



Gender and Authority in Buddhist History: From Enlightened Masters to Empowered Matriarchs

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ABSTRACT:

This research explores the dynamic evolution of gender roles and divinity within Buddhist history, focusing on the transition from male centric religious macrocosm to the emergence of divine female spiritual leaders. By examining key historical periods, doctrinal developments, and socio-cultural contexts, the study highlights how Buddhist narratives, institutions, and practices have either safeguarded or checked patriarchal structures. Through the lens of significant female figures—such as enlightened nuns, spiritual teachers, and divine matriarchs—this research underscores their contributions to Buddhist philosophy, monastic reform, and community leadership. Central to the investigation is an analysis of the dichotomy between the early Buddhist emphasis on spiritual equality and the subsequent institutional limitations placed on women, shaped by lateral norms. Case studies from Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna traditions illustrate both the challenges faced by women in attaining religious authority and their resilience in reinterpreting Buddhist teachings to assert spiritual and social empowerment. The study also examines contemporary feminist reinterpretations of sacred texts and the re-establishment of female ordination, reflecting ongoing efforts to reclaim women's place within Buddhist discourse. Ultimately, this research aims to reframe the understanding of Buddhist authority, emphasizing that enlightenment and empowerment transcend gendered constructs, thereby reshaping the narrative from enlightened masters to empowered matriarchs.

Keywords: Buddhism, Gender and Authority, Bhikkhuni Sangha, Women's Ordination, Monastic Hierarchy, Feminist Perspectives in Buddhism.

1. Introduction:

The history of Buddhism has traditionally been narrated through the contributions and spiritual attainments of male figures, with enlightened masters such as Sāriputta, Mahākassapa, and Ananda recognized for their wisdom, meditative discipline, and leadership within the early monastic community. However, alongside this dominant narrative is a parallel yet often overlooked history of empowered female practitioners who, despite significant socio-cultural challenges, demonstrated remarkable spiritual insight, resilience, and leadership. Women in early Buddhism, including Mahapajapati Gotami, the Buddha's foster mother and the first ordained bhikkhuni (nun), and prominent disciples like Khema and Uppalavanna, who were lauded for their spiritual attainments in the Therīgāthā and Vinaya Pitaka, exemplify the Buddha's radical assertion of women's potential for enlightenment. The establishment of the Bhikkhuni Sangha was a groundbreaking development in religious history, yet its legacy was complicated by the Garudhammas—a set of hierarchical rules that institutionalized gender-based subordination within the monastic order. Despite these limitations, female monastics actively contributed to the preservation and dissemination of Buddhist teachings, shaping religious scholarship, meditative practices, and community life.

In the Mahayana tradition, the concept of universal Buddhahood introduced new representations of femininity, as embodied by enlightened figures like Tara and Guanyin, who symbolized the union of wisdom and compassion. However, even within these texts, narratives of female bodhisattvas are at times framed through androcentric interpretations, such as the frequent depiction of female practitioners needing to undergo a physical transformation into male form before attaining Buddhahood. These complexities highlight the duality within Buddhist discourse, where gender is simultaneously viewed as an illusion and a limitation in certain ritual and symbolic contexts. Yet, beyond canonical texts, the contributions of laywomen and patrons further demonstrate women's pivotal roles in the spread of Buddhism. Figures like Queen Anula of Sri Lanka and Empress Wu Zetian of China provided financial and institutional support that facilitated the establishment of monastic communities, the construction of temples, and the dissemination of Buddhist texts. Their patronage not only strengthened Buddhist institutions but also showcased the power of women as agents of religious transformation.

Despite historical setbacks, such as the dissolution of the Bhikkhuni Sangha in many Theravāda regions due to political upheavals and institutional resistance, contemporary efforts have sought to restore women's ordination and reclaim female spiritual authority. Leaders like Dhammananda Bhikkhuni in Thailand and Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo in the Tibetan tradition have been at the forefront of these revival movements, advocating for equal access to

monastic education, ordination, and leadership roles. International organizations such as Sakyadhita: The International Association of Buddhist Women, co-founded by Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo, have further amplified these efforts by fostering global networks dedicated to gender equality in Buddhist communities. This research traces the historical and doctrinal evolution of gender and authority within Buddhism, examining how female practitioners have navigated systemic constraints and redefined spiritual leadership across traditions. By exploring case studies from early Buddhist scriptures to modern feminist reinterpretations, it highlights the ongoing transformation of Buddhist institutions and underscores the central premise that enlightenment and spiritual empowerment transcend gendered constructs. This re-examination of Buddhist history seeks to shift the narrative from a male-centric account of enlightened masters to a more inclusive recognition of empowered matriarchs who have shaped and sustained Buddhist traditions across time and cultures.

1.1 Early Buddhist Context: Foundational Teachings and Gender Equality:

The early teachings of the Buddha emphasized spiritual liberation for all beings, regardless of caste, class, or gender. The Buddha's establishment of the Bhikkhuni Sangha (order of nuns) was revolutionary for its time, granting women the opportunity to pursue the path to enlightenment. In the Anguttara Nikaya (AN 1.14.5), the Buddha declares Khema as foremost among his female disciples in wisdom: "Etadaggaṃ, bhikkhave, mama sāvikanāṃ bhikkhunīnaṃ paññāvantānaṃ, yadidaṃ Khemā" ("Among my bhikkhuni disciples who are wise, Khema is the foremost."). This statement highlights her pre-eminence in spiritual insight and intellectual discernment.

1.2 The Inclusion of the Bhikkhuni Sangha:

Historical records, such as the Pali Canon, document the Buddha's initial reluctance to admit women into the monastic order, followed by his eventual acceptance due to the insistence of his stepmother, Mahapajapati Gotami. The first Buddhist nun was Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, also known as Pajapati. She was the Buddha's foster mother, her mother's sister. She was the first woman to seek ordination as a Buddhist nun, and Gautama Buddha ordained her five years after his enlightenment. She led a group of 500 women and followers as a spiritual guide. Also had two children of her own. Both of her children, her son Nanda and her daughter Sundari Nanda joined the Buddhist sangha of monastics¹.

The Bhikkhuni Sangha's creation demonstrated a commitment to spiritual equality, but the additional "Eight Garudhammas" (rules of respect) imposed on nuns signified institutional constraints aimed at maintaining male monastic authority. The Garudhammas ("Eight Heavy Rules" or "Weighty Principles") are a set of rules established when the Buddha agreed to ordain women into the monastic community, forming the Bhikkhuni Sangha (order of nuns). These rules outline specific duties and hierarchical structures aimed at governing the conduct of female monastics in relation to male monks (bhikkhus). The imposition of the Garudhammas is considered a significant moment in Buddhist history, as they simultaneously allowed women to participate in monastic life while reinforcing a subordinate status to the male Sanghaⁱⁱ.

The Eight Garudhammas are following:

1. Respect for Seniority: A bhikkhuni (nun), regardless of her seniority, must always pay respect to a bhikkhu (monk), even if he was ordained after her.
2. Ordination Dependency: A woman must undergo training for two years as a probationary candidate (sikkhamana) before being ordained, and the ordination must be approved by both the Bhikkhu Sangha and the Bhikkhuni Sangha.
3. Prohibition Against Criticizing Bhikkhus: A bhikkhuni is not allowed to criticize or admonish a bhikkhu, but a bhikkhu may admonish a bhikkhuni.
4. Confession of Offenses: A bhikkhuni must confess offenses to both the Bhikkhu Sangha and the Bhikkhuni Sangha.
5. Participation in the Rains Retreat: A bhikkhuni must spend the annual three-month Rains Retreat under the supervision of both bhikkhus and bhikkhunis.
6. Inviting Correction: A bhikkhuni must seek advice and correction from the Bhikkhu Sangha after the Rains Retreat.
7. Prohibition on Monastic Punishments: Bhikkhunis cannot impose disciplinary acts (such as banishment) on bhikkhus, but bhikkhus can discipline bhikkhunis if necessary.
8. Restrictions on Ordaining Bhikkhunis: Bhikkhunis cannot ordain other bhikkhunis without the approval of the Bhikkhu Sangha.

The traditional view on these rules were established by the Buddha to maintain monastic discipline and safeguard the reputation of the Bhikkhuni Sangha in a patriarchal society. Whether historical Interpretation is that some scholars question the authenticity of the Garudhammas, suggesting that they may have been added later by monastic elders to consolidate male authority. But the from the view point of Feminist scholars argue that the Garudhammas institutionalized gender inequality within monastic Buddhism and reflect the socio-cultural constraints of the time rather than the Buddha's original intent of equalityⁱⁱⁱ.

1.3 Female Enlightenment in Early Texts

The Therigatha is one of the oldest collections of spiritual poetry written by women and forms part of the Khuddaka Nikaya in the Pali Canon. It comprises verses attributed to early enlightened nuns who recount their journeys to liberation.

The poems reflect themes of impermanence, suffering, renunciation, and ultimate freedom from the cycle of birth and death (samsara). Such as Mahapajapati Gotami's verses describe her joy at renouncing worldly life and attaining full liberation^{iv}. Another Kisa Gotami shares her journey from despair after losing her child to wisdom gained through the Buddha's teachings on impermanence^v. Next in the list is Patachara overcame the immense grief of losing her family and attained arahantship (full enlightenment) through mindfulness and insight. And also gave reference about the Sundari Nanda, cousin of Gautama Buddha, a famous verse from the Therigatha recounts her realization that "Deceptive are the outward forms; fleeting as a flower in bloom. To seek the truth beyond appearances is the path to eternal peace"^{vi}. The Apadana (Nanda-Theri Apadana), the life story of Sundari Nanda is recounted in detail in the mentioned account. The Dhammapada Commentary expands on Sundari Nanda's life by narrating how the Buddha created a vision of a decaying woman to help her see the transient nature of beauty. This visualization helped her develop vipassana (insight meditation) and attain the wisdom necessary for liberation^{vii}.

The Samyutta Nikaya and Anguttara Nikaya also contain stories of female disciples who attained enlightenment. Like Khema Theri, known for her profound wisdom, realized enlightenment after contemplating the impermanence of beauty. Her spiritual journey is recounted in the Khema Sutta (SN 44.1). And the other is Uppalavanna, an arahant known for her mastery of supernatural powers, is often praised in the Anguttara Nikaya as one of the foremost disciples^{viii}.

The Vinaya Pitaka details the establishment of the Bhikkhuni Sangha (order of nuns) and documents how women, once admitted to monastic life, could pursue the same path of meditative discipline and enlightenment as male monastics. In the Vinaya Pitaka Mahapajapati Gotami, the Buddha's stepmother, is described as one of the earliest women to attain enlightenment after receiving ordination. Some Jataka stories recount the past lives of female practitioners who cultivated virtues leading toward future enlightenment. While these tales often reflect societal norms of their time, they also highlight how women could accumulate merit and progress toward spiritual liberation over lifetimes^x.

2. Gender and Authority in Mahayana Buddhism

Mahayana Buddhism introduced new philosophical frameworks that reinterpreted enlightenment and embodiment, expanding the potential for gender transcendence.

2.1 Textual Representation of Women in Mahayana Sutras

Mahayana Buddhist texts such as the Sumatidarikā-paripṛcchā Sūtra include stories where female figures are portrayed as aiming to achieve enlightenment by transcending gendered existence. This scripture portraying Gender as an Obstacle vs. Neutrality so the sutra presents the story of a young girl, Sumati, who makes a vow to attain enlightenment in a world devoid of evil, including the concepts of "women" and "evil intentions."^{xii} This has led to conflicting interpretations. Some scholars, such as Hae-ju Sunim, argue that the absence of gender in this utopian future indicates a critique of societal constructs, where gender distinctions no longer matter for spiritual attainment (Tsomo, 1999)^{xii}. Critics point out that the narrative reinforces negative views by associating femininity with imperfection or impurity. The language of transformation, often from female to male before enlightenment, reflects an androcentric framework. However, feminist interpretations suggest that these passages symbolize the transcendence of bodily form rather than misogyny^{xiii}. The sutra's depiction of a future world "where there are not even words for women" has been read as an allegory for the ultimate dissolution of dualistic thinking, including gender duality. Proponents of this view argue that this emphasizes the Mahayana principle of śūnyatā (emptiness), where distinctions such as male and female are illusory^{xiv}. Similar to other Mahayana texts like the Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtras, where female characters often transform into male forms before attaining Buddhahood, the Sumatidarikā-paripṛcchā Sūtra raises questions about whether Mahayana Buddhism's egalitarian philosophy is consistently applied in its narratives^{xv}. Feminist scholars argue that the depiction of female practitioners undergoing sex transformations reflects both the androcentric biases of early monastic traditions and the aspiration to transcend form altogether. The sutra thus presents a layered approach to gender: while striving for non-duality, it also reflects societal gender biases^{xvi}. These references also shows the sex-change Narratives and Gender Identity, the Mahayana texts incorporate "sex-change sutras," where women only achieve enlightenment after becoming men, reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies^{xvii}. Feminist scholars argue that while these narratives emphasize the illusory nature of the body, they also reflect the limitations imposed by patriarchal norms^{xviii}. In contrast Mahayana egalitarian teachings of early Buddhist traditions, referred that Mahayana Buddhism often stresses the doctrine of universal Buddhahood, suggesting that all beings, regardless of gender, can attain enlightenment. However, institutional practices have not always aligned with this doctrine^{xix}.

2.2 Digital Activism and Authority

Recent movements, such as those surrounding bhikkhuni (female monastic) ordination, have utilized digital platforms to challenge male-dominated hierarchies within Buddhist institutions. For example, the Thai Forest Tradition has seen significant debates over female ordination, illustrating how authority is contested and reshaped in modern contexts^{xx}.

3. Cultural and Historical Contexts

Charles Keyes' 1984 paper, "Mother or Mistress but Never a Monk: Buddhist Notions of Female Gender in Rural Thailand", provides important insights into the perception and treatment of gender in Buddhist cultures, focusing primarily on Theravada Buddhism but with relevant implications for Mahayana practices^{xxi}. On Gender roles in Mahayana Buddhism are influenced by cultural norms. For instance, in Thai Buddhism, religious roles have historically reflected a division of labor, with men dominating monastic positions and women participating more prominently in economic roles (Keyes, 1984)^{xxii}.

3.1 Female Bodhisattvas and Enlightened Beings

Figures such as Prajñāpāramitā, Tārā in Vajrayāna Buddhism (a branch of Mahayana), Vajrayana Buddhism incorporates female figures such as dākinīs, representing aspects of enlightenment through their dynamic, wisdom-oriented presence. Practitioners often meditate by visualizing themselves as these enlightened female beings to transcend dualistic notions of gender^{xxiii}. Guanyin (in Chinese Buddhism), symbolizing compassion and challenging rigid gender roles. The number of female personas as divinity is not so good but the role of existing divine females are greater. These symbolize the feminine embodiment of wisdom and compassion, challenging narratives of female inferiority^{xxiv}.

3.2 Bodhisattva Ideal and Female Representation

Mahayana texts presented figures such as Avalokiteshvara in female forms, like Guanyin (in Chinese Buddhism), symbolizing compassion and challenging rigid gender roles. Guanyin is considered an emanation of Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva who vowed to liberate all beings from suffering. This is articulated in the "Lotus Sutra" (Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra), one of the most important Mahayana texts. The sutra dedicates the 25th chapter, known as the "Universal Gate Chapter," to Avalokiteshvara, explaining how he hears the cries of those in distress and manifests in different forms to aid sentient beings^{xxv}. Guanyin, as Avalokiteshvara's feminine form, is seen as a compassionate savior who responds to any plea for help. The "Lotus Sutra" and "Heart Sutra" (Prajnaparamita Hridaya Sutra) both highlight Guanyin's role in alleviating suffering and granting protection from physical and spiritual dangers, including natural disasters, threats from evil beings, and hardships at sea. In these texts, calling Guanyin's name with sincerity is believed to bring immediate deliverance^{xxvi}. The "Flower Garland Sutra" (Avatamsaka Sūtra) presents Avalokiteshvara (Guanyin) as a cosmic figure present throughout the universe, embodying infinite compassion and assisting all beings on their spiritual paths. Guanyin's wisdom and ability to guide beings across different realms underscore her spiritual omnipresence^{xxvii}. The story of the Thousand-Armed, Thousand-Eyed Guanyin appears in texts such as the "Mahakaruna Dharani Sutra"^{xxviii}. In this narrative, Avalokiteshvara manifests with a thousand arms and eyes to symbolize her boundless compassion and capability to rescue sentient beings across all directions. The imagery reflects her immense capacity to provide help to all beings simultaneously. In Chinese and East Asian interpretations, Avalokiteshvara is often represented as Guanyin, a motherly and merciful figure. While early Indian texts depict Avalokiteshvara as male^{xxix}, the shift to a feminine figure in Chinese scriptures and folklore reinforced themes of maternal love, nurturing, and protection. In the Pure Land Buddhist tradition, Guanyin plays a prominent role as an attendant to Amitabha Buddha. She assists devotees by guiding them toward rebirth in Amitabha's Pure Land (Sukhavati), a realm of bliss and enlightenment. The "Amitabha Sutra" describes how calling upon Amitabha Buddha and Guanyin can lead to salvation and peace^{xxx}. Guanyin's role transcends scripture and has deeply influenced Buddhist rituals, prayers, and iconography. Worshipers often recite the Namo Guanshiyin Pusa chant as a mantra of devotion. Guanyin is also associated with virtues such as kindness, forgiveness, and humility. Her presence in religious art, depicting her with a vase of pure water and a willow branch (symbols of healing), reinforces her image as a merciful deity. Guanyin, rooted in the teachings of Avalokiteshvara, exemplifies the central Mahayana Buddhist ideal of selfless compassion. Through her depictions in canonical texts like the Lotus Sutra and Heart Sutra, as well as cultural adaptations, Guanyin symbolizes hope, mercy, and the ultimate goal of enlightenment for all beings. Her universal appeal and spiritual significance have made her one of the most cherished bodhisattvas in Buddhist tradition^{xxxi}.

The Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra, a Mahayana Buddhist scripture, is celebrated for its philosophical depth, humor, and subversive treatment of conventional norms, including those related to gender. One of the most famous episodes in the text addresses femininity, revealing the sutra's stance on the nature of gender in relation to enlightenment and wisdom. This sutra challenges the dualities of male and female by emphasizing that gender distinctions are illusory in the ultimate truth of emptiness (śūnyatā). One of the most cited examples of femininity in the Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra is the dialogue between Śāriputra (a renowned disciple of the Buddha, known for his deep understanding of Theravāda teachings) and a divine goddess who appears in Vimalakīrti's house. This episode provides a profound critique of gender essentialism. The goddess, residing in Vimalakīrti's abode, engages Śāriputra in a philosophical conversation. When Śāriputra remarks that it is inappropriate for a woman to have such deep wisdom and questions why she does not abandon her female form, the goddess responds by revealing the illusory nature of gender. She performs a miraculous transformation, swapping her form with Śāriputra's to demonstrate that identity based on physical appearance is superficial. The goddess asserts that neither the male form nor the female form has any bearing on the realization of enlightenment. She states that "all dharmas have no fixed essence" and that clinging to gender distinctions reinforces delusions. This teaches that enlightenment transcends physical and social categories, including gender^{xxxii}. The Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra reinforces the Mahayana Buddhist principle of non-duality (advaya), asserting that distinctions such as male and female, wise and ignorant, or ordinary and enlightened are ultimately empty constructs^{xxxiii}. The goddess uses her form as a pedagogical tool, showing that clinging to notions of femininity and masculinity reinforces ignorance. By portraying Śāriputra—a figure emblematic of traditional orthodoxy—as someone caught in gender prejudices, the sutra critiques the view that male forms are superior for achieving enlightenment. The goddess's transformation exposes and dismantles this patriarchal bias, making it clear that spiritual wisdom is not contingent on gender. While the sutra deconstructs the concept of femininity as an essential identity, it

also affirms the importance of honoring the diverse ways wisdom manifests, including through the feminine form. The goddess's self-assured presence demonstrates that femininity can serve as a powerful symbol for liberation and truth. The Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra challenges the limitations placed on femininity in spiritual traditions by presenting a profound teaching on the non-duality of gender. The goddess's dialogue with Śāriputra emphasizes that enlightenment is beyond form, transcending distinctions of male and female. At the same time, the sutra affirms the potential of the feminine form to embody and express the highest truths of the Dharma, making it a seminal text for exploring themes of gender, wisdom, and liberation in Mahayana Buddhism.

3.3 Women as Patrons and Practitioners

Women have historically played significant roles as patrons of Buddhist monasteries and temples, contributing both financially and materially to the spread and institutionalization of Buddhism. In early Buddhist communities, women from royal families and wealthy households often sponsored the construction of monasteries, commissioned religious art, and funded the copying and distribution of sacred texts. One prominent example is Queen Anula of Sri Lanka, who, according to the Mahavamsa (the Great Chronicle of Sri Lanka), converted to Buddhism and provided substantial patronage for the establishment of the Bhikkhuni Sangha (female monastic order) in the 3rd century BCE^{xxxiv}. Similarly, in ancient India, Empress Aśoka's daughter, Sanghamittā, played a crucial role in spreading Buddhism to Sri Lanka and facilitating the consecration of the famous Bodhi tree sapling brought from India^{xxxv}. In China, during the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), Empress Wu Zetian was a pivotal supporter of Buddhism, funding the construction of temples and sponsoring the translation of key Buddhist texts, such as the Avatamsaka Sutra, into Chinese. Her patronage not only strengthened the Mahayana tradition but also legitimized her political authority through religious merit^{xxxvi}.

Epigraphic records from the Sanchi Stupa inscriptions in India further reveal that laywomen, often identified as donors by their names and family ties, contributed financially to Buddhist stupas and monasteries. These inscriptions, such as those found at Bharhut and Sanchi, illustrate that women from various social strata—royalty, merchants' wives, and commoners—provided donations in the form of land, jewelry, and money for religious monuments^{xxxvii}. In Southeast Asia, Queen Chamathewi of Haripunchai (modern-day Lamphun, Thailand), according to local chronicles, was a key benefactor who promoted Buddhism by founding temples and ensuring the continuity of monastic communities^{xxxviii}. These historical examples indicate that women's financial contributions, often framed as acts of merit-making (puṇya), were essential not only to the physical construction of Buddhist institutions but also to the spiritual sustenance of the sangha (monastic community). Their patronage solidified their agency within religious spheres and played a crucial role in the regional dissemination and survival of Buddhism across centuries.

These instances demonstrate how Buddhist communities were often sustained and expanded through the material and spiritual generosity of women, highlighting their integral role in the spread and flourishing of Buddhism. Women have played significant roles as practitioners of Buddhism, engaging in both lay and monastic practices and contributing to the spiritual development of the tradition. The Therīgāthā (Verses of the Elder Nuns), one of the earliest collections of Buddhist poetry, offers profound insights into the lives and spiritual journeys of early female monastics, known as bhikkhunis. These verses recount the experiences of women who renounced worldly life to pursue enlightenment, highlighting their struggles, triumphs, and realizations of nirvana. For example, in the Therīgāthā, the elder nun Sumedha speaks of her determination to escape the cycles of suffering, while Mahapajapati Gotami, the Buddha's foster mother and the first woman to request ordination, is depicted as a pivotal figure in establishing the Bhikkhuni Sangha (order of nuns) after receiving the Buddha's approval. Her story in the Cullavagga of the Vinaya Pitaka emphasizes her resilience and leadership in advocating for women's equal spiritual potential.

Throughout Buddhist history, laywomen also embraced devotional and meditative practices as a path to merit-making and spiritual progress. In texts such as the Avatamsaka Sutra and Lotus Sutra, women are portrayed as capable of attaining the highest levels of wisdom and enlightenment. Notably, in the Lotus Sutra, the story of the Nāga princess—a young female serpent deity—demonstrates that enlightenment is accessible regardless of gender, as she swiftly transforms into a Buddha to challenge prevailing prejudices^{xxxix}. In the Mahayana tradition, figures such as Queen Vaidehi from the Contemplation Sutra are portrayed as exemplary practitioners who, despite adversity, engaged in profound visualization practices to reach the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha^{xl}.

Moreover, historical accounts from East Asian Buddhist traditions highlight the spiritual contributions of female practitioners like Princess Jingu of Japan, who was believed to have practiced meditation and introduced Buddhist teachings to her court^{xli}. And Lady Yeshe Tsogyal of Tibet, a revered yogini who was instrumental in spreading Vajrayana Buddhism and was considered an enlightened being in her own right^{xlii}. These examples from canonical texts and historical narratives underscore that women, as both monastics and lay practitioners, played essential roles in shaping Buddhist practice, demonstrating their capacity for spiritual attainment and their active participation in the religious landscape across different eras and cultures.

4.0 Vajrayana Buddhism: Feminine Embodiment and Tantric Practices

Vajrayana Buddhism, with its emphasis on the union of wisdom and compassion, often depicted female figures as embodiments of wisdom (prajna). In Vajrayana Buddhism, feminine embodiment plays a central role in both symbolic and practical aspects of tantric practices, highlighting the importance of the divine feminine as an expression of wisdom (prajñā) and enlightenment. Central to Vajrayana teachings is the concept of the union of wisdom and compassion, often represented through the symbolic pairing of male and female deities, where the female represents wisdom (prajñā) and the male represents skillful means (upaya)^{xliii}. For instance, the deity Vajrayogini—a powerful female Buddha—embodies supreme wisdom and spiritual transformation, serving as both an object of meditation and an embodiment of the practitioner's awakened potential^{xliiv}. Texts such as the Hevajra Tantra describe Vajrayogini's red, fiery form as a representation of the transmutation of desire into enlightened awareness, demonstrating the path of using

passions as fuel for spiritual awakening^{xlv}. Similarly, Tara, known as the "Mother of Liberation," appears prominently in tantric texts like the Sadhanas as a savior figure who swiftly responds to the prayers of devotees, embodying boundless compassion and fearlessness^{xlvi}.

The Guhyasamāja Tantra and Chakrasamvara Tantra further emphasize the importance of visualizing oneself as a deity—a practice known as deity yoga—which often includes assuming feminine forms as a means to dissolve egoic distinctions between male and female and to cultivate non-dual awareness^{xlvii}. This reflects the tantric view that enlightenment transcends gender and that embodying the divine feminine can help practitioners access profound wisdom. Female consorts, known as dakinis (wisdom beings), also play an integral role as spiritual guides and embodiments of insight in Vajrayana ritual. The Dakini Jālasamvara Tantra describes dakinis as fierce protectors of the Dharma and agents of transformation who challenge attachments and ego-bound thinking^{xlviii}.

Moreover, historical female practitioners such as Yeshe Tsogyal, a consort of Guru Padmasambhava and a revered spiritual figure in Tibetan Buddhism, exemplify the lived embodiment of these principles. Her life story, recorded in the *Life of Yeshe Tsogyal*, portrays her as an enlightened being who underwent intense meditative training, mastered tantric practices, and became a fully realized Buddha^{xlix}. Vajrayana Buddhism's veneration of the feminine as both a symbol of ultimate wisdom and as embodied by historical women underscores the tradition's belief in the indispensability of feminine energy in the attainment of enlightenment.

4.1 Dakinis and Deities

In Tantric Buddhism, enlightened female figures, such as Tara and Yeshe Tsogyal, represented the embodiment of wisdom and power. Dakinis, often portrayed as fierce yet compassionate, symbolized the destruction of ignorance and the importance of embracing femininity as a spiritual path. Dakinis (dākīnīs in Sanskrit) are pivotal figures in Vajrayana Buddhist texts, representing enlightened wisdom, spiritual empowerment, and transformative energy. Often described as celestial beings or female messengers of wisdom, dakinis embody the dynamic and sometimes fierce aspects of the enlightened mind. In texts such as the Hevajra Tantra and the Chakrasamvara Tantra, dakinis are depicted as protectors of the Dharma, guiding practitioners through the complexities of tantric practice by helping them transcend ego and attachmentⁱ. They are associated with the space element (indicative of openness and emptiness) and symbolize the formless, fluid nature of wisdom. Importantly, dakinis appear both as external figures—manifesting as deities, consorts, or teachers—and as internal representations of the practitioner's own wisdom and potential for enlightenmentⁱⁱ.

The Dakini Jālasamvara Tantra describes dakinis as fierce yet compassionate figures, using unconventional methods to shatter ignorance and reveal truth. One of the most revered dakinis in Vajrayana Buddhism is Vajrayogini, who is seen as the embodiment of ultimate wisdom and a fierce liberator from *samsaric* suffering. Her visualization practice, described in various sadhanas (ritual texts), involves invoking her transformative presence to overcome obstacles on the path to enlightenmentⁱⁱⁱ. In addition to their symbolic representations, historical female practitioners such as Yeshe Tsogyal—considered a human manifestation of the dakini principle—demonstrated how dakinis serve as powerful role models for spiritual practitioners. As reflected in the *Life of Yeshe Tsogyal*, she overcame immense trials and became a fully realized being, embodying the dakini's archetype as a fearless and compassionate guideⁱⁱⁱⁱ. Therefore, dakinis in Buddhist texts represent both the embodiment of transcendent wisdom and the capacity for direct, transformative engagement with the spiritual path, emphasizing the inseparability of wisdom and action.

4.2 Historical Female Masters

Throughout Buddhist history, numerous female masters have played crucial roles in preserving and spreading the teachings, demonstrating profound spiritual attainment and serving as inspirational figures. In early Buddhism, the Therīgāthā (Verses of the Elder Nuns) records the experiences of revered female disciples of the Buddha, such as Mahapajapati Gotami, the Buddha's foster mother and the first woman to be ordained as a bhikkhuni (nun), and Khema and Uppalavanna, who were renowned for their wisdom and meditative achievements^{lv}. In the Mahayana tradition, the Avatamsaka Sutra and Lotus Sutra feature female bodhisattvas such as Queen Vaidehi, who practiced deep visualization techniques despite her imprisonment, demonstrating that women could embody profound spiritual insight^{lv}.

In Vajrayana Buddhism, historical female practitioners, particularly in Tibetan Buddhism, have made significant contributions. Yeshe Tsogyal (8th century CE), often considered the mother of Tibetan Buddhism, was a direct disciple and spiritual consort of Guru Padmasambhava. Her hagiography describes her as a dakini and a fully enlightened Buddha in her own right, having endured and transcended immense hardships to attain liberation^{lvi}. Another prominent figure is Machig Labdrön (11th century CE), the founder of the Chöd practice, a unique tantric method that involves offering one's own ego and attachments as a form of ultimate generosity. Her teachings became foundational within Tibetan Buddhism, with her name revered across lineages^{lvii}.

In East Asia, female Chan (Zen) masters like Miao Xin and Mugai Nyodai (the first female Zen abbess in Japan) played influential roles in leading monastic communities and transmitting the Dharma^{lviii}. Their historical presence underscores the spiritual and leadership capacities of women in traditionally patriarchal structures. These female masters not only embodied the highest ideals of their traditions but also expanded the spiritual possibilities for women, illustrating that enlightenment is universally attainable, regardless of gender. Their legacies continue to inspire modern Buddhist practitioners worldwide, emphasizing the contributions of women as essential to the preservation and flourishing of Buddhism.

5. Decline of the Bhikkhuni Sangha

The decline of the Bhikkhuni Sangha (the Buddhist order of nuns) is a significant historical development that unfolded due to a combination of political, cultural, and institutional factors. The Bhikkhuni Sangha was first established when the Buddha granted ordination to his foster mother, Mahapajapati Gotami, as described in the Cullavagga section of the Vinaya Pitaka^{lx}. However, despite its early flourishing in India, Sri Lanka, and other parts of Asia, the Bhikkhuni Sangha began to face decline from the early medieval period. One key factor was the invasion and destruction of Buddhist monasteries by foreign rulers, particularly in India, where Buddhism itself saw a significant decline after the 12th century CE. In Sri Lanka, the Bhikkhuni lineage ended in the 11th century CE due to war and famine, as recorded in the Mahavamsa (the Great Chronicle of Sri Lanka)^{lx}. Since ordination rituals required the presence of both bhikkhus (monks) and bhikkhunis, the absence of an unbroken line of nuns made re-establishing the Bhikkhuni Sangha difficult according to traditional Theravada rules.

Cultural attitudes also contributed to the decline, as patriarchal norms in many regions resisted the full participation of women in religious life. In East Asian Mahayana traditions, however, the Bhikkhuni Sangha was preserved in places like China, Korea, and Vietnam, where nuns' communities continue to thrive to this day, thanks in part to the early transmission of the lineage from Sri Lanka to China in the 5th century CE by Bhikkhuni Devasara^{lxi}. Nevertheless, in many Theravada countries like Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos, the Bhikkhuni order remained defunct for centuries until modern revival efforts^{lxii}. Contemporary attempts to restore the Bhikkhuni Sangha—such as those led by organizations in Sri Lanka and Thailand—seek to address historical losses and promote gender equality within Buddhism^{lxiii}. However, these efforts continue to face both institutional resistance and cultural skepticism, demonstrating that the legacy of the Bhikkhuni Sangha's decline remains a complex and ongoing issue in modern Buddhism.

5.1 Modern Revival Movements

The modern revival of the Bhikkhuni Sangha in Buddhism represents a significant effort to restore full ordination for women within monastic communities, particularly in Theravāda traditions where the lineage had historically lapsed^{lxiv}. The movement began gaining traction in the late 20th century as Buddhist women, scholars, and reformers advocated for the restoration of the Bhikkhuni ordination in response to gender-based inequalities in religious life^{lxv}. In Sri Lanka, the Bhikkhuni Sangha was officially revived in 1998 when a group of Sri Lankan women received full ordination in Bodhi Gaya, India, supported by the Korean Jogye Order, which preserved the unbroken lineage of fully ordained nuns^{lxvi}. This momentous event re-established the Bhikkhuni order in Sri Lanka after nearly a thousand years of discontinuity^{lxvii}. Similar revival efforts took place in Thailand, where women like Dhammananda Bhikkhuni—the first Thai woman to be fully ordained—have played pioneering roles despite significant opposition from traditional religious authorities who argue that bhikkhuni ordination is invalid without an existing Theravāda lineage^{lxviii}.

The major international organizations such as Sakyadhita: International Association of Buddhist Women, co-founded by Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo, have also been instrumental in promoting education, rights, and recognition for Buddhist nuns across different traditions. Moreover, the advocacy and teachings of respected monastics like Ajahn Brahm, who ordained four bhikkhunis in 2009 at Bodhinyana Monastery in Australia, have further bolstered the movement. However, these actions have sometimes led to controversies, such as Ajahn Brahm's expulsion from the Thai Forest Sangha for defying traditional rules. Despite this, his efforts highlighted the growing global support for women's ordination^{lxix}.

In addition to grassroots activism, feminist scholars and legal interpretations of the Vinaya have challenged the notion that bhikkhuni ordination is invalid. Proponents argue that Mahayana nuns' lineages from East Asia, which trace back to the original Bhikkhuni Sangha, provide a legitimate basis for Theravāda nuns to be re-ordained. As a result, fully ordained nuns' communities have begun to grow in Sri Lanka, Thailand, and even the West, where monastic centers led by bhikkhunis provide training and spiritual guidance for both laywomen and laymen. This modern revival movement reflects an ongoing shift toward inclusivity and gender equality within Buddhism, signaling a broader re-examination of long-standing traditions and a recognition of the invaluable contributions of women to the preservation and flourishing of the Dharma^{lxx}.

6. Feminist Reinterpretations and Contemporary Challenges

Feminist reinterpretations of Buddhist teachings and practices have emerged as a significant movement within contemporary Buddhism, aimed at addressing gender inequalities and re-examining the patriarchal interpretations embedded in traditional monastic and doctrinal structures. Feminist scholars and practitioners argue that many gender biases in Buddhist institutions stem not from the Buddha's teachings themselves but from later cultural influences and interpretations of the Vinaya (monastic code). For example, the imposition of the Eight Special Rules (garudhammas) for nuns—outlined in the Cullavagga of the Vinaya Pitaka—has been critiqued by feminist scholars such as Rita Gross and Karma Lekshe Tsomo for reinforcing female subordination to monks, despite the Buddha's purported emphasis on the spiritual equality of all beings. Gross's seminal work "Buddhism after Patriarchy" (1993) reinterprets Buddhist history and texts to argue for a non-dualistic, inclusive understanding of the Dharma that transcends gendered hierarchies^{lxxi}.

A key challenge within this movement is the resistance from conservative monastic authorities, particularly within Theravāda Buddhism, where the validity of re-establishing the Bhikkhuni Sangha is often contested. Some traditionalists argue that the lineage of fully ordained nuns was broken and cannot be restored according to strict interpretations of the Vinaya^{lxxii}. In contrast, feminist interpretations propose that the Mahayana lineage of bhikkhunis, which remains unbroken in East Asia, provides a legitimate precedent for restoring ordination^{lxxiii}. Additionally, feminist reinterpretations

also engage with Buddhist cosmology and representations of the feminine, such as the veneration of dakinis and goddesses in Vajrayana Buddhism, questioning whether such symbolic femininity reinforces essentialist gender roles or empowers female practitioners.

Contemporary challenges also extend to laywomen, who often face limited access to leadership roles and formal religious education in their communities. Efforts to address these disparities include the establishment of institutions such as Sakyadhita: International Association of Buddhist Women, which advocates for women's ordination, education, and rights across different Buddhist traditions^{lxxxiv}. Despite significant progress, female monastics and feminist scholars often encounter institutional and cultural pushback, reflecting broader societal attitudes toward gender roles. The rise of socially engaged Buddhism has also provided new platforms for feminist interpretations, with activists drawing upon Buddhist ethics of compassion and justice to address issues such as gender-based violence, poverty, and human rights. This ongoing movement for reform and reinterpretation demonstrates the evolving nature of Buddhism as it seeks to reconcile ancient traditions with contemporary values of equality and inclusivity.

6.1 Feminist Hermeneutics

Feminist hermeneutics in Buddhism is a critical approach that reinterprets Buddhist texts, doctrines, and practices to address and challenge gender-based inequalities embedded in traditional interpretations. This method aims to recover women's voices and experiences that have often been marginalized or overlooked in Buddhist history and scripture. Feminist scholars and practitioners engage with canonical texts such as the Vinaya Pitaka, Sutta Pitaka, and Mahayana sutras, questioning patriarchal narratives while re-examining the historical contexts in which these texts were composed. For example, the story of Mahapajapati Gotami's ordination as the first bhikkhuni in the Cullavagga—where the Buddha is portrayed as initially reluctant to ordain women—has been reinterpreted by feminist scholars as reflecting not divine resistance, but the sociopolitical constraints of ancient Indian society. Scholars such as Rita Gross, a pioneer in Buddhist feminist studies, argue that the Buddha's teachings on non-self (anatta) and the universality of enlightenment inherently support gender equality, despite later institutional biases. In her work *Buddhism After Patriarchy* (1993), Gross critiques androcentric interpretations and asserts that gender discrimination is antithetical to the core Buddhist principle of liberation for all sentient beings^{lxxxv}.

Feminist hermeneutics also reevaluates symbolic representations of the feminine in Buddhist texts, such as the portrayal of female bodhisattvas like Tara and Prajnaparamita (the personification of transcendent wisdom). These figures are seen as affirming the sacred nature of the feminine and challenging the assumption that the path to enlightenment is inherently masculine. In Vajrayana Buddhism, dakinis (wisdom beings) further illustrate the potential of feminine archetypes as expressions of spiritual power and insight, though some feminist critiques caution against their hyper-sexualization in male-dominated tantric traditions^{lxxxvi}. Additionally, feminist reinterpretations of the Therigatha (verses of early Buddhist nuns) highlight the agency of women who renounced worldly life to pursue liberation, countering portrayals of women as spiritually inferior^{lxxxvii}.

Modern feminist hermeneutics in Buddhism is not limited to academic inquiry but also informs social activism and reform movements, such as the revival of the Bhikkhuni Sangha. Figures like Ven. Bhikkhuni Dhammananda use feminist readings of scripture to advocate for women's full participation in monastic life, challenging exclusionary interpretations of the Vinaya. By applying a lens that deconstructs patriarchal frameworks, feminist hermeneutics seeks to reclaim Buddhism as a tradition of radical inclusivity and egalitarianism, reinforcing the universality of its liberative goals^{lxxxviii}. This approach has broadened contemporary understandings of Buddhism by demonstrating that reinterpretation and reform are consistent with the tradition's adaptive and evolving nature. Rita M Gross', *Buddhism after Patriarchy* argue for a re-reading of Buddhist history that centers female voices and spiritual achievements. As a professor of religious studies and an ordained Buddhist practitioner in the Vajrayana tradition, Gross was known for her influential works on gender and religion, particularly her seminal book "*Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*" (1993). In this work, she challenged the traditional patriarchal interpretations of Buddhist texts and argued that many gender disparities within Buddhist institutions were cultural, rather than doctrinal, constructs. Gross emphasized that the core teachings of Buddhism—particularly the principles of anatta (non-self) and śūnyatā (emptiness)—support gender egalitarianism, as these teachings deconstruct all identity-based distinctions, including those based on gender. She highlighted that while early Buddhist texts like the Therigatha demonstrate that women could achieve enlightenment alongside men, historical contexts later imposed restrictions that reinforced male dominance within Buddhist communities^{lxxxix}.

Gross's approach combined rigorous academic research with personal spiritual commitment. As a student of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, she practiced within the Shambhala Buddhist tradition and frequently drew from her own experiences to critique gender biases in both academic and religious settings^{lxxx}. She argued for a "feminist revalorization" of the female body and feminine wisdom, challenging representations of femininity as inferior or passive^{lxxxxi}. In addition to her feminist critique, she was deeply invested in fostering inclusive spaces in Buddhist practice. Gross was also involved in interfaith dialogue and saw the intersection of feminism and Buddhism as an opportunity to promote social justice and spiritual equality globally.

One of Gross's lasting legacies was her ability to engage in respectful, yet radical, discourse with traditional religious authorities. She maintained that reform was necessary not as an attack on Buddhist tradition, but as a continuation of Buddhism's historical evolution toward greater inclusivity and compassion. Her influence extends beyond Buddhist feminist circles; she reshaped broader conversations in the academic study of religion and continues to inspire scholars and practitioners alike to question the intersection of gender and spirituality. Gross's contributions remain a cornerstone for anyone studying or advocating for gender equality in Buddhist thought and practice.

6.2 Contemporary Female Leaders

In recent decades, women have emerged as prominent leaders, teachers, and advocates in the global Buddhist community, challenging traditional limitations and creating new opportunities for women's participation in spiritual and monastic life. These contemporary female leaders have made

significant contributions to Buddhist practice, education, and social justice, advocating for gender equality and community transformation while staying rooted in the core teachings of the Dharma.

One of the most influential figures in contemporary Buddhism is Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, an English-born nun in the Drukpa Kagyu tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. Tenzin Palmo gained international recognition after her biography *Cave in the Snow* (1998) by Vicki Mackenzie detailed her 12-year retreat in a remote Himalayan cave, where she pursued advanced meditative practices in extreme isolation. Her commitment to full ordination for women and monastic education led her to found Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery in India in 2000, dedicated to training and empowering nuns. In her teachings, Tenzin Palmo emphasizes that spiritual liberation is equally attainable by men and women, criticizing systemic gender biases that have historically limited nuns' education and access to ordination. Her ordination as "Jetsunma" (a high honorific title) in 2008 further solidified her role as a global advocate for bhikkhunis (fully ordained nuns)^{lxxxii}.

In Theravāda Buddhism, Dhammananda Bhikkhuni (formerly Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh) stands out as the first fully ordained bhikkhuni in Thailand—a country where the Bhikkhuni Sangha was long considered defunct. A former professor of Buddhist philosophy and daughter of a prominent female Buddhist leader, Dhammananda took ordination in Sri Lanka in 2003 after facing criticism and institutional resistance in her home country. Despite significant opposition from the Thai monastic establishment, she has continued to train and ordain new nuns and has established Songdhammakalyani Monastery, Thailand's first temple for fully ordained bhikkhunis^{lxxxiii}. Her leadership has reignited debates on the legitimacy of female ordination in Theravāda Buddhism and inspired grassroots movements for gender equity in Buddhist communities.

A leading figure in contemporary Zen Buddhism, Roshi Joan Halifax is the abbot of Upaya Zen Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico^{lxxxiv}. Her contributions to socially engaged Buddhism are widely recognized, particularly in areas such as death and dying, prison outreach, and environmental justice. Joan Halifax's background in anthropology and her commitment to service have informed her teachings on compassion and mindfulness. Her book *Being with Dying* (2008) is a seminal work that explores how Buddhist practice can support those facing terminal illness. As a Zen teacher, she has broken barriers in what was once a predominantly male-led tradition and continues to inspire through her leadership in spiritual activism.

Jetsun Khandro Rinpoche is one of the few Tibetan women recognized as a tulku (a reincarnated lama). As the head of the Mindrolling Monastery in India, she holds a prestigious position in the Nyingma and Kagyu traditions of Tibetan Buddhism^{lxxxv}. Khandro Rinpoche is renowned for her teachings on compassion, mindfulness, and the importance of disciplined practice. In her book *This Precious Life* (2003), she emphasizes the urgency of spiritual practice in an impermanent world^{lxxxvi}. Her leadership as a female lama challenges traditional gender hierarchies and exemplifies how women can hold prominent spiritual roles within Tibetan Buddhism.

Prominent female Buddhist leaders, such as Pema Chödrön and Thubten Chodron, have gained global recognition for their teachings, demonstrating the continued relevance of female authority in modern Buddhism. A *Modern Voice of Compassion and Resilience*, Pema Chödrön is one of the most influential contemporary female Buddhist leaders, known for her teachings on resilience, mindfulness, and compassion. Born as Deirdre Blomfield-Brown in 1936, she became a prominent figure in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition after being ordained as a bhikṣuṇī (fully ordained nun) in 1974. Pema Chödrön is a student of the late Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and was pivotal in popularizing his teachings in the West. As the first American-born woman to become fully ordained in the Vajrayana tradition, Pema Chödrön's legacy lies in her ability to make complex Buddhist teachings accessible to a global audience through her writings and public talks^{lxxxvii}.

Her books, such as *"When Things Fall Apart"* (1997) and *"The Places That Scare You"* (2001), emphasize embracing uncertainty, fear, and suffering as opportunities for spiritual growth and awakening. Drawing on the Tibetan Buddhist concept of shenpa (attachment or "hooked" reactivity), Chödrön teaches that sitting with discomfort and uncertainty can cultivate compassion for oneself and others. As the former abbess of Gampo Abbey in Nova Scotia, Canada—the first Tibetan monastery in North America for Western monks and nuns—Pema Chödrön has been an influential mentor for both lay and monastic practitioners, fostering an inclusive community rooted in meditative practice and Buddhist ethics^{lxxxviii}. Her teachings continue to inspire those facing personal crises, demonstrating how vulnerability and suffering can be transformed into sources of strength and wisdom.

Another trailblazer for monastic revival and Buddhist education Thubten Chodron is a renowned teacher and prolific author in the Gelug tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, known for her work in reviving the Bhikkhuni Sangha and promoting accessible, ethical Buddhist education. Born in 1950 as Cheryl Greene in California, Thubten Chodron encountered Buddhism during her studies and was ordained as a bhikṣuṇī by Kyabje Ling Rinpoche in 1977. She went on to study extensively with His Holiness the Dalai Lama and other prominent Tibetan masters. As the founder and abbess of Sravasti Abbey in Washington State, she established one of the first Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in the West designed for Western monastics, creating a supportive environment for women to pursue monastic training. This initiative has played a significant role in addressing the gap in Buddhist education and monastic resources for Western practitioners.

Thubten Chodron is a strong advocate for reviving the full ordination of women in the Tibetan tradition, regularly addressing issues of gender equality within the monastic system. Her book *"Buddhism for Beginners"* (2001) and her collaboration with the Dalai Lama on works such as *"The Library of Wisdom and Compassion"* series have been lauded for their clarity and emphasis on ethical living, altruism, and interdependence^{lxxxix}. In her teachings, Thubten Chodron emphasizes the cultivation of mindfulness and compassion as tools for navigating everyday challenges, while also stressing the importance of rigorous study and critical inquiry into Buddhist philosophy. Her public teachings and writings bridge the gap between traditional monastic practice and modern, secular audiences, making her one of the most respected voices in contemporary Buddhism. Additionally, she has been a vocal advocate for interfaith dialogue and prison reform, using Buddhist principles to support marginalized communities.

The contributions of these contemporary female leaders highlight the evolving role of women in Buddhism. Whether through monastic revival efforts, scholarship, teaching, or social engagement, they have expanded the boundaries of what it means to be a leader in the Buddhist tradition. Their work reflects a commitment to gender inclusivity, compassion, and spiritual awakening, ensuring that the Dharma continues to flourish in modern contexts. These women not only preserve the teachings of the past but also shape the future of Buddhism by creating spaces for women's voices and leadership within the tradition.

Conclusion:

The exploration of gender and authority in Buddhist history reveals a complex narrative of both spiritual empowerment and systemic constraints, shaped by socio-cultural contexts and evolving interpretations of religious teachings. From the establishment of the Bhikkhuni Sangha by the Buddha to the revered status of female bodhisattvas such as Tara and Guanyin in Mahayana Buddhism, women have consistently demonstrated their spiritual potential and leadership within Buddhist traditions. Despite the imposition of hierarchical structures, such as the Garudhammas, which institutionalized gender disparity, female practitioners like Mahapajapati Gotami, Khema, and Uppalavanna achieved enlightenment and played crucial roles in shaping early Buddhist communities. Laywomen and royal patrons, including Queen Anula and Empress Wu Zetian, further contributed to the spread and institutionalization of Buddhism by funding monastic establishments and supporting religious education.

In Vajrayana Buddhism, female figures such as Yeshe Tsogyal and dakinis exemplify the embodiment of wisdom and spiritual transformation, challenging dualistic notions of gender. However, narratives requiring female practitioners to transform into male forms to achieve enlightenment reflect the persistence of androcentric frameworks within religious texts. Contemporary feminist reinterpretations and revival movements have sought to address these disparities, advocating for a re-examination of traditional interpretations and greater inclusivity. Prominent figures such as Dhammananda Bhikkhuni, Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, and Pema Chödrön have emerged as influential voices for the restoration of women's ordination and the empowerment of female practitioners worldwide.

These ongoing efforts underscore that the path to enlightenment transcends gender, reinforcing the Buddhist principle of liberation for all sentient beings. The contributions of women—past and present—demonstrate their indispensable role in the preservation and transmission of the Dharma. By reframing the narrative to include both enlightened masters and empowered matriarchs, the history of Buddhism becomes a more inclusive and holistic account of spiritual authority. Ultimately, this re-examination challenges historical gender biases and affirms that spiritual awakening and leadership within Buddhism are universal potentials, regardless of gender.

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