

# CHATSUMARN KABILSINGH:

Buddhist, Scholar, Feminist

Nancy P. Arcellanalis photobank



*Religion is the one realm where the struggle for equality and women's rights is the most difficult. All over the world, laws that recognize women as equal to men are being made. Of course, plenty still needs to be done. But even now, women cannot fully make use of the gains that have been achieved because cultural barriers stand in their way. Of these barriers, religion is the hardest to surmount.*

*But within the very grounds of religion, women have been carrying their struggles forward despite the hostility of religion's often male guardians. As religious scholars, women pore over every line of their sacred texts; as feminists, they take it upon themselves to use their findings to strip away mistaken notions about the relationship between women and men.*

*Chatsumarn Kabilsingh is one such Buddhist scholar and feminist. Chatsumarn grew up in the temples of Thailand, where she learned and practiced Buddhism under the aegis of her mother, the first ordained Thai Buddhist nun, and other venerable teachers. Chatsumarn founded the Newsletter on International Buddhist Women's Activities (NIBWA), which she also edits. She currently teaches at the Thammasat University. Recently, she applied for a grant to further study the birthplace of Buddha. Women in Action editor Lilian Mercado Carreon spoke with Chatsumarn about her life's mission as she sees it and how she is sustained by her spirituality and feminism. Excerpts:*

**Q** How did you become active in exploring and explaining the issues and concerns of Buddhist women? Was there any event that specifically made you decide to actively promote the interests of women within Buddhism?

**A** My mother was ordained in 1955. (Chatsumarn's mother is the first Thai Buddhist ordained nun. It was a bold move that traditional Buddhists did not welcome.) I grew up as a child witnessing and understanding "some" of the difficulties my mother had to face. I use the word "some" because as a child of 11, there were only a

few of my mother's hardships that I could perceive. My mother never discussed any of her problems with me, it was simply not done in our culture. Parents are not to discuss any of their grown-up difficulties to complicate the young minds of their children.

When I furthered my studies in Canada, I was still not interested in women's issue. In fact, I wanted to do my research on Bodhisattva (Buddhist savior). But my Chinese supervisor who knew of my family background suggested that I should do something on the nuns' issues. Since my mother is a nun, I should have some insight into their problems.

So my research, *A Comparative Study of Bhikkhuni Patimokkha*, published in India by Chowghamba Orientalia in 1981, focused on the nuns' monastic rules. The nature of the work opened up my mind. I was able to access materials from other Buddhist traditions and this paved the ground for my liberal outlook towards other Buddhist traditions. One book that actually turned on my interest and awareness towards women's inequality in Buddhism was *Women under Primitive Buddhism* by I.B. Horner, an English scholar in Pali and Buddhism. It woke me up to women's issues and deeply inspired me.

Yet all that affected me only at the academic level. Upon my return to Thailand, I still remained purely an academic. Nobody in the campus had any idea about my mother's involvement and I intentionally wanted to keep the two worlds compartmentalised. I was afraid that if I started talking about the nuns' issues, other people would think that I am being "personal" since that was the issue of my own mother's struggle. I thought that an academic should not get "personal." We should remain aloof, impartial and objective and you cannot be objective if you start talking about your own mother.

It was in 1983 when I was invited to attend a conference at Harvard University on Religion and Social Changes. The organizer, Professor Diana Eck sponsored me to give a paper on "The Future of Bhikkhuni Sangha in Thailand." I could not address such a topic without discussing about my mother's ordination as she was the first ordained bhikkhuni. Yet, at the conference, when I showed the slides of her activities, I still did not mention that she was actually my mother.

However, the exposure from that

conference where I met many hard core feminists of other traditions and countries shook me to my core of existence. I was starkly confronted with a question: if I am the only academic in my country who has done so much study and has so much information about the nuns' ordination and yet not do anything to bring about social improvement for Buddhist women, who will?

From then on I transformed my role as an "academic only" to an "academic cum social activist." One of my early commitments was to bring forth the Newsletter on International Buddhist Women's Activities (NIBWA). This newsletter has been going on since October 1984 up to the present. In this process, I found myself blossoming into a Buddhist feminist.

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**Q: In your effort to promote the interests of women, what conflicts or problems do you encounter with other Buddhists? How do you surmount these problems? How is your being a spiritual person important in your work for women?**

The newsletter helps connect me with Buddhist women from other parts of the world. My international involvement actually is my strength. This is the area where I derive so much pleasure and inspiration from in my work to uplift women and, in the process, also free Buddhism from a patriarchal stronghold.

However, I do not fare very well in my own country where Buddhism has always been in the hand of Buddhist monks whose mentalities tend to be very patriarchal. Some of them prefer to keep me at bay by branding me as being influenced by "western values" and, hence, alien to Buddhism and Thai culture. My outspoken nature, while turning off many of my local audiences, is attractive to western audiences. My outspokenness is built on a solid foundation of Buddhist knowledge. I know what I am speaking about. My knowledge is

not from memory but from an understanding of Buddhism that is tested in my own life experience. It is my fate that my work should be more fruitful in foreign countries. Like my mother, I take too quick and too long a step, and I end ahead of the crowd. I am sure they will be grateful of my work but I need to have a century behind my back.

How do I surmount these problems? It is through my understanding of compassion. Those who suppress women do so out of ignorance. I am fighting ignorance, not people. I have learned to develop compassion for them.

In 1983, I saw some militant feminists full of anger, and anger literally eats up a person. I vowed then not to be angry, not to destroy myself in the march to free mankind from ignorance. Through my practice, I have been able to tap the technique of "letting go," should the time be ripe.

At this point spiritual maturity is very helpful to strengthen you and see you through difficult times. It has helped me transcend the immediate world of suffering and to be peaceful within my own self and to be nourished. When one has blossomed in her spiritual path, a person can really help in nourishing others whom she comes in contact with. To help the world ease out the pain, a person needs to be nurturing and mothering.

**Q: Sr. Mary John and Kamla Bhasin, two noted feminists from the Philippines and India, have defined feminism to be any person's recognition of the systematic oppression of women in society and desire to do something about it. Using this definition, would you consider yourself a feminist?**

A: Yes, I agree with Sr. Mary John and Kamla Bhasin's definition of feminism. I openly declare myself a Buddhist feminist. By this definition, I begin from my understanding that Buddhism is the first world religion to come forward to accept the equal spiritual potential of both men and women. Racial, gender and caste biases have no place in Buddhism. I object in words and in action to any social structure which obstructs this highest potential for women.

**Q: Spirituality seems to be a growing trend among both men and women, but especially among women, these days. To what do you**

**attribute this? What needs to happen in order for spirituality to become more than just a trend and become a life style?**

A: Any mature person will realize that happiness is drawn from both the physical and the spiritual; you may say body and mind. Material wealth can provide only satisfaction of the body. But the food for the mind comes from elsewhere. This is something basic that any mature person can understand and agree with. People in the First World reach material wealth and material comfort before many people of the Third World can, although many poor people in the Third World are highly spiritual. Therefore, they, those who have achieved material wealth, should be responsible for going ahead and seeking various paths for spiritual fulfillment.

Spiritual well-being itself will be the motivation for spirituality to become a lifestyle and not just a trend.

**Q: Many people confuse being spiritual with being religious. Most texts only vaguely and generally define spirituality as recognizing the power within one's self and using this to create a better world by connecting with everything in the universe. Can you add anything more to this? How does one know that she is indeed spiritual and not just observing ancient rituals or worshipping goddesses, which seems to be the fad nowadays?**

A: Religious rituals are important for as long as we use them as tools to connect us to the beyond. But they become meaningless when they themselves become the end.

A person who is mature spiritually will always project his/her energy for the betterment of the world. But this does not apply vice versa; people who are helping others are not necessarily spiritual. They may be working because of other external motivations.

**Q: How can a person continue to develop spiritually? Do you know of any centers that help people, especially women, along this often difficult path?**

A: We can begin with a linkage, a network of like-minded women. The objective must be clear that this is a "service to God" so that we can iron out self-centered, selfish motivations. You get nothing out of this network the link is there to give, not to receive.)