

Sylvia Wetzel The Heart of the Lotus - Part Three: Women and Buddhism

2 IMAGINE, YOU ARE MALE

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. ¹

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

¹ Theravada distinguishes between Arhats and Buddhas. Both have the same deep insight into the three marks of existence – impermanence, suffering, and impersonality of all physical and mental phenomena. Buddhas, however, are further able to act as teachers of the age. According to the pali-canon, women can become Arhats but not teaching Buddhas. This position is “reserved” for men only. This view is also shared by the Tibetan traditions. A Buddhist colleague, in answer to the question why this was so, suggested in the early 90s that it was perhaps in compensation for the fact that women can bear children. Perhaps the idea of a purely male line of teaching Buddhas is the psychological compensation for male envy of women’s ability to bear children?

S. Arhat, feminine, Arhanti, P. Arahat; literally “conqueror of enemies;” a person, woman or man, who has overcome all ten chains to become liberated. The ten chains include the classic five hindrances as well as five further blockades along the path to liberation: (1) belief in the personality; (2) doubt; (3) clinging to rituals and rules; (4) sensual desire; (5) ill-will; (6) desire for a subtle form existence; (7) desire for a formless existence; (8) arrogance; (9) restlessness and worry, and (10) ignorance.

in a female body.² 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

² Lotus Goddess, S. mani padma. June Campbell asserts (1) that the Buddha of Compassion, S. Avalokiteshvara, t. Chenrezig, was the later, male variation of the ancient original Lotus Goddess Mani Padma, and that the Mantra OM MANI PADME HUM is a song in her praise, and (2) that the female Buddha-figure Kuan Yin (Chin., Jap., Kannon) is not the later female incorporation of the Indian Avalokiteshvara but, instead, was already known as the Lotus Goddess in China around the turn of the era. This thesis is not accepted in general buddhist research circles but it is an interesting counterweight to the thesis of the "essential" masculinity of the Avalokiteshvara. Compare June Campbell, *Göttinnen, Dakinis und ganz normale Frauen*. Theseus Verlag 1997, pp. 97 ff. See also, June Campbell, *Traveller in Space: Gender, Identity & Tibetan Buddhism* (rev'd ed. Continuum 2002).

Some Western historians of Buddhism believe that Avalokiteshvara was a masculine being but that he appeared in the 11th century in China out of compassion in a female form. For example, Schumann states: "Kuan Yin (Jap. Kannon) [is] the east-Asian form of Avalokiteshvara. He is essentially masculine but, as all transcendental Bodhisattvas, he can also take on a female form if it aids in healing. He is thus often presented as a Madonna figure in East Asian art." (translated from the German) Hans Wolfgang Schumann, *Buddhismus. Stifter, Schulen, Systeme*, p. 211. Walter Verlag 1976, 199(Founders, Schools and Systems). See also, *Lexikon der Östlichen Weisheitslehren*, p. 200. Barth 1986 (Encyclopedia of Eastern Wisdom Teachings).

The (partial) becoming female of Kuan Yin in China was completed in the 11th Century with the legend of the Princess Miao Shan, who was declared to be an incarnation of Kuan Yin. Compare Maria Dorothea Reis-Habito, *Die Dharani des Großen Erbarmens des Bodhisattva mit tausend Händen und Augen. Übersetzung und Untersuchung ihrer textlichen Grundlage sowie Erforschung ihres Kultes in China*, SANKT AUGUSTIN: INSITUT MONUMENTA SERICA UND NETTETAL, pp. 289-309 (Steyler Verlag, 1993) (in German). Rolf A. Stein, who authored most of the work on the female Kuan Yin, dates this change as occurring in the 11th Century in: *Avalokiteshvara/Kuan Yin, un exemple de transformation d'un dieu en déesse*. CAHIERS D'EXTREME ASIE 2, pp. 17-78 (1986) (in French). Thanks to Dr. Adelheid Herrmann-Pfandt for the last two references to the sexual transformation of Kuan Yin in her letter of June 21, 1998. See also: Chun-Fang Yu, *Kuan-Yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara* (Columbia U. Press 2001)

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.³ 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

³ The American Buddhist and feminist Rita M. Gross puts it this way. Compare Rita M. Gross, “Buddha-Dharma has no Gender” VAJRADHATU SUN pp. 11, 14, 15, 28 (August-September 1988). See also, Rita M. Gross, Buddhism after Patriarchy (State University of New York Press 1993).

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 . . .”⁴ That sounds good; not like 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 across from you 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.

⁴ So begins Sosan’s famous Zen Poem “Shin Jin Mei.” (Trust in Mind)

Men are useful

Then a famous woman Lama, a tantric yogini comes to your city,⁵ 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." ⁶ With that, our fantasy-trip ends.

⁵ Lama, t. literally, "noble mother," the Tibetan translation of the sanskrit term guru – teacher. The Tibetan tradition assumes that someone becomes a Lama when people learn from her. Institutions can only confirm academic qualifications but they cannot educate teachers. The students only make a person a teacher. This was suggested by the Dalai Lama at the First Conference of Western Teachers in March 1993 (WBTC 1993) in Dharamsala.

⁶ Daka (male) and Dakini (female), S., tib. Khandro and Khandroma, from tib. Kha (heaven or space) and tib. Dro (to go); literally "one who goes about in the sky of (emptiness)", in English: skywalker, skydancer, traveler in space. Another pair of Tibetan terms for Daka and Dakini is Pawo (male) and Pamo (female), literally "the brave one;" also translated as hero and heroine. On one level, they are symbols for the blissful consciousness which recognizes emptiness. Dakas and Dakinis are shown in differing ways, since they mirror all masculine and feminine experiences on all levels. They also appear in human form.

A traditional image is that of the male Lama with his female Dakini. Many Lamas jokingly call their female students Dakinis, and more than a few male Lamas, both Western and Tibetans, justify sexual relationships with their female students with the "Dakini Principle." Compare Adelheid Herrmann-Pfandt, *Dakinis, Zur Stellung und Symbolik des Weiblichen im tantrischen Buddhismus (Indica et Tibetica, Bonn 1992)* (in German) and June Campbell, *Traveller in Space: Gender, Identity & Tibetan Buddhism, supra* (in English) on the Dakini Principle.

Researchers such as Miranda Shaw hold the optimistic opinion that tantric relationships make equality between males and females at least theoretically possible. Compare, Miranda Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment, supra*. Others disagree and interpret the use of sexuality in tantric rituals not as an acceptance of sexuality as such but as the "technical" use of sexuality for a specific meditative process in which women are merely instrumentalised.

