

# Bodhidharma's Daughters: A Cross-Cultural Examination of Females in Chan/Zen Buddhism

Kellie Chaney

Anthony E. Clark, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Chinese History

*The purpose of this research is to compare Chinese/Taiwanese concepts of Chan Buddhism to those of the United States, focusing on ways Chan has changed in transit. This research concentrates on the concept of gender roles or gender identification and this concept's place in Buddhism. Another topic of this study is the Bodhisattva Guan Yin and female lineage adoration. This study overall seeks to find if these ideas of gender roles or gender identification are a product of modernity, cultural differences, or if they have been present throughout the history of Chan/Zen Buddhism.*

Questions regarding gender equality in Buddhism have existed from the time of the Buddha himself. Accounts of the inclusion of women in Buddhist practice vary greatly, some promoting the ideal of gender equality or the inconsequence of gender, while others promote the idea that masculinity is necessary for enlightenment. Miriam Levering makes reference to gender issues in her article "Lineage or Family Tree," citing the Bodhidharma Da Mo, First Patriarch of Chan Buddhism. Levering reports the Bodhidharma did indeed have female disciples, most notably Cung Zhi, whose name has lasted in Chan records despite a system of patriarchy and gender-biased record keeping present in some areas of Chan practice (1992, p. 155).

Much recent scholarly work has been done in the field of gender issues and gender identification in Buddhism. Likewise, several texts have included cross-cultural comparisons of gender-related Buddhist practices. The focus of these gender-specific studies has primarily been directed towards Japanese traditions in Buddhism as compared to practices in the Western world, especially that of the United States. Though Chinese Chan

and Japanese Zen Buddhism originated in the same tradition, elements of both are culture-specific. Therefore, Chinese Chan Buddhism should be afforded its own separate comparison with the emerging Buddhist traditions of the United States.

## Review of the Literature

Examinations of topics concerning any Buddhist tradition must begin with a survey of the sacred texts of Buddhism known as “sutras.” Several sutras from different traditions concern issues related to gender, some more subtly than others. It is not in a sutra, however, that an account of the first gender issue in Buddhism occurs, but in the *Vinaya Pitaka* (Book of the Discipline). Diana Paul (1985, p. 82-94) provides the full text of this *Vinaya*, which details the conditional admission of women into Buddhism by the Buddha. The *Vinaya* recounts that the Buddha’s aunt and foster mother, Mahāprajāpatī, requested that women be allowed to leave their households, shave their heads, and wear the robes of a nun. The Buddha replied to her on three occasions that only Mahāprajāpatī herself be allowed this honor. Mahāprajāpatī wept for her cause, attracting the attention of a disciple of Buddha, Ānanda. It was Ānanda who convinced Buddha that women should be able to devote themselves completely to Buddhist practice, with Buddha’s condition of the “Eight Rules (Precepts).” Bernard Faure (2003, p. 23) states the “historicity of this well-known episode is quite dubious,” as it is consistent with the telling of Jainism’s foundation of female orders. Paul (p. 81) notes the Buddha’s concern for the loss of family structure leading to the end of the transmission of *Dharma*. Masatoshi Ueki (2001, p. 11) insists that the Buddha’s words reflected no ill feelings or prejudicial thoughts towards women.

Ueki calls the Mahāyāna order of Buddhism the “Renaissance of Buddhism,” noting an emphasis on gender equality in reaching enlightenment (2001, p. 63). It is the Mahāyāna order to which Chan Buddhism and its sutras belong. Ueki cites two relevant concepts of the Mahāyāna movement: that gender could be changed in order to reach Buddhahood and, of particular importance, the idea that gender itself is illusion (2001, p. 63, 70). The first concept of gender change for enlightenment’s sake is seen in the *Saddharma Pundarīka Sūtra* of Tripitaka (Xuan Zang), commonly called the *Lotus Sutra* (Burton Watson, trans. 1993), in the tale of the Dragon King’s daughter (p.185-189). Simply stated, the Dragon King’s daughter is notified that she cannot attain Buddhahood because of her gender. In response, she undergoes transformation into a male as she reaches enlightenment. Lucinda Joy Peach notes that though examples of

gender images in the *Lotus Sutra* vary, the overall message is that “because *all* persons possess Buddha-nature, and not only those of a certain birth, gender, aptitude, and so forth, the possibility of full Enlightenment is available to *all* beings”(2002, p. 62).

There is also a chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* which outlines a rather different account in Chinese Buddhism, that of the Bodhisattva Guan Yin. Kumarajiva's translation of the *Lotus Sutra* in 406 A.D. dedicates an entire chapter of the sutra to the Bodhisattva. According to Maria Reis-Habito, the first appearance of the translated name of Guan Yin, or, Guan Shi Yin, occurs in the Sanghamarman version of the *Pure Land Sutra*, which is not a Chan text, in 252 A.D. (1993, p. 66). Guan Yin transformed from the male Avalokiteśvara of Indian Buddhist tradition to a female in the Chinese tradition during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.) with the rise of the legend of Miao Shan. According to Lee Irwin, perhaps this transformation is due to “a fundamental collective need constantly asserting itself for an active manifestation of the feminine, imbued with celestial potency” (1990, p. 59). In Chinese culture, the attributes of Guan Yin (i.e., mercy and compassion) were considered exclusively feminine characteristics. This assigning of gender-specific characteristics to a more acceptable figure may be the simplest explanation for the change from the male Avalokiteśvara to a female Guan Yin. Legends such as that of Miao Shan give examples of Guan Yin incarnating herself as human in both male and female forms in order to spread the ideal of compassion. In the second concept of the Mahāyāna order, when a person is free of all attachments (especially to self) and realizes the truth of existence, gender will be of no consequence; it does not exist in the first place. Guan Yin epitomizes this concept by incarnating as both male and female.

The *Mahāyāna Lotus Sutra* does make other statements regarding gender. One notable assertion in the “Devadatta” portion of the sutra provides another teaching of the Buddha, where he shows little regard for gender distinction except to place emphasis (p.185). A portion of this particular account affirms, “In future ages if there are good men or good women who, on hearing the Devadatta chapter of the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law, believe and revere it with pure hearts and harbor no doubts or perplexities, they will never fall into hell or the realm of hungry spirits or of beasts, but will be born in the presence of the Buddhas of the ten directions” (p.185).

After this brief examination of Mahāyāna and Chan Buddhism's views on gender, it shall remain to consider the Western interpretations of Buddhism. Sallie Tisdale's work *Women of the Way* provides insight into Western views of Buddhism by giving individual narrative histories of female

Buddhists. It is in Tisdale's "Introduction," however, that she sketches her views regarding gender issues in this belief system. Tisdale reports dismay at discovering what she styles "sexism," stating, "As a feminist, I was sensitive to sexism in other arenas, but I practiced for years before I saw it in my own religion"(2006, p. 3). As one can discover in the reading of Buddhist sacred texts, gender is supposedly a non-issue, leading to the theory that any gender issues may be the result of cultural biases and society itself. Tisdale also states later in her work, "The desire to recognize the women in our Buddhist past is spreading among American Zen Centers" (p. 21). Her use of the word "desire" is problematic, as an original teaching of Buddha concerns the "Four Noble Truths," viz, ridding one's self of desire in order to end one's own suffering.

Rita M. Gross is an author in the field of gender issues in Western Buddhism who writes on themes similar to those of Tisdale. A recent article with a somewhat different approach is "Helping the Iron Bird Fly," an examination of potential abuses of authority in Buddhism across gender lines. A close reading of this work reveals Gross' personal experiences with this issue, as the student of one who, according to Gross, exploited his influence over women (1993, p. 238-239). Later in this article, Gross states, "Buddha was not all wise on this social issue," and asks, "If even the Buddha is not a perfect role model, why should we expect it of the men and women who have enough spiritual insight to function as gurus today?"(p.241).

These sources provide a general insight into two views of Buddhism: that of the West, specifically that of the United States, and that of China/Taiwan. The works of authors Sallie Tisdale and Rita M. Gross focus on gender-specific issues they have identified in Buddhism. Diana Paul, Bernard Faure, and Masatoshi Ueki each cite examples in their works from the earliest texts of Buddhism which minimize gender issues and differences. The *Lotus Sutra* is a primary source and part of the Chinese Chan Buddhist canon of sacred texts. As a primary text, the sutra reveals several accounts of the complete disregard for the issue of gender as it pertains to Buddhist practice and the attainment of enlightenment. The opposing viewpoints of these texts serve this research by illustrating the differing emphasis on gender issues cross-culturally.

## Method

### Qualitative Research Method

As I required the participants in this study to answer open-ended questions, I chose a qualitative method of research, as described in M. Q. Patton's *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* (1990). As some of the questions in my survey could be perceived as personal in nature, I utilized a survey with more general questions at its beginning.

After data collection and transcription, I determined that the cross-case method of analysis would be best for the type of data collected. Each question in the survey was assigned its own thematic category, and the participants were separated into two groups: the group from the United States, and the group from Taiwan. I began by analyzing answers from participants in the same group, especially taking notice of any similarities in the answers. After this, I compared the answers in each category between the groups, noting any similarities, differences or recurring themes.

### Survey Protocol

The protocol for this study (see Appendix) began with the questions that my research sought to answer. These questions were formed into a questionnaire with the addition of more general, broader questions in order to learn the individual perspectives of the participants. After conducting my initial literature review, the final survey with six open-ended questions took form.

**Procedure.** Each interview participant was given three options for completing the survey: answering the survey orally in a live interview, hand writing their answers on a printed copy of the survey, or answering the survey through an individual email. Each of the participants presently cited in this study chose the final option of taking their survey, answering through email, an option designed to ensure the anonymity of the participants. No electronic survey methods were utilized in this option; each participant was contacted individually by an email address they provided, and the survey was sent as an attachment or written into the body of each email. Participants were then instructed to answer the survey at their leisure, returning it to the interviewer in email format.

Each participant was offered a printed copy of the consent form as approved by the University of Alabama's Institutional Review Board (hereafter referred to as IRB). Participants were also provided with an

electronic copy in each email communication from the interviewer and provided their consent without a physical signature, as stated in the approved consent form document. All participants were asked to not provide any identifying information other than an email address. Each email address has been sealed and stored separately from the transcribed survey answers. Numbers and the name of the location of the participants have been used in order to distinguish the surveys from one another (i.e., the first interview participant from Taiwan is identified as “Taiwan 1” and so forth).

**Participants.** For this study, I identified five female Buddhist practitioners from Taiwan (Republic of China) and five from the United States. Participants from Taiwan were identified during my visit to Taiwan in May and June of 2007. Due to the time constraints of a visit lasting three weeks, I elected to visit the Buddhist monastery Chung Tai Chan in Puli, Nantou County, Taiwan and chose the participants from the approximately 1,200 nuns who reside there. During my initial one-day visit to the monastery, I identified four participants who, due to time constraints, chose to answer the survey electronically in order to more carefully consider their answers. The final participant from Taiwan was a referral from another participant, who identified her as a member of the same monastic community.

In the United States, I identified several Buddhist Centers and Study Groups from internet searches and readings I conducted for my literature review. I contacted the centers and groups by telephone or email. The contact persons for the centers and groups forwarded my information to those members that they considered might be interested in taking the survey. A total of six participants from the states of Massachusetts, Oregon, and Washington expressed interest in taking the survey. One participant was identified as male, and his answers are not included in this study. The participant did take the survey, and his answers will be considered in the event that portions of this data collection and study are continued.

### **Language Issues**

A potential issue involved in the interview process is that of differing languages. The native language of each of the participants from Taiwan was identified as Mandarin Chinese. My knowledge of Mandarin and Traditional Chinese characters has been tested as second-year level; therefore, I was able to communicate with the participants in their native language. Each participant was questioned if she wished to answer the survey in written Traditional Chinese characters, spoken Mandarin Chinese, or writ-

ten or spoken English. The participants were each provided with copies of both the questionnaire and the IRB consent form in written Traditional Chinese and English. The present participants in this study each responded in English, as each indicated they had received a college education in the United States and were comfortable expressing themselves in English. Some key phrases were stated in English and Mandarin Chinese by the participants. The interviewer checked the Traditional written character, the Pinyin form of Romanization, the pronunciation, and the translation of each phrase and word with the interview participants via email before transcription occurred.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection for this study occurred during the months of May, June, and July of 2007. Field research in Taipei and Puli, Taiwan (Republic of China) occurred between May 22 and June 9, 2007. The participant group was kept small in consideration of having open-ended questions. Currently in this study, the answers of five participants from the United States and five from Taiwan are being reported. If portions of this study are continued, no further data will be collected from these participants.

### **Analysis**

After the results from each questionnaire were received and transcribed, cross-case analysis began. The answers were divided according to question and group (United States or Taiwan). The answers to each question were then compared between the participants' own group and then against the answers of the second group. Common themes, differences and similarities between the two groups were noted and analyzed.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Beliefs Concerning the Bodhisattva Guan Yin**

The questions concerning the Bodhisattva Guan Yin in this research were not concerned with a definition of who or what Guan Yin is, according to Buddhist tradition and scripture. It instead seeks to discover personal, individual beliefs in the Bodhisattva. The research questions concerning Guan Yin were intentionally left open-ended to allow the participants ample opportunity for self-expression in their answers. These questions were:

What do you think of Guan Yin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion? What amount of respect is she due? How would you classify Bodhisattva Guan Yin (Avalokiteśvara)? For example, in your practice of Buddhism, is she considered a Goddess, a role model, the epitome of mercy and compassion, etc.?

**Reverence and respect in the Sangha.** Each interview participant involved in this study indicated her particular Sanghas practiced reverence of Guan Yin Bodhisattva. Three participants from the United States and two from Taiwan indicated specifically that Guan Yin's name is mentioned in the chanting of the Buddhist lineage in their Sangha. One respondent from the United States indicated the traditional lineage chant of her Sangha includes all male names with one exception. However, this respondent also mentioned the inclusion of Guan Yin and a female lineage:

Yes, we recite a Lineage of Women Dharma Ancestors every other time we do our full morning chanting service. This has been a deeply meaningful practice for many people in our Sangha, particularly the women. We also have numerous chants to Guan Yin, who figures prominently in our lineage.

**Individual classification of Guan Yin.** Respondents from both cultures provided similar answers in regards to classifying Guan Yin. These participants referred to Guan Yin as a role model of tolerance, compassion, mercy, and understanding. One respondent from the United States replied that,

When pressed for an explanation of who/what is Avalokiteśvara, I usually say that I understand the Bodhisattva to be the embodiment or personification of Great Compassion, which is an aspect of the Cosmic Buddha.

Another participant from the United States elaborated:

In our lineage, Guan Yin is viewed as an archetype of compassion. She is largely used as an inspirational image and way of speaking about the power of compassion, and is not explained as a deity or a "real" personified force. However, the archetypal image and stories end up being so meaningful for some people - men and women - that it

begins to feel to them that Guan Yin is, indeed, “real.” In our Sangha we do not discourage regarding Guan Yin in this way, so some of our Sangha members might “pray” to her privately. She is regarded more as an ideal (the “epitome” of mercy and compassion) than as a role model because she is not viewed as human, with human limitations and challenges.

Statements from the interview participants from Taiwan are in agreement with these assessments of the nature of Guan Yin. One woman agreed with a portion of the terminology in the questionnaire (Guan Yin as a role model and the epitome of mercy), but emphasized her classification of Guan Yin:

...especially as personifying our own capacity to practice compassion, deep listening, and being with suffering.

**Comments on Guan Yin's gender.** Another common response among participants referred to the gender of Guan Yin. Two participants from both cultures either identified Guan Yin as being without gender (having shed the need for it) or having both genders (meaning Guan Yin may choose to appear as he/she pleases). One participant from Taiwan emphasized the duality of Guan Yin's gender, stating:

Guan Yin has attained the Buddhahood and then manifests herself a bodhisattva, both a male and a female figure (predominantly the later), to help sentient beings. Guan Yin symbolizes compassion in all Buddhist traditions, despite the figures he/she manifests--male or female, ordained or lay, kind or furious, etc.

An interview participant from the United States appears to agree with this assessment of Guan Yin's dual gender, noting:

In referring to Avalokiteśvara, Reverend Master taught that the Bodhisattva is beyond the duality of gender, although Guan Yin is sometimes portrayed as female and sometimes as male (and often of uncertain gender, i.e., with aspects of both).

Another participant from the United States, however, placed emphasis on the feminine forms of Guan Yin, replying:

I would also consider her a role model and the fact that she is female among many male representations of Bodhisattvas/Buddhas makes her that much more special to me.

### **Gender Issues**

In conversations with female practitioners of Buddhism in Taiwan, one encounters a concerned attitude towards gender issues. When questioned in regards to terminology (if gender differences are indicated in the titles of practitioners), a Buddhist (who identified herself as a “nun”) stated:

In the Chinese language, a monk or nun in charge of a monastery/convent is called “zhuchi.” One cannot tell the gender from the Chinese term. So, I suspect there is no difference between “abbot” and “abbess” to the Chinese/Taiwanese monks and nuns. In China and Taiwan, the female zhuchi (nuns) officiate in the ceremonies, but they do not claim themselves as priests, even though they do what priests can do.

Whether the unimportance attached to gender is caused by a predominantly female clergy, differing cultures, or the result of Chan being uniquely Chinese is unclear and worthy of further study. When questioned specifically on the causes of the unimportance of gender, the initial participant in the Taiwan study appeared to indicate each of these three factors played a role:

Gender is important in some Buddhist traditions. For example, in the Theravada tradition, the female are subordinated to the male. In Japan, monks have a higher status than women. However, in Taiwan, monks are not that predominant, and nuns are respected.

Questionnaires with Western Buddhist practitioners indicate a vast array of opinions on the topic of gender issues within the belief system.

When questioned in regards to gender-based terminology and differing roles according to gender, one participant replied:

In our tradition, monks and nuns have different precepts that they follow, but lay persons do not. Our tradition is very welcoming of people of different gender identifications; our community is very open and welcoming.

A second participant elaborated on what she viewed as a trend currently occurring in American Chan/Zen practice, that of women practitioners seeking to use gender-neutral terminology to lessen the differences between the sexes. She reports:

These terms are used differently in every tradition, so this question is tricky. In American Chan/Zen, most of time it seems that ordained women prefer to be called by the same titles as men, that is, monks or priests. Monks are typically ordained people who are training in a residential setting (a monastery or a temple), and when ordained people are called priests they may or may not be in a residential training setting but have begun a life of service to the Sangha (teaching, administrating, scholarship). Women serve as Chan/Zen priests in America at least as often as men. When a priest is installed as head of a temple, he or she is typically called an abbot, regardless of gender. An exception to this is when the temple or monastery serves only women.

While U.S. interview participants mirror the ideal of Chinese/Taiwanese participants in saying gender does not matter ultimately, opinions on other aspects of gender issues vary greatly. Results of the open-ended survey questions from the United States group expressed these variations, with three participants emphasizing the unimportance of gender, and two participants focusing on gender issues as a struggle they face daily in their own practice. An example of this perceived struggle from these two participants is in one response to the question of Buddhist practice in other cultures (that is, cultures other than the United States). The respondent stated:

It is disheartening to see some traditions where the women (as nuns) essentially exist to keep house and care for the monks who are much more important. I do not see that so much in America.

The answers of these two respondents in particular suggest the concern that other women are receiving unfair treatment because of their locations, the societies in which they live, or the teachings of their Sangha.

### **Conclusion**

The analysis of the two cultures in this study (American and Taiwanese) provides insight into the evolution of Buddhist practice. Perceptions of Asian Buddhist practice as gender biased or chauvinistic appeared to be common among the American participants of this research, and in the writings of American Buddhist authors. The culture of some Asian countries is based on a system of patriarchy, including that of China and Taiwan. However, as seen in questionnaire responses, the treatment of women practitioners in Taiwan is much more gender-neutral than it is perceived from across the Pacific. Just as Buddhism evolved in its initial transition from India to China and continued to change with the teachings of the Bodhidharma Da Mo, it continues to evolve and change as it crosses the Pacific Ocean to the United States. The issue of gender roles and identification has transformed as with all aspects of Buddhist practice over time and distance.

While Buddhist scripture is shown as generally being gender-neutral, gender bias in Buddhism can be said to result from the bias of individuals and cultures based in patriarchy. The Bodhisattva Guan Yin is a prime example of the influence of Chinese culture-specific concepts on Chan Buddhism. Despite the culture being deeply rooted in the patriarchal system that is Confucianism, the male Indian Buddhist deity Avalokiteśvara was transformed into the female Guan Yin. Several factors may have influenced this change, among them the Chinese Daoist belief in a cyclical universe, based on the concept of Yin/Yang. In this system, everything must have its opposite: light and dark, male and female, for example. If there was a male “deity” in Buddha, he must have a female counterpart. Another potential factor is the characterization of Guan Yin as the embodiment of wisdom and compassion. Compassion is particularly seen as embodied in the female gender (Clark, 2005-2007).

The current adoration of Guan Yin appears to be consistent across cultures. This may be due to her being the figure of wisdom and compassion, one that a person can call on for aid in times of need. However, one participant in this study did indicate she especially respected Guan Yin for

her gender. Further study is indicated on this topic, as it is seen in Sandy Boucher's book *Discovering Kwan Yin, Buddhist Goddess of Compassion* that Guan Yin is considered by some to be the epitome of the feminine divine. According to questionnaires conducted by Boucher, Guan Yin is perceived by some as the "Goddess" of Western European pagan traditions, particularly the nature-based practice of Wicca (1999, pp.3-30). As Western European traditions meet those from Asia in the climate of the United States, variances are certain to occur in the further growth of Buddhist practice.

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## **Appendix:**

### **Survey for Participants**

Please feel free to answer any or all of the questions you choose, in your own words. Thank you for your participation!

- 1) If you were not born into the Buddhist tradition, what led you to choose the Path?
- 2) What place do you think gender roles or gender identification have in the practice of Buddhism?
- 3) Is it more and more common for females to choose to be priests instead of nuns or abbots instead of abbesses? What do you think of this?
- 4) Do you think the meaning of Chan/Zen has changed as it has spread to other cultures? Do you have any thoughts about how people, especially women, in other cultures practice the Path?
- 5) What do you think of Guan Yin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion? What amount of respect is she due?
- 6) How would you classify Bodhisattva Guan Yin (Avalokiteśvara)? For example, in your practice of Buddhism, is she considered a Goddess, a role model, the epitome of mercy and compassion, etc.?

