

Women in Buddhism

Instructor

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Institution

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Course Level and Type

Undergraduate class

Hours of Instruction

3 hours / week; 15 weeks

Enrolment and Last Year Taught

20 students, Spring 2000

Course Description

This course aims to provide students with a comparative, cross-cultural perspective on women and Buddhism during different historical periods and in different cultures. We will read: 1) the important Buddhist scriptures that discuss female sexuality and spirituality, 2) the biographical accounts of pious women (including both lay and ordained), and 3) the scholarly works that discuss contemporary Buddhist women in various societies. Through a variety of sources, we seek to understand the Buddhist concepts of gender and sexuality, views of women's spiritual capacities, women's images, roles, experiences, and contributions in Buddhist traditions, and scholarly approaches to women and Buddhism. The course is lecture with discussion. Readings will be taken from primary texts in translation and secondary works.

Required Textbooks

- 1) Murcott, Susan. *The First Buddhist Women: Translation and Commentaries on the Therigatha*. California, Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991.
- 2) Paul, Diana Y. *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in Mahâyâna Tradition*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U. of California Press, 1985.
- 3) Tsai, Kathryn Ann, trans. *Lives of the Nuns: Biographies of Chinese Buddhist Nuns from the Fourth to Sixth Centuries*. Honolulu: U. of Hawaii Press, 1972.
- 4) King, Sallie B. *Journey in Search of the Way: The Spiritual Autobiography of Satomi Myôdô*. SUNY, 1993.
- 5) Tsomo, Karma Lekshe, ed., *Buddhist Women Across Cultures: Realizations*. SUNY, 1999.

Suggested Readings on "Women and Buddhism"

Feminism and Contemporary Buddhist Women

- Allione, T. *Women of Wisdom*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984.
- Friedman, L. *Meetings with Remarkable Women: Buddhist Teachers in America*. Shambhala, 1987.
- Gross, M. R. *Buddhism After Patriarchy*. SUNY, 1993.
- Kalyanavaca, ed. *The Moon and Flowers: A Woman's Path to Enlightenment*. Windhorse, 1997.
- Klein, Anne C. *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.
- Queen, C. and Sallie King, eds. *Engaged Buddhism*. SUNY, 1996.
- Tsomo, K. L., ed. *Sakyadhîtâ: Daughters of the Buddha*. N. Y.: Snow Lion, 1988.
- Willis, Janice D. ed. *Feminine Ground: Essays on Women and Tibet*. Snow Lion, 1989.

Women and Zen Buddhism

- Articles by Ding-hwa Hsieh and M. Levering in *Buddhism in the Sung*, ed. Peter Gregory and Dan Getz. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999.
- Levering, M. L. "Lin-chi (Rinzai) Ch'an and Gender," in Cabezon, Jose Ignacio, ed. *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, pp. 137-156. SUNY, 1992.
- Repts, Paul compiled. *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, n. d.

Images of Women in Buddhist Literature

- Falk, "The Case of the Vanishing Nuns" in *Unspoken World*, eds. Falk and Gross, pp. 207-224. San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1980.
- Law, Jane Marie, ed. *Religious Reflections on the Human Body*. Indiana UP, 1995.
- Richman, "The Portrayal of a Female Renouncer in a Tamil Buddhist Text." In *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols*, ed. Caroline Walker Bynum, Steven Harrel, and Paula Richman. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986. [Also see her article in Cabezon, ed. *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*. and book on this topic.]
- Shaw, M. *Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism*. Princeton UP, 1994.

Goddesses

- Kinsely, D. *The Goddesses' Mirror: Visions of the Divine from East and West*. SUNY, 1989.
- Klein, A. *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen: Buddhists, Feminists, and the Art of the Self*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.
- Olson, Carl, ed. *The Book of the Goddess: Past and Present*. NY: Crossroad 1983.
- Paul, Diana "Kuan-yin: Savior and Saviress in Chinese Pure Land Buddhism," in *The Book of the Goddess: Past and Present*, ed. Carl Olsen, pp. 161-175.
- Reed, Barbara E. "The Gender Symbolism of Kuan-yin Bodhisattva," in *Buddhism, Gender, and Sexuality*, pp. 159-180.

Other Suggested Sources

- Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler. *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, tenth edition. New York: Crossroad, 1994.
- Sharma, Arvind. *Women in World Religions*. SUNY, 1987.
- <http://www2.hawaii.edu/~tsomo/biblio.htm>

Grades and Class Policies

90-100 = A (excellent)	Class Attendance, Participation, and Presentation: 10%
80-89 = B (good)	Assignments: 15%
70-79 = C (average)	Two Short Papers: 40%
Below 60 = F (fail)	Term Paper & Oral Presentation: 20% + 5%
	Final Exam: 10%

I. **Attendance, Participation, and Presentation (10%):** You are expected to participate in discussion and give oral reports of the readings. Each student in turn will be asked to summarize the assigned readings and raise questions for discussion.

II. **Assignments (15%):** 5 assignments in oral (3-5 min.), written (2-3 pages), or both.

III. **Two Short Papers (40%):** 4-5 pages, 12-sized font, and double space. Due at beginning of the class. To be fair to everyone, a late paper is accepted ONLY if you turn it in within three days after the deadline. Also, the highest grade of a late paper is B unless you have legitimate reasons with official documents. An excellent paper means 1) a careful and comprehensive study of the readings, 2) a critical and thoughtful way of thinking, 3) an effective respond to the questions, and 4) with clarity and sufficient textual evidence.

IV. One Term Paper (20%) and Oral Presentation (5%):

Suggested topics:

- 1) Images/roles of women in Christian literature as compared to images/roles of women in Buddhist texts.
- 2) Compare women in Hinduism (or any other religion) with Women in Buddhism.
- 3) A feminist interpretation and reconstruction of Buddhism.
- 4) Buddhism and American women.
- 5) Buddhism and the issues of homosexuality/abortion/ecology.
- 6) Women in Theravada or Tibetan Buddhism.
- 7) Eminent women figures in contemporary Buddhist movements.

NOTE: The above topics are broad, and so you may need to focus on one specific issue or aspect.

Your grade for this part will be based on whether and to what extent you have fulfilled the following requirements:

- 1) Toward the end of the semester, give a 15 min. oral presentation in class. (5%)
- 2) Turn in a 9-12 page research paper (12-sized font, typed, and doubled space) with footnotes and an **annotated bibliography** (i. e., aside from the list, you need to provide brief annotations: what theme and why do you list it as your reference?). (20%).

NOTE: your references must include at least two scholarly books (2 articles or 2 websites = 1 book) published by prestigious or authoritative University Press/Publishing Inc. Do not paste directly from the website and be careful about your source origins.

“Research” means you discover new points aside from our class readings and textbooks and your paper demonstrate serious theoretical reflections and scholarly research.

Final Paper Due: Last Day of the Class.

V. **Final (10%):** multiple-choice, true/false, and/or proper link questions on the five textbooks.

VI. **Meeting with Instructor:** You are required to visit instructor in her office to talk about your term paper at least ONCE before the proposal due.

Course Schedule

<p>Week 1---Introduction to Buddhism and Concept of Gender Week 2-4---The First Buddhist Nuns and Images of Women in Early Buddhism Week 5-6---Images and Roles in Mahayana Buddhism Week 7-8---Buddhist Nuns in China (I) Week 9---Spring Break Week 10--- Buddhist Nuns in China (II) Week 11---Buddhist Women in Japan Week 12---Women and Buddhism in Asia Week 13---Buddhism and Western Women Week 14-15---Paper Presentation Week 16---Course Evaluation and Final Review</p>

Course Schedule:

Week 1

Mon.---Course format, purposes, requirements, and readings.

Wed.---Introduction to Buddhism

Fri.---Issue of Gender in Religious Studies

<p>Assignment #1 Due (a 3-min. oral & a 2-page written report): Look up Scholarly Works, Encyclopedia, and/or Websites to find out what “Gender” and the “Study of Gender” mean.</p>

Week 2

Mon.---Martin Luther King Day [No Class]

Wed.---Earliest Buddhist Women (I)

Reading: Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women*, Intro. & Chapter 1

Fri.---Earliest Buddhist Women (II)

Reading: Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women*, Chapter 2.

Week 3

Mon.---Earliest Buddhist Women (III)

Reading: Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women*, Chapter 3 and 4.

Wed.--- Earliest Buddhist Women (IV)

Reading: Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women*, Chapter 5 and 6.

Fri.---Earliest Buddhist Women (V)

Reading: Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women*, Chapter 7, 8 & 9.

Week 4

Mon.---Class Discussion

Reading: Murcott, *The First Buddhist Women*, pp. 169-199.

<p>Assignment # 2 Due (a 3-min. oral & a 2-3 page written report): Based on your reading of Murcott's book, list two significant points regarding earliest Buddhist women's OWN views toward the issue of female sexuality and spiritual perfection. Provide Textual Evidence Whenever Necessary.</p>
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Wed.---Images of Women in Early Buddhism (I)

Reading: Sponberg, Alan. "Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism" in *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, ed. José Ignacio Cabezón, pp. 3-36. (SUNY, 1992).

Fri.--- Images of Women in Early Buddhism (II)

Reading: Paul, *Women in Buddhism*, Introduction & Chapter 1.

Week 5

Mon. ---Images and Roles of Women in Mahayana Buddhism

Reading: Paul, *Women in Buddhism*, Chapter 2, pp. 106-134 and 155-162.

Wed.---Female Body and Spiritual Enlightenment (I)

Reading: Paul, *Women in Buddhism*, Chapter 5.

Fri.---Female Body and Spiritual Enlightenment (II)

Reading: Paul, *Women in Buddhism*, Chapter 6.

Week 6

Mon.---Bodhisattva of Compassion and Female Buddha

Reading: Paul, *Women in Buddhism*, Chapter 7 and 8 and Conclusion.

Wed.---Video: "Pilgrimage 1987, Pilgrimages to Tianzhu and Putuo" writer/producer Chun-Fang Yu" (BQ6450.C6 P54 1988) [56 min.]

Fri.---Paper #1 Oral Presentation and Due

Paper #1: Write a thoughtful paper that compares women portrayed in early Buddhist literature (S. Murcott's book) to women in Mahayana Buddhist scriptures (Paul's work): to what extent and in what way are there changes regarding women's images and roles & the views toward female sexuality and women's spiritual perfection?

Week 7

Mon.---Oral report on your term paper topic (what, why, and how?)

Wed.---Chinese Buddhist Women

Reading: Tsai, trans. *Lives of the Nuns*, pp. 1-16.

Fri.---Chinese Buddhist Nuns (I)

Tsai, trans. *Lives of the Nuns*, pp. 17-50.

Week 8

Mon.---Chinese Buddhist Nuns (II)

Tsai, trans. *Lives of the Nuns*, pp. 50-86.

Wed.---Chinese Buddhist Nuns (III)

Tsai, trans. *Lives of the Nuns*, pp. 87-106.

Fri.---The Nuns' Order in Traditional China

Hsieh, "Buddhist Nuns in Sung China (960-1279)," *Journal of Sung-Yüan Studies* 30 (2000): 63-96.

Week 9 Midterm Break

Week 10

Mon.---Women in Ch'an/Zen Buddhism

Reading: Hsieh, "Images of Women in Ch'an Buddhist Literature of the Sung Period," in *Buddhism in the Sung* (University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 148-187.

Miriam L. Levering, "Miao-tao and Her Teacher Ta-hui," in *Ibid.*, 188-219.

Wed.---Buddhist Nuns in Contemporary Taiwan

Reading: Huang & Weller, "Merit and Mothering: Women and Social Welfare in Taiwanese Buddhism," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 57.2 (May 1998): 379-96.

Assignment #3 Due: Prepare a 3-min oral & a 2-page summary: Search Website about the life of the nun **Cheng-yen** and the **Tzu-chi** (Ciji) Foundation.

Fri.---Nuns in Contemporary China

Video: "Choice for a Chinese Women: Enlightenment in a Buddhist Convent" BQ647.C46 1993/35 min

Reading: Review by Russel Kirkland in *Education about Asia* 4.1 (Spring 1999), p. 71.

Week 11

Mon.---Buddhism and Japanese Women (I)

Reading: King, Sallie B. *Journey in Search of the Way*, pp. 3-65.

Wed.---Buddhism and Japanese Women (II)

Reading: King, Sallie B. *Journey in Search of the Way*, pp. 67-111.

Assignment #4 Due: Rewrite Satomi Myodo's autobiography into third-person narrative (do not exceed two pages).

Fri.---Class Discussion

Reading: "Soto Zen Nuns" by Paula Arai in Tsomo, *Buddhist Women across Cultures*.

Week 12

Mon.---Paper #2 Due and Oral Presentation

Paper #2: Based on Tsai, King, articles on Ch'an/Zen Women, and information about the nun Cheng-yen/Zhengyan and contemporary Soto Zen nuns), discuss "in what way is Buddhism a constraint for women and in which ways is it liberative?" Do provide evidence from our readings to support your points.

Wed.---Buddhist Women in Asia (I)

Reading: Tsomo's *Buddhist Women Across Cultures*

Fri.--- Buddhist Women in Asia (II)

Reading: Tsomo's *Buddhist Women Across Cultures*

Week 13

Mon.---Buddhism and Western Feminism (I)

Reading: Tsomo's *Buddhist Women Across Cultures*

Wed.---Buddhism and Western Feminism (II)

Reading: Tsomo's *Buddhist Women Across Cultures*

Fri.---Class Discussion on Tsomo's *Buddhist Women Across Cultures*

Assignment #5 Due: Choose any two articles in Tsomo's book: why do you choose these two and what do you learn from them?

Week 14-15

Term Paper Presentation

Week 16

Mon.---Course Evaluation, Final Exam Review, and Final Paper Due

Pedagogical Reflections:

We discuss how women were perceived and portrayed in Buddhist writings and examine Buddhist women's religious communities and achievements. Aside from primary sources, we also read recent scholarly works on the issues of women and Buddhism and compare scholars' interpretations of Buddhist views toward women and the feminine.

The course has no prerequisite. Most students who take this course do not have any Buddhist background knowledge. I recommend some readings (such as Arvind Sharma, ed., *Women in World Religions* [SUNY, 1987] and Serinity Young, ed., *An Anthology of Sacred Texts by and about Women* [Crossroad, 1994]) and also provide lectures to help students gain a general idea of the history, doctrine, and practice of Buddhism.

Class discussion goes well and many of the readings are considered interesting, insightful, and/or controversial. Professor Chun-fang Yu's (Rutgers University) film "Kuan-yin Pilgrimage" is a valuable resource for understanding the significant role of the "Goddess of Compassion" in contemporary Chinese religious life.

Each student has to write a term paper on any topic related to this course. Most of the papers adopt a comparative approach and perspective, and some focus on the roles of Buddhism in contemporary

women's daily lives. In all, students achieve not only an appreciation for religious diversity but also a self-reflective and critical view toward the issue of women in their own religion.