

# Celebrating the Feminine in Buddhism

*As women change the landscape of Buddhism,  
Buddhism is transforming the lives of women*

For centuries, women were not good enough — to lead families, communities, countries, or even attain enlightenment. Men were simply better at everything. Not too long ago, just about everyone believed this — both men and women. Often, women were the worst at putting down other women. From the homes to the monasteries, women walked two steps behind men.

The women's liberation movement of the 70s, and modern advances, changed all that. Women in the West and East now hold leadership roles in all areas of society, bringing about more equality everywhere — from the boardroom to the temples. With education and economic opportunities, many women have come to believe in themselves, their self-worth, and in valuing other women.

For Buddhists, this has also brought a wave of change, with a renaissance of women stepping forward as teachers, nuns, students and leaders. With renewed confidence, they are creating new nunneries, centers, retreats and books, offered from their perspectives as women. Often speaking from personal experience, they exemplify compassion as women, and make the teachings more accessible to other women and men.

Yet, while contemporary women are changing the face of Buddhism, the Dharma (Buddha's teachings) is also transforming the everyday lives of women. Regardless of their roles — as mothers, daughters,



employers, or community leaders — Buddhist women say the teachings have brought new meaning to traditional roles, turning them into sacred paths to enlightenment. When this happens, women experience a different kind of freedom, no longer tied to a gender, but striving towards a greater liberation from delusion.

In celebration of this dynamic interplay between women and Buddhism, we offer these stories of women in the West and East, women in transformed roles, and all of us as embodiments of the feminine spirit.

**C**an women attain enlightenment? Barbara Rhodes, the Korean Zen master, spoke of an early encounter with her Korean teacher, Seung Sahn. "I asked him if there were any women Zen masters in Korea, and he said, 'Oh no, of course not. Women can't attain enlightenment.' He said it with a really straight face and then walked into the kitchen.

I followed him in and said, 'I've been with you for two years and you've always said just to believe in yourself. How can you say women can't get enlightened?'

He just stared at me, pointed his finger, and said, 'So you're a woman?'

In other words, I had grasped man-woman concept. He was saying that you can't attain enlightenment if you hold on to that self-identity."

The recent renaissance of Buddhism in the West has coincided with feminist movements, that have questioned patriarchy. This confluence has produced several contemporary generations of confident women who have turned to Buddhist practice with genuine spiritual appetite, openness to innovation and aspiration to lead. This is a landmark in Western Buddhism.

"American women, having broken with a patriarchal path, are creating their direction, incorporating wisdom wherever they may find it," writes Karma Lekshe Tsomo in "Buddhism through American Women's Eyes."

Among Western Buddhists, the issues vary from community to community. Many convert women have pursued Buddhist practice with gusto and inspiration, with little interest in gender issues and institutional structures. They report that meditation practice is transformational and empowering, providing them liberation that political movements could never deliver. In fact, members of the Vipassana and Tibetan Buddhist communities comment anecdotally that their meditation programs and retreats are attended mostly by women practitioners.

Yet, in some established Buddhist communities, feminist concerns about patriarchal patterns have surfaced. Women and men in Western communities are asking vital questions for the future of Buddhism in the West. What is the role of the spiritual teacher in Buddhism, and what social and institutional forms are most appropriate for the teacher/student relationship? To what extent is hierarchy desirable in Western Buddhism? Do hierarchy and patriarchy go hand in hand?

Asking these questions exposes the central dilemma of a Buddhism that has not been thoroughly implanted in Western environments. Some first and second-generation convert communities have at times pulled free of their Asian traditions, prematurely rejecting teachers and forms that have nurtured their development.

But from the perspectives of many other women, these women could be depriving themselves of essential cultural nurture from those same Asian fonts of wisdom. The great

teachers who brought the Dharma to the West still have a great deal to teach us, and we must be careful not to take a short-term approach regarding what is valuable or not valuable in our Buddhist heritages.

When women teachers meet their students, whether male or female, they report that gender really matters only at first. When mind meets mind, gender is part of the dream of the encounter, and real issues of practice are not gendered ones.

On the other hand, in emphasis and delivery of the teachings, women often emphasize elements overlooked by male teachers. Often this is what attracts students — male or female — to women teachers. A clear example of "women doing it differently" is the emphasis that certain

## Buddhist Women in the West

*When ancient Buddhism and modern feminism meet, the result is a new brand of compassionate teaching in the West*

BY JUDITH SIMMER-BROWN

teachers have placed on compassion or loving-kindness. A number of women teachers have also developed their own communities after leaving more traditional sanghas that were patriarchal in structure.

While the participation of women in Buddhism in the West is remarkable, it is important to put it into perspective. It is common that women often serve in charismatic or leadership roles in the first generation of religions being established in new cultural settings. As these traditions enter the mainstream, they commonly copy the cultural settings in which they reside. If the feminist influences have been insufficient, it is likely that the rich contributions of women in Western Buddhism will be forgotten. Frankly, it is up to us to make sure that does not happen.

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"American women, having broken with a patriarchal path, are creating their direction, incorporating wisdom wherever they may find it,"

writes Karma Lekshe Tsomo in "Buddhism through American Women's Eyes."

**P**ang Kwi-Hi is a successful Korean Buddhist lecturer, novelist and scriptwriter. She is also handicapped and bound to a wheelchair. She created the Association of Disabled Writers and a literature magazine for disabled writers. She also wrote a novel about being disabled. As a university student, she initially studied Buddhism without faith in it, but quickly realized it could be very helpful and started doing its practices.

## Buddhist Women in the East

*Buddhist women in Asia are gaining equality through education, work and independence*

BY MARTINE BATCHELOR

Now, she applies Buddhist tenets in her daily life.

This was one of the characteristics of the nuns and laywomen I met in Korea: they were not weak females needing protection but strong, capable and warm human beings. Whenever I asked them about the position of nuns or women in Buddhism, they did not see a problem. They thought they were equal. They were part of the essential four groups who constituted the great Buddhist assembly: monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen. The great abbess, Myongsong Sunim, told me that there was no difference between monks and nuns. They were both disciples of the Buddha. They were like the two wings of a bird. Their mission in life was to spread the Buddha's teaching.

The Buddha gave a great opportunity to women to practice and realize awakening, when he agreed that men and women could equally attain awakening and the fruits of the path – wisdom and compassion. Over the centuries, many women took that opportunity in whatever setting they found themselves. Of course, historically, there were many cultural and societal obstacles, but it did not stop women. In the "Songs of the Women Elders" ("Therigatha" from the Pali Canon), we find many examples of realized nuns during the time of the Buddha. And "The Lives of the Nuns" ("Pi Ch'iu Ni Chuan") comprises biographies of leading Chinese Buddhist nuns in the 4th to 6th centuries.

What has helped women recently in the East is education, earning a living, and being able to live independent lives. In ancient times, women were more invisible and seldom written about, but nowadays they are more visible, because there is more parity in the whole society. Now, there are many Buddhist women teachers, artists, educators, and social activists in the East. Buddhist women are inspired by a great faith in the Buddhist path, and also in themselves. They find creative ways to manifest wisdom and compassion in their lives. It seems to me that women have always done so, whenever they have had the possibility, but modern

life makes it more attainable.

Buddhism in the past has been patriarchal. Not because it is intrinsic to Buddhism, but because it would have been astonishing if it had not been, due to the existing social conditions. Buddha was already going against the grain of his time, by allowing an order of nuns to form. Nowadays, the positions of nuns in traditional Buddhist countries are still influenced by cultural conditioning. Based on my research in various countries, I would grade it this way: in Korea, the nuns are 95% equal to men; Taiwan 95%; Japan 60%; Tibetan Buddhism 45%; Burma 30%; and Thailand 5%. Sri Lanka was 30%, but now that Sri Lankan nuns can receive full ordination, their positions are improved.

Still, regardless of practice or tradition, I found a common thread among all the women I've met — mindfulness, awareness and attentiveness. They apply the teachings to their daily lives as much as possible, and they develop creative and meditative responses to situations they find themselves in, for their own benefit and for others.

In Korea, I met many nuns who said they became nuns in order to be free spiritually, but also socially and culturally. In a Confucianist society like Korea, they would have been restricted to being the daughter of so and so, then the wife of so and so, and finally the mother of so and so. By becoming nuns they believed they would have more opportunities to realize their full potential as human beings.

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### Website Resources

<http://members.tripod.com/Lhamo/index.html>

A comprehensive listing of leading Buddhist women teachers, activists and scholars of all traditions.

<http://www2hawaii.edu/tsomo/biblio.html>

A comprehensive listing of books about women and the divine feminine in Buddhism.

<http://www.sakyadita.org>

A listing of resources by the Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women

<http://www.enagling.org/ia/vipassana/vipwomen.html>

Resources for women in the Theravada tradition

## Buddhist Women with Impact

**TSULTRIM ALLIONE** – founder of Tara Mandala in Colorado, which "integrates the deep feminine into the fabric of Western Buddhist practice."

**JOKO BECK** – this resident teacher at the San Diego Zen Center emphasizes daily practice that includes a holistic view of living.

**SYLVIA BERNSTEIN** – a Vipassana teacher in the SF Bay Area, who blends Jewish humour with Buddhist practice.

**PEMA CHODRON** – spiritual teacher of Gampo Abbey, Nova Scotia, Canada, who brings earthy wisdom and personal experience to teachings.

**VEN ROBINA COURTIN** – Tibetan Buddhist teacher, who gives exuberant delivery of Dharma, and directs the Liberation Prison Project.

**RUTH DENISON** – Vipassana teacher, who integrates body movement with practice, at the Dhamma Dena in California.

**ROSHI JOAN HALIFAX** – Zen priest and pioneer of "engaged Buddhism," she works with the terminally ill and teaches shamanic relationship to the environment.

**SENSEI WENDY EGYOKU NAKAO** – Abbess of the Zen Center of Los Angeles, which offers sitting meditation and community outreach.

**SENSEI ENKYO PAT O'HARA** – Zen priest at Village Zendo in New York. Leads programs related to AIDs, race, class and sexuality.

**TONI PACKER** – former Zen teacher, who founded the Springwater Center in New York, which shuns rituals, but focuses on awareness and openness.

**VEN TENZIN PALMO** – best known for doing a 12-year retreat in a Himalayan cave, she is building a nunnery to revive an extinct lineage of nuns in the Tibetan Kagyu tradition.

**YVONNE RAND** – Zen Buddhist priest with Redwood Creek Dharma Center, whose concerns about abuse of authority spurred her to develop more egalitarian approaches.

**SHARON SALZBERG** – a leading Vipassana meditation teacher and founder of the Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts.

**DIANE VAN PARIJS** – a Japanese Pure Land (Jodo Shinshu) priest, leading the White Lotus Center in Anchorage, Alaska, which focuses on practices for families.

**MASTER CHENG YEN** – this Taiwanese nun founded the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation, an international organization which provides medical treatment worldwide.



## The Attendant Who Pledged Her Life

JACQUELYN KEELEY

**AGE:** 52 **PLACE OF RESIDENCE:** Boca Raton, Florida **MAIN ROLES:** Former attendant to Lama Yeshe and mother **OCCUPATION:** College program coordinator **BUDDHIST HISTORY:** Met Lama Yeshe in 1977. Attendant to Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa (1978–1984). Co-founder of Vajrapani Institute, California (1977–1978). Director of Tushita Mahayana Meditation Center (1985–1986). Founder of Tubten Kunga Center, Florida (1987). **MAIN BUDDHIST LESSON:** stabilizing meditation for clarity and awareness.

I never saw Lama (Yeshe) as a man, and I never thought of myself in terms of a woman. Anatomically, Lama was a funny, pudgy little man, but I knew that was just the outer casing for a fully developed enlightened mind.

One day Lama asked if I knew why he spent 24 hours a day with me. "You think I spend 24 hours a day with you because you are my girlfriend?" he asked. "I spend 24 hours a day with you, because it is useful for all kind mother sentient beings!" When Lama finished the sentence, my heart became the prayer to be just as Lama had said, to be useful for all kind mother sentient beings.

I (had) met Lama Yeshe in 1977, in answer to my prayers, and requested that Lama lead

me down the Bodhisattva's path resulting in Enlightenment. In exchange, I pledged my life in service, promising to do whatever was necessary to make Lama's efforts more effective at reaching and serving sentient beings.

We hardly ever talked, and certainly never about my personal matters. Yet, despite the lack of conversation, the communication was clear. Lama turned me from a hippie back into the daughter my parents had raised. He encouraged me to wear Western clothing, and presented me one day with a plastic ring with a large pink piece of plastic on it, and said, "Here, I want you to wear jewelry like this." I accepted the symbol of opulent Western wealth and retired my silver and turquoise (Tibetan jewelry). "You twenty century modern Western

woman," he said.

(With me) fashioned in a Western image, Lama showed me off — to his female students in particular — and encouraged them to look like me. For some, Lama's instruction was to wear red nail polish. To another, Lama would prescribe blue eyeliner. To all, the message was clear: there is no value in running away from one's culture and heritage.

Lama (taught) that one could have anything and do anything, as long as it was for the sake of others. "For example," Lama said, "when you practice Dharma, you can go to the beach and get a beautiful tan. You can wear expensive clothes and jewels and make yourself gorgeous to others. But you have to do this with the motivation to hook them, and when you have them hooked, you can help them, you can teach them Dharma. This is successful."

I never served Lama from the position of a woman needing equal rights. I was a human being longing to subdue the poisons in my mind. Lama was the method. I would have done — and would still do today — anything for Lama.

I hoped for a clue from Lama as to what my future would hold. I would hear Lama advise one student to be "great center director," and instruct another to "go to business school and be great business man for Dharma," and I would hope for some profound instruction, as well. Instead, he said, "You make good American mama." This is not what I had hoped to hear!

In 1986, I was pregnant and returned to America to be a "good American mama." Fraught with worry over my circumstances, my ability to manage, and my fear of being separated from the Dharma, I prayed to Lama from the very depth of my heart to give me a sign that Lama was with me, guiding and protecting me. "Lama," I prayed, "give me the baby on Christmas Day."

Although the due date for the child's arrival was January 13, 1987, the baby arrived on Christmas Day, 1986. (I named her) Felicity Noel. I knew her Christmas Day birth was no accident. I knew it was from the love of Lama, and my devotion to this child became equal to my devotion to Lama.



## The Daughter Who Can Be Anything

FELICITY NOEL KEELEY

**AGE:** 16 **PLACE OF RESIDENCE:** Boca Raton, Florida **ROLE:** Daughter **OCCUPATION:** High school student **BUDDHIST HISTORY:** Buddhist from birth **MAIN BUDDHIST LESSON:** Being a good person

I try to have compassion for my mother because she goes through a lot everyday and doesn't need bad stuff coming from me when she gets home. When we get into an argument I try to go off and meditate so I don't blow up at her. If I do get upset for being yelled at, I look to see if my mom's right or wrong — she's usually right, so I make an extra effort to change what I'm doing wrong. I'm currently working on a horrible habit I have of talking back. It's getting better though, because I start to stop talking back to my mom in the middle of what I'm saying!

At school, it's sometimes hard to get my peers to understand when I try to think the "different" and better way. When someone had stepped on a caterpillar by accident, but it was still alive, they weren't that understanding when I put it on a leaf instead of killing it. I don't tell people at school that I'm a Buddhist as they are not very nice about things that are different to them. But those that know think it's cool, and want to learn how to meditate!

It's hard not to get a little jealous when someone gets a better grade than me on a test that I've studied several days for — but I always congratulate them, and am happy for

them. To those that don't like me I show my best face, am nice to them, and complement them if needed — being cold and distant only makes matters worse. If my friends say something unkind, I tell them not to say that; and if someone has made them mad, I try to show them the other person's perspective — that person must feel *ugly* inside to be able to speak so meanly! Although teachers too, can sometimes be a real pain, here again I try to be compassionate to them, and not be mean back, because they have such a tough job, every day!

To me, the Dharma really puts things into perspective because it's *you*, not a higher being, deciding your life, it's how you are and what kind of "seeds" you plant — negative or positive. I've found that the *tonglen* meditation practice [in which you breath in the suffering of others, and breath out relief] can help me through anything — it not only makes me feel better about myself, because I try to take the suffering from the world so there is no more, it also brings perspective because I realize that things could be worse than a stubbed toe, or a throbbing headache.

Being a girl in these times means I have more opportunities. I feel that I can do anything!

I have always wanted to have kids. I once told Lama Yeshe that I'd always felt like I should have a baby. He said, "Well, some people really need to, and some people don't. For some it's very bad, and they're miserable." "What about me?" I asked. And he said, "Maybe you need to have."

In 1979, I met my [late] husband Ashley Walker at Kopan Monastery in Nepal. By the time I had Angelica, I was 39 and had done the things I wanted to do: traveled, studied, took teachings with the lamas, helped build a center, had a business, did long retreats, and had a relationship where we were focused on each other. I was really ready to be a mother.

Before Angelica, I thought I was a patient person – calm and pleasant, without much anger. With Ashley, I saw more anger. There is nothing like a child to push your buttons – they're relentless! With Angelica, I got angry because I was tired, and wanted space – I wanted to have a thought, and go from one thought to the next without being interrupted, I wanted to have a phone call, or a talk with a girlfriend. With a partner you can say, "Back off! I'm going to go meditate, or have a bath, and then we'll talk about it." Try telling that to your two year-old! If I did, it was the signal for Angelica to get louder, right in my face! You get to see how far your practice has gone, what your real attitude is, and how much space you have for someone else.

You can leave a relationship, and a business; you can even leave a guru. But you can't walk out on a kid. It's the middle of the night, they're crying, and you're exhausted, but you have to pull the energy from somewhere. I would do my prayers at two in the morning and feel like, "Surely the Buddhas would have more compassion than to expect me to do this *now* after this day!"

There's nothing like having a child that really opens you to being giving, and forces you to quit being selfish. It happens naturally that you want that person's happiness more than your own. The Lam-rim [teaching texts] say try and develop compassion and love for other sentient beings like a mother has for her child. That kind of love arises spontaneously with a child. And with a child it's easier to understand what that feeling of love and compassion towards all others is.

When (my husband) Ashley passed away, Angelica had a really hard time and

worried about losing me. He died in August 1995 in Hawaii, while building our future home. It was a rainy day, and he fell off the roof of the house. I heard him fall, ran to his side, and was with him for the last 15 minutes of his life. Angelica was six years old, and had a major experience of impermanence without any veil. I was totally in shock for quite a long time. Angeli helped more than anything, as I had to stay present for her. She needed me to be as grounded as possible and to continue taking care of her.

It was difficult for me to meditate at that time – somehow going deep was a little bit threatening. What helped me to meditate and go deeper into my practice was being with my Dharma friends. When we would get together to do pujas, or go to teachings, their energy supported me and protected

me, which allowed me to open up to the Buddha energy—to fully take refuge.

I don't do too much to consciously plant Dharma seeds. I felt that Angelica needed to experience how we lived our practice – that we chose a lifestyle that included a spiritual path, that we took time to meditate, that we treated her with respect, that we thought about the feelings of others, and discussed them. We tried to create a home where Angeli would have the experience of the Buddhist precepts, and where her parents tried to practice the *Paramitas*. She's absorbed a lot of Dharma, and it's part of her, so whether or not she's Buddhist isn't the point. If you're really loving and have Dharma heart, it doesn't matter whether you call yourself a Buddhist or not. You're an awakening being.

## The Mother of an Awakening Being

SHASTA WALLACE

**AGE:** 52 **PLACE OF RESIDENCE:** Boulder Creek, California **MAIN ROLE:** Mother  
**OCCUPATION:** Massage therapist **BUDDHIST HISTORY:** Took refuge with Thai teacher, Dhiravamsa, in Northern California (1975). Took initiations with Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche (1977). Practices at Vajrapani Institute. **MAIN BUDDHIST LESSON:** letting go of attachment.



I have always felt conflicted about the role of (a romantic) relationship in my spiritual path.

Ten years ago, I made the decision to live my life under the guidance of my teacher, Lama Zopa Rinpoche. As such, (a romantic) relationship has always come second to following (the Lama's) advice. It is extremely difficult, especially for a man, to know that his wishes come second to another man's wishes — even if he is an enlightened one!

Because of my commitment, when it comes to the bigger decisions of life, I have made no concessions, and my partner Peter has been the one to make drastic changes in his life plans to support me.

Communication, and karma seem to be key. Early in our relationship, Peter (at right) and I read a self-help couple's book that made reference to telling the "microscopic truth" — those little things that we think, but don't share out of fear of how we might appear or hurting our partner's feelings. We worked hard to do this, and it has helped to develop a level of trust that is exceptional.

Our ability to have harmonious communication is also dependent on having good couple's karma — a result of avoiding sexual misconduct and divisive speech in the past. So, if things just aren't working out, no matter how hard I try, I remember that this entire scenario is being forced on me by karma — my past actions coming at me in living color.

A few years back, I was in a verbally abusive relationship. This was definitely the result of past negative actions, specifically sexual misconduct and harsh speech. That situation was a catalyst for me to "clean up my act," so I would never have to go through that again. In the same way, I try to remember when things are going well (with Peter) — that this is also a (karmic) result, and be happy for a job well done!

My contribution to the relationship is one of perspective, while my partner's contribution is practical. I offer different points of view and know how everybody is feeling. He takes care of the car, the firewood, the plane tickets, packing the suitcases.

In this respect, I think the world is upside down right now. Really, the women should be in the positions of power and leadership, because of their tendency to ponder, process, envisage. The men can follow-up with effective action that brings the thing into reality.

An individual's journey to enlightenment is highly personal. Sometimes what one



## The Girlfriend With a Lama

KENDALL MAGNUSSEN

**AGE:** 39 **PLACE OF RESIDENCE:** Taos, New Mexico **MAIN ROLE:** Girlfriend in a committed relationship **MAIN OCCUPATION:** Program coordinator **BUDDHIST HISTORY:** Took refuge in 1985. Spiritual Program Coordinator at Land of Medicine Buddha, California (1992 – 1999). **MAIN BUDDHIST LESSON:** Guru yoga (Union with the spiritual teacher)

needs to do is not compatible with what our beloved needs, or wants us to do. I think the mark of "true love" is that each of the couple is happiest when the other member is pursu-

ing their greatest happiness — or enlightenment — and is supporting them to do that — materially, emotionally, and from the depth of their heart.

Do female teachers bring benefit that is different from male teachers? For me, the question is not female versus male, but feminine styles of teaching versus masculine styles. A feminine style of teaching (and there are many male teachers who embody a feminine style) is above all, loving, nurturing, and guiding. The Tibetan word *lama* means, highest wisdom (*la*) transmitted through love (*ma*). So a *lama* is a spiritual mother who nurtures their children through the stages of the path. In this approach, success is not about accomplishing or completing practices, but in always staying open and relaxed, thus allowing yourself to be effected by your practices, rather than doing your practices in order to get an effect.

As a teacher, my challenge is creating a place in this world for this type of non-authoritative, experiential style of sharing Dharma. Personally, the only thing that works is to stay centered in myself, to know who I am and what I do, and to trust that that's enough. Success for me is not measured in how many students there are, or how big the programs are, but in personal terms — how centered, happy and relaxed I am in myself, while using my Dharma experience in helpful ways.

My source of inspiration, in terms of the feminine, is Yeshe Tsogyal, a woman who lived in 8th century Tibet as a human *dakini*, a feminine expression of enlightenment. In 1997, during a difficult period of my life, I remembered the counsel of Thinley Norbu Rinpoche who advised Westerners to read the biographies of spiritual masters. So I began reading about her. Yeshe Tsogyal's life story impressed me by its realism. She was a misunderstood child, a coveted woman, an anguished seeker, a committed yogini, a consort, and finally a great spiritual master. What impressed me was that she didn't advocate a path of overcoming, of accomplishing, or of ascending that resulted in final attainment. She seemed to be presenting a unique way, perhaps a feminine way, of truly experiencing the raw material of life in order to transform it into the nectar of realization. I began using her meditation practice and life story.

When I began teaching in 1992, my approach was traditional. Nowadays, I also rely on my understanding of Yeshe Tsogyal's teachings. And on certain tools from the Hakomi Method, an experiential self-study program, based on mindfulness and non-violence.

As a teacher, I see myself as a source of information and support. I like meeting students to explore what is happening in their practice, both on and off the cushion. I like to see Dharma penetrate the whole person. I especially like to help practitioners gain awareness of who they are, what their needs are, and how they can practice in an inspired and nurturing way, without diluting or distorting the Dharma.

Although Yeshe Tsogyal spent extended periods of time in isolated retreat, she did not shrink from the world. She spent the greater part of her human life "in the world" — offering her teachings and her very being to all. She infused all her roles — daughter, princess, yogini, consort, teacher — and esoterically, the mother of all beings and all phenomena.

All roles — or phenomena — are converted into great bliss-emptiness, and in turn, great bliss-emptiness turns into more phenomena.

To accomplish this, there is a form of

assisted-enlightenment, so to speak, called the *dakini* principle. In this context, *dakini* is understood as "skillful movement"—functioning in complete wisdom. In the *dakini's* hands, all phenomena become Buddha activity.

What is often lacking for Westerners, who wish to access the *dakini* principle, is a healthy balance on the one hand of humility and devotion, and on the other, of personal empowerment and permission to invite the *dakini* as a source of liberation. Both women and men have to find their inner *dakini*, so to speak. This must be learned consciously. And they must learn to trust it.

When Yeshe Tsogyal was rejected throughout Tibet, she remained true to herself and her teacher. For women in particular, locating our inner *dakini* requires expanding our sense of who we already are. Then it means using our resources to take the next step, without getting lost in judgment or comparison.

## A Teacher of Feminine Bliss

LAMA DECHEN YESHE WANGMO

**AGE:** 53 **PLACE OF RESIDENCE:** Big Island, Hawaii **ROLE:** Teacher **OCCUPATIONS:** teacher of Vajrayana Buddhism, translator of Tibetan scriptural texts, workshop facilitator and counselor **BUDDHIST HISTORY:** Took refuge in 1978 in Canada from the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa. Lived nine years as a monastic. Cloistered retreat in the US, under the direction of Kalu Rinpoche (1982 – 1985). Authorized as a lama in the Nyingma lineage by Lama Tharchin Rinpoche (1992). Director of Vajrayana Foundation Hawaii and Lotus Gate Sanctuary, Big Island, Hawaii (since 1994). Established Jnanasukha (Wisdom-Bliss) in 2002, a spiritual non-profit, to bring the teachings of Yeshe Tsogyal to the West







## The Inner Activist

ARINNA WEISMAN

**AGE:** 52 **PLACE OF RESIDENCE:** Northampton, Mass. **MAIN ROLES:** activist, meditation teacher **OCCUPATION:** Meditation teacher **BUDDHIST HISTORY:** Studied Vipassana with Ruth Denison (since 1979), and S.N. Goenka, Joseph Goldstein and Michelle McDonald-Smith. Also studied with Thich Nhat Hanh, and Tsoknyi Rinpoche. Resident teacher at Insight Meditation Society (1989-1991). Leads retreats in USA and Germany. **MAIN BUDDHIST LESSON:** The power of taking refuge

Much of social activism takes place in meetings. We are now organizing a candlelight vigil with speakers to talk about war and the possibility of peace in Iraq. I find myself sitting on a hard metal chair, in a poorly-lit church basement, facing an agenda impossibly long for the designated two hours.

I have been to several recent rallies where the speakers only spoke of pain and suffering. This time, I want some speakers who will be uplifting. Others disagree.

When I feel my heart harden, I call on myself to give an open ear and disengage from my attachments. I repeat several mantras to myself: "It is more important

how you relate to what is happening, than what is happening," and "Pay attention with an open heart." When I have lost it, I say: "I forgive myself. I am a student still learning on this path of life."

I have the absolute confidence I am building peace and not war.

I was born in Johannesburg, South Africa, to political activists Myrtle and Monty Berman, who fought for African freedom. Driving into the (black African) townships with my mother, I was shocked to see the stark poverty and lack of facilities. Facing so much suffering burnt an impression into my heart.

In 1979, I joined a demonstration at a

California weapons facility, to stop sending arms to Central America. Some members of the group bickered with each other and were quite nasty. Standing under the sky of stars, I saw that we had no idea of how to be peaceful, although we had a wonderful vision of peace. Yet, I didn't know how to model the change I wanted.

The next day, I sat down in my little cabin and wrote a prayer asking for a teacher. I painted a design around the prayer and hung it on my wall. A month later, a friend invited me to a Vipassana retreat led by Ruth Denison. I hated it. I faced a torrent of negative emotions, which seemed impossible to work with. So I vowed I would not return. Six months later, I was back. On the fourth retreat, I experienced a deep opening, and knew I had found something extraordinarily valuable.

In the Vipassana tradition, there's a quality of mind called appreciative joy, which helps bring about equanimity. I sometimes spend 20 minutes giving thanks. When I feel overwhelmed with disappointment, I start by giving thanks for very obvious gifts, like being able to see and hear, for being able to use my arms, for the trees in the local park. After a while, a rhythm takes over, and I find myself appreciating things I haven't been conscious of.

When I touch my inner beauty through meditation, and honor its expression as a lesbian, I am also provided with a vision that guides me. The practice has offered me a way to challenge my hatred of homophobia, and to look at those parts of my identity that are held as a defense.

Of the many differences between men and women, gay and straight, I think the most important issues have to do with access to political, economic and religious power, and how this inequality springs from our personal and social ignorance. I believe we need to work on the personal and institutional levels for transformation, which is why I divide my time between meditation retreats and social activism.

This is a significant time in Buddhism, because so many women can practice the Dharma. We are coming closer to the full expression of the Dharma, in both its feminine and masculine expressions.

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Arinna weisman leads the Dhamma Dena Meditation Center. Contact: 1-413-586-4915 or [www.dhammadena.org](http://www.dhammadena.org)

Like many Western *sangha* (community of nuns and monks), there is no financial support mechanism in place. If we wish to stay in our own country to teach and promote Buddhism, we have to work to support ourselves. My years of retreat and study have given me a firm foundation.

The majority of my colleagues are driven by money. The proverbial “house, car, holidays, hobbies” formulate much of their desire and wishes. I am not interested in such things, and do not hold any value to them – other than what they can achieve when helping others.

I treat (my staff) as if they are a part of my family. I try to (look) at their point of view first. I use phrases such as: “Please help me to understand this problem, as I am having a problem with ....” My staff and colleagues know they can approach me, and I do not use or pass on their information. This allows them to be relaxed in the workplace, when they are also facing problems on the home front. I do not mean that I am a soft touch and easily hoodwinked. I can be very firm when required. I have done my fair share of hiring and firing. The bottom line is that the client services have to be maintained, otherwise we do not get paid and keep our jobs.

Frequently in corporate life – the wishes of the CEO and senior management is not what is best for their staff, and it is a minefield of personal agendas driven from the top down. I approach everything without any personal agenda, other than wanting to resolve the issue. It really is a question of empathizing with everyone, and remembering that everyone is entitled to respect and wishes to be happy.

I remember the first challenge I faced with the company. My project manager had put a German in charge of a Spanish operation, with an English team. After (the German) telling the English team that they were second rate, and the Spaniards that their system was way behind the Germans, I had to fly out to avoid World War Three. I had two days to bring it back on track. It required my talking calmly to all parties, as well as keeping our (company’s) and the client’s objectives in mind.

Balancing it all can be a tricky business. I manage by keeping everything strictly in its box. Usually, I do not work late, and I do not take work home – mentally or physically. When I am taking on a new client, I often work into the night, until all (my thoughts

are) on paper and can be categorized. I find it imperative that I get it all out of my brain, so that I do not use precious meditation time trying to remember a vital point for a client.

As a nun, I will not work on military or brewery accounts – under the principle of right livelihood. I do not sit at the bar with the men clients overseas, talking about the business until the small hours. I also do not go to some of the social places with them. This can sometimes cause a problem. I usually say that I do not do my job well if I have a late night. This is definitely easier as a female, as men are expected to be a part of the gang, and so much business is still done through this route.

If I am using one of our local offices, and not expecting to meet clients, I wear my lower robe and usually a yellow T-shirt and a maroon jacket. I do not wear robes when meeting clients. For client meetings, I wear formal business clothes. At this point, I am representing the company – not my nunnery.

I now have some (Dharma) students that were initially my staff and colleagues. I often lead meditation (sessions) in the workplace.

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Tenzin Choesang is developing a business retreat center in England, focusing on stress reduction and ethics. Center income will support a nunnery for all traditions. Contact: Choesang@gogointernet.co.uk

## The Working Woman

BIKSHUNI TENZIN CHOESANG

**AGE:** 52 **RESIDENCE:** Buckinghamshire, England **NUNNERY:** Kachoe Ghakyil Ling, Kopan, Nepal **ROLE:** Employer, Manager **OCCUPATION:** Client delivery manager, at a multi-national IT corporation **BUDDHIST HISTORY:** followed Zen (1960s), then Tibetan lineages with Geshe Yeshe Tobden, Geshe Rabten, Lama Yeshe, Geshe Michael Roach and Lama Lhundrup **MAIN BUDDHIST LESSON:** *Tonglen* (breathing in suffering of others, breathing out loving kindness)





## The Dharmic Politician

RINCHEN KHANDO CHOEGYAL (SECOND FROM LEFT)

**AGE:** 56 **PLACE OF RESIDENCE:** Dharamsala, India **MAIN ROLE:** Former politician; organization director  
**OCCUPATION:** Director **HISTORY:** President of the Tibetan Women's Association (1984-93). Minister of Health and Home Affairs (1993). Minister of Education in the Tibetan Government-in-Exile (1994 - 2001). Director of the Tibetan Nun's Project (1997- present). **BUDDHIST HISTORY:** born Buddhist **MAIN BUDDHIST LESSON:** nothing in particular

His Holiness the Dalai Lama once said, "I hear people say that politics is a dirty game, and that all politicians are liars – but it doesn't have to be that way." You can be a politician and truthful, which was true for me. As a politician, there are certain things that need to be done, and if you are truthful to yourself, and handle these tasks sincerely, everything becomes much easier, and more productive. And if things don't work out, it's OK, because you have nothing to hide. Integrity is important. I am myself, whether in the kitchen, or in the office, or giving a talk to thousands of people – it makes the load much lighter.

As a political leader I didn't really meet with any obstacles due to being a woman. The Tibetan community was very accepting towards having a woman hold such positions. Because women in general have a gift for looking at things from a holistic point of view, and in a compassionate way, our contribution does make a difference. The world in the past lost so much, by not having

women play roles in important areas. But luckily now, this is changing.

Never in all my years of working in the Tibetan community, and in the government, did I feel the need to be more masculine. In fact, women are expected to be more gentle and kind, and we are basically that. However, there is a big difference between being gentle and being weak – we have to be firm and inwardly strong to achieve what we want to achieve, but we don't have to change from being who we are. And if anybody tries to take advantage of our gentility, that is when you bring all the firmness you have – but not violently!

In pre-'59 Tibet, most girls did not receive an education. Today we are going through the fourth generation in exile, and the third is completely educated. And women are taking positions at all levels of the government, and community.

Education is also key for the ordained. A system for educating nuns did not exist in the past. However, as the nuns in exile are now

starting to get an education, this situation will change in 10–15 years time. Eventually it would be good to have nuns become *geshes* (Doctor of Divinity graduates). Once educated, it is my hope that the nuns enter the community as social workers, teachers and even babysitters, and in this way make a difference to the lives of others.

Dharma is something that can be made so complicated, and yet it needn't be. If you talk about (concepts such as) emptiness, people like me won't understand. But I am lucky to be married to a husband [Tenzin Choegyal, the youngest brother of His Holiness the Dalai Lama], who makes the Dharma so practical. (Through him), I've come to see that Dharma is what you do, everyday from morning to night – as a leader, administrator, mother, wife – all roles I have held and hold.

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Rinchen Khando Choegyal is currently running the Tibetan Nuns Project, which provides educational programs in several nunneries in Dharamsala, India.  
Contact: [tnpusa@igc.org](mailto:tnpusa@igc.org)



## Spiritual Women Aim to Heal the World

*A gathering of religious women leaders brings hope for reconciliation, peace and prosperity*

Can women change the world? How important is religion or spirituality in this process? Some 500 women from 75 countries met in October last year, to answer those questions. They met at the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, as part of The Global Peace Initiative of Women Religious and Spiritual Leaders. Their goal: for women as a collective to bring the wisdom from their faiths to address global problems. Their agenda: to build peace, reduce poverty and spearhead social programs.

Buddhists comprised one-fifth of the participants. Prominent Buddhist women who attended included: Princess Rattana Devi Norodom of Cambodia, who is devoted to rebuilding the Buddhist community in her country; Mae-Chee Sansanee Sthirasuta of Thailand, Director of the Sathira Dhammasthan retreat center in Bangkok; and attending in absentia was Aung San Suu Kyi, 1991 Nobel Peace prize laureate and leader of the main National League for Democracy in Myanmar.

Other religions represented: Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Jain, Jewish, Shinto, Taoist, Sufi, Zoroastrian, Native American and other indigenous traditions. Participants spanned a wide range of professions, including: nuns, ministers, bishops, rabbis, swaminis, peace workers, scholars, researchers, educators, religious law experts, actresses, businesswomen, and government leaders.

The conference demonstrated the power and effectiveness of women — particularly when spiritual qualities of compassion and caring are harnessed — to

address the most pressing problems of our times.

Sufi practitioner Anne Scott attended as a delegate and speaker.

BY ANNE SCOTT

**A** Palestinian woman had just finished talking about being a woman in Ramallah. She was a panel speaker at The Global Peace Initiative of Women Religious and Spiritual Leaders.

An Israeli woman in the audience stood up. She asked the Palestinian woman why she just blamed Israel, rather than take responsibility herself for bettering the situation of women in Ramallah.

The Palestinian woman tried to speak without blame or accusation, but the Israeli woman was insistent on her point of “personal responsibility.”

For those of us in the audience, it was a difficult and painful moment to witness.

At this point, a woman from the Congo, Africa, walked up to the microphone. She said that in her country, her entire family had been murdered. But she did not harbor resentment.

“I come from a spiritual family,” she said. “What’s done is done. It is not about your ‘this’ or my ‘that.’ We have the same struggle now. It is about the world. If we (women) do not take our responsibility now, it is we who will be blamed.”

The conference itself was quite structured, but the feminine element of inclusion operated through-

**Aung San Suu Kyi, Buddhist human rights activist, and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, who attended the conference in absentia, said in her statement of support:**

“All women have something to offer the world — as a wife, a mother, a daughter, a sister, a friend, a manager, a politician, a national leader, a world leader, a business leader. This world is beginning to recognize (this), but perhaps not enough. I think we still have to do much, to make the world understand that there is a lot that women have to contribute, especially women who put great emphasis on the value of spiritual aspirations.”

out. Women of all positions and spiritual traditions could speak – government ministers, businesswomen, spiritual leaders, women who live in conflict areas, scholars, women from non-profit organizations, mothers, young women. Even when schedules were pushed, and lunches were skipped, every woman who was invited to speak was given her turn. No one was excluded.

And did the women speak. They spoke about their horrors and losses — of a child, a husband, a whole village. Often speaking matter-of-factly, with little emotion, they shared their stories of atrocities: genocide, rape by HIV infected soldiers, insufficient medical care, lack of basic supplies, hunger. They spoke of violence all over the world. One Israeli mother spoke of how she found her son, almost unrecognizable, in the hills behind their house.

Slowly, as women listened together, a consciousness of oneness began to filter into our reality. The reality of hundreds of women together, tired from traveling long distances, stimulated by the diversity, carrying the pain and suffering that many have endured. There were stories of healing and reconciliation, such as the South African woman, who spoke about how she was able to forgive the person who had killed a member of her family.

At one dinner, one woman I sat beside was from Rwanda. She was president of the Association for Genocide Widows. She described the 1994 genocide that resulted in the mass killing of over a million people. Rwanda's population is now 60% to 70% women — half of them widows. She spoke about the trauma of women, and the orphaned HIV babies that were born out of systematic rape of women. "The women can live because God becomes their husband," she said, "and for the children, God becomes their father."

I felt as if the heart of the world was speaking through these women.

One day, I left the conference early. I couldn't take any more of the talks. Walking back to my hotel room, I cried. The world was full of sorrow and suffering. I stared out at the lake, asking myself what was the purpose of this conference. Then I realized I had to go back.

Again in the meeting room, more words, more initiatives, more suggestions. Then it was time for the appreciation of different women. First, the Afghani women were invited to stand in the front. The whole room broke into enormous applause. Then, one by one, women were invited to stand in the front, and more words, more applause. I looked around at the faces in the room. Something was beginning to take place.

What emerged was a consciousness that had no national, religious or hierarchical barrier. Many powerful women had spoken, and yet there was no power structure. Every woman spoke from a different point-of-view, but the message was the same: healing, rec-

onciliation, peace.

Hearing these stories hit one's consciousness over and over again, in so many different ways, until finally, the vision of peace became a reality. What is being born out of the suffering is hope for the world.

Anne Scott is director of the Dream Weather Foundation [www.dreamweather.org](http://www.dreamweather.org)

This conference was started by women, who attended a similar United Nations event, and found that only 15% of the participants were women. Thus, they launched The Global Peace Initiative of Women Religious and Spiritual Leaders, under the auspices of the United Nations, with its first conference in October 2001. The next conference will be in 2004. Contact: [www.millenniumpeacesummit.org/eventframe.html](http://www.millenniumpeacesummit.org/eventframe.html)

## Conference Outcomes:

**WOMEN'S NEGOTIATION CORPS** – Women will visit conflict zones on fact-finding missions, in order to open channels with political leaders to catalyze peace-building initiatives.

**THE BUSINESS COUNCIL FOR PEACE** – This group of 70 businesswomen will fund projects to assist women in regions of conflict.

**BUSINESS SUPPORT FOR PALESTINIAN WOMEN** — Businesswomen of Jewish American, Palestinian and Israeli descent will provide support to Palestinian women via management training, financial education, access to international markets, and loans.

**BUSINESS SUPPORT FOR AFGHANI WOMEN** – International women business leaders will help fund the Women's Center in Kabul, Afghanistan, which provides self-esteem and job training programs.

**BUSINESS SUPPORT FOR AFRICAN WOMEN** — International women business leaders will help Peace Baskets, made by women in Rwanda, who suffered losses in genocide.

**CONFERENCE ON SPIRITUALITY AND POVERTY REDUCTION** – Women plan to harness the power of spiritual organizations to ease global poverty, at this event planned this year.

**BUILDING THE INNER FOUNDATIONS FOR PEACE** – women in this task force are examining ways that peace education and conflict negotiation can become mandatory curriculum in schools.

**DAY OF GLOBAL PRAYER** – Women in this task force are recommending that the United Nations Day of Peace – September 21 – become a Day of Global Prayer, when churches, mosques and temples worldwide organize prayer sessions for peace.

**Khandro Rinpoche, founder of the Samten Tse Retreat Center in India and daughter of His Holiness Mindroling Trichen, said of the event:**

"With the current situation in the world, it is clear that women can and must, with proper education and awareness, bring beneficial changes — and sustained transformation — to the hearts and actions of those who come within their sphere of influence — their families, communities, and nations."

# A Celebration of Buddhist Goddesses

*The goddesses of the Buddhist tradition embody the Buddha's highest teachings of love, compassion, and wisdom*

If all the goddesses of the Buddhist traditions were rolled into one woman, she'd embody the highest qualities of every woman on the planet.

She would be endowed with: innocence, vitality, nurturing, love, sex appeal, wrath, protection, healing, mercy and wisdom. And since she is special – enlightenment.

This woman would have an awesome body, incredible beauty, wonderful complexion, untold patience, and the ability to conquer anything, while emanating love everywhere. Forget about your everyday concerns of work, family, kids, the bills – or even pre-menstrual syndrome – this woman would be so enlightened, those problems would simply make her stronger. Which is probably why so many of us – men and women – pray to her various forms everyday. And have been for centuries.

As a collective, these Buddhist goddesses symbolize not just the ideals that we hope to achieve, but the qualities that already intrinsically exist within us. And while their bodies are female, they in fact symbolize the feminine qualities within all of us – men and women. For, as the wheel of karma turns, we have most likely all been men and women through many lifetimes. And no matter what gender, we are all in need of liberation from the world of delusion.

Among the many Buddhist traditions, the Tibetans have perhaps celebrated the widest range of goddesses. Other traditions in East Asia have tended to focus on the singularly exalted goddess Kuan Yin. Many Tibetan Buddhist goddesses originated from Indian Hindu deities; Hinduism's Kali became Buddhism's Krisna Krodha Dakini. Yet, in all traditions, these goddesses embody the Buddha's greatest teachings – love, compassion and wisdom. In tribute to these remarkable goddesses – and their qualities within each of us – we present the most well known Buddhist Goddesses.



*White Tara*

*Text adaptations from: "The Female Buddhas: Women of Enlightenment in Tibetan Mystical Art," by Glenn H Mullin with Jeff J Watt, featuring the Art Collection from the Shelley and Donald Rubin Foundation, Clear Light Publishers, 2003. [www.clearlightbooks.com](http://www.clearlightbooks.com)*

(ABOVE PHOTO ©2002 RUBIN FOUNDATION)



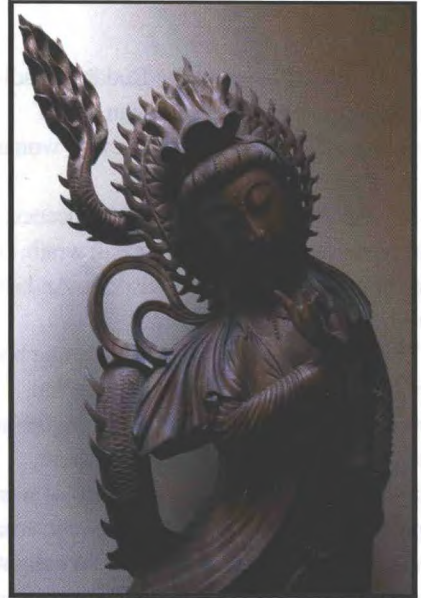
## Tara

This goddess represents enlightenment activity and energy, or Buddha karma. Because this activity expresses itself in limitless ways, Tara herself appears in limitless forms. She can appear as Red, Green, White, Blue, the Eight Taras, the 21 Taras, Tara with seven eyes, eight arms or a thousand arms. She is usually depicted as youthful, about 16 years old. This is because enlightenment bestows vigor and joy, as well as physical stamina, similar to that of a mature teenager. Her full breasts symbolize spiritual nourishment, healing, growth and transformation.

(PHOTO ©2002 THE SHELLEY AND DONALD RUBIN COLLECTION)

## Kuan Yin

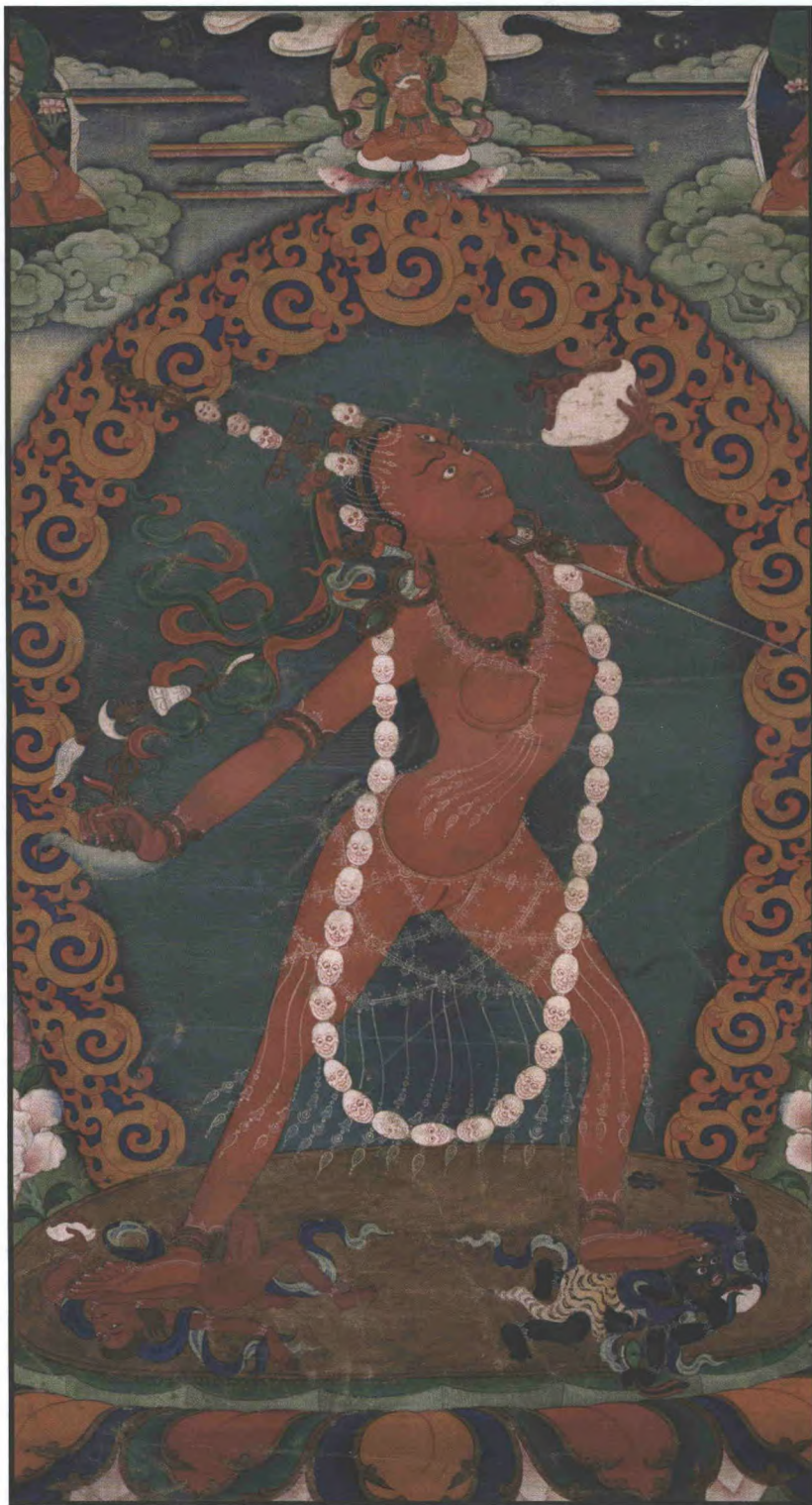
This Goddess of Mercy is one of the most beloved in Asia. She is an enlightened being, or bodhisattva, who turned back at the gates of Nirvana's paradise to help those suffering on earth. Her Chinese name literally means "she who observes sounds" – implying her ability to listen to people's prayers. An incarnation of Avalokiteshvara, who aided the Buddha, she is popular throughout China, Japan, Korea and parts of Southeast Asia, where she is also known as Kwan Yin, Guan Yin, Kannon or Kwannon. (STATUE COURTESY OF CAROLYN E. COBELO/PHOTOGRAPH BY JAAP VAN DER PLAS)



## Green Tara

Green Tara is the most popular female Buddha in Tibet, and widely known in Central Asia. Her green hue symbolizes Buddha karma, the energy that is the source of all matter. This energy is the subtle wind, the force that supports consciousness on its journey from life to life. (PAINTED BY AND COURTESY OF VEN YESHI DORJIE)





## Vajrayogini

This goddess represents the transformation of human weakness into wisdom, and the self into enlightened energy. She is often depicted as red-skinned, to symbolize sexual passion and wisdom. Her feet trample the personifications of desire and jealousy. Her lips drink blood from a skullcap, which symbolizes the bliss of non-duality. And she holds a staff, topped by skulls (which shows vindication over three poisons) and a vajra cross (which symbolizes the union of wisdom and compassion). A highest Yoga Tantra meditational deity, she is central to the Tibetan Naropa lineage of teachings. (PHOTO ©2002 RUBIN FOUNDATION)

## Palden Lhamo

This "Queen of Wrathful Rituals" is a Dhama protector and remover of obstacles. She is invoked as a means of establishing peace through Tantric ritual. She is also associated with divinations, and invoked for oracles.

(PHOTO ©2002 THE SHELLEY AND DONALD RUBIN COLLECTION)



## Prajna Paramita

This is the "Mother of all Buddhas." Beings who achieve "Buddhahood" do so by arousing transcendental wisdom, or prajnaparamita in Sanskrit, which is the highest level possible. Nothing other than this wisdom can deliver enlightenment. Just as mothers give birth to all children on earth, this wisdom gives birth to all who achieve enlightenment. This goddess is a female Buddha, who embodies that wisdom.

(PHOTO ©2002 THE SHELLEY AND DONALD RUBIN COLLECTION)

