

Review of Male and Female roles  
in Official Magazines of two Religious Institutions

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I affirm that I have read and understood the University regulations on Academic Integrity (Academic Calendar pp. 22-23, Academic Regulation 19 of the *Saint Mary's Academic Calendar 2007-08*). I certify that the contents of this assignment are the result of my own research and study. This assignment does not contain material copied from any source unless properly footnoted and included in the bibliography.

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## Summary

This report elaborates on field work conducted on Buddhism. Field visits were done at the Halifax Shambhala Meditation Centre, 1084 Tower Road, Halifax Nova Scotia, on October 3 and October 12, 2007.

This report deals with the roles of women in Shambhala Buddhism. Early writings by Gautama Buddha indicated that he believed that women were capable of enlightenment, and permitted nuns to form their own orders. As time went on and Buddhism spread, misogynistic cultures did not accept women in monastic roles and later writings by teachers and gurus were disparaging to women. In North America, women have been successful in practicing in the Shambhala tradition, and in obtaining certification as teachers, and acharyas. A comparison of the official magazines of Shambhala International and the United Church of Canada shows that women in Shambhala contribute about half of the articles and a significant amount of the teachings as spiritual leaders. In the United Church's magazine, articles by men comprised about two-thirds of the articles. The sample was too small to draw sweeping conclusions, however it is clear men and women have access to participate in these traditions, assume leadership roles, and have their voices heard.

# Review of Male and Female roles in Official Magazines of two Religious Institutions

Shambhala International – *Shambhala Sun*  
and United Church of Canada – *The United Church Observer*

## Introduction

My purpose in doing this research was to learn about the relative level of participation of men and women in the Shambhala International School of Buddhism. After field visits to the Shambhala Centre, and remembering my prior acquaintanceship with a few local adherents, my observation was that participation of women in Shambhala was roughly equivalent to that of men, and that women did not appear to encounter barriers in practicing, or becoming qualified or accepted as teachers. My comparison group is the United Church of Canada, which I know from personal experience to be quite accepting of women in lay and ordained roles.

For neither of these institutions did I expect that women would comprise fully half of the teachers, or typically hold the highest positions, as that would not be reflective of our society. For example, according to Statistics Canada in 2005, in Canadian universities women hold 28 percent of tenured positions, 40 percent of tenure-track positions, and 45 percent of non-tenure-track positions. (as quoted in The Gazette, University of Western Ontario, 2007 November 06). Presently two of fifteen directors of Canadian telecommunications conglomerate BCE are women, though the companies it comprises have many women managers.

## Background on Shambhala International

Shambhala was started in the 1970's in the Kagyu and Nyingma traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, as inherited by founder of Shambhala, Chögyam Trungpa, and his son and spiritual heir, Sakyong Mipham. Shambhala is an international institution with centres in North America and Europe. According to their website they have “thousands of members” and like the United Church, more people visit centres and study but have not officially joined. The Shambhala community embraces diversity of all visitors or members including respecting their original or current affiliation with of other religions, racial, gender and sexual orientation. (source: Shambhala International website). Of 31 acharyas listed on the Shambhala website, 61 percent were men and 39 percent women. It is unclear whether a woman can become the leader of the Shambhala movement however it is conceivable that a leader could designate a woman as his heir.

## Background on United Church of Canada

The United Church of Canada was formed by the union of churches in three Protestant denominations in 1925: Presbyterian, Methodist, and Congregational Churches. Currently membership is at about 600,000 persons and an estimated 1.5 million are under pastoral care. (source: United Church website). The United Church prides itself on its progressive policies on social justice issues and acceptance and integration of women and homosexuals, which varies somewhat by congregation. Currently men make up 65 percent of ordained and diaconal ministers, and women 35 percent. A woman can hold the office of Moderator of the United Church, and in fact three past moderators have been women.

## Women in Buddhism

“And be it women, be it man for whom  
Such chariots doth wait, by that same car  
Into Nibbana’s presence shall they come.”

(Ueki, page 11) The above quotation from the Buddha’s teachings is used by Masatoshi Ueki in his arguments that Buddhism as taught by Gautama Buddha was non-sexist and well ahead of its time in allowing women and men to both practice and join monastic orders. Histories of the Buddha’s life refer to his stepmother requesting to form an order of nuns, and after persuasion, Buddha permitting it. (Fisher). There are also passages in the Buddha’s teachings that insult and disparage women and hold them incapable of enlightenment, in fact they are said to defile men. For example, the Buddhavatamsaka-mahavaipulya-sutram says: “Women are envoys from hell. They would often cut off the seed of Buddhahood. Their external appearances at just like Bodhisattvas, but their internal minds are just like that of Yaksa”. (Ueki, page 3). Yaksa in Buddhism are malevolent demons.

After Buddha’s death the teaching and literature of Buddhism was influenced by local customs and prejudices, particularly the rigid Hindu caste and religion system (Ueki). Further teachings and interpretation by other leaders of Buddhist sects across Asia relegated women to a low status, incapable of attaining enlightenment or dedicating themselves to a monastic life.

In early Buddhism, some women became enlightened beings. (Olson). There are stories of nuns and teachers such as Khema and Dhammadina who accomplished much in the spread of Buddhism and became leaders.

Another explanation for disparaging writings about women is the distinction between women’s ability to practice meditation and other facets of Buddhism, which are accepted in many teachings, and the danger to monastic vows. Monks are warned to stay away from women because they may corrupt men who have taken a vow of celibacy, they can be described in sutras as dangerous or evil.

Social times and pressures, and possibly the paranoia of monks, led to the extinction of the orders of nuns in some countries. In Theravada countries, nunneries were no longer permitted. In Mahayana traditions however, orders of nuns exist. Many writings indicate that women can attain Buddhahood, though discriminatory writings exist as well.

Modern Buddhism in the West has also been greatly influenced by local contemporary culture, in this case towards a more egalitarian attitude to both sexes. (Keller and Ruether). Buddhist communities reflect the social organization of the members, and thus convert communities (i.e. made up of people of European descent living in the West as opposed to immigrants who bring the old religion from the old country) are different from immigrant communities which, at least in the first generation, practice in the same ways as in the old country.

Buddhism first became known and practiced by Euro-North Americans in the early 1900's. Women were active as teachers from the beginning, particularly women who had the means to travel to Asia and around North America. As North American Buddhism progressed, more women became teachers and several have received dharma transmission as leader of an institution. In Shambhala, teachers can be empowered by Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche as acharyas, and one of the best known is Pema Chodron who is abbess of Gampo Abbey in Cape Breton.

North American Buddhist schools have had the same type of problems faced by most churches at various times. Scandals of teachers taking sexual advantage of students have caused damage and scepticism, and this would also affect the degree of welcome and safety women would feel in seeking to study with a teacher in any school. In general though, it appears that opportunities for women are good as both practitioners and leaders of Shambhala International as well as the United Church of Canada.

### Study Method

I analyzed three recent issues of each of the two magazines, *Shambhala Sun* and *The United Church Observer*. For each article, column or other item, I recorded whether it was written by a man or a woman, and whether the writer had an official/ordained role in the organization, that is, for the United Church, the Moderator or a minister; or for Shambhala, a spiritual leader (Rinpoche), teacher or acharya. For interviews, I recorded the sex and role of the subject of the interview (not the writer). Reviews of books or other media were excluded.

### Findings – Statistical

*Shambhala Sun*: Forty-one articles were analyzed. Fifty-one percent of the articles in the sample were written by men and 49 percent by women. Of the articles written by teachers or spiritual leaders, 64

percent were written by men and 36 percent by women. S.M. Rinpoche and C.T. Rinpoche (posthumous publication) wrote five of the nine articles that were written by a man having the status of teacher or above. However, the sample size was probably too small to accurately capture the true population, and in some cases it was difficult to determine the exact role held by the writer of a certain article. Teachers or practitioners from other schools of Buddhism, such as Zen, were also authors of articles and I did not differentiate between schools.

*The United Church Observer*: Fifty-eight articles were analyzed. Sixty-four percent of the articles in the sample were written by men and thirty-six percent by women. Of the articles written by ministers or the Moderator, 58 percent were written by men and 42 percent by women. Again, the sample size for teachers/leaders may be too small. All the ordained persons who wrote articles were affiliated with the United Church of Canada.

It is clear that in both traditions, women have access to spiritual guidance, obtaining certification as teachers, ministers, or higher offices, and have their contributions published in official magazines.

### Conclusion

In terms of participation in the official magazines, men and women participate at significant levels in both Shambhala Buddhism and the United Church. The Observer had a smaller ratio of women contributors, however, women did author many articles on a wide variety of topics. In both magazines, the larger contribution of men with recognized leadership roles compared to women in similar roles probably reflects the larger number of men in the ordained populations themselves.

### Other Observations

Studying these magazines was edifying in other ways. One of the first things observed was that North American Buddhism has many famous or influential adherents, including Richard Gere, Alice Walker, and Allan Ginsburg, whose name and/or photo appear on the *Shambhala Sun* covers. The only “celebrity” mentioned in the three issues of the *Observer* was Bruce Cockburn, who has a United Church background, is openly Christian, and was the subject of a short item on his accepting an honorary Doctorate of Divinity from Queen’s Theological College.

Some preoccupations of the organizations came through in this mini-review. Many articles in the *Observer* dealt with the practical issues of running the church in times of declining membership. In March 2007, the cover story was about the decisions of individual churches to amalgamate, and carried the subtitle

“Aging Membership, Out of Money, Building Needs Repair”. In the article, a minister is quoted saying “Sometimes we have to make those hard decisions as to whether we are worshipping God or whether we’re worshipping buildings.” Paradoxically, the cover depicts a rather dated-looking graphic showing two church buildings as puzzle pieces. In *Shambhala Sun*, there was virtually no discussion or advice about running a centre, retreat or congregation. All three covers featured attractive or well-known people smiling peacefully. Most of the content in *Shambhala Sun* centred either very earnestly or more lightly on individual meditation practice and the individual in society. There was probably twice as much content (taking into account Shambhala’s greater number of pages) in *Shambhala Sun* about spiritual teachings and practice than in the *Observer*.

Although the content in the two magazines perhaps should not be compared as they may intentionally serve different needs of their respective communities, if they were considered in isolation of other factors, the *Shambhala Sun* with its positive messages and star power would likely attract more interest from religion-shoppers than *The United Church Observer* with its tales of declining enrolment and white-elephantine buildings.

Finally, for a tradition that encourages non-attachment and focuses attention on inner needs, the *Shambhala Sun* is full of advertisements for things you can buy, including books, sodas, financial services, cushions, jewellery, clothing, art, as well as advertisements for retreats and charities. The *Observer* contains fewer ads though financial services, travel and insurance are represented.

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