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Buddhist Women and Interfaith Work in the United States

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Women from a wide array of backgrounds and interest areas continue to shape the face of Buddhism in the United States—from women who encountered Buddhism during the women’s movement in the 1960s to ordained women founding temples for large immigrant populations; from women carving out a space for Buddhism in colleges and universities to Buddhist women engaged in interfaith dialogue and working in interreligious settings. As Buddhist scholar Rita Gross notes, the experiences of women in Buddhism in the United States are wide and varied.¹

Increasingly, whether they are ordained Buddhist nuns or are Buddhist activists, women in the United States are engaging with questions of interfaith conversations within this multireligious nation. Around the country, Buddhist nuns dialogue with their Catholic counterparts. In local communities, Buddhist women assume leadership roles in interfaith groups. Behind prison walls, women offer Buddhist meditation instruction. Some women introduce tenets of Buddhism to their communities, while others promote justice with people from various faith traditions. On college campuses, Buddhist women work as chaplains and women Buddhologists integrate Buddhism and interfaith dialogue into their academic interests. This article aims to explore several snapshots of Buddhist women engaged in interfaith dialogue and working as Buddhists in interreligious settings; it is not intended to provide all-inclusive coverage of the many and diverse women in Buddhism in the United States engaged with an increasingly religiously diverse country.²

HISTORICAL GLANCE: BUDDHIST WOMEN AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE IN THE UNITED STATES

Rita Gross suggests that women in the United States began practicing Buddhism in the 1960s and 1970s because “the basic teachings [of Buddhism] were gender-free and gender-neutral, and many found the practice of meditation . . . intensely liberating.”³ Yet, the history of Buddhism is dominated by patriarchal structures and male-centered liturgical and ordination practices. As Bud-

dhism grew American roots, women found that “deeper explorations into the traditional texts revealed misogynistic passages as well as a strong overall tendency to favor men over women in matters of study and practice.”⁴ No longer certain that Buddhism was any less fettered by patriarchy than other traditions, uneasiness bubbled within the experiences of Buddhist women.

In the early 1980s, Cambridge Buddhist Association member Suzie Bowman noted the similarities among women’s experiences of American Buddhism—including struggles of motherhood in a tradition that emphasizes the quiet of meditation halls and an alarming number of stories about abusive male teachers. In 1983, Bowman and the Providence Zen Center hosted a conference called “The Feminine in Buddhism”; seventy women attended. A two-day conference, with 120 participants, followed in 1984. In 1985, they hosted a three-day gathering.⁵

These inspired budding Buddhist Sandy Boucher to take to the road to understand Buddhism in women’s lives. She interviewed more than one hundred Buddhist women in their homes, workplaces, *sangha*. In *Turning the Wheel: American Women Creating the New Buddhism*, Boucher paints portraits of women in Buddhism in the United States in the mid 1980s—immigrant women from Asia who transplanted their Buddhism, white women who discovered Buddhism in tandem with feminism, women of color who encountered a white-dominated Buddhism. In these women’s experiences, she suggests, is American Buddhism with “the possibility for the creation of a religion fully inclusive of women’s realities.”⁶

Against this background, Rita Gross was blazing a trail for Buddhist women in interfaith dialogue. In 1980, an eager Gross attended the first International Buddhist-Christian Dialogue conference. She presented ideas that, twenty years later she says, encompassed “everything to which I have devoted my scholarly attention: . . . feminism, non-Christian religions, accurate information about world religions, Buddhism, Buddhism and feminism, interreligious interchange, even theology of religion.”⁷ After this first splash, Rita Gross attended the 1984 International Buddhist-Christian Theological Encounter—the only woman in attendance.⁸ The organizers were eager to have more women participate; so was Gross. After that conference, she made her further involvement contingent upon more women’s involvement. Because of this insistence, members did, and continue to, work toward equal gender representation.⁹ In 1992, Gross explained, from a personal perspective, the potential of interfaith work and set the tone of her commitment to dialogue—a commitment that encourages other Buddhist women to engage: “My involvement in Buddhist-Christian dialogue grows out of my longing to encounter Christianity positively as well as lend my energies to the emergence of a Christianity that articulates the prophetic voice without exclusive truth claims. That motivation was very clear to me . . . when I first attended a conference on Buddhist-Christian Dialogue, and it has remained with me ever since.”¹⁰

Another one of the first formal Buddhist-Christian dialogues was held at the Naropa Institute in 1981. The theme of this first meeting, with two hundred

attendees, was “meditation.” This topic, attendee Daniel O’Hanlon, SJ, suggests, “was solid ground for dialogue and mutual enrichment.”¹¹ *Speaking of Silence*, the printed account of these early years of Naropa Institute’s interfaith efforts, includes only one Buddhist woman’s voice (Judith Lief, then dean of Naropa Institute). Whereas editor Susan Walker notes that the book necessarily omits much of the happenings of these events,¹² perhaps Lief’s singularity emphasizes the significance of the important role that Naropa Institute Religious Studies professor Judith Simmer-Brown now plays in these gatherings. The work of Gross and Simmer-Brown in interfaith dialogue in academia is explored further below.

Interfaith work and dialogue continue to gain attention in Buddhist women’s circles. In April 2005, Smith College professors Susanne Mrozik and Peter Gregory organized “Women Practicing Buddhism: American Experiences.” Gregory said the conference was “a celebration of how women are changing Buddhism . . . as well as a kind of exploration of issues that women as Buddhists face.”¹³ Engaging interfaith themes, Rev. Andrea Ayvazian led a workshop on “Interfaith Identities,” in which she and participants discussed what it means to live a hyphenated religious identity—Jewish-Buddhist, Buddhist-Christian, and so on. They “shar[ed] where and how . . . different practices overlap, complement each other, or create dissonance . . . and explore[d] the ways . . . Buddhism informs and influences our own faith journeys.”¹⁴

In March 2006, the Buddhist Council of the Midwest and DePaul University sponsored “Buddhist Women’s Conference: Women Living the Dharma.” This conference covered a range of topics, including interfaith dialogue.¹⁵ Two panelists—a Buddhist nun and a Catholic nun—discussed twenty-first-century monasticism. Additionally, Buddhist, Native American, Muslim, Pagan, and Sikh women talked about “Women in Today’s Religious Traditions.”¹⁶

American women are on the forefront of the Sakyadhita International Association for Buddhist Women (*Sakyadhita* means “daughters of the Buddha”¹⁷); Karma Lekshe Tsomo, a fully ordained nun in the Tibetan lineage, is the founder and current president. This organization’s commitments include interreligious dialogue: “Interfaith gatherings, networking and research have been a key element of Sakyadhita activities. Many members, supporters and presenters at conferences and retreats have come from Jewish, Christian and Hindu backgrounds.”¹⁸ At Sakyadhita’s 2004 conference, attendees discussed “Interfaith Understanding, Inter-Buddhist Understanding.”¹⁹

Interfaith dialogue is also bubbling up on the collective radar screen of popular American Buddhism and in the lives of Buddhist women—evidenced by *Turning Wheel: A Buddhist Review*. The Summer 2006 issue’s theme was “Interfaith Dialogue and Action” between Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, and Jews. In her editorial introduction, Susan Moon set the tone in clear terms: “People should be tolerant about religion, don’t you agree? Let’s wipe out religious intolerance! . . . Let’s try interfaith dialogue. Talking to each other can dismantle much of the fear we have about other people’s religions, and enable us to build bridges instead of walls.”²⁰ What follows are snapshots of Buddhist women fol-

lowing Moon's directive—engaging in creative approaches to interfaith dialogue and working interreligious settings.

BUDDHIST NUNS AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Between the 1960s and today, women in American Buddhism have, according to Richard Seager, “become a major force as practitioners and as teachers, intellectuals, and leaders.”²¹ The prominent role of women teachers and nuns in American Buddhism is becoming one of its defining characteristics. The exact numbers of ordained Buddhist women in the United States is difficult to ascertain; Karma Lekshe Tsomo suggests “several hundred Buddhist nuns currently live in the United States.”²² In the summer of 2006, a handful of those nuns met at the Twelfth Annual Gathering of Western Buddhist Monastics, originally conceived by a group of Western nuns of the Tibetan tradition. Here, monastic men and women meet to “share their practices and experiences, joys and sorrows.”²³ The variety of backgrounds of the women on the participant list of the 2005 gathering—women from fifteen different lineages—illuminates the diversity among Buddhist nuns in the United States.

This diversity is reflected in the wide scope of the work of ordained women in interfaith work. This section explores several examples of the work of Buddhist nuns in the United States engaging in an increasingly religiously pluralistic country. For example, Rev. Sik Kuan Yen, a nun originally from Hong Kong, founded the Thousand Buddha Temple in Quincy, Massachusetts, in the late 1980s. After noting a lack of religious space for Cantonese-speaking Pure Land Buddhists, she began offering services from a small house. After six years, she led the community in building a temple—a process that, Kuan Yen admits, was sometimes complicated because she, and not a man, was leading the project. She persisted, in part, because of her firm belief that the Buddha's teachings do not discriminate between men and women. Today, she and four other nuns run the daily operations of this temple, including a membership of 1,600 families—the second largest Chinese Buddhist temple in New England.

Kuan Yen is working to be a part of interreligious activities in her area. Since September 11, 2001, she has participated in interfaith forums and helped organize multireligious prayer groups. Additionally, she has given presentations about Buddhism at local churches. In turn, she has invited members of churches to visit the temple. She believes that all religions work for the good of society on the whole and that interreligious cooperation is important. Though Kuan Yen, whose primary language is Cantonese, is interested in continued participation in interreligious exchanges, the language barrier is a major obstacle to further work like this.²⁴

September 11, 2001, spurred interfaith urges in women across the country. The Venerable Yifa, a Buddhist nun originally from Taiwan, is no exception. When she heard about the World Trade Center, she emailed her friends: “‘Don't hate them.’ Because I feel that if you start to hate them, I think you are not free,

because your mind will be trapped by the hatred.”²⁵ In *Safeguarding the Heart: A Buddhist Response to Suffering and September 11*, Yifa offers a series of Buddhist reflections on September 11. Encouraging interfaith work as a reaction to this event is an important backdrop of her commentary: “Communication and dialogue among members of different religious frameworks is a major step toward the overcoming of artificial boundaries . . . and prejudices within us . . . we need to respect each other’s faiths.”²⁶ This is the spirit one Buddhist nun brings to her interfaith work and ongoing interreligious dialogues.

Outside the small town of Lincoln, Vermont, Abbess Khenmo Drolmo is in the process of opening the first Tibetan Buddhist Nunnery in the United States: Vajra Dakini Nunnery. Drolmo’s work is motivated by a desire to make the teachings of women accessible to women today and in the future. Drolmo suggests that the role of women teachers in Buddhism is at a historical moment: “I often think of my mom who would never have gone outside of the Catholic priest in seeking spiritual guidance. And now we have women offering that guidance like never before. And there is broader acceptance of women’s authority and the potential of women’s communities to be supported. . . . This is an open moment in history. . . . We have . . . capable women teachers.”²⁷

In March 2006, Drolmo was on a panel at the Buddhist Women’s Conference in Illinois with Sr. Suzanne Zuercher, a Catholic woman and member of the Benedictine Sisters of Chicago. Together, these two religiously professed women discussed these questions: What motivates women to become nuns in the twenty-first century? How are women creating community, sharing spiritual lives, and revitalizing ancient systems? How are lay and monastic women working together? What are the current obstacles to maintaining the legacy of nuns’ communities and establishing the appropriate role for women in each religious tradition?²⁸

Women reaching across religious boundaries via their religious vows is a growing trend. In 2000, Bhikshuni Thubten Chodron, an ordained Buddhist nun in the Tibetan lineage and founder of Sravasti Abbey in Washington State, edited the book *Interfaith Insights*. In her introduction, Chodron suggests that “from a Buddhist viewpoint, the multiplicity of religions is necessary and desirable. . . . Because people have different inclinations and attitudes, a variety of religions is necessary to ensure that each person can find one that serves him or her best.”²⁹ The book goes on to record a conversation between Chodron and Sr. Donald Corcoran, a Camaldolese Benedictine nun. The two women discuss their lives as monastics, their approaches to spirituality, and the role of women in their traditions. This exchange serves as a model for how Chodron believes interreligious dialogue should and can be: a conversation that “occurs in an atmosphere of mutual respect and genuine interest. It is a sharing of spirituality that inspires all parties.”³⁰

Drolmo’s panel discussion and Chodron’s book both reverberate in the work of Buddhist and Catholic nuns to start an interfaith dialogue series called “Nuns in the West.” Following is a brief overview of the historical context. In 1996, in

the spirit of the exchanges between the Dalai Lama and Trappist monk Thomas Merton, the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID), a group of Catholic monastic men and women committed to interfaith dialogue, hosted the First Gethsemani Encounter—a gathering of Buddhist and Christian monastics.³¹ Out of this meeting emerged the 2001 book *Benedict's Dharma*, wherein four Buddhists (two women, two men) reflect on the Rule of St. Benedict and what it means for Buddhism in the United States. In response to this book's conference and at the Second Gethsemani Encounter, the nuns began to wonder what it would mean to meet without the men: "What," they asked, "can the two groups learn from each other?"³² In 2003, Yifa hosted the first Nuns in the West dialogue at Hsi Lai Temple in California.

Participation in this first gathering was limited to thirty nuns, and the group met without formal papers or formal agenda. The women discussed contemplative life and its balance with the active life, compared different ways of being nuns, and left the gathering committed to continuing dialogue with two other nuns. Reflecting on the meeting, Sr. Mary Margaret Funk, a Catholic Benedictine nun, knows that the issues discussed were important, but feels they were "secondary to the dynamism of 'being together.' I, for one, tasted the deepest level of dialogue that certainly was communion. My memory of that wonderful sharing has quickened my joy at being a nun."³³

The group reconvened at Hsi Lai Temple for Nuns in the West II in May 2005. Just over twenty-five women gathered to discuss the practices of meditation, mindfulness, the use of dialogue as a way to achieve world peace, the balance between contemplative practice and compassionate service, and the exercise of authority.³⁴ One participant called the gathering "a dance."³⁵ Chodron, also a Nuns in the West participant, reflected on the process of finding themes of similarity and disjunct at these gatherings:

One dialogue I found particularly interesting was the topic of justice. I'd never heard any mention of this word during my many years of Buddhist study and was personally confounded by the multiple meanings it seems to have today. Politicians take "justice" to mean punishment and sometimes use the word as a euphemism for revenge and aggression. The Catholic nuns, on the other hand, use the word very differently: to them it indicates action that remedies poverty, human rights abuse, racism, and other inequalities. As Buddhists, we support these latter aims, but we would use the term "compassionate action" to describe our efforts to improve the world and the lives of the individuals in it.³⁶

Media were excluded from both meetings, but after Nuns in the West I, sociologists Courtney Bender and Wendy Cadge interviewed thirteen Catholic participants and nine Buddhist participants. In a preliminary publication, the two commented on their observations: "As we listened to Buddhist and Catholic women religious reflect on [balancing meditation with action in the world], we were struck by how their answers suggested ways that both groups are thinking

and rethinking their institutional roles in the Western world and how both might learn from each other in this regard. . . . Catholics and Buddhists alike are learning from each other's ways of negotiating the complex of action and meditation."³⁷

Bender and Cadge published their analysis of Nuns in the West in the autumn 2006 issue of *Sociology of Religion*. Their article focuses on a tendency among Catholic nuns to incorporate what they understand as Buddhist practice into their Christian practices—and the occasionally uneasy response of Buddhist nuns. One Buddhist nun felt concerned for Catholic nuns because “‘the Christian nuns were looking to us to help them.’”³⁸ Similarly, some of the “Catholic nuns also expressed concern about whether it is possible to borrow Buddhist meditative practices without also drawing in Buddhist teachings and philosophy.”³⁹ What does it mean, the Buddhists asked, to incorporate the practice without the fullness of the Buddhist worldview?

Bender and Cadge's work reminds interfaith dialogue participants that religions and religious practices are always influenced by and influencing each other. Religion and religious practice, they note, are developed in “ongoing social processes wherein religious groups and individuals live and experience their own histories and religious selves through dynamic engagements with religious others”⁴⁰ in interfaith dialogue. This happened during Nuns in the West, their article argues, and it complicated—not negatively—the exchanges between these women. Dialogue relies on honest recognition of one's own system of belief and sincere interest in another's. Surely, as the women experienced, the challenges of this type of exchange are real; but they do not outweigh the positives. Chodron, for one, suggests that the value of Nuns in the West “cannot be understated. Although we alone cannot cure the world's ills, we can give an example of hope to others . . . our gathering is a contribution to world peace.”⁴¹

In this same spirit of active engagement between religious women, Karma Lekshe Tsomo, a Buddhist nun; Patricia Wittberg, a Catholic nun; and Irshad Manji, a Muslim woman scholar discussed how religiously committed women can be advocates for women's justice within their traditions in the July 2005 issue of *Shambhala Sun*. Manji pointed to the momentous women-led Muslim prayer in New York City in March 2005. She argued that change makers must keep alive Martin Luther King Jr.'s “needless tension” because it keeps people from falling into complacency. Tsomo agreed with the importance of women challenging injustice in religious institutions, but also noted that women ought to be prepared for the sometimes negative repercussions of speaking out. She cited the criticism that was piled on the Buddhist women's movement “for bringing attention to inequality in the Buddhist tradition, because everyone likes to assume that women have equal opportunities in Buddhism. But we see with our own eyes that they don't. We should not allow ourselves to be intimidated or silenced.”⁴² Echoing these two women's sensibilities, Wittberg suggested that Catholic women, particularly those over the age of forty, are finding creative ways to negotiate space within Catholic parishes and communities.

Creativity, persistence, and concrete ideas for change were important themes of this dialogue, as each woman worked to engage each other's traditions and religious lives.

BUDDHIST WOMEN IN LOCAL INTERFAITH GROUPS

In addition to the work of nuns to dialogue across religious lines, many Buddhist women are participating in and leading local interfaith groups. Ji Hyang Sunim, an ordained Zen nun in the Korean lineage, facilitates the Boston Clergy and Religious Leaders Group for Interfaith Dialogue. Founded on respect for the cultural and religious diversity of the Boston metropolitan area, the group meets monthly to "foster those specific dialogues which will help us know, . . . learn from, and celebrate each other as individuals and partners in religion."⁴³ Invited to join by a friend who is a Catholic nun, Sunim has been a member of the group for twelve of its thirteen years. The group, she says, started as an ecumenical Christian group—she recalls, "I was definitely the first Buddhist and it was awkward at times. It took a while to get past 'how are the bagels?'"⁴⁴ Sunim's persistence with this group is rooted in her belief that interfaith work is a natural partner with Buddhism. She considers her involvement a way to "encourage new ways of seeing our interdependence in this increasingly diverse city."⁴⁵

An interesting trend in the post-September 11 United States is the emergence of grassroots, women-led interfaith groups. Kathryn Lohre, assistant director of the Pluralism Project, suggests that, for the women in these groups, "personal testimonies, reflections, and engagement in difficult dialogues are not limited to theological arenas of overlap and divergence, but instead focus on the day to day experiences where conflicts of identity, more often than ideology, are commonplace."⁴⁶ One powerful example of a women's interfaith group is Women Transcending Boundaries in Syracuse, New York. Begun by a Muslim and a Christian woman in the weeks after September 11, 2001, this group is a thriving community of women from diverse religious perspectives. Between forty and sixty women meet monthly to "get to know one another" and share stories from their traditions. Some members also convene a book club, and others gather for cooking classes.⁴⁷ Two women from the Zen Center of Syracuse—Abbot Roko Sherry Chayat and Bonnie Shoultz, an ordained nun since 2003—are involved in the leadership of this group: Chayat provides advisory support, and Shoultz is a member of the Leadership Council. Both have participated in panel discussions with women from different traditions, sharing how they celebrate holidays, birth rituals, and marriage ceremonies. For Shoultz, being a part of the group has provided opportunities to interface with women outside of her regular scope of interactions.⁴⁸

That interfaith dialogue is, at least in part, about encountering the "other" in local, concrete ways, is made clear by Sallie Jiko Tisdale's experience. In the Fall 2006 issue of *Tricycle*, this Buddhist woman reported on an interfaith dialogue between an unlikely duo: the evangelical Christian college Multnomah Bible

College and her zendo, the Dharma Rain Zen Center in Portland, Oregon. As a member of the *sangha*, Tisdale, somewhat reluctantly, helped host students at the zendo. Despite many differences—for example, ideological stances on abortion and homosexuality—Tisdale writes of mutual surprise in enjoying each other's company: "We surprise them by being ordinary. . . . They surprise me by being more than ordinary—by being well-educated, intelligent, and funny. . . . I like these people; they are easy to like."⁴⁹ The two communities have committed to occasional dialogue dinners. To Tisdale's surprise, these gatherings have been more inspiring and more interesting than she anticipated. Tisdale concludes her essay hopefully, though puzzled over the future of these exchanges: "At times, our meetings have been exquisitely painful, at times warm and tender, and always humbling. I did not expect them to be inspiring, but am inspired—they are not what I thought they were. . . . I would have thought it impossible for us to get this far. How much further can we go?"⁵⁰ Tisdale's experience illuminates how Buddhist women and non-Buddhists encounter each other in simple, human places and the potential of such encounter to affect how people understand one another.

These three examples are different ways Buddhist women are stepping outside of their traditions and expectations to engage in the practice of *doing* interfaith dialogue.

BUDDHIST WOMEN IN INTERFAITH SETTINGS

Whereas many Buddhist women are engaging in explicitly interreligious conversations, many others engage in Buddhist practice in interfaith settings, especially as they work in various forms of social engagement. Of course, women's roles in engaged Buddhism are as wide-ranging as Buddhist women's personalities. The examples below are just a glance into women socially active in interfaith settings—in prison ministry, as social activists, and in community education.

The set of challenges here is quite different, though not unrelated, than for the participants in groups such as Women Transcending Boundaries or Nuns in the West. The question for these women is less about how to engage explicitly with another person's religious identity and more about how to be Buddhist, engaging with humans from a variety of religious backgrounds. The emphasis in the stories that follow shifts from looking for ways to talk across religious boundaries to looking for ways to be Buddhist, to offer Buddhist principles, in multireligious settings. They are included here as samples of "everyday" encounters by Buddhist women with a religiously diverse United States.

Prison Ministry

Jenny Philips, a therapist in Concord, Massachusetts, has been teaching meditation to her patients for years. In the 1990s, she began offering Vipassana meditation instruction in prisons. While volunteering at the maximum-security

prison in Shirley, Massachusetts, she heard stories of prisoner-led meditation groups in Alabama's Donaldson Correctional Facility. She visited several times, and, in 2002, Philips shot footage for a documentary film about a ten-day Vipassana retreat held at Donaldson. The film, *Freedom Behind Bars*, profiles individual participants, mostly serving life sentences, and traces how the retreat changes them.⁵¹ Philips's psychological testing has shown that meditation in prison helps people be "less reactive and more able to keep themselves composed."⁵² Philips continues to guide prison meditation groups and finds her own ability and interest in Vipassana meditation expanding.⁵³

Across the country, the Buddhist Peace Fellowship's (BPF) Diana Lion started the nationwide Prison Program in 1998. Today, the program is "deeply committed to working with prisoners, their families, and all other persons associated with the prison system to address the systemic violence within the prison-industrial complex."⁵⁴ Buddhist Alan Senauke, a senior advisor at BPF and volunteer with the Prison Program, wrote about his experience in *Turning Wheel's* issue on interfaith dialogue. Each month, he and two women lead meditation group at California's Women's Federal Correction Institute. For Senauke and the women he works with, this type of work offers unique lessons: "Working in an interfaith context, you see all beings as having the same valence, the same kinds of sorrows, the same kinds of joys. You learn not to put people into any particular religious box. That's the great challenge of interfaith work."⁵⁵

Social Activism

To think of Buddhists doing interfaith activism is, perhaps, to recall pictures of Vietnamese monks burning themselves in protest of the Vietnam War alongside Catholic priests Daniel and Philip Berrigan burning draft files in Catonsville, Maryland. Today, Buddhists are active in interreligious efforts on a wide range of issues: reaching out to the pope, the war in Iraq, and global humanitarian efforts, to mention only a few.

The BPF is one of the more collective voices around social activism in interfaith settings. After Pope Benedict XVI was elected, then executive director Maia Duerr, with BPF staff and board members, sent a letter to the new pontiff, encouraging open lines of communication between Buddhists and Catholics: "We offer this letter in the spirit of affirming a dialogue already well-begun, grounded in loving speech and understanding. In the words of your first blessing as Pope Benedict XVI, may we together continue with perseverance and good works. We include you in our daily meditations and will send blessings in the spirit of lovingkindness—as we vow to awaken, together, to the truth of our interconnected nature."⁵⁶

In a similar vein, BPF is a strong partner with interfaith groups that have formed in recent years to oppose the war in Iraq. In January 2007, BPF joined the 1,000-member coalition United for Peace in supporting the Mandate for Peace march and lobbying day in Washington, DC. Offering Buddhist sensibil-

ities to the gathering, BPF organized a meditation and teach-in to which they “invite[d] Buddhists and friends from all spiritual traditions to come together and manifest the change we are seeking in the world—peacefully and compassionately being together.”⁵⁷ Similarly, Duerr and BPF have joined more than 170 other faith-based and humanitarian groups in the Save Darfur Coalition—an organization committed to making change in the ongoing crisis in Darfur.⁵⁸ Duerr has also represented BPF in the Interfaith Alliance’s response to Hurricane Katrina.⁵⁹ In her willingness to bring Buddhist understandings to social activism, Duerr has become a strong voice for cooperation between religious traditions and a model of a Buddhist woman working in interreligious settings.

Community Education

For many Americans, Buddhism remains an unexplored religious tradition and must be learned about in open forums. In Bowling Green, Virginia, a group of four hundred Boy Scouts gathered to do just that. Jeannette Shin, a Buddhist chaplain in the U.S. Navy, introduced Jodo Shinshu Buddhism to the participants in the 2005 National Scout Jamboree. Organizers were so overwhelmed by the interest in the Buddhist presentation that they had to move the crowd outside. One thirteen-year-old Scout in attendance was eager: “I wanted to get the experience of going to a Buddhist temple.”⁶⁰ Because one Buddhist woman was willing to bring her Buddhism to an interfaith setting, he did.

These three examples of Buddhist women active in interreligious settings suggest how women negotiate space in multireligious America, extending their Buddhism to the broader community.

BUDDHIST WOMEN AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE IN UNIVERSITIES

Academia and university settings provide Buddhist women with opportunities both to engage in formal interfaith dialogue and to teach about Buddhism in interreligious contexts. One of the first Buddhist women academics in the United States was Diana Paul, who, in the mid 1970s, published *Women in Buddhism*—a translation of *sutras* written about, and sometimes by, women in sixth century CE Buddhism.⁶¹ With this book, Paul became one of the first academics to trace the role of women in Buddhist history. Following in those footsteps, Rita Gross was one of the first women in academia to explore the intersection of feminism and Buddhism. In her now classic *Buddhism after Patriarchy* (1993), Gross detailed the history of women’s roles in Buddhism and then envisaged the future of Buddhism in androgynous terms.⁶² Using tools similar to those of her colleagues in Christian and Jewish feminist theology, Gross began to “work towards gender-inclusive and gender-neutral liturgies, to advance women into positions of leadership, and, ultimately, for women to become more fully qualified Buddhist teachers.”⁶³ Today, Gross’s work encourages women in Buddhism to “know what the past involves, so that they can make

informed decisions about retaining worthwhile traditions or reshaping inadequate heritages from the past.”⁶⁴

Buddhist Women in Formal Interfaith Dialogue

In addition to her influence in constructing the intersection of feminism and Buddhism, Gross has played a similarly pioneering role in formal interfaith dialogues. Specifically, in the International Buddhist-Christian Theological Encounter—one of the longest-running ongoing formal conversations between Buddhists and Christians.⁶⁵ In contrast to groups such as Nuns in the West or grassroots groups such as Women Transcending Boundaries, these meetings had formal papers and preestablished agendas, and portions of the meetings were published in an academic journal, *Buddhist-Christian Studies*. Even with this emphasis, according to Gross, the forums were more than “academic exercise”; they required “listening and honest interchange . . . [and organizers hoped for] significant mutual influence between the two traditions.”⁶⁶

Rita Gross paved the way for women’s participation in the group when, after her first year as the only woman, she threatened to withdraw her involvement if the organizers (Japanese Buddhist Masao Abe and Methodist John Cobb) did not attract two more Buddhist women and two Christian women to the forums and into the emerging Society of Buddhist-Christian Studies.⁶⁷ As a result, these gatherings have become important forums in which Buddhist women do interfaith dialogue. In 1996, Gross became the coeditor of *Buddhist-Christian Studies*. By 2004, the “number of women [involved] had grown considerably.”⁶⁸

Gross’s influence in Buddhist interfaith dialogue extends beyond this organization. Recently, Gross coedited *Christians Talk about Buddhist Meditation and Buddhists Talk about Christian Prayer* with Christian Terry Muck. In constructing this book, they asked contributors to consider a more personal dimension of interreligious dialogue: “What have you, as a Buddhist (or Christian), learned from the spiritual practices of Christianity (or Buddhism)?”⁶⁹ The process raised interesting questions for what it really means to incorporate another’s religious practice into one’s own. As the Nuns in the West dialogue suggests, Buddhist meditation, at least some form of it,⁷⁰ seems to lend itself more readily to Christians. As Gross pushes for new sites of interreligious dialogue, her work suggests that spiritual disciplines remain full of potential for exchange between traditions. Though difficult, Gross finds hope in the endeavor: “In many ways, we live in difficult, dangerous times. But one thing we can experience to a far greater extent than any generation prior to our own is the ability to appreciate each other’s spiritual disciplines and their transformative potential.”⁷¹

More than fifteen years after her first foray into formal Buddhist-Christian dialogue, Gross continued to push at boundaries of dialogue, feminism, and interreligious exchange when she coauthored *Religious Feminism and the Future of the Planet: A Buddhist-Christian Conversation* with feminist Christian scholar Rosemary Radford Ruether. In this conversation-in-print, the two women discuss

what it means to engage in interreligious dialogue as feminists. Ruether suggests that, for her, it means that “there are limits . . . to the acceptance of cultural pluralism when it comes to gender. If a tradition says that women, because of the very nature of women, can’t assume the full and equal leadership in society or in the religious institutions, . . . this has to be questioned as discriminatory.”⁷² Gross agrees that interfaith dialogue is not about blind affirmation of everything a tradition has to offer; rather, it demands thoughtful engagement with how practitioners profess religious identity: “[Just] because we can see truth in every religious perspective and do not regard our own religions as superior to other religions does not mean that religious phenomena cannot be evaluated. Instead, what we are saying [is] that no religion has a monopoly on either truth or falsity, relevant or harmful teachings and practices.”⁷³ Gross and Ruether’s dialogue suggests that the potential arenas of interfaith dialogue is boundless. Their book models the ways different parts of each woman’s identity—as scholars, women, feminists, committed to interreligious dialogue—can intersect.

Gross has not been alone as she has carved out a space for Buddhist women to engage creatively in interfaith dialogue. For example, in the same year Gross became coeditor of *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, another pioneering woman in Buddhist interfaith work, Judith Simmer-Brown of the Naropa Institute, joined the editorial board. In her first issue on the board, Simmer-Brown explored the Gospel of Luke through the lens of Buddhism. Describing how her reading sheds light on the space in both traditions for interfaith dialogue, she argues that “The dynamism of Jesus creates fertile ground for the dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity [in that] . . . Buddhism’s encounter with Christianity has challenged it to respond literally . . . to the suffering of the world. . . . Perhaps through the mutual understandings and efforts, Buddhists and Christians . . . might more effectively ameliorate the suffering of the world.”⁷⁴

For Simmer-Brown, the magnitude of social justice issues requires all of the best that both Buddhists and Christians can bring to bear on issues of justice. In recent years, Simmer-Brown has taken up the challenges of globalization and consumerism in an interfaith context. Suggesting one way Buddhism can learn from Christianity, she argues that engaged Buddhists are looking for “a kind of Buddhist ‘liberation theology’ that would bring to bear the best of contemporary social and economic theory and practice, focusing on issues like globalization with the full lens of Buddhist teachings.”⁷⁵

Additionally, Simmer-Brown had the unique distinction of being the only lay coauthor of *Benedict’s Dharma*. Her perspective offered ways to think about the traditionally monastic *Rule of St. Benedict* in a nonmonastic setting. Initially turned off by the Rule, she was startled upon rereading to realize that, even with all of its emphasis on a monastic code and a monastic way of living, “this text resonates with our [majority lay] Buddhist community. . . . The Rule [of Benedict] mirrors my community back to me.”⁷⁶ Today, she continues to teach at Naropa, offering courses on interfaith dialogue, and continues to work on their ongoing dialogue forums.

Gross and Simmer-Brown are just two voices of Buddhist women in academia who have and are widening the paths through which Buddhist women are able to engage the formal interreligious conversation.

Buddhist Women in Interreligious Academia

Since the mid 1980s, women Buddhists have claimed an increasingly strong presence in academia. A glance through the websites of university and college course offerings offers anecdotal evidence. For example, Jan Willis, Tibetan Buddhist scholar and practitioner, teaches an annual course called “Women and Buddhism” at Wesleyan University in which students “attempt to understand the values and concerns that drive, restrain and/or empower [Buddhist] women.”⁷⁷ Similarly, Janet Gyatso, Buddhist scholar at Harvard Divinity School, is teaching “Buddhist Women and Representations of the Female” during spring semester 2007. The course investigates “the lives and subjectivities of . . . Buddhist women . . . both lay and celibate, and modern and premodern.”⁷⁸

The landscape of Buddhist women in academia is expanding and rich with opportunity for interfaith exchanges. As with meditation in prison and community education, the challenge for some Buddhist scholars is less about how to engage in formal dialogue with their Christian or Jewish or Hindu counterparts and more about being Buddhist, offering Buddhist perspectives in predominantly non-Buddhist environments.

One woman contributing to the growth of women Buddhologists is Sharon Suh, a professor at Seattle University—a Jesuit Catholic college. Suh spent two years conducting ethnographic research at Sa Chal Temple in Koreatown of Los Angeles. Suh explored how women’s sense of identity in this Korean American Buddhist community was affected by being part of a minority group within a minority (the majority of Korean Americans are Christian):⁷⁹ “Temple membership and a Buddhist identity act as symbols of the homeland that encourage . . . full-scale integration into a new cultural milieu. Religion provides some of these women with a sense of comfort and belonging to a familiar community by alleviating some of the stresses of immigration and anchoring women in a traditional setting that references the security of what they left behind.”⁸⁰

For some women, temple community is a system of support for women that wards off loneliness and isolation. For other women, Buddhist teaching offers a sense of independence—“Buddhist identity based on ‘finding and knowing one’s mind’ offers women a chance to recreate their identities from housewives and caretakers to ‘Americans making it on their own.’”⁸¹

Her study presents, perhaps, a microcosm of the challenge Buddhist women face in academia. Suh’s ethnography aims to answer the question “How do ordinary Korean American Buddhists live their lives and come to a positive sense of self in the contexts of dislocation?”⁸² Her goal here is not interfaith dialogue, but her work raises questions for many Buddhist women in the United States. According to *Turning Wheel’s* Mushim Ikeda Nash, only 0.4 percent of “religious

Americans” are Buddhist.⁸³ Ikeda-Nash asks, “How do we relate to those Christians who . . . want to ‘save’ us through conversion to their beliefs?”⁸⁴ This is the challenge for the women in Suh’s study, and it echoes in the work of women Buddhist academics. What does it mean for Buddhist women to be minorities within a minority (women within a male-dominated structure, Buddhists within a usually non-Buddhist environment) in the academic world? How do Buddhist women negotiate space in the United States while building relationships with their non-Buddhist neighbors? What does it mean to be a Buddhist in a country where the majority of religious practitioners are not Buddhist? These kinds of questions around living, practicing, and working in a religiously diverse country, raised by the wide diversity of Buddhist women’s academic interests and their continued presence in academia, will continue to be important areas of research and conversation by Buddhist women.

Campus Ministry

Another piece of campus life where Buddhist women build bridges across religious traditions is in offices of campus ministry. Increasingly, universities hire more than the traditional Christian chaplains. For example, Ji Hyang Sunim of the Boston Interfaith Clergy Group is also the advisor to the Buddhist community at Wellesley College. She offers regular meditation circles twice a week, hosts retreats and *dharmā* talks, invites speakers to campus, and hosts other special events.⁸⁵ Sunim has seen Buddhism offer important tools to students in the midst of the busyness of life on a college campus: “Meditation really teaches you to look at things from different perspectives.”⁸⁶ She sees meditation challenging students to see the bigger picture, to see beyond daily stress and the pressure to earn good grades. As Sunim puts it, “Meditation is a cure for perfectionism.”⁸⁷

In this wide variety of ways, Buddhist women are finding creative ways to both engage in interfaith dialogue and to incorporate their Buddhist practices into the interreligious settings of college campuses and academic environments.

CONCLUSION

The conferences and early gatherings of women in the 1980s laid important groundwork for ongoing conversations about the role of women in Buddhism and in interfaith dialogue. Women continue to negotiate space within Buddhist communities and within interreligious contexts in the United States from a wide variety of angles. Buddhist nuns are modeling interfaith dialogue with their Christian counterparts as women Buddhists engage in grassroots forms of dialogue with their non-Buddhist neighbors. In a variety of interreligious settings, women Buddhists are offering the wisdom of their tradition—to prisoners, to Boy Scouts, to college students—as a way to understand and appreciate Buddhism in a religiously pluralistic United States. Finally, women Buddhologists are incorporating both Buddhism and their academic interests in colleges and

universities around the country by asking important questions about how Buddhists and Christians can cocreate a more just world and take each other's religious practices seriously.

The challenges, of course, are real. Language barriers between Buddhists who are not fluent in English and others, as for Kuan Yen, are of increasing concern in interfaith dialogue. Buddhists in the United States who are not fluent in English offer important perspectives about how to engage with non-Buddhists. Without attention to this language barrier, these voices will continue to be sidelined.

Additionally, Bender and Cadge's research reminds dialogue participants that religions are affected by their interactions with other religions, often blurring the line between when one religion starts and the other begins. This complicates the mechanisms of exchange, challenging participants to claim their own identity while engaging with another's—all the while noting the ways they influence each other. These dialogues are not just simple conversations; they are a part of the very *making* of religious traditions.

At the same time, Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike bring preconceived notions to interreligious settings that can be difficult to overcome. Interfaith dialogue is about encountering the "other"—and that includes encountering deeply held assumptions about the conversation partner. As Tisdale's experience makes clear, those assumptions require attention, because they can be as much a barrier to exchange as the religious ideals that separate.

Over and over, women profiled in this paper appeal to meditation as a site of Buddhist-Christian dialogue and exchange. As Gross and Muck, Bender and Cadge note, the exchange appears uneven. There is a tendency for Christians to borrow some form of meditation while Buddhists seem less able to incorporate parts of Christian prayer life. This raises challenging questions of how Christians understand Buddhist meditation and what limits Buddhists' ability to engage in Christian prayer. Sorting out these questions will lead to sensitive, perhaps emotional, discussions, because they tread on the very personal practice of religious identity.

As Sunim's experience with local clergy members reminds, to be Buddhist in the United States is to be part of a minority faith tradition. Across the board, the number of Buddhist women in local interfaith groups is small—and with that comes challenges of negotiating space within the larger cacophony of interfaith discussions.

In a recent commentary at the final International Buddhist-Christian Theological Encounter, Gross wonders if perhaps the bigger challenge to interfaith dialogue is not questions of identity, but pluralism. Her question echoes of Ikeda-Nash's concern: "How does someone who is open to the potential relevance of other religious points of view deal with those who do not practice such openness, who claim that theirs is the only true religion and would eliminate other religions if they could?"⁸⁸ This question seems pressing for each woman

in this paper. Their willingness to engage with people who hold different truths is clear. The same is true for the people these Buddhist women encounter in dialogue. But what happens when that openness is gone? How, then, is sincere exchange even possible?

In the face of these challenges, one thing seems certain: the future of Buddhism in the United States will continue to be shaped by the activities and work of women who are discovering innovative ways to claim space within the tradition and create pathways for interreligious interactions.

NOTES

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2. The research is based on journal articles, books, and e-mail and verbal conversations. Specifically, I am grateful to the interview time these women gave me: Rev. Sik Kuan Yen, Ten Thousand Buddha Temple in Quincy, Massachusetts; Ji Hyang Sunim, Wellesley Buddhist Community; Khenmo Drolmo, Vajra Dakini Nunnery; Members of Women Transcending Boundaries in Syracuse, New York; Jenny Philips, producer, *Freedom Behind Bars*.

3. Gross, "How American Women Are Changing Buddhism."

4. *Ibid.*

5. Ellen Sidor, ed. *A Gathering of Spirit: Women Teaching in American Buddhism* (Cumberland, RI: Primary Point Press, 1987), p. 4.

6. Sandra Boucher, *Turning the Wheel: American Women Creating the New Buddhism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), p. 1.

7. Rita M. Gross and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Religious Feminism and the Future of the Planet: A Buddhist-Christian Conversation* (New York: Continuum, 2001), p. 26.

8. Gross and Ruether, *Religious Feminism*, p. 27.

9. Today, the mission statement of the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies, the society responsible for these gatherings and the related journal, *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, reflects that commitment: "To be as inclusive as is feasible in all such aforementioned activities, seeking a balance with regard to geography, ethnicity, age, sex, denomination or lineage, cultural tradition, and leadership in both academic and religious institutions and in the public and the private sectors." Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies, <http://www.society-buddhist-christian-studies.org/purpose.html>, accessed February 12, 2007.

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20. Susan Moon, "From the Editor." *Turning Wheel: A Buddhist Review*, Summer 2006, p. 1.
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22. Courtney Bender and Wendy Cadge, "Constructing Buddhism(s): Interreligious Dialogue and Religious Hybridity," *Sociology of Religion* 67, no. 3 (2006): 229–247. Quote from p. 232 (quoting Karma Lekshe Tsomo 2002).
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63. Gross, "How American Women are Changing Buddhism."
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66. Rita M. Gross, "The International Buddhist-Christian Theological Encounter: Twenty Years of Dialogue." *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 25 (2005): 3–7.
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69. Rita M. Gross and Terry Muck, eds. *Christians Talk about Buddhist Meditation and Buddhists Talk about Christian Prayer* (New York: Continuum, 2003), p. 9.

70. In her conclusion, Gross argues that while many Christians practice some form of meditation and general calming of the inundation of thoughts, it is not usually *vipashyana* meditation wherein Buddhists aim for “ultimately non-conceptual immersion” (ibid., p. 151).

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