

ALICE COLLETT

# I HEAR HER WORDS



AN INTRODUCTION TO **WOMEN IN BUDDHISM**

# INTRODUCTION

I am not rejecting the world, but because of feeling a lonely sense of *mujō* [impermanence] I am rather seeking a way for my heart to take after pure water, which flows day and night.

Chiyo-ni, Japanese haiku master, on the day of her ordination<sup>1</sup>

Chiyo-ni was a renowned poet of her day, equal to Bashō, the best known of all Japanese masters of haiku poetry. Chiyo-ni does not garner the international fame accorded Bashō, because other male haiku masters of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Japan failed to acknowledge her talent. In the modern era she was rediscovered and is now, again, a well-known figure in Japan, with a statue of her and a museum in her honour near her home town in north Japan. Chiyo-ni's potted history is a suitable preface for this book. Although she was a woman of accomplished talents, her life and works went unrecognized for centuries, due to bias and prejudice.<sup>2</sup>

As nuns and laywomen, women have been part of the Buddhist tradition since it began, in India, some 2,500 years ago. The place of women within the tradition is a subject that has occupied the minds of both practitioners and scholars of Buddhism for centuries. In this book, I provide an overview on the subject of women in Buddhism. Such questions as: Is there equality between the genders in Buddhist traditions? Do Buddhist texts say negative things about women? Do Buddhist ethics support prejudice against women? Are there any Buddhist doctrines that state, suggest, or imply that women are inferior to men? are addressed in the chapters of the book. Over the past twenty years, numerous books, book chapters, and articles have been written on the topic of women and Buddhism, and this current book is a survey of that research.

The book is aimed at anyone interested in the topic of women in Buddhism. It is intended for those seeking a compact account of the rich, often complex, and long neglected story of women's contribution to Buddhist tradition. Women have inputted to both the heritage of teachings and practices and the transformation of the Buddhist tradition up to the present day. Referencing and detailed scholarly information is kept to a minimum. For readers who wish to investigate further, there are references and endnotes that provide details on other sources to consult.

In the book, I argue one simple thing, that there is no justification to support the notion that women are inferior to men within Buddhist doctrine and ethical formulations. As Buddhism was born and developed within ancient and medieval societies that entertained



traditional views of women, we do find, however, that social and cultural mores and norms that class women as inferior did find their way into Buddhist tradition and some Buddhist texts. Certain of these views then became ingrained as key elements of the tradition, such that members of Buddhist communities have, throughout history, attempted to subjugate women. The history of women within the tradition shows us that, often, the negativity did not prevail, instead many women did, frequently via the calmest and most compassionate means you could imagine; that is, simply by being themselves. In the pages of this book, you will meet with Buddhist women who were devoted disciples, became innovative leaders, instigated new teachings and traditions, were instrumental in bringing Buddhism to new shores, built monasteries and nunneries, created communities of nuns and were lauded as esteemed teachers. Like the life and works of Chiyo-ni, much of this history has remained hidden from view for centuries.

## **A New Historical Narrative**

Buddhism begins with the life of the historical Buddha, who lived during the sixth or fifth centuries BCE.<sup>3</sup> Various accounts of the Buddha's life exist, but the basic story is that, as a young man, he had a realization about the true nature of the world and renounced his family life and social responsibilities in a quest for religious liberation. Most of the legendary accounts of his life (although not all) recount that he was royalty, and that one symbolic aspect of his renunciation involved leaving his wife, Yasodharā, and their newborn son.

Within his life story and the narratives that recount how Buddhism began, three women are important. They are Yasodharā, his mother Māyā, and his stepmother and aunt, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī. According to the legendary accounts, when pregnant with the future Buddha, his mother, Māyā, had a dream of a white elephant, which symbolized that the being she would give birth to would be a great man. His mother died in childbirth, and he was raised by his stepmother and aunt. Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī becomes central in the most popular narrative concerning the beginning of the Order of nuns as she, along



with her followers, is the woman who first makes a request from the Buddha to become a nun.

Whether in the legendary life story of the Buddha, or in popular recounted narratives about Buddhism, the portrayal of both Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and Yasodharā is often largely unfavourable, or at least has significant negative undertones. The best-known detail about Yasodharā is that the Buddha-to-be left her when he renounced his worldly life in pursuit of religious truth. And he left her with a newborn infant. What is much less frequently commented upon, less widely circulated, is accounts of Yasodharā that portray her in a more positive light. Some of these are from Buddhist canons. As with other religions, Buddhism includes with its textual corpus both works that are considered canonical and other texts, commentaries, and subsidiary literature. One Pāli canonical narrative, written as an autobiography but composed centuries after the time of the Buddha, could even be said to have a 'feminist edge'.<sup>4</sup> In these verses Yasodharā describes how the Buddha, essentially, could not have achieved Awakening with her. In verse after verse, she describes the extent to which she put aside her own needs to provide what was required:

I performed a lot of service,  
for the sake of you, O Great Sage;  
while you sought the Buddha's Teaching,  
I was [always] your attendant.<sup>5</sup>

She is also predicted to attain nirvana, as a result of helping the Buddha to attain his. This is foretold by a former Buddha who relates part of the narrative:

She will be a like-minded [wife],  
with karma and conduct like [yours];  
through this karma she'll be loving  
for the sake of you, O Great Sage

...

Just as masters are protecting  
the goods that [they] accumulate,

so this one likewise will protect  
[all] of the things that are wholesome.

Compassionate for [future] you,  
she will fulfill the perfections.

Like a lion [freed] from a cage,  
she will achieve Awakening.

...

The woman who's giving herself  
for the merit of the Great Sage  
attains companionship [with him],  
[and] unconditioned nirvana.<sup>6</sup>

In lifetime after lifetime, as the dutiful and mindful wife, Yasodharā protected the sphere of the Buddha-to-be, and enabled him to do what he needed to in order to become who he became.

Similarly, with regard to the Buddha's stepmother and aunt, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, the most popular narrative about her is one within which the Buddha is portrayed as reluctant to begin an Order for women and where special rules are put in place that nuns must follow (more on these below). Much less often circulated, discussed, and read are texts that portray Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī as the counterpart to the Buddha; the founder and leader of the nuns' Order.<sup>7</sup>

In a canonical narrative about the life and death of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī, events that occur are reminiscent of those that are told as part of the legend of the life and death of the Buddha. The account focuses on Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī's wish to attain ultimate nirvana, to die, in a death that mirrors that of the Buddha. When the nuns who were her disciples realized that this was her wish, they decided that they too wanted to go with her. So, at her death, five hundred other nuns also attained nirvana. Her death was, indeed, an auspicious event:

Rising up, she reached nirvana,  
like the flame of a fuel-less lamp.  
There was an enormous earthquake;  
bolts of lightning fell from the sky.

The thunder was rumbling loudly;  
the deities [gathered there] wailed.  
A flower-shower from the sky  
was raining down upon the earth.

Even regal Mount Meru shook,  
just like a dancer on the stage;  
the [great] ocean was greatly grieved,  
and he was weeping in distress.

The gods, snake-gods and titans too,  
even Brahmā, awed at that time,  
[said,] 'this one has now been dissolved;  
in flux indeed is all that is.'

The [other nuns] surrounding her,  
who practiced the Buddha's teachings,  
they too attained nirvana [then,]  
like the flames of lamps without fuel.

Then the Teacher told Ānanda  
whose knowledge was [deep as] the sea,  
'Go [now,] Ānanda, tell the monks,  
[my] mother has reached nirvana.'<sup>8</sup>

It is typical that these two women – so significant in the legend of the historical Buddha – tend to be remembered more in a negative than a positive light. Within Buddhist texts, unconstructive views have long been expressed about women and their abilities. In Buddhist traditions, both formal and informal structures have been put in place within which women are relegated to an inferior status. But this is only half the story, only half the history. The other half – the more positive – is found within the lives of Buddhist women throughout history (and today). These women have overcome obstacles to gain ordination as Buddhist nuns, even in countries in which ordination for women had died out or never been introduced. They have battled family and social pressures to become esteemed teachers of others, often of both men and women. They have endured economic



hardships to spread Buddhism across the globe. Many have become inspirational leaders pointing out the way to those in need. This book is about these women, it tells the other half of the story. In this book I draw on a wealth of recent scholarly material that provides us with insights into the lives of many women in Buddhist history the world over. Negative portrayals of women in Buddhism continue to be published, in spite of this accumulating research. It is now possible, however, to chronicle afresh, mapping Buddhist history and current practice with a new narrative.

As mentioned, Yasodharā and Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī both became nuns. While prominent, they are far from the only two women we know of from early Indian Buddhism. Numerous female disciples of the Buddha feature in the collections of early Buddhist texts. There are accounts of women who became famed teachers, like the nun Khemā, who taught a king. There is a book of poems of elder nuns, that might well be the words of some of these early disciples, as well as innumerable biographical accounts, in which women are held high as exemplars of tradition. There are even lists of pre-eminent women who model accomplished qualities, one of which runs to fifty-one names in its Chinese version.

Alongside the early texts, there are inscriptions made by women, often donor inscriptions at monument sites, many of whom identify themselves as Buddhist nuns. Some of these women also acknowledge their own teachers, who imparted Buddhist teachings to them, and were also often women. Certain of these women as well – counter to textual prescriptions of a gender-segregated community – align themselves within lineages of male monastic teachers.

The new Mahāyāna form of Buddhism began to emerge in India sometime between the first century BCE and the first century CE. Along with it came an abundance of new texts. These sources tell of many more exemplary women.<sup>9</sup> One is the laywoman Gaṅgottarā, who on meeting the Buddha puts to him one shrewd question after another, challenging central aspects of doctrine.<sup>10</sup> After conversing with Gaṅgottarā the text records that the Buddha smiled, which was a rare event and never done without just cause. Another Mahāyāna text is called the *Śrīmālādevīsīṃhanāda*, 'The Lion's Roar of Queen Śrīmālā'. The lion's

roar is a metaphor for the Buddha giving a teaching. With the advent of Mahāyāna come bodhisattva figures, who can take female form. The best-known bodhisattvas are Avalokiteśvara and Tārā. Tārā is not the only female bodhisattva, Prajñāpāramitā is another, both have been called 'Mother of all Buddhas'. When Avalokiteśvara 'travelled' along the silk and trade routes to China, 'he' became a 'she' and manifested as the female Guanyin, a ubiquitous presence in East Asian Buddhism.

Also travelling along the silk and trade routes to China came, along with the whole edifice of tradition, the canonical accounts of female disciples of the Buddha. These were translated into Chinese along with other (particularly Mahāyāna) texts, as this was the form of Buddhism to take hold in China. Soon after the tradition was established there, a nuns' Order was begun. There were new challenges. Buddhist nuns had to take heed of rival female practitioners of other indigenous Chinese traditions, one of whom, on one occasion, poisoned their Buddhist counterpart. Inscriptions by and about women and other Chinese-authored texts, as well as, eventually, those penned by women themselves, detail and recount the lives and experiences of the many women of East Asian Buddhist traditions who gained followers, built nunneries, and taught with accomplished skill. A sixth-century record of Buddhist dwellings in the city of Luoyang says of one of the nunneries and its inhabitants:

... with its many suites of spacious rooms, fitted with symmetrical windows and doors, red pillars and white walls, it was the height of elegance and beauty. The nuns here were among the most renowned and accomplished in the imperial city, skilful at preaching and discussing Buddhist principles.<sup>11</sup>

The next Buddhist tradition to emerge in India was tantra, adopting elements from its compatriot Hindu tantric tradition. The iconography of wrathful and fierce Hindu tantric goddesses was overwritten with Buddhist meaning and morphed into similarly fierce female tantric deities of Indian – later Tibetan – Buddhism. Historical women were equated with these commanding female forms, and a strength and confidence is evident in the biographies of female adherents of the

Tibetan tradition that resonates with these fierce icons. Tantra also galvanized women to write, and we have several Buddhist tantric texts composed by women dating from the tenth to the twelfth centuries.

In these same centuries, in the Theravāda countries of Southeast Asia, murals depicting early nuns were painted on the walls of temples of Pagan. Royal, affluent women were driving forward initiatives to educate young women and girls in Buddhist principles in the Angkorian Empire to the East. From Burma, inscriptions record that women were committed practitioners, eager to make donations that might accrue merit and lead to their attainment of nirvana. As the modern era dawned, women continued to practise Buddhism in different corners of the globe – South, Central, Southeast, and East Asia. They established new forms of Buddhist practice and teachings, composed poetry, built monasteries and temples, taught adults and children, initiated new formal institutional structures, created Buddhist Women's Associations, and took Buddhism to new countries.

Eventually, in the 1800s, Buddhism began to find its way to Western shores, and with this we have a surfeit of evidence of numerous women who played a significant role in making this possible. Female practitioners were involved in establishing women's hubs in migrant communities invited to work in the West. Female scholars began to translate Sanskrit and Pāli texts arriving from Asia. Western women travelled in Asia and authored sympathetic travelogues that influenced some of the best-known names in Western Buddhism. Others travelled to Asia more permanently to be ordained and live as nuns, becoming some of the first full Western converts to Buddhism. Today, there are many female practitioners in all Buddhist traditions practised in the West, and many prominent female Buddhist teachers. These include Pema Chödrön, a Western convert to Tibetan Buddhism, Zen teacher Jiyu Kennett Rōshi, an Englishwoman, and the German-born Theravāda nun Ayya Khema.

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Whilst it is possible, as I have done above, to craft an historical outline of Buddhism that foregrounds the many women who have played



a part, this is not usually how the history of women in Buddhist tradition is told. More often, the critical accounts of their role and presence are highlighted at the expense of the rest. The adverse part of the history has been much more in focus – both within Buddhist traditions themselves and in Buddhist studies scholarship – than the progressive. As a result, the lives and endeavours of the many women who have contributed to shaping the history and modern manifestations of Buddhism have been hidden from view.

A variety of beliefs and formal and informal institutional structures became part of Buddhist tradition as it became established. Many of these have been responsible for the poor treatment of women within each country in which it has existed. Focusing on what is negative in the texts and traditions of Buddhism in relation to women, four primary themes can be identified. These are

1. the belief that women are inferior to men,
2. that it is bad karma to be born a woman and that women need to be reborn as men in the next life to make progress on the path,
3. that women cannot be Buddhas, and
4. issues around the ordination of women.

## **Four Recurring Themes in Buddhist Texts and Tradition**

### **The Inferiority of Women**

Throughout the history of Buddhism many Buddhists – both men and women – have embraced the view that women are inferior to men, and should be treated as such. There appears to be textual support for such a view in, for instance, the example of a set of rules known as the eight special rules. The narrative that accompanies explanation of these rules describes how Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī decided she wanted to become a committed follower of the Buddha, and requested that he begin an Order of nuns. He eventually agreed, but on the proviso that all women ordained as nuns must adhere to eight rules. These rules have become part of sacrosanct Buddhist



canons. They have been and continue to be used within Buddhist traditions both formally, in that they are followed to the letter, and socially, in that they ingrain a view that nuns should be considered inferior to monks, and women to men. Serious problems have, however, been identified with the formulation of these rules. The eight rules appear in the canons of different traditions, although not always in the same place and not always in the same order. In the Pāli *Vinaya* order, they are:

1. A nun who received higher ordination even a hundred years ago must bow to any monk who has received higher ordination even if it was that very day.
2. During the rainy season, a nun must not reside in a place where there are no monks.
3. Every fortnight, a nun must ask two things from the monks: the date of the observance day [an important ceremony] and when the nuns will receive instruction.
4. After the rainy season, a nun must invite feedback from both monks and nuns.
5. A nun who breaches a rule must be disciplined by both monks and nuns.
6. After having trained as a probationer for two years, a female novice should seek higher ordination from both monks and nuns.
7. A monk should not be abused or reviled in any way by a nun.
8. Nuns are not permitted to criticize monks. Monks are permitted to criticize nuns.<sup>12</sup>

These rules, especially the first one, appear to categorially formulate a hierarchy in which nuns are subordinate to monks. And this is how the rules have been interpreted and how they have been utilized: as a means to establish that nuns are inferior to monks.

One thing that the rules do demonstrate is the problem with overreliance on texts, both as a source for history and as a primer for tradition. Texts can be edited, they can be redacted, passages added, and sections removed. Such interventions took place in the history of the eight rules. In an important article published in 1999,

In Young Chung demonstrates that these eight rules could not have been formulated during the time of the Buddha.<sup>13</sup> One reason she gives is that two of the rules acknowledge the novice or probationary period – a period prior to full ordination (for both would-be monks and nuns). This was not part of the ordination process at the time of the Buddha. The arguments that In Young Chung makes in her article have now been widely accepted, at least amongst the scholarly community.

When Buddhism was revived in modern Taiwan, ordination became a popular choice for women. Eventually, nuns outnumbered monks. As this developed into a permanent ratio, it became an unwritten assumption that the eight special rules would not be adhered to. Given the respect nuns now garner in modern Taiwan, it seems inappropriate to request that a nun should bow to a monk.<sup>14</sup> In this modern period, numerous nuns have built and led their own monasteries, holding financial and management power over nuns and monks. Many of these are highly educated women, actively involved in teaching, education, charity, and cultural affairs.<sup>15</sup>

The silent, unwritten acceptance not to follow the eight rules continued for some time. This changed, however, during a series of events in the 1990s and 2000s that centred around one nun – *bhikkhuni* Zhaohui – who publicly denounced the eight special rules. At a conference in 2001, leading a group of monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen, she publicly initiated the tearing up of posters that had the eight special rules written on them. This created a media storm in Taiwan, and prompted a renewed debate on the relevance of the rules, with a variety of views being expressed.<sup>16</sup>

## **Karma and Rebirth as a Woman**

Even amongst those with a basic knowledge of Buddhism, it is widely known that Buddhism espouses a doctrine of karma. It is often misunderstood as an 'eye for an eye' dogma; that if a person acts badly, they will be met with equivalent retribution for their actions. This is a superficial understanding of karma. The word karma means 'action' and the karma doctrine means that actions have consequences;



good actions have good consequences and bad have bad. The doctrine is linked to morality, such that actions and intentions that are ethically positive will have a positive outcome and vice versa.

In a recent book, James Egge explored the karma doctrine in Buddhism and traces the development of it.<sup>17</sup> He has established that there were phases in its development in early Buddhist tradition. The idea evolved over time. One aspect of what comes to be the principal exhortations of the doctrine is that it is bad karma to be born a woman. This is not stated in any Buddhist canonical works, but comes to be expressed in commentaries and other subsidiary literature, as well as in inscriptions. It was, there appears, a 'shift in attitude' between the time of canonical accounts and the later commentarial and other literature. The compilers, collators, authors, and editors of the canons did not consider rebirth as a woman problematic. Instead, there are instances in Buddhist canonical texts in which female rebirth is presented in a positive light.<sup>18</sup>

Doctrinally, as well, the idea that female rebirth is bad karma is questionable. If it is always bad karma to be reborn as a woman, this presupposes that life as a woman is always and invariably worse than life as a man. So, for instance, high-status Indian queens of antiquity, who lived lives of relative luxury, were waited upon hand and foot and wielded significant power, in this context have to be understood as having lives that entailed greater misery than the life of a beggar with leprosy.<sup>19</sup> Whilst arguably, and in general terms, women do live and have historically led lives that entailed greater suffering than men, karma is a natural law and does not operate on the basis of generalizations.

Despite it being the case that to say birth as a woman is bad karma does not accord with the doctrine, and is not stated in Buddhist canonical sources, this also became a mainstay of tradition. Like the eight special rules, it has not, however, remained unchallenged. In 2001–2, Wei-Yi Cheng conducted fieldwork interviewing and surveying opinions of Sri Lankan and Taiwanese nuns. Asking a question about karma, she found 'more respondents who do not accept the idea of women's inferior karma than those who do'.<sup>20</sup> Cheng reports that many viewed the idea as an oversimplification

of Buddhist doctrine, although a variety of opinions were expressed. One Taiwanese nun made the comment that:

... the sex ratio in the world is approximately half male and half female. If [sexes are determined] by the inferiority and superiority of karma, how is it possible to be half and half of the population?<sup>21</sup>

## Women Becoming Buddhas

Buddhism began with the life of the historical Buddha, who was male. Initially, in the earliest schools of thought in Buddhism, it was believed that practitioners could not themselves become Buddhas, although they could attain what the Buddha had attained – the experience of Awakening or state of nirvana. The early schools of thought, however, do not hold that the historical Buddha was the sole Buddha, but that others had existed before him, and would arise afterwards. They maintain that none of these were nor could be women.

One text of the Pāli canon categorically states that it is not possible for women to become Buddhas, nor take on any other similar leadership roles:

It is impossible, it cannot happen that a woman could become an Accomplished One, a Fully Enlightened One – there is no possibility. . . It is possible that a man might be an Accomplished One, a Fully Enlightened One – there is such a possibility.<sup>22</sup>

Writing on this topic, Bhikkhu Anālayo notes that this section is missing in the Chinese version of this discourse. The most likely reason for this, he concludes, is that ‘the theme of women’s inability is a later addition to the exposition’.<sup>23</sup> The understanding of the possible goals for the practitioner changed with the advent of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The belief developed that a practitioner may eventually become a Buddha. Here again, certain texts state that women cannot become Buddhas. For example, the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* states:

Completely perfected Buddha-s are not women. And why? Precisely because a bodhisattva, from the time he has passed beyond the first incalculable age (of his career) had completely abandoned the women's estate. Ascending (thereafter) to the most excellent throne of enlightenment, he is never again reborn as a woman.<sup>24</sup>

As you can see from this passage, there is often no answer as to *why* this might be the case. Here the argument is circuitous; women are not Buddhas because Buddhas are not women. It appears that this proposition was never fully accepted, as there exist other texts that do predict certain women will attain Buddhahood. There are also others that record that the historical Buddha was female in past lives and others that portray women with qualities similar to a Buddha, such as we have seen with Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī.<sup>25</sup> The Tibetan tantric tradition fully acknowledges that there can be female Buddhas. In her survey of opinions of modern Sri Lankan and Taiwanese nuns, Wei-Yi Cheng asked the question, 'Do you agree that one can become a Buddha in a woman's body?' Of the 492 Taiwanese nuns she questioned, 74.4% answered yes. Only 9.7% disagreed.<sup>26</sup>

## **The Ordination of Women**

As we have seen with the narrative accounts of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and Yasodharā, and the issue of the eight special rules, along with the establishment of the Buddhist religion in ancient India an Order of nuns came into being. Although the narrative about the eight rules implies that nuns were not on an equal footing to monks (an implication that is challenged in chapter 1), other parts of Buddhist canonical literature indicate that the community of monks and nuns were equal. For instance, in one passage from the Pāli canon, the Buddha recounts how he wants his community to be when he dies or attains final nirvana. In a passage that is repeated four times, once with monks as the subjects, then nuns, then laymen, and finally laywomen, he is reported to say:



I will not attain final Nibbāna . . . until I have nun disciples who are wise, disciplined, confident, secure from bondage, learned, upholders of the Dhamma, practising in accord with the Dhamma, practising the proper way, conducting themselves accordingly; who have learned their own teacher's doctrine and can explain it, teach it, proclaim it, establish it, disclose it, analyse it and elucidate it; who can refute thoroughly with reasons the prevalent tenets of others and can teach the efficacious Dhamma.<sup>27</sup>

Although the Buddha instigated a following with a fourfold community of monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen, the Order of nuns has not continued to be operational in all Buddhist countries, and in some is believed to have never been established when Buddhism first arrived there. In such countries, namely those of South and Southeast Asia and Tibet, women could not take full ordination as nuns. Instead, other possible routes to a renunciate lifestyle were developed. In these cases, women will often don the garb of nuns, wear robes, and shave their heads. Rather than following the monastic code that a nun commits to doing at ordination they will instead commit to following a set of ethical precepts, either eight or ten.

Although there was no formal Order of nuns in some countries in which Buddhism was the major or state-sponsored religion, investigations over the past two decades have unearthed evidence of women practising that seems to indicate women being ordained as nuns or living as nuns. This history is explored within the pages of this book.

Initiatives to re-establish the Order of nuns in Buddhist countries within the last century have come to fruition in the last few decades. As we will see, a nuns' Order has been re-established in some of these countries. The absence of the option of full ordination for women, which has often resulted in women who choose renunciate lifestyles being seen as inferior to monks, has created some odd cases. In Thailand, women who are accomplished scholars teach monks but nonetheless consider themselves lower status than those they teach. One such example is Mae Chi Bunchuai Sriprem, a Pāli scholar who has received an esteemed title and is a well-respected teacher at the

elite Mahamukut Monastic University in Bangkok. When questioned about the fact that she was a teacher to monks, she replied, 'well, sure, I teach monks, but they are not "my students", they are above me.'<sup>28</sup> Despite this view, Mae Chi Bunchuai did consider herself something of an expert in the Pāli language.

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This book presents an overview of women in Buddhist traditions from the lifetime of Siddhattha Gotama, the historical Buddha, up to the present, and across the globe. To my knowledge, it is the first such introductory survey of the subject. I have charted most of the main countries and regions within which Buddhism has been adopted. While researching and writing, I was presented with an overwhelming amount of data on women from Buddhist history, past and present. It has not been possible for me to include and acknowledge all women in Buddhism's past, nor all women still living today. Many have made significant contributions to the spread of Buddhism. They have left in their wake popular teachings, having overcome obstacles in order to practise. They have received ordination and become nuns, even when it was forbidden for them to do so, or when they were faced with prison time, or admonished, criticized, reviled, even abused. Women have, in each tradition, each county, each region, made a space for themselves.

I begin the book with assessments of Buddhist ethical formulations, Buddhist texts and some basic doctrine. These comprise Part I of the book. In Part II, I turn more fully to the lives of Buddhist women. In chapter 1 I pose the question: Does Buddhism support gender equality? I look at this both from the point of view of Buddhist ethics and with recourse to feminist input and feminism's often uncomfortable relationship with Buddhism and Buddhists. In chapter 2 I focus on Buddhist texts. I highlight the range of attitudes to women expressed in the texts, including the worst comments made about women. Any alleged faults of women articulated in chapter 2 I assess in relation to Buddhist doctrine in Chapter 3. In chapter 4, the first chapter of Part II, I offer some portraits of Buddhist women. I begin with some of the better-known Indian nuns who are considered to have been direct

disciples of the Buddha. Also included in this chapter are portraits of Chinese, Japanese, and Thai Buddhist women, who lived at various points in the history of Buddhism. Chapter 5 is concerned with the history of women in South and Southeast Asian countries. In this chapter I concentrate on Sri Lanka, Burma, Cambodia, and Thailand. Next, in chapter 6, the history of women in Central and East Asian traditions is related; primarily China, Korea, Taiwan, and Tibet. Finally, in chapter 7, I turn to Buddhism in the West, and survey and discuss the various women who were instrumental in Buddhism's journey to the West, as well as others who have worked to establish Buddhism in various Western countries.

When I began this project I intended to bring together, in an accessible way, the main themes in the flourishing scholarship on women in Buddhism through the past two decades. My first working title was *Women in Buddhism: The Basics*. The publishers, however, insisted on a less prosaic title. They asked me if it was possible to include in the title an extract from a Buddhist text. I flicked through the *Therīgāthā*, and happened upon the verses from which the title comes, spoken by the monk Vaḍḍha about his mother. When the title of the book became *I Hear Her Words: An Introduction to Women in Buddhism*, a bit of magic happened. The project began to form itself into a book focused on the lives, works, and teachings of Buddhist women, more so than I had anticipated when I began. It is, then, something that feminists might term a 'her-story' (rather than *his-story*), which, as I say, was not my intention, but in order to do justice to the inordinate amount of women who have contributed to Buddhism over the centuries, I didn't feel like I had much of a choice! And, in this short book, I certainly have not done full justice to this history of women in Buddhism. I remain aware that, as I write this introduction after finishing the rest, there are not only individual women but lives, stories, and practitioners in certain countries that do not get a mention, such as, for instance, Buddhist women in Mongolia and Nepal. Many women who have devoted their lives to spreading Buddhism – past and present – receive but a brief mention, if any mention at all.

What I hope to illustrate in this volume is that women have – both literally and metaphorically – ripped up the rule book. They have



challenged the eight rules, demanded to be fully ordained alongside men, proved that they are not inferior by becoming teachers of both women and men and leaders who have inspired others, and they have engaged in the pragmatic and theoretical work of establishing Buddhism in various countries. Buddhist traditions have been reconfigured to include female Buddhas, and the bodhisattva path reimagined to revitalize the more usually low-status 'feminine' qualities of nurture and care, making these centre stage in the path to Awakening and attributes to which both men and women should aspire. And rebirth narratives have been composed in which illustrious women were men in former lives, thereby demonstrating that it is not necessary to be reborn a man to succeed on the Buddhist path. Such narratives are few and far between but every one of these should be amplified, as women's history is often hidden.<sup>29</sup>

Many women are part of the history of Buddhism, therefore to say 'Buddhism is negative about women' negates them on numerous levels, and as such is a form of sexism in itself. It negates their existence and their contribution. If influential women who overcame obstacles to be ordained, set up nunneries, and taught others are part of Buddhist history – which this book categorially demonstrates is the case – we cannot say Buddhism is negative about women. If we do, in so doing we are disaffirming their contribution. The contributions of these women must be woven into the acknowledged history of what Buddhism was in the past, what it is now, and what it is capable of becoming in the future. The modern manifestations of it are shaped by its past, and these women are part of Buddhism's past, as well as its present and future.

Returning to the female haiku master whose words began this chapter, Chiyo-ni composed poetry about being a woman, and the struggles involved. Chiyo-ni was an ordained Buddhist nun. If we say 'Buddhism is negative about women' we disavow her voice and her contribution – we continue the historical lack of recognition of her life and work.

what the butterfly  
wants to say – only this  
movement of its wings<sup>30</sup>