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Feminist Buddhism as Praxis Women in Traditional Buddhism

This paper discusses a project the author has been engaged in since 1994 with women in the Japanese Buddhist community who are working across sectarian boundaries to recreate a Buddhism that goes beyond patriarchy. While the celibacy prized by many Buddhist orders that profess renunciation of secular married life has resulted in oppression of women, this paper points out that women face similar problems even in the laicized Shin school. The paper describes various perspectives that women of this project have adopted in their feminist critiques of Buddhism and their movement to remake Buddhism for today, and argues that the question of whether traditional Buddhist orders can overcome their predicament depends upon whether the men can open themselves to hear the women's voices of protest. The paper shows that this project can also contribute to a critique of the Eurocentric feminist version of Buddhism that informs the understanding of some European and American feminist scholars in this field.

KEYWORDS: priestly marriage – *jizoku* – *bōmori* – *nisō*/female priest – *shukke* – trans-sectarian networking

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IN THIS ARTICLE, I shall take up the activities of Buddhist women in present-day Japan, a subject that I have been engaged with since 1994. It is fair to say that the women adherents of certain specific faiths are a minority in this society today. No doubt there are even fewer women involved in remaking their own religion to make it freer and less patriarchal.

We must not forget, however, that there are also women in Japan today who have made the choice to live as active agents with regard to Buddhism. They are engaged in questioning its gender-discriminatory structure and in creating a Buddhism that offers equality for both sexes.

Through this movement, I myself have become involved as an active agent engaged with contemporary Buddhism as an issue that concerns me personally, and I have consistently affirmed that many women who have their own independent voices do exist here. The fact that Buddhist women possess the capability and the right to speak using their own words, as will be shown below, must be recognized by male members of the Buddhist orders and by scholars. It is not possible to address the problems of gender discrimination in Buddhism without taking Buddhist women as active agents into account. In many cases, however, these women's own voices have been diminished and depreciated. In other words, the problem of gender discrimination in Buddhism has either been appropriated by certain scholars, or it has been narrated by male members of the Buddhist orders in ways that estrange women from their own experience of it.

As a matter of my own experience, I have frequently witnessed researchers who take an entirely outside position denying the subjective individual voices of Buddhist women. A white male Buddhist scholar who is known for his research on clerical marriage, for example, once showed me a photograph and said, "I think that people like you who are trying to apply feminism to the Buddhist community are exceptions. All the temple wives I know are satisfied, and they aren't complaining." I could not agree with him about this. In the first place, a priest's wife would certainly have found it extremely difficult to expose her inmost feelings to a foreign scholar. Even more, however, the photograph he showed me seemed to have a great deal to say in itself. It showed a woman sitting in the jumble of a temple reception office, holding a small boy in her arms, with older girls seated around her. This photograph superimposed itself in my mind over the pictures of many priest's wives I know who have lived without a word of complaint under the tremendous strains of bearing and rearing a male child to inherit

their family temple. It was impossible for me not to feel incensed at this male Buddhist scholar who lacked the imagination to see the reality: It was not that these women *did not* complain because they had no desire to, but rather that they *could not* complain even if they wanted to.

Two Accounts

It became very clear to me from participating in the movement to remake present-day Buddhism, and in the course of writing about it, that discourse concerning the human rights of Buddhist women involves ethical and political complexities. In brief, we find the women followers of Buddhism accounted for in two ways, as follows. The first account is produced by those priests of the conservative ranks who dominate the Buddhist community. They take a stance as advocates of tradition, preaching that women are recipients of edification by men and therefore cannot be potent actors in religious practice. Women's virtue consists in obeying men, and they are expected to commit themselves to secondary, supporting, or behind-the-scenes roles of the kind considered proper to women. As for nuns, apart from preaching the Buddhist teachings and performing rituals, they are expected, if anything, to do chores for the male priests. This situation gives us glimpses of the notion that, if these women are authentic followers of Buddhism, then they will take on those duties as part of their Buddhist practice. Wives of priests are assigned roles as mothers that emphasize their bearing and rearing of male children to inherit the fathers' temples, and they are exhorted to devote their entire body and mind to those tasks as the exalted work of a bodhisattva. This account is also characterized by the unquestioning conviction that Buddhism is a non-violent, tolerant religion that makes it possible for human beings to coexist with nature. Thus the spirituality of Buddhism is superior to the bellicose monotheism of Western religions. The account further tells us that women are responsible, in their capacity as mothers in the home, for communicating the Buddhist teachings to their children.

At the opposite end of the pole is the faction that seeks, from its place on the outer edges of the Buddhist community, to promote human rights and do away with discrimination. This second kind of account could be described as a discourse of edification that derives from a notion of universal human rights. According to this account, Buddhist women do not have the capability to understand and verbalize their own circumstances, so the men who take this view, as experts in the Buddhist view of human rights, must be the ones to speak for those women. This account is thus tinged with colonialism. These men appear to think that women have blocked their own self-reform by legitimizing the injustice done to them in the name of their faith. In this account, faith is in danger of being taken as a sign of oppression. Those who take this view appear to be claiming that if women would only deny that faith and sup-

port the human rights propaganda espoused by these men, then they would automatically find themselves on the side of universal justice. Apparently, as these men see it, Buddhist women have internalized their gender consciousness under patriarchal dominance, so that the women's behavior is tantamount to collaboration with the patriarchal order of the Buddhist community and thus is unqualified to constitute resistance. Given this presupposition, anything that women followers of Buddhism might say is automatically reduced to the "subjective utterances of complicit insiders."

Though these two kinds of accounts may at first glance appear to be opposites, they have in common a lack of appreciation for the understanding that Buddhist women have of themselves. Both alike portray and define these women's subjecthood one-sidedly. The language that these women use to represent themselves has been appropriated both by the conservative traditionalists in the Buddhist orders and by the edification-oriented proponents of human rights (KAWAHASHI and KUMAMOTO 1998). Another point to remember here is that when Buddhist women attempt to speak out for themselves, they are excluded from the arena in advance. Neither of these two views has ever acknowledged the need to create occasions where Buddhist women who have been divested of the right to their own voices could speak for themselves.

Women and the Fiction of Priestly Renunciation of Secular Life

Virtually all of the existing Buddhist orders can be said to have marginalized women in terms of both institutions and teachings. I find this problem presented to me constantly in a recurring question that appears every time with very concrete specificity: How can gender discrimination in religion possibly be corrected? For myself, writing about the women's movement in Buddhism represents a means of working toward improvement of the discriminatory conditions that presently prevail. I believe, in addition, that this effort is meaningful as a questioning of the research conducted in Buddhist studies and religious studies, which has set aside that problem as either unworthy or self-evident, and in either case has disregarded it.

The locus of the problem, as I have seen it, is the fictitious principle of priestly renunciation of secular life (*shukke* 出家), which is one of the major factors obstructing equality for both sexes in Japanese Buddhism today.¹ There is no doubt that religious renunciates who hold strictly to the precepts do exist in present-day Buddhism, though they are extremely few.² As is widely known, however, marriage has become the norm for male priests in virtually every

1. In my earliest work on priests' wives, I referred to this as "fictitious celibacy" (KAWAHASHI 1995).

2. No definite data exists on the number of religious renunciates, in the strict sense, that are to be found in the various schools of Buddhism.

school of Buddhism in Japan. They have become laicized (*zaike-ka* 在家化), much as in Shin Buddhism. The problem is that the Buddhist orders have made no serious move to face this fact openly, but instead continue even today to maintain a stance of ostensible priestly renunciation of secular life. I would like to approach this problem by discussing ways in which this fictitious principle of celibacy has distorted the everyday lives of women who live in temples.

The spouses of male priests are commonly referred to as temple wives (*jizoku* 寺族 or *jitei fujin* 寺庭婦人). These words were coined during or after the Meiji Era, and the traditional term in Shin Buddhism was *bōmori* 坊守, while other schools used such terms as *daikoku* 大黒 and *o-kuri* お庫裏. Prior to the Cabinet decree of 1872 that allowed male priests to eat meat and take wives, only the Shin school of lay Buddhism institutionally permitted its priests to marry. The other schools did not officially recognize the wives of priests, though they may have tacitly tolerated them. That situation has remained basically unchanged until today, more than one hundred and thirty years after that Cabinet decree was issued. The reason for this is that, so long as marriage by priestly renunciates is considered a violation of the precepts under Buddhist doctrine, no school of Buddhism can positively declare that marriage is not, after all, a violation of the precepts, but rather an affirmative aspect of priestly life in the world. As a consequence, the wives of priests have remained invisible both doctrinally and institutionally, and have been marginalized. Being women, they were not supposed to be present in the first place, and this has also made discussion of their position ambiguous.

The fact is, however, that the actual administration of temples in all schools of Buddhism in Japan depends on the presence of these temple wives. The women are allotted the job of sustaining their temples, based on the notion of “teaching activity that is proper to women” noted above.³ Almost all Buddhist temples today are kept going by the labor of women who are allowed neither an institutional nor a doctrinal *raison d’être*. The impact of this fact must not be overlooked.

This condition of being limited entirely to auxiliary background duties may appear to place these women within the same kind of traditional, gender-based assignment of roles found in society at large. Non-Buddhist religious orders also face similar problems regarding the wives of their clergy. Protestant churches in America, for example, are said to be founded on the assumption of a male preacher and the universal maid-like preacher’s wife present as a couple. The preachers’ wives, as appendages in their husbands’ pastoral activities, are

3. Lists of the obligatory duties of priests’ wives in the various schools contain such items as “assistance to the chief priest, education of the children or successor, exemplar for parishioners, protection, maintenance, and prospering of the temple, teaching of parishioners,” and so on, but the duties actually required of them are defined more or less entirely by the first two items.

expected to serve as model wives, and often suffer under the strain of playing roles that are foreign to who they actually are (LANGFORD 1998, pp. 23–25). The parallel is clear.

The fictitious principle of priestly renunciation of secular life, however, places different constraints on women's lives here than in religions that acknowledge the secular logic of marriage. This provides hints of the position of priests' wives in the so-called renunciate orders (*shukke kyōdan*). The articles of religious constitution (*shūken* 宗憲) of the Sōtō school (to which I belong), as revised in 1995, represent this order's first attempt to define the wife of a priest. As it happens, however, the text of Chapter 8 of this constitution states, "those parties other than priests who adhere to the beliefs of this school and reside in temples are referred to as temple family (*jizoku*)"—namely, temple wives. It is immediately apparent that this definition deliberately evades any recognition that *jizoku* applies in nearly all cases to the spouses of male priests. A school that proclaims the principle of precepts for celibate priests must, after all, avoid explicit reference to the fact that *jizoku* exist as a result of marriage. Some schools state that, strictly speaking, *jizoku* in a celibate order refers to family members and relatives of the temple priest. The Sōtō school, however, appears to place a greater emphasis on the principle of priestly renunciation than other schools. Research by Kumamoto Einin shows that the Sōtō school council (its equivalent of a denominational legislature) declared in 1885—even after the Cabinet decree that "meat-eating, marriage, growing hair, and so on, are to be allowed at the priest's own discretion"—that "women should not be allowed to live in temples." The ostensible ban on marriage for priests was maintained until 1906 (KUMAMOTO 1994, p. 101). Even today, elder priests of the order engage in self-contradictory argumentation. They claim, for example, that the proper place of the priest is to guide his wife and children to renunciation of the secular life, but the problem is that instead priests are being laicized by their wives.

The situation has not advanced very far from the dispute over priestly marriage during the Meiji Era. At that time of sudden and rapid modernization, the Nichiren school priest Tanaka Chigaku declared that marriage by priests did not violate the precepts, and he called for institutional reform in all schools of Buddhism. The Sōtō priest Kuriyama Taion, thinking it impossible to carry out such a reform, initiated a movement to lift the prohibition on marriage; Kuruma Takudō originated the practice of temple weddings, and he himself performed them (KUMAMOTO 1991). None of these actions, however, brought official recognition of marriage for priests, and there is no sign today that the councils of any of the schools will open the matter to discussion. In fact, obstinate believers in an anachronistic principle of priestly renunciation can even be found among the younger generations of priests.⁴

4. This is discussed in KAWAHASHI 2000 and KUMAMOTO 2000.

Chapter 8 of the Sōtō school constitution, which deals with temple wives as mentioned above, was actually included as an important new feature when the constitution was revised for the first time in forty years. Passages covering priests and parishioners existed before 1995, but temple wives had been omitted from the constitution. The new addition, as we have seen, hardly provides official recognition for temple wives. The Sōtō school policy working group, which is made up of members of the council, has since considered a proposal to amend the definition of temple wives. As in 1995, however, the temple wives themselves are not being given any voice in the discussion. It seems, in fact, that the disjunction between priests' wives and precepts of priestly renunciation is being ignored, and any debate will be limited to matters of terminology.

The Sōtō priest Takahashi Tesshū found that priests today value the family and “display no logic or behavior that would integrate their present lives with the path of renunciation.” Feeling qualms about the principle of priestly renunciation, he wrote, they can no longer feel “confident as priests” (TAKAHASHI 2001, p. 48). As long ago as the Meiji Era, a priest could write that “if Śākya-muni, Bodhidharma, or Dōgen Zenji appeared today, they would probably take wives and experience the essence of family life and the realities of society” (MARUYAMA 1911, p. 852). Ironically, the efforts being made now appear to be leading us backwards.

The Buddhist orders' proclamation of the principle of priestly renunciation for our present day confuses the priests' self-identity and can ultimately deny them occasions for seeing into their own nature. This also confuses the sense of identity of the priests' spouses, the temple wives.

In observing that the relations between the men and women in temples who are thus bound by a fictitious principle of priestly renunciation, I have noticed that the wives are forced into insecure positions and assigned their roles very one-sidedly. Most of the renunciate orders need, first of all, to honestly face the existence of the women who are priests' wives and realize the truth, that the professed principle of renunciation has kept them from dealing in good faith with the realities of actual temple life. Some take attitudes that reduce the problem of gender inequality in temples to a merely private matter between husbands and wives. This problem, however, is not to be resolved separately within each temple at the private level, but is a crucial issue that involves the gender views of the Buddhist orders in general. Some view the problem of temple wives as entirely too specific to yield a critique of patriarchy in Buddhism at large. I argue, however, that present-day Buddhism appears to have nearly lost the ability to put its own house in order, and if the Buddhist community will reexamine itself, I am convinced that will lead to exploration of ways to recapture its religious ideal of equality.

In the case of the Sōtō school, the fact that the founder Dōgen was unmarried furnishes the order with a constant conceptual model. According to Sugawara

Shōei, a scholar of Buddhist history who is himself a Sōtō priest, although the stance of renunciation places a special, greater value on renunciates than on the laity as a matter of course, the meaning of Dōgen's stance must be understood in his historical and social context. Dōgen's renunciation involved his refusal to accept the state authority of the time, and his intent to transcend secular status structures in order to uphold the transcendence of religious faith. Sugawara casts a critical eye on arguments that ignore these points to interpret renunciation only in terms of scripture (SUGAWARA 2000). The Roman Catholic Church is another institution that has traditionally emphasized celibacy. The English Bishop Paul Southgate, however, found reasons for not choosing celibacy in the example of a past pope who had showed how abuse of celibacy led to contempt for sex, aversion for women, desire to distinguish oneself from other men, evasion of ordinary responsibilities, disdain for the world, and so on (SOUTHGATE 2001, p. 254). His argument could well be applied to Buddhist orders that cling to their principle of renunciation.

I would like to emphasize that this discussion is not in the least intended to hold up some notion of an official wife's position that temple women should seek to achieve, nor to suggest that they should rest content with a wife's status. That strategy would be unproductive, as suggested by the experience of the Jōdo Shin school, to be discussed later. Although this school incorporated the spouse of the priest into the structure of its lay order, that order still suffers from gender discrimination problems. What concerns me is that a notion of marriage founded in the professed rationale of priestly renunciation might initially be misunderstood as being somehow up-to-date. The fact that renunciate orders have not positioned priests' wives in a marriage structure—seeing that, for example, the husbands and wives have different family names—might mislead some observers into thinking that this recognizes men and women as equal and independent individuals. My point, however, is that this is deceptive.⁵

Who Has the Right to Speak?

Critiques of present-day Buddhism like mine are sometimes accused of arrogance for assuming that criticism of a religious order will be allowed if it comes in the name of feminism. Here I would like to return to the question I posed near the beginning: Which members of the existing Buddhist orders speak for

5. In Zen schools, for example, the renunciate priest-husband was ordinarily interred in the grave for the historical line of chief priests in that temple. In some regions, therefore, husband and wife are buried separately. This at first glance resembles the present-day practice of women who seek to establish their individual identities by burial apart from their husbands. The two practices, however, derive from entirely different rationales. In the case of the priest's wife, she will be buried separately, regardless of her own wishes, because the priest's violation of the precepts cannot be made public. Muchaku Toki, a temple wife in the Sōtō school, has severely criticized this practice (MUCHAKU 1996, p. 70).

those orders as they are at the present time? The voices considered to speak authoritatively for the orders clearly belong to senior men. This means that I am criticizing leaders in these kinds of religious order for being the kind of authority that is established at the expense of the voices of the weaker members. Under this structure, a one-sided representation gains currency in which the voices of women as agents remain unheard, and this problem must be recognized.

To reiterate an earlier point, the conservative ranks of the religious orders have defined the roles of the temple wives as well as the meaning of their existence in the name of legitimacy, and have muted those women's independent voices. We have seen how the institutional definitions of specific schools exclude the temple wives' own perceptions of themselves, who are the ones directly concerned. There is a parallel movement to involve temple wives in teaching and other such "activities that male priests expect them to undertake." It has been proposed, for example, that temple wives be obligated to take a certain amount of religious training and then be made to assist in rituals as replacements for nuns, whose numbers are constantly diminishing. This idea is informed by the same thinking that weighed the advantages and disadvantages of priests' wives during the Meiji period. Some who favored official recognition of marriage at that time took the utilitarian view that wives should be used in temple teaching. Hikita Seishun has described the idea that, "since women are by nature plentifully endowed with meekness and affection, parishioners find them easy to approach. They are thus effective in drawing people in and guiding them to faith.... Therefore, if priests wed women of refinement and gentility, instruct them in doctrine and use their wives to teach, then those priests will double their effectiveness through this combination" (HIKITA 1991, p. 215).

It is apparent that male priests expected women's particular virtue to benefit their teaching activity. Thus they rather one-sidedly favored participation by temple wives in that activity. No regard is given here to the hopes or expectations of those temple wives themselves. My own experience has also been that when a religious order discusses the status of temple wives, the primary issues are the wives' responsibilities and frame of mind. These issues took precedence, as I recall, and suggestions that temple wives be respected as people in their own right met with little or no understanding.

Women are thus virtually excluded from decision-making, and matters concerning temple wives are consequently decided by men. Many temple wives resign themselves to this, and simply stand aside and watch. Still, there are those among the temple wives who feel compelled by their own faith, not by any urging from male priests, to take up religious training of their own accord, or to engage in activities to spread the teachings. They cannot take an active role in rituals or preaching in their status as temple wives. These women, therefore, make the choice to undergo religious discipline in convents, then work with the

temple priests who are their husbands to spread the Buddhist teachings. These women are not one-sidedly being assigned secondary supporting roles, as described above. Rather, they are of their own accord seeking ways to enter into Buddhist practice. I should note that this movement is viewed critically by advocates of the revolutionary account, the second account of Buddhist women I described near the beginning of this article. These men have prejudged the temple wives as incapable of resisting the other, conservative perspective. I have actually heard them claim that temple wives who seek to obtain qualifications or study so they can participate in priestly teaching activities are only being duped by the patriarchy. These men appear to have convinced themselves that temple wives are so easily and powerfully influenced by male priests that it would be impossible for the temple wives themselves to originate any movement to improve their own situation. Those who take such views would appear, as a result, to have even lost sight of the difference between women who take secondary supporting roles forced on them by male priests, and women who choose voluntarily to propagate their faith. Thus the faction that would deny recognition to temple wives as actors in their own right will never listen to the voices of the temple wives themselves. Temple wives, for them, will never be more than “victims who are essentially lacking in the capacity to make their own decisions.”

Advocates of both conservative and revolutionary accounts, therefore, are trapped in the dichotomy of men as teachers and women as perpetual recipients of teaching. Temple wives (and nuns, as well) have therefore been excluded from discussion of the problem of discrimination against women within their own religious orders.

Women Who Would Remake Buddhism

Even if the men who dominate the Buddhist community close their eyes to feminist critiques of present-day Buddhism, however, women have already begun to voice protests in various quarters. This is not to say that these women (including myself) have already concluded that Buddhism is an essentially sexist religion (as typified by the fictitious principle of priestly renunciation) that one-sidedly cheats women of their rights. These women’s protests actually express their desire to restore Buddhism to life by their own efforts. Their reasoning is that teachings that so constrain and belittle the lives and experiences of women cannot hold out hope of salvation to anyone.

Since 1994 I have participated in a project to create a Buddhism that goes beyond patriarchy. The people committed to this project make up a diverse group that includes wives (such as myself) of male priests, female priests (nuns), women who are a combination of both, and women who do not belong to any particular Buddhist order, among others. These women are participating for a

variety of reasons, and what they have in common is their choice to live in engagement with Buddhism or Buddhist temples of their own accord. These women have a commitment beyond the boundaries of the various schools. Their project, in brief, is to amplify women's voices in the Buddhist community by a variety of means, including autonomously organized workshops, publication of workshop findings, and formation of networks across sectarian boundaries for information exchange, and, by means of women's participation, to transform present-day Buddhism to provide gender equality. The project also intends to envision a new Buddhism that empowers present-day women. This involves reinterpretation of conventional, male-centered Buddhist history and doctrine in light of women's own experiences. In this sense, the goal of the project extends beyond mere criticism of Buddhism.⁶

The dialogue among women across sectarian boundaries has much in common with the ecumenical cooperation by Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish women in Europe and America to overcome the traditional gender discrimination in Judaism and Christianity. Dialogue extending beyond schools and sects has brought women to understand that their individual experiences of gender discrimination were culturally and historically structured. They have come to realize that the crucial move for resolution of these problems is, above all, for women to unite in voicing their protests. Our Network also functions as a support group for women who have begun to speak out within their communities, to help keep them from becoming isolated. The recognition by Buddhist women that they have issues in common has expanded the Network.

It is natural for women to resist gender-discriminatory constructions, but now they are also becoming fully aware of the fact that patriarchal Buddhist orders have thwarted women's realization of their own religiosity. This does not mean, however, that Buddhism is the root cause of Japanese patriarchal structures, nor is this the principal thrust of their criticism. On the contrary, these women find truths in Buddhism that can lead to freedom for women, which is precisely why they seek to remake Buddhism to affirm the lives and experiences of women. This becomes clearer in light of the development of feminist theology in Europe and America. Feminist theology generally contains two perspectives, it is said, the revolutionary and the reformist. The revolutionaries find gender discrimination to be so entrenched in the traditions of Judaism and Christianity that these faiths cannot change, so they seek to discard those traditions. The reformists, while recognizing traditional gender dis-

6. *Bukkyō to jendā: Onna tachi no nyoze gamon* [Buddhism and Gender: "Thus Have I Heard" by Women], published by Toki Shobō in 1999, was the result of several years' activity by Josei to Bukkyō Tōkai-Kantō Nettowāku [Tōkai-Kantō Network for Women and Buddhism], with which I am involved. The title cites "thus have I heard" [*nyoze gamon*], which is an opening phrase in Buddhist sutras, to make the point that "this is how we have heard and understood the teachings of Buddhism as women."

crimination, also find that Judaism and Christianity convey a message of liberation, so they seek instead to transform the traditions.⁷

The Buddhist women's project, as I see it, corresponds to the approach that seeks not to simply discard religious tradition as a product of patriarchy, but rather to remake it as egalitarian. The women in the Buddhist community firmly believe that the Buddhist teachings as reconsidered from the woman's perspective will generate the energy needed to shake up gender-discriminatory social and political structures. Thus they are determined to remain steadfastly within tradition and work there to transform those structures. The feminist theologian Ann Carr uses the term "double critique" to show how, if religious traditions restore the truths that can guide women to liberation, then the power of those truths should go on to energize critiques of existing gender-discriminatory cultural and social institutions, and thus bring about reform (CARR 1988, p. 103). Similar spiritual aspirations underlie the Buddhist women's project, and it must not be ignored that these women are taking action on that basis to incorporate women's experiences as they re-read the Buddhist scriptures and seek reform of the patriarchal Buddhist community.⁸ In this way, the activities of the Buddhist women are founded in their conviction that Buddhism can speak equally to women and men alike, and that this will come about through reexamination in terms of women's experiences.

Ōgoshi Aiko finds that the primary aim of Buddhist feminism in Japan is "a feminist critique of Buddhism that will eradicate the gender discrimination that is built into the culture," because Buddhist values, specifically Japanese forms of discrimination, and structures of violence are inextricably linked together in Japan (ŌGOSHI 1997, pp. 63–65). However, I think a different view can be taken. Ōgoshi argues, for example, that Shinran's view of women "suggests that inherently sinful women can only effect their salvation when they fall completely as

7. See, for example, CHRIST and PLASKOW (1979). Since then, however, Plaskow et al. have expressed concern that this dichotomy might invite misunderstanding by making it appear that the revolutionary stance, which is more radical, is also more progressive and thus superior. They have further noted that the reformist perspective is by no means monolithic (CHRIST and PLASKOW 1989, pp. 6–7).

8. Ukō Kikuko, of the Tōkai-Kantō Network for Women and Buddhism, and Nagata Mizu, a scholar of early Buddhism who is also a member of the Network, have led in essaying a protest related to the critique of Buddhist scripture from a feminist perspective. *The Teaching of Buddha* is a popular compilation of scriptures published by the Society for the Promotion of Buddhism (Bukkyō dendō kyōkai 仏教伝道協会), and has been translated into forty-one languages. The passages in it relating to women, however, contain numerous problems. A section titled "The Life of Women," for example, emphasizes that the proper way of life for a woman is to serve the man. Furthermore, the scriptural passages about women appear to have been selected arbitrarily by the men who compiled the book. The Network asked the Society for the Promotion of Buddhism to revise the book. I was present at discussions with the Society administration, and am pleased to report that their response indicated they were going to give positive consideration to proposals that the content of the book be reevaluated.

sexual objects,” and that this is a “teaching that legitimizes women’s sexual self-sacrifice” (ŌGOSHI 1997, pp. 113–15). If so, then obviously such Buddhist teachings can never offer women salvation. This interpretation is reminiscent of the revolutionary perspective in feminist theology, described above. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, who represents the reformist approach, characterizes those women who find that Christianity is irremediably sexist, and that it legitimizes male domination and violence toward women, as radical post-biblical feminists. To women who take this stance, a reformist approach like Schüssler Fiorenza’s is a “waste of time” and legitimizes existing gender discrimination (SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA 1990, pp. 24–25). This discussion, however, has so far indicated that my fellow writers and I believe that the Buddhist tradition is remediable, and that it does embody the possibility of transformation into something that affirms the agency of women. We still expect to find possibilities for a new, feminist Buddhism founded upon that belief.

Where, then, is the teaching in Buddhism to be found that promises to guide women to liberation and open to them the expanse of a new horizon? Śākyamuni Buddha pointed directly to a way by which human beings would acknowledge one another as equals. What gives strength to today’s women is the truth that Śākyamuni Buddha did not discriminate among human beings by their birth. Sexual and racial prejudice strip individuals of their dignity and rights based on their gender, race, ethnicity, and so on. Śākyamuni Buddha, however, explains in the clearest possible terms that such prejudices have no real foundation. When women reevaluate Buddhism from their own perspectives, this teaching becomes a support and a driving force in their quest to create a society of equality and coexistence. Another crucial point, in addition to this teaching, is that the essence of Buddhism (if we consider it to have any “essence” at all), is the truth that all things exist in relationship and are undergoing ceaseless change. Śākyamuni Buddha cautioned against taking any fixed view of things and events. The Buddhist negation of essentialism presents the possibility of breaking down the assumption that gender differences between men and women are immutable and universal. Seen in this light, the struggles of Buddhist women to improve conditions of gender discrimination from their own situation within their religious traditions are doing more than just unsettling patriarchal religious authority. We might also see them as relativizing secular feminists’ accounts of women’s liberation.

Ursula King, a feminist scholar of religion, rewrote the feminist slogan “the personal is political” to read “the spiritual is personal and political” in order to emphasize that spiritual concerns relate not only to the individual’s inner life, but also to society and other collectivities. In other words, she shows the error of censuring women who seek a religious life for being escapist and anti-political, and explains the necessity to recognize instead how spirituality generates political action and a communal ethos (KING 1993, pp. 198–99). This observa-

tion also applies to the women's movement to remake Buddhism in Japan. In fact, the women in the Network engage in a wide variety of social and political action, such as supporting the human rights movement in Burma, campaigning against capital punishment, holding study groups on *buraku* discrimination, working in local environmental protection movements, operating shelters for victims of sexual violence, supporting programs for aid to Southeast Asian children, holding exhibitions of paintings by former Imperial Japanese Army "comfort women," serving as volunteers in handicapped education, campaigning for women legislators, and so on.

The Network as Praxis and as Dialogue

Women's dialogue, which transcends the boundaries of religious schools and orders, reveals a way for women to live in engagement with Buddhism without imprisoning themselves within traditional Buddhism. The women of the Network do not critique the inbred discrimination in present-day Buddhism from a single, uniform point of entry. They all undergo their own, various encounters with Buddhism, and they take widely varying positions in their approaches to Buddhism. As will be shown later, while these women's experiences intersect and overlap, they also differ. Even though their positions and perspectives may differ in very subtle ways, however, they have in common a positive choice to live in engagement with Buddhism, or with their temple. Where these women previously existed as scattered points in isolated locations, the purpose of the Network is to link them into connected lines along which they can learn from each other's efforts, speak out, and take action together.

Here I would like to describe the impact of Buddhist women's activities beyond sectarian boundaries. For myself, one of the most valuable results has been the perception, achieved through dialogue, of the differences and similarities between renunciate Buddhism and lay Buddhism. As noted earlier in this article, criticism of the fictitious principle of priestly renunciation neither implies an uncritical acceptance of the status of wife nor a facile endorsement of marriage. I myself have had this brought home to me forcefully by, in large part, my encounters with women of the Jōdo Shin school, which is a lay order of Buddhism.

The Shin school takes a lay Buddhist approach, and so, of course, it has no need to make a display of priestly renunciation. The constitution of the Honganji faction of the Jōdo Shin school, for example, presupposes the relationship of marriage for priests. Thus they describe women with the status of *bōmori*, which corresponds to *jizoku* in the Sōtō school, as "wives of temple priests, wives of those who were temple priests, or their surviving spouses." Likewise in the Ōtani faction of the Shin school, the regulations for temples and churches specify that "spouses of temple priests and church superintendents are to be

referred to as *bōmori*, and spouses of former temple priests and church superintendents are to be referred to as former *bōmori*.” It is a matter of well-known historical fact that Shinran, the founder of the Shin school, took Eshin-ni as his wife and had children by her. In other words, marriage by priests and inheritance by their descendants are at the foundation of the Shin order, and priests’ wives therefore also belong as integral, foundational elements of the order. While schools that proclaim adherence to precepts adjuring celibacy will subtly obscure the gender of the *jizoku*, therefore, orders that have priestly marriage as a distinguishing characteristic will tend to assign the women who marry priests to roles that are more or less fixed, as a matter of course.

In fact, when I first began interacting with women of the Shin school, I thought that they seemed somehow relatively free of the oppression experienced by women in the renunciate orders. Regardless of the doctrinal and institutional differences, however, even the wives of Shin priests are expected to subordinate themselves in secondary supporting roles under male priests. Thus the sermons preached to women by priests of the Shin school are substantially the same as in the renunciate orders. I later came to account for the similarity in experiences among priests’ wives in the different Buddhist orders by the reasons I will explain below.

Priests’ wives are, very simply, not supposed to exist in the Zen schools and other renunciate orders, and they are consequently situated in ambiguity. In the Shin school and other lay orders, the wives of priests are situated very clearly in their temples and in the order, and as a result there is, if anything, an even stronger tendency to assign them gender-discriminatory roles based on a conventional division of labor, so that ultimately they find themselves placed in positions subordinate to their husband priests. That is, in the alienation from their own subjecthood that these women all experience irrespective of apparent doctrinal differences between renunciate and lay orders, the women are bound by the gender roles that men prescribe for them. Women who are temple wives in the renunciate orders reconcile themselves to their uncertain status and are rendered powerless. In the lay orders, by contrast, the wives of priests are burdened with the exemplary image of the *bōmori*, and lose sight of other alternatives. Ultimately, both groups of women are denied the opportunity to express their own subjecthood.

Women in both the Shin schools, however, are protesting this situation. In the Ōtani school, they have demanded that the order’s executive revise its gender discriminatory provisions. Ruling that the spouse of a male temple priest is therefore a *bōmori* reveals entrenchment of a fixed gendered role, and amounts to ignoring the independent volition of the wife. This goes counter to the professed principle of the Ōtani school that it is “an order formed by both men and women.” At present, however, the order has still rejected protests lodged by many women, and has adopted the discriminatory provisions described above.

One active member of our Network, Obata Junko of the Ōtani faction, has observed that the *bōmori* system forms “a one-sidedly dependent relationship whereby the woman’s position is determined by the status of the male temple priest” (OBATA 2001). Another Network member, Ukō Kikuko, has similarly criticized the current regulations of the order for “treating the spouse as an appendage of the temple priest and thus failing to recognize her human rights” (UKŌ 2002, p. 133).

It is also true, however, that some women in the Shin school have no reservations about the nature of this lay order that recognizes marriage, and feel no compunction about occupying the position of *bōmori*, the legitimate wife. I encountered a woman of the Shin school who, when speaking to women facing the problems of gender discrimination in Sōtō and other renunciate orders, said, “Frankly, I think it’s harder in your order. The Shin teachings tell us it’s only natural to have women in the temples, but it’s different for you.” Such women speak from the unquestioning conviction that lay orders are superior. Women who behave judgmentally in this way toward women from other schools and factions hold up the married relationship of the Shin school founder Shinran with his wife Eshin-ni as the religionist’s ideal, and they appear to be projecting that image on the husband-wife relationships in their own temples.

I am concerned, however, that excessive faith in the notion of the “*bōmori* who is the wife recognized as the equal partner of a priest” places women at risk of falling into a trap laid by the patriarchy of the order. That is, the notion of marriage in the Shin school, which is an article of faith for *bōmori* women, is not necessarily shared by the men in their order. The background to Shinran’s marriage has been explained in various ways, and though I am not qualified to comment on them, I suspect it is the rare priest who thinks that Shinran entered on marriage because he was looking for a wife to accompany him as an equal on the Buddhist way. Nakamura Ikuo, for example, characterizes the Shin school notion of marriage in the early modern period as follows: “In the final analysis, Shinran ventured to adopt the anti-Buddhist, anti-precept action of ‘meat-eating and marriage’ as an expedient means for awakening people to the boon of salvation by Amida Buddha. It was his rhetoric for this purpose, and not because Shinran himself personally desired those things” (NAKAMURA 1999, p. 12). Perhaps something similar is happening today, as well.

The excessive idealization of priest and wife as partners in religious activity could even lead to a kind of idolization of the couple. In the Shin school, as a result, bachelor priests are apparently sometimes regarded as heretical. The more that women in the Shin school emphasize their vision of husband and wife uniting in evangelical work, the more estranged the celibate nuns and priests who are active in the renunciate orders will feel.

Up to this point I have mainly discussed the problems that face the spouse of

a priest, but the fact is that nuns face problems of even greater complexity. Traditionally, nuns in renunciate orders most often achieved their status by being adopted into a temple for nuns. It is rare even today for these nun temples to have parishioners. They typically have the status of branch temples (*matsuji*, also referred to as *shitadera*) that are subordinate to temples led by male priests, and in most cases they are economically disadvantaged. Iijima Keidō, a nun of the Sōtō school who is my contemporary in age, was looking back on her experience of being taken into a nun temple when she wrote, “Just the fact that the inheritors of nun temples are steadily diminishing in number speaks to the tremendous difficulties and the numbers of problems we face when we live as nuns” (IIJIMA 2001, p. 33).

Whereas male priests in renunciate orders can set aside their celibacy with great ease, nuns are generally required to maintain celibacy and keep their heads shorn. In many cases, of course, these women have chosen for themselves to live steadfastly by the principle of priestly renunciation, but beyond that, I find, they are being subjected to undeclared pressure by the gender views of the community at large. It is seen as a matter of course that a male priest should be attended by a wife to take on routine work so that he can devote himself to his mission. In the case of a woman priest, however, people expect that the presence of a husband or child will entangle her in household duties and obstruct her work as a religionist.⁹ In any event, the precepts are enforced with greater severity on the women’s side.

It is unfortunate, however, that some women of the Shin school who do not have regular contact with shaven-headed nuns appear to show little if any understanding of their plight. From the perspective of a nun who has no husband and must fend for herself, the wives of priests (regardless of their school) are existing in a dependent relationship with their husbands. I once heard an older nun say, “Nuns are different from priests’ wives because we have to do everything for ourselves.” Among other things, this also expresses the pride of a person who has been put in the position of living independently. If the married couple is privileged as the agent of religious work as described above, however, the reality of the unmarried nun will be rendered invisible to our view.

The point I wish to emphasize is that, if the lay Buddhist notion of marriage is accorded absolute status and the position of the priest’s wife is privileged, this will set a barrier in place that walls off from each other the lay order wives and the Buddhist women of other schools and factions. Uncritical acceptance of the *bōmori*’s status as a recognized wife also constitutes willful disregard of the various elements of discrimination embodied in that status. This is precisely why I stated earlier that criticism of the fictitious principle of priestly renunciation

9. It is probably for similar reasons that in Japanese Christianity, women who felt a vocation to be priests in the Episcopal Church were until very recently expected to remain unmarried.

does not imply an uncritical acceptance of the status of wife, nor a facile endorsement of marriage.

The discussion to this point may be summarized as follows: While the renunciate orders have refused to face the reality of priestly marriage, the Shin school, because it views priestly marriage as a matter of course, has conversely shown no inclination to pursue the subject as an issue of concern to itself.¹⁰ A way must be found, therefore, that allows the women who are priests' wives in the lay orders to live without being trapped or buried by fixed gender roles in the temples. The renunciate orders, for their part, should stop pretending that no women even exist in temples, and squarely face the fact that the *jizoku* so necessary to the temples of today are none other than the wives and partners of the priests. As this happens, the women of the renunciate orders will no doubt find possible ways of affirming their own *raison d'être* in the temples. This is something I have come to be convinced of through the praxis of the Network.

Buddhist Women Begin to Speak

Here I want to reiterate, emphatically, that the movement to recreate Buddhism is not seeking to protect temple women in order to assure survival of their temples, nor aiming to expand their authority over temple management. If those were its objectives, then the movement would never obtain endorsements from women outside the Buddhist orders, and it would certainly be seen as nothing more than a movement for privileged women within a closed world. Our goal, however, is rooted in the Buddhist conception of the human being. Buddhism is originally supposed to have taught the equality and liberation of human beings—one wonders, then, how it could have changed so much that it can be termed a gender-discriminating religion. In order for Buddhism to truly overcome gender discrimination, the men must have the courage to undertake self-reform, and the relationships of control and submission between men and women must be corrected. This must happen, because the present-day Buddhist community, structured to deprive just one of the sexes of their rights, can have no prospect of a future. What men must do in order to treat women as equal to themselves is, more than anything else, to listen to the protesting voices of the women around them.

I have also emphasized the necessity for the Buddhist community to transform into a locus where women are allowed to be themselves. It is not possible, after all, to discuss what the women of the Buddhist community seek in Buddhism, and how they want to reform its present condition, so long as their own independent agency is ignored. The women of the Network are now beginning

10. Obata Bunshō explains that since priestly marriage (*saitai*) was viewed as a self-evident tradition descending from Shinran, there is no “history of any serious doctrinal debate about the nature of the question of marriage in the Shin community” (OBATA 1990, p. 103).

to speak out on a variety of different occasions and in different situations. "Writing has made me feel stronger in myself," as many women have found.¹¹ Mori Ichiu, a member who is a Nichiren school nun, wrote, "We women have to break out of the kind of shell that has enclosed us up to now, as solely recipients of the teachings. There must be some way to go on being engaged with Buddhism from a responsible subjective stance that allows us to examine our own way of living. When priests see increasing numbers of women like that around them, the priests will begin to change of their own accord" (MORI 1999, p. 85; also see MORI's article in this issue). The Buddhist community should realize that women have this ability and this power to speak for themselves. For these women, who previously existed as scattered points in isolated locations, to join together so that they form connected lines, and to raise their voices in protest, is far from meaningless. Their activity as a Network even has the potential to stimulate the Buddhist orders to change. The future of Buddhism in Japan today depends on whether the men are capable of seriously and sincerely hearing the Buddhist women's protests.

The women with whom I have been engaging in these activities do not articulate their own situations by means of the discourse typical of sophisticated academic feminism. Most of them have fashioned their own visions from the experiences and perceptions they have gained as insiders in the specific circumstances of the temples where they live and work. As I have tried to make clear throughout this article, the accounts formerly given of Buddhist women have been one-sided. Women have been represented as though they either belong to the faction that accepts men's teaching and affirms the status quo, or they are helpless victims of the Buddhist patriarchy, and women's own responsible, subjective resistance to either account has hardly ever been noted. On the discussion of subjects, Sherry Ortner acknowledges the existence of subjects that are made to submit to power relations, but at the same time she also emphasizes the need to look at how a subject resists, negotiates, and constructs its world in its own specific circumstances. So long as we do not recognize that "actor's point of view," in the end our accounts will sacrifice the actor's intellectual and political activity (ORTNER 1996). A disparaging view like that of the white male Buddhist scholar I mentioned at the beginning of this article, who said that "temple wives don't voice any resistance," appears to me essentially identical to the Orientalist gaze on the Asian woman that needs to be criticized. One of my purposes in writing about the women's movement in the Buddhist community

11. In addition to the book, since 2001 the Kantō Network for Women and Buddhism has been publishing a newsletter titled *Onna tachi no nyoze gamon* ["Thus Have I Heard" by Women]. Members from the Sōtō school have also been giving presentations on the issue of priests' wives at the Sōtō Zen Buddhist Missiology Conference [*Kyōkagaku Taikai*], held periodically at Komazawa University, and these have also been gaining the attention of men priests in the order. See *Kyōka kenshū* [Sōtō Zen propagation journal] 44 (2000), 45 (2001), and 46 (2002).

is to protest this kind of Orientalist representation of “silent, subjugated Buddhist women who have no ability to resist.”

Unfortunately, however, the attempts by women in Japan today to remake Buddhism from a new feminist perspective are little known, if at all, in Europe and America. A growing number of women in recent years, largely in America, have looked to Buddhism for a spirituality to replace Judaism and Christianity. Some of them have given up on Asian Buddhism, finding it spoiled by gender discrimination, and made the colonialist maneuver of proclaiming Western society to be the driving force for a new Buddhism. Rita Gross (1993), a central figure in this project, stresses the superiority of Western-style feminism and casts a jaundiced eye on the Buddhist women of Asia. Gross claims that Asian women do not know about feminism, and have no means by which to extricate Buddhism from indigenous patriarchies, so it is up to Western women to create a Buddhism that is beyond patriarchy.

The arrogance of first-world feminism as typified by Gross is effectively critiqued by the feminist anthropologist Kamala Visweswaran. To those false claims that only Western women understand egalitarian feminism, so that women of other regions cannot partake of it, VISWESWARAN replies by denying that feminism is a possession of the West, and affirming that feminism must be considered not in the singular but in the plural (1997, p. 616).

More recently, the non-white feminist scholar of religion Kwok Pui-lan wrote this penetrating criticism: “Gross’s discussion completely overlooks the feminist movements that are developing in many parts of Asia, and does not envisage that Asian Buddhist women can be change agents within Buddhism” (Kwok 2002, p. 28).¹² In order to overcome such negative views, as well as for other good reasons, it is clear in any event that the Buddhist community in Japan must undertake to reform its present condition.

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12. Western scholars of Buddhism have pointed out Gross’s lack of competence in documentary sources, history, and so on. Nevertheless, Gross is still a central polemicist on feminism and religion in American religious studies, at least. See KAWAHASHI 1994.

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