

Buddhism and Feminism

Toward Their Mutual Transformation

PART II

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Women's Access to Dharma: A Feminist Looks at Buddhist Practice

In this concluding section of my essay, I will discuss a few practical issues that arise as Buddhist practice and feminist concerns interpenetrate. Despite my overwhelming appreciation of Buddhism, I have not found that Buddhism negates the need for feminism. In fact, I have reached the opposite conclusion. Just as feminism could be greatly enriched by Buddhism, so feminist insights are essential to the needs of Western Buddhism and to the creation of an enlightened society. Nevertheless, just as feminists often resist Buddhist insights, so many Buddhists do not appreciate, and even resist, the relevance of feminism to Buddhism.

For a long time I was puzzled about why Buddhists often react so defensively when the subject of feminism arises, given that they seem to manifest many of feminism's goals. It seems reasonable that women's access to Dharma, that is, to the teachings and practices of Buddhism, would be a self-conscious and basic concern of the Sangha, the Buddhist community. Feminism's concern for the quality of women's access to all human concerns, especially those promoting the

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richness and fullness of life, seems completely in accord with basic Dharma. Why the resistance and defensiveness?

Finally, I realized the combination of factors involved. Buddhism stresses gentleness and not holding a grudge against the world, qualities which are not often associated with political "isms" in this country. Feminism, like most other "isms" sometimes presents itself as a set of ego-centered demands, a credential, or some other expression of clinging. If it were, it could easily become a barrier to practice and realization. Feminism, as a fixed and rigid ideology, would indeed be most inappropriate as a Buddhist concern. However, since feminism, as tempered by Buddhist practice, is not such a phenomenon, Buddhist defensiveness against feminism is misguided.

Because I am both a Buddhist and a feminist, I am quite concerned about women's access to Dharma, and about what Buddhist institutions do to foster and hinder that access. This central concern arises out of my attempts to live with and reconcile myself to the indubitable fact that traditionally, and to some extent in the contemporary situation, women have not become accomplished Dharma practitioners and teachers nearly as frequently as have men, and traditionally, women have often had little access to practice at all. I can find only two possible explanations for this situation. Either women are simply less capable, and inferior to men, in their potential for enlightenment; or else, Buddhist institutions support and encourage the dharmic potential of men more effectively than they support and encourage women's potential for enlightenment. The first explanation seems to me to be incompatible with basic Buddhist teachings, especially with teachings about the Buddha-nature and basic goodness of all sentient beings.¹⁰ That leaves the second explanation which in fact is my position. It is

¹⁰ Unlike some other religious traditions, Buddhism teaches that fundamentally, human nature is unflawed, manifesting warmth, energy and intelligence. The empirical facts of human evil and confusion are seen as temporary veils and obscurations. This basic human nature is called *tathāgatagarbha*, which means the "pregnancy (becoming) a thus-gone one," i.e., a Buddha. In English it is usually called "Buddha-nature." In some traditions it is called simply "basic goodness." See Reginald Ray, "Tathagatagarbha: The Awakened State of Mind," in *Garuda V: Transcending Hesitation* (Boulder: Shambhala Press, 1977), pp. 32-45; Chogyam Trungpa, *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior* (Boulder: Shambhala Press, 1984), pp. 35-41; and Ozel Tendzin, *Buddha in the Palm of Your Hand* (Berkeley: Shambhala, 1982), pp. 45-48.

also my position that work which undoes those inadequacies is an aspect of bodhisattva¹¹ activity, of working for universal well-being, the central goal of Mahayana Buddhism.

My concern for women's access to Dharma begins with questions about how Buddhism can be most effectively presented to women who are not yet practitioners. Is it adequate simply to present Dharma in a general way, assuming men and women, rich and poor, black and white, etc., will equally discern its relevance? Or is it more skillful to speak directly to people's diverse and varied situations? Is there some kind of "women's slant" or women's point of departure into practice? The answer is both no and yes. At the most basic level, Dharma is Dharma, and all believers practice because of their experience of the First Noble Truth, the truth of suffering, which is general and universal. But women (and other specific groups of people as well) often respond more readily to some ways of presenting teachings than to other ways. A style of discussing Dharma that masks itself as universal when it actually speaks out of or to fairly limited experience could be detrimental. It could alienate rather than promote connection because such generalizations may either seem irrelevant or may deny or belittle people's own experience. The specific situations of new Dharma students, as well as their potential connection with "general," universal experiences, should be taken into account by the skillful teacher. Stated in that general way, such attention to method or skillful means¹² is clearly part of basic Buddha-dharma. Specifically applied to the cur-

¹¹ The Mahayana practitioner usually takes the bodhisattva vow, a vow to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. During the long journey to perfect complete enlightenment and after attaining enlightenment, the bodhisattva performs acts to help others on the path to enlightenment. See Chogyam Trungpa, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* (Berkeley: Shambhala Press, 1973), pp. 167-184, and Trungpa, "The Bodhisattva Vow," in *Garuda V*, pp. 46-55.

¹² *Upāya*, generally translated as "skillful means" or "method" is the counterpart or mate of wisdom in Mahayana Buddhism. It is the technique of applying one's insight or understanding so that one's action is appropriate and effective in the specific situation. These applications cannot be mechanical, since it is important that they be appropriate to the situation; thus skillful means is considered a relatively advanced ability. "Skillful means" and "wisdom" are always seen as equally necessary and complementary partners in Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism. No situation can be dealt with adequately by applying only one of them. In this case, recognizing that ways of presenting teachings may be specific rather than universal is an aspect of wisdom; articulating ways of presenting the teachings so that they are appropriate to a great variety of situations is an aspect of skillful means.

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rent situation, a necessary aspect of method is teaching skillfully to women, and to other groups who, with or without justification, feel that they are not part of the “general,” supposedly “universal” culture. I also believe that Buddhists are quite careful to teach skillfully to some segments of the population, but that there is an unwarranted and curious resistance to do so in the case of women. This reluctance may stem from the hostility, polarization and paranoia generated by “the women’s movement,” but the admitted difficulties and confusion of the women’s movement do not warrant an overall ignoring of women’s specific situations when presenting Dharma. Rather, within the limits of neither editing nor perverting the teachings, we could approach women’s concerns directly.

One might well ask what about women’s situations is so unique or different that special attention, beyond the usual humanistic concerns, is required. The basic explanation is that, given the strength of sex-role socialization and the separate worlds women and men are conventionally trained to inhabit, there is no guarantee that Dharma is available to women simply because it is taught in the wider culture. Furthermore, sometimes “general,” supposedly “human” experiences seem to be far more applicable to the vast majority of men than to the vast majority of women. For example, I have heard some classic reports of how discussions of ego and egolessness or of the Mahayana path have mystified women, because the supposedly universal language through which Dharma was being taught simply did not illumine their experience as women. One response to a standard discussion of ego as territoriality, after real effort to make sense of it all, was an exasperated, “That does sound accurate—for men’s egos.” Another common reaction is that, typically, women experience so little self-esteem and so much pressure to consider themselves last, that they wonder how developing egolessness or walking the bodhisattva path can possibly be relevant to them. People have observed to me that most of the women so visible in the Buddhist Sangha seem to be very strong—untypical—women in their projection of self-confidence, and that it is easy to see how they can afford to take the Buddha-dharma seriously, but what about other women who mainly feel and project feelings of inadequacy?

Obviously, there is some mutual misunderstanding here. Twenty years ago, in a ground-breaking and influential article in Christian

feminist theology, "The Human Situation: A Feminist View," Valerie Saiving pointed out that the overlay of ego typically takes different forms in women and in men, especially if sex roles are fairly rigid.¹³ Consequently, because their ego-forms are so different, what is often good advice for men about overcoming ego is inappropriate for women. Saiving specifically advocated studying women's egos and gearing religious teaching to their situation, rather than assuming that the "general universal" message covers all the bases. The parallel to the situation now faced by Buddhists is astounding. More attention to the ways that women's egos develop in patriarchal and sex-role-ridden culture and to the specific ways in which Buddhist psychological categories such as the six realms and the five Buddha-families are experienced by women could do a lot to indicate how best to put the dharmic message in terms that would "click" with women's experience.¹⁴ Here Buddhism could well incorporate what feminism has discovered about the different forms ego typically takes in women and in men. It would be helpful to make skillfully explicit that the weak passivity, indecisiveness, lack of initiative, etc., that typically characterize a woman's ego are indeed styles of ego, not lack of ego. These ego styles cause all the problems caused by "ego," and derive from the same causes as any other ego style. Furthermore, making more explicit the ways in which egolessness manifests as gentle strength, as self-respect, dignity, and *maitri* would also be helpful, especially for people who know they are too weak, not too strong.

Whether or not all these comments about women's specific experiences turn out to be relevant in the long run, at this point ignoring them entirely amounts to diminishing women's access to Dharma. Perhaps, as sex roles die out entirely or become much less restrictive, specific attention to women's and men's experiences and ego styles will become superfluous. But, at this point, women's awareness of themselves as a specific group outside the "general" culture is so

¹³ Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," in *WomanSpirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), pp. 25-42.

¹⁴ The "six realms" and the "five Buddha families" are important psychological categories or descriptions of different psychological styles. They are found especially in Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism. See Chogyam Trungpa, "The Six Realms" and "Tantra," in *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, pp. 121-138 and pp. 217-244. See also Trungpa, "The Five Buddha Families," in *Journey Without Goal: The Tantric Wisdom of the Buddha* (Boulder and London: Prajna Press, 1981), pp. 77-85.

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heightened that Buddhists can either address women's concerns directly or alienate many potential practitioners. Many women, myself included, when new practitioners, are intuitively drawn to practice but have absolutely no inclination to become involved in yet another male-dominated enterprise. I constantly meet newer women practitioners who are open to practice, but are also quite wary and sceptical about the totality and completeness of women's access to Dharma. Given Buddhist history and some apparent or real male dominance in contemporary Buddhism, their wariness is warranted and must be directly addressed. Subtle nuances of language ("women and men" used interchangeably with "men and women") and skillful use of examples and analogies genuinely pertinent to women in current cultural and psychological environments are significant. Such skills should be emphasized in teacher training programs and teachers should consciously develop them. Beyond such technical skills, the most powerful message of all is the example of women shrine-hall attendants, teachers, and administrators functioning equally, and in relatively equal numbers, with their male counterparts. Such messages are so powerful that they short-circuit the elementary questions about women's access to Dharma.

For women who are practitioners already other questions occur. In one way or another all their problems center around the potential incompatibility between serious and significant Dharma practice and the expectations conventionally placed on women. There is no question that for all the world's so-called "great" religious traditions, including Buddhism, high dharmic achievement and intensive dharmic involvement were traditionally expected to be men's concerns and were far more easily integrated into their life cycles than into women's. Women could be pious vis-à-vis tradition, but piety isn't quite the same thing as participation. Feminist scholarship is now discovering how much of an alternative religious system women have created to cope with their exclusion from the spiritual mainstream, but that doesn't resolve the issues I want to bring up.¹⁵

¹⁵ Fieldworkers curious about the actual religious lives and interests of women are discovering many ways that women cope with patriarchal religion and their exclusion from many aspects of public and formal religious practice. This kind of research has been especially fruitful in Muslim and Hindu contexts. See the seven articles on Muslim and Hindu women in Falk and Gross, eds., in *Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives in Non-Western Cultures* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980).

Women's typically heavy investment in domesticity, and its impact on significant or serious Dharma practice, are central questions for anyone concerned about women's access to Dharma. Domesticity will probably continue to be an important concern for many women, but Buddhism's history of bringing together women's serious involvement in Dharma and their domestic responsibilities is dismal. Opposition between domesticity and spirituality is a major theme in many of the world's great religious traditions, including large segments of Buddhism. Domesticity is often seen as promoting attachment and thus as antithetical to a dharmic life style. Furthermore, most cultures, including Buddhist cultures, have cared more that women fulfill domestic responsibilities than that they practice intensively, and have pressured most women into domesticity. If those women's pursuits were then evaluated as practice situations and enough time for formal practice were *structured into* the rest of their activities, it could become a workable situation. But in fact, at the extreme, women's domesticity was encouraged as necessary for the maintenance of humanity while domesticity itself was seen as an undharmic trap. Even if domesticity is not devalued, that does little good if women are encouraged to put all their time into domestic activity and none into formal practice. This impasse could easily be overcome if two steps were taken: first, if domesticity would be seen as equally the responsibility of men and women, insofar as domesticity is necessary and worthwhile, and second, if domestic responsibilities were to be seen as part of a larger practice context. Traditionally, such attitudes have not been normative in Buddhism.

If domesticity has usually been oppressive to women, surprisingly, monasticism has usually been liberating, not only in the Buddhist, but also in the Christian context. Monasticism for women provides the only women's alternative to the domesticity that is usually defined as non-dharmic. Women's monasticism was often women's closest approximation to the self-determination and prestige normally accorded men. However, historically, the model of monasticism is also not without serious problems. In every Buddhist culture, women's monasticism has fared far less well than men's monasticism. The stories, probably later interpolations but still problematic and popular, of the Buddha's own opposition to the women's order are only the beginning. There were always many fewer nuns than monks; typically

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they received less economic support and prestige, and do not seem to have had the rich access to ritual and study that was enjoyed by men's orders. Most depressing of all, in most countries, full ordination for women has died out. For me, that record is extremely depressing.

As with domesticity, the historical models give us some clues as to what to avoid if we want to structure contemporary Buddhist institutions so that both women and men have adequate and equal access to Dharma. As an option or an alternative, I believe that monasticism has much to offer—both to women and men—if it were restructured so that women's orders were not second-class versions of men's orders. Historically, men's orders fared better than women's because of the *presupposition* that men's and women's orders should be separate and the *consequent* favoring of men's orders.¹⁶ “Separate but equal” just doesn't seem to work in any culture, in any historical period, on any issue. Buddhist monasticism, given what happened to the nun's order, is an example of the general rule. Women's access to Dharma and to the monastic style of involvement in Dharma are too important to be lost in the rules about separation of women's and men's orders. Why, in a life style completely dedicated to renunciation and celibacy, is it important to retain separate women's and men's orders? Buddhist monks and nuns, unlike Christian, dressed and shaved identically, and were equally supposed to leave domestic ties and life styles behind. Worrying so much about separate women's and men's orders seems to be a hangover from the domestic, premonastic life style, as well as a concession to that domestic value system—a concession that has cost women a lot. The traditional hesitation about combining women and men's monastic institutions undoubtedly results from concern about temptations against celibacy. While it is important to structure monastic institutions so that unnecessary temptations against celibacy are avoided, it is more important to foster women's equal access to Dharma. Too often in Buddhism and in other religions, men's celibacy and chastity are protected by isolating or restricting women to a delimited sphere. These institutions have the effect of also limiting women's access to the highest quality teaching and practicing environments.

If, on the other hand, women have full access to Dharma training and are thus in a position to engage in Dharma formulation, the tradi-

¹⁶ Nancy Auer Falk, “The Case of the Vanishing Nuns: The Fruits of Ambivalence in Ancient Indian Buddhism,” in *Unspoken Worlds*, pp. 207-224.

tional concerns of women are more likely to be included in Dharma literature as aspects of Dharma. Since Dharma has been formulated mainly by monastic men, the inclusion of lay women as real Dharma practitioners, and therefore spokespersons for the path, will affect some conventional discussions quite significantly. In particular, evaluations of domesticity and motherhood would be radically affected.

In general, feminists and feminist theologians have looked at domesticity and said two things: 1) It does not deserve the low marks for accomplishment and competence it has traditionally received; and 2) there is no reason for domesticity to be more a woman's concern than a man's concern. I am hopeful that the general Buddhist emphasis on the sacredness of the ordinary can promote clear recognition of the inherent dignity of the domestic sphere, for everyone, not just women. Buddhist emphasis on practice should also help us see that the potential dignity of domesticity is hard to discover when it is the only element in one's life style; therefore, no one should be in a situation of such heavy domestic responsibility that practice is difficult or impossible.

Mothering has been at the center of women's domestic concerns. Discussions of the relationship between mothering and Dharma practice provide an excellent example of the input well-trained and articulate women practitioners could have in reformulating some aspects of dharmic teachings. Two trends stand out in existing Dharma literature. From the mother's point of view traditionally, motherhood was not seen as particularly dharmic because of the peculiar and overwhelming attachment supposedly involved in the mother-child bond. This view comes across clearly in some sutras anthologized by Diana Paul in her book *Women in Buddhism*.¹⁷ I have also heard it voiced as an explanation for why men, not women, are the most advanced students in the Sangha at present. Despite this tendency to evaluate mothering as a path of attachment rather than non-attachment, repeatedly in Mahayana practices we are encouraged to remember our mother's care as a model of bodhisattva activity.¹⁸ This involves a gall-

¹⁷ Diana Y. Paul, *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in Mahayana Tradition* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1979), pp. 60-73.

¹⁸ In the Mahayana meditation practice of *tong-len*, "exchanging one's self and others," one strives to develop egolessness and compassion, and to perform bodhisattva activity by deliberately, in one's meditation, giving away all one's good fortune

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ing contradiction that I have never seen resolved in any Buddhist literature. From the mother's point of view, she is encouraged to think of her concern for her child as attachment, but from the child's point of view, she is encouraged to think of the mother's concern as altruistic. The resolution of this conflict that I am suggesting, and one that I think would be common knowledge if women had more input into Dharma formulation is that, within proper limits, allowing for significant formal study and practice, mothering is indeed a valuable post-meditation discipline for both male or female practitioners.

An important extension of concern about the accessibility of Dharma to both non-Buddhist and Buddhist women is the topic of role models, past, present, and future. The present generation of women practitioners faces the somewhat difficult problem of having few lineage heroines or major contemporary teachers to imitate and emulate. In a lineage that stresses devotion to the teacher as a living example of Buddhahood and one's own awakened qualities, that can be an obvious problem for a woman. When all the examples of enlightened minds that one sees reside in male bodies—from the founders on the *thankas* (painted icons which are major shrine decorations) to the great contemporary teachers whose pictures are above the shrine beside the *thanka* or to the lineage holder who sits elevated at shrine level—then it is difficult for a woman to avoid wondering how seriously she is included in the whole enterprise. Some might say, "What difference does that make? They're human beings, you're a human being." But that's a little naive. Feminism has too successfully demonstrated that a consistent lack of role models of one's own gender is experienced as a subtle, non-verbal, often unconscious but very powerful clue as to whether or not one really is included in certain "generic" classes. At best we might say that the absence of major female teachers is not an *ultimate* barrier for women who are already relatively experienced practitioners. But the fact that we can work with the present deficiency does not dissolve it, explain it, or excuse it. I feel it is important to discuss

to others and taking on their woes. Since this practice is difficult to do, one is often advised to begin the meditation session by contemplating someone who has been selflessly generous and contemplating how readily one would exchange one's good fortune with that person's difficulties. The person usually recommended as that person is one's mother.

where our necessary role models will come from in the past, present, and future.

The past is Asian Buddhism; there are not too many role models there. As a rebuttal to this statement, one may assent that there were significant women teachers in Asian Buddhism.¹⁹ While this claim is true, it does not answer the fundamental challenge. In most periods of Asian Buddhist history and in most Asian Buddhist cultures, such women were much less numerous than their male counterparts. They are largely exceptions to the norm for their gender. They could be called tokens. More importantly, they were largely unsupported by the institutional fabric of their society and their religion. The model of tokens struggling against an institutional fabric that discourages women's spiritual practice is not a model. Furthermore, even though these heroic women did exist, today in most Buddhist circles, they are very little known about, which is not the case for their male counterparts, whose stories are told and retold.

Luckily, past conventions about sex roles are not determinative for the present in Buddhism to the same extent they are for other religions. This is one of the most fortunate pieces in the puzzle faced by Buddhist women. Thus in the West, Buddhist women seem not to have noticed the inadequate involvement of their Asian counterparts in Dharma and instead have taken other models to heart. As a result, today there are numerous women practitioners and student-teachers who are highly regarded and relatively advanced. It is also important that, within their abilities, these women "senior students" teach and function as shrine-hall leaders. Their visibility greatly promotes women's access to Dharma by providing a non-verbal and obvious encouragement to newer students. More heartening yet is the encouragement that most women Dharma students receive from their gurus. Everyone is being encouraged to go further and no limits for women have been hinted at, in most students' experience. Thus in many forms of Western Buddhism, I see the current lack of major women teachers as more of a transitional than an ultimate problem.

However, during the transition, several potentially explosive or devastating issues do have to be worked through. One is the possibility

¹⁹ Tsultrim Allione, *Women of Wisdom* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984).

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of being too touchy about the past, and the other is being too naive or complacent about the future.

Being too touchy about the past would be quite debilitating and could become a serious block or excuse in one's own practice. Retaining a grudge against the past would be just another way of holding onto one's own territory and avoiding renunciation and surrender. Like many other women's issues, this touchiness can be a painful dilemma, especially for newer students.

I am more concerned about an opposite kind of straying from the middle path, namely, complacency about or ignoring of the whole issue of women's access to Dharma, especially the tendency to believe that problems of women's access to Dharma will or have already disappeared in Western Buddhism. That presupposition, I believe, is based on naivete about Western tendencies toward misogyny. If women lose their present access to Dharma, it will be because of naivete about the sexism of Western culture, not because of the models of Asian Buddhism. The present openness of some Western Buddhist communities to women goes radically against the grain of traditional Western religious and cultural patterns as well as against the grain of Asian models.

Western Buddhist groups owe their current health, not to models of Asian Buddhism and certainly not to models of Western culture in general, but to the coincidence of some Western women's two-hundred-year long defection from patriarchal social arrangements and the arrival of great Buddhist teachers in the West. As Western Buddhists, our primary models and problems about gender-role issues derive from Western, not from Asian culture. So the pitfalls and the problems of our cultural heritage need to be studied and reflected upon. Anyone who denies a profoundly misogynist tendency in Western culture both past and present simply does not understand Western culture. Given the current political situation, the fragility of women's current good situation is obvious. That is what Western Buddhists have to work with and to overcome in developing the first Sangha in which women in large numbers participate equally in all aspects of practice.

A presupposition or naivete about Western women's access to Dharma also misses the wonder of the *coincidence* of the arrival of great Buddhist teachers in the West and emergence of the Western feminist movement. This *coincidence*, not either factor alone, I believe, is

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necessary to bring women's access to Dharma to levels unheard of for many, many generations. Had our teacher and other major teachers arrived in the West at a different point in the cycle of ups and downs of the women's movement, I do not think there would be so many prominent women students with such strong practice commitments. But these teachers arrived at a time when women did things for themselves, not vicariously through men. We should all be grateful to that quirk of fate provided by Western culture, to the genuine coincidence of two events—the women's movement and the arrival of Buddhist teachers—because without the one none of us would be students of Buddha-dharma, but without the other many of us who are women would be more involved in fostering men's practice than in practicing ourselves and we certainly wouldn't have become teachers and leaders of the Sangha in such numbers. Only serious and genuine appreciation of this auspicious coincidence of Buddhism and feminism will provide a future in which the question of female role models need not arise because they are present.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have tried to demonstrate how a continuing personal connection with both Buddhism and feminism provides a synthesis that is, for me, personally compelling, though by no means an easy path to follow. If I did not appreciate Buddhism so much, it would be easy to drop feminism. But feminism has taught me that things which are helpful to human beings, such as Buddhist practice, must be available to all human beings. Therefore, because I appreciate Buddhism, I remain a Buddhist feminist. Nevertheless, a Buddhist feminist, I discovered, is something quite different from a typical secular feminist, who often seems more concerned about self than others, and is often eager to emulate the least gentle and dignified aspects of an oppressive culture. Therefore, I can only be a *Buddhist* feminist. It would be auspicious, under whatever label people choose, for many to combine the gentleness of Buddhism and the strength of feminism, to join the vision of Buddhism with the vision of feminism, so that it is no longer necessary to conjure up their synthesis out of one's own practice alone.