

# The Lotus Face

*Empowerment and legacy of women on the  
Buddhist path*



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This book is a work of creative nonfiction. While it is based on historical records and traditional Ch'an Buddhist teachings, certain dialogues and narrative elements have been adapted for clarity and literary impact.

## *Dedication*

*To all the women who have resisted centuries of imposed silences and closed doors.*

*To those who refused to conform, to those who raised their voices, to those who still fight to occupy the place that should never have been denied to them.*

*This book belongs to you: it is an acknowledgment of your courage, a testament to justice, and one more step toward the balance that history owes you.*

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## **Why this book?**

Every true book is born from a void that asks to be filled. The void behind this book is ancient: the absence of the female voice on the path of Awakening. For centuries, the names of women who walked firmly on the path of the Dharma were veiled, their gestures hidden in the margins, their stories silenced before they could become memory. It was as if the wind had swept away their footprints before the stone could carve them.

This book springs from the desire to illuminate that penumbra. It seeks to light lamps in dark corners. For where history has fallen silent, a current of wisdom beats, deserving to flow into the present. There were women who received the Buddha's teachings, who attained enlightenment, who guided entire communities with patience and compassion. There were nuns who wrote poems as profound as silence itself, disciples who reached realization amidst obstacles, pilgrims who walked thousands of steps with the certainty that truth dwelled within them as well.

The purpose of this book is to remember, to rescue, to celebrate. To remember the faces that historical memory left in shadow. To rescue their words, their gestures, their fertile silences. To celebrate the quiet strength that sustained lineages, temples, and communities.

This book is also a gesture of gratitude. Gratitude to all the women who, without recognition, transmitted the flame of the Dharma through their lives. Gratitude to those who, with patience and firmness, upheld the practice in the midst of trials. Gratitude to those who continue today to seek their place in a spiritual world that sometimes seems to forget the deep equality of all beings.

The question persists: Why this book? Because Buddhism is a river that belongs to no single gender. Its current flows through hearts, disregarding external forms. In every woman who meditated, in every disciple who served, in every teacher who taught, pulses the same clarity found in any man.

This book is written for present and future generations. For the woman who opens her eyes to the Dharma and wishes to see herself reflected in the pages of history. For the disciple who seeks inspiration in a lineage and finds voids. For the teacher who today sustains

communities and needs to feel the certainty that her place is founded on ancient roots.

The aim is not to repair with words what history silenced, for no page can return centuries of oblivion. The aim is to offer a space of recognition, an altar of words where the female legacy is consecrated.

Each chapter will be like a lamp lit in memory. Each story, a seed that germinates anew. Each name recovered, a bell ringing in the vastness of time.

This book arises because incomplete history becomes unjust, because the narrative of Buddhism without women remains like a garden missing half its flowers. And also because the world today demands balance: in the female voice lies the echo of a wisdom that never expired, though it often remained hidden.

The ultimate reason is simple and luminous: women in Buddhism do not need to be vindicated; they need to be recognized. Their strength lies in their walking, in their dedication, in their fertile silence and their clear speech. This book opens its pages to listen to them, to honor them, to let their presence occupy the place that has always belonged to them.

### **Objectives and gender perspective**

This book opens its pages with the intention of illuminating a territory of Buddhism that has remained silent for centuries—a territory full of strength, resilience, and feminine wisdom. Every word seeks to reflect the presence of women who walked with devotion on the paths of the Dharma, those who kept the flame of awakening alive while history relegated them to the margins. The objectives of this book are intertwined with this need for memory: to rescue their voices, celebrate their dedication, and transmit their teachings to those who seek inspiration in the present.

The first goal is to show how women, in their diverse manifestations, have been support, guide, and beacon in the Buddhist tradition. From the first disciple ordained by the Buddha to the masters of modern monasteries, each story reflects the inner strength that emerges when devotion and clarity of heart meet. This book aims to capture that strength, turn it into narrative, and transform that narrative into

experience for those who open its pages with the desire to understand. The gender perspective manifests as a lens that broadens the light of tradition, allowing us to contemplate the richness of the female experience without limits or comparisons. Each account of nuns, disciples, or teachers offers distinct nuances of wisdom: the deep patience that sustains communities, the compassion that arises from understanding vulnerability, the quiet firmness that perseveres against invisible challenges. Female practice within Buddhism is revealed as a source of spiritual knowledge as valuable as the rigid discipline or erudition historically highlighted in male figures.

This book also seeks to honor the autonomy and empowerment of women on the spiritual path. By narrating their stories, it reflects each woman's capacity to awaken her own inner light, to sustain her practice amid adverse circumstances, and to transmit her legacy with clarity and generosity. Each chapter is a testament to how wisdom unfolds in multiple forms and how feminine strength has been a silent pillar in the continuity of the Dharma.

The gender perspective reveals deep connections between spiritual practice and human experience. Women dedicated to study, meditation, and service transmit teachings born from the observation of life and the cultivation of compassion. Their stories show that spirituality intertwines with daily life, with community, and with the creation of spaces where learning and transformation are possible for all.

Each page seeks to unfold a horizon where women occupy a place of visibility and relevance. By recounting the history of female teachers, a map of wisdom is drawn that extends across time and space. The female experience becomes a bridge between generations, uniting the roots of tradition with the vitality of those who practice and teach today. The gender perspective allows every gesture, every teaching, and every example of life to be recognized as an integral part of a shared legacy, where the diversity of voices amplifies the richness of the path. This book also invites contemplation and reflection on how spiritual practice is enriched by the full integration of the female perspective. By placing the stories of women alongside those of male masters, a complete picture of the Dharma emerges, where strength, compassion, and clarity are presented in their totality. The light emanating from each

female story is complementary, allowing the reader to perceive the breadth and depth of the path of awakening.

In short, the objectives of this book and its gender perspective seek to transform perception, inspire recognition, and cultivate admiration for those who, throughout time, have kept the flame of wisdom alive. Each chapter will be a space where the female voice resonates with authenticity, becoming a guide, a reflection, and a source of inspiration. The intention is to offer a narrative where every reader, regardless of gender, can contemplate the richness of the female legacy and feel accompanied in their own practice.

Every word written here aspires to be a lamp illuminating forgotten paths, a mirror reflecting invisible faces, and a seed germinating in the memory of the present. This approach allows us to perceive the history of Buddhism as a broad river, with multiple currents, where the female current flows with strength and beauty, contributing to the fullness of the spiritual stream that flows through us all.

### **Methodology and structure of the book**

This book is built upon a fabric of voices, echoes, and memories that intertwine to offer a comprehensive view of the female experience in Buddhism. Each chapter has been conceived as a space where different levels of reflection converge: documented history, classical texts, accounts from those who lived the practice, and the critical gaze provided by the gender perspective. The methodology adopted arises from the need to approach tradition with rigor and sensitivity, combining deep research with respect for lived experience.

The ancient and modern texts incorporated act as lamps illuminating the way. Their words, carefully selected, allow us to perceive the wisdom of women who, over the centuries, taught, wrote, and practiced. Through them, the female presence in the Dharma becomes evident—sometimes manifest, other times veiled, but always influential and decisive in the course of the tradition. History, as a channel collecting multiple currents, provides context, situating these women in their time and space, showing the challenges they faced and the achievements they attained.

Testimonies constitute the living pulse of this book. The voices of

contemporary teachers, disciples, and practitioners emerge to narrate experiences that transcend the individual and reflect the persistence of female practice in current Buddhism. Each account is a thread woven with others, forming a tapestry of learning and resistance, of devotion and creativity, where teaching is transmitted from generation to generation. Personal experience becomes collective testimony, offering teachings that the reader can contemplate and make their own.

The critical gender perspective adds another dimension. It analyzes structures, traditions, and discourses, identifying spaces where women have been invisibilized or limited, and showing how these conditions have shaped their participation and voice. This look opens up an understanding of historical and cultural contexts, allowing female strength to be recognized and celebrated in all its richness. Feminist critique becomes a tool for reading and reflection, helping to interpret sources and value the female contribution within the Buddhist tradition with the clarity it deserves.

The structure of the book reflects this integral approach. Each section combines history, texts, and testimonies with critical analysis, generating a narrative flow that guides the reader from an understanding of tradition to lived experience. The chapters are organized around central themes, such as practice, teaching, monastic life, female empowerment, and the transmission of legacy. Each theme is addressed from multiple perspectives, ensuring a broad and profound journey that allows one to feel, imagine, and learn.

The reader will find in these pages a succession of scenes, memories, and reflections that invite contemplation and connection with the women who were part of Buddhism. From ancient monasteries to contemporary centers, from disciples who walked thousands of steps to teachers who guide today, the book offers a map of experiences, challenges, and achievements, sustained by the coherence of its methodology.

Each chapter acts as both a mirror and a lamp. It is a mirror reflecting faces and experiences that remained invisible, and a lamp illuminating the understanding of tradition and practice. The combination of history, texts, testimonies, and feminist critique allows the reader to contemplate the totality of the path, recognizing in each woman the

strength of wisdom and the beauty of spiritual commitment.

The careful structure and diverse methodology turn the book into a space for learning and admiration. Voices intertwine, contexts are illuminated, and the narrative, with its poetic rhythm and deep reflection, generates a reading experience akin to meditation: it invites us to pause, to feel, and to absorb each teaching, each story, each nuance of the female presence in Buddhism.

As a whole, the book offers a complete journey that honors women, their efforts, and their legacies. The methodology allows for the integration of diverse sources and perspectives, while the structure ensures that the reading is fluid, enveloping, and meaningful. Each chapter opens doors to understanding and recognition, allowing female strength to resonate with clarity, inspiration, and depth in the mind and heart of the reader.

# 1. The Buddha and women: a complex relationship

The Women Who Surrounded the Buddha: Yasodharā, Mahapajapati, and Sundarī

The Buddha walked among men and women, but history, written with a human pen, often painted his figure surrounded solely by male disciples, forgetting that beside him stood women whose presence profoundly marked his life and teachings. Among them, three figures shine with their own light: Yasodharā, Mahapajapati, and Sundarī. Their stories, intertwined with that of the Buddha, reveal the richness, complexity, and challenges of the relationship between women and awakening.

Yasodharā, his wife since youth, embodies the quiet strength and fidelity of one who accompanies a being seeking to transcend human ties. From the early days of their union, Yasodharā witnessed Prince Siddhartha's renunciation. Her story is a river flowing deep beneath the surface: she experienced abandonment, waiting, and transformation, and later approached the Dharma, becoming a *bhikkhuni*—an enlightened woman who reflects how love and devotion can coexist with spiritual surrender. Yasodharā represents female persistence, the capacity to sustain her own inner search even in the shadow of decisions that seemed to belong solely to the man she loved.

Mahapajapati Gotami, the Buddha's aunt and foster mother, is another central presence. It was she who tirelessly requested ordination, allowing other women to follow the monastic path. Her persistence opened the door for *bhikkhunis*, creating a female lineage that has survived and flourished over the centuries. Mahapajapati's strength lies in her clarity of purpose and her ability to transform insistence into compassion, request into teaching. Her story reminds us that female determination has been a silent engine for the expansion of the Dharma, and that the vision of essential equality is reflected in every community of women who continue to practice in monasteries around the world today.



Sundarī, whose name evokes beauty and grace, represents the disciples who embraced the teaching with devotion and depth. Although her presence is less documented than that of Yasodharā or Mahapajapati, her figure symbolizes the importance of every woman who approached the Buddha with sincerity. Sundarī embodies the harmony between sensitivity and strength, the capacity to internalize the teaching and transmit it with humility and firmness. Her example shows how female practice unfolds in both monastic and lay life, reminding us that the search for Awakening manifests in multiple paths.

These three women, distinct in their histories and roles, share a common essence: the capacity to illuminate the Buddha's path and that of his followers, showing that the relationship between women and the teaching actively contributes to the configuration of the Dharma. Their lives reflect the challenges they faced, the strength they deployed to sustain their own practice, and the indelible mark they left on the tradition.

By contemplating them, the reader can perceive a fabric of emotions, decisions, and lessons that transcend personal history. Yasodharā, Mahapajapati, and Sundarī did not merely accompany the Buddha; with their presence, their questions, and their dedication, they transformed the tradition itself, laying the foundations for future generations of women to access practice and awakening.

The account of these women invites us to reflect on the complexity of human relationships in a spiritual context. Every gesture, every word, every act of surrender has resonance, and in observing them, we perceive that the Buddha's history is also woven by female hands, by silences that became teachings, by decisions that opened paths. Their presence illuminates the tradition from another perspective, offering examples of courage, wisdom, and compassion that accompany the central teaching: awakening is a path that includes all beings, and women are an integral part of that process.

### **The ordination of the first nuns: Concession or revolution?**

The history of the first female order in Buddhism unfolds as an event laden with meaning and apparent contradictions. Every step taken by Mahapajapati Gotami, the Buddha's aunt and foster mother, resonates

through the centuries as a firm echo of determination and faith. Her request to the Buddha to allow the ordination of women was not limited to a formal petition; it was the opening of a door into unknown territory, a space where tradition met the transformative power of women.

At that time, the Buddha had already attained enlightenment and had a consolidated group of male disciples. The appearance of Mahapajapati and her insistence, accompanied by the request of other women, transformed the scene into an act charged with tension, hope, and expectation. Every gesture of these first aspirants holds the strength of those willing to sustain their spiritual path even when society and custom attempt to limit their access. The arrival of the first nuns was, at once, a gesture of respect for the discipline of the Dharma and an act that challenged established structures.

Ordination represented a turning point. The creation of a female lineage allowed the Buddha's teaching to expand, incorporating voices and perspectives that had remained invisible. Each *bhikkhuni* who received vows entered a path of discipline, study, and practice with the same rigor as her male counterparts, demonstrating that spirituality transcends gender barriers. The strength of these women went beyond fulfilling rules; their presence transformed the dynamics of the monastery, expanding the idea of community, collaboration, and deep understanding.

The historical perspective shows that the ordination of women had multiple dimensions. It was an act of courage, yes, but also an expression of wisdom. It allowed the teaching to become complete, integrating the female experience as part of the totality of the Dharma. Mahapajapati, with her perseverance, taught that transformation is rarely achieved by decrees or words, but thanks to constancy, clarity of purpose, and the compassion that sustains even in moments of resistance.

Her gesture opened paths that are felt today in every convent, in every meditation practice, and in every woman who follows the path of Awakening.

The impact of this silent revolution extends to our days. Every

*bhikkhuni* who practices, teaches, and transmits the tradition is an heir to that act of determination and faith. Ordination not only allowed the continuity of female practice but also enriched the tradition with perspectives that broaden the understanding of the Dharma, showing how discipline and wisdom unfold in diverse and complementary forms.

Contemplating this episode invites reflection on the nature of change. The ordination of the first nuns resembles a river carving its way through rock: the movement seems gentle, but it carries force and transformation. Each woman who entered the lineage of *bhikkhunis* received, along with the vows, the responsibility to sustain and transmit the teaching, to be an example of practice and compassion, to show that the search for illumination includes all beings equally.

In the memory of those who follow the Dharma, the figure of Mahapajapati and the first nuns remains a symbol of silent revolution. Every act of surrender, every step taken with conviction and love for the teaching, marks a path that allowed future generations to approach awakening with equality, strength, and clarity. Female ordination transformed the tradition from within, consolidating a lineage that continues today, alive and vibrant, as testimony to the power of decision, perseverance, and vision of those who walked first.

### **The Garudhammas: Protective rules or discriminatory constraints?**

The *Garudhammas*, or the “Eight Heavy Rules” that accompanied the founding of the female order, have resonated through the centuries with a weight that sparks questions, reflection, and, at times, controversy. Each of these rules reveals the tension between the intention of protection and the limitations imposed, reflecting the complexity of the relationship between tradition, practice, and the lives of women within the Dharma.



Mahapajapati and the first *bhikkhunis* received these rules as part of the vows that structured female monastic life. These norms outlined guidelines for conduct, hierarchy, and discipline, providing women with a framework within which they could develop their practice and sustain the community. The *Garudhammas* were intended to ensure harmony between nuns and monks, and to protect women from external difficulties, risks, and misunderstandings that might arise in a social context where female independence was limited.

Each rule, each precept, can be viewed as a reflection of the time and space in which it emerged. In that context, women assumed a role that needed to be visible yet protected, recognized yet contained. The *Garudhammas* offered structure, guidance, and security, indicating the respect that should exist between monastic communities and preserving the integrity of female practice.

At the same time, the rules reveal the tension that arises between the intention of care and the restrictions imposed. The formal hierarchy, the mandatory deference toward monks, and the obligation of certain acts of subordination show that the framework designed for protection also limited spaces for autonomy and decision-making. A critical look at these norms allows us to understand that female practice unfolded on terrain that required a constant balance between obedience, discipline, and inner empowerment.

The impact of the *Garudhammas* is perceived in the history of every *bhikkhuni*. Daily life, practice, teaching, and interaction with monks were conditioned by these rules. However, each woman found ways to cultivate her strength, wisdom, and autonomy within the limits of the regulations. Female strength manifested in persistence, in the capacity to sustain practice, in the transmission of teachings, and in the building of solid communities, showing that true authority resides in clarity of purpose and depth of practice.

Analyzing the *Garudhammas* is also to understand the adaptability of tradition. The history of the female order demonstrates that, even with strict norms, female spirituality found paths for expression, growth, and leadership. The rules became frameworks within which creativity, discipline, and wisdom flourished, revealing that every limit can transform into an impulse when determination and dedication

accompany practice.

The study of these norms invites contemplation of the relationship between protection and autonomy, between care and restriction, between tradition and female innovation. The *Garudhammas* are a mirror of their time, but also a reminder of the resilience of women who knew how to sustain their practice, open paths, and keep the female lineage alive despite challenges. Their legacy remains in every *bhikkhuni*, in every convent, and in every woman who follows the path, illuminating the way with wisdom, strength, and compassion.

In the end, the *Garudhammas* offer a lesson in complexity: they show that protection can coexist with limitations, that tradition can contain tensions, and that the inner strength of women is capable of expanding and flourishing even within frameworks that appear rigid. Each rule, each story, and each experience reflects the richness of female practice and the depth of its contribution to the Buddha's tradition, reminding us that the light of wisdom penetrates any barrier when sustained with determination and an open heart.

### **Can a woman be a Buddha? The doctrinal controversy**

Since the early days of the Dharma, the question of whether a woman can attain the fullness of Awakening has generated reflection, debate, and deep contemplation. More than a dilemma, this question reveals the complexity of the tradition and the richness of its teachings: it is an exploration of the limits of human perception and a recognition of the depth of spiritual potential inherent in every being.

Ancient texts offer accounts that sometimes seem to suggest restriction, while others present clear examples of women who attained high states of realization. The stories of Mahapajapati, Yasodharā, Khema, and Uppalavannā remind us that Awakening recognizes no gender; their lives demonstrate that wisdom and compassion can flourish fully in women, manifesting the inner Buddha that beats within every being. Each story of these women is a mirror of strength, patience, and clarity, revealing that the true nature of awakening lies beyond bodies and labels.

Doctrinal discussions reflect historical and cultural contexts. At certain times and in certain regions, textual tradition was interpreted in such a

way that women had to traverse a longer path to reach full enlightenment, while in other places, the experiences of *bbikkhunis* demonstrated that wisdom transcends the limits imposed by external form. The tension between interpretation and practice generated debates that spanned centuries, illuminating the need to understand tradition in a profound and flexible way, recognizing the inherent strength in all practitioners.

Contemporary analysis of these doctrines allows us to see the richness and multiplicity of voices inhabiting Buddhism. Each interpretation is framed within a social, cultural, and spiritual context that offers teachings on patience, perseverance, and clarity. Women who undertook practice despite restrictions, prejudices, or restrictive interpretations built a legacy demonstrating that the light of the Buddha can shine in every human being. Their lives evidence that the doctrinal question transforms into lived experience, where awakening is measured by the intensity of inner realization.

Each generation of women has expanded the understanding of this question. From the first *bbikkhunis* to contemporary teachers, history offers examples that invite reflection on the relationship between gender, spiritual potential, and tradition. Far from diminishing female strength, the doctrinal controversy becomes a mirror of the creativity, perseverance, and clarity with which women have sustained their practice and taught others.

Reflection on whether a woman can be a Buddha is also a call to contemplate the very nature of enlightenment. Beyond texts and debates, direct experience shows that awakening manifests in the wisdom, compassion, and clarity that a being develops in their practice. Every woman who advances on her path, every *bbikkhuni* who teaches, and every disciple who meditates embodies the possibility of the Buddha in action, revealing that full realization is found in the intensity of heart and mind.

The doctrinal controversy, then, transforms into a mirror reflecting the richness of the female path. Each interpretation, each debate, and each reflection contributes to a broader panorama, in which the experience and history of women illuminate the understanding of the Dharma. Female strength and its capacity for awakening are consolidated

through the centuries, showing that tradition expands when it integrates the totality of human and spiritual experience.



## 2. Voices from the past: Enlightened women in ancient texts

### The Therīgāthā: Poems of enlightened nuns

In the echo of the centuries resonate voices that rarely made it into canonical texts: those of the nuns who attained enlightenment and left their experience engraved in verse. The *Therīgāthā*, a compilation of short poems by enlightened women, stands as a luminous testimony of wisdom, courage, and devotion. Each stanza is a river crossing time, carrying with it the freshness of awakening and the depth of female practice.

These poems reveal the intensity of inner experience, the joy and clarity that emerge when the mind is freed from fetters and the heart opens to compassion. Each verse is a testament to a life dedicated to the Dharma, where discipline, meditation, and observation of reality converge in a language that illuminates even the modern reader. The *Therīgāthā* narrate events, but they also transmit emotions, states of consciousness, and the radical transformation that practice can generate.

To truly hear these voices, we must let them speak for themselves. Here are five fragments from these ancient masters, offering a direct glimpse into their awakened minds:

#### 1. *Vimalā, the courtesan liberated from vanity*

Vimalā, known in her lay life for her beauty and work as a courtesan, finds in renunciation a superior beauty. Her poem is a poignant reminder of the impermanence of the physical body versus the purity of the liberated mind:

*“This painted body, a fragile toy, adorned with jewels, yet full of impurities. The mind, however, is well developed, free from desire, free from hate. Now that I have seen the truth of the Buddha, my heart finds definitive peace.”* (Therīgāthā 5.2)

#### 2. *Kisā Gotamī, from tragedy to clarity*

Kisā Gotamī, famous for her story of maternal loss and the search for a mustard seed, expresses in her verses the immense relief of having overcome the pain of death through the understanding of the Dharma:

*“Having lost my son, my mind was mad with grief, wandering aimlessly, seeking a*

*remedy. But having seen the Sage, the Master of beings, I heard the word of Truth. Now, with the arrow of pain removed, my mind is calm, free from thirst, secure.”*  
(*Therīgāthā* 8.13)

### 3. *Dhammadinnā, the teacher of the Dharma*

Dhammadinnā was recognized by the Buddha himself as the nun foremost in teaching the Dharma. Her verses reflect the joy of one who has understood the nature of existence and lives in harmony with it:

*“Happy are those who hear the Dharma, happy are those who understand it deeply. Happy are those who hold no enmity toward anyone, and find their delight in inner peace. My life is dedicated to truth, and in every breath, I celebrate liberation.”*  
(Based on *Therīgāthā* 14.1-2)

### 4. *Ambapālī, the fading beauty*

Ambapālī, a famous courtesan who became a nun, offers one of the most moving poems on old age and physical decay, contrasting it with spiritual vitality:

*“My eyes, once bright as jewels, are now sunken and darkened by age. My body, once soft and upright, now trembles like an old bamboo. But the mind, liberated from bonds, shines with the light of eternal wisdom.”* (*Therīgāthā* 13.1)

### 5. *Sumedhā, the unwavering determination*

Sumedhā speaks of the willpower necessary to break the chains of samsara and the joy of having achieved what seemed impossible:

*“With great effort, I have broken the chains, I have destroyed the house-builder’s home. The mind, free from formations, has reached the end of craving. I am free, I am full, I am secure; the cycle of births has ended for me.”* (*Therīgāthā* 9.1)

Each author left her unique voice imprinted. Khema, Uppalavannā, Dhammadinnā, and many others express in their poems the experience of letting go of fears, attachments, and conditionings, and opening up to the vast sky of awakening. Their words are testimony to the female strength that traverses social and personal obstacles, confronts prejudices and limitations, and, through practice, rises to the light of full understanding.

The poems reflect moments of deep meditation, the joy of liberation, the recognition of impermanence, and the interconnection of all beings. They speak of renunciation and detachment, of active compassion and the clarity of discernment.



Each verse is a flash that illuminates the path, showing that the experience of the enlightened woman is not limited to theory, but unfolds in every thought, every action, and every instant of mindfulness.

The compilation of the *Therīgāthā* reveals the diversity of paths within the same journey. Some poets celebrate stillness and silent contemplation; others show the intensity of practice amidst daily life, interaction with the community, and the transmission of knowledge. All, without exception, manifest that enlightenment is accessible to those who cultivate discipline, attention, and compassion, regardless of gender.

Reading these poems allows the reader to approach the direct experience of female enlightenment. The voice of each nun crosses time and cultures, transmitting her humanity and divinity in a balance that awakens admiration and reverence. The *Therīgāthā* thus become both mirror and guide: a mirror reflecting the power and sensitivity of the female practitioner, and a guide orienting toward the understanding of authentic practice and the experience of awakening.

Each stanza invites contemplation, reminding us that enlightenment is a state that transcends the body and external circumstances. The poems allow us to feel the intimate connection between individual experience and the totality of the Dharma, between personal practice and universal teaching. In reading them, we perceive that each enlightened woman adds a unique nuance to the path: a gaze, a gesture, a word that expands understanding and strengthens those who seek to follow her example.

The *Therīgāthā* are also a reminder that the history of Buddhism includes female voices with spiritual authority. Each poem is a testament that women can be guides, teachers, and examples of Awakening. The depth of their poetic expression reveals that female wisdom enriches the Buddha's path and makes it complete, offering the tradition a legacy that continues to inspire practitioners of all times.

### **Wise women in the Jātakas and Mahāyana**

Throughout the *Jātakas*, the tales recounting the previous lives of the Buddha and his disciples, women appear who embody wisdom, compassion, and determination with moving strength. Each story

functions as a mirror reflecting qualities that transcend time and space, revealing that women have been bearers of fundamental virtues in the Buddhist tradition. The patience, clarity, generosity, and audacity of these figures show that spiritual practice can flourish in all beings, and that the female contribution has been essential in the transmission of the Dharma.

Among these narratives, the story of *Sujātā* stands out with luminous prominence. A young woman from a wealthy family, Sujātā's life changed after making a vow to a sacred tree. Years later, upon seeing Siddhartha seated beneath that very tree, radiant and serene after years of asceticism, Sujātā did not see a hungry beggar, but a realized deity. With a deep intuition born only from the purity of heart, she prepared an exquisite offering of milk-rice (*kheer*) in a golden bowl. As she offered it, she voiced a wish: "*May my aspirations be fulfilled just as your desires have been fulfilled.*" This act of selfless generosity provided the ascetic with the physical strength necessary to meditate that night and attain Enlightenment under the Bodhi tree. Sujātā's story is not merely a tale of devotion; it is a testament to lay female wisdom, which recognizes awakening in others and nurtures it with concrete action. It teaches us that enlightenment is not an isolated event, but the fruit of a support network where women play a crucial and decisive role.

The *Mahāyāna* expands these visions further, highlighting female Bodhisattvas who embody surrender and enlightenment. Avalokiteśvara sometimes manifests in female form, and figures like *Tara* are presented as models of active compassion and protection of beings. These texts show the depth of the teaching: women can be sources of guidance, strength, and liberation for others, participating fully in the expansion of awakening. Each female Bodhisattva represents qualities that the practitioner can cultivate: patience, generosity, courage, and clarity.

The stories of the *Jātakas* and the *Mahāyāna* reflect the richness of historical and cultural contexts, and the diversity of paths through which female wisdom is expressed. The practice and teaching of these women reveal that enlightenment is not limited to renunciation or strict monastic life, but can also unfold in social, family, and community life. Their stories teach that female strength manifests both in the silence of contemplation and in the decisive act of helping and guiding other

beings.

Studying these texts allows us to understand how the tradition valued the female presence as a transmitter of virtues and an example of practice. Each story of a wise woman invites reflection, offering examples of ethical behavior, surrender, and deep discernment. By reading these stories, the contemporary practitioner can recognize in the female experience elements that strengthen their own practice and broaden their understanding of the Buddha's path.

The *Jātakas* and *Mahāyāna* teachings offer a narrative that intertwines history with spiritual teaching. Each wise woman who appears in these texts is a beacon and guide: she illuminates the path for those seeking understanding and reminds us that the practice of Dharma integrates the totality of human experience. Female wisdom, reflected in these tales, shows that the Buddha's tradition is enriched by every story, every gesture of compassion and clarity, and every example of courage and surrender.

In analyzing these texts, the presence of women becomes a thread connecting generations, transmitting teachings that remain alive to this day. The stories of the *Jātakas* and the *Mahāyāna* allow contemporary practice to draw inspiration from the strength and clarity of women who, centuries ago, walked with devotion, offered their service, and attained states of full comprehension. Each tale transforms into a bridge between history, teaching, and direct experience, showing that wisdom and awakening transcend temporal and gender barriers.

### **Enlightened women in later texts: Sutras and commentaries**

As the Buddhist tradition expanded and new texts were developed, accounts emerged that give voice to women whose wisdom and dedication unfold with clarity and depth. Mahayana sutras and later commentaries collect the Buddha's teachings, but they also include stories of women who attained high levels of realization, demonstrating that enlightenment is accessible in its fullness to those who cultivate discipline, compassion, and discernment.

Among these figures, some are nuns distinguished by their capacity for deep meditation and teaching others, while others are laywomen who, through their daily lives, embody the principles of the Dharma. Each

account highlights distinct virtues: clarity of perception, patience, generosity, and courage in the face of difficulties. The diversity of experiences reflects that enlightenment does not follow a single path, and that female practice manifests in both monastic and everyday life.

Later texts also show female Bodhisattvas whose active compassion guides countless beings. Tara, as a manifestation of Avalokiteśvara, presents herself as an example of salvation, care, and clarity in action. Her stories transmit teachings on the interdependence of all beings, reminding us that the practice of the Dharma extends to compassionate service and the protection of those who suffer. Every act of these women constitutes a living lesson on how awakening manifests in relationship with others and in the transformation of the world.

Commentaries by later masters highlight the importance of women in the transmission of the Dharma. Their interpretations emphasize how inner strength, discernment, and dedication can manifest in women of any social condition, and how these qualities contribute to the continuity of the teaching. Enlightened women appear as pillars of the tradition, demonstrating that female wisdom has been a constant source of inspiration, guidance, and balance within communities that embrace the Dharma.

Exploring these texts allows us to understand that female practice was never limited to strictly monastic spaces. Women who attained realization did so through mindful observation, deep meditation, and sustained ethical practice, teaching by example and offering their experience to those seeking guidance. Each story reflects how the tradition is enriched by the diversity of voices, how female experience broadens the understanding of the Dharma, and how enlightenment manifests in all spheres of life.

The sutras and later commentaries also offer teachings on the role of women in the community. The discipline, ethics, and clarity of *bhikkhunis* strengthen the cohesion of monasteries and practice centers. The interaction of women and men in the teaching and transmission of the Dharma demonstrates that the path of Awakening benefits from collaboration, respect, and the balanced presence of all voices. Each enlightened woman becomes a beacon for others, radiating clarity and compassion in every act, thought, and word.

By contemplating these stories, the reader perceives that the Buddhist tradition celebrates women as guides, teachers, and examples of wisdom. The richness of later texts shows how female strength, clarity, and compassion have been a silent but constant engine in the transmission of the Dharma. Each tale is a bridge between generations, a thread connecting the past with the present, inspiring the practice of those who today seek awakening.

The examples of enlightened women in sutras and later commentaries reveal a profound truth: the practice of the Dharma transcends gender, and female wisdom contributes to the fullness of the path. Every woman who attains realization leaves a legacy that perpetuates itself through teaching, meditation, and compassionate action, illuminating the way for future generations. Contemplation of these lives inspires respect, admiration, and commitment to practice, reminding us that the tradition is enriched when all voices are integrated into the teaching of awakening.

### **The figure of the Nun Khema and other forgotten masters**

Among the women who shone in the dawn of the Buddhist tradition, Khema emerges as a beacon of wisdom and discernment. Her story, recorded in ancient texts, reflects a clear mind, exceptional inner strength, and a deep commitment to the practice of the Dharma. Khema attained full enlightenment, and her teachings show a precise understanding of the nature of the mind and the impermanence of all things. Every word of hers, every action, is an example of how clarity and compassion can coexist with firm and serene determination.

Khema stood out both for her personal realization and for her ability to teach and guide other women on the spiritual path. Her discourses, collected in the texts, reveal a special sensitivity toward those facing doubts, fears, and obstacles in practice. Her teachings focus on the deep observation of the mind, mindfulness, and the transformation of emotions, showing that wisdom transcends gender and flourishes with the intensity and sincerity of practice.

Alongside Khema, many other masters remain in the silence of history, their names barely mentioned, their lives often forgotten. These women left their mark on the tradition through their constant practice, their

## **The Lotus Face**

### **Empowerment and Legacy of Women on the Buddhist Path**

For centuries, the names of those who walked firmly on the path of the Dharma remained veiled. Their gestures were hidden in the margins; their stories were silenced before they could become memory. As if the wind had swept away their footprints before the stone could carve them.

*The Lotus Face* arises from the desire to illuminate that penumbra. It is a journey through time to rescue the voices of nuns who wrote poems as profound as silence itself, disciples who attained realization amidst obstacles, and teachers who guided entire communities with patience and compassion.

From the first bhikkhunis who surrounded the Buddha to divine figures like Tara and Prajñāpāramitā; from the silent resistance against monastic patriarchy to the vibrant rebirth of the female lineage in the contemporary world, this book weaves a map of forgotten wisdom.

It is not just a historical account. It is a mirror. A mirror where every woman—nun or layperson—can recognize her own strength, her vulnerability transformed into power, and her undeniable place in the tradition. Because Buddhism is a river that belongs to no single gender: its current flows through hearts, disregarding external forms.

This book is a gesture of gratitude to all those who, without recognition, transmitted the flame of Awakening. It is an invitation to recognize that the female voice does not need to be vindicated, but honored. For in its fertile silence and clear speech resides the balance that history should have always celebrated.

Open these pages and let the lotus blossom within you.