

Sylvia Wetzel

The Heart of the Lotus

A Buddhist Perspective
on Women's inner and outer Liberation

The Book

Why do present day women take an interest in a “middle age” religion? Buddhism like Christianity was founded by a male teacher and was organised, transmitted and interpreted by men. This book is “a protocol of an encounter”. A contemporary woman has read the teachings of the Buddha “against the grain” and has found some first answers and many more questions. In order for a religion to stay “alive” it has to be rediscovered by every generation anew. Just to follow tradition is not enough. Whenever women take interest in a traditional religion – be it Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism or Islam – they are given a double task: We are looking for a contemporary expression of an old teaching. Many contemporary male Buddhists from the West and some from Asia are working on this task. Women have to read patriarchal teachings critically “with the eyes of a woman”. *The Heart of the Lotus* presents central teachings of Buddhism and describes traps we fall into, if we don not consider our cultural background and our biological sex and social gender. It takes up typical questions women are asking and presents first results: concepts and exercises which can support contemporary women (and men) on their path to inner and outer freedom.

The Author (See also page208)

Sylvia Wetzel was born 1949, practices Buddhism since 1977, mainly in the Tibetan tradition. With her critical approach to and creative interpretation of European culture and gender issues the author and Buddhist meditation teacher is one of the pioneers of Buddhism in Europe since the mid-eighties.

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A Buddhist Perspective
on Women's inner and outer Liberation

Translated from the German
into American English
by Jane Anhold

First English Edition 2015
www.bod.de

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Introduction

You've picked up this book because you are curious about the title or because you already know something about Buddhism: perhaps you've read one of Thich Nhat Hanh's books on Buddhist meditation or you've seen the Dalai Lama or the German-American nun Ayya Khema on television. Perhaps you've seen a film on Tibet or spent your last vacation in Thailand or Sri Lanka. Perhaps a friend recommended this book to you. You may also be wondering why a modern woman should concern herself at all with a strange medieval religion which, like Christianity, has been passed down, administered and interpreted by men? Or you want to know how an insider woman sees Buddhism?

I encountered Tibetan Buddhism in northern India in 1977. Since then, the teachings of the Buddha have remained the great inspiration of my life. My heart is moved by the teachings on love and compassion, and the clear instructions challenge my intellect to its limits. Meditation practice allows me to discover new levels of perception and shows me the limits of our conceptual view of the world. The encounter with the Green Tara, a Buddha figure of the Indian and Tibetan tradition, gives me courage as a woman to go the path to awakening which Buddhism describes.

The subtitle "*Women and Buddhism*" was chosen purposefully. This book does not give an overview of the role of women *in* Buddhism. Instead, it is a protocol of the encounter of a contemporary woman with the Buddha's teachings. With my questions about the meaning and the place of women in Buddhism I have read the teachings "against the grain" and found some preliminary answers and

many further questions. Bringing the “thoughts and experiences of women” (Luce Irigaray) to Buddhism is a long process. I would like to challenge women (and men) in the West to take their questions about Buddhism seriously, to move them in their hearts and bring them to Buddhist teachers from the East and West. That does not damage Buddhism. It keeps it alive.

Asian men and women of every generation and culture have rediscovered the teachings over two and a half thousand years. Simply following the tradition as passed down is not enough. A saying in the Tibetan tradition is “if the students are not better than the teacher, the tradition dies.” For that reason, women and men in the West must study and practice the teachings “from the bottoms of their hearts and with all their power” so that a form of Buddhism can arise which reflects the conditions of our time and culture.

It is not easy to rediscover a religion over and over again. We can be successful if we try to rediscover Buddhism in the Asian traditions. To create a Western, an American or a European Buddhism in which women can find themselves, is a tight-rope walk. Without enough clarity and depth, the teachings become banal or watered down or stuck in rigid traditional forms. We can only find the middle path by exploring the extremes on either side, and in order to do that we need courage and trust, much knowledge and deep experiences in meditation. We also need to understand our Western culture, to maintain contact with experienced traditional teachers and a continuous exchange with practitioners and teachers of the different traditions in the West. A western Buddhism for men *and* women cannot be thought out around a coffee table or constructed “from the gut.”

People who try something new are by nature heretics, and they make mistakes. They are, justifiably, viewed by the established traditions with mistrust – we only know afterwards whether we have applied the teachings to our time and culture or whether we have simply watered them down and conformed them to contemporary tastes. With the ideas or theses and practices in this book I would like to encourage women and men in the West to come into contact with the teachings and practices of Buddha and to examine them with their hearts.

The women have a double-task: We must search for a timely form for old teachings, and many Western and Asian men work with us on this task. We must also view a patriarchal religion critically, “with the eyes of a woman.” In the first two parts of this book, the central teachings and practices of Buddhism are presented and there are descriptions of some of the situations in which we can be misled if we fail to consider our cultural background and our gender. The third part takes up typical questions which contemporary women have about the teachings and interprets the teachings, with the help of these questions, “against the grain.” A fantasy trip into a Buddhist world dominated by women sharpens our awareness of the extent of male dominance in Buddhism and of the consequences for teachers and practitioners. The fourth part presents the first practical result: theses and exercises which can support women along the path into inner and outer freedom. We still have much work to do before Buddhist teachings have been worked through in terms of gender issues and Western culture.

To approach this book: You can either first read the chapters which interest you particularly or read the book through

chapter for chapter. Every chapter is connected with the others on many levels. There are many repetitions. This cannot and should not be avoided. They are part of the living tradition and are also useful. The basic statements in the teachings are connected to each other in many ways, and we approach them over and over again with different questions. Buddha did not teach a finished system. Instead, he answered the questions of his contemporaries and chose the style and the symbols which were appropriate to them. These spontaneous instructions were then passed down in an oral tradition for several hundred years before they were put into writing shortly before the turn of the millennium. These are the Buddha's teachings, upon which all later interpretations and commentaries are based. Their structure can only be grasped after approaching those teachings intensively, both intellectually and in meditation. Without personal experience with the contents of the teachings, the central statements can only be superficially grasped and are like a skeleton – without flesh and blood.

Acknowledgments

Many people, circumstances and teachings have contributed to this book. Here I would like to thank some of those who have decisively influenced my thinking and feelings about life. The Tibetan Lama Thubten Yeshe (1936-1984) opened my heart for Buddhism and communicated the essence of the teachings to me with practical lessons, openness, humor, compassion and great skill. His alert interest for questions and his trust in the serious interest of his Western students encouraged me to try the teachings out and to experiment with them. One of his visions was the presentation of the Buddhist teachings without using any “Buddhist” terminology. We haven’t arrived there yet but are on the way. Lama Yeshe was one of the few Tibetan Lamas I heard about who was a woman in his last life. This Tibetan nun was abbess of a nunnery near Lhasa. Perhaps that was why it was easy for Lam Yeshe to take women and their questions seriously and to encourage them to seriously confront the tradition. I was introduced to the teachings and learned to treasure them through two other teachers from the Gelug-tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche and Geshe Tegchok.

After Lama Yeshe died in 1984 I was looking for a female Buddhist teacher. For a few years, I was accompanied on the path by the women Rinzai-Zen-Master Gesshin Prabhasadharmā Roshi (1931-1999). She supported me without suggesting that I should leave my Tibetan path. The Theravada-nun Ayya Khema introduced me to the sermons of the Buddha, taught me the Stages of Absorption (P. *jhana*) and continuously inspired me to put complex teachings into practice in practical exercises. Both women teachers were

born in Germany and we could communicate quite deeply in my mother tongue. Since 1955 I have been studying the teachings and exercises of the general Mahayana tradition and the Tibetan Kagyu- and Nyingma-tradition with the English teacher Rigdzin Shikpo (Michael Hookham).

Many Western people were and are inspiring me in integrating the Buddhist teachings in my daily life in the West. The cultural philosophy of Jean Gebser opened my vision for the close connection between religious forms and spiritual development and between cultural images and the essence of the spiritual path. This creative philosopher from Bohemia has indelibly inspired many contemporary thinkers, such as the musician Michael Vetter and cultural philosopher Ken Wilber. C.G. Jung and his student Erich Neumann sharpened my view for the dark sides of the spiritual path and encouraged me to stick to and follow my heretical questions and to discuss them again and again with Eastern and Western teachers and representatives of established Buddhism. The French philosopher and psychologist Luce Irigaray and the Italian philosopher Luisa Muraro offered me the gift of their model of “gender difference” (Italian: *differenza sessuale*). It has proven to be the key to discovering the “male model” behind all so-called general human teachings, to questioning the accompanying “female model” and to finding a way out of the patriarchal one-sidedness.

I happily recall those well-known names. However, just as important are the less well-known fellow practitioners and teachers from the East and the West. I studied the Buddhist teachings with them and we deepened them together in meditation. I took up the works of European thinkers and discussed them with Western friends and colleagues, male and female. Since 1986 I have passed on my experiences in

lectures and meditation courses, and many Western women (and men) feel inspired and supported by my style of teaching and practicing. Their positive responses have consistently strengthened my resolve to follow my questions further, even when there are no quick answers in sight. Thank you all who had and have the courage to search for and try out new ways with me.

The collegial support of many Western Buddhist teachers has been and is a great inspiration to me. I have presented my “feminist Buddhism” to them since 1993 at international, European and national conferences, and they encouraged me to seek and go my own way.¹

My warmest thanks, finally, to Dr. Viola Altrichter, Dr. Adelheid Herrmann-Pfandt, Dr. Barbara Knab, Dr. Sylvia Kolk and Marie Mannschatz. Each goes her own path and our exchange has enriched my life. They have each read the manuscript and given suggestions which led to more clarity and less Buddhist “insider” language. Thank you also to my editor Tanja Reindel of Fischer Verlag, who competently handled this project from the very beginning.

Jütchendorf

Spring 1998 for the German edition

Sylvia Wetzel

Acknowledgments for the English version 2015

I would like to express my gratitude to my translator Jane Anhold. I met this wonderful US-American lawyer at a public talk in the British-American Club in Berlin in October 2001. We had much fun in discussing terms and topics and - she took up meditating right away when she started translating the book in the winter of 2001-2002.

It took more than thirteen years to find a publisher, as one publisher in USA whom i contacted and who considered publishing it found it too old-fashioned feminist. Other publishers in USA and UK did not even consider publishing it. Fortunately we have now the chance to publish it through the books-on-demand.

Jütchendorf

Easter 2015 for this English edition

Sylvia Wetzel

Introduction to the revised edition 2010

“Ten years after”, looking back in great joy, mostly at least. Sometimes the tear in one eye and the smile in the other are simultaneously seeking attention. I handed in the manuscript with the Fischer Publishers in Frankfurt in person in May 1998. In January 1999 the first edition was published with the (not quite correct) subtitle: Women and Freedom. How the caption of the fourth and last section of the book made its way onto the cover as the subtitle we never found out. The amended subtitle appeared then, for the second edition as originally planned - Women and Buddhism. Ten years and four editions later Fischer took the book off its list. Some years previously the rather delightful series Fischer Spirit had already been discontinued. I am very happy that the recently founded publisher edition steinrich in Berlin is going to publish the book in a revised, extended and beautifully designed, new edition.

Is the book still relevant? Has the topic not been dealt with? I don't think so. Many things have been set in motion over the last ten years and this process may well continue. Blindness towards gender roles is not just an issue with religions in general or Buddhism in particular. Within the postmodern democratic societies of the west there is still much room for emancipation of both women and men from well-worn roles. In a new chapter I have taken stock and will introduce a model of how we can initiate necessary change. I believe that women and freedom go together and so do women, men and freedom – but only if we fully commit to it with passion, humour and a very long breath.

To tune into this here comes a little, but true story. During a conference on gender-mainstreaming three people are sitting in a café. The topic of the conversation is equal rights on all levels in society. Two women occupy one table, a man the table next to them. One of the women asks the other: "What do you see when you look in the mirror in the morning?" "Well, a tired looking woman with messy hair." "Now, there's the difference: *I see a black woman.*" The man at the next table has overheard the dialogue and for him suddenly the penny drops: the prevalent skin colour stays invisible. Being a bright man he also understands something else: " *I see a person in the mirror.* The prevalent gender is and remains invisible."

May this book contribute to the voices of women in Buddhism being clearly heard. This will fundamentally change Buddhism in the West and in the East.

May all beings benefit.
Jütchendorf, Christmas 2009
Sylvia Wetzel

Acknowledgements 2010

My thanks go to Sabine Hayoz Kalff in Zollikon, Thomas Bisswanger-Heim in Freiburg and Peter Gäng in Berlin for their suggestions for the new chapter. Thanks to Peter Gäng for so thoroughly checking the book and thanks to the participants of my courses for the many conversations on the topic, which have shaped the new chapter.

Ten years after: Taking stock

Movements in the East

Many things in Buddhism have been set in motion, in the East as well as in the West. Let us firstly look towards Asia. There, the public role and the social status of nuns are rather significant, less so the prominence of so-called laywomen who practice and teach. Twenty-two years ago, in 1987, the First International Buddhist Nuns' Conference was held in Bodhgaya, North India, initiated by three brave women: The University Professor Dr. Chatsumam Kabilsingh and two German nuns, Venerable Ayya Khema and Jampa Tsedrön (Carola Roloff). All three women later received the full Bhikshuni ordination. Twenty-two years on from this historical conference for nuns there are now over five hundred fully ordained nuns in Sri Lanka.

This is a huge success. It was made possible because the West has had a spirited women's movement for over a century, which affects all levels of society, including any established religions and which also radiates as far as Asia. This is how this first historical encounter of confident and brave Buddhist women from the West and Asia came about. From then on every two years, a further nuns' conference has been held, mostly in Asia and organized by Sakyadhita, "Buddha's Daughters". These conferences maintain a spirited interest in the subject, and many women and some men are offering support for nuns by sponsoring their education and maintenance costs. The visible result of all this work was the

International Nuns' Conference in Hamburg in the summer of 2007.

From 2001 onwards, an international committee of Buddhist women in Thailand has awarded prizes to outstanding women in Buddhism. At the start of the new millennium two nuns, Dr. Lee from the US and Dr. Rattanavali from Thailand, had a true idea for a millennium. They decided no longer to complain about the poor treatment of Buddhist women in Asia and antiquated attitudes of monks in Thailand who consider the full ordination of women to be absurd. Instead they wanted to honour smart and brave, ingenious and successful women by awarding them a prize. The inspiration for this originated from the practice in Thailand to give awards to successful women in politics, business and society, which was introduced a few years previously.

With the friendly support of the UN-office in Bangkok up to twenty female Buddhists from Asia, Europe and the Americas receive the "Outstanding Woman in Buddhism Award" each year. The award goes to younger and older women, to aristocrats and politicians, to laywomen, to the ordained and virtually ordained. The official ceremony, well attended by the media, is held in close proximity to the International Women's Day on the 8th of March and the women celebrate their mutual appreciation and encourage each other. Also on March the 8th brave monks do give the full ordination to some women. For me this date is also a wonderful expression of the creativity in encounters of women from the East and the West.

When I received this award in Bangkok in 2008 I was deeply impressed by this approach. I could only marvel at the courage and at the creativity of these wonderful nuns and laywomen from Korea and Taiwan, from Sri Lanka and Thailand and other

countries in the East and West - and at their achievements so far. My impression was that these women are going to push the full ordination of women in Thailand and the rest of Asia through. This approach to celebrate successful women publicly we could also adopt in the West. You can find more on these projects on the relevant web pages listed in the appendix.

Movements in the West

What does it look like in the West? The question regarding nuns in the West is merely a peripheral issue. The majority of practitioners and teachers in the West are not ordained. Within European and American Buddhism it is more about how a medieval tradition meets with modern times, the encounter of tradition and the modern. It is about the cultural incorporation of traditional models of Asian Buddhism into secular societies, which have been shaped by the Age of Enlightenment, democracy, equal rights and technological progress. As the majority of women in the West have access to education and property they do play an important role in the Buddhist world of the West. This mirrors the historical situation in Asia. The role of women in Buddhism has been and still is reflected in the social and cultural role of women in their societies in all cultures and at all times. But what the increase in numbers of women in Buddhism means for the women themselves and for Buddhism, is pondered on rather little. This is no different from anywhere else in society. Women do play a role, but the reflection on this role lags behind, which hinders the esteem and full development of abilities of *both* genders. Within the First International Conference of Western Buddhist Teachers in 1993 in

Dharamsala, North India, we were five women and twenty-two men from Europe and the United States – so roughly one fifth were women. Observers and guests were mainly Tibetan Lamas, all of them men, and a few laypersons from the West. Attending the third conference in 1996, again in Dharamsala, over a quarter were women, eight out of thirty participants. At the fourth conference in the year 2000 in California over a half of the 250 attendants were women.

A very important step for Buddhist women in Germany and Europe, towards reaching the greater public was the conference “Women and Buddhism” in Cologne in spring 2000, which was initiated by Sylvia Kolk and myself. The idea for this conference developed while we two Sylvias took a long walk in the rain. We had both been active in the Women’s Movement and found once again that our work as Buddhist teachers complemented that perfectly. Put in a somewhat exaggerated way Sylvia Kolk takes Buddhism into the feminist scene and I take gender roles into the Buddhist scene.

Well over a thousand women and some men attended the introductory evening on the Thursday and over two and a half days more than thirty female teachers covered a huge bandwidth of topics in their lectures and workshops. Many participants felt they experienced the onset of a third Women’s Movement that was originating this time from women in spiritual practice. I will describe the spirited and manifold movement associated with my courses towards the end of the chapter.

My conclusion is – women are practitioners and teachers, women are instructors and women are managers of Buddhist institutions and practice centers in Europe and in the Americas. For almost a decade the German Buddhist Union

has had a female chair. For a long time I myself used to hold the position of vice chair and then chair of this Buddhist umbrella organisation. Although the percentage of female teachers in Europe and particularly in Eastern Europe is lower than in North America even here women are teaching more than ever.

Opportunities for the future

These are promising indications. But my wish list regarding reflection of gender roles is still quite long. Roughly every ten years a special edition of the German Buddhist Union's magazine is published on the wider subject of "Women in Buddhism". I was in charge of the first two special editions, when the magazine was still named "Lotusblätter – Lotus Leaves". The third was published in 2009 under its new name "Buddhismus aktuell – Buddhism up to date". Each time my concern had been that women *and men* reflected on their role through their contributions. What then did get published were mainly contributions on the position of women in Buddhism. For the unambiguous title "Women and Men, Female and Male" of the special edition in 1999 I had asked Buddhist teachers personally to examine the texts of their choice in regards to the *image of men* they presented. Still what I received were contributions on the position of women in Zen-Koans, the role of nuns in Sri Lanka, China or Tibet.

I would like to state my concern here again very clearly. I am – generally, in this book, in my courses and lectures – *not primarily* concerned with the role of *women* in Buddhism or with the affinity of women *to* Buddhism (and vice versa). I am primarily concerned with the reflection of the gender roles by *men and women* in Buddhism and everywhere in society,

culture and politics. I wish for men to examine Buddhist texts regarding the image of men that they convey. I wish for male Buddhist teachers to offer courses for men and for them to examine together with their students their self-image as men. I wish for teaching women and men to observe their language and to acknowledge their often mainly female audience audibly. Is that so difficult? It seems that way.

I wish for women and men not to accept the patriarchal “facts” without comment or dismiss with a joke. I am asking again: Does it go together, women and freedom? For many young women and men this does not seem to be a question any longer today. For a few millennia it appeared to be a paradox. For a long time women in Christianity had no soul. Up to the start of the twentieth century they were not allowed to study and in one Swiss Canton not even to vote until 1977. Even today it is a complicated balancing act for women to coordinate their desire to have a family with a demanding job. And most managing positions are still occupied by men.

Most Buddhist monks in and from Asia and many of their teaching disciples are of the opinion that even today no woman can become a Teaching Buddha of an aeon. In this our fortunate aeon there should exist thousands and the historical Buddha Shakyamuni was considered to have been the seventh. That this position is reserved for men, does in their view, have nothing to do with prejudice. It just happens *to be* this way. Sadly, one has to have occupied a few high-ranking positions in Samsara, the cycle of existence, and these are still reserved exclusively for men. One colleague considered genuinely during a conversation in the early Nineties that this might be the compensation for women being able to bear children. Unconsciously, he had touched the sore point.

Interpreted in terms of depth psychology it can read like this: All patriarchal myths and institutions are an attempt to conceal men's envy of not being able to give birth and to compensate this envy. As long as this underlying envy does not get recognized as such but is lived as arrogance and does lead to male privileges in society, the compensation is not recognized as what it is either, but reinterpreted. This would make a lovely research project for a men's group, be it amongst psychologists, philosophers, theologians or Buddhists.

In some Buddhist traditions women are still – in the twenty-first century – excluded from full ordination as nuns. In spring 2007 the International Nuns' Conference in Hamburg with many high-ranking female and male speakers, laypersons and ordained guests from all over the world and from all important traditions, showed that things in this regard have been set in motion. But it also showed that it is very necessary. A few years ago a German-language television program showed some Thai monks laughing and slapping their thighs when asked about their view on a full ordination of women. They giggled: "That's a bit much. Next we'll get dogs that want to be ordained". It would be nice if more men and monks who do not feel that this sort of attitude is acceptable considered how they could contribute to the reduction of this kind of prejudice. And it is already happening! On October 22nd, 2009 for the very first time four nuns of the Thai Forest Monastery Tradition in Australia received the full ordination as Bhikkhunis. The well-known Australian monk Ajahn Brahm took on the responsibility with the support of Bhikkhu Sujato. Many people do consider this step a milestone for the reintroduction of the full ordination of nuns. Ajahn Brahm's monastic community Wat Pa Pong in Thailand, however,

excluded him on the 1st of November 2009. With this at the back of my mind I am asking myself again and again: What is the fascination in Buddhism for women and men from the West? Are we interested in the same things? Do we hear the same? Do we make the same of it? Does gender play a part when we listen to Buddhist teachings and when we practice? Sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn't. Gender seems to play a role when you look at who occupies the front rows, who prepares the coffee in the centers, who tidies up after events and who transcribes the lectures and compiles them into books. Are these meaningless details? What are the effects on the interpretation and integration of the teachings? In the following paragraph I would like to introduce a model, which will make men and women more sensitive to these subjects, to these questions.

Six kinds of relationships and one insight

When in 1998 I wrote this book I had already been teaching Buddhist meditation for twelve years. In the meantime I have given over one hundred and fifty longer courses (between 6 and 10 days), most of them courses on Green Tara for women. It is a pleasure to watch how the confidence of women is nourished through meditation in these courses. I've been thinking a lot about what is at work here and how. I will present my thoughts on this in the first chapter of Part Four. My theory is that women need horizontal, vertical and transcendental relationships amongst their own gender. Towards the end of the same chapter I will apply this model to men. In the meantime I have clarified and extended this point. I now call it "six kinds of relationships and one insight", as my assumption is that both genders each do require three kinds

of relationships to their own and three to the opposite gender.

What is the insight? The Buddha teaches that the path towards freedom begins when we become aware that all phenomena arise conditionally. Once we apply this not only to flowers, tables and to living beings in general but also to gender roles and relationships, to prototypes of families and organizational structures in centers and other institutions we will discover an endless amount of space. We can then take a closer look and set necessary changes in motion. We no longer have to worry about how men and women, relationships and families are supposed to be. Instead we watch our experiences and can see how the gender roles are changing. We can observe this even from our own life experience. Our grandparents most certainly had other notions than we do about the division of labour in the household and about who could or should take on which profession.

Almost by itself arises from the insight of the conditionality of all phenomena a more mindful but also more creative use of language. Language does change once our view of the world changes. We have for example “reinvented” the titles Gurvi for a female teacher and Arhati for a woman who has achieved the aim of awakening or enlightenment. They are according to Sanskrit grammar the female equivalents of the male Guru and Arhat, but the terms will not be found in a Buddhist reference text. Now we no longer call a female teacher the “Lady Guru” or the “Lady Lama” – that was a first attempt – but the grammatically correct “Gurvi”. And in German we no longer follow the patriarchal grammar, which prescribes that Green Tara is *a female* Buddha or *a female* Bodhisattva but we address her significantly with the correct gender specific article.

Once we understand that all our roles are changing we sometimes feel insecure and don't know how to behave. Many conflicts between women and men, within our own and with the opposite sex have to do with obscured gender roles. How now do we find out which way we want to live as women or as men? For that we need *relationships*, namely to *our own* and to *the opposite* gender. The relationships to the opposite gender will become constructive and productive when we have stable and long-term relationships in the three dimensions within our own gender. My theory is that women need *horizontal* relationships on eye level, so they can discover within that the diversity of how different women's lives can be. They need these relationships their whole lives over, this applies even to little girls and elderly ladies. Then they will not end up in the trap of defining themselves as opposites or supplements to a fixed image of men, to the father or brother, to the boss or son or to a partner by their side. This process is helped enormously by local meditation groups, self-organized day or day-to-day retreats amongst other women. For the day-to-day retreats the group meets each evening for a week on a particular topic. First there will be a short silent meditation, a guided meditation on the topic and time for exchange. Once the participants have practised for some time these groups do work well without guidance. Women also need *vertical* relationships with women. They need female role models, symbolical mothers and Buddhist teachers. Each time a woman consciously learns something from another woman she learns to attribute competence to women and therefore to herself. And finally women need female images of awakening, a *transcendental* relationship with their own gender. Luce Irigaray speaks of Divine Women, *femmes divines*. In my courses the most central image of

awakening is usually Green Tara, a female Awakened One, a Buddha, a liberated woman.

When these three kinds of relationships have sufficiently developed – there is no perfection other than as an idea – then relationships to men will become productive. Then women should become open for encounters with the opposite sex. With this experience behind them women can profitably co-operate with men and meditate, learn from male teachers and worship male Buddhas. Many women relate that their relationship to men has changed for the better since they have approached encounters with men from their own symbolic reference point. The danger of adapting to the wishes and needs of the opposite sex diminishes and the ability to feel empathy grows.

Some men in my mixed courses also feel that this approach is very helpful. I advise them to meet within a men's group a couple of times during the course and to discuss the model of "six relationships and one insight" with each other. They then contemplate together which kind of relationships with women and men they have in their lives and what is missing. Usually I hear the following: Men are complaining about the lack of spiritual friends and they discuss their practice preferably with women. As a rule they feel no shortage of male role models and teachers and the same applies to male Buddha-figures. These role models and Buddha-images provide a rather traditional male image. This leads also to some rather painful conflicts with male teachers and these kinds of role models are rarely inspiring in regards to a constructive and contemporary male image. Taking part in courses held by a female teacher has a positive effect on the esteem men hold for women, and meditating on Green Tara opens up new horizons.

My conclusion: We can accept the necessary but also painful changes in the gender roles once we understand at least intellectually that all roles and self-images are constantly changing depending on cultural and social, and on political and individual circumstances.

Also if we live in viable and long-term relationships and enjoy them in horizontal, vertical and transcendental varieties. Empowered this way we can persistently and with holy stubbornness read the texts and exercises against the grain, discover any patriarchal elements, and clearly name and change them.

Tara Libre

The extent of what is possible when women get together and reflect on their gender roles in a meditative context can be seen in a network of Buddhist women. It evolved towards the end of the 1990s in the surroundings of my courses, increasingly after the publication of this book and the congress in Cologne in spring 2000.

The Tara Libre Mandala is a network for the path towards inner and outer freedom, mainly for women. It is open for men, however, who have participated in my courses. The name originates from two big liberation movements. For the path towards inner freedom stands Green Tara, literally “The Liberator” or “liberated woman”. The Spanish “libre” refers to the peaceful revolution of the women’s liberation movement in the twentieth century and is an expression of appreciation for the political paths of liberation in the West, from which it emerged. The combination of Buddhist and feminist insights produces an enormous potential for liberation, which finds

expression in the shape of Buddha Tara and can be made reality in the Tara Libre Mandala.

A great inspiration for my work has been and will be Lama Thubten Yeshe (1935 – 1984). With his well-grounded and compassionate, clear and humorous manner he gets to the heart of Buddha's teachings and practice. He shows us how to "get a foot in the door" and does so shape the spirit of Tara Libre in a crucial way. The Tara Libre Mandala today is co-operating with female and male Buddhist teachers, who do support our concerns. Amongst them are the Dharma-teachers Lama Tsültrim Allione (Colorado/USA) and Lama Shenpen Hookham (England), the Gelugpa Lama Lodrö Rinpoche (Erlenbach/Zurich), the Dharma-teacher and psychologist Martin Kalff (Zollikon/Zurich), the Indologist and Sanskrit scholar Peter Gäng in Berlin.

All wise women from all Buddhist schools belong to our lineage. To empower our vertical relationships with women we evoke them in courses and during Tara-celebrations with our new liturgy. From Easter 1999 long-standing students of mine have been assisting on my courses, and quite a few I have been coaching to become meditation teachers. Sabine Hayoz Kalff (Zollikon/Zurich) and Agnes Pollner (Cologne) received permission to teach at the start of 2005 and Lily Besilly (Reichenow near Berlin) in autumn 2008. More women are currently in training. All of them are developing the vision of Tara Libre further and are examining with great devotion and inspiration how women today can take the path towards liberation in the midst of relationships and work, in cities and using all their senses – and without ignoring that they are women.

The contents of Tara Libre are focused on the teachings on Green Tara and Buddha-nature, on practice, teaching and

study mainly amongst women, the connections with occidental philosophy, Christianity and Indian Vedanta and lastly on regional networking. All this is happening during short and longer events – in 2009 over a hundred lectures, practice days, weekend courses and practice weeks took place – in regional practice and study groups and via the *edition tara libre* publications of study material, scriptures, CDs and MP3-CDs.

For now over thirty local practice groups exist from Kiel to Munich and from Basel to Lucerne. Women who have taken part in a Tara-course are gathering here. If they wish they are accompanied and advised by mentors. By now several hundred women have been feeling the connection with Green Tara and her gospel of the liberated woman. Some men also find this approach of meditative reflection of gender roles productive. Generally a local practice group develops first and if need be additionally a mixed group for women and men. Local practice groups for men I would consider useful but do not exist just yet.

New and old questions

As a conclusion I would like to ask a few questions which have affected me for a long time and do so again and again. Maybe you have the same questions or quite different ones. I wish that they may fall onto fertile ground whatever the end result may be. One more time the question: Does gender play a role within Buddhism? If yes, in which way? My theory is that it does play a role and does so on all levels. The issues are: Who does the teaching? Which methods are transmitted? Which elements and methods make up the practice, discussions and studies? Which questions are considered to be important?

Which model lies behind the human being Buddhism refers to? Which male model lies behind the monk who is considered a role model in most tradition? Which female image lies behind the nun who is in many traditions today – in the twenty-first century – still denied full ordination? Which male and female model lies behind the archetypal couple of Guru and female disciple in Tibetan Buddhism? Behind the Yab-Yum depictions, the enlightened Buddha-couples on Tibetan Thangkas? On many you can hardly make out the woman, when she so curiously clings to the male deity and often it looks as if there is a little girl on Buddha's lap. These are paintings by male painters but Western Thangka-painters also rarely think of painting the couple visually to be equals. Why not? I only know of one modern painting of an enlightened couple on which they are obviously recognisable as a couple (it was painted by a man in Berlin who cares deeply about the subject) and of one Yab-Yum statue depicting a couple in a loving embrace of equals (made by a female artist in Berlin). Which image of humanity lies behind the general instruction to control one's wild aggression and to replace the constant grasping of material things and people with endless love and compassion? This sounds very much like the image of an extrovert warrior from the Asian (or European) Middle Ages. Not many Western men today can find themselves in there. If you point out that aversion and greed are expressed differently in women nobody wants to really think about it. Are women and men identical? In which way? How are they different? What does that result in? Do monks and male teachers still call the shots using the unrecognized and unaudited male model and the female disciples then follow suit? Even today and in some Western centers, the nuns take their seats behind the monks. Any nun "ordained one hundred

years ago” is supposed to bow before a monk ordained “yesterday”. At least she recites a verse saying that during her ordination. Even the Dalai Lama admitted in 1993 in Dharamsala: “I am embarrassed too”, when a Western monk expressed his alienation about the verse. Still only an assembly of elder monks from all Tibetan traditions could decide on an official omission of this verse and despite the Dalai Lama’s request such an assembly has not come about since 1993.

I can forgive the elder Tibetan monks the comment that it just is their custom as they had lived in the Middle Ages until two generations ago. And gender roles – as well as status and property - are generally hardly questioned in traditional societies. The majority of Western teachers does think and act differently these days. And quite a few of the younger Tibetan Lamas who have been raised in exile in India and some have studied in the West do at least perceive it as an important issue. But still there are not many female or male Buddhist teachers who care to think in depth about the issue of gender roles in Buddhism. But what isn’t yet may well still be. I happily do my share towards it and this book is one contribution to this discussion.

To conclude I do have some general questions: How significant is the practice in our day-to-day life with a job *and* children and relationships? Who is in charge of the definition of “real” women and men? Do women have the same rights as men? Are they only permitted to do the same things as men despite being different? Or are they allowed to study and practise *differently*? Which woman does want that? Who decides on that? Who gives it a try? Do women and freedom go together? Yes, they do go together but we have to be committed. Eleven years ago I wrote this book because I had understood by then

that these questions do not answer themselves. We have to raise the issue of gender roles in Buddhism and we have to do it publicly, clearly and repeatedly. As long as many women and men maintain against their better knowledge and personal experience that gender doesn't matter except maybe in intimate relationships, households and in fashion, then unquestioned gender roles play an even bigger part and will interfere with our relationships and with our spiritual lives.

11 Imagine, you are male. A guided meditation for the Dalai Lama. Dharamsala, India, 1993 (pp.140-144)

Do Buddhas have to be male? What do body and soul, body and mind, have to do with one another? Can Buddhas be sexist? Does enlightenment transcend gender roles? I would like to invite my readers to follow me on a fantasy trip. Make yourself comfortable and read the following:

Imagine, you are a man, a male human being! You are interested in meditation and Buddhism. You approach a beautiful Tibetan-style temple. Taking off your shoes, you enter. And there you see her on the wall across from the entrance: Buddha Tara on a beautiful Tibetan mural (T. *thangka*) which is perhaps two or three meters high. Of course, you recall, the Buddha was female. All of the thousand teacher-Buddhas of our fortunate age are women or so the tradition would have it. On the Thangka, she is surrounded by sixteen of her closest disciples, the sixteen Arhantis, liberated, free women. The murals are seamed with heavy, glistening brocade and shimmer in wonderful colors.⁶

You are lucky. Today a famous Buddhist woman teacher will give a lecture. You wait with hundreds of others for the arrival of the XIVth Dalai Lama, winner of the Nobel-Prize for Peace and beloved leader of the Tibetan people. You know that the Dalai Lamas are the incarnation of the Lotus Goddess, the manifestation of love and compassion on earth, always in a female body.⁷ The Dalai Lama is accompanied by high dignitaries, each of whom, like their honored leader, has decided for centuries to reincarnate as a female for the well-being of all living beings.

Now the Buddhist nuns enter, strong, self-confident, beautiful women in shimmering red and yellow robes. They are led respectfully into the places reserved for them in the first rows. The monks scurry in behind them. A little shy and ashamed, they take their places in the back. You know some of the stories about the traditional Lamas, who, with one or two exceptions were all women. Over all of them thrones the peaceful and powerful figure of Green Tara.

The Dalai Lama's lecture is enlightening and inspiring. You feel that you have been understood in the deepest sense. You feel good in this circle of people striving for insight and love. But something bothers you. Probably, it is your "ego." You have heard that before in these groups. Whenever something appears strange, one should always first remember that it is only the battle of the "ego" against reality.

*A chicken is not a bird – a male is not a human
Modified Russian proverb*

Imagine now – remember, you are a male – you turn to a female Buddhist teacher the next chance you get. A famous abbess from Sri Lanka is lecturing in your area. Somewhat irritated and troubled but at the same time full of trust in the integrity of these wonderful nuns (and monks), you make an appointment for a personal interview, a one-to-one talk. A second nun remains in the room and the door is not completely closed because ordained nuns (and monks) live in celibacy and, understandably, are never supposed to be alone with a person of the opposite sex.

You turn to the honourable abbess with your questions: "I value the teachings and the practices of Buddhism very highly but why are there almost only women who teach? Why are

the teaching Buddhas always women? Why do the nuns sit in the first rows and the monks behind them?” The honorable nun sits relaxed in her chair and sips a tea which a young novice, bowing, has just served her. She looks somewhat surprised but at the same time very compassionate and says: “Young man, don’t worry about this. Sex and gender play (almost) no role along the spiritual path. Practice, and then all problems will resolve themselves.”

“Yes, but why are there only female teachers?” you ask further. “Well, in some scriptures it is written that a male reincarnation has less value than a female reincarnation. However, that does not mean that men are discriminated against. That is only a compassionate description of the social reality.⁸ It is simply more difficult for men; their lives are full of strain and work. I will pray that you are reincarnated as a woman in your next life. Then it will be easier for you. You can also pray for a female reincarnation.”

Yes, you think, men do not have an easy life. Despite equal rights, one still looks on us as second-class persons, as incomplete women, as people who actually are of the “wrong” sex. Seeing that as an expression of compassion is an interesting thought. “A life as a man has less value than a life as a woman.” That is no more than a description and not a normative declaration. Perhaps that will help me to find my way as a male in Buddhism.

In emptiness, there is neither woman nor man

So far, so good. After a few weeks and months, there is a lecture by a famous female Zen teacher, entitled “The great path is not difficult, for those who have no preferences...”⁹ That sounds good; no preference for one sex. Really wise, non-dualistic. You make an appointment here also for a one-to-one talk. The honorable Abbess of a well-known Zen temple sits in elegant silk robes and looks attentively at you. She does not smile but she emits much peace and clarity.

You ask your questions again: “You see, I find Zen wonderful. I mean it does seem somewhat martial but all in all I like the aesthetics in the Zen hall, the recitations and the enormous seriousness and perseverance in the exercises. But as you see, I am a man. I am confronted everywhere with female Buddhas, with female teachers, with the genealogy of the great Zen-matriarchs, and it is always centered on nuns and their views. As a male, I simply do not appear. It is difficult for me to identify with all of these female figures.”

“Young man” answered the Zen master with the hint of a smile, “young man, I give you one piece of advice: practice, practice tirelessly. Move the Koan in your stomach until it feels like a red ball of fire. Practice, experience emptiness. In emptiness, there is neither man nor woman, neither body nor mind and thus, there are no problems. Man, woman, body, soul, that is all unimportant. It is only the surface. You must go deeper. Practice. Recognize the emptiness, then all your questions will be resolved in a huge smile. Believe me. I have also had this experience, along with all the great masters of all times and places, and I am quite convinced that even the male masters would agree with me.”

You take the advice to heart and meditate tenaciously and with dedication. At times, you experience moments in which sex and gender really play no role – in your meditation and on your pillow. But almost every time you attend a lecture, open a book or hear a story, a woman is the central figure, surrounded by a squad of young women or men, who serve her with dedication.

Men are useful

Then a famous woman Lama, a tantric yogini comes to your city,¹⁰ to lecture on Joy and Wisdom. In conclusion she gives an “Initiation to the Green Tara,” an introduction into meditation with a female Buddha-figure. Acquaintances and female friends who you know from courses recommend that you turn with your questions to this charismatic Tibetan. She speaks English perfectly because she was educated in a private Catholic school in India and later studied Philosophy and Comparative Religions at an English university. Once again, you turn trustingly to a Buddhist authority and ask: “You see, I honor and treasure Buddhism, but how do I fit as a man in this women’s religion? Everywhere, everything centers on women. Okay, there are a few male Buddhas in tantra, but the teachers are almost all women.” The tantric Lama beams at you charmingly and opines, completely relaxed: “Don’t worry young man. You are a wonderful and valuable person. You are a wonderful Daka. You can help us women to awaken our Kundalini-power and thus to become enlightened to the welfare of all beings.”¹¹

With this, our fantasy-trip ends.

FOOTNOTES

FOREWORD

¹ *Compare* the different conferences of Western teachers of Buddhism, Western Buddhist Teachers Conferences (WBTC). The international WBTCs in 1993, 1994, 1996, in Dharamsala, India, all included detailed conversations with S.H., the Dalai Lama; the European WBTC 1994 in France and 1997 in Germany; the German WBTC 1994 in Langenfeld and 1996 at the *Waldhaus am Laacher See*. Since the main point of these conferences up until now has been personal exchange among the participants, there are only internal protocols and a few reports in newspapers about them. An extensive video-film was made about the WBTC in Dharamsala in 1993: *In the Spirit of Free Inquiry*, Meridian Trust, London, 1993. www.meridiantrust.com