

Women Zen ancestors, a second take

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§0. Overview

When I started Zen practice over 30 years ago most of us knew little or nothing about our female ancestors. Barbara Rhodes had just gotten inka (authorization to teach) in my school, one of the first western women Buddhist teachers. Most of us figured this was a great anomaly in Buddhist life. It was even said by many western practitioners in many branches of Buddhism that the great contribution the west would make to Buddhism would be the inclusion of women. Gary Snyder wrote in his Zen center's newsletter how amazing it was that they'd had a retreat in which half of the participants were women. Never before had so many women practiced!

Which shows how ignorant we were. And how arrogant.

17 years ago, in 1991, Susan Murcott's *The First Buddhist Women* appeared, followed, in 1993, by Rita Gross' *Buddhism After Patriarchy*. This material wasn't new to scholars, but it was new to many and perhaps most western practitioners. The reaction by many in the Buddhist community was a kind of joyous shock. Mini-courses sprung up, women's lineages were constructed — we had women ancestors after all!

In the 15 years since, scholarship has been extended and popularized, so that it now seems somewhat matter-of-fact that of course we have women ancestors. Scholars of the Sung, of the Goryeo, of the Tang, and other east Asian dynasties have uncovered not only the scattered names of women we had before, but have uncovered the broader picture of nuns' and laywomen's lives within the Buddhist community.

As the art historian Cheeyun Lilian Kwon said in the abstract to her article *Nuns, Donors, and Sinners: Images of Women in Goryeo Buddhist Paintings* (about the Goryeo period in Korean history, but applicable to most times and places in Buddhist life):

Extant woodblock prints and silk paintings often depict women as recipients, practitioners, and patrons of the Buddhist faith; they appear in the form of taking the tonsure, mingling with monks or nuns, commissioning Buddhist images, or receiving punishment in the underworld after death. Whether on woodblock print or in fine color on silk, images of women are shown with equal prominence as participants in the support and practice of Buddhism, and as subjects to judgment in the underworld bureaucracy under similar conditions as the men. Karmic reward and retribution is portrayed in a perfect meritocracy regardless of gender, whether it be accumulating good karma by offering donations, or receiving punishment for past wrongdoings. Rebirth in the six paths also neither emphasizes one sex over the other, as the two possible gender forms appear with equal consistency. As such, images of the *Goryeo sangha* in Goryeo Buddhist paintings allocate equal emphasis on both the male and the female, possibly reflecting the Goryeo society as described in the texts. What is remarkable, however, is that while the Buddhist *sangha* may be represented by both sexes, they are ultimately framed within a system governed by patriarchy.¹

Kwon's abstract is the over-arching narrative for these notes: women are always present, their presence is not considered remarkable, and while the systems within which they operate are (almost always) marked by patriarchy and even misogyny, women are vital to the life of the community as both supporters and leaders.

§1. The bad news

With a few exceptions, and pretty much like every other form of human activity other than child-bearing, child-rearing, and breast-feeding, there were institutional barriers to women's practice and recognition within the

¹ *The Review of Korean Studies*, Vol 8, No. 2 (179-198)

various Buddhist communities. They are well-documented and well-known; they serve to hide what women have actually done; so let's get them out of the way quickly.

(i) Some Buddhist sutras taught in some places that women were a distraction, that they were inherently inferior and polluted, and that enlightenment could only come to a person in a man's body.

(ii) Bolstered both by (i) and the generally fragile status of women in most societies, when women did gain access to practice, especially in the context of Buddhist monastic institutions, there were limits to what they were allowed to do — in some times and places (including today) women were not given the same access to education and practice as men and worked essentially as servants. Those that had access to education and practice had a harder time gaining acceptance as leaders or teachers (except within their female communities).

(iii) The Buddhist monastic orders institutionalized women's inferior status in many ways: women take more vows (the eight rules, plus other vows)²; women sit behind men at assemblies; while men are ordained by other men, women need both male and female approval in order to be ordained. Local rules might even restrict women's movements outside the temples and monasteries.

(iv) Buddhist teachings on acceptance, equanimity and karma could easily be used to discourage change.

Here are the eight rules, in slightly summarized form:

1. A nun must give homage to a monk, no matter how new he is or how experienced she is.
2. During the rainy season retreat a nun cannot stay where there is no monk.
3. Every two weeks a nun needs to ask the monks about important ceremonial dates.
4. Confession after the rainy season retreat must be before monks and nuns
5. A nun who has committed an offense must be disciplined by both orders.
6. Nun ordination is received from both orders.
7. Nuns cannot insult or ridicule a monk.
8. Nuns cannot correct monks but monks can correct nuns.

#1 is the most famous, usually stated in this form: "A nun of 50 years must bow to a monk of 1 day." Clearly it is meant to confirm the higher status of monks. #2, 3, 4, 5, 6 prevent gender segregation; #3, 4, 5, 6 give monks authority in the nuns' community (nuns have no authority in the monks' community); and #7 and #8 make it difficult for a nun to participate in any kind of joint decision making.

All that said, in practice many of these rules were broken. Some of them — #2, #5, #8 — were broken routinely in Mahayana nuns' temples. Even #6, the most rigidly adhered to, has been broken out of necessity in a few times and places.

§2. The good news

(i) While some Buddhist sutras were hostile to women, others were supportive (for some examples, see below).

(ii) Laywomen were present almost from the beginning as practitioners and supporters of the dharma; similarly, nuns were present almost from the beginning as part of the monastic sangha. Segregation by gender varied at different times and places, but women were generally part of assemblies and had dharma interaction with men. Women were not silent, either. Even from the beginning they were active as teachers, speaking in the public square to both women and men. Women could be honored for their practice, learning, and attainment. When they appear in Buddhist stories, their presence is taken for granted.

(iii) As often happens when religion is (as it almost always is) gendered, women's institutions could be strong and vital. At various times and places, women's institutions were seen as freer from corruption than men's, and women's practice was considered to be, on average, more sincere.³

² Aside from the eight rules, nuns traditionally take more vows than men. In the Korean tradition there are 250 vows for monks and 338 for women.

³ Contemporary Korea, stretching back to the early 20th century, is one such time and place.

(iv) In some places and times (see below for the example of 15th century Korea), edicts that were built on negative perceptions of women actually strengthened their independent status, and encouraged exactly the sort of change that their authors could not have imagined and would not have wished.

And, hovering over all consideration of the status and capabilities of women, was the basic Buddhist doctrine that all beings inherently have Buddha nature.⁴

§3. Nuns, part I

Originally, the monastic order had no women. Even when his stepmother, Mahapajapati, asked him three times to create a women's order, Buddha refused. So she went back home, cut her hair, put on saffron robes, and walked with a large group of women (similarly dressed?) for 150 miles to Vesali, where the Buddha was staying. She wept. Buddha's great disciple Ananda noticed. He interceded for her, three times. And was turned down by the Buddha three times. Finally Ananda asked if women were able to realize perfection and become arhats. Buddha said yes. Ananda pointed out the contradiction. Buddha relented, and said that his stepmother and other women could join the order if they accepted the eight special rules. Buddha then predicted that ordaining women would reduce the time of Buddhism on earth to 500 years instead of its allotted 1000. If indeed he said that, it was over 2600 years ago.

The main source of information about the early nuns' sangha is a group of poems called the *Therigatha*, which is accompanied by descriptions of the women who wrote them. "Theri" means nun or female elder in Pali. The masculine counterpart is "thera," and "Theravada," a term for southeast Asian Buddhism, means "way of the elder."⁵ "Gatha" means song. In the Pali version these gathas have a strict form of stanza and meter that does not survive translation into English.⁶ It is not clear that the stories told about these women by others are historically accurate, but I will write as if they are.

When I first read these poems in Murcott's book about a dozen years ago, I was struck by the strength of these women. They are free. You get the feeling they could stand up to anyone and anything, and in some of the poems they do. I was also struck by the directness of their language, although I recognize that this may be an artifact of translation.

On second reading, I was struck by the conventional nature of many of the poems, that is, the stock phrases and standard notions. This is typical of literary work 2500 years ago. People borrowed phrases and ideas from each other freely. There was not the sense of individual ownership, that this is *my* work. What is remarkable about the *Therigatha* is that these stock phrases and standard notions are not particularly *women's* stock phrases and standard notions. They belong to the Buddhist canon of the time. So while the lives these women speak of before ordination are definitely women's lives, situated in women's situations, the perfection they have realized after years of cultivation is the same perfection that men realize.

Here's Isadasi describing her life before ordination:

Morning and evening
I bowed to the feet
of my father-in-law and mother-in-law.

If I saw my beloved,
his sisters, his brothers,
or even his retinue,
I trembled and gave up my seat...

⁴ A good summary of both the positive and negative Buddhist teachings about women can be found on the web: Chinese Bhiksunis in the Ch'an Tradition by Heng-Ching Shih, http://ccbs.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-NX020/15_09.htm

⁵ Of course the word used is the male variant.

⁶ Susan Murcott and Anne Waldman have excellent translations.

Compare this with the fruits of practice, as written in Mutta's gatha:⁷

Free, I am free.
I am free
by means of the three
crooked things,
mortar, pestle, and
my crooked husband.

I am free
from birth and death
and all that dragged me back.

These women came from many backgrounds. Many of them had great sorrow in their lives. Some were beautiful, some were rich, some were poor. It is clear that they were highly respected by the entire sangha. They taught both men and women — one of the gathas describes an encounter in which a nun bests a Brahman in argument, and it is not described as a particularly big deal. Mahapajapati, Patacara, Dhammadina, Khema, Uppalavanna, Kisagotami (she of the mustard seed) and many others among the 72 authors of these gathas were women renowned as teachers, praised by the Buddha, and praised by others. They are individuals even in their virtues — Dhammadina is a great preacher, Khema a great administrator, Uppalavanna a great magician...

§4. Women in the Mahayana canon

Some of the more fantastic Mahayana myths served to absorb characters from early Buddhism into the Mahayana pantheon. Thus Kwan Yin is a transformed Chinese princess as well as the male Avalokitesvara. And in the *Sutra of the Buddha Teaching the Seven Daughters*, six of the daughters of King Kiki are reborn in the time of the Buddha to become some of the most famous nuns of the *Therigatha*: Khema, Uppalavanna, Patacara, Bhadda-Kundakesa, Kisagotami, and Dhammadina. Typical of Mahayana extravagance, several of these daughters are described as having lived lives of celibacy for 20,000 years.

Other Mahayana myths absorb beings from the mythology of India, such as the eight year old daughter of the Naga king who attained enlightenment (the Nagas were like centaurs or mermaids/mermen, except that their lower half was like a serpent or dragon). The impact of this story is attenuated by disagreement between various versions on whether she had to shape-shift into a male body first.

Rita Gross' book *Buddhism After Patriarchy* lists a number of these female beings, and when I first read it I was grateful that there were any, and figured she'd listed all. Far from it. Even if you ignore Tibetan mythology, with its profusion of devas and goddesses and consorts, women and other female beings are not scarce in the Mahayana sutras, and are given a great range of power and influence.⁸

Nothing is more phantasmagorical in the Mahayana canon than *The Avatamsaka Sutra*, and it is worth looking at the depiction of female beings there. Flipping at random through Thomas Cleary's translation of the last chapter — the chapter on Sudhana's pilgrimage — we come upon Buddha's mother Lady Maya "sitting on that throne, her physical form transcending all in the triple world, having gone beyond all states of being; facing all beings; appearing according to their mentalities; unstained by any world, being made of myriad virtues; in the likeness of all beings, appearing in such a way as to please all beings; adapted to develop and guide all beings; descending into the presence of all beings; appearing continuously to beings at all times like the sky, appearing to all beings to be permanent; not going anywhere, not passing away from all worlds, not coming anywhere, not coming into existence in any world... [and so on for another half page]... without discrimination, based on the thoughts of all beings; beyond conception, unknowable to all beings; based on resolve, never leaving the mundane; pure, nonconceptual like Thusness." And so on for many more large pages with small type.

⁷ Both translations are from Murcott, and the story of Pajapati quotes liberally from Murcott's version.

⁸ A small caution not to take this too far: while many Mahayana sutras have women characters, many others, including some of the most famous (e.g., the Diamond Sutra) have no women except possibly in an anonymous audience.

And it's not just Queen Maya. In his pilgrimage Sudhana meets with a number of female mendicants, laywomen, nuns, goddesses and night goddesses, as well as male monks, mendicants, laymen bodhisattvas, & etc. He even meets the prostitute Vasumitra, who brings men to enlightenment through sex (her Korean nickname was "Pass-A-Million"), turning passion to dispassion, and desire to the end of desire. They are all magical, they all dwell in myriad realms at once, they are all deeply enlightened, they are all dedicated to the liberation of all beings, and they all teach all beings.

While female beings can be found in the Mahayana sutras, gender is rarely discussed explicitly. One striking exception is chapter 7 of the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, Sariputra's encounter with the devakanya (a sort of minor divinity). Despite her divine nature, she is one of the more down to earth beings in any Mahayana sutra, and her encounter with Sariputra reminds us that feminism is not a modern invention.

First, some general background:⁹ The *Vimalakirti Sutra* centers on the layman Vimalakirti, a successful businessman and deeply accomplished practitioner. Under the pretext of his being ill, various Buddhas, bodhisattvas, arhats, and other beings set off to visit him (somewhat reluctantly, since Vimalakirti always wins in dharma combat). The sutra focuses on the doctrine of non-duality, which Vimalakirti himself famously expounds by silence.

In chapter 7, Buddha's famous disciple Sariputra,¹⁰ a comic foil throughout the sutra, confronts a devakanya who showers flowers on the throng of bodhisattvas and disciples. Sariputra, ever fretful, tries to shake his flowers off. The devakanya asks him why he does this and he, ever judgmental and somewhat prissy, responds that they "are not in a state of suchness." The devakanya immediately points out to him that it is mind, differentiating, which is causing the problem.

Sariputra realizes that this is someone to pay attention to, and asks "How long have you been in this room?" She answers cryptically, "My stay in this room is just like the Venerable Elder's [i.e., Vimalakirti's] liberation." Sariputra, clueless, asks for clarification. "Do you then mean that you have stayed here for a long time?" No doubt disgusted, the devakanya retorts, "Does your liberation also involve time?" Sariputra is chastened and admits he doesn't know what to say. The devakanya then expounds on various aspects of liberation, and when Sariputra asks, "What have you gained and experienced that gives you such eloquence?" she replies, "The fact that I neither gain nor experience anything gives me this eloquence," and expounds the doctrine that there is nothing to attain. As it turns out, she has been hanging around Vimalakirti, listening to him preach, for twelve years.

Sariputra then asks her, "Why do you not change your female bodily form?"

She replies, "For the last twelve years I have been looking in vain for a female bodily form; so what do you want me to change?" A dialogue on form and illusions follow, in the course of which she says, "All phenomena (including forms) are also unreal." At which point she changes herself into a man and Sariputra into a devakanya. A little freaked, Sariputra exclaims, "I do not know why I have turned into a devakanya!" After a discourse in which she quotes the Buddha's saying "All things are neither male nor female," she turns herself and Sariputra back to normal.

Sariputra has learned his lesson. "The form of a woman neither exists nor is non-existent." The devakanya extends this: "Likewise, all things are fundamentally neither existing nor non-existent..." Sariputra asks (not very politely) about her future rebirth and when she will attain enlightenment. After further dialogue she explains that enlightenment "is not an objective which can be realized." After a little more dialogue, Vimalakirti praises her. She "has realized the patient endurance of the uncreated and has reached the never-receding Bodhisattva stage. In fulfillment of a vow, she appears at will to teach and convert living beings."

I summarize this chapter at length because it has a lot to tell us about the early Mahayana attitude towards women. The devakanya's analysis of gender is not that women and men are equal, but that gender does not exist. (This is true, and a double-edged sword: invoked to liberate women, and yet another frequently invoked lame excuse to perpetuate a misogynist status quo.) Her role is not to listen but to speak, and when she speaks

⁹ I am relying on the Charles Luk translation. There is a more recent translation out by Burton Watson.

¹⁰ the recipient of the teaching of the *Heart Sutra*

she plays a major role, expounding two important doctrines, on existence and on enlightenment. By her gender switching and her refusal to be fooled by categories, she exemplifies the doctrine of non-duality which is the focus of the sutra. She is the only character in the sutra other than Buddha whose discourse is unchallenged by Vimalakirti, and the only character other than Buddha who is praised by Vimalakirti.

And finally, perhaps most tellingly, she is not given a name.

§5. Nuns, part II

Sometime around the second century, a Buddhist monk's community was well established in China. The first women's temple was established in 312 AD, but women did not receive full ordination until 357. The reason for this is interesting.

For full Buddhist ordination, a woman must be approved by both monks and nuns. (In the section on Korea we'll discuss the standard contemporary requirements of the Chogye order). Where nuns' lineages have died out this has spelled disaster. Until very recently, no woman could receive full ordination within either the Theravada or Vajrayana lineages; women who wanted to fully ordain had to go to one of the major Mahayana centers (Hong Kong, Taipei, Seoul) for ordination.¹¹ But there were no Chinese nuns to start with, so how could there ever be any? This problem was solved by a group of Theravada nuns from what is now Sri Lanka, who traveled to China in order to enable their Chinese sisters to establish a Chinese line of Mahayana nuns.

Things developed fairly quickly after that. Because this was China, both nuns and monks had freedom from the strict application of vinaya (monastic) rules. For example, Chinese monastics handled money. Certain strictures peculiar to nuns — for example, not crossing rivers, not traveling alone — also were frequently ignored. By the 8th century, the monastic community was flourishing, with about 50,000 nuns and about 73,000 monks. Women entered the lineage charts (more on this below), and were publicly honored, e.g., by being invited to teach the emperor. But by the 9th century, Buddhism was persecuted, and about 26,000 monks and nuns were forced out of the monasteries. Despite this, a strong monastic community persisted. Nuns played an important role. Their temples had considerable independence. While monks and nuns normally did not practice together in the dharma room,¹² they encountered each other often (and we have many stories of such encounters). Many nuns were renowned for their virtue, their learning, and their practice, and hagiographic stories were told (the classic volume of Mahayana nun hagiography is the 11th century compilation translated as *Lives of the Nuns*) that were meant to be inspiring to both men and women.

Various versions of the lineage chart have varying numbers of women, starting with Moshan (see below). I believe the maximum is 14 women listed, at least five of whom were laywomen. We know very little about most of these women (as with most of the men). The most notable Ch'an women teachers had written records just as the men did, some of them widely distributed at the time. But the women's records disappeared into the archives (think — out of print but in a couple of libraries) while some (relatively few, but some) of the men's records — Joju, Linchi — remained, figuratively speaking, best sellers and never went out of print. An exciting strand of contemporary scholarship consists of bringing the women's records to life again.

When we look at these women's records it becomes obvious, just as in the rhetoric of the *Therigatha*, that there is no distinctions between the practice or teaching of women and men. Women's dharma combat is just as powerful. Women in the Linchi tradition shouted and gave blows just as the men did. Whether this is a matter of capitulation to a male model or a refusal to be limited by female stereotypes is a matter of opinion. These women were who they were and I am grateful for it.

§6. More about laywomen

As in many religions, laywomen have carried much of the Buddhist tradition forward. Donations from laymen and laywomen have always been essential to the support of Buddhism. This has been institutionalized in Asia to a very high degree. More to the point, despite its monastic tradition, there are stories in Buddhism of laymen and laywomen who are recognized for their practice and realization — Vimalakirti is not the only one, and we'll

¹¹ Seoul has been removed from the list because the training requirements in Korea are now more stringent.

¹² but as some of the stories below make clear, there was some mixing at times

give a few more examples below. And, most tellingly, because of the expectations on women to marry and have children, many women who did become nuns did so late in life, after they were widowed or had raised their children. Many of these women did much of their training while they were still laywomen (cf., Miao-tsung, below). In some of the Chinese and Korean courts, aristocratic women supported a kind of in-house women's temple. Some of these upper-class women took some form of monastic vows, others didn't; some continued to function in the broader society (as we do), others didn't. In general, upperclass laywomen were readily accepted as students by Buddhist teachers, even as students of great accomplishment, and at times were praised by their teachers in public homilies. Interestingly, when they were praised it was in what we would consider masculine terms: Zen masters in the Tang and Sung tradition were not interested in praising modest gentleness in either men or women. (The situation was different in other forms of Buddhism; the nuns of the *Lives* were praised for such qualities as self-effacement and modesty, but just as it is not clear that the Linchi masters considered their terms of praise to be masculine, it is not clear that the author of the *Lives* considered his terms of praise to be feminine.)

§7. Four renowned women in the Tang and Sung dynasties

It's time to flesh out the generalities of sections 5 and 6. Here are a few stories about a few women in the Ch'an tradition of the Tang and Sung dynasties

1. The nun Tsung-chih.

Tsung-chi was one of the four major students of Bodhidharma. Only one of them, Hui-ke, made the lineage charts, but the others were considered important figures, having received a sort of partial transmission. Here is the story:

When Bodhidharma was about to return to India, he asked his four top students to state their realization. Tao-fu said that the Buddhist path transcends language but is not separate from it. Bodhidharma said "You have attained my skin." Tsung-chi said it was like seeing one of the Buddha-lands; if you see it once you never need to see it again. Bodhidharma said "You have attained my flesh." Tao-yu said that the four elements are originally empty and the five aggregates not existent, so nothing that he comprehends is attainable. Bodhidharma said "You have attained my bone,," Hui-ke silently bowed. Bodhidharma said "You have attained my marrow."

So a woman was there at the beginning of Ch'an.

2. Ling Chao.

She was the daughter of Layman Pang, a famous lay practitioner — he appears in the lineage charts and is sort of the Tang version of Vimalakirti, except he wasn't rich. At some point, probably when Ling Chao was a teenager, her father sank all his possessions in the river, left his wife and son on the farm, and wandered through China with his daughter. They lived, by choice, in great poverty. There is an extensive record of Layman Pang's dharma combat, but little about Ling Chao (and even less about her brother). Here are two stories:

A visitor asks the Layman whether Zen is easy or difficult. He says it's very difficult, like trying to scatter sesame seeds over a tree. The visitor walks a little further and asks the Layman's wife. She says it is easy, like touching your feet to the ground when you get out of bed. The visitor walks a little farther, sees Ling Chao, and asks the same question. Versions of her response differ, here's one: not difficult, not easy, when hungry eat, when tired sleep.

Layman Pang is old, he's ready to die, and he says to Ling Chao, "See how high the sun is and report to me when it's noon." She realizes what's going on, goes outside, and says, "Father, come quick, it's an eclipse!" He goes to look, she hops on the bed, sits with her

hands in hapchang,¹³ and dies. He comes back, sees her, and exclaims, “My daughter beat me to it!” He then stays alive another seven days to observe the funeral rites.

In the (few) stories about Ling Chao she inevitably comes off as the person of deepest attainment, the only one who reliably has attainment deeper than her father.

It cannot be stressed enough how little we know of her. In a recent book she has been semi-fictionalized into an exploited figure, working her fingers to the bone to support her lazy father. I like to think of her instead as a fearless wanderer like her father, striding free of social constraints and enjoying every minute of it. The unrecoverable truth is most probably in between.

3. Moshan Liaoran.

Moshan was the first woman to appear in the lineage chart, and was considered one of the major teachers of her time (late 8th and early 9th century). She was a contemporary of Linchi. Her male student Guanxi Xian famously declared “I received half a ladle at Father Linchi’s place and half a ladle at Mother Moshan’s. Since I took that drink I’ve never been thirsty.”

Moshan’s name means “summit mountain.” This gives context to the following dialogue, which records Guanxi’s meeting with the woman who became his teacher.

Moshan asked, “Where did you come from?” and he responded, “I left the entrance to the road.” “Why didn’t you block it?” she asked. He had no answer, and bowed in acknowledgment. Then he asked, “What is Moshan like?” She said, “Its peak isn’t visible.” “What sort of person lives there?” “Not with male or female form.” Guanxi shouted KATZ and asked, “Why don’t you transform yourself?”¹⁴ And Moshan answered, “I’m not a fox spirit.¹⁵ Why should I transform myself?” At which point Guanxi became her student, working in the vegetable garden for three years.

4. Miao-tsung

Miao-tsung was born into a wealthy family. As a teenager, ignorant of Ch’an, she had a great insight but thought everyone had them so didn’t mention it to anyone. She married, somewhat against her will, and began practicing on her own. She had several encounters with various Ch’an masters in which she basically blew them away. Still a laywoman, she took lay precepts with Ta-hui and sat a summer retreat during which she fully awakened. She was recognized as a teacher while still a laywoman, and did not become a nun until quite old.

Here are two stories about her.

The first is part of her first encounter Master Yuan, Ta Hui’s teacher:

Yuan greeted her by saying, “How can you, a protected lady from a wealthy family, be prepared for the business of a great hero?” She replied, “Does the Buddha dharma distinguish between male and female forms?”¹⁶ Yuan then asked her, “What is the Buddha? This mind is the Buddha. What about you?” She said, “I’ve heard of you for a long time, but you still say that kind of thing.”

And so on. This woman was completely fearless. But not quite ripe. It was only when Ta-hui, commanded by Miao-tsung’s husband (a high government official), gave a speech which quoted Shih-t’ou’s line, “This way won’t do; not this way won’t do. This way and not this way both won’t do” that Miao-tsung fully awakened, and was acknowledged by Ta-hui.

¹³ “hapchang” is Korean for the hand posture that Japanese call “gassho;” in English it is translated as “palms together”.

¹⁴ Shades of Sariputra and the devakanya!

¹⁵ the shape-shifter of east Asian mythology

¹⁶ Back in the Vimalakirti Sutra again!

The encounter with Yuan is also interesting, because it makes clear that (a) he is skeptical about an upper class woman seriously practicing Zen, but (b) is quite happy to take on a woman student if she appears worthy. This combination of stereotype and exception seems quite familiar.

The most famous story about Miao-tsung occurred when she, still a laywoman, was practicing at Ta-hui's temple and was lodged in the abbot's quarters. The head monk disapproved, so Ta'hui told him to go interview her.

When the head monk showed up, Miao-tsung asked him, "Is this a dharma interview or a wordly interview?" The head monk said, "A dharma interview." Miao-tsung told him to send his attendants away, and went into the room. When she called him in, he saw her lying face up on the bed, naked. He pointed at her womb and said, "What kind of place is this?" She replied, "All the Buddhas of the three worlds, the six patriarchs, all the great monks everywhere — they all come out from here." The head monk said, "Will you let me enter or not?" She replied, "It allows horses to cross; it does not allow asses to cross." She then declared the interview over and turned her back to him.

As a nun she was known for keeping the precepts strictly and for leading a life of great austerity. The governor of Kiangsu province ordered her to leave her life of seclusion to become the abbot and teacher of a woman's temple, which she did, but she soon asked permission to retire, which was granted.¹⁷

§8. Women as supporting characters

An even larger group of stories involves women as supporting characters in men's enlightenment stories. Usually the women are catalysts. The general form of these stories goes like this: a sutra master is defeated in dharma combat by a woman. Stunned, he leaves his comfortable life and begins hard training. Eventually he awakens deeply and becomes a great Zen master. As for the woman, she served her part in the story and never reappears. Here are two such stories.

1. The nun Jin Se (True World)

Before Zen Master Guji encountered Zen he was a famous sutra master. One day he was studying the sutras when his light was blocked by a tall nun wearing her large straw traveling hat. This was incredibly disrespectful — not only didn't she bow to him as she was supposed to, but she didn't even remove her hat. This strange nun walked around Guji three times, each time striking her staff on the ground in front of him: thud! thud! thud! Then she spoke: "If you can give me one word I will remove my hat." Stunned, he could not say anything. The nun turned to leave. Realizing that it was getting late and the path was dangerous, he asked her to spend the night at his temple. "If you can give me a word I will spend the night," she replied. He could not and she left. Shaken, he realized that all his sutra training meant nothing, and turned to the path of Zen.

2. A teahouse lady

The great sutra master Dok Sahn was traveling and came to a tea house where he wanted to have lunch. The old lady running the place said, "Oh, you are a great sutra master. Please, I have a question for you. If you answer this question you can have your lunch for free. But if you can't answer it, you get no lunch." Impatient and not a little bit angry at her impertinence, he replied, "You are speaking to a *Diamond Sutra* master! My knowledge is unparalleled through the land! Ask me anything!" "Okay," said the old lady. "The *Diamond Sutra* says, 'Past mind cannot be grasped, present mind cannot be grasped, future mind cannot be grasped.' With what kind of mind will you eat your lunch?" Dok Sahn could not answer. Stunned, he realized that all his sutra training meant nothing. He asked the woman

¹⁷ In this, as in the circumstance of Ta-hui's lecture, we see the intimate relationship between government and religion in the China of that time.

who her teacher was, and went up the mountain to learn from him. Later he became a great Zen master.

There are many, many stories like this. Note the double-edge. On the one hand, there is a clear message that women can be formidable practitioners of the dharma. On the other hand, there is a patronizing message: if even a woman (usually an old woman) can wake up, what's wrong with you, male monk, that you haven't awakened yet? There are even records of homilies in which male teachers exhort their male students in exactly this way.

§9. A brief trip to Japan

The situation in Japan was never as good for women as in China or Korea. During the Meiji dynasty in the mid-19th century it became even worse as the full vinaya was pretty much destroyed. Monks became priests, married, and their temples were inherited by their sons. This remains the Japanese pattern, except in large training monasteries. What little room there was for women teachers was even further diminished.

The two dominant figures in Japanese Zen are Dogen, a 13th century Soto master, and Hakuin, an 18th century Rinzai master. Both had important women students. Dogen wrote extensively in his great work, the *Shobogenzo* of the dharmic capability of women. He wrote passionately of the importance of recognizing everyone's capabilities and learning from any good teacher, no matter what the external circumstances (e.g., married men, women; even fox spirits). He wrote of specific individuals (e.g., Moshan). And he spoke with great approval of the situation of the nuns in contemporary Sung China. He wrote of these nuns as having equal status with monks:

If one of them has the reputation of having acquired the dharma, the court will grant an edict appointing her abbot of a nunnery.¹⁸ She will then immediately go up to the dharma hall in the monastery [to give a lecture]. From the abbot on down, all the monks will attend and, standing erect, they will listen to her expound the dharma. It is the monks who will put the questions. This has been the rule since ancient times.¹⁹

Dogen had been to China, and while the picture he paints is somewhat more optimistic than the reality, it is not that far off; as we have seen, women who became accomplished despite all barriers were, indeed, recognized. The situation was much worse for women in Japan than it was in China, and he was using the Chinese acceptance of women (partial though it was) to encourage Japan to change; hence the over-optimism.

As far as I know, Hakuin has no such written defense or praise of women, but the community that grew up around him accepted women readily. Most famous is his student Satsujo. Here are the outlines of her story. As a young girl she attained enlightenment and, now awakened, sat on the sutras (because she understood they were not special). Her parents were shocked and brought her to the local Zen master. He realized that she had attained deeply, but that this was no excuse for arrogance, so he told her to act appropriately. Which she did, living a pretty ordinary life²⁰ except that everyone knew she was a highly accomplished Zen practitioner. While not formally a teacher²¹ she taught informally (as Layman Pang and Ling Chao did). When her granddaughter died and she wept people questioned her attainment, at which point she stopped weeping long enough to say, "my tears are not for me but for my granddaughter." In between her childhood and old age there are various details of her encounters with her teacher or with other practitioners. In most of these encounters she clearly "wins," whatever that means.

¹⁸ Another example of how what we would consider meddling by government in religion seems to have been considered normal in much of east Asia much of the time.

¹⁹ A full translation of these passages can be found at http://www.stanford.edu/group/scbs/sztp3/translations/shobogenzo/translations/raihai_tokuzui/rhtz.translation.html. Or just Google "Dogen women."

²⁰ I am reminded of Kierkegaard's knight of faith

²¹ unlike her earlier Chinese counterparts

Then there is the nun Ryonen Genso. She was born into a noble family in 1646. Her life was typical of the life of the nobility — a stint at court as a child, studying calligraphy and poetry; an arranged marriage; children. It became untypical when, in 1672, with the permission of her husband, she became a nun in the Obaku school (a combination of Zen and Pure Land, the smallest of the Zen sects in Japan, considered heretical by many Rinzai and Soto teachers). Not satisfied with her study at the women's temple, she asked two different teachers to admit her as a student. Both refused, on the grounds that her beauty would distract the monks. At the second refusal she heated up an iron and held it against her face, deliberately destroying her beauty.

She became her teacher's leading student, a great teacher in her own right, and abbot of her own temple.

Her calligraphic poem about her self-mutilation is a famous work of art. I was lucky enough to see it at KU's Spencer Museum many years ago, as part of a traveling exhibit on Zen art in Japan. The palpable physical evidence that this woman was real, and that her own hand had created the work in front of me, was overwhelming.

Here is her poem:²²

Formerly to amuse myself at court I would burn orchid incense;
Now to enter the Zen life I burn my own face.
The four seasons pass by naturally like this,
but I don't know who I am amidst the change.

In this living world
the body I give up and burn
would be wretched
if I thought of myself as
anything but firewood.

§10. Korea: context

Seon (a.k.a. Zen) Buddhism came to Korea during the reign of Queen Seondeok, the Queen of Silla, a devout Buddhist. During her reign (mid-7th century) the Korean peninsula was wracked by almost constant warfare, but she kept her kingdom intact and established a close relationship with China. She founded or rebuilt many major Buddhist temples. The next two rulers of the Silla kingdom were also women, and this time is regarded as a somewhat golden age of Buddhism and of general Korean culture.

The Goryo (a.k.a. Koryo, a.k.a. Goryeo) period (10th to 14th centuries) was also a period of Buddhist flowering in which women were encouraged in their Buddhist practice. The monastic orders were thriving (both men's and women's). Many aristocratic women practiced while at the court, and became nuns later in life, after discharging their family duties. The great male teacher Hyesim, who compiled the first collection of Korean kong-ans,²³ explicitly challenged the doctrine that you cannot be enlightened while in a woman's body, and had many women students. As part of a peace agreement, many Goryo women were sent to China (at least one Chinese empress, the Empress Ki, was in fact Korean), and Korean women had a strong influence on Buddhism at the Yuan court.

In the early Choson period (14th to 15th centuries) Buddhism was suppressed by the ascendant Confucians. The monastic sangha was seen as a political threat. Monks and nuns were seen as licentious, even criminal, and several strict edicts were passed in order to decrease or even eliminate the monastic sangha. Because the relative freedom of nuns was especially threatening to Confucian gender ideology, the strictures on nun were especially severe. In 1404 it was forbidden for women who were not already nuns to take vows. In 1413 an order was passed to laicize all nuns who had never been married. In 1444 an order was passed to isolate the remaining nuns, forbidding them even to walk in the streets. This happened in the context of general gender separation; during this period upper class women endured a kind of purdah. These same upper class women — including women of the royal household — were the main support for the nuns' sangha, both financially, and

²² Translated by Steven Addiss, in his book *The Art of Zen*, p. 95; a reproduction of her calligraphy is on p. 96.

²³ = koans (Jap.)

personally. For example, since in Confucian ideology a widow should not remarry, it was not unusual for an widow to take nuns' vows, and nuns' temples were built on the estates and palaces of the aristocracy even while the male family members were taking active steps to suppress Buddhism.

Ironically, these rules in fact strengthened the nuns' sangha, making it even more independent from men than it had been. Throughout the Buddhist world, the nuns' order in Korea has been among the most stable, lasting continuously for over 1500 years.

Let's skip now to the last 125 or so years, the period beginning with the late 19th century Buddhist revival led by the great monk and Zen master Kyong Ho up to the present.

Kyong Ho's revival of Korea Buddhism roughly coincided with the beginning of Japan's attempts to subjugate Korea in the late 19th century. By 1910 Japan was fully in charge and, following both the 14th century Confucian example and the example of mid-19th century Japan, attempts were made to dissolve the monastic sangha, largely by encouraging monks to marry while still remaining monks. As generally happens when male celibacy is dissolved in religious orders, women's celibacy was not dissolved — even in contemporary Korea, where there are several orders of married monks, there are no orders of married nuns --- nuns in the married monk orders are expected to remain celibate.

After the Korean war, the celibate monastics and married monastics challenged each other over control of temples and other Buddhist properties. Nuns were prominent in this effort, and the government eventually backed the celibate orders.²⁴ At this time there were actually more nuns than monks in the dominant Chogye order, and some major temples were given over to nuns. Generally these temples were in poorer shape than the ones given to monks, and major nuns of this period had to put a lot of their energies into physical reconstruction of their temples.

Nuns' communities are largely independent from monks communities, although when temples are closely associated the monks and nuns may attend ceremonies and dharma speeches together. Nuns sit behind monks, but they join in public dharma combat vigorously, with no hindrances. Beginning in the early 20th century, a small number of nuns have been recognized as both great meditation masters and as great sutra masters. They generally teach other women. With the exception of the somewhat maverick Dae Haeng Sunim (who founded her own order and later gave a generous bequest to the Chogye nuns' order) I am not sure whether any have addressed audiences which include men.

Their training has become more rigorous over the last century. One hundred years ago a woman living far from a major training temple could take the full vinaya vows and find herself working essentially as a servant to an older nun or to neighboring monks. She might not receive any sort of Buddhist education other than a rudimentary acquaintance with forms, and might not even have the opportunity to attend retreats.

Today the training is rigorous and long for any woman wanting to become a nun — that is why Korea is no longer a resource for women from other traditions wanting to take the full vinaya vows. A woman wanting to become a nun first spends six months as a haengja (a sort of pre-novice), followed by four weeks of basic Buddhist education, followed by an exam. If she passes, she takes sramanerika (novice) ordination from ten nuns (three teachers and seven witnesses). Then she spends four years in seminary, largely studying Korean texts on practice, conduct, and rules, and sutras. This training is intensely communal in nature, with no privacy (think of army barracks), almost no personal freedom, and only the most limited individual initiative. The metaphor used in Korea for this kind of training is potatoes rubbing against each other to become clean; when monks and nuns begin training, this is the hardest part; when they look back on their training, this is what they value the most. Halfway through the four years there is another partial ordination ceremony (sikarnana), also presided over by ten nuns. Finally at the end of the four years there is an examination. If woman passes she gets to take the full vinaya vows, this time presided over by ten nuns and by ten monks. At this point she gets to be referred to as a bhikkuni. At this point she is fully a nun.

²⁴ For a long time the non-celibate orders seemed to be dying out, but the Taego order became resurgent in the late 20th century and now has branches all over the world.

Until fairly recently, a woman could replace the seminary by four years of intensive Soen practice, but I have heard from some sources that this is no longer possible. I have heard from still other sources, that nuns are expected to have three years of Soen practice after seminary. But maybe this is just Soen nuns, I don't know.²⁵

After taking full vows, both monks and nuns have quite a bit of freedom. Much as Catholic monks and nuns, they can focus on practice, they can work within their community, or they can work in the community at large. While most who work outside their temple do so as teachers, social workers, and so on, nuns can have businesses — in 2002 I visited a restaurant in Seoul owned by a nun; she regarded the vegetarian food she served as her way of waking people up (given the meat- and fish-oriented cuisine of most Koreans, she had a point).

While monks and nuns dominate the face of Buddhism in Korea, laypeople are an integral part, and laywomen in particular are devoted practitioners as well as benefactors. When my teacher came to America he formed residential communities that included laypeople, but he was not the first Korean Zen master to live in a such a community; his great grand-teacher Kyong Ho did so as well. Dedicated women lay practitioners are recognized as *bosal nims* and are a kind of backbone for Korean Buddhism. I used to think that *bosal nims* were simply women who cooked and cleaned for monks, and certainly many of them do that, but contemporary *bosal nims* can have a lot of dharma responsibility: chaplains in prisons, Buddhist counselors in schools, and so on. Lay people in Korea undergo a fairly extensive course of Buddhist study before taking ten precepts., after which they are known as dharma teachers. The Chogye order has lay organizations associated with it, and has begun giving lay people some organizational responsibility within the order. A consortium of about thirty lay Buddhist organizations operates independently under the name Buddhist Solidarity and Reform. Women are active in these organizations. In addition, there are teasing glimpses of lay women teaching at the highest levels — the kong-an “Peop Ki Bosal’s Grass” gives an example of a woman teacher, almost certainly lay (she is not called Sunim) during Man Gong’s time.²⁶ Man Gong goes to check her and evidently approves (but one person I consulted was sure she was mythical, a bodhisattva, not a human being). The laypeople in Korea to whom my teacher gave transmission and inka do not teach openly in Korea, the way such people do here. Instead they teach informally (the male teacher Hwa Ryon Gosa²⁷) or quietly (the woman Zen master Hyun Soo Lee, who retains the public title *Bosal Nim*, and privately teaches a small circle of women students).

In traditional Korean Soen, people do not have regular interviews with teachers. Encounters are often public, and private encounters tend to be instigated by the student or, more rarely, take place during other activities, such as traveling together. So while the women we will meet in the next section did not do much of what we would consider formal teaching, they were considered important leaders and teachers, especially for other women. Korean monastics have sponsors (the word is *unsa*) who act as spiritual guides even after full ordination, and these women were considered great *unsas*.

§11. Three important Korean nuns of the early to middle 20th century.

If you go to the Chogye order web site, you’ll discover that Man Gong had at least three women dharma heirs, Beophui, Iryop, and Mansong Sunims. (If you went to the Chogye order web site a few years ago, this information was not there.) It is not always clear what kind of authorization they received — inka, transmission, or none of the above — but it is also not clear how important that is in Korea, where the most widely used title for important monks and nuns is *Kun Sunim*, or “big monk,” which is an informal title, not formally acknowledged through a ceremony. Ko Bong gave inka to the nun Sae Deung Sunim, but I have not been able to find out anything more about her. I will say a little about Beophui, Iryop, and another important nun, Songyong.

²⁵ Korean Buddhism is syncretic, and the same temple can house Soen, Pure Land, sutra, and other types of monastics; a monk or nun can move from one form of Buddhism to another without leaving the temple.

²⁶ Man Gong was one of Kyong Ho’s students, a great Korean Zen master of the early 20th century.

²⁷ Gosa, or Gosal nim, is the male equivalent of *Bosal nim*.

Beophui is the only woman who has a biography on the *Great Soen Masters of Korean History* web page of the Chogye order. Born in 1887, she was left at a women's temple by her grandmother when she was three, took novice precepts at 14, and full precepts at 21. She began studying with Man Gong at the age of 25 — the Chogye web site has the revealing phrase, “Though a nun, she practiced Seon meditation just like the monks” — and received transmission at the age of 29. She was a major administrator, a widely respected *unsa*, and was known for her tireless energy, working during the day, practicing most of the night, sleeping only about two hours a night. She never gave a dharma talk and left no written record. Her teaching was largely by example. Apparently the first nun in the modern era of Korean Buddhism to be taken seriously by the monks, she had a great influence on the nuns' order, both in her own right and from her dharma descendants. The Chogye web page describes her as establishing a woman's lineage, and describes nine of her students as Masters [their capitalization].

Songyong was born in 1903. We know a lot about her from Martine Bachelor's wonderful book *Women in Korean Buddhism*, whose second part is devoted to a biography of Songyong Sunim. Illiterate, like most nuns of her generation she was not strongly encouraged to practice (except by her *unsa*, whom she saw only rarely), but instead was encouraged to devote herself to working for an elderly nun. But Songyong had a very strong practice mind and was finally given permission to leave the temple where she lived and go practice with Man Gong. After that her life took on the standard trajectory of a practicing monk or nun — intense practice (e.g., the 90 day retreats called *kyol che*) alternating with more relaxed (by monastic standards) periods of time. Also as is fairly typical in Korea, she practiced at various places with various teachers, although she clearly considered Man Gong her main teacher. As is typical in Korea, she had only rare interviews with teachers. In her first interview with Man Gong, when she asked for a *hwadu*²⁸, she was greatly discouraged by the question he roared at her (“Since you are incapable of knowing the head or the tail, what kind of *hwadu* are you talking about?”) Later, when she asked another teacher for a *hwadu*, he told her that if she had not received a *hwadu* from Man Gong from whom would she ever learn? Despite these discouragements, she persisted in her strong practice. Eventually Man Gong's question actually became a *hwadu* for her, and she had many breakthroughs, although she herself was never satisfied. She became an important mentor for young nuns, as Beophui had been for her, and was highly respected in the monastic *sangha*.

Finally, we have the decidedly unordinary life of Kim Iryop. Born in 1896 into a Christian family, she was a well-known writer, feminist and intellectual, whose achievements were overshadowed in the public mind by her life — several lovers, marriages, a child out of wedlock, all in the open and without shame. Then, at 33, she became a Buddhist nun and Man Gong's student. She promised Man Gong that she would stop writing, but found this impossible. In the early years of her training she wrote secretly, at night, in the dark; later she wrote openly. Most of her later writing was meant to encourage others to practice Buddhism. Her own practice was fierce: in the last ten years of her life she remained in meditation posture more or less continuously, not even lying down to sleep; in her last three years her legs had atrophied to the extent that she could no longer walk.

§12. Frogs

About 25 years ago I sat a solo retreat at the Providence Zen Center. All night I would hear the frogs, and nearly every day I walked to the pond to look for them. Being an ignorant city girl, I was looking for brownish-greenish things hunched over on logs or rocks waiting for insects to go by. Of course I didn't see anything like that, and I assumed the frogs must be hiding. Then one day my eyes looked below the surface of the water near the shore, and there they were, dozens of them, pale and green and stretched out. They had been there all along. I just hadn't known where to look.

Women Buddhist practitioners and teachers are like those frogs. They have been there all along. But much of the time they weren't what people expected to see, so they were invisible even when they were in plain sight. We are lucky to be living in a time when people know where and how to look. We are lucky to have revealed to us so many more inspirations for our own practice, whether we are female or male.

²⁸ = great question

Suggested readings:

Martine Batchelor, *Women in Korean Zen: Lives and Practices*

The first part of the book is about Batchelor's experience as a nun practicing with Ku San Sunim; the second part is Songyong Sunim's "as told to" autobiography. Highly recommended. Gives a strong sense of what it is like to be a nun.

Martine Batchelor (ed), *Walking on Lotus Flowers*

Contains several essays by Korean nuns in various schools

Baochang, Shih Pao-Ch'ang, Kathryn Ann Tsai (tr.) *Lives of the Nuns*

Ancient Chinese biographies of Buddhist nuns of the fourth to sixth centuries

Jose Cabezon, *Sexuality and Gender*

A seminal compilation, it contains an article by Miriam Levering on Rinzai rhetoric towards women, including a paean to a lay woman

Eunsu Cho, *Korean Buddhist Nuns and Laywomen: Hidden Histories, Enduring Vitality*

The first and so far only focused attempt in English to trace women throughout the history of Korean Buddhism

Peter Gregory and Daniel Getz (eds), *Buddhism in the Sung*

Contains articles by Ding-Wa Evelyn Hsieh and Miriam Levering on Ch'an women

Beata Grant, *Daughters of Emptiness: Poems of Chinese Buddhist Nuns*

Exactly what it says, from the 6th century to the 20th century, focusing on ancient China; most of the women were Ch'an nuns, and Grant has written excellent short biographies to give context

Rita Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*

Especially good on portrayals of female beings in the early Mahayana sutras

Susan Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women*

The *Therigatha* fleshed out with extensive commentary

Grace Schireson, *Zen Women: Beyond Tea-Ladies, Iron Maidens, and Macho Masters*

An excellent comprehensive history of women's participation in east Asian Ch'an/Soen/Zen

Arvind Shah (ed), *Women Saints in World Religions*

Contains Levering's work on Miao-tsung (which is also included in *A Zen Sourcebook*, edited by

Stephen Addis, Stanley Lombardo, and Judith Roitman)

Major scholars in the field

The scholarly study of Buddhist women is thriving. Here are a few scholars worth reading. Their work tends to be scattered in journals and anthologies, so I give no references.

Paula Arai
Eunsu Cho
Patricia Fister
Ding-Wa Evelyn Hsieh
Miriam Levering

A technical note on spelling:

English transliterations of Chinese names are notoriously hard to reconcile. There is the Wade-Giles system (to take a typical name, Ch'ao Pu-chih). There is the Pinyin System, sometimes radically different from Wade-Giles (e.g., Beijing instead of Peking). Furthermore, Buddhist monks and nuns have several names at different stages of their lives, and are also by the places they lived. As a final complication, Korean and Japanese versions of Chinese names often resemble neither the Chinese nor each other. I basically took whatever spelling was used by my source, and only in the case of famous names or terminology (Ch'an instead of Chan) worried about consistency.

Then there's Korean. Is it Goryo, Goryeo or Koryo? Boephui or Pophui? Again, there are rival systems to transliterate Korean into English; I chose the spelling used most often in the references I consulted.