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### How American Women are Changing Buddhism

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# How American Women are Changing Buddhism

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Fall 2014

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## Introduction

Buddhism has become a common religious practice in the United States, followed by Asian Americans as well as Americans who converted to the religion. As Buddhism becomes integrated into American culture, certain issues rise to the top as they become the lead focus in this integration. The role of women in Buddhism is one of them. An examination of the materials shows that American culture is changing the way traditional Buddhism is practiced by engaging women in all its structures, and by putting less focus on the Buddha and more on meditation and mindfulness. Women take on master teaching and ordination roles in Buddhism because of gender equality in America. Not all Buddhist women in Asian countries have the opportunities that American women do, and American women are changing the norm of a woman's position in the religion. This thesis explores how American women are changing Buddhism by incorporating Western ideas into the tradition, and how Buddhism changes Americans, by giving them more modern principles and teachings that apply to everyone, not just Buddhists.

In a way, Buddhism is most modernized in the hands of American women. Chapters I and II give examples of American women, from different Buddhist traditions, who became ordained as nuns or trained as teachers, and created the path for other women to do the same. These women are influential and show that women are more than capable of holding a high position in Buddhism. In Chapter I the focus is on ordained women, including three American women, Pema Chödrön, Karma Lekshe Tsomo, and Maura O'Halloran, and the Thai practitioner Chatsumarn Kabilsingh. Pema Chödrön is a highly educated woman, who became the first American Vajryana *bhikshuni* nun.

Chödrön is popular in the United States because she can relate to women. She was once married with children, divorced, then married and divorced again. Her role as a wife and mother, dealing with the stress of family, resonates with the lives of many American women. Her goal as a nun is to help people deal with their suffering, and find joy by living with loving-kindness. Karma Lekshe Tsomo is also a Tibetan nun, who is working to help women in other countries to get access to better education and be ordained. Maura Soshin O'Halloran traveled all the way to Japan to train as a nun in a monastery. She quickly proved herself as the earliest Zen nun, but was tragically killed in a bus accident at age twenty-seven. Her legacy is remembered at the monastery, where she is represented as a Bodhisattva in statue form. Even though she was only a Zen nun for a short time, she showed all the Japanese men at the monastery that even someone raised as an Irish Catholic can attain enlightenment. Finally, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh is a living example of a woman who worked hard to become a nun in the traditional Theravada school of Buddhism. She worked for years helping poor people and children find shelter and education. She now works to help women find education that can lead to ordination. In her opinion, Thailand as a society has gone against the Buddha's teachings on equality, and has left women to suffer. Her work is notable because she wasn't raised in America with a right to education, but she believes nevertheless that every woman should be allowed this opportunity.

Chapter II discusses women teachers in America. These women are not ordained, but their life's work is teaching Buddhism to Buddhists and lay people. Dipa Ma was not an American, but she was influential to Americans, namely the Insight Meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg. Dipa Ma was compassionate to everyone and taught loving-kindness.

Salzberg was encouraged by Dipa Ma, and now teaches meditation and mindfulness to others herself. She learned compassion from Dipa Ma, and now uses her status as a teacher to help Americans, not just Buddhists, achieve happiness, through her teachings and meditation. The next teacher, Jan Willis, is an African-American professor who taught at Wesleyan University. She taught courses on Buddhism, but her goal was not to convert her students, but to educate them on the principles, so that they could draw their own conclusions and use the teachings in their own life. Willis also is making a difference in Buddhism by promoting racial diversity. Her history with the Black Panthers shows her desire for racial equality and change. She is expanding and diversifying “elite” Buddhism, which is the practice of Buddhism by converted Americans. Lastly, Toni Packer was a Zen Buddhist teacher, who emigrated from Germany to upstate New York. She worked to make the practice of Buddhism more compassionate to her students, and established her own meditation center. Each of these women took a part in changing the way Buddhism is taught in America and to whom it is taught. These teachers not only take on Buddhist students with the goal of enlightenment, but also speak to a larger American audience to show how the teachings relate to him and how they can help in all situations. Buddhism is no longer just a religion, but these women made helped promote it as a lifestyle.

In Chapter III, the specific ethical case of abortion is explored in the Theravada, Mahayana, and Japanese perspective. In America, abortion is a legal practice, but also a controversial one. Many people and religions have strong opinions on whether it is a moral practice. In America, women are expected freedoms, even though some states are working to end the practice. Turning to Buddhism, the older Theravada tradition doesn't

support abortion, while the Mahayana sect is more compassionate to women who are making the decision. In Japan there is even a ritual for the unborn fetus that helps lessen the guilt of the parents. This ceremony has come to America and now helps non-Buddhist Americans overcome their grief. Yvonne Rand is an American Buddhist teacher and priest of this ceremony. She teaches men and women of all religions to believe that their unborn child is going to be taken care of. This is an example of how a Buddhist practice came to America and changed the way Americans view abortion.

Buddhism is prevalent in America in corporate life, businesses, in the environment movement, and in the general consumerism of the American population. It appears popular throughout culture, and images of the Buddha universally signify peace and equanimity. Within this “Buddhist explosion,” American women are making their own tradition focusing on compassion and loving-kindness. Through the changes they’ve made, American women teachers and women with ordained positions help promote the idea that women are just as capable as men in reaching the ideal in Buddhism.

## Chapter I: Ordination

Becoming a female ordained nun or monk in all branches of Buddhism is a difficult task. There is a stigma against women in many Buddhist countries that keeps them from education, meditation, and ordination. One of the reasons is simply because they have a woman's body. Their bodies are "polluted" because of menstruation and childbirth, so even if they were to be ordained, the merit they give to donors is polluted as well. People are less likely to give alms to a woman because of this, so monks see it is better for women to not be ordained. In many countries men have the power in all areas of life, and women are not valued as equals. The Buddha understood men and women are to be equals, and equally capable of experiencing enlightenment. The disparity is that men can freely be educated and become ordained, but women struggle with finding a way to achieve this goal. Going back to the time of the Buddha, Maha Pajapati Gotami, Siddhartha's aunt and the woman who raised him, was the first female ordained in the tradition. She asks Buddha three times if she can be ordained, to which he replies no. Gotami goes out with 499 other women to seek enlightenment and, through the meditation of the monk Ananda, is successful. She leads other women, so that when she returns, Buddha allows her to be a nun. This story shows women that they can be ordained because the Buddha himself allowed it.<sup>1</sup> Sadly over time, it has not been a normal practice for women because of social restrictions on their education. American women have made strides in becoming ordained in this traditionally Asian religion. This chapter focuses on four modern women Pema Chödrön, Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Maura O'Halloran, and Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, who have all had the opportunity to be ordained, and what they have done to pave the path for other women to do so.



The American women who are hoping for universal female ordination are Pema Chödrön, Karma Lekshe Tsomo, and Maura O'Halloran. They traveled all over the world to study Buddhism and obtain their ordination, and they are examples of educated and capable women. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh is a Thai woman who has gone against the culture of her country to be ordained in the Theravada tradition. She serves as a role model to all Theravada women, not just in her own country of Thailand. These women are all great influences on the future of ordained women, and their work shows that they are making strides in changing the way women are perceived in Buddhism.

## **I. Pema Chödrön**

Pema Chödrön (b. 1936) is an American Mahayana Tibetan nun, who became the first Tibetan ordained nun. She grew up as an American Catholic and got married at age twenty-one. After having two children, her family moved to California, where she attended University of California. She received a bachelor's degree in English literature and a master's in elementary education. A few years later, Chödrön was divorced, remarried, and divorced again. When trying to deal with this turmoil, she found a column by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a Tibetan Buddhist, which helped her deal with and sort out her feelings. She had no education in Buddhism, but this article led her to the Tibetan teacher Lama Chime Rinpoche. For a few years she worked under him in London, and studied with Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche in San Francisco. Deciding she would remain single for the rest of her life, she was ordained as a nun in 1974. The Tibetan tradition limits the authority of women and Chödrön was unable to be fully ordained. It took years

for her to find an official member who could authorize her as a *bhikshuni* nun, and in 1981 Chödrön became the first American ordained Vajaryana *bhikshuni* nun.<sup>2</sup>

Her ordination was a process because she was the first woman to do it. His Holiness the Sixteenth Gyalwa Karpapa, leader of the Tibetan lineage called *Karma Kagyu*, gave her permission to take these vows, which she had to translate from Chinese to English. Her hard work in changing the rules was monumental in the future of Western women being ordained as nuns.<sup>3</sup> She traveled to Hong Kong to take her vows at the Miu Fat Temple, where she was the only Westerner and the only English speaker. The Chinese Mahayana vows are extremely difficult, including ceremonial burns to test pain tolerance. These burns left marks on her head, scars that she still has today.<sup>4</sup> This experience only made her stronger and more independent because, before becoming a nun, she felt she relied too much on her husband. When finding Buddhism she learned to figure out things on her own and to be independent. She said she feels fearless being free of dependency.<sup>5</sup> In America women are able to live independently, but it took her experience with Buddhism for her to realize how capable she is.

As an ordained nun, Pema became an author, with best sellers such as, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* (200), *Living Beautifully: with Uncertainty and Change* (2013), and *The Places that Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times* (2002). This has led to her popularity as a teacher, a retreat leader, as well as a public speaker. She is still an active nun and in October 2014 she was featured on Oprah Winfrey's "Super Soul Sunday." Pema Chödrön says that her life fell apart when her second husband admitted to having an affair and told her he wanted a divorce. She confesses that she wanted the traditional marriage and role as a wife with the security

that it brings. Once her marriage crumbled, she said she didn't realize how attached she was to her husband's perspective of her, and that one of her first steps in recovery was to learn to be confident in herself. She discovered that it is important to fail, and then to deal with the pain of events that are out of one's control. She then says that people do not need to "improve themselves", meaning that improvements, such as ones to appearance, shouldn't be made because it says that the self isn't good enough. She also tells Winfrey that negative emotions are worthless because they block what is good.<sup>6</sup>

Chödrön's background of an American housewife is relatable to many women in America. She is sympathetic to the pressures of being a wife and mother, and knows the feeling of a broken heart. She tells her stories to relate to women in the hope that her experience will help someone else. By appearing on Oprah Winfrey's talk show she is reachable to a large audience. The messages she gives to American women is that they are strong enough to be their true selves. Through her books and TV appearances, she has access to a group of women that may not normally be informed about applying the principles of Buddhism to everyday life. Not all Americans know about Buddhism and how it can help them, so her role as a public figure is important to spreading her message. Chödrön is skilled at explaining her message and showing compassion, and in her books she explains Buddhist terms in secular ways so that they will appeal to a large audience.

Pema Chödrön lives at Gampo Abbey in Nova Scotia, which is a Buddhist monastery founded by her teacher Chögyam Trungpa in 1983. It is an isolated location where she leads Buddhist retreats for men and women. She is the teacher there and wrote down her speeches that are compiled in one of her books. *The Wisdom of No Escape and the Path of Loving-Kindness* (1991) is a book of Pema Chödrön's lectures from the spring

of 1989. The message of her dharma talks is to help people rid their suffering and destructive feelings. In the first chapter of her book, Pema Chödrön writes about loving kindness and living without negativity. As she said to Winfrey, Chödrön describes a life where one accepts what he or she can't change, and is able to come to a place where one is void of negative emotions.

To lead a life that goes beyond pettiness and prejudice and always wanting to make sure that everything turns out on our own terms, to lead a more passionate, full, and delightful life than that, we must realize that we can endure a lot of pain and pleasure for the sake of finding out who we are and what this world is, how we tick and how our world ticks, how the whole thing just *is*.<sup>7</sup>

In this passage she describes a goal of her retreats and practices in Buddhism. After Chödrön's divorces, she suffered, but was able to turn around and find a life of joy. Today, she is living as an example to show her followers that they can overcome anything. The journey on finding oneself isn't all hardships, but Chödrön assures her followers that there will be joy as well. Self-discovery is a process and learning about the world takes time. Pema Chödrön takes a Western perspective as an ordained nun and her past and experiences connect to those of many Americans. Her nationality is important because by growing up American, she is more relatable and can reach followers by sharing experiences, and her practices do not seem as foreign as those of ordained nuns across the world. Being the first ordained American Vajaryana nun gives her authority to be a leader and to be influential to many men and women. As the first American Tibetan nun, she is the ultimate role model for women who want to become a nun. She found Tibetan Buddhism by chance when reading an article, but this changed her life. The Tibetan teachings gave her the power to overcome her hardships to eventually help other

people deal with their own suffering. Paving the way for women to become ordained, Chödrön opened up the worlds' eyes about the image of an ordained Tibetan.

## **II. Karma Lekshe Tsomo**

Following Pema Chödrön, Professor Dr. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (b. 1944) became an American Tibetan nun. Growing up in Hawaii, Tsomo came to Buddhism out of curiosity after hearing many jokes about her last name Zenn, and its “connection” to Zen Buddhism. She learned about Buddhism and traveled to Asia, where she took trips to monasteries and learned of the Dalai Lama’s teaching. These experiences were influential in her choice to become a nun, but she had challenges finding a way to receive ordination. Today she is a professor at the University of San Diego and is the president of the International Association of Buddhist Women. She works tirelessly to promote women in Buddhism and to fight for equality within the religion.<sup>8</sup>

In a speech she gave at the 2006 Global Buddhist Conference in Perth, Tsomo spoke about equality between men and women in Buddhism. In the Theravada tradition, she said, women are equal to have the opportunity of being liberated from samsara and are allowed to become *arhats*, enlightened beings, but there isn’t an equal opportunity to become ordained. In Mahayana, there is a disparity of equality, because when becoming a fully enlightened Buddha one must be in the male form, an idea that comes from the *Lotus Sutra*. There is also a great imbalance of education and opportunities that males have in comparison to women. Tsomo’s goal is to help women receive more education and to give them access to ordination and leadership positions in this country. Tsomo is

revolutionizing the way women are treated around the world because of her position. Her journey in becoming a nun wasn't simple because monasteries do not let women in, but she was able to get her first ordination in 1977 in France. At this time there were no Tibetan women in this position. In 1987, she co-founded the *Sakyadhita* movement, meaning "Daughters of the Buddha," which is an international Buddhist group of women and men that supports Buddhist women. Through her work many more women Buddhist nuns have been ordained and given education and better jobs.<sup>9</sup> Buddhist women follow ordained male role models, and this shows the inequality between men and women. The humanitarian work that is being done in Asia by Buddhist women shows that there is hope for the future. Tsomo dedicates her life to lessening the imbalance of power in Buddhism, and the difference is evident in the progress already made since her work first began.

In the book edited by Karma Lekshe Tsomo, *Innovative Buddhist Women Swimming Against the Stream*, she writes a chapter called "Factions and Fortitude Buddhist Women in Bangladesh." She starts off by saying that not a lot work has been done on Buddhist women in Bangladesh, so Tsomo decided to research this. During her stay in Bangladesh her mission was to learn about their culture, but try to organize a system that would allow for more female ordination. Tsomo writes that women are more committed to their vows than men are in an ordained life because they do not have the same opportunities to leave the monastery. Men are freer to take on other careers, obtain higher education and live a life away from being a holy person. When women are given better education and training it is beneficial to both women and men in the community

and for the progress of the country, so she argues in favor of the investment in these programs.<sup>10</sup>

When discussing Buddhists in Bangladesh, Karma Lekse Tsomo writes that it is a predominantly Islamic country, and Buddhists are a minority. She said she was treated with the same respect and welcome that would be given to a male monk, which was meaningful to her because she was not expecting it. Nuns do not have the authority that monks do and, additionally, in Bangladesh, there is a gender inequality, which would make this discrimination even stronger. She is unique as a *bikkhuni*, but feels as though people were able to make the adjustment to showing her respect.<sup>11</sup> Her presence gave hope to women in Asia that they could also become a fully ordained nun. She wants women to realize that they do not have to live under oppression. She is proof that this can be achieved and that people will come to accept women in authority. On one occasion, when giving a speech, Tsomo felt that the male monks in the audience were not paying attention to her. Her response was to say to the crowd that women are capable of being disciplined and mindful, two important Buddhist values, and this group of women at the speech was a great example; they only lack the Buddhist education that the men had.

The education system in Bangladesh is not adequate by the standards of Karma Lekshe Tsomo for men or women. Buddhist women are content with what little education they do have because they have more opportunity than the Muslim women in their country. There are classes available to both men and women at the college level, but it isn't enough for a Buddhist to gain a thorough education. Tsomo comes up with a solution to this problem, which she says that Buddhism as a religion should put more work into fixing the problem. She praises Bangladesh for keeping Buddhism strong and

for respecting the values of women, even with some negative Muslim influences so present in culture. Even though Buddhist women do have certain societal benefits, Tsomo thinks that there could be ordination for women nuns. She says they need better education, authority figures to support them, and positivity surrounding this movement to create enthusiasm to become a nun.<sup>12</sup> Tsomo's work has built a larger understanding of this issue in her travels and through her speeches and books. She serves as an example to women around the world that full ordination can be achieved. She is an important figure and role model that also works to make ordination happen for other women. Tsomo is able to make a large difference, partly due to Pema Chödrön proving women are capable of Tibetan ordination, but also with her work across the world trying to expose more women to education and ordination.

### **III. Maura Soshin O'Halloran**

Maura O'Halloran (1955-1982) was an Irish-American Zen Buddhist monk, who started out as a Catholic girl in Boston, Massachusetts. When she was four years old her family moved to Ireland, where her father was from. The family then moved back to Boston, while her father finished graduate school. At age fourteen, they moved back to Ireland when her father died in a car accident, and she helped her mother raise her five younger siblings. She attended Trinity College in Dublin, where she volunteered in homeless shelters and with special needs children in Ireland. This work helped her understanding of suffering, which eventually led her to learn about meditation and prayer in Buddhism. She became detached from material things, such as clothing, and became



disciplined with her spending. She spent her years after college traveling all across the world, and working in America to make money to fund her experiences. She made a large service trip in Central and South America, which lasted from April to late December 1978. She then moved back to Boston for almost a year to work and financially plan for her trip to Asia.<sup>13</sup>

In the past, Catholics have studied Zen along with Catholicism, so O'Halloran wasn't a lone Westerner when she went to a Japanese Buddhist monastery in 1979. The connection between the two religions can be seen between Zen meditation and the traditional focused prayer that monks and mystics do. She studied meditation of the mind and body and was tested by her teachers. Six months into her stay she experienced enlightenment and felt compassion for all things. This led her to study harder on her meditation, which she felt fulfilled in and completed her training in Japan, in 1982. Tragically, she was killed in a bus accident at age twenty-seven in Thailand, while she was on her way home. Her fellow monks remember her as a compassionate being that is off in her next life saving the world.<sup>14</sup>

*Pure Heart Enlightened Mind* was published after O'Halloran's death in 1994. It is a collection of her journal entries and letters that she wrote during her stay at the monastery. A statue of her serves as a memory of her at the monastery where she learned Zen Buddhism. Her mother writes in the Introduction of the book that O'Halloran is remembered as an emanation of the "*bodhisattva* Kannon, the Buddhist saint of compassion."<sup>15</sup> Even though she was not a Zen nun for very long, she was able to make an impact on the Zen monks in Japan. She proved that women can be skilled enough to practice with the men and her dedication was strong enough to become enlightened.

On her arrival at the Toshoji Temple on November 18, 1979, she was the only Western person and was given her tasks and a new name, Soshin, which means “great enlightenment, simple mind, or warm/open/frank heart.”<sup>16</sup> She is told that enlightenment may take years, but to trust her teacher, Go Roshi, and she reaches enlightenment not long after her arrival. She writes in her diary a week after her first experience, “I couldn’t contain my joy, looking at dead people, thinking of nothingness.”<sup>17</sup> Through her experience at the monastery, meditation became more difficult and she was allowed less sleep. In one letter to her mother, O’Halloran thanks her for a book called *Zen and the Bible*, which combines her Catholic roots with her new practice. She also writes about her difficulties in learning old Japanese for her next ceremony.<sup>18</sup> In a different letter dated May 17, 1982 to a friend name Kate, she writes, “I became an official female priest on Ruth’s birthday. I am Soshin osho now.”<sup>19</sup> She is called *osho*, which is the Japanese word for a Buddhist monk. She is given this name when she is ordained and has a ceremony, which completed her stay at the Japanese monastery.

In the months before her death, O’Halloran was traveling back to the United States to spend Christmas with her family. She planned on stopping in Southeast Asia for two months of travel in October 1982. Unfortunately her overnight bus went off road and she, along with the driver and two others, were killed. Her ashes now lay next to her father’s in Lewiston, Maine.<sup>20</sup> Although she only lived for twenty-seven years, O’Halloran proved herself as a nun through her skills. She had more to give as an ordained woman, but she was not given the opportunity to live out her life. She moved her fellow monks so much that they chose to commemorate her life at the monastery. This action shows how important she was to them and how she, the only woman and

Westerner, could achieve enlightenment as any other monk. O'Halloran went to the Japanese monastery not knowing anyone or with a background in Zen Buddhism. Her legacy lives on as a role model to other women, Asian and American, who want to obtain their ordination.

#### **IV. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh**

Chatsumarn Kabilsingh (b. 1944) is the daughter of the first Thai Mahayana *Bhikkhuni* nun, Voramai Kabilsingh, who was ordained in Hong Kong. When returning to Thailand, she had difficulties because male monks did not accept her status. Over years this discrimination lessened, but it was still not legal for a woman to become ordained in Thailand. This all happened when Chatsumarn Kabilsingh was growing up. At age ten, her mother was ordained after she had started an orphanage and cared for poor children. In these years, Voramai studied meditation and decided to become a nun because it would allow her to help more people in need. She transformed the family's home into a temple and her daughter Chatsumarn remembers feeling uneasy when describing her mother's new job to her friends. She was raised Buddhist and learned all the prayers and meditation at a young age. Her mother opened a school and taught her to be compassionate to others. Before Chatsumarn became a monk, she tried to keep up her mother's work in the institutions she had built, but was more focused on helping the people than creating the buildings. Chatsumarn knew that she would be a role model for other women, so she waited to become ordained until she knew she could fully commit

for life. She wanted her husband and children to be stable and independent before she made her Theravada vows, which were made in 2003.<sup>21</sup>

In a 1994 *Share International* interview of Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, she talks about women and how their social status can be changed. Kabilsingh says that the Buddha believed that women and men have the same chance to reach enlightenment. She says that women's spiritual capability is not demonstrated because there are not many opportunities for them to be ordained in most Buddhist countries. Kabilsingh believes that by becoming ordained women are able to help underprivileged people in a more affective way. "If we have fully ordained nun, we could open up the horizon of different activities for women."<sup>22</sup> She believes that women have the potential to do anything that men can, so they should be given more responsibilities in the religion, such as ordination, for the benefit of the greater good. She then says if men and women could work together the world would modernize and there would be less suffering.<sup>23</sup>

Kabilsingh doesn't freely talk about women's ordination when she is in Thailand, as it is a delicate topic; female ordination was banned in 1928. Now women are allowed to become nuns in Thailand under the constitution, but the Thai Sangha Council, a powerful Buddhist group, doesn't believe women should have this right.<sup>24</sup> As Kabilsingh was the first nun, she had to create a new order of female ordained nuns. There are still traditional people that have a stigma against ordained women, but Kabilsingh is trying to prove their worth. One of her goals is to build several monasteries so that females can be ordained. There is still a huge divide between the care and education a monk gets, in comparison to what a female gets. This proves that there is gender inequality in Thailand.

Chatsumarn Kabilsingh understands that as a whole Buddhist education is not strong enough for women to become ordained nuns and monks. She has helped put in a system of training and is hopeful for the future of ordained women. There is a damaging vision of women in Thailand and she believes that women do not feel as though they can become enlightened because of this.

When women cannot become ordained, because the image of women is so negative, that pushes women to the other end of the spectrum. That's why the door to brothels is open for women. But why are the doors closed for women to become nuns? I talk about the need to see social issues as holistic — you cannot separate them.<sup>25</sup>

Kabilsingh says that there is a relationship of women not allowed to be ordained and the amount of women prostitutes. She says that women feel badly about themselves and their lack of rights so they comply with the image society creates. Women are stripped of their rights in Thailand, so they believe they are beneath men. If education and ordination were available to more women, fewer women would be prostitutes. It is clear to Kabilsingh that these two topics are related and her goal is to create a system where women have opportunities.

Society has changed the view of women and this differs from the way the Buddha thought about them. Kabilsingh takes women out on retreats, where women talk about the problems and how to change the image of women. She says, “Educated people tend to change more easily, but educated people are only the minority.”<sup>26</sup> This statement is important because it she discusses how education is the way to success, but it is not accessible to everyone, especially women. She says that all people should be educated on this topic so they know that women are capable of the same high position in Buddhism as men, and women should be given the same rights in education and beyond. Chatsumarn

Kabilsingh is unique because she overcame adversity to become the first Theravada nun. She is using her education to help others and create a system of higher education for women in Thailand. Another point she makes is that women need to be enthusiastically supported by one another because it helps morale. Relationships with support are stronger and more effective and more change can be made.<sup>27</sup> By putting Kabilsingh's ideas into action, the perception of women and their status in Asian countries can be changed. Her position is influential and she is noble in her fight for equality in Buddhist ordination.

Pema Chödrön, Karma Lekshe Tsomo, and Maura O'Halloran were strong and significant influences of American women that proved they were as capable as men to become enlightened and ordained. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh is a Thai woman, who has become involved in women's rights in Thailand. These women all want the same outcome of more ordained women, but for this to happen, they needed to prove it was possible. Pema Chödrön became a Buddhist later in life, but nonetheless was able to reach enlightenment and become a nun. She had to experience real heartbreak before this happened, which encouraged her to work harder. Karma Lekshe Tsomo was not born Buddhist either, but now works tirelessly to help women achieve what she has. Maura O'Halloran was a life lost too early, but showed the men at her Japanese monastery that she was more than capable in completing the tasks they gave her. Finally, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh faces real discrimination in her home country of Thailand, but shows that with dedication, a woman can go against the negative culture and live a life as an educated nun. These women do not feel that they are any better than other women, but conversely they want to help others experience the various benefits of Buddhism. This shows how selfless they are and that they fully believe in the work they have dedicated their lives to.

## **II: Teachers**

Women teachers of Buddhism come from all different backgrounds, and have a variety of inspirations, from which they draw and from whom they learned. American Buddhist women have the opportunity to take risks and are free to expand or change their religion, given the many opportunities of their culture. This chapter focuses on four influential female Buddhist teachers and the reformations and progress they have made in Buddhism. Dipa Ma, an Indian teacher, was a leader in bringing meditation to lay women in India. Before her, many women, including wives and mothers, did not have the access to a meditation role model. She was compassionate to all, and showed much care for all her students. Dipa Ma inspired the next teacher, Sharon Salzberg, who became a meditation teacher after studying with Dipa Ma in India. Salzberg, who is based in Barre, Massachusetts at the Insight Meditation Society, has a large following through her teachings on meditation, but she also uses Buddhist values to help her students cope with everyday issues. Salzberg uses a blog to reach out to her students and promote her lessons on the Internet.

The third teacher, Jan Willis, is an African American Baptist Tibetan Buddhist, who appreciates the values of Christianity as they intersect with the lessons of Buddhism. She does not choose between the two religions, but lives by a unique combination of both. Willis recently retired from her position as a professor at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, where she taught Buddhism from an academic viewpoint. Willis also deals with the issue of race in Buddhism, because as an African-American woman, she is unique as an “elite” or converted Buddhist. The last teacher is Toni Packer, who immigrated to New York from Germany, in her adult life. She discovered

Zen Buddhism and soon after became a teacher. She opened up her own meditation center in upstate New York, where she was able to set her own rules, adapted to the American context, on how to teach. She created her own version of Zen Buddhism that was more focused on meditating, and less concerned with traditional Buddhist practices, such as bowing. Her contribution changed this tradition because it was modified to better fit in with American culture. All of these women brought new advances and modernizations to Buddhism in America that have changed the tradition of the religion in this country, and that have implications for contemporary Buddhism in the global setting.

### **I. Dipa Ma**

Dipa Ma (1911-1989) was born in Chitagong, Pakistan in 1911, and even as a child was captivated by Buddhist teachings. She grew up in a traditional Bengali culture, which means her schooling ended at age twelve when she married Rajani Barua. Soon after marrying, her husband got a job in Myanmar so she lived with her in-laws back in India. Two years later, Dipa Ma joined her husband, and in time they fell in love. At this time she wanted to have a child, but she was not able to get pregnant. Fearing that she would not ever become pregnant, Rajani's parents lined up a new wife for him, but he did not leave Dipa Ma. Rajani, who became a teacher to Dipa Ma, told her to treat everyone as her child so that she would not feel childless. Thus, she became a mother to all and cared deeply for them. A couple of years later, Dipa's mother died and left behind an eighteen-month-old son, Bijoy, who Dipa and Rajani adopted as their own son.<sup>28</sup>

Dipa Ma became increasingly interested in learning meditation, but traditionally a woman needed to complete her housewife duties before she could become a *sādhvi*, a



religious person.<sup>29</sup> When Dipa Ma discovered she was pregnant at age thirty-five, her plans were pushed back, but sadly the baby girl died three months after she was born. Dipa Ma became pregnant again, this time with a healthy girl, and two years later found out she was expecting a baby boy. Unfortunately, this boy died at birth, leaving Dipa Ma understandably, heartbroken. These two losses were enough to have Dipa Ma desperate for meditation to remove her sadness, but Rajani was adamant that it was not time yet. As if Dipa Ma could take even more suffering, she became very sick and was bedridden for five years. During this time, Rajani took care of their daughter, Dipa, while continuing to work to support the family. This pressure of raising a newborn and supporting the family was difficult for Rajani, and after few years of this, he suddenly died of a heart attack.<sup>30</sup>

Dipa Ma found herself alone in a foreign country when the Buddha came to her in a dream and told her to work for her own freedom.<sup>31</sup> At this point she gave both her daughter and her valuables to her neighbor and traveled to a meditation center in Burma. During a focused meditation, she realized that a dog was biting her, and she entered a hospital, non-seriously ill. After this, Dipa Ma went home to her daughter and practiced meditation at home. A couple years went by and Dipa Ma was given the opportunity to meditate with Mahasi Sayadaw, a respected Burmese teacher known for the “notation practice,” which takes note of each movement. During this time, she had a breakthrough that changed her life.<sup>32</sup>

Dipa Ma reached the first stage of enlightenment within six days of being at the meditation center with Mahasi Sayadaw in Burma. She regained her health and lived in a new state of peace. Her family and friends joined her at the center after seeing her progress. The group of women was making progress together, when Dipa Ma became a

teacher. The women stayed at the center until 1967, when the government of Myanmar exiled all foreigners. Upon settling in India, lay people, and in particular, women came to her for instruction on meditation. Dipa Ma helped women toward their enlightenment and toward a life experiencing mediation through the performance of household chores. This was “cutting edge” for housewives and they learned about mindfulness in everyday activities.<sup>33</sup>

Dipa Ma was an inspiration to women because it was not as common for a woman to be a teacher or to be enlightened. One woman, Michele McDonald-Smith said, “For me to meet a woman who was that enlightened, it was more powerful than I can ever put into words. She embodied what I deeply wanted to be like.”<sup>34</sup> Dipa Ma was a role model because she showed how a woman can be a mother and also become enlightened in a tradition of men. Dipa Ma said to women, “You can go more quickly and deeper in the practice than men because your minds are softer.”<sup>35</sup> This is a compliment because she says that through a woman’s ability to feel emotion, she can have more “movement” in her practice. According to Dipa Ma, a woman’s mind is “softer” because it is calmer and more gentle, allowing for better concentration in meditation. Although Dipa Ma was a Theravada Buddhist, she disagreed with the traditional argument that only men can be buddhas. In her culture, women are not treated as equals and she challenged this idea. She encouraged women to be independent and supported them to take their meditation to the next level, all in a caring, maternal way.<sup>36</sup>

Dipa Ma was a proponent of *metta*, loving-kindness, which she showed in her compassionate ways of loving everyone. Dipa Ma traveled to America for three months in 1980 and again in 1984 teaching at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre,

Massachusetts, which was founded by Sharon Salzberg and Joseph Goldstein. The luxuries of America were not appealing to Dipa Ma, and Americans were inspired by her lack of interest in technology and comfort. Goldstein and Salzberg traveled to Calcutta to learn more from Dipa Ma before her death. Salzberg said that during her last visit with Dipa Ma she was told by Dipa Ma to not return to India, but to start teaching meditation with Goldstein. They then opened the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies together. The kind support from Dipa Ma helped Salzberg to become a teacher and bring Dipa Ma's teachings back to America.<sup>37</sup>

## **II. Sharon Salzberg**

Sharon Salzberg (b. 1952) is currently a meditation teacher and author and in the Theravada Buddhism tradition. She was born in 1952 in New York City, and during her childhood she faced suffering by death of loved ones. She later attended State University of New York, Buffalo, where she took a course on Asian philosophy and discovered Buddhism for the first time. In 1970 she traveled to India to learn meditation and to find tranquility. She took part in a meditation course in 1971 in Bodh Gaya, India, which affected her enough to stay until 1974. Upon her return to America, she became a *vipassana* insight meditation teacher, and then in 1976, she created the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts with Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield. Her companionship with Goldstein continued when they opened the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies in 1989 and the Forest Refuge in 1998. Since then, Salzberg has given many speeches at prestigious events, been a panelist with the Dalai Lama, organized

several retreats, and written New York Times best-selling books, along with many other accomplishments.<sup>38</sup>

Dipa Ma was incredibly influential to Salzberg because Dipa Ma encouraged her to be more conscientious while meditating. Salzberg now has her own students, whom she leads on retreats around the world. As she cannot always be with all her students, Salzberg uses a personal website to share her message with them. The Internet has significantly changed the way teachers can interact with their students because they can post blogs, articles, and podcasts to reach students all over the world. On Salzberg's website she lists ways to contact her and links to other pages that could be of interest to Buddhist practitioners. In American culture, the Internet is a common and efficient way to spread a message. Even though religion is an old practice, American teachers, such as Salzberg, use new media to expand their following and discuss contemporary issues. This has revolutionized her following because it has allowed her to reach out to and keep in contact with thousands more people than she could before the Internet. Another way she reaches out to Americans is by not centering on specifically Buddhist scriptures. She takes Buddhist ideas and applies them to situations that any American, Buddhist or not, would need help with. For example, in Salzberg's blog she writes about dealing with hatred, finding happiness, relaxation, and dealing with enemies. She helps readers work through their problems, without necessarily connecting her teachings to specific religious doctrines.

On her blog, for example, Salzberg posts an article that she wrote about finding happiness at a mundane job. She teaches the reader how to meditate and readjust any unhappiness to find coherence. She first says that one should coach himself or herself to

be happy, similar to how one learns any skill. A way of doing this is to release all negativity and focus on that feeling. Salzberg then notes her second step to find happiness is to stop distractions such as social media and text messages, and start paying attention to every action, such as the movement of fingers. This step helps one realize his or her power of concentration and full attentiveness, which can apply to any area of work.

Salzberg then addresses competition at work and how working as a team makes for a stronger environment, with genuine relationships resulting in a happier workplace. This is an important talk for Americans, where survival of the fittest and the quest for profit often hinder people's relationships. The fourth step in finding happiness is to control how one's perception is received by others. Taking a moment to decide what to say can help in making an impression on someone, even though the other person's judgment cannot be controlled. When taking this moment a person has a clear view of how they will come off. Salzberg's fifth step is about mindfulness, because one must be mindful about the way he or she expresses oneself to another person. Salzberg says to be more skilled in the way one communicates with another because it can strengthen the relationship. The next step requires one to have integrity and respect for others, because in doing so one can acknowledge that every other person wants to be happy as well. The seventh step is to look for the meaning in every action because it gives greater significance to the world around and less focus on single mundane everyday tasks. This is especially important because it is easy to lose focus on the big picture, but Salzberg encourages Americans to remember the higher importance of their actions, such as working to get a promotion at a job. The final step in Salzberg's guide to happiness is to have awareness, which she says removes the negative aspects at work, such as rivalries and fear. By being present, one

can live away from harm and be happy. To conclude, Salzberg writes that with all these steps one is able to live happy not just in their work environment, but in all aspects of their life.<sup>39</sup>

Salzberg's main message on her website is about meditation. She cares about her students and wants them to find their inner peace, which shows her mindfulness and compassion she has for all, similar to Dipa Ma. On the website there is a quote from Sharon that serves as a message to her readers.

Each of us has a genuine capacity for love, forgiveness, wisdom and compassion. Meditation awakens these qualities so that we can discover for ourselves the unique happiness that is our birthright.<sup>40</sup>

She believes that her students can achieve happiness through meditation, which is her area of expertise. She does not say that one must meditate, but encourages people to meditate through her stories of its power. Although she is physically distant from many readers, through her website people can be touched by her insight and try self-healing for their problems. This is a new wave of coming to religion because the teacher is communicating through technology, which shows the modernization American women are bringing to Buddhism. Many other Buddhist teachers do not have access to the Internet or technology, but Sharon Salzberg uses it to create a connection with people that otherwise she would be unable to do.

### **III. Jan Willis**

Growing up African-American in the Jim Crow South, Jan Willis (b. 1948) had first-hand experience with suffering and anguish, which sparked her interest in finding ways to cope with traumatizing events. She learned about non-violence through Martin

Luther King's campaigns in Alabama, her home state. When she attended college at Cornell during the Vietnam War, she encountered horrible images of the Vietnamese people on television. She saw their suffering and became fascinated by their strength, only to find out that they were Buddhist, which led directly to her choice of studies. Her junior year abroad was spent in India, where she studied with Thai monks, followed by a stay in Nepal. When returning to Cornell for her senior year, she became involved in the racial protests at the university and came very close to joining the Black Panther Party after graduation. Thinking of her past of non-violence, she traveled back to Nepal in 1969 for a year that she spent in a Tibetan monastery. She then traveled home again to America, where she attended Cornell to get her master's in philosophy and then to Columbia for her doctorate in Indic and Buddhist studies. Her career led to taking several long retreats and to writing a considerable amount on Buddhist philosophy.<sup>41</sup>

Willis comes from an African American Baptist family that regularly attended church. After finding Buddhism, Willis returned to church with her father, and she began to see similarities between Buddhism and Christianity. She writes that the lessons in the Christian services she attended mirrored lessons from Buddhism. The themes included "overcoming suffering, about patience, strength, and the cultivation of true love. And they were delivered with compassion."<sup>42</sup> Through this bond between the two religions, Willis felt complete. She could acknowledge the two parts of herself and find the meaning in the disparate elements of her belief. Feeling both Baptist and Buddhist, Willis is a new type of American Buddhist woman. She feels free to be a part of both of these religions, and practice the ideologies that she thinks are the best for her. She says she tends to think of Buddhist principles when she needs advice, but in moment when her

plane was hitting a rough patch, she called on both the Buddha and Jesus Christ to help her.<sup>43</sup> She is open to being apart of the two religions because she can draw on both for guidance.

For a part of Willis' young life, she believed that communication could solve any issue. She thought that if she could have a conversation with the Klu-Klux-Klan, she could help them transform their ideas. Willis then realized that it would take more than just communication to solve issues. She came to the conclusion that it is up to the individual to make his or her own decisions, meaning that she can't simply tell someone what to think and have it be the truth. She wants people to realize their own personal power and how that can make a difference. She writes, "If they were made to feel confident in their own abilities to think for themselves, that could change their lives."<sup>44</sup> For this reason, Willis became a teacher; she wanted to help students realize their potential and ability to come up with their own thoughts. She didn't want to lecture, but her approach is to help the student find their power.

Willis does not teach Buddhists to reach enlightenment, but at Wesleyan University she taught Buddhism to the diverse population of students. As a professor, she did not have the same profession as Sharon Slazberg; Willis was not a meditation teacher, but was an academic teacher. She only had her class meditate when they were learning about mediation. Yet similar to Salzberg, she writes about Buddhism and connects its values to relate to American life. She understands that religion professors are often looked at in the fear that they are giving sermons or converting their students, but she wanted her students to understand the important values of Buddhism, academically. She



didn't want them to suffer and wanted them to be happy in life.<sup>45</sup> She was compassionate to her students, as any Buddhist teacher is, and pushed them to find their inner strength.

The students at Wesleyan were not the only people that Willis had an influence on. As an African-American Buddhist, she also works to include racial diversity in "elite" Buddhism in America. She is an example to other African Americans, in particular those that suffered because of race, of someone who has overcome pain with the help of Buddhist teachings. She explains her belief in both the Baptist Church and in Buddhism, to spread her beliefs to her community. Willis is unique as a teacher because of her Baptist background, race, and job as a professor. She did not try to help her students towards enlightenment, as is the job of many Buddhist teachers, but she subjectively taught her students the material for them to interpret.

#### **IV. Toni Packer**

Toni Packer (1927-2013) was a Zen Buddhist who lived in Rochester, New York. She was born in Berlin in 1927 during Hitler's Nazi Germany. Coming from Jewish decent, she was baptized in the Lutheran church out of fear of anti-Semitism. Growing up during the war, Packer was troubled about the inhumanity she was experiencing. She then moved to Switzerland with her family, where she met her American husband Kyle, whom she married in 1950. They moved to New York and Toni studied at the University of Buffalo.<sup>46</sup>

Packer did not stay in school for very long, but she remained a fervent reader. She started with books about feminism, but then found Buddhism. She read Philip Kapleau's

book *Three Pillars of Zen*, which gives a guide to meditation. When she learned that Kapleau worked less than two hours away from her, she joined his meditation center.<sup>47</sup>

Through her Buddhist education, she learned about chanting and the hitting stick, two topics she questioned. She wondered why words were quickly yelled in chants and not spoken slower to intensify their meaning. Packer also reviewed the *keisaku*, hitting stick, because she didn't understand how this practice during meditation came from compassion. She worried about the person who is hit and the person doing the hitting. She felt that there were other ways to bring energy into the mind and body, without using the stick. When she opened her meditation center she did not allow hitting sticks.<sup>48</sup> This shows that her compassion for the body and mind helped her change the traditional practices of Buddhism. Packer stood up for what she believed in, and didn't carry out practices that she felt were wrong. Older teachers questioned her about the rapid changes she had made, and this made her rethink herself as a Buddhist. She came to the conclusion that her method of teaching is by asking questions and challenging older ideas, which in itself is a Buddhist practice.<sup>49</sup>

This was not the only practice that Packer left at the Rochester Zen Center. For example, because of her non-Buddhist upbringing, she wasn't convinced by the ideas of karma and the cycle of rebirth. She also didn't believe in wearing robes, bowing, or the idolization of the *bodhisattva*.<sup>50</sup> When she opened her meditation center, the Springwater Center, in upstate New York, she was focused on the meditation practice, which is what she saw to be most important. She had a more Western approach to Zen Buddhism and removed many of the Eastern practices, such as the *bodhisattva*. She kept it simple at her

meditation center, with less the focus on the Buddha, and increased practice of meditation.

Packer was free to leave Kapleau's center and start her own because of the opportunities women have in America. She opened her own mediation center, the Springwater Center, in 1981. Even though Kapleau invited her to be his successor, she left to create her own center with mediation the way she felt it should be taught. After her death, the center continues to have retreats and teach in the way Packer instructed. Packer felt that everyone can learn from one another.

We are human beings, not 'students' and 'teacher,' coming together and questioning, looking together, not having made up our minds about what we're looking at, but starting afresh.<sup>51</sup>

She believed in meditation bringing people together, a time with no titles or hierarchy. People can learn from each other, especially when they keep an open mind. Packer kept her meditation center open to everyone and wanted people to experience silence, but also form relationships with others. People can share their problems and worries and help each other come over their difficulties.<sup>52</sup> She was against hierarchy so that no one could force another person to do something. She wanted the experience to be self led so that people could create their own path without being told how to get there.<sup>53</sup>

In conclusion, the advances that women teachers have made to Buddhism in the recent years have revolutionized who can practice Buddhism. Dipa Ma, although not American, brought meditation to women, which inspired American Sharon Salzberg. Dipa Ma was compassionate and gave women the chance to learn meditation, even by teaching lessons in her own house. Salzberg reaches practitioners over the Internet, where she makes her lessons appeal to many Americans, not just Buddhists. She writes about

how to deal with current life problems, such as ones that come up in an office job or while riding the train. An American does not have to be a Buddhist to take her advice, and this is what makes her blog so appealing. Another teacher, Jan Willis faced additional suffering growing up as an African American woman in the Jim Crow South. She had to overcome hate that she faced every day, and prove all the people wrong who doubted her ability to attend Cornell as an undergrad. Her personal beliefs in both Buddhism and Christianity attest to the America's freedom of religion. Willis' resilience is demonstrated by her accomplishments as a Tibetan Buddhist and as a professor. She brings racial diversity to Buddhism and within meditation centers in America. Finally Toni Packer studied Zen Buddhism, but realized that she needed to make changes. This was also possible because in America people are free to practice the religion they want. The removal of the hitting stick was made out of compassion for the practitioners, while other changes, such not bowing showed the Westernization of the religion.

These women have made Buddhism more open and more accessible, whether through the use of the Internet or through the change of the practice, which created a larger American following. American Buddhist teachers focus more on mindfulness to maintain focus in life, rather than knowing and practicing the Buddhist mantras. In particular these four women have made significant advances that have changed Buddhism in this country forever.

### Chapter III: Abortion

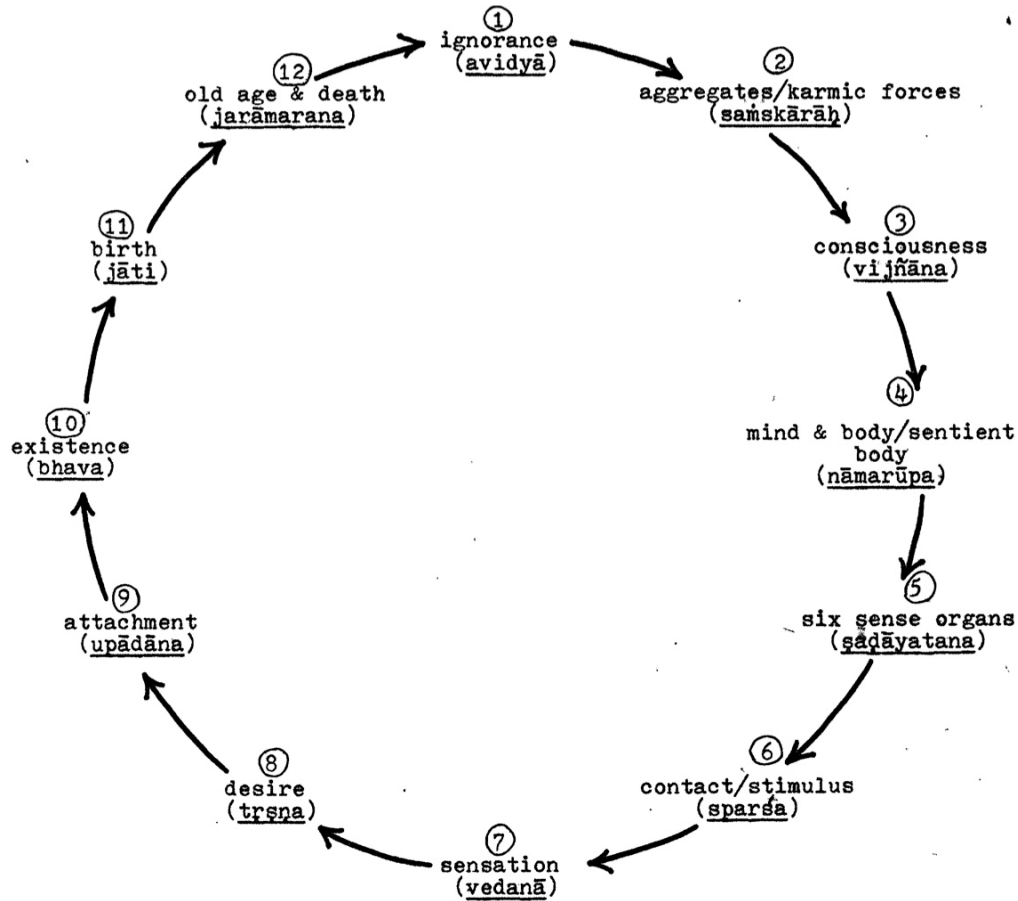
Many Western religious traditions have both pro-choice and pro-life advocates on the issue of abortion, and in many non-Western traditions people also have such a range of views on abortion as well. In Buddhism, for example, there is a divide between those who see abortion as wrong and completely unacceptable, and those who are willing to tolerate and cope with the outcome. Theravada Buddhists are more traditional in their views of abortion because they strongly believe in non-violence and in the notion that a fetus has a conscious life from the beginning. They are against the idea of abortion and do not sympathize with women who choose to have an abortion. In Mahayana Buddhism, practitioners have compassion for a pregnant woman who has had an abortion, but they also have compassion for the fetus in its next life. In Japan, for example, there are ceremonies that are performed in honor of the fetus and to help him or her in the future. These come from the worship of the *bodhisattva Jizō* and from the *mizuko kuyō* culture, which is a ceremony for the unborn child. Japanese society accepts abortion as a practice, and specifically as a form of birth control and because of this, the Buddhist coping method through *Jizō* practice helps parents relieve their guilt. This chapter explores the debate of pro-life and pro-choice using the Buddhist schools and principles, and shows how the *Jizō* culture in Japan may comfort parents and provide for the aborted fetus, as introduced in America.

## I. Theravada Buddhism

Theravada Buddhism, the oldest branch of Buddhism, is more traditional and is not open to abortion as a response to an unwanted pregnancy. As Peter Harvey notes in *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, there is the belief that human consciousness starts from the moment of conception in the mother's womb. Underlying this is the Buddhist principle of continuous rebirth, as seen in the Twelve-Fold Chain of Dependent Origination, meaning that one is reborn into a new life and body after death, during the journey to *nirvāna*. Life in Buddhism is seen as starting at the beginning of life as a fetus, and this concept is widely accepted among Buddhist monks and lay alike.<sup>54</sup> Buddhist monks take life very seriously, even the life of a bug or a blade of grass, and Harvey quotes scriptures that say if a monk "deprives a human being of life, even down to destroying an embryo, he becomes not a (true) renouncer, not a son of the Sākiyans."<sup>55</sup> This clearly states that to end the life of a fetus is a negative, punishable act, and Harvey further states that to give an abortion would be cause for a monk's dismissal from his community. For the mother of the fetus, the consequence of abortion is a lower rebirth, as an abortion is considered an act of murder. Once a person dies, he or she is reborn into a new life according to his karma from his past life. It is important to Theravada Buddhist to not disrupt this natural progression of life because it affects the karma of the fetus, mother, and person who performs the abortion.<sup>56</sup> Theravada's see the pregnancy as a consequence of life, and a woman should carry it out to benefit her and her unborn child's karmic future.

Theravada Buddhists believe that in the circle of life and death there is an immediate link between death and new life. They see the instant and direct connection

between a death and the next birth, giving them reason to be against abortion. The *Pratītyasamutpāda*, or the Twelve-Fold Chain of Dependent Origination, shows how after one dies without enlightenment, he or she is instantaneously reborn into a new body. If, after *jarāmarana* (old age and death), there is still *avidyā* (ignorance), *samskārah* (aggregates/karmic forces), and *viññāna* (consciousness), then one is taken to a new rebirth. The first three steps are connected and belong together to bring the being into the fourth step of *nāmarūpa* (mind and body). The person then grows its senses and organs in *sadāyatana*. The fetus has consciousness before it has attachment or desire, but according to the Theravadans, it is as human as it will ever be. The twelve steps of the *Pratītyasamutpāda* demonstrate that there is not a time when a being is not considered life, and because of this Theravada Buddhists believe that, at all times a fetus is alive and that abortion is the killing of that life.



Another argument Theravada's use against abortion is the notion of self. In Buddhism there is no self and no possessor of a body. Everything changes and is transient, including the body and one's absolute self. All things, including the self, are caused and conditioned. *Anatta* is the doctrine of "no self", which means that a body is caused and conditioned and there is "no self", or a substantial thing to own in anything. The body does not belong to a woman, and no person can claim his body as his own. The argument against abortion says that a woman has no ownership of her body to make a decision about it. The life of the unborn child needs to be taken into account too, and an abortion would take away a life that no one had the right to. The ideal in Theravada Buddhism is nirvana or enlightenment, which is the end of suffering. Women can't affirm



that their bodies are their own, so the decision to have an abortion is not hers and she should go through with the pregnancy.<sup>57</sup>

Buddhists believe that everything happens because of karma and, if a woman is pregnant with a baby, it is a result of her karma and the karma of the embryo.<sup>58</sup> She cannot have an abortion because it not only affects her, but it affects the fetus and the family. Abortions cause interference with karmic forces, which change the cosmos. By having an abortion, a woman, the fetus, the family, and the doctor are all affected and can suffer from this one decision. Their karma is negatively altered, which makes it more difficult to become enlightened.

There are exceptions to the strict karma rules in Theravada, such as in cases where a woman is medically unable to go through with her pregnancy, or her pregnancy is a product of rape. An abortion can be implemented in these situations with less karmic consequences. Although this is still an act of violence, if a woman is void of “greed, hatred or anger, and delusion,”<sup>59</sup> the bad karma can be redeemed in her present lifetime. A mother, as an adult, is seen as having more worth in society and able to make positive contributions, which clearly a fetus is not able to, so it is viewed as more important to save her life. In the opinion of the Thai Theravada monk, Phra Depvethree, when a woman and a fetus are both in danger, the woman’s life should be saved because of her societal value.<sup>60</sup> Another situation where abortion can be seen as having a good intention is when it is given to a woman with HIV. By having an abortion, the child is saved from a life of suffering and HIV, and the family is free from that pain. On the other hand, an abortion with the purpose of gender selection gives rise to bad karma because the intention is selfish.<sup>61</sup> An abortion for this reason can’t be condoned because it does not

help the fetus avoid suffering. The parents in this situation are greedy, which will negatively affect their karma. Abortion is a controversial topic with different rules and beliefs, but even in some traditional Theravada Buddhist places, it can be explained and pardoned by pure actions in the future.

## II. Mahayana Buddhism

The story “King Sivi” in the Jataka Tales tells the legend of King Sivi, who gives his eyes to a blind *brahmin*. He does this because is completing his *bodhisattva* perfection of generosity and is willing to make a sacrifice for the benefit of another. King Sivi says, “Of all outside things there is nothing I have not given; but this kind of giving does not content me. I want to give something which is a part of myself.”<sup>62</sup> King Sivi is selfless and generous and wants to do more for the community.

This story relates to the Mahayana view on abortion because King Sivi preforms violence on himself in order to show compassion for another. Sivi’s eyes can be equated to a woman’s womb because in both cases a person is committing violence to benefit another. Even though King Sivi is gruesome, his act ultimately helps the *bhahmin*, who is really Buddha. When a woman has an abortion out of compassion, she goes against the Buddhist principle of non-violence, but she knows that the child would be better off in a different rebirth.

King Sivi is advised to not give up his eyes because it will be painful and is not an easy thing to do. He does it anyway, which shows that he is strong and willing to make the sacrifice to do something good. This decision not only helps the *brahmin*, but it affects him as well. This story shows the Mahayana principle of *upaya*, skillful means,

because the act is violent, but it is made out of compassion, and for the purpose of wisdom. When a woman is not fit to have a child, she is compassionate to give it a better life, and then should be shown compassion by others. In the Mahayana tradition women are not as looked down upon when having an abortion, and even though the act is violent, they are doing it out of compassion for the fetus.

Mahayana Buddhists have this different approach because they are more understanding of the complexities of the decision. These branches of Buddhism show compassion for a woman who has an abortion and for the aborted embryo. They use the “everyday truth” that self is owned by the being and that he or she can do what he wants with it. The body is the owned by the current person that occupies it, and that beholder can make decisions about the body. This means that because it is her body, a woman should be allowed to have an abortion, if it is her only option. The purpose of an abortion is to relieve suffering of the mother and fetus. Mahayana Buddhists understand if there will be great suffering on the mother and child, then they will be compassionate to the mother and fetus that are affected.

The Dalai Lama is the head of Tibetan Buddhism and understands the conflict with the Theravada view on abortion. In a 1995 *New York Times* interview with the Dalai Lama, he says that he sympathizes with women that get an abortion because he sees abandoned children and how much they suffer. Although he is a supporter of birth control and knows the Buddhist ideology of non-violence, he understands why women get abortions. He said that abortions should be contingent on each situation, and the examples he uses are a situation in when the child will be born with mental handicaps or in when the mother will have extreme difficulty being pregnant.<sup>63</sup> This shows that the

leader of Tibetan Buddhism, part of Mahayana Buddhism, is compassionate and practical about abortion, which sets the tone for the whole tradition.

### III. Japanese Buddhism

Japanese Buddhism is a part of Mahayana Buddhism that is also compassionate for women when having abortions. Japan is a modern country where abortion is legal, and many women practice their right to have an abortion. When Japanese women feel guilty they participate in a *mizuko kuyō* ceremony, where they support the fetus in his or hers next life, a ritual that has spread to the United States.

In the article “Buddhism, Abortion and the Middle Way,” Roy W. Perrett writes that Japanese Buddhism has created a *middle way* between anti-abortion and pro-choice. The “middle way” is not being either pro-choice or pro-abortion, it’s *mizuko kuyō*, which is the ritual that forgives the parents for having an abortion and prays for *Jizō* to help the fetus. The *Jizō* culture that started in Japan, attempts to relieve some of the parental guilt after having an abortion. *Jizō*, a *bodhisattva* figure, helps protect the unborn child in its transition to the next life. *Jizō* chooses to live in the “six realms of the universe”<sup>64</sup> so that he can help any dead souls that are there, such as unborn children. He is their protector so that they are saved and taken to a better rebirth. Abortion is a complicated topic though, because even though killing is viewed as wrong, one must have compassion for the mother, who is making this difficult decision. Perrett also notes that Buddhists are no different from people of other religions who do something religiously “immoral,” such as having an abortion.<sup>65</sup> Many religions are against abortions, but it is still an act that is practiced all over the world. In Western cultures the argument for pro-life assumes the

embryo is a full, conscious person with the same rights as a birthed child, while pro-choice argues that the embryo is a collection of cell matter. In Japanese Buddhism, the embryo is seen as a life, but when having an abortion, the mother chooses to “give the child back” so that it can be reborn into a different life.<sup>66</sup> In their eyes their child is not killed, but it is reborn into a family that can take care of him or her. This is a “middle way” because they are not pro-life or pro-choice, but they take the third path that morally allows them to have the abortion, while assuming that the child will be taken care of.

Buddhists are compassionate and will forgive a woman if she has an abortion. This *Jizō* ritual eases the guilt of a woman so that she can move on in her life. It is said that a mother’s good intention of a ritual and prayer can help the fetus in its next life. This practice takes away some of the sadness of a woman, and the positive action can give her good karma. Ultimately, nothing in Buddhism is permanent, so a mother’s guilt and suffering, over time, will too pass.<sup>67</sup> Japanese Buddhists also cope with their guilt by knowing that their baby will be “returned”<sup>68</sup> back into the cycle of birth and rebirth. This is a unique to Buddhism and cultures that believe in reincarnation, which could help a woman know that her child will move on to a different, more stable life. Through the ceremony of *mizuko kuyō*, people can give a service in honor of their unborn child and give thanks to *Jizō* for his help in saving their child.<sup>69</sup> In *Jizō* temples in Japan, mourners leave dolls as toys for their unborn child that they can play with in their “own world”<sup>70</sup> The parents believe that *Jizō* takes care of their child while in the underworld, waiting to be reborn, and that the toys they bring will keep their child busy in the meantime.

In American communities, the *mizuko kuyō* ceremony is often practiced by Zen Buddhist Japanese Americans, but this ritual is also expanded so that it appeals to all

Americans. Typically these *mizuko kuyōs* start inside the main worship room of a temple. American Zen temples usually have pews leading up to an altar, which is an example of Western Christian influences in the American Buddhist culture. Before the ceremony, the priest prepares an origami figure of a baby and a tablet, which says *mizuko spirit* in Japanese.<sup>71</sup> The beginning of the ceremony is a time of personal reflection so that the people attending can prepare themselves; the priest then rings a bell and offers candles to Buddha. The chants at this ceremony include The Three Refuges Prayer and The Heart Sutra, both of which are common in *mizuko kuyō* rituals performed in Japan. The next chants are made when the people at the ceremony give offerings and while the priest burns the origami figure. The chants, spoken in Japanese, are the words to *Jizō*, whom the practitioners are calling on to protect the unborn child. The priest then recites a speech that explains the relationship between *Jizō* and the fetus. To conclude this ceremony, the Buddhists go in front of a *Jizō* figure and make offerings of incense and more chants. They go outside and release the ashes of the origami and, with this the ceremony releases some of the pain.<sup>72</sup> The Zen school's *mizuko kuyō* keeps Japanese traditions, but still this practice is not as common as it is in other sects of Japanese American Buddhism, such as with the more Americanized *mizuko kuyō* ceremonies.

When a new culture or religion comes to American it is often “Americanized,” meaning America’s popular culture mixes in, creating new customs. Most of the Japanese people who are attending *mizuko kuyō* in America are originally from Japan; they are not second or third generation. People who have family who immigrated before World War II do not commonly attend *mizuko kuyō* because abortion was not prevalent in Japan when their family was living there.<sup>73</sup> Abortion was not a common practice, so when coming to

America, the pre-WWII immigrants did not put *mizuko kuyō* ceremonies into temples. In newer American-Japanese temples, particularly in the Zen school, the *mizuko kuyō* ceremony is full of traditional Japanese elements because the practitioners are closely related to Japan.

Just by being performed in America, the ritual is altered. It cannot be held in a traditional Japanese temple because of its location in America and the ceremony is held on a smaller scale because it is not as popular here as it is in Japan. Every temple has its own way of conducting the ceremony, and freedom is given to the priest to make changes. A noticeable change is in the use of chairs and pews; a change to make worshippers feel comfortable and to assist the elderly.<sup>74</sup> There are also many different variations a priest can make to alter the ceremony, such as the language it is performed in. Not all temples adjust the ritual and place of worship, but in particular, the *mizuko kuyō* ceremony can benefit those from other religions and cultures. Any woman can feel guilt about having an abortion, so this ritual that helps women accept, and the freedom from her from suffering can serve as a therapy to anyone, regardless of whether or not she is a Japanese Buddhist.

One example of a female Buddhist priest who altered *mizuko kuyō* to better fit her audience is Yvonne Rand. She holds a high title in her Buddhist community as a Zen priest and teacher, but she also identifies herself as a woman and mother. Rand is an example of a Mahayana Buddhist who had an abortion when she became pregnant. It took her years to come to terms with her decision, and she was healed through her study of the *Jizō* figure in Japan. Even though she had an abortion and is pro-choice, Rand says she is against abortion because fundamentally abortion is intentionally killing a life.

Although she is not in favor of abortion, she sees it as a last solution to an unwanted pregnancy and supports a woman's right to have an abortion.<sup>75</sup> She uses the Mahayana principle of compassion to sympathize with women and their families in their suffering of having an abortion.

After having her own abortion, followed by the death of a close friend, Rand traveled to Japan to learn more about the *Jizō* figure and culture. She witnessed rituals that honored lost fetuses and babies, and she was affected enough to bring this practice back to America. Traditional ceremonies that she observed included prayers of Buddhist women to their unborn child. What makes Rand an innovative Zen priest is her ability to relate to a large group of people and not just to those who are pro-life or pro-choice, because she herself struggles with those terms. She is compassionate to women, men, and children of all religions, which makes her ceremonies unique. Her goal for her ceremonies is to help people deal with their loss and the effects of their action. She wants to enlighten people to their ignorance and suffering so that they can resolve their grief.<sup>76</sup>

Rand's Buddhist Memorial Ceremonies are, for example, not typical *Jizō* rituals. The ceremony starts in a quiet room, where people sit and stitch a small article of clothing, such as a hat or bib, for the statues at the front of the room. These representations embody the diverse crowd in the room. For example, there is a figure of *Jizō*, one of Mary and Jesus, and one of a mother and child. The next step in the ceremony is one of listening with no feedback. Anyone is allowed to speak, but no one responds, which provides silent comfort and safety. When this part of the ritual is finished, the group moves outside to a garden and forms a circle. This is where everyone speaks about his or her loss and places their sewn garment on a figure. Rand brings the



ceremony back to Buddhism by sharing the “Heart Sutra,” which gives the families closure. Mourners also write prayers for apology and for the future of the unborn child. When these prayers are hung in the trees, the ceremony comes to a close.<sup>77</sup> Rand’s version of the *Jizō* ceremony is adjusted to better suit Americans and their own religious beliefs. This ceremony doesn’t focus as much on the role of *Jizō* and his saving of the unborn souls, but it does acknowledge that the aborted fetus was a life and that people have strong feelings toward it. Whether they believe that their unborn child is going to Heaven, back into the cycle of *samsara*, or are uncertain, women participate in this ceremony for closure on that part of their life. Rand does this because of her compassion to all, which is more important to her than her feelings of anti-abortion.

Theravada and Mahayana take different views on abortion because of the use of violence and the question of whether it is justified or not. Theravada, the more traditional view, supports non-violence, except in few isolated cases. Mahayana, the newer school, agrees with what is best for the woman, even if she has to use violence, and then treats her with compassion. Within the Mahayana school, Japanese Buddhists accept the woman’s decision to have an abortion. The Japanese Buddhist *mizuko kuyō* rituals help console and support the family of the aborted fetus and look after the unborn child in the transition to his or her next life. Buddhists are similar to people in other religions, such as in Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism, who have opinions about the morality of abortion. Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Hinduism as religions are against abortion, but religious and non-religious people alike have personal beliefs about this practice that may or may not coincide with what their religion says or what is the culture norm. There will never be an easy answer for a pregnant woman who can’t go through with her pregnancy,

but she can find a way to deal with her answer. In America the abortion debate continues, even years after 1973 Supreme Court case *Roe v. Wade*, which gave women the right to have a legal abortion three months into their pregnancy. As it is now in America, many women have the opportunity to have an abortion, which sometimes leads to guilt. The *mizuko kuyō* ceremony in America, not only helps Buddhist women, but also can be extraordinary beneficial to women of all religious backgrounds. This practice shows how American women, like Yvonne Rand, are changing Buddhism to better relate to Americans, not by changing the main values, but by opening the ceremony up to everyone in a less religious direction.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the women that are the subject of this thesis show that Buddhism is changing in America and that women have a large part in this modernization.

Traditionally, men have been on top of the hierarchy in Buddhism because the Buddha was a male, and in most countries it is customary for men to have more power. Some of the first ordained nuns, Pema Chödrön and Karma Lekshe Tsomo in Tibetan Buddhism, Maura O'Halloran in Zen Buddhism, and Chatsumarn Kabilsingh in Theravada Buddhism, went against the tradition and proved that they were strong enough to study with males and become ordained. Pema Chödrön then went on open a meditation center, write best selling books, and give speeches on letting go of negativity and living by loving kindness. Karma Lekshe Tsomo, also an ordained Tibetan nun, is an organizer for the advancement ordination of women globally. She is leading the way in the effort to get higher education and respect for women all over the world, but mainly in Buddhist countries, such as Bangladesh. Maura Soshin O'Halloran learned the Zen tradition in Japan, where she mastered her tasks at a young age. She completed her nun training by the age of twenty-seven, but was not given enough time to spread her message personally. Her accomplishments from her life make her an inspiration and leader of Zen Buddhist nuns. Finally the Theravada nun, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh had to overcome obstacles, such as gender discrimination, to be given the chance to take her vows as a nun. She is an example to women globally that it is possible to be a nun in the Theravada tradition.

In America, Buddhist nunneries and mediation centers are becoming more popular. American converts and immigrant Buddhists have started these centers that are

all across America. The first Theravada Buddhist temple in America was the Dhamma Cetiya Buddhist Vihāra in West Roxbury, Massachusetts. It was founded by the nun, Ayyā Gotamī, in 1997. She previously worked with psychologists, and with this knowledge, she is able to educate her students with a mixture of Western ideas and her traditional Buddhist teachings.<sup>78</sup> She is another example of how women in America are changing Buddhism. She opened up her own center, which is not as common in Asian countries, and teaches in her own way. An example of a Mahayana center is the Vajra Kakini Nunnery that is located in Bristol, Vermont. Venerable Dhyani Ywahoo is the founder and learned Buddhism by taking in the Buddhist practices and combining them with her Cherokee Native American beliefs.<sup>79</sup> Ywahoo is another woman who uses her culture to better fit Buddhism into her life. These women are only two examples of how Buddhism spreads into America and how women take control of the future of the religion.

In Chapter II, four women teachers were explored including Dipa Ma, Sharon Salzberg, Jan Willis, and Toni Packer. These women all brought new ideas to Buddhism and changed who is able to learn meditation. Dipa Ma brought Buddhism and meditation to women in India, while Salzberg gave lessons that were not as religious, but could relate to many Americans. Jan Willis, as a professor, taught Buddhism to her students and let them explore the principles she gave them. Although she notes in her book, *Dreaming Me*, that after taking her class, one of her male students dropped out to become a Buddhist monk. The student's father was not pleased, but she was able to convince him to stay in school to finish his education.<sup>80</sup> She also brought the issue of race to American Buddhism, and opened up the religion to a more diverse population. The final teacher

Toni Packer, changed the way she taught Zen Buddhism by removing distractions, such as the worship of the *bodhisattva*, to have a more simple meditation practice. Her Western ideas influenced her decision, which in the end made her a successful and well-loved teacher. All these women were changed by the practice of Buddhism, whether it was helping them through a difficult time, or teaching them to live with loving-kindness, and they all changed Buddhism in America.

The case study of abortion in this paper serves to show how a controversial American issue is handled by a Buddhist. In the end, there is not an agreement through Theravada and Mahayana Buddhists, but there also is no agreement between any two groups of Americans. The Theravada Buddhists are more conservative in their ideas about the wrongs of abortion, while Mahayana Buddhists support the choice of the mother. The *Jizō* culture in Japan, which came to America, serves as a way for the family to live with their decision. This disagreement between Theravada Buddhists and the Mahayana Buddhists is not the only topic that would create a divide in the religion. These two groups dispute ethical and personal issues such as capital punishment, euthanasia, and homosexuality. These topics are not specifically American, but are relevant in American culture.

The significant changes that American women have made to Buddhism are present in how the religion is practiced today. There is no “typical” American Buddhist, and the women profiled in this paper demolish those stereotypes. Their work has been monumental to the spread of Buddhism in this country and its household popularity. Buddhist American women are a special case because they have religious freedom and equal opportunity as men. Women in other countries do not have the same chances that

American women do, so the work done by Americans is important in the future of Buddhism.

## End Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Andrea Miller, “Becoming Pema,” *Lion’s Roar: Buddhist Wisdom for Our Time*, November 1, 2009, <http://www.lionsroar.com/becoming-pema/#>.

<sup>3</sup> Lenore Friedman, *Meetings with Remarkable Women: Buddhist Teachers in America* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), 95.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 95-96.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 100.

<sup>6</sup> Super Soul Sunday, “Pema Chödrön,” *OWN TV* video, 42:25, October 19, 2014, <http://www.oprah.com/own-super-soul-sunday/Pema-Chodron>.

<sup>7</sup> Pema Chödrön, *The Wisdom of No Escape and the Path of Loving-Kindness* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1991), 3.

<sup>8</sup> “Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo,” *Awakin.org*, <http://www.awakin.org/local/sv/?pg=speaker&who=lekshe>.

<sup>9</sup> Karma Lekshe Tsomo, “Women in Buddhism,” *Youtube* video, 9:56, March 20, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbAijRlg0-E>.

<sup>10</sup> Karma Lekshe Tsomo, “Factions and Fortitude Buddhist Women in Bangladesh,” in *Innovative Buddhist Women Swimming Against the Stream*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo, 42-57. (Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000), 43.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 53.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 55-56.

<sup>13</sup> Maura O’Halloran, *Pure Heart Enlightened Mind* (Boston: Charles E. Tuttle Company, INC., 1994), 3-5.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Ellsberg, “Maura O’Halloran,” *Gratefulness.org*, <http://www.gratefulness.org/giftpeople/ohalloran.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> O’Halloran, 1.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 21.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 265-266.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 282.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 297.

<sup>21</sup> Martin Batchelor, “Chatsumarn Kabilsingh: Advocate for a Bhikkhuni Sangha in Thailand,” in *Women’s Buddhism, Buddhism’s Women*, ed. Ellison Banks Findly, 59-61. (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 59-60.

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- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> Simba Rousseau, Bangkok. "Thailand's nun's fight for equality," *Deutsche Welle*, December 20, 2013.
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- <sup>30</sup> Ibid, 203.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid, 204.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid, 205.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid, 208-209.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid, 210.
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid, 210.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid, 211.
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- <sup>43</sup> Ibid, 310.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid, 191.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid, 294-295.
- <sup>46</sup> Lenore Friedman, *Meetings with Remarkable Women: Buddhist Teachers in America* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987), 44-45.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid, 46.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid, 48.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid, 55.
- <sup>50</sup> Andrea Miller, "Toni Packer," in *Buddha's Daughters*, ed. Andrea Miller, 211. (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2014), 211.
- <sup>51</sup> "Teachers," *Springwater Center*, 2009, <http://www.springwatercenter.org/teachers/>.
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- <sup>53</sup> Miller, 211.

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- <sup>54</sup> Peter Harvey, *Introduction to Buddhist Ethics* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press: 2000), 311.
- <sup>55</sup> Harvey, 313.
- <sup>56</sup> Harvey, 315.
- <sup>57</sup> Suwanbubbha, p. 158-159.
- <sup>58</sup> Harvey, 325.
- <sup>59</sup> Parichart Suwanbubbha, "The Right to Family Planning, Contraception, and Abortion in Thai Buddhism," in *Sacred Rights: The Case for Contraception and Abortion in World Religions*, ed. Daniel C. Maguire, 145-165. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 155
- <sup>60</sup> Suwanbubbha, 158.
- <sup>61</sup> Suwanbubbha, 155-156.
- <sup>62</sup> H.T. Francis and E.J. Thomas, *Jātaka Takes* (Cambridge: University Press, 1916), 382.
- <sup>63</sup> Claudia Dreifus, "New York Times Interview with the Dalai Lama," *New York Times*, December 5, 1995, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/tib/nytimes.htm>.
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