

## Feminine Dharma: Buddhist Women and Duty to the Earth

*First Runner Up, Humanities*

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Buddhism has long been acknowledged for its concern with the welfare of all beings and its concentration on the continued care of the natural world. Buddhist philosophy offers a sense of connection between oneself and all other beings of the earth, and a compassion for this relationship. *Dharma*, or the teachings of the Buddha, places an emphasis on one's responsibility to one's own path, others' well-being, and the world, but what about the feminine voice within the tradition? Does the message of universal compassion, interconnectedness, and *dharma* change through the perspective of a woman? This paper will examine the question of how women within the Buddhist tradition have reformulated basic Buddhist principles to engage one of the largest problems facing humanity today—the ecological crisis and the degradation of the natural environment. Through collective efforts of Buddhist women, an emphasis has been placed on our duty to preserve and protect the natural environment. Along with this sense of *dharma*, women of the Buddhist tradition are employing both Engaged Buddhism and Ecofeminism to reunite strong Buddhist principles with a compassionate concern for the integrity of the world.

### **Buddhist Dharma and the Feminine**

The voice of the feminine within the Buddhist tradition can be examined in a number of different ways. We may consider the role of women in early Buddhist history in India; we may look at the differences among men and women within the early *sangha*; we may examine whether or not early Buddhism had a radical effect on societal bounds; or we may consider whether gender plays a role in attainment of enlightenment. However, for the purposes of this paper, we will examine the role of the woman within the early Buddhist community, as it points to the role of the woman within Buddhism today. We will look at Buddhist *dharma* and how it relates to the female perspective.

Buddhism is an ancient religious tradition and philosophy that developed out of Nepal around 550-500 BCE. It is centered on the teachings and life of Siddhartha Gautama, a Hindu prince who renounced all of his worldly possessions in order to find a path to enlightenment. "After studying with two teachers, he lived in the forest for six years as an ascetic, undertaking severe renunciate practices such as fasting, exposing his body to extremes of heat and cold, retaining his breath, and 'resting' on a bed of brambles." (Fisher, 2007, 97) Through his spiritual journey, Siddhartha experienced the "Middle Way" through which he achieved liberation from the cycle of suffering that is life, known as *samsara*. In doing so, he became the "Buddha," or awakened one, and sacrificed his acceptance into *nirvana*, or release from *samsara*, in order to teach others the path to enlightenment. The Buddha began his teachings,

or *dharma*, to a select few ascetics and renouncers to inform them of the path to enlightenment—The Middle Way, which can be described as moderate use of ascetic practices combined with controlling the mind or meditation. The first group of followers was known as the *sangha*, a term now used to refer to a Buddhist community. The *sangha* consisted of both men and women, and the path of the Buddha was open to all, regardless of Hindu caste, gender or other social and religious affiliation. "It was to [the *sangha*] that he preached his first sermon. It contained the essential teachings of Buddhism" (Robinson, 2004, para 15), or *dharma*.

The central *dharma* within the Buddhist tradition consists of the Four Noble Truths, the Eight-Fold Path, and the concept of compassion and interconnectedness. The Four Noble Truths were the first teachings of the Buddha. They consist of: all life is suffering; the origin of suffering is desire or attachment; the cessation of suffering is attainable; and the path to cessation is the Eight-Fold Path or Middle Way. The Eight-Fold Path, which will not be described in detail here, simply explains correct behavior in accordance to the Middle Way. It is through these Buddhist teachings that practitioners develop their everyday practice, ritualistic action, and belief. And it is through the realization of both the compassionate capability of one's self and the direct relationship to all others that true enlightenment may be achieved.

Everyone and everything had the capacity within themselves to become enlightened with what is known as their "Buddha Nature." This Buddha Nature is an "immortal element within the purest depths of the mind, present in all sentient beings, for awakening and becoming a Buddha" (Spirit and Flesh, 2011, para 1). Therefore, it was understood that both men and women were capable of such enlightenment. However, due to strong cultural and societal norms at that time in India, women were not viewed as equal to men, but rather were totally under men's power and control: "The social matrix in which Buddhism arose was one which accorded to women an inferior position" (de Silva, 1994, para 6). This social context of patriarchy would prove to have future ramifications upon women within the tradition.

The beginning of the Order of Nuns within the Buddhist tradition illustrates the ambiguity of equality experienced by Buddhist women. On the one hand, Buddhism was a vessel for societal reformation as it was proclaimed to be universal and egalitarian. On the other hand, women continued to experience subordination to men through prescribed roles of women, and regulations of nuns, that monks did not have to adhere to. Early Buddhist scriptures list 348 specific rules for nuns, but only about 250 for monks. First and most important were the Eight Special Rules, which men were not required to keep in order to be accepted into the *Sangha*. Other specific rules only pertaining to nuns included not being allowed to live further than six hours away from the monastery, and always having to abide by monks' guidelines. "To allow [women] the freedom of moving through the countryside independently as wandering mendicants, forsaking any family responsibilities, was already such a revolutionary step that the restrictions were perhaps placed on them to make their new status more acceptable both to monks and to society at large" (Fisher, 2007, 102). The Buddha and his followers at the time were greatly questioned by wider society for allowing women to become part of the religious community, as well as to travel with men as ascetics. However, it is reported that the Buddha allowed women to retire from

their worldly duties and homes, "on the condition that the nuns should abide by Eight Special Rules, in addition to their other ascetic vows" (Fisher, 2007, 101).

Some women during the time of the Buddha in fact achieved enlightenment and their stories were recorded. "A number of them became powerful teachers, leading large groups of female renunciants as their compassionate acts and eloquence attracted more women to the order" (Boucher, 1998, 74). A number of laywomen also played a significant role within the early Buddhist community. These women would help the Buddhist monks and nuns and other renunciants of the tradition by spreading the stories and *dharma* of the Buddha to surrounding communities, while showing how a Buddhist lifestyle could be lived out in everyday life. Soon, "when the women who shaved their heads and took robes had reached a sufficiently enlightened state, they began to give discourses on the teachings of the Buddha and the path to enlightenment" (Boucher, 1998, 74). It was through both these monastic and laywomen that other Indian women began to realize their potential outside the world of the domestic sphere, relieving them of a dominating patriarchal society.

### **Engaged Buddhism and Buddhist Feminism**

Social movements and reform, both religious and non-affiliated regimes, have long influenced positive social change. As the world continues to move toward a thirst for wealth, material possessions, and resources, inspired by desire and greed, people from religious traditions are currently using ancient religious teachings to make relevant contributions to contemporary society. "In the twentieth century, a politically and socially active form of Buddhism called 'Engaged Buddhism' came into being and quickly became a large and powerful movement throughout Buddhist Asia; toward the end of the century, it also became very influential among Western Buddhists" (Sulak, 2005, 1). Engaged Buddhism has since become one of the most influential religious social movements of our time, and has employed ancient religious wisdom in order to affect exponentially the impact of social engagement.

Buddhist Engagement, for the purposes of this paper, will be defined as active involvement in the world, in one's own society or global community, in an attempt to make positive changes while at the same time finding religious or spiritual inspiration and guidance in one's own beliefs and practices. Engaged Buddhism is a contemporary expression of Buddhism that actively encourages non-violent engagement with the world through social, political, ecological and economical outlets. It is considered to be "one of the most significant developments in contemporary Buddhism in Asia and the West" (King, 2006, x). Engaged Buddhism is the act of applying the philosophical and ethical ideals of Buddhism to the injustices present in society. The act of being engaged can create compassion, empathy, and a deep connection with oneself, others, and the world. Engaged Buddhism is ultimately concerned with societal transformation based on the harnessing of the individual potential for basic human goodness. This realization demonstrates the interconnection, not only between people, but everything within the natural world.

"Engaged Buddhism" is a term originally coined by Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh in his 1967 book *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*. The term was used to describe the application of Buddhist *dharma*, or simply Buddhist law or teachings. Such teachings included compassionate action and the realization of the interconnection of all beings. The application of this *dharma* was used to inspire non-violent action against the injustices and suffering in the world. Engaged Buddhism's "philosophical and ethical roots lie deeply within traditional Buddhist philosophy and values, which it applies to contemporary problems" (Sulak, 2005, 2). Thich Nhat Hanh was responding to the acts of injustice he witnessed during the Vietnam War. He was the ideological leader of the "Struggle Movement," which strove to bring an end to the war. He coined the term Engaged Buddhism, "using it to refer to the kind of Buddhism that he wanted to see develop: one that would translate the wisdom and compassion that Buddhists strive to develop into concrete action on behalf of all sentient beings" (Sulak, 2005, 4).

This modern form of Buddhism, commonly called "Engaged Buddhism," tries to reconcile religious conceptions with social ethics and human rights. Buddhist communities in the West try to adapt traditional Buddhism to modern Western societies. Engaged Buddhism is, in a certain sense, a result of the great tension modern Buddhists felt between theoretical and idealized concepts, and the way these concepts have been used, such as the feminist movement.

As Buddhism moved across geographical bounds from the East to the West, it was introduced to cultural and social settings quite different from that in which it originated. "Its spread to the West coincided with the growth of the women's movement [and therefore] Western feminist scholars have examined it from their own critical perspectives" (Fisher, 2007, 116). According to such feminist assessments, Buddhism possesses a more egalitarian view of the social world and a less patriarchal structure than that of other major world religions. However, many feminists still maintain that "Buddhism as received tradition is not perfect and complete as it is. It needs to be revalorized by feminist insights in order to overcome patriarchal inadequacies and excesses, and to be true to its own vision." (Fisher, 2007, 118-119) What followed was a rise in feminist evaluations of Buddhism, both academically and spiritually.

Feminists and social activists, both within and outside the Buddhist tradition, have concentrated efforts in areas of research such as female imagery in Buddhist texts, the ordination of nuns, the issue of race and gender, homosexuality and equal rights, environmental concern, and the image of the goddess. Other issues that have received special attention have been the role of the woman among different lineages of Buddhism including Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana, and Zen. "Vajrayana Buddhism, for instance, has come under feminist criticism for the Tantric principle of the joined efforts of a man and a woman to achieve transcendental spiritual insights and powers" (Fisher, 2007, 117). Other examples include Tibetan Buddhist myths of female rock demons and deities, and female bodhisattvas. Two of the most popular and contrasting portrayals of women can be found within the representations of Mara and Arya Tara. Mara is a female demon known within the Buddhist tradition to have tempted the Buddha under the Bodhi tree, trying to seduce him in order to distract him from enlightenment. Arya Tara, in contrast, is a female bodhisattva known for her characteristics of true compassion and healing qualities.

Deeply intertwined with these issues is a profound concern for the compassion for all beings. "Many of the basic tenets of Buddhism, such as non-attachment, the transitory nature of life, the interconnectedness of all beings, karma and renunciation, support this viewpoint" (Banks Findly, 2000, 339). The relief of suffering in all aspects is central to the Buddhist path and therefore is an important principle to Buddhist feminists and activists. Buddhism considers the "spiritual and moral consciousness in which we take responsibility for not only ourselves but for how we affect other beings and the earth" (Banks Findly, 2000, 339). It is within this realm of thinking that Buddhism and the concept of Ecofeminism have united in recent decades in an attempt to relieve the suffering of the natural world, and everything in it.

Ecofeminism is a movement holding that the subordination of women is directly related to the degradation of the natural world. It views patriarchal society as the reason for lowered levels of status for women, animals and the earth, thus leading to the depletion of natural and non-renewable resources. "Ecofeminist activism grew during the 1980s and 1990s among women from the anti-nuclear, environmental, and lesbian-feminist movements" (Lorentzen & Eaton, 2002, para 2). More recently, the movement has also branched out to include the interconnections between sexism, the domination of nature and animals, racism and social inequalities. Essentially, Ecofeminism can be best described as a movement or philosophy holding that the social attitude which leads to the domination and oppression of women is directly connected to the social attitude that leads to the abuse of the natural environment.

Within the last century, humankind has been witness to an extraordinary amount of scientific discoveries including medical research, space exploration, and the introduction of genetic modification. "The medical conquest of disease, lessening infant mortality and doubling the lifespan of the affluent, insufficiently matched by birth limitation, especially among the poor, has created a population explosion that is rapidly outrunning the food supply" (Radford Reuther, 1994, 18). The gap between the rich and the poor has created a disproportion of wealth, resources, and power. Developed countries with fractional populations control the majority of the world's resources, which has led to extremely high rates of poverty, sickness, and death in developing countries. This Westernized vision of scientific and industrial revolution is founded in patriarchy and injustice. "This system of global affluence, based on exploitation of the land and labor of the many for the benefit of the few, with its high consumption of energy and waste, cannot be expanded to include the poor without destroying the basis of life of the planet itself" (Radford Reuther, 1994, 19). Through this system, we are rapidly and irreversibly destroying our earth: we are destroying the air, our water supply, our natural forests, and our wildlife. But how can we move away from this path of destruction? How might we go about beginning the reversal of these unjust acts?

The world itself has existed long before humans came to roam the earth. The earth does not need humans in order to sustain itself, however, we as humans need what the earth provides for our own survival. An Ecofeminist view of the world consists of the belief that "we need to recognize our utter dependence on the great life-producing matrix of the planet in order to learn to reintegrate our human systems of production, consumption and waste into the ecological patterns by which nature sustains

life" (Radford Reuther, 1994, 22). In this way, we also have to realize that human thought and consciousness of the world is not a transcendent occurrence, but rather a part of it. We as humans have the ability to acknowledge our own actions within the world, but that does not in fact separate us from the world. According to feminist perspectives, "we need to think of human consciousness, not as separating us as a higher species from the rest of nature, but rather as a gift to enable us to learn how to harmonize our needs with the natural system around us, of which we are a dependent part" (Radford Reuther, 1994, 20). The sense of superiority developed out of patriarchal societies must be dismissed and reformulated to include all members of the human race as equal partners.

Combined together, Buddhist concepts of feminism and ecological feminism have very similar concerns for justice in the world. In order to address the issues of injustice happening to our natural environment, a different way of thinking is required. Buddhists are concerned with the suffering of all beings in the world, as are feminists. Therefore, the union of Engaged Buddhist principles to that of feminist theory concerning the well-being of the earth creates the perfect opportunity for intelligent and thoughtful dialogue concerning these issues.

### **Feminine Dharma: Duty to the Earth**

*Since 1987 Buddhist women from around the world have begun to unite on a grassroots level and assume leadership in working for the welfare of human society. This movement, emerging from the margins into the international spotlight as a force for social change, is an example of how women can unite their resources and talents, work in harmony, and make significant contributions to global understanding. This innovative movement, while focusing on Buddhist women's issues and perspectives, embraces all living beings.*

*Karma Lekshe Tsomo, 2005*

Buddhism, like many other world religions, was founded by a man within a patriarchal society. Therefore, although women received better treatment within the Buddhist tradition, they were still not considered equal to men due to cultural norms. However, in light of Westernized struggles for equalities among gender, Buddhist women now have the power to re-envision their own tradition in order to speak to the ecological crisis and present our duty to the earth. "Feminists have encouraged women to reclaim the stories of their lives and speak what they know from direct experience" (Kaza, 1993, 58). This has meant speaking out about sexual and environmental abuse, conveying the power of women's experiences, and realizing the importance of women's potential in addressing environmental concerns. Women may be able to express themselves through a number of different outlets. "We make connections between each other, between the personal and the political, between ourselves and the greater world, and between ourselves and nature" (Straus Benson, Lion, Marko, 2008, 103). However, "in feminist religious studies in Buddhist and other traditions, women struggle with the discontinuity between personal experience and patriarchal tradition, looking for new language, forms, and community that match women's religious experience" (Kaza, 1993, 59). This has created a new tradition of analysis, thought and portrayal, with many different layers of understanding and experience.

Both Buddhism and feminism offer critical tools for examining the roots of environmental destruction. Both hold that a thorough examination of all points of view are necessary for a valid account of any tradition, whether it be of religious or ecological origin. However, according to Stephanie Kaza, a professor of Ecofeminism at the University of Vermont who also specializes in Ecology and Religion, "Because Buddhism has been transmitted almost entirely through patriarchal cultures, its investigation of gender conditioning is underdeveloped" (Kaza, 1993, 59). In her opinion, "this weakens the Buddhist argument for ecological interdependence, because it misses the critical link between patterns of oppression of women and the environment" (Kaza, 1993, 60). Buddhism must be re-evaluated by women, for women, in order to speak to the totality of the tradition, including perspectives and experiences of the lower-statured and oppressed. The Buddhist feminist position embraces this connection.

For both Buddhism and feminism, the essential truth of interconnection is central to the liberation and freedom of all beings. Feminist Buddhists who acknowledge this path of liberation can be extremely effective and compassionate participants in the struggle for environmental awareness. "Acting from deep-rooted experience in the freedom to choose options other than oppression, they can work creatively and skillfully to open up environmental conversations that have been frozen by loss of relationality" (Kaza, 1993, 62). Buddhist women have the capability to articulate these experiences, and illustrate them with colours that are only now being recognized within our societal canvas. Humankind must begin to realize we can learn from our experiences within nature, and not just from the experience of the rich, elite, and noble men, but also from every encounter with the natural world.

In addition to the strong capability of the feminine voice, in environmental terms, the notion of the Buddha can be interpreted as that which teaches. Therefore, a Buddha can be anyone or anything that someone can gain individual or worldly knowledge from. "To see all beings as teachers means one can learn from wolf, redwood, buffalo, river, and mountain. To see the Buddha as teacher within means one learns from one's own experience with the environment" (Kaza, 1993, 64). We can always learn and continue to learn from that which we are surrounded by, as well as from our own individual experiences.

Rita Gross, an internationally known Buddhist scholar on gender issues, critiques the tendency of Buddhism to emphasize the individual path to enlightenment, claiming that in order to achieve liberation, one has to achieve it alone. However, this type of mindset enables the person to think only of the self, rather than of others within the world around them, and disconnects them from the world itself. Gross's "feminist reconceptualization of *sangha* rests on the values of community, nurturing, communication, and relationships, traditionally cared for by women in many cultures" (Kaza, 1993, 68). This feminist perspective of community strengthens the feminist values of unity and compassion. Gross titles this framework the *friendship-sangha model*, as it strives to create companionship and dialogue on environmental ethics through political and spiritual opinions and perspectives. She believes this model is a "helpful and appropriate basis for re-finding and redefining our human relationships with plants, animals, and ecological communities. It is both enjoyable and sustainable, and can serve as a significant

counterpoint to the recent history of industrialized attack and plunder" (Kaza, 1993, 71). It is through such critiques and re-evaluations that the women's voice becomes relevant and highlighted.

With a continued and combined effort of Buddhist women, the questions of the future of our planet are beginning to be addressed. Women both within and outside the tradition are reformulating Buddhist ideals in order to emphasize the importance of the experiences of the oppressed. A union of Buddhism and feminism has created an arena for open dialogue on such issues. And it is through this dialogue that these experiences can be heard and molded into social and environmental activism that is beneficial to all beings. The woman's voice within the Buddhist tradition truly has the capability to empower all beings for the benefit of all beings.

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