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Transcending Gender: Female Non-Buddhists' Experiences of the *Vipassanā* Meditation Retreat

Brooke Schedneck

Department of Religious Studies, Rhodes College, Memphis, TN 38112, USA; schedneckb@rhodes.edu

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Abstract: Female non-Buddhists have been writing detailed descriptions of their personal experiences in *vipassanā* meditation retreats since the 1960s. These memoirists relate to the English-speaking world their experience of the retreat process and self-transformations. Early memoirists traveled Asia in order to learn and practice *vipassanā* meditation. These memoirs are as much about the meditation practice itself as living in an Asian culture. The mindfulness craze, beginning in the late 2000s, brought with it increased awareness of *vipassanā* practice. At this time we see a renewed interest in recording *vipassanā* retreat experiences, but these are even more personal and not concerned with travel, as many *vipassanā* meditation retreats are now available outside of Asia. I consider four female memoirists: Marie Byles and Jane Hamilton-Smith, writing in the 1960s and 1970s, and Raji Lukkoor, and Jennifer Howd, whose memoirs appeared in 2010 and 2014, respectively. These women's writings demonstrate that, although non-Buddhist female meditators understand *vipassanā* meditation as a nongendered practice, it is still an embodied, gendered experience. Each of these women has different reactions to the female gender on the retreat, from outrage at gender discrimination to acceptance of it, from judgment of female teachers and meditators to revealing a more feminine self.

Keywords: meditation; Theravada; Buddhism; women; gender; autobiography

Female non-Buddhists have been writing detailed descriptions of their experiences in *vipassanā* meditation retreats since the 1960s.¹ These memoirists relate their account of the retreat process and their own self-transformations. Early memoirists, who wrote their accounts in the 1960s and 1970s, traveled to Asia in order to learn and practice *vipassanā* meditation. The rise in popularity of mindfulness meditation, beginning in the late 2000s, brought with it increased awareness of *vipassanā* practice. At this time there is also a renewed interest in recording *vipassanā* retreat experiences. But the impulse to experiment, to see if *vipassanā* meditation really works, to try to gain benefits from this practice as non-Buddhist women, remains the motivating force of these memoirs across time. These women's writings demonstrate that although non-Buddhist female meditators understand *vipassanā* meditation as a nongendered practice, it is still an embodied, gendered experience. These women have diverse reactions to the female gender on the retreat, from outrage at gender discrimination to acceptance of it, from judgment of female teachers and meditators to revealing a more feminine self.

In this article, I consider four female memoirists: Marie Byles, Jane Hamilton-Merritt, Raji Lukkoor, and Jennifer Howd. The early memoirists, Byles and Hamilton-Merritt, traveled to Burma and Thailand to take part in *vipassanā* meditation retreats.² As they were among the first and only

¹ *Vipassanā*, as part of the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, is usually translated as insight and is a technique of meditation that aims to "see things as they are" through close self-observation of the mind and body, and gaining insight into the unsatisfactory, impermanent, no-self or non-substantial nature of all phenomenon.

² During the early 1960s, the time of Marie Byles' *vipassanā* meditation retreat experience, the country was called Burma. In 1989, the country's name changed to Myanmar.

foreign women to join retreats in these Asian countries, they reflect on the different cultures and peoples they meet. These two women must find teachers and centers that will accept them as participants. Marie Byles' *Journey into Burmese Silence* records her time in a number of Burmese meditation centers in the early 1960s. Byles is well regarded in her native Australia as a feminist, lawyer, journalist, and conservationist. Jane Hamilton-Merritt's *A Meditator's Diary: A Western Woman's Unique Experiences in Thailand Monasteries*, published in 1976, details her experience as a lay foreigner, attempting to learn meditation in Thailand. Throughout the book she describes challenges and triumphs in finding instructions and opportunities to practice. Hamilton-Merritt, an American, is best known as a journalist, writer, and human rights advocate, and has twice been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. As foreign non-Buddhist women entering into a meditation retreat and monastic setting for the first time, they could have a variety of responses to perceived gender inequalities. We will see that Marie Byles and Jane Hamilton-Merritt have contrasting views on their experiences as female meditators, ranging from shock and dismay to acceptance and understanding. Even with these opposed views, both authors agree that meditation and the Buddhist teachings and practice transcend gender despite any challenges they face as female, non-Buddhist, and foreign meditators in Asia.

The contemporary memoirists, Raji Lukkoor and Jennifer Howd, do not have to travel as far. Their retreats both take place in their native California, with mostly American teachers and participants. The contemporary memoirs both take place in the Buddhist diaspora through the S.N. Goenka retreat network³ or through the Spirit Rock Insight Meditation Center in California.⁴ *Inner Pilgrimage* by Raji Lukkoor, an engineer from India based in California, details her 2010 meditation retreat. Instead of reflections on Buddhist cultures, this is an in-depth, moment by moment account of the inner thoughts and processes of the author's 10 days at a *vipassanā* retreat. Jennifer Howd, an American writer and mindfulness consultant, in her 2014 memoir *The Mindfulness Diaries: How I Survived My First Nine-Day Silent Meditation Retreat*, takes us into her mind during her retreat. Each of these latter two memoirists presents not so much a narrative as a diary of their experiences, chronologically detailing a wide sample of the thoughts that arose in their minds during each day of the retreat. In this way these memoirists represent a shift within modernity called 'the subjective turn,' which brings increased attention to the self and the mind (Taylor 1989). This subjective turn is characterized by a high level of interiority and self-reflexivity, as one's experiences become objects of reflection, and an increased value of ordinary life as part of spiritual growth. These two women follow this trend, and also agree with the earlier memoirists that the *vipassanā* meditation retreat transcends gender. However, their experience illustrates the ways in which the retreat remains an embodied experience that takes place in social settings that respond in different ways to the female gender. Throughout their retreats, the contemporary memoirists judge themselves and other females and hope to cultivate 'feminine' qualities of compassion and vulnerability.

Through an analysis of the main themes of these memoirs, I will address the following questions: How have female non-Buddhists accessed the *vipassanā* meditation retreat? What were their challenges and difficulties? Did these change over time? How do they narrate their experiences in relationship to the female gender? Their accounts illustrate the ways meditation exists within the tension of a practice that, although purporting to be beyond gender, must be enacted within hierarchical spaces, which often separate men and women. To illustrate this relationship between a practice that is perceived to be beyond gender and one that is enacted in a gendered way that makes clear distinctions among genders, I analyze their descriptions of how these women experience the retreat in embodied ways. The two early memoirists experience a tension between the ideals of Buddhism, which transcend gender, and the ways they and other women are treated in the monastic retreat settings. The latter memoirists

³ Courses in the format of S.N. Goenka continue at retreat centers throughout the world. For a listing of this vast network see www.dhamma.org.

⁴ Spirit Rock Insight Meditation Center has many influences, but describes its main lineage as stemming from the Thai forest tradition. See the website: www.spiritrock.org.

do not experience gender discrimination but do experience the retreat in gendered ways. In the end, all four memoirists were motivated to write a memoir of their retreat in order to create awareness of *vipassanā* meditation for the international English-speaking audience and laud the practical benefits they received from the practice. Despite gendered experiences, these women find the *vipassanā* meditation retreat to transcend gender enough for them to achieve some kind of self-transformation.

1. *Vipassanā* Meditation as Beyond Gender

Vipassanā meditation, within the Buddhist tradition, purports to be a universal practice accessible to all people. In this way *vipassanā* meditation, in addition to the *dhamma* [Buddhist teachings], is interpreted by many Buddhist teachers as being beyond gender. Buddhist and non-Buddhist women, however, have not always experienced *vipassanā* meditation and the Buddhist tradition in this egalitarian way. There are many studies on women and the monastic life in Asia but fewer on the ways that female bodies intersect with *vipassanā* meditation. Cook (2010) and Schedneck (2017) have argued that *vipassanā* meditation has opened up new spaces for female participation and leadership roles within Buddhism. However, the ways that non-Buddhist women experience the *vipassanā* meditation retreat has not yet been explored. In this section I will discuss the ways in which the tradition conceptualizes itself as beyond gender, using the literature available concerning Buddhist feminism and female monasticism, and contrast this with the literature on how women actually experience Buddhism.

The Buddhist tradition itself is characterized as having soteriological inclusivity, or the ability of any person, male or female, to reach the religion's goal of *nibbāna* [Pāli] [enlightenment]. The famous verses of the *Therīgāthā* detail the realizations of many female *arhats* [enlightened persons] who were disciples of the Buddha. This spiritual achievement of women is verified during the Buddha's time but also in the present day, where in recent decades Theravāda Buddhist communities declared female practitioners to have reached *nibbāna* (Seeger 2010, p. 571). This possibility of becoming an *arhat* is facilitated most visibly today through *vipassanā* meditation. Jordt writes that this is a technique that is "accomplished as an intuitive and universal progression of insights" (Jordt 2007, p. 60). In this way *vipassanā* meditation is seen to accomplish the same goals along the same path for all people as the path to *nibbāna* is conceived of as nongendered. Female participation in *vipassanā* meditation is not contested, and although male meditation teachers are in the majority, more and more female practitioners are taking on this role (Schedneck 2017, p. 313).

Beyond *vipassanā* meditation, other aspects of the Buddhist *dhamma* are considered to be beyond gender. The Buddhist teaching of non-self is also seen to be liberating by female Buddhists. However, both Hsiao-Lan Hu and Rita Gross find that this does not mean that Buddhists act as if there is no gender. Having the ideal that there is no self, that the existence of a permanent self is not real, does not mean that gender is not real for Buddhists (Gross 2004, p. 4). Paradoxically, Hu asserts that the idea of the Buddha's teachings transcending gender has meant that gender inequality has not been seen as an important issue (Hu 2011, p. 72). In other words, soteriological inclusiveness is not the only dynamic at work, but also what Sponberg (1992) labels as 'institutional androcentrism', or the idea that Buddhist institutions are created for and by men, and 'ascetic misogyny', which sees women as tempters and adversaries on the path to becoming *arhats* for men. This dynamic has been noted across Asian Buddhist traditions (Hu 2011, p. 73).

In this way, seeing women as having the same potential to achieve *nibbāna* as men does not translate into gender equality across Buddhist cultures. Gender-neutral teachings and the liberating practice of meditation, unfortunately, have historically been delivered in male-dominant environments and forms (Gross 2006, p. 1211). When women pointed this out in 1960s and 1970s North America, Gross writes, they "were told that the dharma (Buddhist teachings) is beyond gender and that women were being overly sensitive and divisive when they were bothered by misogynistic stories or institutional male dominance" (Gross 2006, p. 1211). As well, Gross rightly points out "To take seriously Buddhist claims that the dharma is beyond gender is difficult if all those who embody and

teach it have male bodies” (Gross 2006, p. 1213). Karma Lekshe Tsomo has located the problem within predominantly male contributions to Buddhist scholarship (Tsomo 2009, p. 438). Because of this, more female scholars and visible meditation teachers could help to create Buddhist cultures that are closer to the gender equality ideal.

Although women can achieve enlightenment, this message is often not conveyed to them. In addition, the highest spiritual goal of becoming a Buddha, at least in the Theravāda tradition, has never been open to women. Appleton, through a study of texts in the Theravāda tradition, states that this sends a message to women that female birth is lower than male birth, must be a consequence of previous bad *kamma* [actions], and that women should aspire to be reborn as male. This generates “a serious impact on the aspirations of Buddhist women in South and Southeast Asia through to the present day” (Appleton 2011, p. 35). Karma Lekshe Tsomo adds that, because of “the many sufferings that women experience, many Buddhists regard a female rebirth as the result of unwholesome actions, or bad karma” (Tsomo 2016, p. 307). Bonnet-Acosta concurs in her ethnographic study of Burmese nuns that they are “encouraged by the monks to pray so that they can become men in their future existences,” which can create a feeling of inferiority (Bonnet-Acosta 2014, p. 38). Thus there is a paradox of gender inequalities that continue to exist while women’s spiritual potential is clearly affirmed. However, the nuns whom Bonnet-Acosta interviewed focused instead on creating the appropriate conditions in which they could develop spiritually. These conditions would include less cooking and cleaning and more time for practicing meditation and studying. With these conditions, the Burmese nuns in Bonnet-Acosta’s study believed that, in women’s bodies, they could become *arhats*. Some women find solace in the soteriological inclusivity in the tradition, but for others the institutional androcentrism and ascetic misogyny they experience in reality outweigh this principle of gender equality.

Aside from ordained women, some lay meditators and lay meditation teachers have experienced difficulties in their practice. In an overview of *vipassanā* meditation in North America, Sandy Boucher writes about Jacqueline Schwartz, one of the cofounders of the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Barre, Massachusetts. Because she did not receive much support to investigate gender discrimination at IMS, she resigned as a teacher and left the Theravāda tradition in 1983 (Boucher 2006, p. 647). In many of these cases, the promise of soteriological inclusivity is not borne out in practice. The non-Buddhist female meditators considered below, each of whom experiences the *vipassanā* meditation retreat for only a short time, represent a new group to test the level of gender equality perceived within Buddhism.

2. Early Female Memoirs

Both of these early female non-Buddhist *vipassanā* meditators traveled to Southeast Asia for their retreat experiences. Jane Hamilton-Merritt traveled first to Bangkok, where she received instruction on the technique of *vipassanā* meditation at Wat Mahathat. She continued to practice in her hotel room, as there were no facilities for foreign women at the time; however, when she traveled north to Chiang Mai, she found Wat Chiang Man, a *vipassanā* retreat center where it was possible for her to stay in the temple. During the retreat she spent many hours meditating in her room and meditation halls within the temple. Marie Byles was also on her own schedule as she learned *vipassanā* meditation through her Burmese friends and translators at various meditation centers in the country, mostly in the Mandalay and Sagaing regions. She practiced for many hours a day but also took time to tour other temples with her lay Burmese friends. During both of their periods of practice in the 1960s and 1970s, there were few places available for foreign female practitioners. Their memoirs reveal how rare an experience this was for them, as well as the male monastic teachers and lay Buddhists they met.

Despite these female meditators’ mostly positive results of the retreat and the many benefits they describe, they experienced challenges related to their female gender. For Marie Byles, gender equality and the roles available for women in Burmese temples were important issues she could not avoid during her retreats and visits to Burmese pagodas. When observing the nuns at Mohnyin Pagoda who cooked and cleaned for the monks and novices, she felt frustrated. She pays particular attention to the rules these nuns must follow in relation to their male counterparts: they could not sit alone or

speak alone with a monk or man, they were forbidden to approach any monk inside the monastery, they could not stay long in the presence of a monk, and they had to avoid questioning and seeking explanations for the Buddhist teachings (Byles 1962, p. 110). In her narration, Byles is constantly attuned to the differences between monks and nuns, noting that monks receive more donations and have far better living conditions (Byles 1962, p. 83). She comments on the higher status of the monks and their positions of authority, especially her teacher at Mohnyin Pagoda, to whom she had to ‘grovel’ on the floor and present offerings (Byles 1962, pp. 107–8). She is surprised that, in contrast to her reaction, the nuns did not feel aggrieved at their situation (Byles 1962, p. 90). Byles describes her views vividly when she writes of *vipassanā* meditation centers as “not the best of places for you when you had a mother who used to walk in suffragette processions and when you yourself pioneered the path for women in the legal profession and helped to inaugurate legislation giving equal rights of guardianship to mothers! On the other hand, the very object of meditation is to rise above the pairs of opposites—the congenial and uncongenial, the pleasant and the unpleasant” (Byles 1962, p. 91).

She tries to reconcile this contrast between meditation practice and gender inequality by reminding that gender is not connected to the highest ideals of Buddhism. She writes that “The Buddha had not despised women. But what did it all matter? In meditation everyone became merged in those waves of ceaseless change. In meditation one knew of oneself that there was neither clean nor unclean” (Byles 1962, p. 90). Through reminding herself of the transcendent nature of Buddhist teachings, she thought that she had ended her attachment to views and opinions, but she continues to struggle with the difference between the ideals of *vipassanā* meditation and her observations in Burma. When Byles lists the nuns’ duties, “which included cooking for themselves, the monks, and various pilgrims, sweeping the compounds including that of the men yogis, cleaning their own quarters and those of the monks, and of course the pagoda itself,” it is hard to miss her exasperation (Byles 1962, p. 112). She concludes that because of her Australian upbringing, she could not, in the end, understand Burmese Buddhism in its entirety. She writes:

“All this monk-worship and nun servility would be merely a source of amusement to the tourist. Western men probably wouldn’t notice. But when you are a woman meditator and a member of the servile community, you notice it very much indeed. And when you have been trained to abhor sex and class superiorities the abhorrence upsets your equilibrium and causes pain” (Byles 1962, p. 111).

She decides to send loving-kindness to the monks who are worshiped as gods and who treat nuns as servants. For her Burmese Buddhism does not demonstrate gender equality, which would allow her to embrace it more fully and see the practice as being beyond gender.

However, in the final pages of the memoir, the universal nature of meditation and the Buddha’s teachings trump these issues of gender. She quotes the words of her teacher at Maha Bodhi Meditation Centre: “he asserted that it was not necessary for Australians to become Buddhists nor even understand the basic principles of Buddhism . . . there is only one Dhamma, one Law which holds all” (Byles 1962, p. 186). She finds her teacher and his words moving. She writes of his center, “. . . even to know such centres exist may be an inspiration to those few in the West who are genuinely seeking to find the pearl of great price and are prepared to pay the cost demanded for it” (Byles 1962, p. 188). She sees Buddhism as a tradition that can reach beyond gender, revealing parts of human nature despite the gendered practices she described in the Burmese setting.

Jane Hamilton-Merritt observed a less fraught relationship between Buddhism and gender, seeming to accept gender separation as a matter of course and relating facts to her audience rather than her reactions. She writes, “Since women cannot become monks, one of the most important ways for women to gather merit is through their sons when they join the community of monks, the ‘Sangha’” (Hamilton-Merritt 1976, p. 17). When meeting a *mae chii* [Thai Buddhist nun], she describes matter-of-factly to her readers that the lineage of fully ordained nuns has died out. She narrates that today the role of the *mae chii* is assisting the temple with cooking, tending to flowers and lay people.

She writes as an aside: “I later learned that there is an effort in Thailand to elevate the status of the nun” (Hamilton-Merritt 1976, p. 53). Hamilton-Merritt does not offer her opinion as a Western woman, only accepting that this is the way of life in Thailand, not something to be regretted or changed. She feels unfortunate but not discriminated against when she encounters difficulties in finding a Buddhist monastery in Bangkok that would accept her, a foreign woman, as a resident. Although she received kind responses and was told she could visit the temple, the question of living there was met with the response that there were “no facilities for women” (Hamilton-Merritt 1976, p. 20). She does not blame Thai Buddhists but accepts their system, writing:

“I was trying to enter a way of life that demanded seclusion and meditation and was primarily open to men. Monks are not only celibate, but they must not touch a woman. They may speak to a woman, but only if another person is present. So it is easier not to have women living in *wat* [Buddhist temple] compounds, particularly *farang* [foreign] women. I did not want to do something stupid or break a rule which would cause a monk to go through a complicated purification ceremony” (Hamilton-Merritt 1976, p. 28).

This acceptance of the temple space as primarily male leads to anxiety over any interaction with monks. She is nervous meeting the abbot of Wat Mahathat, reminding herself not to touch him and to maintain respectful behavior. However, when she entered the abbot’s room she asked herself: “What was I doing here? This was a man’s world. Foreign women had no place in a Buddhist *wat* [temple]” (Hamilton-Merritt 1976, p. 26). She is not resentful of this fact, but it does cause her much self-doubt and fear. When she introduced herself to the abbot, she writes, “He seemed not to hear . . . Sweat trickled down my body from fear and heat, but mostly from fear” (Hamilton-Merritt 1976, p. 27). Hamilton-Merritt was also concerned about her dress and appearance when talking to the abbot. “I thought of my dress, which was probably too short because I could see one of my knees showing as I knelt. I was embarrassed” (Hamilton-Merritt 1976, p. 83). Later on, when the abbot of Wat Chiang Man in Chiang Mai called to her to come inside the *vihara* [main temple hall], she feared that women were not allowed. But instead of admonishing her, he asked her to help decorate for the Buddhist holiday, saying: ‘You put this cloth around our Bodhi tree. Men make things not pretty; women make them pretty’” (Hamilton-Merritt 1976, p. 127). Her narration reveals constant anxiety and worry over offending Thai monks and Thai Buddhism as a whole. She clearly has great respect for this tradition and sought to blend in with the community while practicing meditation.

Although she remains worried about her presence in the temple space, meditation remains a source of pleasure and transformation, rising beyond her apprehensions concerning gender: “I was amazed that I had found the strength inside me to reach such depths in myself. It had not been easy, yet I knew what had happened to me could happen to anyone who made the effort” (Hamilton-Merritt 1976, p. 129). She is grateful and appreciative for the experience, not resentful but remarking instead on the welcoming nature of Buddhism. Besides meditation, the Buddha’s teachings also feel welcoming to her. She is comforted by the Buddha’s teachings that place a value on experience over faith. She writes: “The Buddha did not demand from his followers a blind faith in his teachings. Instead, he taught that everyone must explore these teachings for him or her self so that the individual might come personally to see and to know the truth . . . How different is this Buddhist idea from those religions that decree that faith alone will bring understanding!” (Hamilton-Merritt 1976, p. 24). Faith and belief here are labeled as exclusive and alienating, while a rational exploration of the truth is seen as soteriologically inclusive. Hamilton-Merritt is most interested in relating this aspect of Buddhism to her audience. She declares Buddhism as a path to follow, and the Buddha as a great teacher, but it is important to her that he was a person. She feels freedom knowing that she is not being judged by a god figure (Hamilton-Merritt 1976, p. 53). Because of her focus on Buddhism’s lack of faith, belief, and god figures, she does not seem to notice or mind the distinctions between male and female roles within Thai Buddhism. Through her month-long meditation retreat, she experienced what she believed to be universal teachings and practices that rose above gender.

3. Contemporary Female Memoirs

More contemporary memoirs by Raji Lukkoor and Jennifer Howd reveal less attention to gender as a feature in their retreats. Perhaps this is because their retreats take place in California, USA, and they encounter none of the monastic culture that can make women feel anxious and gender separation more obvious. Nonetheless, there is some discussion of the embodied ways in which these contemporary memoirists experience the retreat. Raji Lukkoor took part in a 10-day *vipassanā* meditation retreat near her home based on the teachings of S.N. Goenka. Goenka retreats are available in many places around the world and have become popular because of their effective and replicable methods. These retreats involve group-sitting meditation with talks about *vipassanā* meditation by Goenka played via video each night. All retreats have different teachers and volunteers who help to facilitate the experience of the meditators. Jennifer Howd also attends a short retreat near her home in California at the Spirit Rock Meditation Center. This center regularly holds *vipassanā* retreats at their facility with a number of regular and guest teachers as leaders.

Raji Lukkoor's retreat is filled with mostly non-Buddhist laymen and -women. Therefore, her experience of gender is concerned mostly with the lay Buddhist population rather than monastic leaders. Throughout her memoir, she comments on her fellow women meditators' behavior and appearance. Lukkoor mentions her surprise at seeing a laywoman as one of her teachers. She writes: "I was expecting someone more spiritual looking—clad in long robes, white or ocher, and with long hair and beard, a Buddha-like smile, and love and compassion spurting out of him like a mountain spring; I was definitely *not* imagining a female" (Lukkoor 2011, p. 16). While we can imagine that Marie Byles would be overjoyed to see a woman in a leadership role at a Buddhist retreat, Lukkoor's ideal of a meditation teacher is clearly a man. However, Lukkoor is not upset by seeing a woman in the teacher role, only surprised.

When discussing her fellow female meditators, Lukkoor either praises or denigrates them based on their outfit choices. She is upset when she sees female meditators dressed immodestly—wearing tank tops, which are explicitly against the rules. She writes about one meditator in particular: "She floats forward, her buttocks waggling with each step. Sex oozes from her like a fountain. Many sets of eyes are ogling her, and from the smug expression on her face, I know she knows it. While she oozes sex, I ooze disbelief. I can't wrap my brain around the inappropriateness of her daring" (Lukkoor 2011, p. 37). In contrast, she praises another young woman: "Her demure appearance and angelic smile always brighten my spirits. She dresses modestly in pants or long skirts and conceals her matted blonde hair under a scarf. There is an elegance and poise about the way she walks and the way she speaks" (Lukkoor 2011, p. 53). Instead of being concerned about whether her own actions are appropriate for a female meditator, she focuses on the modest and not so modest behavior of her fellow participants, judging their appearance and actions. It is important to note that there are no such comments about male participants. During the retreat, Lukkoor's thoughts wander to praise and criticism of female meditators, indicating that even though there is no male monastic hierarchy, gender discrimination is still possible through other means.

However, despite these judgments of female meditators and teachers, she is satisfied with the meditation practice as something that can transcend gender. In her discussion of how she thinks about her *vipassanā* meditation experience post-retreat, Lukkoor writes: "There was no joyous ecstasy that came over me, no halo over the head, no bathing in white light, no angels descending. I did not have any visions or instant awakenings. Did I meet God? I don't know. Did I see my soul? I don't know. Here's what I do know. *Vipassanā*, for me, was a catalyst for conscious or mindful living" (Lukkoor 2011, p. 160). For Lukkoor the transcendent experiences of ecstasy, haloes, white lights, and angels are devalued over the practical and simple mindful lifestyle that she deems inclusive enough to demonstrate soteriological inclusivity. In this way *vipassanā* does not challenge Lukkoor's way of life. She writes: "... *vipassanā* didn't overwrite any of my values or beliefs; rather it enhanced them" (Lukkoor 2011, p. 167). Here Lukkoor tells readers that they need not fear a practice that will change their lives or values. Similar to the early memoirists, the meditation practice itself is viewed as above

gender, while the retreat contains gendered elements. The difference for Lukkoor is that the gendered experience comes from her internal judgments of other females, rather than her observation of the contrast between male and female roles within Buddhist spaces.

Jennifer Howd wrote her self-published meditation memoir as a way to share the experience of *vipassanā* practice with others. With tips at the end detailing what to bring and what to expect, her memoir is written with the intention to inform those interested in and curious about attending a *vipassanā* retreat. Like the previous memoirists, through the self-transformation she describes, Howd is also interested in motivating others to try out this practice. However, her experience in the retreat related to gender uncovers a different emphasis. Instead of focusing on others or Buddhist gender hierarchies, Howd is most interested in how to create what could be labeled as ‘feminine’ characteristics in herself. This aspect of her interpretation of her own meditative progress can be viewed as part of a gender essentialist discourse. Within this discourse, women and men have essential characteristics that are necessarily part of their behavior and the balance between the two helps societies to run smoothly. One strand of gender essentialism asserts that women have a natural tendency to be more compassionate, less violent, and more caring in relationships than men (Gross 2004, p. 5). This idea is illustrated most vividly within Taiwanese Buddhism through the teachings of Taiwanese Buddhist leader Master Cheng Yen, the founder of the Tzu Chi (Compassionate Relief) Society. Elise DeVido finds that Master Cheng Yen and her organization promote an essentialist notion of feminine nature as “self-sacrificing, infinitely forbearing, compassionate nurturer of others” (DeVido 2010, p. 77). Howd does not state where she received the essentialist notions of gender she details in her memoir, but she values these feminine ideals and attempts to replicate them as a goal for herself.

In the beginning of her memoir, before she arrives at the retreat, Howd offers background about the work she has done to improve herself through meditation and mindfulness practice. Howd writes, “I’d been doing a great deal of inner work over the past three years to get to know myself better, chipping away through hardened layers of anxiety, depression and stoicism to excavate the softer, more vulnerable woman at my core” (Howd 2014, chp. 1, para. 13). In her idea of positive self-transformation she incorporates tropes of an ideal compassionate, natural, and pure female. “A kinder, gentler, more compassionate inner voice is at the wheel now. This part of me isn’t as used to driving, but nowadays it always manages to swoop in and take over when a metaphorical crash is in sight” (Howd 2014, chp. 2, para. 9). She enters the retreat as a way to solidify the work she has done. Howd has seen the ways in which Buddhist meditation practice has improved her life in this way, and hopes the retreat can help this to continue.

In the retreat, she notices her transformation continuing when she is able to appreciate the beauty of nature and the animals in the retreat center. For instance, she describes this moment she observed at Spirit Rock Meditation Center: “a desert hare hops out in front of me, stopping me in my tracks. I watch as her little white cotton tail disappears beneath some nearby brush . . . Smiling, I feel grateful to the hare for helping me create the space to appreciate the beauty that’s right in front of me” (Howd 2014, chp. 2, para. 33). The important thing for her is not just noticing this moment, but her reaction. She is able to take pleasure from nature and this revelation of her softer side is attributed to her meditation practice. During this retreat, she is continuing the practice she has learned from her Buddhist teachers of labeling and identifying her thoughts. She writes: “I first came across the notion of labeling thoughts in Pema Chödrön’s book *When Things Fall Apart*. Through her writings, Pema has been a teacher to me, her voice helping me cultivate the kind voice I now use . . . ” (Howd 2014, chp. 2, para. 48). Howd details her female teacher’s words and goals and hopes to emulate them in her goal of self-transformation towards becoming a milder, softer female.

However, it is not always easy for her to maintain this compassion towards herself. Howd is sure to discuss not just the positive benefits but also the difficulties she experienced on the retreat. When she felt sick, Howd writes that “the kinder, gentler me remains silent, lying trapped under it all” (Howd 2014, chp. 3, para. 13). The woman she wants to be, she believed, can be uncovered through meditation. But she was still trying to uncover this gentle person underneath the tough

exterior she had cultivated throughout her life. The retreat, she believes, helped her to crack open her more feminine self at her core. Howd reveals how she had chosen to be stoic towards the outside world to protect herself, shutting out love and connection, but loving-kindness meditation helped her to “reintegrate a part of myself that I had unwittingly lost. It, quite literally brought me back in touch with my heart, and back in touch with me” (Howd 2014, chp. 4, para. 29). Loving-kindness, or *metta* meditation, is a popular practice in American Buddhism in which meditators repeat phrases of love towards oneself and others in order to cultivate this as a natural feeling outside of meditation. Howd describes how this practice made her feel: “I started accessing the warmth, compassion and vulnerability at my core, which ultimately helped me love myself—and others—on a whole new level” (Howd 2014, chp. 4, para. 28). She further demonstrates how positively she values vulnerability when she is proud that she can cry when thanking her teachers in her individual interview (Howd 2014, chp. 5, para. 14). Again, in this description, she finds that her feminine qualities are revealed during this practice.

At the end of her retreat, she knows that, although she has improved in her goals of self-transformation, she has to continue meditation to maintain these qualities. She is wary of slipping back into destructive thought patterns of judging others, and resolves to focus on kindness and beauty instead (Howd 2014, chp. 6, para. 33). Her focus on compassion and natural beauty reveals her belief that meditation can help her be a better person and a better woman. These typically labeled feminine qualities of compassion, vulnerability, and sensitivity are Howd’s goals for self-transformation. She is most focused on herself, while Lukkoor’s gendered comments emphasize the ways women present themselves in the retreat environment. However, similar to the early memoirists, both Lukkoor and Howd find the meditation practice itself as being beyond gender, even as they struggle to transform themselves into the women they want to be.

4. Conclusions

Universal discourses claim to transcend gender and understand all of humanity in all times and places. These claims, however, meet with conflict and debate because they are set within particular cultures, beliefs, and cosmologies. For the early memoirists, the meditation practice is beyond gender and, for the most part, makes up for the fear and discrimination they feel as female foreign meditators in Asia. Marie Byles sees meditation as a practice that can transcend gender but finds that it is unfortunately couched within a set of constraints on the monastic life for women in Burma. Jane Hamilton-Merritt does not feel pity for herself or other women in her retreat experience. She accepts that Buddhism is part of a culture she does not understand and is much more concerned with offending anyone than gender inequality.

The two contemporary memoirs of non-Buddhist female participation in *vipassanā* meditation retreats also allow us to see how meditation becomes positioned as transcending gender, despite gendered experiences. Lukkoor does not have trouble labeling *vipassanā* meditation as a practice that can benefit anyone, even as she judges her fellow female meditators’ behaviors and appearances. Howd is also convinced that *vipassanā* meditation is the key to uncovering her essential female characteristics. Their experiences demonstrate that, although non-Buddhist female meditators mainly agree with the tradition, that *vipassanā* meditation is a nongendered practice, they still embody and experience the retreat in gendered ways. But because they did not become ordained or meditation teachers, instead of a critique of the tradition’s claim to soteriological inclusivity, in their limited experience, the non-Buddhist memoirists conclude that the practice is beneficial and can transcend gender. Their experience as lay non-Buddhists taking part in a short *vipassanā* meditation retreat experience made it easier for them to accept the tradition’s claims. However, like female monastics and meditation teachers who become more involved in Buddhism, we can imagine that if these memoirists continued to pursue retreats and Buddhist teachings further, they might question soteriological inclusivity. From this we can conclude that the meditation retreat can be perceived as an experience, which transcends gender. However, more continual involvement with the community and social

settings of the tradition would, most likely, be cause for reservations concerning gender. Future research could analyze the experiences of women who are more involved with Buddhist meditative traditions and their perceptions of gender.

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