

Women in American Buddhism

Summary: American Buddhism has created new roles for women in the Buddhist tradition. American Buddhist women have been active in movements to revive the ordination lineages of Buddhist nuns in the Theravada and Vajrayana traditions.

One of the characteristics of the ongoing transformation of Buddhism in America is the visible role of women in American convert Buddhist communities both as practitioners and, increasingly, as teachers. While Asian Buddhist women have played significant roles in Buddhist history, on the whole women have been denied equal opportunity to engage in the full range of ritual practices, study of the *dharma*, and spiritual and institutional leadership positions in the community.

By the 1970s, many American women were students of Asian Buddhist teachers, both in Asia and in America. And many received *dharma* transmission, becoming the first women in Buddhist teaching lineages that had been exclusively male for as long as memory holds. The Venerable Karuna Dharma, an American woman, became the immediate *dharma* heir of the Venerable Thich Thien-an, one of the first Vietnamese monks in America and the founder of the International Buddhist Meditation Center in Los Angeles. Charlotte Joko Beck, who started the San Diego Zen Center, and Jan Chozen Bays, the teacher at the Zen Community of Oregon, are both *dharma* heirs of Maezumi-roshi of the Zen Center of Los Angeles. Maurine Stuart-roshi who served for many years as resident teacher at the Cambridge Zen Center, was made a roshi by the Japanese teacher Soen Nakagawa-roshi. Ruth Denison brought the Vipassana traditions of U Ba Khin, a Burmese meditation master, to her retreat center called Dhamma Dena in the Joshua Tree desert, where she has become known for retreats especially for women. Sharon Salzberg returned from India, having studied with Goenka and Munindra, and is now one of the guiding teachers of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. In the Tibetan tradition, American-born Pema Chödrön has carried on the tradition of the Sixteenth Karmapa and Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, both Tibetan teachers, and is now abbess of Gampo Abbey in Nova Scotia. In the Korean Zen tradition, Zen Master Seung Sahn made three of his American students Zen masters, one of them is Barbara Rhodes, who has been a leading teacher at the Providence Zen Center.

These are just a few of the many women who have become influential teachers in the various streams of the Buddhist tradition in the United States. They are about the business of creating new kinds of Buddhist institutions in the United States. They have generated new organizational forms, such as retreats specifically for women, nationwide conferences on women and Buddhism, and journals such as *Kahawai: A Journal of Women and Zen*. And to some extent their style has given a freshness and immediacy to the language of Buddhist teaching and practice. Pema Chödrön's book *The Wisdom of No Escape*, Joko Beck's *Everyday Zen*, and Sharon Salzberg's *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness* all give hands-on, homespun Buddhist teachings woven from the idiom and substance of daily life. The "feminization" of Buddhism might well become one of the lasting characteristics of the distinctive new form of the Buddhist tradition taking shape in America.

Buddhist women in Asia, North America, and Europe have also established networks with one another in the past 25 years. One concern has been the ordination of women into full monastic orders. On the whole, the leadership of Asian Buddhist traditions has been dominated by men, especially monks. According to tradition, women were admitted to the early *sangha* by the Buddha, but the order of Buddhist nuns died out in the Theravada and Tibetan traditions. However monastic lineages for women did continue in most Mahayana traditions and orders of nuns have persisted to the present primarily in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. In the 1980s a worldwide Buddhist women's movement, the International Association of Buddhist Women, began bringing Buddhist women from both East and West together. The linking of the Buddhist women of America with Buddhist women throughout the world is sustained by the *Newsletter on International Buddhist Women's Activity (NIBWA)*, published by Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, professor of religion and philosophy at Thammasat University in Bangkok and a frequent speaker at U.S. Buddhist conferences. More recently, the 1st International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in the Sangha met in Hamburg in 2007. The goal was to once and for all reestablish the ordination of nuns in those Buddhist traditions that had lost their nuns' lineages. However, ordinations of these nuns still remains controversial and is not accepted by all throughout the worldwide Buddhist community.