

Women in Buddhism in the U.S.

Since Buddhism reached American shores in the nineteenth century, women have been a part of the transmission of the *dharma* (Buddhist teaching) as students, lay people, teachers, nuns, academics, artists and activists. Women from a wide array of backgrounds and interest areas continue to shape the face of Buddhism in the U.S.—from women who encountered Buddhism during the women’s movement in the 1960s, to ordained women founding temples for large immigrant populations, to young women using Buddhism and art as a tool of changing the world, to women carving out a space for Buddhism in colleges and universities. As Buddhist scholar Rita Gross is careful to note, the experiences of women in Buddhism in the U.S. are wide and varied.¹

Historical Glance: Women in Buddhism in the U.S.

Buddhist scholar Richard Seager claims that since Americans’ interest in Buddhism spiked in the 1960s saw a spike in interest in Buddhism among Americans, Buddhist communities across the country have been forced to struggle with how to be a part of America. With that struggle have come questions about the role of women in Buddhism.² The history of Buddhism is dominated by patriarchal structures and male-centered liturgical and ordination practices. Yet, Rita Gross suggests that women in the U.S. began practicing Buddhism in the 1960s and 70s because “the basic teachings [of Buddhism] were gender-free and gender-neutral, and many found the practice of meditation not only gender-free, but intensely liberating. To many feminists,...Buddhism and feminism seemed to be allies.”³ As Buddhism grew roots in the U.S., women began to realize that “deeper explorations into the traditional texts revealed misogynistic passages as well as a strong overall tendency to favor men over women in matters of study and practice...[Women] were told that the *dharma* is beyond gender and that women were being overly sensitive and divisive when they were bothered by misogynistic stories or institutional male dominance.”⁴

In the early 1980s, Cambridge Buddhist Association member Suzie Bowman began to notice similarities among women’s experiences of American Buddhism—including struggles of motherhood in a tradition that emphasizes the quiet of meditation halls and an alarming number of stories about abusive male teachers. Bowman began working with the Providence Zen Center in Rhode Island to host a one-day

¹ Gross, Rita. “How American Women are Changing Buddhism.” *Shambhala Sun*. July, 2005. *Shambhala Sun* online. Accessed 13 April 2006.

<http://www.shambhalasun.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1319&Itemid=0>

² Seager, Richard Hughes. *Buddhism in America*. Columbia Contemporary American Religion Series. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999:185.

³ Gross, 2.

⁴ Gross, 2.

conference of seventy women called “The Feminine in Buddhism” in 1983. This was followed by a 1984 conference that spanned two days with 120 participants and a three-day conference/retreat in 1985.⁵

These conferences inspired budding Buddhist Sandy Boucher to take to the road, interviewing over one hundred Buddhist women in their homes, work places, and *sanghas* (Buddhist communities). She knit their stories into a book about how women were practicing Buddhism in the mid-1980s. First published in 1988, *Turning the Wheel: American Women Creating the New Buddhism* explores the varied experiences of women in Buddhism in the U.S. The book illustrates the experiences of immigrant women from Asia who brought their Buddhism with them and of white women who discovered Buddhism in tandem with feminism. Boucher also describes the challenges for women of color in the U.S. who encountered a white-dominated Buddhist culture. In her hopeful introduction, Boucher suggests that these women are a part of creating an American Buddhism in which “lies the possibility for the creation of a religion fully inclusive of women’s realities.”⁶

Today, this exploration continues in many ways. Drs. Susanne Mrozik and Peter Gregory of Smith College, an all-women’s college in Northampton, Massachusetts, organized “Women Practicing Buddhism: American Experiences” in spring 2005. Gregory said the conference was “a celebration of how women are changing Buddhism...as well as a kind of exploration of issues that women as Buddhists face.”⁷ A book on the conference’s findings is forthcoming, though a sample of the work was reprinted in the magazine, *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. In it, Helen Tworok, *Tricycle*’s founding editor, argues that it is time for American Buddhist women to rethink what power means—“[M]y hope for all those living on the American sidelines—such as women and Buddhists—is that we use our compromised status to our best advantage; that we capitalize on our experiences and strengths and training to investigate alternatives to conventional views of power.”⁸

This March, the Buddhist Council of the Midwest partnered with DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois to sponsor the “Buddhist Women’s Conference: Women Living the Dharma.” Video streams of the conference will be available on their website in the coming months. The conference covered a range of topics, including: gender of the *dharma*, what it means for women to live the *dharma* in the 21st century, interfaith dialogue, the experiences of Asian women in the U.S. and being a mother and a Buddhist.⁹

⁵ Sidor, Ellen, ed. *A Gathering of Spirit: Women Teaching in American Buddhism*. Cumberland, Rhode Island: Primary Point Press; 1987: 4.

⁶ Boucher, Sandra. *Turning the Wheel: American Women Creating the New Buddhism*. 2nd edition. Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press; (1988) 1993: 1.

⁷ Clemente, Schuyler. “Exploring ‘Women Practicing Buddhism’” in *NewsSmith* online. Accessed 17 April 2006. <<http://www.smith.edu/newssmith/winter2005/buddhism.php>>

⁸ Tworok, Helen. “Just Power: A Reflection of 50 years of American Women Buddhists.” in *Tricycle*. Winter 2005: 58-61+ 116-7: 59-60.

⁹ Dharma Women website. Accessed 17 April 2006. <<http://www.dharmawomen.org/>>

From an international perspective, American women have been on the forefront of the Sakyadhita International Association for Buddhist Women. (*Sakyadhita* means “daughters of the Buddha”¹⁰). Karma Lekshe Tsomo, a fully ordained Tibetan nun who teaches at the University of San Diego, is the founder, current president and has helped organize nine conferences since 1987. In June 2006, Buddhist women from around the world gathered in Malaysia around the topic “Buddhist Women in a Global Multicultural Community.” Several American women participated: Dr. Sharon Suh, a professor in Seattle University’s Department of Theology and Religious Studies, gave the keynote address about border-crossing in Buddhist communities; Zenju Earthlyn M. Manuel, an African American student of Zen in Oakland, California, presented a paper on what Buddhism has to do with Black women; Boucher hosted a writing workshop on “Women’s Global Connectedness;” and Susanne Mrozik, of Smith College in Massachusetts tackled the huge question: “What does Buddhist Practice Mean to American Women?” The summaries of these talks are being compiled and will be available on the website.

Buddhist Women Teachers & Monastics

Between the 1960s and today, women in American Buddhism have “become a major force as practitioners and as teachers, intellectuals, and leaders in ways quite different from women in Asia.”¹¹ The prominent role of women teachers in American Buddhism is becoming one of its defining characteristics. The role of “teacher” in Buddhism varies according to tradition, but generally there are two types: lay teachers who have been trained in a particular lineage and have been authorized to teach and ordained monastic nuns and monks who may or may not teach the *dharma* to other Buddhists.

The Abbess of Vajra Dakini Nunnery in Vermont, Khenmo Drolmo, suggests that the role of women teachers in Buddhism is at a historical moment:

I often think of my mom who would never have gone outside of the Catholic priest in seeking spiritual guidance. And now we have women offering that guidance like never before. And there is broader acceptance of women’s authority and the potential of women’s communities to be supported...This is an open moment in history...We have women teachers and capable women teachers.¹²

What does it mean to be a woman and a *dharma* teacher in the U.S.? In its July 2000 issue, *Shambhala Sun* facilitated a conversation among four well-known women Buddhist teachers in the U.S.: Judith Simmer-Brown of Naropa University, Pat O’Hara, a Soto priest in New York, Barbara Rhodes of the Kwan Um School of Zen and Sharon Salzberg, co-founder of Insight Meditation Society. Each of these women encountered Buddhism with a male teacher. In recent years, each has discovered the value of women teachers and are, themselves, women teachers. For example, Salzberg realized that her first woman teacher encouraged her in a way slightly different than her male teachers had: “Something within her

¹⁰ Seager, 198.

¹¹ Seager, 186.

¹² Drolmo, Khenmo. Abbess, Vajra Dakini Nunnery. Telephone Interview. 16 June 2006.

experience was a woman's understanding...She was the model for me of how to take the losses, the tragedies and the difficulties of life, and actually use them as enrichment for my understanding of the *dharma*.”¹³ Rhodes draws on her roles as mother and nurse in her teaching: “I think I have rounder corners than a lot of the male teachers and that can be a blessing sometimes. When my daughter was little, I would pick her up all the time, and I think I pick up my students in a way—not physically, but with that same sense of patience and loving their weaknesses.”¹⁴ Many women students of Buddhism, according to Pat O'Hara's experience, are hurt by the patriarchy of Buddhism. Recognizing this, her community started inserting the names of women in Buddhism into the chanting of lineages. O'Hara reports that, during the chanting, “I saw the faces of the women in the room bathed in tears. Seeing their faces in tears is what woke me up to how important this is to many women.”¹⁵ Judith Simmer-Brown worries about the future of women teachers in Buddhism, pointing to history for evidence: “There's a pattern whenever you have a new religious movement that women are often influential at the beginning, but one or two generations later, they're gone. As these movements become institutionalized, the structures become increasingly patriarchal and women are moved out....Maybe that won't happen. That would be wonderful.”¹⁶

In addition to *dharma* teachers like the four women above, almost every Buddhist tradition has communities of ordained people who are often, though not always, teachers. The role of women's ordination in Buddhism dates to Shakyamuni Buddha (the historical Buddha born 2,500 years ago in India) and his aunt, Prajapati. She implored him to allow women to be ordained. After some convincing from a cousin, the Buddha finally allowed it.¹⁷ The female lineages carried on until about one thousand years ago when women's ordination came to a virtual halt in the broad majority of Buddhist countries due to war and lack of historical memory of women's position in the *sangha*. In the last fifty years, this has begun to change. Women-led monastic communities and nunneries are beginning to form in the U.S. The exact numbers of ordained Buddhist women in the U.S. is hard to pin down. One scholar shoots in the dark and suggests 50 women while a Tibetan Buddhist nun suggests hundreds (perhaps a thousand) Asian nuns and 150-200 non-Asian nuns in the U.S.¹⁸ This summer, a handful will meet at the Twelfth Annual gathering of Western Buddhist nuns. According to their website, this is an event originally conceived by a group of Western nuns of the Tibetan tradition and has evolved into a “much cherished opportunity for Buddhist monastics living in the West to meet and share their practices and experiences,

¹³ McLeod, Melvin, discussion moderator. “Women's Liberation” in *Shambhala Sun*, July 2005.

Shambhala Sun online. Accessed 13 April 2006.

<http://www.shambhalasun.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1405&Itemid=243>.

¹⁴ McLeod, 4.

¹⁵ McLeod, 6.

¹⁶ McLeod, 6-8.

¹⁷ Seager, 13. and Rev. Patti Nakai, “Women in Buddhism.” *The Living Dharma* online. Accessed 7 July 2006.

<http://www.shambhalasun.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1405&Itemid=243>.

¹⁸ Email with Venerable Thubten Chodron and Dr. Janet Gyatso of Harvard Divinity School. June 2006.

joys and sorrows. It is both an occasion for old friends to reconnect and for others to meet for the first time.”¹⁹ The variety of backgrounds of the women on the participation list of last year’s gathering—35 women from 15 different lineages of Buddhism—points to the diversity among Buddhist nuns in the U.S.

This diversity is made evident by the wide scope of the work of ordained women. What follows are several snapshots of the work of Buddhist nuns in the U.S. First of all, the Thousand Buddha Temple (also see the Pluralism Project profile) in Quincy, Massachusetts, was founded by Rev. Sik Kuan Yen, a nun originally from Hong Kong. In the late 1980s, she and her teacher visited the area and noticed a lack of opportunity for Cantonese-speaking Pure Land Buddhists to practice. From a small house in a residential neighborhood, she began offering services. Six years later, she led the community in building their current temple space. Kuan Yen admits that at times, there were troubles because a woman was leading the community, but she is reminded that Buddhist teaching does not discriminate between men and women. She and four other nuns run the daily operations of this temple—the second largest Chinese Buddhist Temple in New England, with 1,600 families as members. The temple recently acquired new land and a new building and has plans to expand its education program for younger Buddhists in the community.²⁰

On the other side of the country, the first Theravadan Buddhist female-only monastery in the Western U.S. opened in August of 2005 in Fremont, California. Named Dhammadharini (*Dhammadharini* means to uphold the dharma in feminine form), this monastery is “dedicated to supporting and providing for the basic requisites of Buddhist women dedicated to the cultivation and realization of the Path, and to sharing the fruits and benefits with our local community, our greater human family and earth, for the long-lasting benefit and happiness of all forms of life in all their myriad dimensions.”²¹ Located in a suburban house, the building does not look like a monastery from the outside. But inside two *bhikkhunis* (Buddhist nuns) are turning a dream into reality. Five years ago, at a time when there were no Theravadan Bhikkhuni *Sanhas* or Bhikkhuni Viharas (places for women to train for ordination) in North America, founder Bhikkhuni Tathaaloka was asked by the abbot of nearby Wat Buddhonusura (a Buddhist temple in Fremont) if she had ever considered founding a monastery. The question got her thinking and today, the monastery’s daily rhythm is classic *bhikkuni*—they are up at 5 a.m. for prayer, breakfast, and a walk through the neighborhood collecting donations of food.²² During the walk, the women “chant passages of thanksgiving, appreciation and blessing for those who offer alms, and [more] often [than not] spend time

¹⁹ “Eleventh Western Buddhist Monastic Conference” on Urban Dharma website. Accessed 19 June 2006. < <http://www.urbandharma.org/shasta05/page4.html> >

²⁰ Yen, Rev. Sik Kuan. Founder and Director, Thousand Buddha Temple. Personal Interview. Translator: Rodney Yeoh and Rev. Dr. Dhammapida. 27 June 2006.

²¹ Dhammadharini website. Accessed 14 June 2006. < <http://www.dhammadharini.org/> >

²² Jones, Jonathan. “Buddhist retreat for women opens” *Oakland Tribune*. 22 August 2005. *Oakland Tribune* online. Accessed 16 June 2006.

<http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4176/is_20050822/ai_n15813521>

speaking with the donors about their lives, Dhamma, and our Buddhist monastic way of life and answering whatever questions and inquires they might have.”²³ A slideshow of the daily routine is here: <http://extras.insidebayarea.com/ot/gallery/index.asp?folder=living/monk>.

Outside the small town of Lincoln, Vermont, Abbess Khenmo Drolmo is in the process of opening the first Tibetan Buddhist Nunnery in the U.S: Vajra Dakini Nunnery. The nunnery hosted its Ground Blessing in late 2005 and expects to begin building the meditation hall, living space, and library/classroom in spring 2007, with the building ready for residence by early 2008. The founders hope to eventually accommodate eight women by 2015. While the building awaits completion, the women of Vajra Dakini have not waited to start their work. The nunnery currently has two candidates for ordination, one of whom will be ordained this summer. Drolmo’s work is motivated by a desire to make the teachings of women accessible to women today and in the future. “There have been very few teachings of women that have been recorded and I want to make that happen now. Women’s stories and teachings within Buddhism, like in literature, are so often lost.”²⁴ Drolmo herself was one of the few women converts to Buddhism in the 1960s who had a woman teacher. But that did not seem unique or out of the ordinary to Drolmo. In fact, she notes that, “I didn’t realize the gender specificity of Buddhism until I went to India. There were very few women teachers there and they weren’t a part of the public perception of who teaches Buddhism.”²⁵ The nunnery is an effort to both retain those teachings and to change that perception, particularly within Tibetan Buddhism.

There is considerable debate about the presence and roles of nuns in Tibet. According to Drolmo, it is generally believed that there were individual women teachers and nuns in Tibet, but the presence of formal lineages is unclear. The Dalai Lama has decided to push the question of ordination of women in Tibet by asking Western women ordained in the Tibetan tradition to take a more vocal part in the conversation. Several women have written a paper about female ordination in *Vajrayana* (Tibetan Buddhism) and it is being presented to the Tibetan *sangha* this summer.

As is becoming clear, the history of Buddhism in the U.S. is a history of the East influencing and mingling with the West, and vice versa. The increasing numbers of American Buddhist women seeking and gaining ordination is having an affect on both Eastern and Western Buddhism. In addition to decisions like the Dalai Lama’s to look more closely at the role of ordained women in *Vajrayana*, another explicit example of the back and forth between East and West is the Tibetan Nun Project (TNP). Based in India and Seattle, Washington, TNP works to provide education and support to nuns and nunneries from all Tibetan Buddhist lineages in India and Nepal.²⁶ TNP was founded in 1987 “to provide education and

²³ Tathaaloka Bhikkhuni. Email conversation. 6 August 2006.

²⁴ Drolmo. Telephone Interview 16 June 2006.

²⁵ Drolmo.

²⁶ Tibetan Nuns Project website. Accessed 15 June 2006. < <http://www.tnp.org/>>

humanitarian aid to refugee nuns from Tibet and the Himalayan regions of India. Food, clothing, housing, and basic medical care were organized.” Today, TNP supports five nunneries and over 500 nuns.²⁷ The project works to improve health care and access to food and education. They help with resettlement of Tibetan refugees and TNP trains women toward self-sufficiency and encourages leadership within their communities. TNP also works to establish more facilities for Buddhist nuns. More broadly, TNP aims to improve the status of ordained Buddhist women around the world²⁸

Buddhist Women & Social Activism

When Dr. Chris Queen of Harvard University lists characteristics of the emerging “American Buddhism,” he includes social activism as a part of what makes this iteration unique.²⁹ Women’s role in engaged Buddhism is as varied and as wide-ranging as the women’s personalities. The examples below give a feel for the ways women are socially active around race relations, interfaith dialogue, prison ministry, and political activism out of their Buddhism.

Race Relations

When Jan Willis, a Buddhist practitioner and scholar and a Black woman from Alabama, talks about her trip to a London meditation group in 2001, she is quick to note that 31 of the 40 people were Black, exclaiming: “Black Buddhists! In 25 years in Buddhism, I had never been in such a *sangha*. I felt so high. It was great!”³⁰ Alicia Carroll of Dorchester, Massachusetts, understands Willis’ sentiment. Returning from a trip to China which piqued her interest in Buddhism, she remembers the first time she went to a meditation group at Boston Old Path Sangha. She told Vanessa Jones of the *Boston Globe*, “I was nervous going in there. Showing up and looking in—Wow, I’m the only person of color.” In response, Carroll and another woman in Dorchester have started hosting a “People of Color Meditation Sitting Group” in one of the woman’s homes. The *Boston Globe* reports that an average of ten people attend the weekly sittings on Friday evenings.³¹

Interfaith Dialogue

Interfaith dialogue has bubbled up on the collective radar screen of American Buddhists. The entire summer 2006 edition of *Turning Wheel* is dedicated to “Interfaith Dialogue & Action” among Buddhists, Muslims, Christians and Jews. Rev. Sik Kuan Yen at the Thousand Buddha Temple in Quincy, Massachusetts, is working to be a part of inter-religious activities in her area. Similarly, Ji Hyang Sunim,

²⁷ Tibetan Nuns Project website.

²⁸ Tibetan Nuns Project website.

²⁹ Queen, Chris. “Buddhism in America” course. Class Discussions. Harvard Divinity School. Fall 2005.

³⁰ Pintak, Lawrence. “‘Something Has to Change’: Blacks in American Buddhism.” *Shambhala Sun*. September 2001. *Shambhala Sun* online. Accessed 1 May 2006.

<http://www.shambhalasun.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1741&Itemid=0>

³¹ Jones, Vanessa. “The Way of Oneness” *Boston Globe* online. 19 April 2006. Accessed April 2006.

<http://www.boston.com/news/globe/living/articles/2006/04/19/the_way_of_oneness?mode=PF%2020>

an ordained Zen nun in the Korean lineage, facilitates the Boston Clergy & Religious Leaders Group for Interfaith Dialogue (also see the Pluralism Project profile). Founded on a respect for the cultural and religious diversity of the Boston metropolitan area, the group is committed to dialogue across religious boundaries. Members of the group meet monthly to discuss various topics and “gather to foster those specific dialogues which will help us know each other, learn from and celebrate each other as individuals and partners in religion.”³² Sunim’s leadership has been important for keeping the group organized and meeting regularly. Her involvement “encourages new ways of seeing our interdependence in this increasingly diverse city.”³³ Sunim has been involved with the group for twelve of its thirteen years. She was invited to join by a Catholic nun friend and finds interfaith work a natural partner with Buddhism. The group, she says, really started as an ecumenical Christian group—“I was definitely the first Buddhist and it was awkward at times. It took a while to get past ‘how are the bagels?’”³⁴ But the group has persevered. This fall, they will continue to increase the diversity of perspectives by inviting a Muslim woman to be a part of the steering committee.

In another interesting inter-religious effort by ordained Buddhist women, Buddhist nuns and their Hindu and Christian counterparts in North America have started an interfaith dialogue series called “Nuns in the West.” Meeting first in 2003 and then again in May 2005, the just over twenty-five women gathered to discuss the practices of meditation, mindfulness, the use of dialogue as a way to achieving world peace, the necessary balance between contemplative practice and compassionate service, and the exercise of authority.³⁵ Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron, an ordained Buddhist nun in the Tibetan lineage and founder of Sravasti Abbey in Washington state (see Pluralism Project Affiliate Andrew Housiaux’s research: History of Sravasti Abbey, Daily Life at Sravasti Abbey, Generosity in Action: Dana at Sravasti Abbey, and Supporters of Sravasti Abbey) and speaks highly of the importance of these kinds of dialogue: “The power of women of different faiths meeting together and sharing in harmony cannot be understated. Although we alone cannot cure the world’s ills, we can give an example of hope to others, and our gathering is a contribution to world peace.”³⁶

Prison Ministry

The Buddhist Peace Fellowship’s nation-wide Prison Program was started in 1998 by Diana Lion. Their mission lays out the general sentiment of Buddhist prison ministry: the Prison Program is “deeply committed to working with prisoners, their families, and all other persons associated with the prison

³² Boston Clergy & Religious Leaders Group for Interfaith Dialogue website. Accessed 15 June 2006. <<http://www.bostonclergygroup.org/>>

³³ Sunim, Ji Hyang. Personal website. Accessed 21 June 2006. <<http://www.natural-wisdom.org/background.html>>

³⁴ Sunim. Ordained nun in Korean lineage. Telephone Interview. 23 June 2006.

³⁵ “The American Monastic Newsletter” on Order of St. Benedict website. Accessed 15 June 2006. <<http://www.osb.org/aba/news/2005/octa.html>>

³⁶ “The American Monastic Newsletter.”

system to address the systemic violence within the prison-industrial complex.”³⁷ Jenny Philips, a therapist and meditator in Concord, Massachusetts, has spent the last four years working on a documentary about Vipassana meditation in Alabama’s Donaldson Correctional Facility. Philips’ documentary, *Freedom Behind Bars*, is scheduled to be released in the fall of 2006. This documentary “tells the story of a group of prisoners, mostly serving life sentences, who undergo a ten-day silent Vipassana meditation retreat.”³⁸ The film profiles individual participants while also and tracing the changes in them as a result of this retreat.

Philips has been teaching meditation to her therapy patients for years and, in the 1990s, started volunteering with a Massachusetts-wide program that offers Vipassana meditation in prisons. Vipassana Meditation (or Insight Meditation) “originated in lay-oriented meditation retreat centers in south and southeast Asia... Vipassana is used to promote moment-to-moment awareness of the fleeting phenomena in the mind and body.”³⁹ While working at the maximum security prison in Shirley, Massachusetts, she began to hear stories of prisoner-led meditation groups in Donaldson Correctional Facility. After a visit to the facility in 1999, she spent the next three years planning and getting approval to host a ten-day Vipassana retreat and permission for a camera crew in the maximum-security prison. In 2002, Donaldson became the first prison in North America to host a ten-day Vipassana retreat. In the years that have followed, Philips’ psychological testing has shown that participants “are less reactive and more able to keep themselves composed.”⁴⁰ She also wonders if part of the interest among prisoners in meditation is because “life is so hard in [prison]; people are much more mindful of their inner needs and when something grounds them, they’ll grab on.”⁴¹ Philips’ own meditation practices have been affected by her work at Donaldson. While she has been meditating for about fifteen years, this experience has introduced her to the specifics of Vipassana meditation, a practice she now does regularly.

Political Activism

To think of Buddhists doing political activism is to imagine the famous pictures of Vietnamese monks burning themselves in protest of the Vietnam War. Today, Buddhists are active on a wide range of issues: the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the environment, and health care, to name just a few. One of the avenues for Buddhists to use to be involved in these issues is through the Buddhist Peace Fellowship’s Buddhist Alliance for Social Engagement (BASE) program, started by a woman named Diana Winston.

³⁷ Buddhist Peace Fellowship website: The Prison Project. Accessed 21 June 2006. <http://www.bpf.org/html/current_projects/prison_project/prison_project.html>

³⁸ Phillips, Jenny. Press release: *Freedom Behind Bars*. Received via email, 22 June 2006.

³⁹ Seager, 146.

⁴⁰ Phillips, Jenny. Producer, *Freedom Behind Bars*. Telephone Interview. 23 June 2006.

⁴¹ Phillips.

By the time Winston was twenty-six, she had been practicing Vipassana for several years, but had begun wondering what her next step in life ought to be. Struck by the importance of putting together social action, service, *dharma* practice and community, she proposed the creation of the BASE program under the umbrella of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. What began as an experiment in “fusion of Western social-change wisdom...with Eastern *dharma* wisdom”⁴² has become a strong network of socially-engaged Buddhists around the country. According to its website, “BASE provides six months of support communities for the study and practice of socially engaged Buddhism. Participants work or volunteer in service or social action, and meet regularly for study, support, discussion, training, and meditation. Groups have weekly meetings and monthly retreat days.”⁴³ These groups are either location-based or formed around interest groups—for example: there are San Francisco-based groups, aging-focused groups, Spanish-speaking groups and prison reform groups. Winston’s biographical website describes BASE as “the first Buddhist volunteer service organization, a kind of urban Buddhist peace corps.”⁴⁴ BASE is a way for Buddhists to be trained, sustained and active in social reform movements. Since its formation in 1995, BASE has worked with over 200 people. In August of 2006, BASE will add four more groups to its network. While Winston is no longer the coordinator of BASE programs (she now works with *ThinkSangha*, a Buddhist think-tank for Buddhist social issues), she continues to “share the socially engaged dharma, reminding my *sangha* members that the meditative practice and the world out there don’t make strange bed-fellows.”⁴⁵

Buddhist Women in Academia

In the mid-1970s, Buddhist Diana Paul published *Women in Buddhism*—a translation of *sutras* (Buddhist canonical texts) written about, and sometimes by, women in sixth century Buddhism. With this book, Paul became one of the first academics in the U.S. to trace formally the historical role of women in Buddhism. Following in those footsteps, Buddhist Rita Gross was one of the first women in academia to take seriously the intersection of feminism and Buddhism in the U.S. In the early 1990s, Gross published *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, wherein she details the history of women’s roles in Buddhism and then envisions the future of Buddhism in androgynous terms.⁴⁶ Using tools similar to the Christian and Jewish theologians of a few decades before her, Gross began “to work towards gender-inclusive and gender-neutral liturgies, to advance women into positions of leadership, and, ultimately, for women to become more fully qualified Buddhist teachers.”⁴⁷ Today, Gross’ work encourages women Buddhists to “know

⁴² Winston, Diana. “Socially Engaged Buddhism Inside-Out” in Sumi Loundon, ed. *Blue Jean Buddha: Voices of Young Buddhists*. Wisdom Publications: Somerville, Massachusetts; 2001: 182-88: 185-6.

⁴³ Buddhist Peace Fellowship: BASE Introduction. Accessed 21 June 2006.
<http://www.bpf.org/html/current_projects/base/base.html>

⁴⁴ Winston, Diana. “Wide Awake: A Buddhist Guide for Teens.” Accessed 21 June 2006.
<<http://www.wide-awake.org/about.html>>

⁴⁵ Winston in Loundon: 187-88.

⁴⁶ Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press; 1993: 222.

⁴⁷ Gross, “How American Women are Changing Buddhism.”

what the past involves, so that they can make informed decisions about retaining worthwhile traditions or reshaping inadequate heritages from the past.”⁴⁸

Since the mid-1980s, women Buddhists have claimed an increasingly strong presence in academia. A glance through the websites of university and colleges’ religious studies courses offers anecdotal evidence. For example, Jan Willis, Tibetan Buddhist scholar and practitioner, teaches an annual course called “Women and Buddhism” at Wesleyan University. The course uses “Buddhist texts that present traditional views of women as well as a variety of contemporary materials that reveal aspects of the lives of Buddhist women in ancient and contemporary times...[to] attempt to understand the values and concerns that drive, restrain and/or empower such women.”⁴⁹ The exact number of women Buddhologists is unknown. In 1999, Dr. Charles Prebish of Penn State published a survey of Buddhist scholars to investigate how many people are what he calls “scholar-practitioners,” meaning that they not only teach the academic study of Buddhism, but, like Jan Willis, also practice. While none of the data he collected then was gender specific, he is in the process of following up that study. Of the list of 185 Buddhist scholars he has, he has received 150 responses and 35 of those are women. “When I started in Buddhist Studies [in the mid-1960s],” he says, “there were almost no women Buddhologists.”⁵⁰ Today, Janet Gyatso of Harvard is the co-chair of the Buddhist Studies section of the American Academy of Religion and Prebish guesses that the number of women Buddhologists and women scholar-practitioners is growing.

One of those budding Buddhologists is Dr. Sharon Suh, a Buddhist scholar at Seattle University. Suh recently published *Being Buddhist in a Christian World: Gender and Community in a Korean-American Temple* (2004), which is a culmination of two years of ethnographic research at Sa Chal Temple in Koreatown of Los Angeles, California. Her book aims to answer: “How do ordinary Korean American Buddhists live their lives and come to a positive sense of self in the contexts of dislocation?”⁵¹ The Korean American Buddhist community is a minority group among a minority—the majority of Korean Americans are Christians and studies suggest there are at least 2,800 Korean American Christian churches. Yet, not to be overlooked are the eighty-nine Korean American Buddhist temples in the U.S., as of 2000.⁵² For the first generation immigrant women she interviewed at the Sa Chal Temple, Suh found:

⁴⁸ Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*: 26.

⁴⁹ Willis, Jan. “Women and Buddhism.” Course Syllabus from 2006-07 Wesleyan University Catalog. Accessed 17 April 2006.

<https://iasext.wesleyan.edu/regprod/lwesmaps_page.html?crse=006597&term=1069>

⁵⁰ Prebish, Charles. Buddhist scholar at Penn State. Email communication. 1 May 2006.

⁵¹ UCLA grad student. “A look at ‘Korean American Buddhism, Gender, and Identity.’” Accessed 1 May 2006. <<http://www.international.ucla.edu/buddhist/article.asp?parentid=34189>>

⁵² Suh, Sharon. *Being Buddhist in a Christian World: Gender and Community in a Korean-American Temple*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press; 2004: 3-4.

Temple membership and a Buddhist identity act as symbols of the homeland that encourage...full-scale integration into a new cultural milieu. Religion provides some of these women with a sense of comfort and belonging to a familiar community by alleviating some of the stresses of immigration and anchoring women in a traditional setting that references the security of what they left behind.⁵³

In this way, the temple community is a system of support for women that wards off loneliness and isolation. For other women, Buddhist teaching offers a sense of independence—"Buddhist identity based on 'finding and knowing one's mind' offers women a chance to recreate their identities from housewives and caretakers to 'Americans making it on their own.'"⁵⁴

Suh tells the story of one woman who grew up in a Buddhist household in Seoul. When she was a teenager, her family converted to Christianity. Upon her move to Los Angeles in 1973, she continued going to church "out of habit." After two divorces, she left Christianity and returned to Buddhism, in part because of the guilt-trip she received at the church over her failed marriages. Suh found that "being Buddhist enables a woman to overcome the social stigma of divorce and provides a new support system following the dissolution of her marriage."⁵⁵

For the most part, Suh's research was with first generation Korean Americans. Occasionally, one of these women discussed concern over the future of Sa Chal Temple and Suh herself noted a low number of second-generation Buddhists at worship services on Sundays.⁵⁶ As a result, Suh concludes her research uncertain of the future of Sa Chal. Suh's academic study provides insights into the many ways women are thinking about the complex nature of Buddhism in the U.S.

From a slightly different perspective, Ji Hyang Sunim of the Boston Interfaith Clergy Group is also involved in the academic community as the Buddhist Advisor to the Buddhist community at Wellesley College, an all-women's college in Wellesley, Massachusetts. The group offers regular meditation circles twice a week, retreats, *dharma* talks, invites speakers to campus and other special events (last year, they hosted six Tibetan nuns who made a sand *mandala*). As advisor, Sunim offers "formal meditation practice, pastoral support and leadership to the college community around spiritual and ethical issues."⁵⁷ Sunim suggests that Buddhist practice is part of what helps Buddhists see through the busy-ness of life on a college campus: "Meditation really teaches you to look at things from different perspectives."⁵⁸ For Sunim, the challenge within Buddhism is to allow meditation to help you see the bigger picture, to see beyond daily stress. This draws many students into the Buddhist community: "Meditation is a cure for

⁵³ Suh, 96.

⁵⁴ Suh, 98.

⁵⁵ Suh, 128.

⁵⁶ Suh, 209.

⁵⁷ Sunim, Ji Hyang. Personal website. Accessed 21 June 2006. <<http://www.natural-wisdom.org/background.html>>

⁵⁸ Sunim, Telephone Interview. 23 June 2006.

[perfectionism].”⁵⁹ Suh and Sunim’s work point to two different ways Buddhism has a growing presence in the academic world in the U.S. and the role women have in that presence.

Buddhist Women & Art

“Buddhism, art and social action all inform one another...the contemporary engaged Buddhism movement emphasizes that everything is interdependent and interconnected, thus fostering a sense of universal responsibility.”⁶⁰ This type of intersection between Buddhism and art is being played out by Buddhist women in a wide variety of ways. Two snapshots of women doing so provide an interesting glimpse into American Buddhism.

Twenty-six year old Vaughn Bell, a sculptor and Zen practitioner, grew up in a secular household in Syracuse, New York. Throughout her youth, she was peripherally aware of Buddhism and her mother had a connection with the Syracuse Zen Center. During college, she began taking classes on Buddhism, reading books about ecology and Buddhism. She began practicing Buddhism formally in the Rinzai Zen tradition around 2000.

Bell’s artwork is concerned with the interaction between humans and the environment. Her recent productions have ranged from portable Zen gardens to asking viewers to consider where they live and why. For Bell, “Buddhism and art are completely intertwined. Both are about the practice of questioning.”⁶¹ For example, the relationship between plants and humans is an ethical question for Bell that relates to her practice. She insists that “part of Buddhist practice is to come to realize you’re not separate. Art is part of that process.”⁶²

At first glance, Bell’s work does not scream “Buddhism!” There are not statues of Buddha or temples visible in the work, but for Bell, the connection is clear—“as an artist, it takes a lot of discipline and endurance and faith in my own process. Zen practice is part of what helps me do that.”⁶³ In addition to Zen as a tool for her artwork, Bell also sees Zen itself as an art form. Not only the practice of meditation and the rituals which are artistic in their own right, but more particularly in the ways in which Zen is being reformed for practice in the U.S. Bell’s encounter with Buddhism was with a female teacher and a *sangha* of strong women in Syracuse. Noting that Rinzai Zen has a history and stereotype of being patriarchal and rather “macho,” Bell doubts that her interest would have been nurtured if not for those women and the subtle ways they are negotiating space within Buddhism. For example, part of the Rinzai

⁵⁹ Sunim.

⁶⁰ Nahm-Mijo, Trina. “Engaged Buddhism: Moving & Creating its Stories” in Tsomo, Karma Lekshe, ed. *Innovative Buddhist Women: Swimming Against the Stream*. Richmond, Virginia: Curzon; 2000: 313-325: 313.

⁶¹ Bell, Vaughn. Seattle-based artist. Telephone Interview. 15 May 2006.

⁶² Bell.

⁶³ Bell.

Zen practice is to chant an all-male lineage. At the Syracuse Zen Center, Roko Sherry Chayat has inserted the names of women into that lineage. For Bell, the subtle shifts in the way Zen is being practiced by people in the U.S. makes Zen an art form. The shifts are evidence of “vibrant connections [within communities]...and [the shifts] are very attentive to what people today are doing.”⁶⁴ They are also part of what inspires Bell as a Buddhist artist.

Sumi Loundon, a practitioner of Vipassana Buddhism, is another young Buddhist woman who is blending art and Buddhist practice. While Bell focuses on human relationship with the environment, Loundon focuses on the emerging role of young Buddhists in the U.S. In addition to being the assistant director of the Barre Center of Buddhist Studies in Barre, Massachusetts, Loundon is the editor of two compilations of essays by young Buddhists—*Blue Jean Buddha* and *The Buddha’s Apprentices*. Sumi explains her interest in the introduction to the latter:

Seven years ago, while cooking and cleaning as a volunteer at a small New England meditation center, it dawned on me that I was surrounded by people of my parents’ generation. Our conversations revolved around reminiscences of the ‘60s, children leaving for college, and retirement plans. Where were all the people my age, the twenty-somethings?⁶⁵

Loundon grew up in a Buddhist household in New Hampshire. One of the many discoveries she has made in her work with young Buddhists has been a rethinking of the division generally drawn between American Buddhists. This line usually falls along immigrant lines. In her work, though, a more authentic division seems to fall between convert/non-convert Buddhists. “People who, like me, grew up in Buddhism, are a bit rounder, less worried about orthodoxy and generally not as zealous.”⁶⁶

Asked how her identity as a woman affects her Buddhism, Sumi wonders if being a woman within Buddhism “sensitized me to power issues within communities...There is still an undercurrent of male dominance and spiritual communities have a tendency to be out of date. For example, I was new to a Board of Directors for a Buddhist organization and an older man suggested that I do the fundraising because I was a young, attractive woman.”⁶⁷ These are the kinds of things she hopes to see changing in the next ten years—“we need to continue to keep alive questions of ethics and power. We still have a lot of awareness-raising to do. I think older women in Buddhism have an obligation to keep the memory [of past abuses] alive.”⁶⁸ Attempting to bridge this age gap in Buddhism in her own artwork, Sumi’s concluding section of *The Buddha’s Apprentices* includes the reflections of some well-known elders in the tradition (such as Thich Nhat Hanh and Venerable Yifa) on their thoughts on themselves as formerly

⁶⁴ Bell.

⁶⁵ Loundon Sumi, ed. *The Buddha’s Apprentices: More Voices of Young Buddhists*. Wisdom Publications: Somerville, Massachusetts; 2006: xiii.

⁶⁶ Loundon, Sumi. Editor of two books on young Buddhists and Assistant Director at Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. Personal Interview. 10 May 2006.

⁶⁷ Loundon.

⁶⁸ Loundon.

young Buddhists. The wisdom of the older generation, Sumi insists, can be really helpful guidance for the journey of younger Buddhists.

Conclusion

Whether they are ordained women passing on the *dharma* to others as teachers or social activists grounded in Buddhism, women are negotiating space within Buddhist communities in the U.S. from a wide variety of angles. The conferences and early gatherings of women in the 1980s provided some important groundwork for on-going conversations about the role of women in Buddhism. Of course, women have been an important part of Buddhism for centuries, but the documentation of their roles is lacking and will likely continue to be the focus of academic research on women in Buddhism. Today, Buddhist nuns and teachers are paving the way for a formal role for women within the tradition—both within in the U.S. and internationally. Race relations, interfaith dialogue, prison ministry and political activism are important foci for women’s social activism and their Buddhism. Women Buddhologists are incorporating both Buddhism and their academic interests in colleges and universities around the country. Buddhist artists are finding ways to use Buddhism as an instrument of creativity. The future of Buddhism in the U.S. will continue to be shaped by the activities and work of women who are discovering innovative ways to claim space within the tradition.