Cyber Sisters: Buddhist Women’s Online Activism and Practice

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Introduction

While Buddhism emerged in India in the 5th century BCE, and until the late 19th century it was only typically found in Asia, the 20th century saw the spread of Buddhist traditions across the rest of the world as an outcome of colonialism, migration and globalization. Compared to other Asian religions, however, Buddhism is remarkable for tending to attract a greater proportion of western converts relative to its size new host populations. One of the attractions of Buddhism to western followers, particularly women, is reported to be its perceived emphasis upon gender equality in contrast to many other religions, at least at the level of individual lay practice, therefore offering a more individualized and egalitarian style of religiosity. While Buddhist traditions can be interpreted to support the view that sex does not stand in the way of enlightenment, it is also the case that some Buddhist texts state that the so-called lower rebirth of being female is a result of bad karma, due to negative acts committed in previous lives (Owen 1998). Overall, in the 21st century most Buddhist archetypes of enlightenment remain male and positions of power and privilege within the majority of Buddhist organizations continue to be held by men (Tsomo 2009: 155). Within both Theravada and Tibetan traditions barriers exist to women’s full ordination and even where women can fully ordain (i.e. in Chinese Mahayana traditions) gender equality is often compromised by rules and practices that discriminate against nuns. While in contexts where women

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1 In England and Wales according to UK census data the number of Buddhists rose from 144,453 in 2001 (Bluck 2006: 15) 247,743 in 2011. This data also tells us that in 2011 in England and Wales there were 83,635 white Buddhists, 9,855 mixed race, 147,796 Asian/Asian British, 2,809 Black/African Caribbean/Black British, and 3648 “other”. While we do not know how many within any of these categories are converts, and how many are “heritage” Buddhists, Buddhism has a high proportion of white adherents, especially in comparison to other “Asian” religions. For Islam: 210,620 white, 102,582 mixed, 1,830,560 Asian/Asian British and 272,015 Black; for Hinduism: 12,026 white, 9,761 mixed, 781,199 Asian/AB and 5474 Black, and for Sikhism 7460 white, 5122 mixed, 368503 and 1431 Black. All figures from: http://www.nomisweb.co.uk/census/2011/LC2201EW/view/2092957793?rows=c_ethpuk11&cols=c_relpuk11.
cannot fully ordain there is evidence that their situation is improving or that women have found ways to mitigate gender discrimination, they are often not viewed with as much respect as men and may be denied equal opportunities for teaching and practice (Tomalin 2006; 2010).

The experiences of Buddhist women across the globe today are widely diverse reflecting their geographical and social location, the type of Buddhism practiced, whether they are lay or ordained, as well as their individual personalities. However, the perception that there is also a shared experience for women who practice Buddhism that is partly defined by a sense of “unequal opportunity” has given rise to a number of organizations and networks particularly since the late 1980s that aim to link this eclectic group of female Buddhist practitioners and activists? Buddhist scholars, nuns and practitioners have been at the forefront of global Buddhist organizations, challenging gender disparities and striving for equality for women in all Buddhist traditions. The fact that many of these organizations have emerged in western settings, and appear to draw on feminist notions of a shared sisterhood marked by the struggle for equality with men, has attracted negative comment from postcolonial critics who argue that most Buddhist women in non-western settings do not view themselves as feminist nor do they necessarily want to fully ordain. Salgado, for instance, has recently stated that:

In considering the lives and practices of contemporary nuns, I argue that renunciate narratives can be misunderstood when placed, as they often have been, within a theoretical framework of liberal feminism. 2013: 2

She views western feminist narratives as incapable of framing the lives of nuns in non-western Buddhist settings. This is an important critique that reminds us of the diversity of Buddhist women’s experiences globally, but can become hyperbolic when it suggests that there are rigid divides between East/West and ethnic/convert Buddhism.

In recent years, more of this Buddhist women’s social movement activity has been conducted digitally through websites, Facebook pages and Twitter accounts. Some organizations, such as Sakyadhita (daughters of the Buddha) (Fenn and Kopperdayer 2008; Kopperdayer and Fenn 2006), founded in 1987 (before the Internet explosion), make use of websites and social media to complement their offline activities. Others, such as the Alliance for Bhikkhunis and the Yogini Project have been formed more recently and their web presence is fundamental, with core activities that are web-reliant, including online fundraising and the sharing of digital material. In addition to organizations that