DONALD LOPEZ ARGUES that the rise of Buddhist Modernism and the mindfulness movement in the United States often leads to a narrow understanding of meditation. Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and a variety of apps such as Headspace and Calm can help anyone use meditation to ease anxiety or be happier and fitter. Meditation becomes synonymous with calming and healing the mind and the body. In his critique of Buddhist Modernism, Lopez argues that the desire to make Buddhism correspond with scientific narratives, broadly speaking, covers over or erases some of the powers that come with advanced meditation practice. The tension between enchantment and Western enlightenment also reveals a gendered element. Buddhist stories of magical monks enjoy some popularity. Supranormal powers of Theravada nuns and women, in contrast, are more hidden and obscure. Given the suspicion surrounding supernatural powers in Theravada communities, there seems to be a relationship between who can harness magical qualities and their abilities to attract supporters.

An examination of Sanskrit and Pali words associated with the term mindfulness alludes to the mystical qualities of meditation practices. Leah Kalmanson points to the often-overlooked supranormal powers embedded within the Pali word *jhāna*, which transforms through translation to the Chinese *chan* or Japanese *zen*, and frequently evokes images of a monk deep in meditation. The concentration needed to master meditation can yield great insight that transcends scientific knowledge. Indeed, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* contains many stories of monks who could predict the exact day and moment of their death. Yet Theravada scholars, as Rachelle Scott notes, believe it is unorthodox to use superhuman powers as proof of enlightenment. Critics of such stories would
argue that dependence on miracles as a sign of Buddhist achievement is more in line with Mahayana, of which Zen is a branch, than Theravada Buddhism. Few well-known stories, therefore, attribute supranormal powers to Buddhist women in the Theravada tradition.

To combat these trends, Jonathan Walters presents stories of Mahapajapati, the stepmother/aunt of the historical Indian Buddha, and her magical powers in *Gotami’s Story*:

Narrator:
Gotami bowed to the lord
Then leaped into the sky.
Permitted by the Buddha, she
Displayed her special powers. (80)
She was alone, then she was cloned;
Cloned, then alone.
She would appear, then disappear;
She walked through walls and through the sky (81).

Gotami is grammatically the female counterpart to Gotama. Walters states succinctly, “Gotami is the Buddha for women.” In *Gotami’s Story*, she wrestles credit from Ananda and proclaims, “The great Buddha made women nuns only at my beseeching” (verse 29). The common narrative, of course, is that Ananda convinced the Buddha to allow Mahapajapati to become a nun and join the sangha. That she reportedly had a following of over five hundred women is evidence that she, like Gotama, could be the leader of a community. Mahapajapati’s story also shows that the female form did not place any limits on her or prevent her from achieving any goal, including Buddhahood. “Her Buddhahood is important precisely because it verifies the goal of female monastic practice.” The verse below indicates that even the Buddha recognized the folly of those who underestimated her:

The Buddha:
Yet still there are these fools who doubt
That women too can grasp the truth.
Gotami, show miracles,
That they might give up their false views (verse 79).

The Buddha asked her to display her supramundane powers to quiet the skeptics and naysayers. Through her acts, she revealed the kind of divine body that was unbounded by the laws of physics or the material world.

Gotami’s exhibition of her powers shows that nuns are equal to monks in terms of Buddhist knowledge and practice. The story of Mahapajapati’s founding a *bhikkhuni* lineage, an order of Buddhist nuns, is not only about
obtaining for their female counterparts the prestige enjoyed by monks, but also about the desire to build a community of and for women. Building a community for Buddhist women requires attention to the lived experiences of women and, hence, an engagement with a more complex understanding of meditation.

Lopez examines the Sanskrit term bhavana to reveal meanings and associations that do not fit neatly within the spirit of European Enlightenment, which so values rational thought. In addition, bhavana reveals the interplay and even struggle between this-worldly and other-worldly beings. Bhavana refers to the practice of “memorizing sutras and chanting verses to ward off evil spirits.”

The practice of memorization may, indeed, seem antithetical to the critical thinker. Furthermore, the notion that someone would recite those memorized passages to conjure away evil spirits certainly runs counter to the reason of Western scientists.

Yet, some contemporary monks in Thailand and Burma, or Myanmar, have gained fame for their mysterious abilities to cast away dangers. Theravada nuns can have supranormal powers but the supranormal power to conjure away evil spirits remains elusive for women. In contrast, Theravada nuns and women have acted as mediums or vectors for angry spirits. Some Theravada women, as I discuss at length in my book, have been allowed to study and live with Buddhist nuns after mad spells that no monks could counteract. Theravada women, through channeling angry spirits, have been able to begin finding community with other Theravada women who want to study the dharma. I would not want to reduce the entanglement of Theravada women and angry spirits to merely performative acts. Such a reading would, again, work to crowd out the space for enchantment in Theravada Buddhism. Instead, I would like to take Theravada women as a model for being able to express anger in a way that registers both as belonging to Theravada culture and a critique of it.

I am grateful to Jason Wirth for his comments and suggestions that I consider adding a short conclusion to my book to help tie things together. Thanks to him, I sought to articulate more clearly why the intersection of Buddhism and feminism holds such great potential. He understood (even before I did) that my book was a reclamation project of Theravada Buddhist nuns, which helped me to think about possible ways of emphasizing the legacy of Buddhist communities of women. Theravada women seem to be able to do something that eludes many Western women: develop solidarity with each other by allowing the expression of anger. Their efficacious ability to express anger points not just to the interplay of Buddhist and feminist philosophies but also to the creation of a community that is led by women. Because women’s anger is still often looked upon as unfounded and/or unhelpful in Western philosophy and
in many spheres of U.S. culture, I certainly find the development of feminist sanghas in Theravada communities to be magical.


Notes

1. Donald S. Lopez, Jr., The Scientific Buddha: His Short and Happy Life (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 82.
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