

# Exploring Strategies for Research on Buddhist Women

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All people have been, and continue to be, agents and actors creating and participating in history. The neglect of certain people in historical accounts, therefore, is an *historiographic* problem. It is not a problem of *history*. To expand the scope of what is deemed important to include in historical accounts, we must begin with interpreting the lack of historical documentation as an indication of how much has been lost rather than as proof that women were not involved.<sup>1</sup> This principle is based upon a notion of historical significance that acknowledges the contributions of those who may not have received official or institutional recognition for their efforts, but, nevertheless, continued to act and serve. Lack of recognition does not necessarily indicate lack of activity. One must first explain what people were doing in order to say what they were not doing. In lieu of information, one can only conclude that one does not know. This approach to interpreting historical events is particularly important when one wants to explore issues pertaining to women.

Furthermore, studies of women cannot proceed without the benefit of detailed ethnographic studies of women in various cultural settings.<sup>2</sup> In *Women and World Religions*, Rita Gross clearly advocates this type of research as an integral aspect of understanding a religious tradition.

The...most important set of information—the actual lives, attitudes, and activities of women—is often overlooked, an omission which presents an obvious problem. This information should be of first priority for understanding women's participation in a tradition and also of first priority for understanding the totality of any tradition.<sup>3</sup>

This also contributes to the active concern for understanding women in their own cultural context and with their own religious awareness. It is critical in such studies, however, to be aware of ethnocentric perspectives that can lead one's analysis of ethnographic research astray. Ifi Amadiume, an African scholar, is keenly aware of the ethnocentrism inherent in the presuppositions of scholars who think that women are inferior across all cultures and in all social contexts.<sup>4</sup> From her vantage point vis-à-vis western scholarship on women, it is clear that gender is a socio-cultural con-

struction which must not be confused with sex, a biological category. She continues with words of caution about racist biases that function like an insidious disease upon the scholarship.<sup>5)</sup> Through the insightful instruction of non-western scholars, many western scholars are becoming increasingly sensitive to the assumptions they bring to their work. Listening to the voices of women and men in their own context is indispensable to understanding them. With equal gravity we scholars must listen to our own voices, for it is through our works that many ideas about people and places are disseminated.

Ever since women during Śākyamuni's lifetime (6th c.B.C.E.) claimed the rights to seek ordination and pursue the contemplative life, Buddhist monastic orders for women have been an important mode in which women have expressed and explored their spiritual development,<sup>6)</sup> yet the paucity of scholarly attention to their distinct religious values and lifestyles obscures the signal importance of their paradigmatic form of female religiosity. Buddhist scholars have begun to recognize the various social forces that impinged upon textual sources, hence, critical research has emerged which sheds light upon the position of Buddhist women in ancient India. An example that lies at the foundation of this issue is the creation of a story that the founder of Buddhism, Śākyamuni, declared that the Dharma would decline 500 years sooner if women were admitted into the monastic sphere. Many scholars are now convinced that this is an interpolation. Jan Nattier has discovered that there is no surviving text which mentions nuns bringing about a decline of Buddhism before the first schism in the fourth century B.C.E., a century after Śākyamuni's passing.<sup>7)</sup> Evidence also suggests that it did not become a unanimously adopted view, for no texts from the Mahāsāṃghika branch, the branch from which Mahāyāna schools are derived, include this interpretation of the decline of Buddhism. Furthermore, Yuichi Kajiyama claims that "Gautama asserted equality in religious ability of men and women in the face of the existing convention of societal discrimination against women."<sup>8)</sup> He dates the sources that espouse the incapacities of women between the late third and first centuries B.C.E.<sup>9)</sup> Such scholarship confirms that women were not understood to be inferior by the founder of Buddhism. The evidence, thus, should lead us to refrain from making general and simplistic conclusions concerning the dynamics between Buddhist women and men. To assert that women have been universally oppressed is in and of itself an act of oppression. By not seeking to highlight the contributions of women—even, or especially, those not recognized by their contemporaries—historians tacitly subjugate women and perpetuate the unfair treatment women might have experienced

in history.

As scholars gain a clearer understanding of what female monastics have been involved in and what their perspective is on their own situations, a picture of strong, devout, and resilient monastic women is emerging. In light of this, however, most scholarship on nuns paints erroneous impressions that must be modified. Incorrect information and omission of information on monastic women create a similar effect for they mute the voices of dedicated monastic women. Impressions of monastic women as weak social misfits with an occasional, but rare, powerful, imperially endowed female monastic linger in the literature. Descriptions like the following, which only present part of the picture, confirm such impressions. "The nunnery was a place of refuge for women who did not wish to marry, widows, abandoned concubines, and prostitutes."<sup>10</sup> Although there were women who came from difficult circumstances, there is no evidence that this was a widespread or primary reason for pursuing monastic life. Even when the motivation to enter the monastic life did derive out of their poor life conditions, this does not mean that they were not sincere and dedicated to Buddhist teachings. Perhaps what most poignantly illustrates the inequity inherent in such statements is that the motivations of their male counterparts are rarely questioned.

The exploration of the history, lifestyle, teachings, religious practices, and self-perception of women clearly depends upon the lens through which the researcher and writer perceive them. The researcher and the researched have a mutually transforming affect upon each other. It is a challenge, however, to make contributions to theoretical and intellectual discussions when one begins with a keen awareness of the personal and imaginative nature of scholarly research and writing.<sup>11</sup> The fundamental basis for my methodological approach is grounded in my disbelief in facts that exist "out there," independent of an experience, interpretation, or perception of them. Therefore, I do not aspire to reveal a definitive truth sterilized of all non-objective elements.

Many thinkers, including W.C. Smith, Lawrence Babb,<sup>12</sup> and a growing number of scholars concerned with cross-cultural studies of women,<sup>13</sup> urge scholars to search for indigenous categories and themes by beginning with open-ended questions and allowing the material to shape the answers. Smith's position that a particular methodology should not be decided upon before one discovers the nature of the material to which a methodology will be applied is reflected in the statement quoted below. "All religions are new religions, every morning. For religions do not exist up in the sky somewhere, elaborated, finished, and static; they exist in men's [and wom-

en's] hearts."<sup>14</sup>) Smith goes on to say that, "Methodology should be developed out of the particular problem that one is considering, not vice versa, and it should be ephemeral, subordinate, and fundamentally dispensable."<sup>15</sup>) His understanding of methodology is reminiscent of the Buddhist notion of vehicles to enlightenment, which is that the sundry teachings and practices are rafts that must be discarded upon reaching the other shore of enlightenment. If one tries to remain attached to these vehicles of liberation after their purpose has been achieved, they become cumbersome obstacles. Likewise, when methodology is reified as more than a way to understand a particular thing at a particular time, the matter at hand is obscured.

This anti-reductionist approach requires methodological pluralism with a phenomenological orientation. An experientialist methodology is inherent in a phenomenological approach to the study of religion. The following scheme is based upon Smith's tri-part outline of what he describes as a personalist methodology. One, it is the study of persons, in which significant data lies in what it means to the person who is the believer. Two, it involves recognizing that the observer is a person with a particular point of view, and three, the awareness that the relationship between the observer and the person being studied is personal.<sup>16</sup>) The methodology of using various methodologies according to need, appropriateness, and applicability is particularly helpful when researching women, for strategies and interpretations must be experimented with in order to disencumber the study from androcentric approaches and categories.

Religion is a dynamic and organic subject of study. Increasingly, scholars are becoming sensitive to the affect the researcher has upon what is being described. In accord with this understanding, Smith argues that "the attitude, the philosophy, and the general orientation of an author are of major consequence for any scholarly study; are at least equally important, and usually more important, than the method employed."<sup>17</sup>) More recently, Marcus and Fischer realize that research and writing about it are a dialogue between the researcher and the researched.<sup>18</sup>) Valentine Daniel is of like minds when he states that culture "is to be located in the creative act of communicating."<sup>19</sup>) In response to Geertz's definition of religion in which "symbol" is the critical hinge upon which the definition hangs,<sup>20</sup>) Daniel defines culture in terms of "signs." A sign is a heuristic device made up of an irreducible triadic structure. The structure consists of three mutually affective components: (a) objects, (b) interpretant, and (c) the representant. The object need not be a material thing, but rather it is that which is "thrown before" the mind, towards which one's attention is directed. The interpretant is the locus of interpretation, that by which a sign

is contextualized, part of a connected web. It is not an isolated entity. It is necessary for it connects the representamen and the object to a meaningful reality.<sup>21)</sup> With this system of sign, the relationship between the researcher and the culture being researched can be understood as a host of internally related events. By "internally related events" I refer to the phenomenon that the object, "a," and interpretant, "b," mutually affect each other so that the representant, "c"—the event that is experienced—is the interaction of "a" and "b." That is, the representant is the creation "c," a novel event derived from the relationship of "a" and "b."<sup>22)</sup> Commencing from this understanding of the nature of experience and reality, which is based upon signs, Daniel explains that "a culture is understood herein to be constituted of those webs of relatively regnant and generative signs of habit, spun in the communicative act engaged in by the anthropologist and his or her informants [or collaborators]..."<sup>23)</sup>

With this background, one can begin to see that the difference between sign and symbol has far-reaching ramifications in one's approach to the study of religion and the results of one's study. The pursuit of symbols assumes there are symbols "out there" that can be recognized and interpreted by appropriately informed people. Although accompanying the concept of symbol is an awareness that symbols must be understood in their cultural context and that there can be numerous interpretations of the symbols, the concept of symbol is not as dynamic as the concept of sign. The semiotic perspective, however, requires one to consider not only the signs of culture, but also consider the self as a sign—a web of signification.<sup>24)</sup> An awareness of this dynamic relationship where signs have a mutually formative affect upon each other—the researcher (sign) as an integral part of the culture (sign system) being researched—leads one to *approach the study of a culture or a religion as an organic process of creativity.*

Reflective anthropologists and qualitative ethnographers are engaged in a self-conscious analysis of this organic process of creativity whereby, in the context of the research experience, the background of the researcher has become a focus of attention. Critical reflection upon the dynamics involved in the relationship of self, as researcher, and other, as both that which is being researched (whether it be texts or people) and the results of the research (usually a book or article), illuminates issues that range from the metaphysics of experience to the complexities of human interaction. At a metaphysical level, all experiences are novel events derived from the factors involved in the creation of the event, whether they be books, people of similar or different backgrounds, writing a sentence, understanding an idea, or meeting an old friend. This is most clearly evident at the

level of signs where the mutual transformation of elements result in the creation of a novel experience. The logical development of this variety of process philosophy is that there are no objective truths or facts for any amount of intelligence or expertise to uncover. In this scheme, distinguishing researcher from research is only possible at a microscopic level of metaphysical analysis.

At the social level of human interaction, one can see the distinct elements: researcher, that which is being researched, and the results of the research. I would like to examine the relationship between the researcher and that which is being researched.<sup>25)</sup> In research of all varieties and methods the factors of the researcher's affect upon the researched and the researched's affect on the researcher are ever present. These issues, however, are more poignantly illustrated in field research involving the study of people as individuals or groups.<sup>26)</sup> The common method employed to obtain information about people in the field has been called "participant observation." This method developed in conjunction with the conceptually polarized categories known as "insider" and "outsider."<sup>27)</sup> The aim of participant observation is for an "outsider" to participate in a group in order to gain understanding of the "insider's" way of life. Scholars have already begun to challenge the underlying assumptions inherent in these categories.<sup>28)</sup> They are predicated upon a rigid conception of self and other which betrays the experience of people who are actually in the field. At the same time that it is a romantic notion that a person can enter into another community for a limited period of time and claim that they have become an "insider," it is equally difficult to deny that there are different types of interaction that yield varying levels of intimacy. Rather than there being distinct categories of insider and outsider, there is a continuum that ranges from complete difference in gender, culture, race, age, class, religious orientation, etc. between the researcher and the researched and relative similarity between them. The rubric insider-outsider, therefore, must be used with extreme caution and awareness that they are merely relative designations which must be carefully contextualized.

Furthermore, all along the continuum between insider and outsider, the mutually effective events, also known as signs, are occurring at the metaphysical level. Therefore, the background of the researcher, the contents of the matter under scrutiny (texts, people, etc.), and the results of this interaction (books, insights, dissertations) are all internally related in the creative processes of researching, understanding, and writing. Attention to this phenomenon is echoed in the works of many scholars. Golde voices this concern in her "Introduction" to *Women in the Field* by questioning

“how were my data affected by the kind of person I am, by my sex or other apparent attributes, and how did my presence alter, positively or negatively, the flux of life under observation?”<sup>29)</sup> In stressing that the study of religion is the study of religious people, W. C. Smith encourages scholars to become genuine friends with various religious people, because one can only learn what is in the heart of a person in the context of a personal two-way relationship.<sup>30)</sup>

There is a compelling similarity between the understanding that research is an organic process of creativity and the philosophical orientation of Zen master Dōgen. Centuries ago, Dōgen realized that there is nothing more to experience than the here and now and that there is nothing “out there” for one to discover and master. When experiencing the present moment, there is no place for determining truth or falsity. Such judgments are alien to Dōgen’s epistemological and ontological insights.<sup>31)</sup> Beginning with an ontology of non-dualism, there is no vantage point from which one might be able to determine truth or falsity. What is, is. Since there is nothing outside of the ontological status of one who acts now and is here, one can only know what one experiences.

Such thinking is echoed in the fields of process philosophy, reflective anthropology, qualitative ethnography, and religion. Research, particularly field research, is direct involvement in the here and now. Moreover, even when doing historical or textual studies, these studies, and the people who engage in them, occur in a particular place and time. Dōgen’s insight into the relationship that being and time are indistinguishable in the present moment lends historic weight to the claims of contemporary scholars that research is a matter of an internally organic creation. Research, like all activity, is a phenomenon in the present moment. It is an activity of discovery, but it is not the discovery of an entity existing independent of time, but the moment of discovery is an event where being and time are created. Whitehead, a modern process philosopher, uses the vocabulary “conrescence of an occasion of experience” to describe this phenomenon. Dōgen uses the phrase “being-time” to explain the same. He asserts that “all being is time” and “time itself is being.”<sup>32)</sup> “Thus,” he continues in poetic fashion, “a pine tree is time, bamboo is time... Mountains are time. Oceans are time.... If time is annihilated, mountains and oceans are annihilated.” Reflective anthropologists and qualitative ethnographers, including Daniel,<sup>33)</sup> Clifford,<sup>34)</sup> Crapanzano,<sup>35)</sup> Gold,<sup>36)</sup> and Narayan,<sup>37)</sup> are aware of this phenomenon as reflected in their awareness of the mutually transforming effect the scholar has on the subject of study and the study on the scholar. W. C. Smith also understands the study of religion to be a process

of the mutual transformation of friends with varying faith orientations. With conviction he writes that “the practitioner of comparative religion...may become no longer an observer vis-a-vis the history of divine religions of distant or even close communities, but rather a participant in the multiform religious history of the only community there is, humanity.”<sup>38)</sup> From many fields of experience ranging from a modern metaphysical philosopher, to a medieval Zen master, to contemporary members of academe, there is concurrence that research is a creative activity of the present moment.

By extension, one can readily see Daniel’s assertion that culture is an open-ended process.<sup>39)</sup> Naturally, the study of culture is also a process. No amount of study can claim to discern a definitive truth, for there are no absolute static truths in a process. Clifford states without qualification that “ethnographic truths are inherently *partial* —and incomplete.”<sup>40)</sup> Whitehead, as though he had discussed the matter with Dōgen, argues even more strongly. “Reality is just itself, and it is nonsense to ask whether it be true or false.”<sup>41)</sup> There is only “we” in the present moment, and we are all internally related in a web of creativity where distinctions like insider and outsider serve only as relative terms to the collective whole of humanity. We all must realize, along with Smith, that “the culmination of this process is when ‘we all’ are talking with each other about ‘us.’”<sup>42)</sup>

Keeping in mind the creative and organic nature of scholarship is a necessary strategy for opening up the vista of scholarship on women.

- 1) Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Quilting,” p.40.
- 2) Margot Duley and Mary Edwards, eds., *The Cross-Cultural Study of Women: A Comprehensive Guide* (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1986).
- 3) Rita Gross, “Tribal Religions: Aboriginal Australia,” in *Women in World Religions*, p.39.
- 4) Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed Books, Ltd., 1987), p.4.
- 5) Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters*, pp.7-8.
- 6) I. B. Horner, *Women Under Primitive Buddhism: Laywomen and Almswomen* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1930); Hellmuth Hecker, *Buddhist Women at the Time of the Buddha* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1982); Kathryn A. Tsai, “The Chinese Buddhist Monastic Order for Women: The First Two Centuries,” in *Women in China: Current Directions in Historical Scholarship*, ed. Guisso and Johannesen (Youngstown: Philo Press, 1981): 1-21.
- 7) Jan Nattier, *Once Upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1991), pp.28-33.



- 8) Yuichi Kajiyama, "Women in Buddhism," *The Eastern Buddhist New Series* Vol. XV, No.2 (Autumn 1982), p.61.
- 9) See page 59 of Kajiyama's article on "Women in Buddhism" for a detailed explanation of his conclusion.
- 10) Margot Duley, "Women in China," in *Cross-Cultural Study of Women*, ed. Margot Duley and Mary Edwards (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1986), p.244.
- 11) Other scholars have voiced this concern, including George Marcus and Michael Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1986), p.21.
- 12) Lawrence Babb, *Redemptive Encounters: Three Modern Styles in the Hindu Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).
- 13) A volume including twelve scholars explores the relationship of sex and gender in different contexts. Shelly Errington's chapter, "Recasting Sex, Gender, and Power: A Theoretical and Regional Overview" is a thought provoking introduction to the issues. Jane Monnig Atkinson and Shelly Errington, eds. *Power and Difference: Gender in Island Southeast Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).
- 14) W. C. Smith, "Comparative Religion: Whither and Why?" in *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology*, ed. Eliade and Kitagawa (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p.34.
- 15) W. C. Smith, "Methodology and the Study of Religion: Some Misgivings," in *Methodological Issues in Religious Studies*, ed. Robert Baird (Chico, CA: New Horizons Press, 1975), p.15.
- 16) W. C. Smith, "Whither and Why?" pp.34-58.
- 17) W. C. Smith, "Misgivings," pp.15-16.
- 18) Marcus and Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, p.29.
- 19) Valentine Daniel, *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way* (Berkeley: University of Berkeley Press, 1984), p.47.
- 20) "Religion is: (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic." Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1973), p.90. Geertz reifies symbols to such an extent that they function like "facts."
- 21) Daniel, *Fluid Signs*, pp.15-18.
- 22) Daniel's triadic structure of signs bears similarity to Alfred North Whitehead's metaphysical discussion of "the concrescence of occasions of experience." See Whitehead's *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: The Free Press, 1933), particularly chapters 11-15, for a development of these concepts. Chapters 16-20 show the compelling ramifications of this process philosophy for civilization.
- 23) E. Valentine Daniel, *Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way* (Berkeley: Uni-

versity of California Press, 1984), p.13.

Iñes Talamantez, a scholar of Native Americans, has pointed out the inherent arrogance in using the term “informants,” and prefers the term “collaborators” for the people who are active participants in field research. Presentation at Harvard University, “Insiders and Outsiders,” October 26, 1991. She is currently preparing for publication a monograph on qualitative research methods which addresses the issue of the collaboration of insiders and outsiders. Talamantez’s groundbreaking work in this area has deeply influenced the approach taken in the present study.

- 24) Daniel, *Fluid Signs*, p.40. It is interesting to note that the concept of self as a web of signification coheres to the Buddhist concept of “no-self.”
- 25) Since there is an excellent discussion of the relationship of the researcher and the results of the research in *Writing Culture: The Poetry and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) and *Other Tribes, Other Scribes*, I will defer to their expertise on the subject and not rehearse their theories and insights here.
- 26) For a clear discussion of the field research method, participant observation, see Danny Jorgensen, *Participant Observation: A Methodology for Human Studies* (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1989).
- 27) Insider and outsider correspond to the cognitive anthropological jargon emic and etic, respectively. Emic and etic derive from the linguistic terms “phonemic” and “phonetic.” Emic is internal to a language or culture and derived from etic, which poses as universal or scientific. Since these are actually relative terms, Geertz’s “experience-near” and “experience-far” come closer to capturing the relative nature of the phenomenon. This helps unravel the relationship of the researcher to the research. For further discussion see Marcus and Fischer, 1986, pp.30-31.
- 28) Anthropologist Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney is among the leaders in this investigation. Consult her article, “Native’ Anthropologist,” *American Ethnologist*, Vol.11, No.3 (August 1984): 584-586.
- 29) Peggy Golde, *Women in the Field*, p.5.
- 30) Smith, “Comparative Religion,” p.39.
- 31) There are a number of Dōgen’s writings which one may consult to understand his epistemological, ontological, and soteriological biases. Particularly illuminating ones are fascicles in the *Shōbōgenzō: Genjō Kōan, Uji, Tenzo Kyōkun, Sansui Kyō, and Gabyō*. In brief, the soteriological ramification is that there is no place or state towards which to aim. Enlightenment is a matter of acting enlightened in each moment.
- 32) Quotations are from Dōgen’s *Shōbōgenzō* fascicle entitled *Uji* [Being Time]. Translations are mine.
- 33) Daniel, *Fluid Signs*. See “Introduction.”
- 34) Clifford and Marcus, *Writing Cultures*.
- 35) Vincent Crapanzano, “Hermes’ Dilemma: The Masking of Subversion in

Ethnographic Description," in *Writing Cultures*.

- 36) Ann Grodzins Gold, *Fruitful Journey*.
- 37) Kirin Narayan, *Saints, Scoundrels, and Storytellers*.
- 38) Smith, "Comparative Religion," p.55.
- 39) Daniel, *Fluid Sings*, p.42.
- 40) *Writing Cultures*, p.7.
- 41) Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, p.241.
- 42) Smith, "Comparative Religion," p.34.

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