Life As It Is
"A Call for Women's Ordination"
Episode #29 with Karma Lekshe Tsomo
March 20, 2024

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Karma Lekshe Tsomo: Buddhist women are now taking highly visible roles in social welfare and politics and education and economics and spiritual direction, things that were really not open to them when we began our work overall. So this has been very heartwarming, very inspiring, very encouraging.

James Shaheen: Hello, I'm James Shaheen, and this is *Life As It Is*. I'm here with my co-host Sharon Salzberg, and you just heard Karma Lekshe Tsomo. Venerable Lekshe is a scholar, social activist, Buddhist nun, and former professor of religion at the University of San Diego. She is a cofounder of the Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women and the director of the Jamyang Foundation, which supports educational programs for Buddhist women and girls around the world. She now lives at the La'i Peace Center in Hawaii, so you're likely to hear some chickens and roosters in the background. In our conversation with Venerable Lekshe, we talk about her unlikely path to Buddhism at a young age, her work advocating for women's education internationally, how she integrates spiritual practice and political activism, and her hopes for the future of women's ordination. Plus, Venerable Lekshe leads us in a guided meditation. So here's our conversation with Karma Lekshe Tsomo.

James Shaheen: So I'm here with Venerable Karma Lekshe Tsomo and my co-host Sharon Salzberg. Hi, Venerable Lekshe. Hi, Sharon.

Sharon Salzberg: Hello there.

James Shaheen: It's good to be with you both. Venerable Lekshe, you're off the grid in Hawaii. Can you tell us where you're joining us from?

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Karma Lekshe Tsomo: I'm joining from La'i Peace Center in Wailua on the north shore of Oahu overlooking the Pacific Ocean with birds chirping.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I can hear the birds. That's why I thought I should let our listeners know where you are. I'm jealous. Also, I'm feeling sympathetic joy. Sharon taught me that. So we're here today to talk about your work with women's ordination, but first I'd love to hear more about your own story. So to start, you tell us how you first came to Buddhism.

Karma Lekshe Tsomo: I suppose it began at conception because I was born into a family with the name Zenn, Z-E-N-N, I'm not making this up. I found the passport, the German passport, handwritten, where it had been changed from Zinn to Zenn. So with this name, I guess I was on track to discover Buddhism. And I think I was about 11 when the kids at school kept teasing me about being a Zen Buddhist. I had to find out what it was. So I found a couple of books in the public library, *Zen Buddhism* by D. T. Suzuki, and Alan Watts. I read them from cover to cover and thought, well, this is it for me. I mean, these just started to answer all the questions I had as a child. And so I took it and ran with it.

James Shaheen: I guess it's just karma then, as always. I love this story. At 19, you took your surfboard and traveled to Japan by boat, and on that boat, you had a vivid dream of yourself in robes, at which you resolved to become a monk. Can you tell us more about this aspiration?

Karma Lekshe Tsomo: Well, I took my surfboard to Yokohama, but it was a year later after a year in Japan, when I traveled on to Southeast Asia on a ship somewhere between Hong Kong and Singapore, I suppose it was around Saigon somewhere. I had this very vivid dream of being in a circle of monastics in robes, and everyone was joyously happy, and I thought, "Oh, this is for me." And then I determined strongly that I wanted to do that. So it took me a while to get to the monastery, but that was the first opening, the first insight into following a monastic path.

Sharon Salzberg: So after spending time in Japan, you continued to travel throughout Asia, spending time in Malaysia, Thailand, Nepal, India, and Sri Lanka. You say that in each country, you searched for a monastery that welcomed women but never found one. Can you tell us a bit about your travels and how they shaped your understanding of Buddhism and of Buddhist monasticism in particular?

Karma Lekshe Tsomo: Well, I was traveling alone because my travel companion in Southeast Asia didn't want to go on to India. And so I was traveling with my guitar and landed in Calcutta with millions of people sleeping on the pavement. So I think that that made a strong impression because I grew up in Malibu in a life of privilege, and I had never seen hunger and homelessness and poverty and misery like that. I mean, I guess you could say I'd seen misery, but not that kind of misery. So that made a very strong impression on me. And I went almost immediately up to Nepal. In those days there were no flights. So I went on a truck and traveled up, and I guess I was taking a lot of risks, but maybe I didn't realize it so much at the time.

There were only about twenty foreigners living in Nepal at that time. And we mostly stayed in the same house and played a lot of music. I think I was the only woman. And we would stay up reciting poetry and reciting *Howl* and all sorts of playing all kinds of Bob Dylan music and so on and really wandering and discovering ourselves and looking for dharma, but we were too early. This was 1965. So I remember then going on to India and looking all over India. People were really kind to me and wanted to adopt me and so on. But I kept traveling and never found a monastery, really, not only a monastery for women, but a monastery in general. I went down to Sri Lanka to go surfing. I found a buddy from Santa Barbara.

Arthur C. Clarke was there, and he had the only surfboard on the island and he was in England. So we pretty much had to make do with body surfing at that time. So altogether, I guess I wandered around Asia for two years. And finally, my brother was worried about me. So he was

in the army in Okinawa and he gave me a ticket to Okinawa and then back to the States and I went back to school and so on.

I'm not sure that was a great decision, but anyway, at that time, they really weren't the kinds of teachers and courses and English speakers, translators and so forth that we have today. So it takes time. Everything ripens in its own time.

James Shaheen: So when you did come back to the US, you began studying Japanese at Berkeley, my own alma mater, where you also found yourself marching to protest the injustices of racism and war. Can you tell us more about these early experiences of bringing together spiritual practice and political activism? How did your involvement in protest movements inform your later advocacy work?

Karma Lekshe Tsomo: Well, I think it was a great sort of awakening for me because I was quite isolated. I was just minding my own business, translating Japanese poetry when suddenly we got tear gassed out of classes for the fault of building a little garden for the children on a vacant lot. And there were many very eloquent speakers in those days, and people were not only protesting the Vietnam War and war everywhere, but also gender injustice, racial injustice. And it really woke me up because I had not been exposed to this kind of thinking. So I'm very grateful. Following up on that, when I came to Hawaii and would be active in the movement here, integrating spirituality and dharma practice. I would like to pay tribute to Roshi Aiken because he had started Diamond Sangha here in Honolulu. I was living right nearby and he was the one who made it legitimate to be both a Buddhist practitioner and a social activist. He did not see a conflict there and at that time Buddhist practitioners may have been a bit siloed. Everything was about contemplation, but he said, well, we need to participate.

So that was, I think, quite brilliant, but of course, now we see that many social justice movements go on the rocks because there are no spiritual foundations and Buddhism here has something to contribute because the whole idea of non-harm and lovingkindness and so forth

means that Buddhist social activists, in my experience, take a different path, that, yes, we protest, I still march, and often with other religious leaders, we try to tap down the inclination to get upset or violent at these protests, and it's always on the edge. So it's really important to have peaceful voices in the crowd to try to keep things peaceful.

Sharon Salzberg: After you studied at Berkeley, you traveled to Dharamsala and studied at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives. I wonder if you could tell us something about your time there and what brought you to Dharamsala. What did you find most striking about your experience there?

Karma Lekshe Tsomo: Ah, well, you see, when I was a child, I had all of these questions about death. What happens to us after we die? And I could never get any really satisfactory answers. The best they could do was, if you're good, you go to heaven. If you're bad, you go to hell. To me, that just seemed overly simplistic. Surely there must be some middle way. And so that was an important journey. First, I'd been in Hawaii at East West Center doing Asian studies, mostly Chan Buddhism and so on.

And then when I went on to Dharamsala, I had to complete my studies because I'd been playing around in Bali and Thailand and so forth. I had to complete my studies by July 1st or repay all that money. So I remember vividly running down the mountain with a little Indian girl holding my hand to show me where the Tibetan library was.

And when we arrived first into the classroom, at the other end of the room was a small lama sitting on a cushion, hand pointed in the air, saying, "And at the second stage after death, you will see a faint smoke," and he was describing in detail exactly what happens to us after we die. I was so impressed that I sat at his feet for six years and learned all that I could from him.

That was Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey, appointed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and he had a lot to teach, mostly Indian Buddhist texts and also Tibetan texts and commentaries. So I felt very

fortunate. The living conditions in those days were quite poor. And of course, my limited funding ran out along the way. You know, I had someone in Honolulu sell my guitar, and I was getting $50 for Christmas from my mom and, but I was determined to learn while I had the chance. So that was a very fortunate opportunity, I think. Of course, there were very few translators at the time. As soon as they got good, they would be invited to foreign countries and we'd have to start all over again.

So eventually we were more or less forced to learn Tibetan. And of course, that was a great honor too, a great privilege, because once we knew Tibetan, we could go and study with anyone. We didn't need a translator. And so we were very fortunate most days to study with teachers who had studied with great practitioners like Geshe Rabten and so on, all of them in Beijing and so on.

It was a great time. And it was a very vibrant time in India, too. A lot of the world's greatest Buddhist scholars and translators and interpreters of Buddhism to the Western world studied and did research at the Tibetan library, like Robert Thurman and Alex Burson and Jeffrey Hopkins and Donald Lopez, and people came through all the time. So it was a very vibrant atmosphere and learning time. We had a great time.

James Shaheen: During your time there, you helped create a study center for nuns to learn to read Buddhist texts and train as scholars. Could you tell us more about your work improving women's access to education?

Karma Lekshe Tsomo: Yes, I started to look around and see that Tibetan nuns did not have the same opportunities that we did. And so I felt that I should do something to help create conditions for them to study also. So that was in the 80s. I landed there in 1972, and of course they could have come to the Tibetan Library to study, but I guess they were shy, and the big obstacle was literacy. So I just found a lama to teach literacy to nuns who had come from Tibet. And in two months they all were able to read, and they were so delighted. At first they were shy that they

weren't capable of doing so, but I encouraged them by saying that once they learned to read, they could learn to understand what the Dalai Lama was teaching, because often people take the teachings as a great blessing, but unless we study dharma thoroughly, it's difficult to understand this very complex philosophy and so forth. So getting the vocabulary and the language up to and including philosophical vocabulary is really important. And the nuns really took it and ran with it. They wanted to learn everything. They started pouring out of the remote Himalayan areas, asking to join.

We didn't have the facilities. That's when I got bitten by the snake, looking for land where we could build a monastery for women. Well, that's another story. Obviously I survived it, but that was a big obstacle on the path. Many obstacles on the path.

Sharon Salzberg: So was the study center the Jamyang Foundation, is that what it is?

Karma Lekshe Tsomo: It started with Jamyang Choling, a monastery in some mud huts up in Mcleod Ganj, just about ten minutes from His Holiness's residence. I was studying at the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics, thanks to the kindness of His Holiness, but it was not designed for women. And at one point I needed to make a decision whether to advocate for women, for nuns to be admitted to the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics or establish something separately. I knew there had been an incident where nuns were admitted to the Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies in Sarnath, and one monk and one nun got married, and so the nuns were kicked out of the Institute.

And so I thought, well, rather than take a risk on that, it wasn't until many years later that they were admitted and are now today, they're able to study there, but there was all about ten years when they were. And so I thought to establish a separate project, not only to avoid those risks, but especially to help nurture the nun's self-confidence because there have been a lot of discussions about single-sex education in, say, the United States, and it seems like it is efficient, especially for young women to have their own space, and that turned out to be correct. I think

that they have benefited from having their own space and not feeling intimidated. Now, when they get together and debate with the monks, oh, they can hold their own. His Holiness has been encouraging them all the way to study well and even outsmart the monks. And sometimes they do.

So now education projects in monasteries for women throughout India and Nepal are there again. But in those days, there were none when we began our work. But the benefits have been really great. Women are developing as teachers and translators and mentors and role models for women, demonstrating that we can do it. So that's been very important. I'm talking here about India and Nepal, where I do most of my work, but in other countries also, there is a trend toward increasing education and leadership and teaching by and for women. So this has been wonderful to watch over the last forty years.

Sharon Salzberg: I was going to ask you what it was like for you to witness more women stepping into leadership positions, as you mentioned, a number of nuns went on to obtain the title of geshe or master of philosophical texts. They've participated in the tradition of philosophical debate, which is very kind of elaborate and often intense, at least to witness. So what was that like for you?

Karma Lekshe Tsomo: Well, it's just been so heartwarming, but it hasn't been easy. There was a lot of resistance in the beginning. When I started advocating for education for the nuns, some factions were not pleased and rumors abounded. All kinds of strange things started popping up, but I wasn't going to be intimidated. And so when, as I saw the nuns take this up despite, they were also getting pushed back from the community: "Why do women need to study? They can just say *om mani padme hum*." But the nuns were really wise beyond their years. Some came when they were 11 years old.

And when I got bitten by the snake, there were three young nuns from an area called Spiti, who had requested to join our project within the mud huts and above Dharamsala. And I said, "Well, I

can't take responsibility for young children like that. I'm not there." And the other nun said, "We will take care of them." And so among them, several have become geshes. They were ready to take on this enormous responsibility of caring for young children to help them get an education and to stand up in the face of community sort of discouragement, really. And now they're doing great and they're teaching other nuns.

So that was the first project. And then I had a feeling, well, you know, we can't bring everyone to Dharamsala. And so I thought, let's create projects up in the mountains for the nuns, which is what we've done. We've got about twelve monasteries. Several now are functioning independently. They can manage everything on their own, but because they're so remote and have such limited funding, the areas are very poor. And so we started projects there and then the obstacle, the problem was finding teachers. All the teachers of course are male because they have had the opportunity to study so far. And until the first few generations of nuns who are all afraid to teach come up, then we're dependent on finding male teachers.

Well, the living conditions up there are so poor, it's very difficult to find teachers. It's extremely cold. In those days, it was under three or four meters of snow in the winter, and there was no connectivity. There was no communication, no healthcare, very little food. Even now, mostly the teachers come up in the summer months, but with climate change, the length of time that they're to stay is lengthening, maybe up to about six months now. So that's been a good change. So these are just some of the real life problems that the nuns have faced and overcome are working so hard to overcome.

James Shaheen: OK, Venerable Lekshe, I have to ask, you mentioned it twice. What happened with the snake?

Karma Lekshe Tsomo: Ah, the snake bite story. Well, I was walking in the forest trying to find some land where we could build a community for nuns to study. And I walked under some brush and I must've gotten bitten by a snake on my right shoulder, but I didn't see it. So I didn't know

why I felt so sick. I made it back to the monastery, but I was really in bad shape. And the next morning, the Tibetan doctor, Yeshe Dhonden, found the bite because he'd been giving me acupuncture because I'd been in a bus crash, also looking for land for the nuns.

So these would be interpreted in Tibetan society as obstacles, and some would even say, "See, that's what you get for trying to educate women." In any case, I was finally hospitalized. I mean, I almost didn't make it and was in the hospital in Delhi and then later in Tijuana. I mean, I had no money. I was a nun. I had no health insurance, nothing. And so they took me to Delhi to amputate my arm. And when I got there, they figured I was in a life-threatening circumstance and they didn't want to be responsible if I died. So they just left me lying there. And somehow I survived. And that's probably a good thing because now I have a right arm. It's a reconstructed arm.

James Shaheen: And you're alive.

Karma Lekshe Tsomo: Yes, I'm alive and kicking. So I guess my work was not finished.

James Shaheen: No, apparently not. In fact, you went on to found the Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women in 1987. You organized a conference in Bodhgaya and out of that grew Sakyadhita. So could you tell us a bit about Sakyadhita? What were your aspirations in founding it?

Karma Lekshe Tsomo: Well, in the beginning, we just wanted to have a conversation because a number of us started to recognize that women really weren't getting a fair shake. Their living conditions were really substandard. A lot of the nuns were living in wooden boxes with plastic on top. They weren't getting sufficient nutrition. They were getting no education. And so we thought we should get together and talk about it.

Now, the circumstances in all countries are not the same, but the gender imbalance persists throughout the Buddhist world. So we got together, we talked about it in Bodhgaya and

organized this conference with Ayya Khema and Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, who is now a nun, Venerable Dhammananda. And we thought it would be just a small gathering, but then when His Holiness Dalai Lama kindly agreed to give the opening address, 1,500 people showed up. So mostly we were sitting in a circle on the ground in Bodhgaya talking about where can we go with this? And we all agreed, the Tibetan nuns especially, that we needed to focus on education. Without education, we really couldn't do much. So that's where we began to work. We also realized that we needed some kind of an organization in order to take this work further. Now, I'm not a joiner, believe it or not. The only thing I had joined up to that point was Malibu Surfing Association.

James Shaheen: I'm from Southern California too, so I get it.

Karma Lekshe Tsomo: You get it. Yeah, right. Exactly. But in this case, we realized that it was necessary. And the Sri Lankans with one voice said, "OK, we're going to call it Sakyadhita." We started from small beginnings and decided to organize the next conference in Thailand. When I told His Holiness, "Oh, but Thailand is very difficult." He said, "That's good. Take the most difficult one first." So he's been very supportive and encouraging all the way along. Venerable Dhammananda organized that conference. And then we went to Sri Lanka and just every two years we organized a conference in a different country. And we've just concluded the 18th Sakyadhita Conference in South Korea, and on some days, 5,000 people showed up. It's all beyond our dreams. Quite astonishing. And we've learned so much in the process. You know, we started adding workshops, and we've always had meditations. We've always had chanting, things that people don't realize but have affected other Buddhist gatherings around the world, chanting in different languages and so on. Our original decision to create an alliance of laywomen and nuns and also to include men if they wished, I think this has also been very valuable that we're not exclusionary, though some people think it's just for nuns, but it's not at all. But of course we have to admit that the nuns have been very enthusiastic in embracing this movement, and we were ignored, we've been ignored by most media until very recently. I really appreciate that

you're doing this podcast because if you look at the history, I mean, we've worked very hard to try to get any kind of publicity for our conferences, but no one was interested, generally speaking.

Now things are starting—well, of course, when you're successful, things get easier. But when we were struggling, people would say, "Oh, this is just a nun thing," and we just kept plowing along, and it's really worked out beautifully. And we try to bring nuns from developing countries to each conference.

And this has transformed the lives of so many women, both laywomen and nuns. When they go back to their communities, then they can share what they experienced. They can share what they learned and they feel inspired that yes, they can hold a microphone and share their story too. So this has been very beautiful to watch.

James Shaheen: I was reading *Eminent Buddhist Women*, an anthology that you edited that came out of a conference by the same name, a Sakyadhita conference. And maybe you and Sharon would not be surprised, but I was very surprised that the theme, eminent Buddhist women, would be controversial. Why was it controversial? Can you say something about that? Obviously, not everybody's as enthusiastic.

Karma Lekshe Tsomo: Right. I think for 2,500 years, it's been assumed that Buddhist teachers should be male and that men have some special qualifications, some special power. In Burma, they even call it *bon*, that men have something that makes them especially gifted as Buddhist teachers. Some even say that's why monks are more respected is that they have this bon. Some also believe it's because they have such a hard time with celibacy, so if they can keep it together, then they should be respected, but that's more or less anecdotal.

So when we sat down in Saigon, Ho Chi Minh City, to organize the conference, we met with all of the highest monks. The whole upper echelon, as well as the eminent Buddhist nuns, were

there. And we proposed this title, "Eminent Buddhist Women." And the monks said, "Oh no, that's not appropriate. Women cannot be eminent." And we thought, really? It seems like for them, that just did not compute. That women could serve, as we see in all Buddhist temples, in the kitchen, behind the scenes, the organizing, the counting, the risk taking, much of it is done by women. But to be considered at the center, the eminent practitioner is rare. We see, of course, in the United States that there are exceptions with Venerable Thubten Chodron and Pema Chodron and Tenzin Palmo and Sharon Salzberg, and so many eminent teachers. But this was a new concept that we're talking about 2010. The concept that a woman could be eminent was alien to their minds. I insisted that women can be eminent. Look at the Buddha's stepmother. She was eminent. And there have been many throughout history, but we don't have their stories.

Sometimes they're dropped out or their accomplishments were perhaps not considered worthy of reporting. But now we're revising the concept that women truly can't be eminent. And then what is our definition of eminent also? For us, it's to have integrity. It's to be loving and kind. It's to dedicate oneself to the service of others. So women fulfill those criteria.

James Shaheen: Well, I can turn this now to the eminent Sharon Salzberg, who has a question.

Sharon Salzberg: Oh my goodness. The stories of adversity are really incredible, and you persevered throughout it all, which is very beautiful and leaves a legacy that influences many, many others. You're also reminding me of one of my teachers, who was a woman. Her nickname was Dipama, or Dipa's mother. She was a Bengali woman who had studied in Burma, and she would have loved to meet you, and I think you would have loved to have met her. And there's a story that's told about her where she was sitting up in her bed, seemingly asleep or close to sleep, and there were two people sitting on the floor having this discussion about supposedly some commentarial piece in the teachings saying that in the very last life of the bodhisattva, when he becomes a fully enlightened buddha, he needs to be a man. And these people were going back and forth about that.

One was saying that it's just the commentaries. It's not a direct teaching. And the other person was saying that it's just a sociological statement that as a man, you have a lot more influence and therefore you have to be a man. And they're kind of going back and forth. And they say, Dipama just rose up out of her slumber and said, "I can do anything a man can do." And then she went back to napping. You brought it all back to me, just listening to you, which was really very beautiful. So let's go back to Sakyadhita, one of your great accomplishments, for the moment. It's grown significantly, as you said, the most recent conference was the largest in the organization's history with, what was it, like 3,000 women attending. Can you say something about that organization taking off and what you've noticed as the organization has grown and evolved?

Karma Lekshe Tsomo: Well, Sakyadhita started out with great aspirations, but we never dreamed that we would be able to accomplish what's occurred since then. And it has been full of struggles from the beginning. For the first ten or twenty years, we would start every year with the newsletter with zero in our pockets. And we would have to somehow raise the money to send out the newsletter. Of course, it was printed in those days. We have all worked as volunteers from the beginning. None of our expenses to go to these conferences have been paid by the organization, none of our accommodations or things like that. Each one has contributed completely from their own resources to make this happen because we've gotten so little support from anywhere. Everyone loves what we're doing, but very few people send in their memberships. So we have gotten support from some nuns in Asia, in Taiwan, Korea, and so on. And that has really helped us too. I have to honestly admit that we have been shocked at how little support the organization has garnered from, for example, privileged women in the West. And yet we just decided to continue because we were so avidly convinced that this was transformative, not only for women, not only for the Buddhist traditions, but also for the world. And I'm not the first one to point out that the world's situation is really a mess and women can hardly be held responsible for it, but we can be active in helping to transform it. So with this strong commitment in mind, we just carried on and the organization has grown in scope.

It has attracted more enthusiasm and support. The publications have reached tens of thousands of people, hopefully clarifying the history of Buddhism and bringing women's history to the fore because all those stories that weren't told before, now people have been doing amazing research often on the ground to recover the stories of Buddhist women in different Buddhist cultures, and not just nuns, mind you, also laywomen, because laywomen's contributions have also often been overlooked.

So one big factor in our work is to inspire others on the path to liberation and also to make options available for both men and women. We felt that women especially perhaps understand the value of the dharma teachings, especially in these already stricken areas where, wow, the women just work overtime. They're constantly working to feed their families and take care of their families. And at the same time, they find time for dharma practice. They practice every day in their various different ways, and they understand that living a spiritual life brings peace and happiness to themselves and their families. So, of course, the spiritual life can take many forms. You know, we modern people, we do have many advantages. In fact, we have more time, perhaps. And we also have the freedom to design our own spiritual path. We don't necessarily inherit one tradition and one tradition only. We can take, as you, Sharon, and many other American Buddhist teachers have demonstrated, we can take wisdom from the different traditions, including non-Buddhist traditions. And at the very least, it offers an alternative to people in this chaotic, marauding world that's consumed by consumerism and misery and can help them to make the most of this precious human opportunity. So Buddhist women are now taking highly visible roles in social welfare and politics and education and economics and spiritual direction, things that were really not open to them when we began our work overall.

So this has been very heartwarming, very inspiring, very encouraging. And I think the future looks bright, really, because women are becoming more independent. Of course, that's very threatening to some, but women are having a good time. And of course, a lot of it's tied into economics, but that's maybe a different topic, but we do have to think about it.

Sharon Salzberg: You've also been vocal in advocating for nuns around the world, and it seems like that movement for women's ordination has been gaining momentum in recent years. I wonder if you can tell us a little bit about the current state of women's ordination, and what do you see as the major challenges facing Buddhist nuns today?

Karma Lekshe Tsomo: Well, the movement has definitely been gaining momentum and women now have more opportunities than at least since the time of the Buddha for getting fully ordained. But not in all countries. Opportunities have opened up, but it's not a done deal. So we could say that, for example, Sri Lanka has been a real model of progress. And in the beginning there was terrific opposition. Oh my, you should have seen the press reports. And it's a very complicated issue. So here, I think I have to begin by saying that the Buddhist traditions are all diverse. There is no Vatican to dictate policy from on high. Even the different traditions don't necessarily have a single figure or a single council that makes decisions for the tradition as a whole. And so it's enormously varied from country to country, but let's take Sri Lanka as an example because it illustrates a few important points. First of all, we need the will of the women. If the women are not interested in getting fully ordained, it's going to be slow going. But in Sri Lanka, there were a number of women who were determined to become fully ordained. When they first came, sixteen people came from Sri Lanka to Bodhgaya in 1987, and they told me they'd never heard the word *bhikkhuni*, but the minute they did, they had to have it. And so they went off to figure out a way that they could make this full ordination for women available. And they did. So now in Sri Lanka, there's somewhere over 4,000 nuns and at least half of them are fully ordained.

The opposition came not only from the highly placed monks, but from men who were their disciples, from the government, and even from some nuns who followed the advice of their teachers saying "We don't need this." So it has also not been so easy, but they persevered and they had to go to another tradition to get the ordination because it was not available in Sri Lanka. It was discontinued in the 11th century, but fortunately some Sri Lankan nuns in the 5th century

took the lineage to China where it has flourished ever since. And that meant that they could receive ordination from either Chinese or Korean bhikkhunis, because from China, the lineage went to Korea, to Taiwan, to Vietnam, and so on, though unfortunately not to Japan. So they started out by taking ordination in Sarnath in India from Korean nuns and monks. And then they stayed there for a year because they were really worried about what reception they would get when they returned to Sri Lanka. It was a time of civil war, and they were afraid that they would be greeted by rotten tomatoes or even bombs.

But in the intervening year, we see all these Sri Lankan pilgrims were coming to Sarnath, where the first Buddhist teachings were given by the Buddha way back in the day. And they came there too, and the nuns were ready to tell the story of the first turning of the dharma wheel. So these first ten Sri Lankan nuns became very famous.

A year later, when they thought it was safe to return to Sri Lanka, they were greeted not by rotten tomatoes or bombs but with golden parasols, the royal umbrellas that the monks were greeted with. And so things got off to a good start in Sri Lanka. Of course, these issues have to do with monastic law, which is extremely complex. For example, there is a strong tradition of respect for the teacher. If the younger nuns get fully ordained and their teachers, their nun teachers, are not fully ordained, then it creates a sort of an imbalance, an awkward imbalance where, in fact, the teacher should, by rights, bow to the disciple, and that's culturally not appropriate.

So, these are some of the maybe smaller, significant obstacles in the way. But the nuns have continued, and now, I mean, more than half are fully ordained. Now, in other traditions, where they've never even had novice ordination, like Burma, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Bangladesh, the nuns keep eight precepts, the precepts that lay people keep on the new moon and full moon day, but they keep them for life with celibacy, but they have no status in the tradition.

For example, in Thailand, if they want to ride the bus, they're not nuns, so they have to pay. But when it comes time to vote, they can't vote because they're nuns. So there's a contradiction in

terms there, right? And in the Tibetan tradition, the nuns do have access to novice ordination, and they are considered part of sangha, but the road to opening up full ordination for women has been very slow. We've been researching it for over forty years, providing all the research and translating it into Tibetan to provide it. We've said that ordination is valid, but so far it has not been accepted. The Dalai Lama strongly supports the idea of having bhikkhunis in the Tibetan tradition, but he says he as a single bhikshu cannot make that decision.

It needs to be a decision of the senior sangha council, which is all male, and so far they have not agreed. So that's where we stand. So big progress in some parts of the world. And also underground, like in Thailand, there's said to be forty monasteries and maybe 400 fully ordained nuns, but they're just keeping a low profile, practicing quietly, gaining the respect of the community, and little by little things will change.

James Shaheen: We recently had the scholar and writer Vanessa Sasson on the podcast, and she spoke about the stories in Buddhist texts about Mahapajapati Gotami's request for ordination. So can you tell us about the story of Mahapajapati? How has this story shaped how you understand movements for women's ordination today?

Karma Lekshe Tsomo: Well, I think it's remarkable, first of all, that we have this history because of course, history was not written down at that time. It was a legend. It was orally transmitted for centuries, really. So we're fortunate to have her story because she was really a trendsetter, a trailblazer, and she wouldn't take no for an answer.

She was determined to become a renunciant, and she would not settle for being a renunciant at home. So she requested the Buddha three times. In my reading, he did not give her a flat no. He said, "Please don't ask." And the latest research by, for example, Bhikkhu Analayo, in his view, the Buddha's reasoning was that it was too dangerous for women to go wandering in the forest.

Remember, the first group of Buddhist renunciants lived in the forest under trees going for alms. Mahapajapati was a queen, and all of her 500 ladies in waiting were also very privileged aristocrats. How were they supposed to go and beg for food from the villagers? You know, it seemed impossible, but she finally decided to trek across northern India.

These 500 women shaved their heads, they put on robes, they trekked barefooted across the northern plains of India in the sun and the rain, and they arrived to ask once again for admission to the sangha, to the monastic community. And at first, the Buddha hesitated, but his cousin, Ananda, friend of women, asked him, "But didn't Mahaprajapati nurture you and nurse you as a child? Wasn't she enormously kind to you?" "Oh yes, she was. Definitely she was." "And do women have the capacity, the potential for liberation from the wheel of birth and death?" "Oh yes, Ananda, certainly they do." "Well then, wouldn't it be well if they were allowed to join the sangha?" And the Buddha agreed. So by her perseverance in what I believe was the first Buddhist liberation movement in the world, she got what she thought was right: equality in the Buddhist community. And she went on to be a leader of the nuns' community until her death at a very ripe age. So she had great leadership qualities as well. And we know that thousands of women became liberated at that time. We have their stories.

James Shaheen: Vanessa Sasson departs from her academic style and fictionalizes the account you just gave, and it reminded me of something you wrote in *Eminent Buddhist Women*, and if you don't mind I'll quote you. And it's really about narrative and how stories are told. You write, "Footnotes and prescribed page lengths do not necessarily deem stories to be authentic. Who decrees that footnotes are necessary for telling women's stories? Who demands uniform page lengths for legitimacy? Perhaps it is time to liberate women from those artificial constraints. I have chosen to allow the authors to tell the stories as they wish." Could you say more about this? You're pushing back against something.

Karma Lekshe Tsomo: Yeah, you know, I think that there are several points here, several points of contention. First of all, history is written by the victors, and throughout history, men have had

a monopoly on the tools of the trade. If women were not given an education or allowed an education, except for maybe a few aristocratic women who studied with their brothers, then they really didn't have access to how the stories were told. Does that invalidate their stories? On the other hand, if we have no historical evidence, how do we know that it's true? So I think that Vanessa navigates this divide quite well in that she admits that it's fiction. She's fictionalized the story. So she says that from the outset and at every talk she gives because we don't have any sort of historical documents to document all of this. We simply have the legends that have passed for hundreds of years. And there's no way to verify them at this point. But then the same would be true of early Christian history or Muslim history or Hindu history as well. And yet by telling the stories, I think they gain legitimacy and are valuable for inspiring other women on the path.

So, we assume that women's stories, in a tradition that prizes integrity, honesty, and all of that, would be close to the mark. And you know, the *Therigatha*, the verses of eminent Buddhist women, is a document of 73 stories written by 70 early Buddhist women at the time of the Buddha and their poetry. So there are several good translations, and then there's one so-called translation by someone who didn't know Pali, so that raised this whole issue of authenticity. That's why I respect the fact that Vanessa has been very clear about what she's doing in fictionalizing these narratives. And in a way, they have a very important purpose in reaching out to more people who are not going to sit down with a Pali dictionary and wade through these sort of stylized ancient texts and in encouraging women to write their stories.

So that's maybe one of the most important contributions of Sakyadhita is that we have been encouraging women to tell the stories of eminent women in their own traditions, women that they've known and loved and studied with and even lived with. I mean, that's as valid as it gets as far as I can see.

Sharon Salzberg: What are your hopes for the future of Sakyadhita and for the future of Buddhist nuns?

Karma Lekshe Tsomo: Well, I hope that the Sakyadhita movement will grow, that more people will support it, and that more women will work together to bring their ideas and their good energy to this movement. Of course, we do have national branches in many countries, and we have a number of local chapters as well.

I'm sitting on the land of the Hawaiian people, but they have given us their full support as a peace center through Sakyadhita Hawaii, the local chapter of Sakyadhita here in Hawaii. And I hope it will grow around the world and that women will be recognized as leaders and thinkers and practitioners. I hope that ordination opportunities will open for women in all traditions, peacefully, with the support of the male sangha and with the support of other women. The one advantage of being a monastic, and mind you, all monastics don't live in monasteries because building monasteries is enormously expensive and women don't have access to that kind of funding often. We're always struggling with that, and so we have to work within those constraints. But still, as nuns, women have the freedom, really, to devote their entire lives to dharma. We don't have to go to birthday parties. We don't have to go, occasionally we go to a wedding, but we're not required to. And as long as we get lunch, we can devote all of our time and energy to teaching and practicing and living the dharma. So I think it's valuable, but of course, laywomen can also do that these days. We're living in a time when it's OK to be single. This has not always been the case for women in human history. Usually, there were only two options, marriage or monastery, and here Buddhism has served an important purpose in allowing women to be monastics. Not every tradition has that opportunity. So if we can get full ordination in all Buddhist traditions, then I can check out. My work will be done.

James Shaheen: OK, well, with that, Venerable Lekshe, thanks so much for joining us. It's been a great pleasure. We like to close these podcasts with a short guided meditation. Venerable Lekshe, would you be willing to lead us?

Karma Lekshe Tsomo: Certainly, I'd be happy to. Let's sit comfortably, peacefully, happily, and fill ourselves with lovingkindness from head to foot, with lovingkindness displacing all unhappy

thoughts, all worries, all regret, all traumas, rejoicing in all of the good deeds that we have done since beginningless time, and then sharing this peace and lovingkindness with all living beings throughout space and time. May they all be happy. May they all be peaceful. May they all be free from suffering. By virtue of the merit that we have accumulated, may we achieve the state of perfect awakening in order to liberate all living beings from suffering, leaving not one behind.

James Shaheen: Thank you so much. You've been listening to *Life As It Is* with Karma Lekshe Tsomo. Tricycle is a non profit educational organization dedicated to making Buddhist teachings and practices broadly available, and we are pleased to offer our podcasts freely. If you'd like to support the podcast, please consider subscribing to *Tricycle* or making a donation at tricycle.org/donate. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. If you enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a review on Apple Podcasts. To keep up with the show, you can follow Tricycle wherever you listen to podcasts. *Tricycle Talks* and *Life As It Is* are produced by Sarah Fleming and the Podglomerate. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening.