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Visual Compassion for Women's Empowerment

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Abstract

Little attention has been given to principles of Buddhist moral conduct in the West. There are ten virtuous actions of Buddhist moral conduct, called the Ten Virtuous Deeds of the Bodhisattvas. Drawing from the works of contemporary women thinkers and artists, this article considers how the beauty of human nature and spirituality can be cultivated based on Buddhist feminist perspectives. There are many oppressed women in Asian countries whose voices are not heard in society. Buddhist feminism based on the Ten Virtuous Deeds of the Bodhisattvas can probe deeply into the heart of the moral issues and nurture the powerful flow of spiritual energy for the women. This is a theoretical study that elaborates on women's struggle for their liberation as inspired by the art of Rima Fujita.

Key words: art, Asia, Buddhism, moral conduct, spirituality, women

Introduction

According to the Dalai Lama, “the basic purpose of education is to broaden and cultivate the mind through a wide variety of learnings” (Mishra, 2014, p. 63). But, how should we broaden and cultivate our minds? What kind of learning tool is the most suitable for its purpose? Drawing mainly from the works of contemporary women thinkers, and artists whose works exemplify these perspectives, this essay considers how the beauty of human nature and spirituality can be cultivated from a Buddhist feminist perspective.

In Buddhism, meditation is one of the most popular images for many in the West. Although moral imperatives are at the core of society, Buddhist moral conduct has received little attention in Western culture and it is often misunderstood; the notion of karma is an example of such a case. The word karma translates as action. Unlike the common misconception, karma is not fate or unchangeable destiny. Instead, it refers to one's good and evil deeds that result in pleasant or painful experiences in the future in the same manner that the planted seeds eventually ripen as various fruits. Thubten Chodron, a nun in Tibetan Buddhism, explains that karma refers to our body, speech, and mind's intentional actions, such as what we do, what we say, and what we think. These kinds of actions leave imprints and tendencies upon our mind-stream (Chodron, 1999, p. 93).

Although the Noble Eightfold Path is well known, there are ten virtuous actions of Buddhist moral conduct, called the Ten Virtuous Deeds of the Bodhisattvas. A Bodhisattva

in Sanskrit signifies an enlightened being who seeks Buddhahood through the practice of the perfect virtues (*paramita*). A Bodhisattva renounces complete entry into Nirvana until all beings are saved. A Bodhisattva always provides active help and is ready to take upon him or herself the suffering of all other beings. Dalai Lamas in Tibetan Buddhism (Vajrayana) are considered to be manifestations of the bodhisattva of compassion. The most important of these transcendent bodhisattvas are Avalokiteshvara (Kuan-yin in Chinese, Kannon in Japanese). Kuan-yin means “hearing the cry.” She is renowned for her caring and compassion throughout the East Asian countries. Kuan-yin is depicted with many arms, and it is believed that the one-thousand-arms Kuan-yin uses her hands to dispense her mercy to the thousands who ask her help.

As a Buddhist and Shintoist from Japan, I propose a Buddhist feminism that fosters spiritual growth and morality based on the Ten Virtuous Deeds of Bodhisattvas by illustrating the reality of oppressed women in Asian countries. It is the first step for opening the mind to be aware of the uniqueness of all diverse cultures of people, places, food, fashion, music, dance, and art. In such diverse cultures, there are many women whose voices are not heard in society. Just like many small drops of rain create a river by transforming their power, so every single compassionate action and education will become the powerful flow of spiritual energy for oppressed women. Gloria Durka (1991) states:

When we express our spirituality through art – by drawing, painting, sculpting, fashioning pictures with words or music, or making beautiful things such as embroidery, knit goods, woven fabrics – we ground our spirituality in creation. The careful making of beautiful things helps us to center ourselves so that we become still and filled with reverence for the stuff with which we work. Created works also manifest the energy toward the good with which the Creator has gifted us (p. 85).

Regardless of art created by a professional or an amateur, art teaches us that the beauty in this world can be a powerful tool to “manifest the energy toward good” (Durka, 1991). Art enables us to transform negative energy against oppressed women into empowerment.

The Method of Study

The research is based on theoretical methodology, which aims to reveal aspects related to interreligious education and women's empowerment as inspired by the art of Rima Fujita.

Art and Action by Rima Fujita

The Japanese artist, Rima Fujita¹ says that art is a tool to serve humanity. She says, “It’s my responsibility to create art to raise awareness of important issues in the world” (Ram, 2019). So, for example, she has created picture books for Tibetan refugee children to help preserve their unique culture and language, and established Books for Children, a non-profit organization. She explains, “I’ve made 7 picture books and have donated more than 15,000 books to the community-in-exile. They are all written in Tibetan, English, and Japanese.” Many of her books have forewords written by the Dalai Lama,

and she donates her book royalties to Tibetan refugees. Her picture book *The Day The Buddha Woke Up* (Miller & Fujita, 2018) which describes the path of Siddhartha Gautama. There is an iconic scene that after six years of struggle on the ascetic path, Siddhartha ate a bowl of sweet rice soup offered by a village girl, Sujata. He kept practicing meditation under a Bodhi tree and achieved Nirvana in Bodh Gaya. Because the scene had special meaning to Fujita, she wanted to keep the painting which was very rare. However, when asked to donate a painting to a Free Tibet School², she donated it because she remembered the words of Tibetan *geshe*,³ the joy of sharing with others. When she visited a sacred place, Bodh Gaya, a Tibetan *geshe* said to her, “Rima, you must share this joy with others. Think of thousands of people who wish to be here, but cannot. You cannot keep this extraordinary experience to yourself. You must share. Remember that” (Ram, 2019). The *geshe*’s word is a calling to all people who are fully filled with their food, clothing, and shelter, to share the joy with those who cannot afford them.

What kind of experience makes humans special? Rita Gross asserts, “For a Mahayanist, no other experience is more central than the discovery of *Bodhichitta*. (Gross, 1993, p. 180)” *Bodhichitta* means the mind of enlightenment or altruistic intention, in Mahayana Buddhism. It is the mind dedicated to attaining enlightenment that is to be able to benefit all others most effectively. *Chitta* means mind, heart, or attitude. *Bodhi* means awake, enlightened, or completely open. Sometimes the completely open heart and mind of *Bodhichitta* is called the soft spot, a place as vulnerable and tender as an open wound. It is equated, in part, with our ability to love. Even the cruelest people have this soft spot. Even the most vicious animals love their offspring (Chodron, 2019). Even the cruelest people have a soft spot; if so, good-minded people could evoke the ability to love for those who do not have a warm heart (Chodron, 2019).

The Ten Virtuous Deeds of the Bodhisattvas

The Ten Virtuous Deeds of Bodhisattva are as follows: Not to take a life, not to take what is not given, avoid sexual misconduct, not to deceive, avoid slander of others, avoid harsh words, avoid empty speech, avoid greedy thoughts, not to be malicious, avoid the wrong view (Thrangu, 2016).

The ten virtuous actions are categorized into three levels of conduct: body, speech, and mind. From the karma theory standpoint, the body’s three unwholesome actions are 1. killing, 2. stealing, and 3. sexual misconduct. The speech’s four unwholesome actions are 4. lying, 5. harsh speech, 6. slander, and 7. malicious gossip. The three unwholesome actions of the mind are 8. greed, 9. anger, and 10. delusion (Della Santina, 2017). Thus, unwholesome karma and the ten virtuous actions are the two sides of the same coin.

Furthermore, there are the simple practices of good conduct of body, speech, and mind, and the special practices of good conduct of body, speech, and mind. When one realizes the faults of doing negative actions and merely refraining from doing negative actions, it is thought to be the simple practice of good conduct. On the other hand, when one refrains from doing negative actions and practices positive actions, it is the special practice of good conduct (Thrangu, 2016). But how should we practise special good conduct?

The Virtuous Actions of Body

Not to Take a Life

The first virtuous action of the body is no killing. Not to take a life should be extended to all sentient beings. There are many insects on the ground, and we might crush them merely while walking. However, by walking carefully and mindfully, we can avoid killing insects. Thus, Buddhism teaches that we should not think, "Oh, it's only an insect!" when we see a small insect. From the karmic perspective, karma's determining factor as good or evil was the state of one's mind when a specific act was committed; therefore, unintentionally stepping on an insect is not considered negative karma. However, if one knowingly steps on the same insect out of anger or desire to see it suffer, it causes evil karma. Furthermore, it is believed that karma determines one's destination after death. Positive karma leads to rebirth as a celestial being or human, while negative karma brings about rebirth in hell or the realms of animals and hungry ghosts (afflicted spirits). Buddhism teaches that meditation on kindness and compassion to all beings reinforces this precept. Animals, birds, fish, and insects, all living beings, have the right to survive and try to find happiness, just like us.

Thailand, also known as the Smile of Land, is a country of Theravada Buddhism. A report of PETA Asia reveals the cruel circumstances of the betta fish industry in Thailand. According to the reporter, "Dead bettas were found at every one of the 10 facilities. Some had been dropped on the floor, where they appeared to have suffocated to death, and their bodies were being eaten by ants. Others were found rotting in tanks amid live bettas." The workers at the facilities roughly sorted live fish for shipment, leaving them in the waterless trays for extended periods. Those whose tails were considered imperfect would be discarded while others were packed into small bags slightly larger than betta fish's own bodies. The fish were shipped without food to more than 20 countries around the world for sale in stores. According to a worker, a tranquilizer is added to water to keep the starving fish from eating their own tails. As a result, many fish die before reaching their intended destination (Matthies, 2020, p. 18–19).

Why do betta fish whose tails are considered imperfect need to be discarded and end up their lives on the floor eaten by ants? Saito (2013) names this kind of notion as popular aesthetic discriminations, as the size and the visibility of creatures matters and are aesthetically appreciable in popular culture. If we are aesthetically attracted to certain creatures, we tend to care about their fate and are inclined to protect them, while we tend to remain indifferent toward those creatures, we do not find aesthetically appealing. The aesthetic preferences affect the individual's attitude and resulting actions, such as supporting environmental organizations and laws. Saito illustrated such an example of a snail darter in the United States. There was little public support for protecting snail darters, two-to-three-inch members of the minnow family, which were threatened to extinction by the completion of TVA Tellico dam (Saito, 2013, p. 58–59). Educators should not be caught up with popular aesthetic discrimination that judges by appearances but rather teach their students the inherently precious value of life.

There is a notion of Wabi-sabi in Japan. Wabi-sabi is a beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete. Wabi-sabi forces us to contemplate our own mortality, and evokes existential loneliness and tender sadness. It stirs a mingled bittersweet comfort since we know all existence shares the same fate (Koren, 2008). *Mujō*, or impermanence,

is Buddha's essential teaching. Understanding transitory lives and finding beauty through impermanence and imperfection may be called Buddhist feminist aesthetics. One can truly understand the deeper meaning of the precept of No Killing by practicing compassion toward all living beings. For example, adopting abandoned animals or donating to animal shelters is thought to be the special practise of good conduct, more than passively refraining from killing animals, fish, and insects.

Not to Take What is not Given

Not stealing refers to abstention from taking what is not given. It does not merely mean to prohibit theft but includes fraud, deception, and exploitation. For example, according to the ASEAN Post, raw human hair has a weighty commercial value processed into hair extensions and wigs. Raw human hair is a coveted commodity in international trade. Thus, hair extensions have become an important segment in the hair industry with an estimated annual sales range from \$ 250 million to over \$ 1 billion in U.S. currency. However, the human hair trade has been exploiting ASEAN⁴ women (Hasnan, 2020). For example, hair extensions in the United States cost between \$ 500 and \$ 2000, but many hair owners only received a tiny fraction (e.g., \$ 3 in Vietnam). In Southeast Asia, long hair is estimated as a mark of beauty with deep religious and social meaning, particularly in Buddhist majority countries. Unfortunately, the human hair trade is not regulated allowing unfair trade to traders. In her article, *Made in Cambodia*, Erica Ayisi points out that women in poverty are supplying America's market for hair because Cambodian women do not know how to bargain over the hair price nor where to sell their hair for the international market price. Soeng Sen Karuna of the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association says that the government should think about the people and not allow excessive exploitation to take place (Hasnan, 2020). In Southeast Asia, hair traders target impoverished areas to buy hair from gravely poor people. Education and vocational training are needed for women to prevent exploitation.

Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si* (2015) calls for broad cultural revolution in response to the environmental crisis. While the encyclical considers several crucial points of view, poverty and environmental change resonate with women's hair trade exploitation in developing countries. The Pope declares that the poor countries' natural resources fuel the development of the richer countries and calls for an appreciation of the poor's immense dignity (Martin, 2015). Not to take what is not given or not stealing should be applied to all business trades. Chodron (1999, p. 75) points out, "When we conduct business ethically and have genuine concern for our clients, suppliers and so on, they trust us. By having a good relationship with them, they continue to do business with us and refer others to us as well." Doing business based on (business) ethics and concern for others is an excellent example of the special practice of good conduct and is considered to be a virtuous action of Bodhisattva.

To put oneself in someone's shoes is an ability to imagine oneself in another person's situation or circumstances. It requires one to imagine another's pain, sadness, and disappointment. As an artist, Fujita had terrible experiences. She says, "I was abused and sexually harassed by famous art dealers. They stole my works and often I never got paid for my art that were sold. I witnessed so much greed and dishonesty in the commercial art industry" (Ram, 2019). The modern society of consumerism tends to be egocentric

and lacks sympathy for others. The self-centered attitude is to be transformed into the action of altruism as embodied in The Ten Virtuous Deeds of Bodhisattva. Thus, when one sees others' misery, she or he should practise giving and sharing joy with others, and one should never take what is not given.

Avoid Sexual Misconduct

This precept refers to appropriate sexual behavior and refraining from hurting another person through sex. For monks, this requires celibacy, and for laypeople, it refers to limiting sexual intercourse within marriage. Hurting another person through sex must include sexual crimes, such as rape and trafficking girls in this contemporary world.

Each year, thousands of girls from Bangladesh and India's West Bengal are sold into sexual slavery and forced to work in brothels and red-light districts. The brothel is a prison for the girls. The gate and the fence around the building are always locked and guarded. Anjali's real stories (16 years old when she was sold to the brothel) and Sayeda (14 years old) are examples of being hurt by adult men through sex. Girls were raped 20 times a day by their customers. They took painkillers to endure the physical torment. Anjali said, "We would feel such shame ... when we had customers who were older men, older than our fathers." Anjali was trafficked by her boyfriend. Her boyfriend told her that he would marry her. After staying at the shelter a year and a half, Anjali could return home and begin working at a factory. However, returning home was not the end of her suffering. The families do not welcome many trafficking victims because they fear being shamed by their relatives and neighbors. "A person is only fooled once ... not again and again," were 19-year-old Anjali's words.

Anjali's friend, Sayeda, was raped by the brothel owner when she was brought to the brothel. She heard from the other girls that it was "his way of assessing what he could charge his customers for having sex with them," and "new arrivals like Sayeda deemed closest to virgin hood were the most expensive: 500 rupees or about seven dollars." Furthermore, the owner forced the girls to drink alcohol to make them more pliable. At first, Sayeda was resistant, but she found herself "being intoxicated helped blunt the trauma of being a sex slave," and she began to drink heavily as a way of passing the time throughout the day. "Oh, I've cried and cried. How much more could I cry?" Sayeda said, indeed, the girls' pain, such as Anjali and Sayeda, would not be healed for a long time (Bhattacharjee, 2020, pp. 90–115).

Many other girls are forced to work at the brothels as sex trafficking of minors is a multibillion-dollar industry across the globe. As mentioned, avoid sexual misconduct should include sexual crimes, such as trafficking girls and forcing them to work as sex slaves. Educating young women is essential to prevent the victimization of such sexual crimes. Durka (2014) asserts, "Preventing violence means teaching about the cause of violence, and naming it where it exists (p. 248)." So, educators have a crucial role in teaching children where violence comes from, how they protect themselves, and when they need to raise their voices.

The Virtuous Actions of Speech

Not to Deceive, Avoid Slander of Others, Avoid Harsh Words, and Avoid Empty Speech

There are four actions regarding speech, as listed above. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2015) describes an incident in her home country, Nigeria. “Recently a young woman was gang raped in a university in Nigeria, and the response of many young Nigerians, both male and female, was something like this: “Yes, rape is wrong, but what is a girl doing in a room with four boys?” She continues, “These Nigerians have been raised to think of women as inherently guilty. And they have been raised to expect so little of men that the idea of men as savage beings with no self-control is somehow acceptable.” Considering the rape victim’s emotion, the comment, “what is a girl doing in a room with four boys?” (pp. 32–33) is harsh speech, which completely traumatizes the victim. Similar notions of women as inherently guilty are observed in Asian countries.

Yuriko Saito illustrates common criticisms of a female rape victim’s appearance. When a victim was “wearing heavy makeup, a super-mini skirt, low cut top that tightly clings to the body and stiletto high heels,” the public tends to make a judgment about her character based on her appearance. Also, many people justify rape by saying, “She was asking for it.” These words hurt victims because rape is not caused by wearing a mini skirt or high heels (Saito, 2013, p. 162). So, what are some examples of other issues of speech?

Harsh words hurt young girls using the internet. According to the research of Plan International, more than half of 14,000 girls in 22 countries around the world reported that they have been harassed online. In the U.S. alone, 99 % of girls said they use social media, and 43 % said they have experienced some form of harassment on online platforms. In particular, activists attract “vitriol and attention” regarding perceived feminist or gender equality issues. Online harassment emerged as a significant theme among young girls who report that it was the norm (for boys and men) rather than the exception (Plan International USA, 2020). The following comments are from young Asian women.

My feminist friends are usually targeted by males because of the patriarchal society we are living in. These same people do not want other individuals with other genders to be empowered (Girl, 17, Philippines).

Some of my friends, when they comment or, you know, give opinions on some of the political matters, there are some people that ... are a bit narrow-minded, so they tend to use fake accounts and do some harsh comments using rude words, and you know, saying that ‘who are you to tell this?’ ...Using harsh words and “*You are not supposed to do this, you are a girl, just don’t mess up with this kind of thing*” (Young woman, 21, Myanmar).

I often face harassment online or in public, and it makes me feel unsafe, because every time, whatever I’m doing on social media, people keep commenting. I have to cover my hair, or I have to wear a long dress, or anything and yeah, I just feel I cannot express myself freely (Young woman, 19, Indonesia) (Plan International USA, 2020).

Chodron (1999) suggests that closed-mindedness is due to fear because many people do not want the sand castle of their worldview to be shattered by a new idea. They fear they would be lost. In her book, *Open Heart, Clear Mind*, she proposes that:

When we find ourselves across the table from a person talking about a new subject or idea, we can approach the conversation with joy in learning, rather than with a judgmental attitude that has already decided the other person is wrong. We'll let ourselves listen, reflect, grow, and share, while we re-examine our previous idea. Such an approach is beneficial in many circumstances (p. 59).

Since ancient times, Japanese people believe that mystical power or spirit dwells in words. It is called a *Kotodama*. If a person says something, it is thought that the words have the power to make things true or materialized. For example, some words should not be used during a wedding ceremony and a funeral ceremony, as people believe that words have a dark power to curse. No lying, no double tongue, no harsh speech, and no idle talk can be applied to social media ethics. "When sitting alone, watch your mind. When in public, watch your speech," (Chodron, 1999) is a Tibetan Buddhist teaching, which addresses the essence of our mind and speech. The offering of warm words (*gonse*) is one of the Seven Kinds of Offering in Buddhism. Avoiding harsh speech, providing warm words to others, and giving comfort is the special practice of good conduct (Society for the Promotion of Buddhism, 1999, pp. 336–337).

The Virtuous Actions of Mind

Avoid Greedy Thoughts

Avidya in Sanskrit refers to ignorance and delusion. Avidya is a state of mind that does not correspond to reality and brings suffering. In a consumption society, many people live in a world of delusion. They think they would be happier if they can buy a larger house, a brand-new car, or the latest version of smartphone. Thus, in the world of materialism, people are good at addition (doing sums.) Without adding more and more materialistic pleasures, they cannot know happiness. However, it is a delusion. The statement, "Enjoyment of the qualities of desire brings no satisfaction, as though one had drunk salty water" in the *Lalitavistara-sutra* (Bays, 1983, p. 66) teaches that there is no satisfaction in desire. From the Zen perspective, simple life is the best, and one can accomplish it by subtraction thinking. Wabi-Sabi has similar moral precepts, such as, the first thing to do is to get rid of all that unnecessary. Leonard Koren (2008) explains:

Material poverty, (and) spiritual richness are wabi-sabi bywords ... wabi-sabi tells us to stop our preoccupation with success-wealth, status, power, and luxury-and enjoy the unencumbered life ... leading the simple wabi-sabi requires some effort and will and also tough decisions ... Wabi-sabi is exactly about the delicate balance between the pleasure we get from things and the pleasure we get from freedom from things (p. 59).

To avoid greedy thoughts, keeping a wabi-sabi lifestyle seems to be ideal. Donating personal belongings that one does not need any longer is the embodiment of the special practice of good conduct in the Ten Virtuous Deeds of the Bodhisattvas.

Not to be Malicious

Hate crimes have been increasing worldwide, but not all cases are reported. According to the U.S. Department of Justice Bureau statistics, 250,000 Americans over the age of 12 are victimized by hate crimes each year; however, only one third are reported. What does hate crime indicate? The FBI defines hate crimes as “criminal offenses motivated, in whole or in part, by the offender’s bias against race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender, or gender identity” (Hunt & Martinez, 2015).

In South Asia, acid attacks are an extreme form of hate crime and violence against girls and women. Acid attacks are a form of violence in which acid or another corrosive substance is thrown at a person – usually a woman or a girl – with the intention of maiming, torturing, or killing them. Acid attacks perpetrated against women and girls are used as a means to scar the survivor permanently. They are used because so much bearing is placed on the physical appearance of women and girls. There are approximately 1,500 acid attacks a year globally; however, this kind of crime often goes unreported because of the fear of reprisal. Although acid attacks occur worldwide, this type of violence is most common in South Asia, such as India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, where acid remains inexpensive and freely available (ActionAid UK, 2020).

The story of one of the victims, Masuda Akter Moni is sad and painful. In 2012, Moni was a college student who had engaged in many extracurricular activities, including art, dance, and music. One day, she was approached by a local youth who expressed his desire to marry her. But Moni refused his marriage proposal. On August 13th, 2012, the youth and three accomplices held Moni down in front of her house and poured acid on her face. Moni suffered severe burn injuries on her face, eyes, right hand, chest, and backside. Her eyes were severely damaged, and her eyesight began to deteriorate. She received treatment along with psychological assessment and counseling for the trauma. Moni showed signs of depression and anxiety, for which she received continuous counseling and therapy. At the hospital, she was surrounded by staff who are survivors of acid violence themselves. This kind of support from women give victims like Moni courage and strength to recover from the tragedy and restart a new life. However, Moni suffered severe damage to her eyes, leading to further complications (ASF, 2020). For example, educational institutions are not supportive of acid attack survivors; therefore, most of them won’t return to school or college. Families are also often not supportive, and they blame the survivor as it is thought to be a shame. The costs of the medicines are also a burden to the victims’ families. Thus, the grassroots movement of women’s organizations is pivotal to stop violence against women and girls (ActionAid UK, 2020).

It is a shocking fact that educational institutions are not supportive of acid attack survivors. An acid attack is evil. The educational institutions must support the survivors to continue their studies by providing scholarships or financial aid. Simultaneously, educating family members is crucial to support the victim whose body and mind are devastated. *Not to be Malicious* is the minimum standard. We need to go the extra mile. As Chodron (1999) claims, “We can accept ourselves for what we are and have faith in our ability to become kinder and wiser people. This balanced view of ourselves also gives us mental space and respect others (p. 59).” To have a balanced view of ourselves and create a mental space to respect for others is *the special practice of good conduct* in the Ten Virtuous Deeds of the Bodhisattvas.

Avoid the Wrong View

The tenth virtuous action is to avoid the wrong view or misconceptions. Nepal is known for Mount Everest, the highest peak in the world. Nepal is the place where Gautama Buddha was born about 2500 years ago. However, this beautiful country is the home of serious issues regarding women's health because of its faulty view of women. There is a practice called chhaupadi, which holds that a woman is unclean when she is menstruating. Women have to leave their homes and sleep at a hut built for seclusion during their menstrual period. Eighteen-year-old Ishwari Joshi says, "The first time I had my period, I was 15. I had to stay for nine days." The spaces for chhaupadi are tiny and shared by several families without proper beds or bedding. When the women are isolated for chhaupadi, they cannot cook, eat nutritious food, drink from or bathe in the village water source. They are forbidden from touching plants, cattle, or men. It is believed that if women touch a cow, it would not give milk. After four days in the hut, the village women bathe in a stream an hour's walk away. There is an annual religious ceremony for women to atone when they accidentally touch a man or pollute their environment. It is believed that chhaupadi has its roots in Hindu scriptures, and is a widespread social practice among Buddhists too (Jolly & Venema, 2017).

Despite the fact that the Nepalese Supreme Court outlawed the practice of chhaupadi in 2005, a 74-year-old village man said, "I used to get sick if my wife touched me during her period." A younger village man thinks the tradition should continue for "keeping a clean environment and health and safety in the house", "as village women only have cloth rags to soak up their flow." He continued, "Menstrual blood is a poison." A young girl in her early 20s says, "It was really sad for me as a young girl. Why should I be called impure? It's a natural thing that every woman goes through." Pema Lhaki, who runs a reproduction health program, states that old attitudes can be hard to shift even in a large city. It seems an older man and even a young man want to keep the tradition by claiming different reasons. Pema Lhaki asks, "Who says it is impure? It gives life. We tell women there is power in their period" (Jolly & Venema, 2017).

The cultural belief that touching a cow causes no milk or menstrual blood is poison, is an extreme view based on gender discrimination. Respecting different cultures and traditions is crucial. However, when a traditional ritual is inhumane, it should be changed, not preserved. It is a ray of light that a woman like Pema Lhaki runs the reproduction health program. Regarding chhaupadi, the wrong view must be corrected to the right view for women's health and wellness.

In response to the Dalai Lama's request, Fujita depicted a book titled *ReWa*, which teaches Tibetan refugee youth about sex education and health. *ReWa* means "hope" in Tibetan. The book contains ten pieces of advice to Tibetan youth regarding sexual harassment. The last piece of advice is trust and believe in yourself. This is so because:

You are the highest authority on you. You know yourself best. You know what you need, want, and value. Do not let anyone else make the decisions for you. Healthy boundaries make it possible for you to respect your strengths, abilities and individuality as well as those of others (Palmo & Boeijinga, 2015, p. 23).

Clearly, sex and reproduction health education is essential in Asian countries to overcome culture, such as harmful chhaupadi, which denigrates women.

How Can Art be Action?

Madhubani art, often called Mithila art, had its origin in a small town called Mithila, located on the border of Bihar in India and Nepal. The literal meaning of Madhubani is honey from the forest. According to Vani Vishnu, the Madhubani art form was begun by women who felt oppressed and could find no other way of expressing themselves, their ideas, and thoughts. This lack was due to illiteracy. They use simple geometrical shapes and natural homemade colors that are vibrant and bright. Paints are made out of things that women can find easily in a village. For example, yellow color is made from turmeric, pollen, lime, and milk of banyan leaves, and blue is made using Indigo. Madhubani painting depicts amazing descriptions of events and situations (Vishnu, 2016). Its original form was a mural for rituals, such as depicting family happiness and fertility. The beginning of Mithila art can be traced to the marriage of Nepal-born Princess Sita and Mithila-born Prince Ram, when people celebrated their wedding and decorated their homes with the images of deities, sun, flowers, plants, and animals. They believed that their art contained the energy of the universe, and an appreciation for nature (Nihonkeizai, 2019).

The Madhubani artist, Sunaina Thakur, discovered that women can support themselves by learning the art, and so founded an art training center for women. Since 2009, 300 students there had their works sold at galleries in Katmandu, Nepal. Thakur believes that the art center can preserve this cultural heritage for future generations. She explains:

Born in Nepal, I used to observe my mother and grandmother painted on the wall since my childhood. When I was fifteen, I saw similar paintings in the textbook. Until then, I did not know it was a Mithila painting. I wanted to learn how to draw, but it was not easy (Nihonkeizai, 2019).

At the age of sixteen, she married a man chosen by her parents. In Nepal, it is expected that men can receive an education. However, the notion that women exist only for housekeeping is deeply rooted in society. Women are responsible for preparation of meals, taking care of their cattle and providing care for their elders. Even in front of family members, Thakur hid her face behind a veil, and took it for granted. Yet her wish to learn Mithila art was strong, and she persuaded her family for permission to begin studying even though her mother-in-law was not so happy with it. Once she went outside for her study of art, she questioned why women cannot decide their way of live by themselves. She thought it might be possible to change the way for women through art. Her central theme depicts and publicizes women's current circumstances because she believes that while one person can't raise 100 voices, art can (Nihonkeizai, 2019). Her art illustrates the negative effects of gender discrimination for women, such as the vicious cycle of poverty and child marriage which exposes to girls to HIV/AIDS, and other sexually transmitted diseases and violence (UNICEF, 2014). Thakur's example is another Art and Action by women.

Conclusion

Because of COVID-19, the year 2020 was challenging for all. Many people described their situations as if the world suddenly became upside down. During this difficult time, Fujita depicted her favorite Avalokiteshvara and a woman. The exhibition title, *Karuna*, refers to compassion in Sanskrit. She explains:

There is a woman (or a girl) in most of the visions I see in my dreams. I don't know who she is, but she may be my alter ego or she could be myself in another life. I see her as a messenger who brings important messages to me, and my job is to convey those messages by creating art. I believe that the woman is a messenger of Avalokiteshvara and the woman is connecting us with the Bodhisattva of Compassion ... The pandemic has affected all of us in the world, and many of us have been facing many challenges. On top of that we all have our personal challenges to deal with. We are all suffering, and we all need compassion for ourselves and for others. Things naturally get healed over time, but some things require extra work. Compassion heals wounds and pains. Compassion allows you to love yourself and others. Compassion helps you forgive yourself and others ... I myself have survived this difficult season of uncertainty with daily meditation and prayer, and creating art has kept me sane (Ram, 2019).

When asked about the ultimate purpose of life, Fujita's answer is "(Nurturing) Altruism". But how can we nurture altruism? Is the answer love or compassion? Chodron's (1999) answer is both. She explains, "Love is the wish for others to be happy, while compassion is the wish for them to be free from all suffering ... Love is an internal attitude of care and concern for all. Compassion regards others as equal to ourselves, for all of us equally want happiness." Thus, "With love and compassion we'll go on to develop the great resolve to take care upon ourselves the responsibility for the happiness of others" (p. 157). We will be called Bodhisattvas when we have the altruistic intention spontaneously day and night.

To have altruistic intention spontaneously day and night is challenging. The Ten Virtuous Deeds of Bodhisattva are the minimum moral precepts to walk the spiritual path for Mahayana Buddhists. If we care about others with love and compassion by practicing the extra work, the world will be a better and more sustainable place for all and for future generation. As Fujita and Thakur demonstrate, art can be a medium for empowering women in these challenging times. Indeed, art can convey spiritual wisdom to all.

Notes:

(1) Fujita was born as a Buddhist in Japan; her image of Buddhism was not positive until she came to the United States because of her father's business transfer to New York City. One night, she heard a voice in her dream. The voice said, "You must help Tibet now!" As she began to learn about Tibetan Buddhism, Fujita began dreaming about Buddhist images and would often have various deities visit in her dreams to convey the spiritual messages. Soon she realized that art was not a goal, but only a tool to serve others; a tool to make the world a better place, to be the voice for the voiceless, to help humanity.

- (2) Students for a Free Tibet (SFT) was founded in New York City in 1994 by a group of Tibetans and young students and supporters. The concept of SFT was borne from the understanding of the critical role students, and young people have played in freedom struggles throughout history.
- (3) Among the sects of Tibetan Buddhism, the Gelug school places the most rigorous emphasis on philosophical study, administering a scholastic degree in large monastic universities that can take two decades or more to complete: the *Geshe* degree. *Ge* means virtue, and *she* means knowing. *Geshe* thus means one who knows virtue, one who knows what should be practiced and what should be abandoned.
- (4) The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) consists of ten countries: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

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