary roles. Recently there has been something of a "Buddhist nun boom" in Japan, and young women seek quite casually to get a taste of the experience of nun training, imagining that becoming a nun would be fascinating (see, for instance, Marunouchi Hannyakai, ed.,

Religion and the Power of Women as Agents of Peace

by Lilian J. Sison

Dedicated women of faith, Christian and Muslim alike, have worked successfully to advocate peace and reconciliation in violence-torn Mindanao in the southern Philippines.

The war between the government military and the Muslim rebels in Mindanao, southern Philippines, has raged for almost four decades. It has left thousands of Muslim families homeless and many members orphaned and widowed. In situations of militarization and ongoing conflict, women and children are the helpless victims. On the one hand, the women in the conflict-affected areas are not heard, and the truth about their situation remains untold, while on the other hand, there are women, especially women of faith, who empathize with them and take up their cause.

Accordingly, I have encountered many women and women's groups involved at all stages of conflict work, from prevention to resolution. They put great efforts into raising various initiatives and training in the issue of peace building. Consequently, I have put together the experiences of some of these women I have come in contact with, as well as using other sources, in order to explore the multiple ways in which women of faith relate with peace and security, assessing their participation and unraveling their potential for shaping more stable and harmonious communities. Perhaps the distinctive feature that I have put into this essay is the reference to faith in women's peace advocacy. To this end, some women of faith active in peace work in Mindanao are highlighted. The interesting stories they share led me to look deeper into the motivations of these women in their peace-building activities.

The women behind the Mindanao Commission on Women (MCW), composed of Christians, Muslims, and indigenous women, are strategic actors for peace in the region by putting together a Mindanao agenda for peace and development from a woman's perspective. They have been successful in influencing the peace negotiations between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the National Democratic Front (NDF) with the endorsement of three women in the previous peace panels: Irene Santiago, Sylvia Paraguya, and Nieves Confessor.¹ They believe that since women suffer most in armed conflict, they have special

attributes, valuable insights, and experiences that they bring to the negotiation table that can result in a "better peace." The inclusion of the women in the peace panels was brought to fruition by the success of the Mothers for Peace campaign of the MCW. Mothers for Peace is a nationwide peace coalition where women of different faith and cultural backgrounds gather in solidarity in their motherhood, propelled by a shared desire for genuine peace in Mindanao. The movement started as a campaign to demand a cease-fire between the Philippine military and the MILF after the bombing of Buliok in 2003. Using the mass media and face-to-face encounters, the campaign drew attention to the senseless loss of lives and to the victims caught in the armed conflict in Mindanao, especially the women and children. Because of the success of the campaign in its demand for a cease-fire and a return to the negotiating table, the campaign drew wide support from the public, and the Mothers for Peace campaign metamorphosed into a movement. Currently, the thrust of the movement is "to create *peace circles* to strengthen and expand its mass base and to make peace-building a part of ordinary women's lives."² The movement has three approaches to

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Filipino women displaced by conflict in Maguindanao Province grate coconuts in an evacuation camp on July 3, 2009, in the southern Philippines. Fighting around the marshlands on central Mindanao had escalated in the previous eight weeks, driving more than 350,000 people from their homes and farms.

peace-building initiatives: (1) The promotion of values for personal peace and self-management; (2) skills training on conflict prevention, resolution, and containment of violence; and (3) food security through the Mothers for Peace Fund.

What motivates women to organize themselves into peace circles? As mothers, the women of Mindanao are fearful for the security and future of their children.³ They worry that the prolonged social conflict in Mindanao may affect the development of their children, thereby producing a generation that espouses violence as a way of life instead of cherishing love, peace, and justice. The women felt the need to raise their voices in unison with other mothers and advocate for the end of all conflict. They cry out for justice and the right of their children to live in peaceful and humane communities. Bai Matabat Diamad, president of the Sarangani Center for Muslim Women, believes that if mothers from every home become peace advocates, communities can become peaceful. Another convener of the Sarangani peace circle, Lourdes Casabuena, said that peace must start from one's heart. She further emphasized that "if peace is within us, it will eventually radiate to others," while Jocelyn Kanda, the peace program manager of Kalinaw Sarangani, believes that "conflict is a cycle and it is important that someone has to be equipped in preventing conflict from escalating into violence."⁴ The idea of teaching women mediation, arbitration, and skills for harmonious living with others regardless of faith and cultural differences was affirmed by Bai Liza Saway, a woman of indigenous spirituality.⁵ The women of Mindanao are convinced that by forming a critical mass of women peace advocates they can elevate their cause to a national movement. For them, a national political will is essential to bring to a peaceful conclusion the conflict between the government and the MILF. And so, as Mothers for Peace, they gather together in their homes, neighborhoods, workplaces, in assembly halls

and in their churches to celebrate their individual and collective strength as mothers working for peace in the ways of peace. Their unity and the image of motherhood help them become powerful agents for peace and security.

I would like to express appreciation for the fact that the philosophy behind Mothers for Peace is anchored on the belief that mothers possess special attributes inherent to them. The life-enhancing spirituality that values women's experience of giving birth, nurturing, educating, and healing as the extension of God's care for life makes them capable of transcendent kindness, that generosity of spirit to empathize—the primal understanding of what it means to suffer—not only with their own pain but also with the pain of others, which makes them powerful advocates for peace. As women of faith, their belief in the divine in such practices as prayers and rituals strengthens them in their personal and collective struggles to build peace. For both Muslim and Christian mothers, mutual respect for Mary, who is featured in both the Holy Bible and the Qur'an as the mother of Jesus, creates a spiritual meeting point. For them, Mary is an enduring and everlasting model of peace. They look to her as a source of solace and strength.

Another woman peace advocate, Bailinda Eman, is a Muslim and a member of Gawad Kalinga (GK), a Philippines-based nation-building movement that sprang from the Couples of Christ, a Catholic lay community. She is a coordinator who heads the Muslim Affairs of GK. In my interview with her, Bailinda narrates her path to reconciliation and her peace advocacy. She is the only Muslim member of a predominantly Christian organization. Bailinda is the daughter of a Muslim revolutionary. She grew up hating Christians, but by a twist of faith, she found herself reading the Bible while enrolled in a Catholic university. Her search for truth in the Christian-Muslim conflict in Mindanao brought her

to the sublime realization that religious differences cannot be the cause of the conflict as long as people put their faith into action. She understood that for both Muslims and Christians, religion is about basic human goodness expressed in the oneness of God and in the respect for the dignity of all people and for God's creation. This was her personal turning point, leading her to discern the true meaning of reconciliation. The first bold step that she took on the road to reconciliation was to work in GK. The group builds communities by erecting shelters; by providing education, values formation, and information concerning the environment; and by supporting productivity skills, tourism, and health.⁶

Bailinda states that her involvement with Christians in GK makes her a good Muslim. She organized the building of thirty houses and the rebuilding of the community in Barangay Patikul Liang, Sulu, a dreaded territory of the Abu Sayaf (a group of "terrorists"). Using her skills at mediation, she heroically brought together volunteer groups of Christians, Muslims, military officers, rebel soldiers, local government officials, and civic leaders to cooperatively build the GK shelters.

Initially, Bailinda found difficulties in her peace advocacy because she is a Muslim woman. Women of her faith, she says, are supposed to be serving the home. They are powerless. There is this misconception in the Muslim world that solving conflicts is wholly a man's game. But this is changing in practice, according to her. Women's roles are undergoing great changes and metamorphoses. Muslim women are beginning to assume important roles in the promotion of peace and the development of their communities and dialogue among people of many faiths. Islam, as a religion of peace, mandates both male and female followers to take responsibility in the keeping of peace and order.⁷

In preparing herself for the GK work, Bailinda lived with Christians in order to learn their way of life and also for Christians to learn her way of life as a Muslim. Her experience taught her that religion is not the source of conflict between Muslims and Christians. To Bailinda, it is the mindset of the people, the misconceptions, and the lack of education on each other's way of life that create conflict. Bailinda's thinking is affirmed by the religious leaders whom I have encountered in previous dialogues in Mindanao.⁸ They assert that the problem in Mindanao is rooted not only in economics or territorial integrity but in ignorance and the insensitivity of the people to religious beliefs and culture, the laws and regulations, the rights and freedom of people, and ignorance of morality. This insensitivity is creating the big gulf between the Muslim and Christian communities of Mindanao and is exacerbated by the presence of government troops in the region.

In my position as secretary general of Religions for Peace Philippines, my own peace advocacy in Mindanao lies in providing a capacity-building program on mental health and psychosocial support for community women volunteers, the internally displaced youths who are victims of conflict and

most often recruited as child soldiers, and the military personnel of the Sixth Infantry Division in the conflict areas of Central Mindanao. The training of the military, which is the first in the country at the division level, is essential to the military personnel assigned in conflict areas, as it would help them in minimizing the impact of the psychological trauma from combat situations that are encountered by the army and to mitigate the risk of post-traumatic stress disorder.

It is very important that the men and women of the military be able to take care of themselves, because they are not only soldiers but human beings vulnerable to the effects of the conflict as well. It is heartwarming to note the changing paradigm in the military, where the trained army personnel use their newly acquired psychosocial skills in their peace-building activities in civilian communities, especially those internally displaced in the conflict-affected areas. I believe that the way to promote a culture of peace in the security sector is to build the capability of the men and women in uniform for peace-building activities.

It is my thesis that there can never be any fruitful dialogue for peace in Mindanao unless and until the psychological wounds brought about by the conflict are healed as part of the rehabilitation process. The training aimed to empower the community women volunteers, the youths, and military personnel to do their share in peace building and healing by equipping them with the necessary skills and competencies in mental health and psychotrauma healing. The encounter was also a means of providing the landscape for personal healing and reconciliation, key ingredients toward achieving inner peace and an attitude of dialogue among some of the stakeholders in Mindanao.

What motivates women to advocate for peace and do their share in community building? The Christian women whom I have identified in this essay work with a strong sense of voluntarism. They work to be of service to others without expectation of reward. The women see their involvement as an expression of their faith in action. Faith provides the moral lens for prompting them into action. The Catholic social teaching of "preferential option for the poor"⁹ and the opportunity to live a life in "service for others," especially the poor, the depressed, and the deprived, for to be an authentic Christian one must obey and put into action Christ's teachings. For Christ has said: "As long as you did it for one of these the least of my brethren you did it for me" (Matt. 25:40). His greatest commandment was: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself (Matt. 22:34-40).¹⁰ Pope Benedict XVI in his encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est* declares that Christians who work for charity must not only be professionally competent but also must "dedicate themselves to others with heartfelt concern, enabling them to experience the richness of their humanity." Their love for neighbor is "a consequence deriving from their faith, a faith which becomes active through love. . . . Practical activity will always be insufficient unless it visibly expresses a love for man, a love nourished by an encounter with Christ."¹¹ In our times, a special obligation

calls on us to make ourselves the neighbor of every person without exception.

For Bailinda, the only path to peace is to put faith into action, whether one is Christian or Muslim. She says that the Christian message of love for one's neighbor reflects the same benignness and magnanimity in the teachings of Islam. The Holy Prophet (*pbuh*) said: "I swear by the Being in whose power is my life, no one of you can be a true believer unless he desires for his fellow brother what he desires for himself" (Al-Bukhari).¹² The fundamental values contained in the teachings of both Islam and Christianity transcend ethnic, cultural, and religious differences among people. By finding God's love in each person, Muslims and Christians can live together in a peaceful and harmonious coexistence.

From the work of the women of faith whom I have presented here, one can conclude that women's grassroots and NGO peace-building activities are context specific in that they are focused on the violence inherent in the Mindanao conflict and the deep-seated prejudices between Christians and Muslims. Their success lies in the strength of their faith, where love as a universal value is deeply rooted in their religious traditions and in their desire to put their faith into practice. Though they work with the spirit of voluntarism, their peace-building activities are strongly supported by structured organizations with the capability of mobilizing and securing resources and in training and building women's capability for peace advocacy.

Their work involves personal and organizational accountability and is oriented toward processes such as reconciliation and healing through peace advocacy, capacity building, and people empowerment. Their task of building peace is firmly anchored in their faith and in a vision where they see the unity of humankind in peace, because peace is attainable, sustainable, and certainly desirable. One thing is com-

mon among these women peace advocates, Christians and Muslims alike: they exude a holistic spirituality that is integral, harmonious, and inclusive, promoting life and peace. □

Notes

1. Margie Floirendo, "Healing the Past: Building the Future," Seventh General Assembly Report, Asian Conference of Religions for Peace, October 2008.

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3. *Mindanao Commission on Women*, accessed June 9, 2009, <http://www.mindanaowomen.org/>.

4. Gandhi C. Kinjiyo, "Sarangani, GenSan mothers join peace movement," *MindaNews*, February 3, 2009.

5. Jane McGrory, *Faithful Peace, Peaceful Faith: The Role of Women of Faith in Building Peace* (London: Progressio, 2008).

6. *GawadKalinga.org*, accessed June 4, 2009, <http://www.gawadkalinga.org/>.

7. Bae Zahra P. M. Abinal, "The Role of Women in Promoting Peace and Interfaith Dialogue. Proceedings of the Seminar on Islam and Interfaith Dialogue." Islamic Embassy of Iran and University of Santo Tomas, February 2007.

8. Lilian Sison, "Youth and Inter-Religious Dialogue: Lessons from the Midsayap Experience. Proceedings of the Seminar on Islam and Interfaith Dialogue." Islamic Embassy of Iran and University of Santo Tomas, February 2007.

9. *Gaudium et Spes*. Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. Promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI, December 7, 1965.

10. Christian Community Bible: Catholic Pastoral Edition (Macau: Claretian Publication, 2008).

11. Pope Benedict XVI Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*, December 25, 2005.

12. Macrina Morados, "Theocentricism and Pluralism: Are they Poles Apart?" Paper presented on "Pluralism in Islam and Western Thought," University of the Philippines, June 2008.

Parents and children belonging to Rissho Kosei-kai visited the Philippine island of Mindanao August 7–13, 2010, to hand out gifts to children collected by the organization's Dream Bag Project. In cooperation with the Mindanao Children's Library, a local NGO, the Rissho Kosei-kai families handed out 862 bags of toys and school supplies to children in three villages of the province of Davao del Sur. On Mindanao, where the majority of the population is Christian, the Muslim minority demanded autonomy and formed the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in 1984. Violence had erupted frequently since the 1960s, and many people were driven from their homes, becoming internally displaced persons.

Religions for Peace: Promoting the Roles of Women of Faith in Peace Building

by Jackie Ogega

The international nonsectarian organization is explicitly dedicated to mobilizing religious communities to collaborate for peace. Through its Women's Mobilization Program, it works with others to develop programs that engage both men and women in efforts to empower women and girls.

Religion has begun to receive recognition for its capacity to play a positive role in peace building (Appleby 1999; Vendley 2005; Smock 2006). While this is highly encouraging, this paper limits itself to a review of Religions for Peace's efforts to support the roles of women of faith in peace building. It outlines a gender-aware approach to peace building that focuses on the particular capacities of groups of women of faith.

In offering this outline of Religions for Peace's approach, I am acutely aware that the "visibility" of women of faith as fundamental actors in peace building remains marginal. A search of the literature does not offer much by way of documented cases of woman of faith serving as agents of peace. But visibility in the literature and life on the ground in conflict zones are starkly different realities. In fact, women of faith are vital peacemakers in many conflicts. Their absence in the literature may say more about our "lenses" than about their contributions. My colleagues' and my experience of working in Religions for Peace in conflict zones has con-

vinced us that (1) women of faith are already on the front lines of peace building, and (2) they can do even more than they already are doing if they are recognized, equipped, and engaged in partnerships. This conviction, borne of experience, animates Religions for Peace's commitment to help put a spotlight on women of faith. Given the minimal state of documentation, these reflections will have served their modest purpose if they help to raise our awareness of the commitment and capacities of women of faith to build peace.

Religions for Peace is a nonsectarian organization established in 1970 and explicitly dedicated to mobilizing religious communities to collaborate for peace. Religions for Peace advances a multidimensional notion of peace that acknowledges that the well-being of each person is related to the well-being of all, and it calls for the responsibility to reject the misuses of religion in support of violence (Religions for Peace 2007). Its mission lies in multireligious efforts to transform violent conflict, promote just and harmonious societies, advance human development, and protect the earth. The work to promote the inviolable rights, well-being, and dignity of women and children is therefore at the core of Religions for Peace's mission. There is no peace when a woman is dying giving life, when a child is raped, when a woman faces honor killing, when proliferation of arms threatens the security of entire communities, or when climate change alters the course of the earth. Through its Women's Mobilization Program, Religions for Peace works with network members to develop different programs that engage both men and women in efforts to empower women and girls, and to address common threats to peace.

Women of faith are often overlooked mediators of conflict. One of the successful approaches of Religions for Peace is to build the capacities of religious communities to act as mediators in situations of conflict. Haja Simatu Kassim was one of the fifteen women of faith who resolutely left the relative safety of their homes, churches, and mosques to meet with a rebel group to negotiate peace in their country. It was April 1997. Buildings lay in smoldering ruins. Women and children stared hopelessly, their hands and legs amputated. The fight-

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One of the working groups meets at the Women's Assembly held August 24–25, 2006, in Kyoto before the Eighth World Assembly of Religions for Peace, which convened August 26–29 in Kyoto.

ers whom Haja Simatu and the other women of faith were set to meet were largely responsible for this misery. For two decades, Sierra Leone, a poor country of five million people, had been lurching from crisis to crisis. Political turmoil, war, and corrupt rule had forced individuals and communities to react through whatever means to defend themselves under uncertain circumstances. The fighters had ravaged villages, recruited child soldiers, and mutilated or murdered all those suspected of disloyalty. As the women of faith headed up to the mountainous hideout to meet with the fighters from the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), they had only faith to hope that they would survive, or even begin to quell the violence. Ignoring personal safety, and despite knowing that their respective communities and families might be put at risk, these women of faith, members of the Inter-Religious Council of Sierra Leone, representing the nation's largest Christian and Muslim organizations, successfully met with the rebel leaders. This led to a process of negotiations that involved multiple partners and ultimately to an unprecedented release of fifty child soldiers.

This mediation by women of faith from the Inter-Religious Council of Liberia illustrates one of Religions for Peace's approaches to peace: networking the existing religious com-

munities, organizations, and groups for multireligious cooperation by building national and regional Inter-Religious Councils (IRCs). IRCs bring together women and men of faith for common action. Religions for Peace is composed of more than seventy national IRC structures and six continent-based IRCs around the world that help diverse religious communities to align around common challenges to peace, and offers ways to utilize complementary strengths of different faiths. There are some situations where IRCs lack political will to effectively support the leadership of women of faith. More can be done to strengthen the capacity of IRCs to fully and more effectively integrate women of faith. There is progress with more and more women of faith providing leadership in IRCs, and through their networks. They not only serve as mediators, but play other peace-building roles, including conflict prevention and early warning, negotiation, advocacy, nonviolent activism, and education.

Women of faith also take effective action as peace builders working through their already established networks and groups, both formal and informal. Religions for Peace established the Global Women of Faith Network in 2001 as a conduit for mobilizing and promoting women's visibility and agency in peace building. The network, with its national

and regional affiliates in thirty countries and five continents, consists of more than one thousand religious women's organizations engaged in peace building. The network aims at providing a common forum that facilitates communication, coordination, and the exchange of insights that stimulate creative common action for peace among women of different faiths (Religions for Peace 2009). It also provides a powerful impetus toward mainstreaming women of faith as leaders in multireligious forums.

Religions for Peace convenes women of faith alongside male religious leaders for dialogue, advocacy, and action. About every five years, Religions for Peace convenes representatives of its Global Women of Faith Network for its World Assembly. At the most recent World Assembly, held in Kyoto in 2006, women of faith formed more than one-third of the official delegates. The World Assembly elects its governing board, and today women of faith form 34 percent of the Religions for Peace World Council governing body.

Religions for Peace equips the Global Women of Faith Network for action through capacity building and training. Existing literature stresses that NGOs' approaches to peace building can be sustainable when they are geared toward

capacity building for skill-based infrastructure (Lederach 1998, 47–51; Smock 2006; Reeves and Baden 2002). Religions for Peace has engaged its Global Women of Faith Network in conflict-transformation training workshops that focus on interactive problem solving, collaboration, and analysis of shared problems (Religions for Peace 2004). The training programs have played a convening role, bringing women of faith from different religions and sides of the conflict together to share their perceptions of the conflict, analyze their roles in it, and develop approaches to advance reconciliation.

Haja Simatu recounted her experience to other women of faith from Liberia, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, and Sierra Leone at a regional training seminar on conflict transformation organized by Religions for Peace in Freetown in 2003: "I had never seen a rebel leader, only heard of their terror. Now, standing face to face with one, I just called on Allah (God) to help me stand still. The rebel leader looked at me for a long time. Then he opened his mouth to speak and his first words were '*you look like my mother, all of you look like my mother. I have not seen my mother for a long time. Shall we pray?*' and this is how we began our first meeting with the RUF fighters."

Through its African Women of Faith Network, Religions

Participants in the Women's Assembly held before the Eighth World Assembly of Religions for Peace in Kyoto in August 2006 pose for a commemorative photo. More than a third of the delegates to the Eighth World Assembly were women.

for Peace has facilitated solidarity visits and cross-border exchanges in countries with violent conflicts. For instance, through the program on the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa Inter-Religious Coordinating Mechanisms for Peace, women and men of faith have been engaged in regional convening and capacity building to address the root causes of the conflicts in the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa region. This coordinating body has undertaken solidarity visits to Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Religions for Peace has developed a number of tools following the capacity-building training, including a leadership manual for women of faith to transform conflict, manuals to address HIV/AIDS-related stigma and discrimination, fact sheets on maternal deaths and fistulas, and a tool kit for engaging religious communities in ending violence against women and girls (Religions for Peace 2004, 2009). The tools are essential for further mobilization and capacity development of the networks.

Although the Global Women of Faith Network is an effort toward greater inclusion and visibility, the danger of essentializing or ghettoizing women's roles in peace building must be avoided. Religions for Peace has embarked not only on building a movement of women of faith but also on strengthening multisectoral partnerships with other secular, academic, and governmental organizations.

Religions for Peace contends that religion brings particular values, resources, assets, and services that can be mobilized to build peace (See table 1). Table 2 illustrates some of the forms of problem-solving roles engaging these religious assets for common action to transform conflict.

Religions for Peace has adapted this basic method as a framework to take into account other forms of conflict and violence and therefore be more precise on the multidimensionality of conflict and peace that affects women's security and livelihoods.

Religions for Peace hopes to contribute to the literature

on women of faith as agents of peace building by documenting some of the good practices. That will include a gender-aware analysis of the agency of women of faith in relation to resources, relationships, institutions, and access to peace-building assets and decision making. Analysis of these dif-

Women religious leaders representing many countries and religious traditions exchange opinions about work for peace during the Women's Assembly held August 24–25, 2006, in Kyoto.

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Social	Moral	Spiritual
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mosques, churches, temples, and other social structures located in virtually every village, district, and city • Networks of communication and action • Most developed, interconnected, and locally led social infrastructure in existence, reaching from the smallest village to the capital and beyond • Familiar and trusted institutions that can provide social cohesion in the aftermath of violent conflict 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spiritualities, moral structure, and influence • Elaboration of code of ethics as moral standards • Mechanisms for inculcating moral visions and religious identity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make available the strength to bear the unbearable, hope when all seems hopeless, forgive the unforgivable • Spiritualities for reconciliation and reconstruction

Table 1. Religious Assets and Their Peace-Building Roles (adapted from Vendley 2005)

Forms of Problem-Solving Roles	Religious Assets			
	Social	Moral	Spiritual	Multireligious
Education	Grassroots religious networks educate local populations regarding seeds of conflict.	Religious leaders speak out against scapegoating other religions, ethnic groups, and communities.	Religious communities invoke religious practices to counter messages of hate and calls for violence.	Religious leaders of different faiths advance shared commitments to transforming conflict.
Advocacy	Women of faith call for peace in their communities. Grassroots religious networks promote community justice initiatives.	Religious leaders articulate the moral responsibilities of combatants, call for cease-fire, and engage in nonviolent activism for peace.	Religious communities engage community-based efforts to break the cycle of violence.	Different religious communities work together to advocate for an end to violence.
Mediation	Religious congregations and women's groups bridge the divide between combatants.	Religious leaders provide a space for mediation and call on the faithful to support peace negotiations.	Religious leaders engage religion to bridge the unbridgeable.	Inter-Religious Council facilitates "Track 2" peace negotiations among combatants.
Reconciliation	Local religious community institutions work to reintegrate former child soldiers.	Religious leaders foster community reconciliation that protects the rights of all groups.	Religious practices foster mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation.	Inter-Religious Council promotes and supports national reconciliation among all groups.

Table 2: Forms and Problem-Solving Roles of Religious Assets (adapted from Vendley 2005)

ferent but interrelated components should focus on both the specificity and the diversity of roles among women of faith with other women, and in relation with men.

Religions for Peace's approach entails building multi-sectoral partnerships aimed at overcoming the invisibility of women of faith as religious actors to ensure access to resources, decision making, and sustainability of their efforts. The approach calls for rigorous documentation that fully demonstrates the comparative advantage of engaging women of faith, and the significance of their roles and values in peace building. Fruits are already apparent, and as we hone our lenses they will appear more and more in the literature. □

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Religion and Women: “Empower Women—Empower the Future”

by Johanna Boeke

The valley spirit never dies.
It is the woman, primal mother.
Her gateway is the root of heaven and earth.
It is like a veil rarely seen.
Use it. It will never fail.

—Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*

If there is one thing we have in common when it comes to faith, it is that we all have a story. Stories of all people are rich in meaning and can be a precious source of understanding other cultures and religions. For many years I have participated in international and interreligious meetings and conferences and discovered the revealing and inspiring power of hearing the stories of people of different faiths. I have a confession: I find it easier to do this at a gathering of women than when men are present. Women are often confronted with and dominated by the rules, ideas, and structures of male-oriented traditions.

I believe there is a fundamental problem in many cultures, including my own, concerning women and boys. Often boys and men are more valued than women and girls. I remember vividly the time when I delivered our second child, another girl. When the nurse put her in my arms, my eyes filled with tears of joy and exhilaration. The nurse, misinterpreting my tears, patted me on the shoulder and said: “Don’t worry, dear, next time you’ll have a boy!” And this happened in the United States, a supposedly enlightened nation!

This article, “Religion and Women: ‘Empower Women—Empower the Future,’” reflects my understanding that these points are interrelated.

In much of the world, girls and women remain second-class citizens. Although many international agreements recognize women’s human rights, the facts show that women are much more likely than men to be malnourished, poor, and illiterate and to have less access than men to medical care, property ownership, and economic opportunity. They are also more likely to be victims of violence. Yet, from the very beginning, women all over the world have participated and continue to participate in religion. In all ancient pantheons there are women deities: in Japan, Amaterasu Omikami, the Sun Goddess, is the highest Shinto deity. In many cultures women are worshiped as goddesses and priestesses and hailed as great examples of faith. But history shows that women’s roles have changed and religions have evolved into a more patriarchal system. Women are continually challenged to fully participate in religious activities that carry the weight of authority.

In many societies and nations in the world, women are denied positive social recognition. Whole societies are organized to keep women as property to be handed down between men and families.

But we must not forget that despite real problems of religious discrimination against women, religions have offered women hope and comfort and some degree of dignity and respect for a few thousand years, often when other avenues to these resources were lacking. Nevertheless, I want to argue that there is a great need for women to organize within religion to act and advocate on behalf of the welfare of women everywhere. Fortunately, many interfaith organizations have responded to this need in the past decades by encouraging full participation of women in decision making.

In addition, many separate religious women’s groups have been organized, nationally and internationally. In the global community they are actively engaged in upholding the rights and dignity of women and children; supporting programs

Johanna Boeke was born and raised in the Netherlands, where she met her husband, Richard Boeke, at a congress of the International Association for Religious Freedom in The Hague in 1964. She is a Unitarian Universalist minister and past president of the International Association of Liberal Religious Women. She and her husband have served churches in the United States and England. They live in the United Kingdom and continue to be active in interfaith organizations.

Ladakh women take part in a literacy project supported by members of IALRW Japan. Photographed in August 2005.

that aim to improve women's education, health, and economic opportunity; and combating violence against women and girls, reaching out beyond themselves to bring about universal peace.

I have been privileged to be associated with the oldest international women's organization: the International Association of Liberal Religious Women (IALRW). It celebrated its one hundredth anniversary at a conference in India in September of 2010 with the theme "Women in Action." From the beginning, IALRW women believed that despite different definitions and explanations of faith traditions, there are common threads weaving them together. One of the members, a Muslim woman, calls the IALRW "an organization of the pooling together of hearts," which indeed it is.

It is this pooling of hearts that has guided and continues to guide the women to implement their mission of providing economic and social justice and equality for women. Among the many causes the members of IALRW have supported is a literacy project near Kolkata (Calcutta), and they continue to sustain a literacy project in Ladakh, India (generously supported by members in Japan).

After a visit to Ladakh in 2007, IALRW president Kathy Matsui wrote: "At the centres we visited, the women there reported to us—with excitement—how much they have achieved after studying at the literacy centres. They shared their joyful experience of being able to make phone calls (as they were now able to read numbers) and to do simple arithmetic at the market where they sold their produce. How happy they were to be able to read the Lotus Sutra. Literacy brought them confidence, joy, and understanding."

The IALRW is but one of many women's faith-based organizations in the world. And more and more their voices are

being heard, their work of educating and assisting women recognized as essential for the world to live in peace, because to empower women and girls and to improve their well-being is to change the reality and well-being of society.

What is needed now more than ever is to communicate women's experiences and views on religion and faith in international interreligious organizations. What is needed now is to create places where people whose voices are often not heard can participate and know their voices are heard. What is needed is to create more and more places where women and men will work together to respect, protect, and promote women's human rights, and to dream and work together to create a good life for all beings and the earth.

We share a common origin as human beings; we are children of the same creator. We know the world is big enough for all of us. We seek to know each other; we honor and listen to each other's stories. □

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A literacy project enabled this Ladakh woman to sell her produce at the market and on the street. Photographed in 2007.

Empower Women through Faithful Connections Around the World

by Barbara Kres Beach

The oldest international women's organization and the youngest agree. Their principles are solidly in accord, and their members work hard, dedicated to their faiths and to their actions.

Johanna Boeke writes eloquently as past president of one of the oldest women's international religious organizations, the International Association of Liberal Religious Women (IALRW). I carry the memory of the honor they bestowed on me, to be their keynote speaker for the one hundredth anniversary celebration in Kochi, Kerala, India in 2010. They welcomed me. By contrast, I represent one of the *youngest* international organizations for women, the International Convocation of Unitarian Universalist Women (ICUW), formed in 2009 in Houston, Texas.

At the ICUW founding meeting in Houston, more than six hundred women from thirty-seven U.S. states and seventeen countries joined together to deliberate and name the priorities that all of us agreed would enhance the lives of women throughout the world. While I do not wish to sound frivolous, I must ask you the question I ask myself: Can you *imagine* 623 women agreeing so completely on anything?

We did, and the IALRW's president, Kathy Matsui, and Johanna Boeke were there to confirm that I speak the truth.

What we agreed to is a vision—to achieve tangible advances in the lives of women worldwide through concerted action and international partnerships. We agreed to a mission—to enable women to achieve their human rights, including access to economic opportunities, health care and security, education, and political expression. We agreed that our goal is to work together with groups such as IALRW and others who share common values.

Perhaps it is not surprising that the oldest international women's organization and the youngest agree. Our principles are solidly in accord, and our members work hard, dedicated to our faiths and to our actions.

Perhaps most important, we open ourselves to be transformed by this collaborative work, sharing our goals and our stories to stimulate entrepreneurial leadership and to understand what works best.

We are part of a new movement of religious organizations for women. We are communities of faith who speak together *and* who do the hard work that needs to be done.

The International Convocation of Unitarian Universalist Women, one of the world's youngest international organizations for women, holds its founding meeting in Houston, Texas, in 2009.

ICUW, for example, is working with women's groups in North East India, the Philippines, and Transylvania (Romania). They have embraced the goals we agreed upon in Houston and are empowering their own grassroots networks, developing additional projects, and becoming sustainable. Convocations are being planned in Transylvania and the Philippines. One recently took place in North East India. We invite others to join a virtual community for women of faith and action on the ICUW Web site (<http://www.icuw.com/>).

In Kochi, I had a special joy. In the heat of the afternoon, IALRW board members and I sat down together. We agreed to work together. We also agreed that it would be good for women in faith communities around the world to support each other and to celebrate each other's successes.

I pray that this will come to pass. Pray with me. Let this joining together of women of purpose, faith, and power come to pass. May it be so. Amen. □

Barbara Kres Beach is executive director of Strategic Relations for Management Concepts, one of the leading training and professional development companies in the United States. She is past president of the Partner Church Council and current president of the International Convocation of Unitarian Universalist Women. She became committed to international work and interfaith dialogue at her first congress of the International Association for Religious Freedom in Japan in 1984. She and her husband, the Reverend Dr. George K. Beach, live in Virginia.

Women and Nonviolence— Clearing a Path for the Future

The Twenty-seventh Niwano Peace Prize Commemorative Dialogue
between Ms. Ela Ramesh Bhatt and Rev. Nichiko Niwano

The twenty-seventh Niwano Peace Prize was awarded to Ms. Ela Ramesh Bhatt of India, founder of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), a women's labor union with more than 1.2 million members throughout India. She was honored for her contributions of more than thirty years to improving the lives of her country's poorest and most oppressed women workers. In this commemorative dialogue with Rev. Nichiko Niwano, president of the Niwano Peace Foundation, on the theme "Women and Nonviolence—Clearing a Path for the Future," held on May 12, 2010, in Tokyo, she emphasized the importance of realizing that we are all bound together at all levels, now and for centuries.

Niwano: As president of the Niwano Peace Foundation, I am deeply grateful that you have made the long trip here from India.

Ms. Bhatt, I have learned many things about your achievements from reading various materials about you. I was particularly impressed by the fact that your activities promoting self-reliance for female workers are based on the spirit of nonviolence.

Efforts for social reform always arouse opposition. If we look at history, there have been a great many confrontations wherein "blood washes blood" in cycles of violence. Even in our present time, violence swirls around the world. I think that within this context, your work clears a new pathway to the future for us humans.

Furthermore, you do not view women simply as "the weaker sex." You have said that "women are the key to the formation of society" and that "women must become the leaders of social change." These are extremely important messages as we consider the future.

Although I am meeting you for the first time, Ms. Bhatt, I have very much looked forward to having this dialogue with you, and it is a great pleasure to greet you.

Bhatt: First of all, thank you very much, and I'm really very pleased and grateful that the Niwano Peace Prize of Japan has recognized the courage and the hard work of my SEWA sisters in India. And they are trying to build a peaceful society based on constructive work.

Personally, the prize is humbling. And it makes me more conscious of the enormity of the challenges before us. And I realize that life is short and art is long.

You see, I grew up during the days when our country was fighting for independence. Mahatma Gandhi showed us the

way. He said to enthusiastic young people like me that "if you attain freedom at the point of a gun, the gun will rule over you. The way in which you attain your freedom is more important than the goal itself." So when we fight on the path of truth and nonviolence, we attain true freedom, because freedom comes from within, it cannot be given. This was a difficult but important lesson for us to learn.

However, when I started working with textile laborers and then began organizing poor, self-employed women, I was struck by the poverty, the poverty of the working poor. They worked so hard, so why were they still poor?

So I started realizing that poverty is violence. Poverty is violence against human dignity. And war is the crudest form of violence, but an unequal society is equally violent. Poverty is chronic violence. People suffer daily traumas that are physical, mental, and even spiritual. I found that people turn to physical violence after they've suffered many other forms of silent violence in their daily lives. So, lastly, this made me see violence and nonviolence in a different light.

Niwano: Unfortunately our world is a world where "survival of the fittest" is the rule, where "might makes right." To be able to use nonviolence to resolve the problems that come up, religious compassion, love, and courage are absolutely essential. This may not be feasible unless we humans achieve a very advanced state.

Nonviolent is often thought of as generally meaning powerless. But Gandhi's spirit and actions were able to lead India to independence, overcoming this perception and proving, I believe, that nonviolence is not powerlessness.

Bhatt: I think we have to learn from children. We do not have to say anything to them, because their hearts are full

of love and pure and always truthful. But it is we adults who would teach them violence in thousands of ways.

But if I have to say something to them, I would say that when you fight with your body or with a weapon, the stronger person will win, and it will not matter whether they are right or wrong. But I tell them that if you win over your opponent's heart with love and truth, you will both win.

I tell them that nonviolence requires courage. Only the truly strong can be nonviolent even in the face of violence. I tell them very simply that fearless children do not need guns and swords.

Niwano: Mr. Masahiro Yasuoka, an authority on Eastern thought, political philosophy, and the neo-Confucian teachings of Wang Yangming, wrote on the topic of "the path of coping with evil." This is something I have studied since my youth, and I think it's very apt. So please allow me to introduce you to his work.

Mr. Yasuoka points out that to follow the path of coping with evil, one must understand first that "because of the reality of survival of the fittest, the weak will lose to the strong," and second, that "responding to violence means, in other words, taking a vengeful attitude." These are the most general attitudes one may take to cope with evil.

He goes on to say, "The third thing is that the opposite of a vengeful attitude is a religious attitude. An attitude such as Christ's command to 'love your enemies,' or Confucius's teaching, 'show forbearance and gentleness in teaching others, and do not avenge unreasonable conduct.' However, this is a state that is only attained after extraordinary personal practice, and is absolutely not something that can be put into practice impulsively."

In particular, he has positioned Gandhi's doctrine of non-violence as follows. "It is often translated as nonresistance, but that is not correct. The spirit of Gandhi's philosophy does not mean yielding, through its practice of nonkilling and nonviolence, to the power of an opponent. Rather, the opposite is true; it attempts to neutralize that power. It is a religious conviction and movement that engages one's entire being, and is not mere nonresistance."

It is my sense that the activities that you are promoting, Ms. Bhatt, are also those of wholehearted religious conviction and movement.

Bhatt: I've been saying this all the time.

I said this because if you focus on women, you will find a natural way to bring harmony and balance to society. A woman wants to live and work and bring up a family in a stable community. She wants roots for her family. She is a natural forger of bonds with her neighbors and with the wider community. She is a stabilizer, a networker, a worker, a provider, a caretaker, an educator. So, essentially, woman is both a creator and a preserver. Every woman is past, present, and future.

So a woman's participation and representation is an integral part of the peace process.

My experience at the national and international levels has been that women bring constructive, creative, and sustainable solutions to the table. Women feed, clothe, and shelter families. They invest in the next generation.

That has been my daily experience through SEWA. What I'm saying is not superlatives, and it's not rhetoric. What I'm saying is my experience in SEWA. So, I firmly believe that with women's leadership we would have a more peaceful, constructive society. A gentler economy. And a holistic approach to politics.

Niwano: When you point out that in human life women play an important role in all aspects, I think you are absolutely correct.

In the words that have been passed down to us as Shakyamuni's, a mother's influence is cited as a most important component that builds one's character.

It is the mother that teaches a child tenderness, warmth, and consideration for others. These are the values of cooperation, being helpful to others, and sharing. In building a harmonious society, these maternal characteristics are absolutely essential, and it would not be wrong to say that they are what Shakyamuni desires.

Ms. Ela Ramesh Bhatt, the recipient of the twenty-seventh Niwano Peace Prize, participates in the dialogue.

Self-employed women in Delhi rejoice on May 17, 2007, over a Supreme Court decision upholding measures to protect the livelihood of women street vendors.

On the other hand, masculinity is associated with efficiency, productivity, rationality, and the like. Its aims are self-assertion and surpassing others. There are indications that such paternal characteristics have caused various inconsistencies in modern society.

Ms. Bhatt, you have said, "Women must become the leaders of social change," and I think that is also demanded by the times.

Bhatt: What I mean is the feminine way. Not woman in a narrow sense, but in a feminine way. So, by feminine leadership I mean not only more women leaders but also leadership by men who are feminine within themselves. Men, too, can restore a balance between humans and nature, between livelihood and the business corporation.

But the woman's way has a different sense of time. A different pace of growth. And it puts people before profits. It puts subsistence before surplus. So that is the feminine way that I mean.

Well, let us look at the way women around the world live in the environment, why it is important. I'll tell you that their lives are lived closer to nature. They consume less. Women make products that nourish and enrich human lives. For women, sustainability is tied in with daily living. Women recycle, women economize. Women treat the environment with care. Because they are thinking of their children.

So, their motive is first sustainability and then profit. And that is the most nonviolent way of living. Nature, which is Mother Earth, has to be treated with respect and love. Not exploited. Yes, so that's why I link nonviolence and women so closely.

Niwano: Mr. Yasuoka, whom I quoted earlier, also said, "The father must be respected by his children."

A child will not respect the father if he has only been pur-

suing quick profits or efficiency. Ordinary words and deeds are also important. The father must not lose track of the need to improve himself through self-assessment and constant learning.

It is the father who particularly has the role of providing economic and mental stability for the family, and this creates the basis on which the mother can impart to her children tenderness, warmth, and consideration for others.

Bhatt: First, what I admire is that the women of Japan are strong. I so much admire, their beauty and their grace, since I have seen women in Japan in their daily lives; they live with grace. And their sense of detail. I am a big admirer of Japanese crafts. Your textiles, your baskets, your attention to detail, are seen.

Your love of nature and your spirit of finding beauty in old and worn-out things—Japanese women carry that rich cultural heritage. And at the same time, they are modern and dynamic, and brave, strong. This is what all women in Japan are like.

You see, I don't think happiness has anything to do with affluence or poverty. Joy is in finding out what makes us human. I mean celebrating life on earth as members of a large family of humans and animals and plants. You all have

Rev. Nichiko Niwano, president of the Niwano Peace Foundation, takes part in the dialogue.

personally experienced that the joy is in sharing, in loving, in relating, in knowing the unknown. So we are bound at all levels.

I mean joy is in understanding each other and happiness is in sharing a meal, or our courtyard. So that is what I mean by happiness. Affluence has nothing to do with it.

We need a worldview that embodies community rather than individualism. Subsistence rather than surplus. I think the challenge that we all face today is, how do we listen to the voices of the people? How do we empower people at the local level? By empowering local people and the local economy, local resources. How do we let diversity flourish? By enabling

many more people to enjoy freedom. And let us make sure that the voices of the poorest are heard. I think these are our common concerns.

Niwano: In the past, Japanese people placed great importance on the spirit of “knowing that one has enough” or being satisfied with what one already has.

That spirit has been gradually forgotten, however, due to our postwar education system, and we seem to have been possessed by an idea that material abundance means happiness. As we now face a global recession, such thinking is causing people to think that this will mean unhappiness.

On this point, those of us who are engaged in religion must firmly tell people that human happiness is not found only in material abundance. If we change how we look at things, we see that just being given a life as a human is itself indeed a miracle. At the same time, we are being permitted to live here now, with countless blessings. It is very important to be grateful for this and to nurture the spirit of being satisfied with what we have.

The word *abundance* generally refers to material abundance. However, Gandhi, who was a saint, and Shakyamuni

were both focused on nothing so much as a spiritual abundance. We, too, have been given such power to see fully the true nature of things. I believe it is important to awaken to that.

Bhatt: Of course, this has been a very enriching trip for me, and I feel very honored to be sitting here with you. I have learned something from what you said today.

In India we have given birth to the Buddha, but he lives today in the hearts and minds of people all over the world. He lives now . . . I mean, the Buddha’s life and ideas are celebrated here. His spirit lives on far beyond the land of his

Rev. Niwano presents to Ms. Bhatt the English translation of his recent book after the presentation ceremony on May 13, 2010, for the twenty-seventh Niwano Peace Prize, at the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of Japan in Tokyo.

birth. I feel delighted to learn that; this is how we are all bound together. I mean bound together now and for centuries.

So, let us overcome the mind-set that is still rooted in narrow terms. By narrow terms, I mean actually that this is *my* land, *my* language, *my* people, *my* knowledge. The entire world is our family.

As we say in Sanskrit, “*vasudhaiva kutumbakam*,” that is, “the world is one family.”

What an honor it is to be associated with the Niwano Peace Foundation and Rissho Kosei-kai. To be wholly dedicated to lasting peace on this earth is a great honor.

So, thank you very much on behalf of SEWA, on behalf of me and my colleagues. *Om shanti*.

Niwano: Ms. Bhatt, until now I knew of you only through what I had read. Today, however, I have met you personally and been able to learn more in depth about your activities in the spirit of Gandhi, and I am deeply impressed.

I think that the impact of SEWA’s work must not stop with India but be a model for the people of the entire world. I expect even more successful efforts from you. Thank you very much. □

Like a Mother's Love

by Nichiko Niwano

We should consider others' suffering as our own and comfort them with the selfless love that a mother gives her child.

As I may have already mentioned many times, the world today thinks highly of having things streamlined and efficient. Of course, achieving this requires a great deal of planning and effort so as to benefit the largest number of people. It is a fact, however, that in putting economic interests first, the act of showing others consideration and empathy—kindheartedness—is at times being ignored and abandoned. Also, with so many people prepared from infancy to compete in various qualification tests, with the ultimate goal of landing a good job, sometimes to the point of excluding all other interests, there is no denying that for kindhearted people who are not able to adapt to such a situation, modern society can be an increasingly difficult place in which to live.

In other words, the relentless pursuit of the profit goal can result in casting aside the important mindset of respect for other human beings, and this leads to an increase in people who are harmed spiritually or even are afflicted by illness.

I think that the key phrase in putting the brakes on this trend, and the way of thinking that will resolve it, is “like a mother’s love.”

In considering what a mother’s love is and how it functions, we can see the way to healing other human beings.

Kindness Has No Gender

In June 2010 the World Cup soccer tournament was held in South Africa. I think most of you may know about the participation of the Japanese national team, and how one member of that team missed a kick in the penalty shootout and lost the game for Japan. After the match there was an unforgettable scene—his teammates, all of whom had made great efforts, gathered around that team member, who was sobbing, and some put their arms around his shoulders and all tried to comfort him.

Of course, we think of motherly love as a characteristic only of women, but such kindness is not limited to just one gender. There was deep kindness in the simple action of the soccer players who gathered around their teammate without blaming him for his failure, who was devastated after losing the game, and cried along with him, demonstrating their warmth and affection in considering his suffering from the bottom of their hearts, wordlessly encouraging him, and sharing with him the strength and courage to go on—which

was nothing but the working of a sentiment very much like a mother’s love—and it was the high point of the match.

When my sisters were young and hurt themselves, they would come to Founder Niwano and say, “It hurts here.” He would put his hand on the place they showed him to soothe the pain and make them feel better. Diligently being quick to relieve someone’s suffering and putting the person at ease—even in such small acts we can recognize the working of something like a mother’s love.

It is written in the Shrimala Sutra that “[One] will become the unsummoned friend of all living beings, give comfort to the multitude with great compassion, and empathize with the world like a Dharma-mother.” This basically means that one should become a person who, when other people are suffering, accepts their suffering as one’s own, and without asking goes to them as a deeply compassionate friend and extends a hand and comforts them with the selfless love that a mother bestows on her child.

To realize a world in which that type of kindness and compassion is valued and consideration is shown to everyone, we members of Rissho Kosei-kai, who strive to lead our lives according to the teachings of the Buddha, cannot simply and thoughtlessly turn each page of our daily lives, but must practice showing consideration to the people around us. In order to recognize what is important, however, occasionally there may be a need for a kind of paternal strictness, too.

In the Parable of the Burning House in chapter 3, “A Parable,” of the Lotus Sutra, an elderly father does not carry his children out of the house when it is engulfed in flames, but instead devises a plan to have them leave the house of their own accord. He does not directly use his own hands to save them, but instead gives them advice and warning that causes them to become aware of the danger and reach safety on their own. Naturally, such fatherly thoughtfulness is also an example of parental love.

Let us determine to show kindness and consideration wherever and whenever people are suffering physically or spiritually, whatever the conditions may be. □

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The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law

Chapter 17

Discrimination of Merits

(2)

This is the 104th installment of a detailed commentary on the Threefold Lotus Sutra by the founder of Rissho Kosei-kai, Rev. Nikkyo Niwano.

Since ancient times, the latter half of chapter 15, all of chapter 16, and the first half of chapter 17, the so-called “one chapter and two halves,” have been regarded as the main part of the Teaching of the Original Buddha. The “one chapter and two halves” have been thought of not only as the main part of the Teaching of the Original Buddha but also as the core of all of the whole Lotus Sutra. Nichiren admired them as the true spirit of all the Buddhist scriptures.

From the explanation given earlier, the reason should be apparent.

The latter half of chapter 17 and the eleven remaining chapters of the sutra are called the “concluding part [of the Teaching of the Original Buddha],” which primarily answers two questions: “What is produced by true faith?” and “What mental attitude is required to achieve true faith?” In this concluding part, the World-honored One commissions us to preach and spread this true faith to posterity.

The merits described in the first half of chapter 17, “Discrimination of Merits,” are those of faith. They are the merits achieved in the mind. These same merits are preached in the latter half of chapter 17 and the first half of chapter 18. However, beginning with the latter half of chapter 18, the merits described are those that appear in human relationships or in daily life.

Some people think that they need not pay attention to such merits. They may feel that if they thoroughly study the “one chapter and two halves” as the essence of the Lotus Sutra, understand them fully, and believe deeply in the infinite life of the Buddha and in the eternity of their own buddha-nature, there is no need for the remainder.

That would be quite sufficient, if indeed they could practice as perfectly as they think. If so, their faith would certainly be perfect. But, is there one person like that among ten thousand or even a million? It may be the ideal, but in actuality, practicing so perfectly is very difficult.

Ordinary people feel regretful when they hear the preachings of the ideal state of mind because they feel it to be infi-

nately remote from their actual lives, as if it existed on some other planet. Yet when this ideal state of mind is presented so that it relates to their daily lives, then the teachings come alive for them. Herein lies the first reason why the concluding part of the Lotus Sutra is important.

The minds of ordinary people are likely to become lazy. Though fully recognizing the value of the teaching, if they understand the virtues of the teaching only in a theoretical way, they slide into negligence. However, if they regularly read and recite the sutra, which teaches that those who embrace and practice true faith elevate themselves, they will renew their determination whenever it begins to slacken. This is the second reason why the concluding part of the sutra is important.

The Buddha also commissions us to teach and spread the Dharma, for which we ought to be grateful. We are heartened and inspired with courage whenever we receive his profound words. This is the third reason why the concluding part of the sutra is important.

The concluding part of the Lotus Sutra is both indispensable and of great value to ordinary people, that is, to virtually all of us. Understanding this deeply, we must approach the concluding part [of the Teaching of the Original Buddha] as wholeheartedly as the main part, without arrogance but rather with humility in our hearts.

TEXT Thereupon the Buddha addressed Maitreya Bodhisattva-Mahasattva: “Ajita! Those living beings who have heard that the lifetime of the Buddha is of such long duration and have been able to give rise to but one thought of faith and discernment—the merits they will obtain are beyond limit and measure.

COMMENTARY *Able to give rise to but one thought of faith and discernment.* Despite still being unable to sustain a firm faith, if one feels for even just an instant that it must be true, even then one will obtain such great merit.

TEXT Suppose there be any good son or good daughter who, for the sake of Perfect Enlightenment, during eighty myriad kotis of nayutas of kalpas practices the five paramitas: dana-paramita, sila-paramita, kshanti-paramita, virya-paramita, and dhyana-paramita, prajna-paramita being excepted; these merits compared with the above-mentioned merits are not equal to even the hundredth part, the thousandth part, or one part of a hundred thousand myriad kotis of those merits; indeed, neither numbers nor comparisons can make those merits known.

COMMENTARY We risk misunderstanding this passage if we read it carelessly. Because the Lotus Sutra strongly emphasizes bodhisattva practice, it may seem contradictory that people will obtain more merit in having one thought of faith and discernment concerning the eternal life of the Buddha than in actually practicing the five paramitas for eighty myriad kotis of nayutas of kalpas.

Yet if we read carefully, we can grasp the difference in the values of the merits from the phrase “neither numbers nor comparisons can make those merits known.” This expression means that there can be no comparing these merits because they are of different orders altogether. In plainer language, we can compare one million pounds or dollars or yen and one pound or dollar or yen because each is a sum of money. But we cannot compare a million dollars with the joy of reaching the summit of a high mountain and say which is superior and which is inferior. The two are by nature dissimilar, so comparing them is futile. So too is what is being preached here.

Donation, which sacrifices self on behalf of people and society; keeping the precepts, through which one leads a proper life by observing the Buddha’s precepts; forbearance, by which the mind remains unaffected by external interests; effort, in which one wholeheartedly strives toward achieving a proper goal; and meditation, through which one cul-

tivates an unshakable, concentrated mind—each of these five paramitas is good for us to practice. They are important practices by which we can elevate our minds and improve our character.

However, we cannot attain the ultimate realm of enlightenment through these paramitas (perfections) alone. By these practices alone it is impossible to reach buddhahood. As we saw in the previous issue of *DHARMA WORLD*, even the bodhisattvas, whose pure practices are beyond the capability of ordinary people, may well require eight lifetimes to achieve buddhahood.

If we practice in this way, and even if we are able to develop superior characters as human beings, we will still be unable to see through to the ultimate reality of all things in this world, unable to take even one step into the realm of true enlightenment. This small step separates us as ordinary human beings from the Buddha.

How can we span the gap of this one small step? Through no more and no less than recognizing and believing in the eternal life of the Buddha. When we know that the Buddha’s life is eternal, then we comprehend that the Buddha is with us in whichever world we happen to find ourselves and we believe that our buddha-nature neither arises nor perishes.

Ordinary people cannot gain a full awareness of this. However, believing in and understanding it even for an instant is something anyone can do. We can all have the thought, “Yes, it actually is true.” This thought causes us to make a great leap as a human being, one that is different, in terms of quality and level, from the character improvement realized through practicing the five perfections (paramitas).

Having heard the teachings to this point, it ought to be clear why the Buddha says, “prajna-paramita being excepted.” Within Buddhism, “wisdom” means the ability to ascertain the ultimate reality of all things. The culmination of that insight is none other than the Buddha’s wisdom. Consequently, one who is already equipped with true wisdom as

The bodhisattva Maitreya. This bas-relief depicts the bodhisattva enthroned in the Tushita heaven before his descent to earth as the successor of Shakyamuni Buddha. Kushan period, third–fifth centuries. Kapisa, Afghanistan. Schist. 29.7 x 43.8 cm. Owned by Musée Guimet, Paris.

a result of practicing prajna-paramita can already be called a buddha, so the Buddha excludes prajna-paramita, perfect wisdom.

The word “belief” or “faith” is used in many ways, but in Buddhism we do not use it to mean a sort of haphazard faith, but belief that comes from awakening to the universal truth. One might even say that belief falls within wisdom. In the everyday sense of the term, “wisdom” is dispassionate, intellectual, rational judgment; but in the Buddhist sense, “wisdom” incorporates the totality of emotion, reason, judgment, and belief, and they come to life in enlightenment.

Therefore, if one practices the five paramitas—donation, keeping the precepts, forbearance, effort, and meditation—and is possessed of wisdom, this is the same as practicing the Buddha Way. In contrast, to practice the five paramitas while not possessing this wisdom is to merely be cultivating one’s character. There is a huge qualitative, dimensional gap between the two.

This is why the Buddha continually preaches that if we complete the six paramitas, or the Six Perfections, by adding the sixth paramita of wisdom to the five paramitas, then we will attain buddhahood. Understanding this point is crucial.

The four faiths and five categories

Since ancient times, the essential points of this chapter have been the “four faiths and five categories” (*ssu-hsin wu-p’in* in Chinese). This division was first made in China by T’ien-t’ai Chih-i in order to make this chapter more easily understood.

The “four faiths,” also referred to as the “four faiths during the Buddha’s lifetime,” came from the idea that the faith in the Buddha during his lifetime could be divided into four stages: (1) generating but one thought of faith and discernment [concerning the infinity of the Buddha’s life], (2) generally comprehending the implications of [the Buddha’s] words [concerning his infinite life], (3) broadly preaching the sutra to others, and (4) profound faith and the perfection of meditative discernment.

The “five categories,” also referred to as the “five categories after the Buddha’s extinction,” are derived from the idea that true faith in the Latter Days of the Dharma can be divided into five categories: (1) initial rejoicing over the sutra, (2) reading and reciting the sutra, (3) preaching the Dharma to others, (4) concurrently practicing the six paramitas, and (5) primary practice of the six paramitas.

Generating but one thought of faith and discernment

The first of the four faiths is to generate but one thought of faith and discernment concerning the infinity of the Buddha’s life, even if for a brief moment to exclaim, “I see.” As we have noted repeatedly, the merits obtained by this practice are beyond limit or measure because the achievement of such faith and discernment is a great, rapid advance as a believer.

Therefore, the World-honored One has this to say in the conclusion to this prose passage:

TEXT If any good son or good daughter possesses such merit as these, there is no such thing as retrogressing from Perfect Enlightenment.”

COMMENTARY *Retrogressing from Perfect Enlightenment.* This phrase by itself means to fall back from making efforts to seek the enlightenment of the Buddha, and in this case the “retrogression” consists of harboring doubts about the eternity of the Buddha’s life.

If we do not believe that the life of the Buddha is eternal, then we cannot believe that the Buddha is always with us, or that our own buddha-nature is neither arising nor perishing. Such lack of faith results from being a slave to appearances and is the way of ordinary people. To try to attain the enlightenment of the Buddha while viewing the world from such an unelevated perspective is as irrational as trying to fly without wings. One must savor the World-honored One’s emphasis on the words “there is no such thing as. . .”

TEXT Thereupon the World-honored One, desiring to proclaim this meaning over again, spoke thus in verse:

“Though a man, seeking the Buddha wisdom, / During eighty myriad kotis / Of nayutas of kalpas / Were to perform the five paramitas, / And during those kalpas / Give alms and offerings to buddhas, / Pratyekabuddhas, and disciples, / As well as to bodhisattvas— / Rare and precious food and drink, / Superior clothing and bed furniture, / Monasteries built of sandalwood and / Adorned with gardens and groves, / Such alms as these, / Wonderful in variety— / Were he to maintain them through all those kalpas / And transfer the merits from these gifts to the Buddha Way;

COMMENTARY Here the Buddha is preaching about the practice of donation.

• *Transfer the merits.* This means applying to others the merits we might receive for ourselves.

For example, reading and reciting sutras is a means of deeply implanting the Buddha’s teachings in one’s mind, which is thereby purified. So by nature, reciting sutras is a practice for our own progress along the path to buddhahood. However, when we recite the sutras at a memorial service for the spirits of our ancestors, we transfer the merits that we should receive to our ancestors [so that they might attain enlightenment]. This is why sutra recitation before the altar is called the transfer of merit.

This transfer of merit is not performed only for the sake of the dead. According to its original meaning, it is applicable to living people as well, and indeed it is much more meaningful for the living than for the dead. If we recite the sutras on behalf of the elevation and happiness of the whole of humankind, we transfer the merits that we should receive to the whole of humanity. This is why we conclude our morning and evening recitations of the sutras with “May these merits / Extend universally to all, / So that we, with all living beings, / Together accomplish the Buddha Way.”

Thus, transfer of merit is donating the merit of the Dharma, the most valuable treasure a person can have, to other people. For this reason, it is a much more noble deed than making donations of money or material goods.

Making a monetary or material donation to others with the expectation of this act returning merit to us is hardly true donation. Our making donations to others that increase their happiness a little is nothing out of the ordinary. However, when we make donations to others with the hope that it will arouse the buddha mind within them and eventually help all people to accomplish the Buddha Way in this world, we make donations of the very best kind. That is why the verse says, "Transfer the merits . . . to the Buddha Way."

Two further points should be added in reference to merit transference. First, although merit transference should be performed wholly for the sake of others, the merit that results unfailingly returns to the one who performs the deed. Second, the greatest merit transference to the spirits of our ancestors is to purify and elevate ourselves, that is, to perform bodhisattva practice. Nothing is more joyful and reassuring to the spirits of our ancestors than our own self-improvement. Therefore we must not restrict ourselves to reciting the sutras in form alone, but through recitation purify and elevate ourselves in every way.

TEXT Moreover, though he were to keep the precepts / Purely, without flaw or fault, / And seek the supreme Way / Which all buddhas praise;

COMMENTARY *Flaw or fault.* This means defilements, which are delusions and insatiable greed leaking through the flaws or faults of the mind.

TEXT Or were he patiently to endure insult, / Stand firm in the stage of gentleness, / And though evils came upon him, / Keep his mind undisturbed; / Were he by [other] believers / Who were filled with utmost arrogance / To be harassed and regarded with contempt, / And still be able to bear even this;

COMMENTARY These lines are concerned with the practice of forbearance.

- *Gentleness.* This refers to a harmonious, well-balanced, flexible state of mind.
- *Undisturbed.* This indicates the mind that is not swayed and set adrift by external pressures.
- *Harassed.* Through trifling fault-finding, arrogant people with imperfect understanding of the Dharma harass those who believe in the true Dharma.

TEXT Or were he to be diligent and zealous, / Ever strong in will and memory, / And during measureless kotis of kalpas / With all his mind continue unremitting, / And during numberless kalpas / Dwell in secluded places, / And whether in seated or walking meditation / Avoiding sleep and always concentrating his mind;

COMMENTARY Effort is being described here.

- *Secluded places.* This refers to quiet, isolated places like the depths of the mountains or the middle of the forest.
- *Walking meditation.* This means contemplating the Dharma while walking.
- *Always concentrating his mind.* This describes keeping a mind that is disciplined and does not allow itself to be distracted by insignificant matters.

TEXT Were [he], by this means, / To be able to attain states of meditation / And for eighty myriad kotis of kalpas / Calmly remain in them with unperturbed mind; / Were [he], maintaining this single-minded happiness, / Willing to seek the supreme Way, [saying]: / 'I will attain complete wisdom / And go on to the utmost reaches of meditation';

COMMENTARY This passage explains the practice of meditation.

- *States of meditation.* There are various states of meditation. In chapter 24, "The Bodhisattva Wonder Sound," there are many examples of such states.
- *Singleminded happiness.* This indicates merit that can be obtained through concentration of the mind.
- *The utmost reaches.* This refers to the absolute, the ultimate point, the highest perfection.

TEXT Were such a man for hundreds of thousands of / Myriads of kotis of kalpas / To perform such deeds of merit / As those above expounded; / Yet any good son or daughter / Who, hearing me declare my [infinite life], / Believes it for the duration of but a single thought, / That one's reward surpasses his. / If anyone be entirely free / From all doubts and misgivings / And in his deepest heart believes it for but a moment, / Such shall be his reward.

COMMENTARY This of course is the merit of generating even just one thought of faith and discernment concerning the infinity of the Buddha's lifetime.

Needless to say, the reward spoken of here is the reward that comes from faith, namely, the merit of true faith.

TEXT If there be bodhisattvas / Who have followed [good] ways for innumerable kalpas / And hear of my announcement of my [infinite] life, / They will be able to receive it in faith; / Such men as these / Will bow their heads in receiving this sutra / And say: 'May we in the future / Have such a long life to save all the living; / And just as the present World-honored One / Who, King of the Shakyas, / On his wisdom throne raises the lion's roar, / Preaching the Dharma without fear, / So may we in future ages, / Honored and revered by all, / When sitting on the wisdom throne, / In like manner tell of the limitless life!'

COMMENTARY It is easier to comprehend this passage if we think of it as conveying directly what the bodhisattvas are thinking.

TEXT If there be any of profound spirit, / Pure and upright,
/ Learned and able to retain what he learns, / Who under-
stands the meaning of the Buddha's words in all its implica-
tions, / Such men as these / Will have no doubts about this
teaching.

COMMENTARY *Learned.* This means not only hearing many teachings but remembering them. We have noted before that Ananda is called "Ananda, foremost in hearing many teachings."

- *To retain what he learns.* See "The dharani power" in the January-March 2011 issue of DHARMA WORLD.

- *Who understands the meaning of the Buddha's word in all its implications.* This is a somewhat opaque circumlocution. Simply put, this phrase means to comprehend the meaning of what the Buddha says, grasping his meaning without mistake.

- *This teaching.* This indicates specifically the infinity of the Buddha's lifetime.

TEXT "Again, Ajita! If anyone hears of the long duration of the Buddha's lifetime and comprehends its implications, the merit attained by this person will be beyond limit and he will advance to the supreme wisdom of tathagatas;

COMMENTARY

Generally comprehending the implications of [the Buddha's] words

This mental stage transcends that of "generating but one thought of faith and discernment." It is not only to generally comprehend the infinity of the Buddha's lifetime, but to apprehend its broader meaning. Basically, the following interpretation is fine.

The infinity of the Buddha's lifetime means that at each moment and at all times the Buddha is constantly here with us, continually preaching the Dharma. Because our own buddha-nature is unborn and undying, by believing and practicing the Lotus Sutra, someday we will definitely attain the spiritual state of being united with the Buddha. Being covered with the various clouds of illusion, however, we do not perceive the eternal life of the Buddha or see that he is always watching over our spiritual progress, so we become lax. However, if we gradually remove the clouds of illusion from our minds, someday we will certainly see the Buddha and become one with him. One or two lifetimes may be insufficient, but since we know that the Buddha is always here with us and that the buddha-nature is unborn and undying, we can confidently and hopefully tread the path of constant progress. Besides, we are not alone. When all people have the same feeling and proceed hand in hand toward this goal, a truly peaceful, highly advanced and ideal society will be realized on this earth.

Once we understand the profound meaning of the eternal life of the Buddha—a teaching that appears so simple—we take the first step toward the Buddha's wisdom. This mental

stage attained by deepening our faith is referred to by Chih-i as "generally comprehending the implications of the Buddha's words concerning his infinite life."

TEXT how much more will [this be the case with] the one who is devoted to hearing this sutra, or causes others to hear it, or himself keeps it, or causes others to keep it, or himself copies it, or causes others to copy it, or with flowers, incense, garlands, banners, flags, silk canopies, and lamps of fragrant oil and ghee pays homage to the sutra; this man's merit will be infinite and boundless and able to bring forth the Buddha's perfect wisdom.

COMMENTARY *Silk canopies.* These were customarily carried by attendants and held over buddhas, kings, noblemen, and honored priests when they traveled.

- *Ghee.* This refers to liquid clarified butter from cow's milk. Tapers soaked in ghee are offered to the images of buddhas even now in the area from Tibet to India.

Broadly preaching the sutra to others

This is the stage of the believer who has gone a step further than "generally comprehending the implications of [the Buddha's] words [concerning his infinite life]." In this third stage, we not only understand generally the true implications of the infinity of the Buddha's life but devote ourselves to hearing and remembering the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, which take root in our minds; and we devote ourselves to religious practices, including copying the sutras, and express our devotion to and gratitude for the teachings. In addition, what is specifically important is to encourage many people to hear the teachings and guide them toward the Buddha Way.

If our practices do not purify and elevate the whole world, then we have not devoted ourselves wholeheartedly to the teachings, for the Buddha's original vow is to liberate all living beings.

Therefore, the person of true faith is bound to progress from the first stage to the second, and from the second to this third stage of "broadly preaching the sutra to others."

In this stage, we learn to revere the Lotus Sutra in various ways. Paying homage to the sutra is a way of expressing our devotion to and gratitude for the Buddha's teachings. The beautiful offerings and ornaments mentioned here symbolize a deep sense of gratitude to the Buddha. As ordinary human beings who are grateful for the teachings, we want to express our appreciation in some manner. For believers to make donations that adorn temples and altars is quite natural and proper.

TEXT Ajita! If any good son or good daughter, hearing of my declaration of the long duration of my lifetime, believes and discerns it in his inmost heart, such a one will see the Buddha always on Mount Gridhrakuta surrounded by a host of great bodhisattvas and shravakas, and preaching the Dharma. And he will see this saha world whose land is lapis lazuli, plain

and level, its eight roads marked off with Jambunada gold, lined with jewel trees; with towers, halls, and galleries all made of jewels, in which dwell together its bodhisattva host. If anyone is able so to behold, you may know that this is the sign of profound faith and discernment.

COMMENTARY

Profound faith and the perfection of meditative discernment

These words teach us the fourth mental state that we attain when, in our heart of hearts, we believe and discern the eternal life of the Buddha. Seeing the Buddha always on Mount Gridhrakuta means that we will recognize that the Buddha always resides with us, wherever we are. We thereby realize vividly that the Buddha's teachings surround us.

The saha world looking like a beautiful land means that when we have sufficient faith, we will perceive the saha world to be essentially identical with the Land of Tranquil Light. The actual world of the present will be transformed into a pure and joyous one, when our minds are continually filled with religious exultation. In this state of mind, wherever we look we will see beauty, and any person we see will look like a bodhisattva. We will be able to see through a person's outward appearance to the buddha-nature inherent within.

The highest state of mind that a believer can attain is called the stage of profound faith and the perfection of meditative discernment. "Discernment" carries the meaning of beholding life and beholding the world. If from the bottom of our hearts we believe and discern the infinite life of the Buddha, then we can view life and the world according to his teachings and remain continually in the world of religious exultation. As a result, we can see the saha world as essentially identical with the Land of Tranquil Light.

TEXT "And again, if [anyone] after the extinction of the Tathagata, hears this sutra, and does not defame but rejoices over it, you may know that this is already a sign of deep faith and understanding;

COMMENTARY Here begins the teaching of the ideal way of the believers and the merits that they should receive thereby in later ages following the Buddha's extinction, that is, the "five categories after the Buddha's extinction."

Initial rejoicing over the sutra

The first stage of this ideal is "initial rejoicing over the sutra." We cannot say that we have faith if we only have an intellectual understanding of the Buddha's teachings. We cannot reach the mental state of faith until we experience spiritual rejoicing in the teachings. The mental state of beginning to feel gratitude for the teachings is called initial rejoicing over the sutra.

This state of mind is so important that its merits are discussed in detail in chapter 18, "The Merits of Joyful Acceptance."

TEXT how much more the one who reads and recites, receives and keeps it—this man carries the Tathagata on his head.

COMMENTARY

Reading and reciting the sutras

By merely having the "initial rejoicing over the sutra," one can be said to have already attained true faith, and one advances a step further by receiving and keeping the teaching. By repeating the sutra to oneself with conscious care and thought, one reaches the stage of faith that Chih-i called "reading and reciting the sutra."

• *Carries the Tathagata on his head.* On his shoulders or on his head means that he continually receives the Buddha, that the Buddha is always with him.

TEXT Ajita! Such a good son or good daughter need no more erect stupas, temples, or monasteries for me, nor make offerings of the four requisites to the monks. Wherefore? [Because] this good son or good daughter who receives and keeps, reads and recites this sutra has already erected stupas, built monasteries, and made offerings to the monks, that is to say, has erected, for the Buddha's relics, stupas of the precious seven, high and broad, and tapering up to the Brahma heaven, hung with flags and canopies and precious bells, and with flowers, perfumes, garlands, sandal powder, perfumed unguents, incense for burning, drums, musical instruments, pipes, flutes, harps, all kinds of dances and plays—singing and lauding with wondrous notes—he has already made these offerings for innumerable thousands of myriads of kotis of kalpas.

COMMENTARY Devotedly studying the teaching is as significant as a million material offerings, maybe even more valuable. In other words, the Buddha's preaching clarifies the true nature of making offerings and shows that pure religious activities are superior to all else.

TEXT Ajita! If anyone, after my extinction, hears this sutra, and is able either to receive and keep, or himself copy or cause others to copy it, he has [already] erected monasteries and built thirty-two red sandalwood halls, tall as eight tala trees, lofty, spacious, splendid, in which abide hundreds, thousands of bhikshus; [adorned also with] gardens, groves, and bathing pools, walking paths and meditation cells; with clothing, food and drink, bedding, medicaments, and all enjoyable things provided to the full therein. Such monasteries and such numbers of halls, hundreds of thousands of myriads of kotis, countless in their number, he has here in my presence offered to me and to [my] bhikshus. Therefore I say if anyone after the extinction of the Tathagata receives and keeps, reads and recites it, preaches it to others, either himself copies it or causes others to copy it, and pays homage to the sutra, he need no longer erect stupas and temples or build monasteries and make offerings to the monks.

COMMENTARY *Tala trees.* These are a type of palm tree that is here used to express a unit of height.

• *Enjoyable things.* These are things which make for convenient living. To the bhikshus whose only shelter is the branches of the trees over the ground where they sleep and whose only possession is an iron bowl, even the utensils of everyday life are precious, for they make life easier.

Preaching the Dharma to others

Here we read about the merits of preaching. In this stage we come to feel that we cannot help communicating the Buddha's teachings to others as we receive and keep, read and recite the sutras, and gradually realize their value. We are not limited to preaching the Buddha's teachings by word of mouth, but can inform others of his teachings by means of letters, articles in magazines and newspapers, and books. Even those who are not good at speaking or writing can show the value of the Buddha's teachings to other people through their silent actions. All of these practices are included in "preaching the Dharma to others."

The category of "preaching the Dharma to others" is the mental stage in which we go further than elevating ourselves and being liberated as individuals, advancing to the bodhisattva practice of instructing and benefiting others. Naturally, the merits one receives at this stage are greater than those attributed to reading and reciting the sutra.

Significantly, in this and the previous category the Buddha states that we need "no longer erect stupas and temples or build monasteries and make offerings to the monks," as he said in chapter 10, "A Teacher of the Dharma."

He is teaching that immaterial offerings made from the heart are of far greater value than material offerings not made from the heart. The greatest offering that we can make to the Buddha is to receive and believe the teachings, practice them, and spread them. By doing so, we elevate ourselves and the people of the world. We must first take this to heart.

Next, we must not fall into thinking that we need no longer build temples and monasteries simply because the Buddha declared that his whole body is contained in his teachings and that we do not have to enshrine his relics. A person who accepts the sutras from mere logic alone may interpret these words literally. To do this is to lack gratitude toward and reverence for the Buddha. That means to accept the Buddha's teachings in theory alone and fail to have faith in them.

Needless to say, we as believers should make the greatest effort to believe and receive the teachings, practice them, and preach and spread them for the sake of society as a whole. At the same time, we naturally desire to make material offerings to the Great Benevolent Teacher who leads us to the supreme Way, and to the many bodhisattvas who have helped him through the ages.

As has often been repeated in this series, the more deeply we believe the Buddha's teachings, the more we feel bound to express our gratitude in some material form. This is why we

adorn our Buddhist altars with various offerings, worship at the altars morning and evening, extol the Buddha, and pay homage to him. This we must inscribe indelibly in our hearts.

In the next section we reach the more advanced stage of accumulating practices.

TEXT How much less he who is able to keep this sutra and add thereto almsgiving, morality, forbearance, zeal, concentration, and wisdom. His merit will be most excellent, infinite and boundless; even as space, which includes east, west, south, and north, the four intermediate directions, the zenith and nadir, is infinite and boundless, so also the merit of this man will be infinite and boundless, and he will speedily reach perfect knowledge [of the Buddha].

COMMENTARY *Concentration.* In the original Chinese text, the word translated as concentration is *i-hsin*, meaning singlemindedness. So this term signifies meditation to focus one's attention on one thing alone.

• *The four intermediate directions.* This refers to southeast, southwest, northeast, northwest. The "ten directions" are composed of these four intermediate directions, the four primary directions (north, south, east, and west), the zenith and nadir.

• *Perfect knowledge [of the Buddha].* The Buddha's transcendent knowledge (see the May/June 1997 issue and the January–March 2009 issue of DHARMA WORLD).

Concurrently practicing the six paramitas

Here is described the category of "concurrently practicing the six paramitas." "Concurrently" does not mean to practice them all simultaneously, but rather to receive and keep the sutra, read and recite the sutra, and preach the sutra, all the while practicing the six paramitas. However, at this stage it is almost impossible to practice all six paramitas perfectly. Therefore the Buddha implies that we should begin our practice according to our ability wherever we can, whenever the situation and circumstances allow.

Shakyamuni Buddha never under any circumstances urges us to attempt the impossible. He teaches us to build our religious practices gradually, beginning at whatever stage we can. In chapter 2, "Tactfulness," he preaches that each person can enter the Buddha Way from any stage, as seen from the fact that children who while playing gather sand to make a buddha's stupa, enter the Buddha Way.

In chapter 17, the Buddha shows us the logical order in which we can deepen our faith step by step without attempting the impossible. Chih-i systematically reduced these to the "four faiths during the Buddha's lifetime" and the "five categories after the Buddha's extinction" to make this chapter more easily understood.

It is important to note that earlier in this chapter the five paramitas seemed to be de-emphasized in order to emphasize the merits that one can obtain in the stage of generat-

ing but one thought of faith and discernment [concerning the infinity of the Buddha's life]. In the present category, however, it is the six paramitas, not just the five, which are emphasized as essential to faith. Let us examine the reason for this.

Shakyamuni was endowed with the Buddha's wisdom and was a superior leader. The disciples who were directly instructed by him during his lifetime could enter into deep faith as a result of listening to the Buddha's words and appreciating them.

The Buddha's disciples were able to advance rapidly in their practice of the five paramitas because they were directly instructed by the Buddha's wisdom. To oversimplify somewhat, they were given wisdom by Shakyamuni, and out of this wisdom they had only to practice intently the other five paramitas—donation, keeping the precepts, forbearance, effort, and meditation. One can easily imagine that they could constantly practice with deep emotion and religious exultation because they did so under the direct guidance of the Buddha, their model of superior character.

However, since this great leader and teacher departed from this world, those who would follow his teachings, particularly those of us who live in the Latter Days of the Dharma, must study and practice his teachings through our own power. We must seek wisdom in the teachings that he has left us and must realize it for ourselves. Therefore, in contrast with the period in which he lived, in our day we must regard the practice of all six paramitas, wisdom included, as most important. That is why the Buddha strongly urges us in this category to practice all six of the paramitas. We sense here Shakyamuni Buddha's immense consideration for us, and cannot help feeling extremely grateful.

Believers who belong to the mental stage of this category practice the six paramitas in different ways, each according to his circumstances. Sometimes one's practice of the paramitas is incomplete and imperfect, and one has to practice them while concurrently receiving and keeping the teachings, reading and reciting them, and preaching them to others. This is why the category is called "concurrently practicing the six paramitas."

As a believer progresses to the highest stage, he can practice the six paramitas intensively and perfectly. Next the Buddha preaches the merits that a believer will obtain from such practice.

TEXT If anyone reads and recites, receives and keeps this sutra, preaches it to other people, or himself copies it, or causes others to copy it; moreover is able to erect caityas and build monasteries, and to serve and extol the shravaka monks, and also with hundreds of thousands of myriads of kotis of ways of extolling, extols the merits of the bodhisattvas; also [if he] to other people, with various reasonings according to its meaning, expounds this Dharma Flower Sutra; again [if he] is able to keep the commandments in purity, amicably

to dwell with the gentle, to endure insult without anger, to be firm in will and thought, ever to value sitting meditation, to attain profound [states of] concentration, zealously and boldly to understand good teachings, to be clever and wise in ably answering difficult questionings; Ajita, again, if after my extinction there be good sons and good daughters who receive and keep, read and recite this sutra, who possess such excellent merits as these, you should know that those people have proceeded toward the wisdom throne and are near Perfect Enlightenment, sitting under the tree of enlightenment.

COMMENTARY *According to its meaning.* This means "in accordance with the true meaning of the Lotus Sutra without fault" when believers preach it.

• *Dwell with.* The original meaning is to "live together with," that is, for fellow believers to join together in friendship and form an assembly.

Primary practice of the six paramitas

The believer who has attained this stage of perfect practice is said to have reached the category called "primary practice of the six paramitas." As the Buddha has declared, if one attains this mental stage, he is near Perfect Enlightenment.

Hence, one should speak highly of such persons and venerate them, as the Buddha says in the following.

TEXT Ajita! Wherever those good sons or good daughters sit or stand or walk, in that place [you] should erect a caitya; all gods and men should pay homage to it as a stupa of [the relics of] the Buddha."

COMMENTARY [In the fourth category] the Buddha said that one need not erect stupas for him, whereas in the final category he proclaims that where a person practices the six paramitas intensively one should erect there a caitya and pay homage. Here the Buddha is stressing the great importance of practicing the teachings of the Lotus Sutra and of spreading them to others in the Latter Days of the Dharma. We should feel grateful for these words from the Buddha.

TEXT Thereupon the World-honored One, desiring to proclaim this meaning over again, spoke thus in verse:

"If anyone, after my extinction, / Is able respectfully to keep this sutra, / This man's happiness will be infinite / As is above explained. / Such a one will have made perfectly / All kinds of offerings / And erected stupas for relics, / Adorned with the precious seven, / With banner towers, high and broad, / Tapering up to the Brahma heaven, / With thousands of myriads of kotis of gem bells, / Stirred by the wind to mystic music. / For innumerable kalpas / He will have paid homage to these stupas / With flowers, incense, and garlands, / With celestial garments and playing of music, / With perfumed oil and ghee lamps burning / And illuminating all around. / In the evil times of the Latter Days of the Dharma, / He who

can keep this sutra / Will have, as above [shown], / Perfectly made all kinds of offerings.

COMMENTARY *Banner towers.* This is the finial of the pagoda, also called a spire.

- *All around.* This means to go around; in this case, to illuminate the perimeter of a pagoda with lights.
- *The evil times of the Latter Days of the Dharma.* This is the so-called last of the five 500-year periods, the period when the teachings of the Buddha are lost. Because of the hardening of people's hearts, the practice of evil deeds prevails and conflicts take place ceaselessly.

TEXT If anyone can keep this sutra, / It will be as if the Buddha were present / And he, with ox-head sandalwood, / Built monasteries to serve him, / Consisting of thirty-two halls, / Eight tala trees in height, / With superior food and fine garments, / Beds and all complete, / With abodes for hundreds and thousands; / With gardens, groves, and bathing pools, / With walking paths and meditation cells, / All beautifully adorned.

COMMENTARY *It will be as if the Buddha were present.* The Buddha in this verse is Shakyamuni Buddha himself. In other words, the Buddha is saying, "I myself who am here."

- *Ox-head sandalwood.* This is a valuable reddish, aromatic wood.
- *Superior food.* This refers to delicious, choice meals.

TEXT If anyone has the mind of faith and discernment, / Receives, keeps, reads, recites, and copies, / Or moreover causes others to copy, / And pays homage to the sutra, / Strewing flowers, incense, and sandal powder, / And uses perfumed oil of sumana / And campaka and atimuktaka / For constant burning; / He who pays such homage to it / Will obtain infinite merits; / Just as space is boundless, / So will it be with his merits;

COMMENTARY *Sumana.* This is a jasmine, a shrub or vine with beautiful flowers.

- *Campaka.* This is a tree with fragrant blossoms whose wood is also used to make incense.
- *Atimuktaka.* This is a tree whose flowers are so fragrant that they are said to make even a dragon lick its lips. It is also used to make incense.

TEXT How much more with one who keeps this sutra, / Gives alms and keeps the commandments, / Is forbearing and delights in meditation, / Not irascible, nor speaking ill, / Reverent to caityas and sanctuaries, / Humble toward the bhikshus, / Far removed from haughtiness, / Ever pondering on wisdom, / Not angry when asked about difficulties / But compliantly explaining them; / If he is able to do these deeds, / His merits cannot be estimated.

COMMENTARY *Far removed from haughtiness.* This means to keep apart from self-conceit or pride.

- *Difficulties.* In addition to questions that are merely hard to answer, this includes those that are intended merely as harassment or merely to criticize.
- *Compliantly.* This indicates to obey the Buddha's intention and to follow the true meaning of the teachings.

TEXT If one meets such a Dharma teacher / Who has accomplished such virtues, / Let him strew divine flowers upon him, / Cover him with divine clothing, / And salute him by bowing to his feet, / With a mind as if thinking of the Buddha.

COMMENTARY *A Dharma teacher.* The meaning of this term is not specifically limited to ordained priests. Whoever practices the true Dharma and preaches it for the sake of others is a "Dharma teacher."

TEXT Moreover, let him reflect thus: / 'Soon he will be going to the wisdom throne / To achieve nondelusion and the unconditioned, / Widely benefiting gods and men.'

COMMENTARY *Going to the wisdom throne.* Though literally it means proceeding to the place where the Buddha was enlightened, it is used figuratively here to refer to his entering the world of enlightenment.

- *The unconditioned.* This means the law of absolute permanence, unaffected by the changes of arising and extinction resulting from causes and conditions; in short, nirvana.

TEXT Wherever he dwells and stays, / Walks, sits, or lies, / Or preaches but a stanza [of this sutra], / In that place erect a stupa, / Adorn it and make it beautiful, / And in all ways pay homage to it. / When a Buddha son dwells in such a place, / It means that the Buddha himself uses it / And ever abides in it, / Walking, or sitting, or lying down."

COMMENTARY The Buddha regards anyone who believes and discerns his teachings wholeheartedly as his own son and calls him a Buddha son.

He also says that wherever a Buddha son dwells is the Buddha's abode. If we believe completely, the Buddha comes to wherever we are and abides there with us.

For a believer nothing could be more desirable. To live together with the Buddha, to arise with him in the morning, to go to bed together with him at night—this is the realm of religious exultation, or the perfection of man's religious life.

To be continued

In this series, passages in the TEXT sections are quoted from *The Threefold Lotus Sutra*, Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Company, 1975, with slight revisions. The diacritical marks originally used for several Sanskrit terms in the TEXT sections are omitted here for easier reading.