

Sylvia Wetzel Heart of the Lotus - 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, (page 11) 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 (page 12) 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 them 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

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This English version was prepared for the internet. May it be a step to find a publishing company who is happy to publish this book in a traditional paper version to be read everywhere.

Jütchendorf, Summer Solstice 2002 Sylvia Wetzel