

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

1 WOMEN ASK QUESTIONS

Many women “forget” or ignore their biological sex and their social gender when they start to take up buddhist teachings and practices. Some, however, do ask questions. In this chapter, I would like to focus on typical questions of women and give tentative answers to some of them. A systematic preparation of the questions and recommendations would suggest that a clear path for women already exists in Buddhism. Since that is not the case, I would like to just discuss some of the questions as they have come up and to put my experiences and recommendations up for discussion. My result so far: At this time there is no non-sexist tradition in Buddhism. Whoever makes such a claim either does not consider seriously the questions of women or does not understand them. I do believe, however, that Western Buddhism will change greatly when women speak out and enrich the traditional teachings with their experiences.

Sexist statements in the teachings

How have men and women dealt with sexist statements in the teachings up until now? What is the result of specific strategies? Here, without claiming to be complete, some of the typical attitudes will be described.

Ignoring: We can simply ignore such statements and concern ourselves with those teachings which inspire us. This attitude is often accompanied by the tendency to “forget” our gender or to ignore it. A common argument in favor of this attitude is “I am physically a woman but since the mind is beyond gender, I won’t bother about gender either.”

Interpreting teachings as relative: We accept sexist texts as being part of a specific period of time, and we believe that such texts do not express or affect the core of the teachings: Well, in patriarchal times there are patriarchal monks, and they write such things. Who knows whether the Buddha ever really said it? We accept these statements as part of the changing history but find them unimportant; and we believe that such statements had and have no influence on the important, central statements in the teachings. A majority of Western teachers takes this position, usually implicitly but sometimes explicitly.

Distinguishing between pure teachings and later falsifications: Some people think that an enlightened master like Buddha was incapable of uttering sexist statements. They interpret such texts as being added at a later time by sexist monks. If you consider that the teachings were passed down orally over several centuries and were not put into writing in sanskrit and pali until the turn of the last century, then it is theoretically possible that some texts were altered or falsified. As a practical matter, however, teachings which have been or are passed down orally are generally considered to be much more precise than those handed down in writing, so that this theory is conceivable but not convincing.

Distinguishing between usable (timeless) teachings and sexist (era-dependent) materials in the teachings: If we interpret the buddhist traditions as a timeless truth in a historical vessel, then we can accept that the teachings also reflect the respective cultural values and social conditions. If we also apply the key teachings about dependent arising to buddhist teachings and practices themselves, we can be quite hopeful that Western practitioners and teachers together will create forms which correspond not only to contemporary men but which also take up the values and experiences of contemporary women.

Women and freedom

For as long as women have been prejudiced as a result of their biological sex, they have worked to be accepted as fully-valued members of the human society. More than 200 years ago Olymp de Gouges pointed out to her brothers in the French Revolution that they had forgotten women in their formulation of the "General Rights of Men." The men had, as was usual, confused "male" and "human" and had "forgotten" the second sex, the female humans, the women. At the beginning of the 20th century women fought for their rights to education and to a political voice. The feminist movement of the 1970s took up this idea again and fought for equal rights for women and men. By then women had grasped that the so-called typical female personality traits were found in the behavior of all minorities and suppressed groups: falseness, envy and intrigue, submissiveness and lack of forcefulness, intellectual inflexibility, etc.

Feminist therapy was developed in the early 1970s and included three large thematic areas: dealing with rage; becoming independent and taking care of one's own needs, and relationships. Thirty years later women are still asking the same questions in buddhist courses and centres: dealing with anger, how to develop self confidence and the ability to express their

wishes and needs and the meaning of relationships. What does that mean? Did the women not learn anything? Have they still not transformed into "general human beings"? Do they still fall back into the old gender roles which are, in this case, offered by Buddhism?

One obvious conclusion: every therapy, every religion, every philosophy and every spiritual path is as patriarchal or friendly towards women as the women and men who have worked with them in the past and who are working with it now. The wonderful teachings of the Buddha contain both timeless truths and views, opinions, values and customs which are products of their times. Distinguishing between the two is the great and difficult task of everyone who takes the path. Every path is a walk along a tight-rope. Finally, only at the end do we know whether it was the right path or not. It is easier and more comfortable to accept a modern or traditional system without critically inspecting it and to trust that the great – mostly male – authorities are all-knowing and that they, in their infinite wisdom, always do what is right. Particularly people with little self confidence tend to accept authority without criticism. Among these, many are women. As long as women follow male-oriented models of freedom, their self-confidence is vulnerable. It is only loaned. This further supports the orientation around existing male standards.

This book describes three female role models, each of which determines the relationship of being a woman to freedom differently. The first is the traditional model of hierarchical difference between men and women where the gender role of women is defined by men according to their needs. The Italian philosopher Luisa Muraro interprets it very precisely as a model which defines woman as being without freedom. The second is the model of equal rights. Women are considered equal to men and this model "grants" women social and cultural equality with men without reflecting the fact that they are women. This Luisa Muraro calls freedom without being a woman. This model sees the only way to freedom for contemporary woman in adapting herself to the male model. A variation of this second model is that of the gender-neutral individual. Here also, we are talking about freedom without being a woman. The third, the "sexual difference" model postulates a connection between being a woman and freedom. It accepts two biological sexes (Italian: *differenza sessuale*) but does not specify "natural" gender roles for them. This model is consistent with the buddhist concept of dependent arising because it rejects any concepts of the "nature" of a woman or of static female roles and accepts that any gender roles arise in dependence on many inner and outer conditions. It is hoped that these roles will change in accordance with the

thoughts, speech and actions of specific women at specific times. The same goes, of course, for men and male gender roles.

Courage to ask questions

It is not easy to ask questions. A woman needs a lot of courage to take her qualms and doubts seriously, especially when fellow male and female practitioners roll their eyes and say: "Not these feminist questions again. That is all old stuff. We explained it all in the sixties and seventies."

All buddhist schools want to lead humanity and even all beings out of suffering into the great liberation. In doing this, they have different points of emphasis and use different methods which were developed and formulated under different cultural conditions. Early Buddhism teaches insight into the three marks of existence – suffering, impermanence and lack of substance of all phenomena – as a way out of suffering. Insight is thus the path to compassion and love. The Mahayana speaks of wisdom and compassion and teaches compassion as the practical path to the insight that everything is empty of the concepts we have about them. Compassion gives us the power to master all difficulties along the path. Tantric Buddhism works with the two concepts of bliss and emptiness and teaches non-dualistic joy as the path to deep wisdom. Deep wisdom manifests itself as love for all beings and as the power and skill to make the best out of all situations.

To which audience are these teachings and practices directed? Many teachers believe that they are meant and taught for general humanity, without "consideration" of gender, culture or social background. They may accept that the teachings are dressed in time-dependent garments, that they are hidden behind feudalistic manners and customs and that their world view is that of a male. These teachers believe, however, that these time related aspects of the teachings are irrelevant, and that even where they may play a role, their effects are insignificant. For this reason, they believe that such questions are irrelevant and are of interest to no one and – that for them seems to be the cause why no one discusses them willingly.

Women on the buddhist path have doubts and questions in five areas: dealing with suffering; expressing rage, anger and other "negative emotions;" feelings of self-confidence and trust in oneself; love relationships and the relationship to one's body and the senses, and the role of teachers.

Mahayana and Compassion

Compassion is considered the motor for spiritual development in Mahayana (S., great vehicle, from maha = great and yana = vehicle, path). Together with the teachings on dependent arising and emptiness, it is considered the essence of the great vehicle. Compassion is defined as the wish to liberate oneself and others from suffering. However, only when I recognize my own suffering as such can I have the wish to liberate myself from it. If I think that my constant jumping from one activity to another is happiness, I will not feel the lack of inner peace and I will not long for liberation. Only when I feel the pain of my fellow-humans behind arrogance and hardness, behind complaining and intriguing, can I wish from the bottom of my heart that they can liberate themselves from it, and only then can I support them to the best of my abilities.

The recommendation to feel and become aware of one's own suffering and the suffering of others is a huge inspiration for all people who know little about themselves, who feel little of themselves and who are accustomed to ignoring the interests of others. These teachings seem to be directed to classic male "machos" in the East and West who are moved by the ideal of compassion, and who often actually do turn to doing good for their neighbours.

What happens in a woman, though, who has been taught to be sympathetic to the needs of others, while neglecting their own needs, when she hears these teachings? Some feel that their attitudes towards life are being confirmed and valued. The problem is that they then continue to ignore their own limitations in wanting to live their life "for others." Other modern women, however, who have just learned to take their own needs seriously and to express them, feel pushed back into old roles.

In the "helping" professions, the attitude in helping has been examined since the 1970s, and women have discovered that the symptoms of the "helper" syndrome are found to a great extent in the traditional female role. The term "helper syndrome" is associated with specific attitudes and behavior patterns: helping as an inner urge; a negative self image; hidden narcissistic needs; suppressed and repressed aggressions; an undeveloped and unstable self-identity (above all in women); over-identification with the client; rigid self-identity and over-identification with

high ideals (above all in men); a hierarchical relationship to the client, and an inability to enter into a relationship as an equal.¹

Buddhism distinguishes between compassion and pity. Pity is called the "close enemy" of compassion, since we can easily confuse the two. If we consider this instruction in the light of our contemporary understanding of gender roles and the helper syndrome, we can avoid traps and learn to effectively use compassion as the driving force along our path.

With compassion, we become aware of suffering, understand how it arises, know that it is impermanent and will stop and thus have no fear of it and can integrate it. With this knowledge, we can feel our way into the suffering of others without identifying with it, and we can help to the best of our ability. We know that the causes of suffering lie in the affected person, and we don't expect that we, with just a bit more effort, can resolve all problems. We do our best and are able to live in an imperfect world. If we do not understand the mechanics of suffering, how it arises and is dissolved, we are afraid of it and run away, suppress it and identify with the suffering of others. We believe we must save the whole world and put ourselves and others constantly under pressure. Tradition calls this pity.

Rage and Anger

Let's assume that the dissatisfaction we experience stimulates our interest in our inner development and that the well-being and happiness we experience make it possible for us to work with ourselves. So we try to attentively observe our physical behaviour, our speech and our mental workings, to become more and more intimately acquainted with our attitudes and the results of our actions. We strengthen our awareness through the work with ethical guidelines and try to deal wisely with pleasant and unpleasant feelings. So far, so good.

When Western women and men practice ethics, love, compassion, empathy and mindfulness, their development can be flawed if they do not consider the cultural conditions and the attendant gender role with which they live. There are typical traps into which westerners fall when, for example, they try not to express their negative feelings because it is seen as unwholesome in the buddhist tradition.

¹ Compare Wolfgang Schmidbauer, *Die Hilflosen Helfer* Rowohlt Reinbek 1977 ((Helpless Helpers) and *Helfen als Beruf*. Rowohlt Reinbek 1983 (Professional Helping)

If one looks at practising Buddhists in Europe one has the impression that the main point is to move slowly and speak in a soft voice of the “good, true and the beautiful.” In addition to empathy for others, the virtue patience is esteemed very highly. We are supposed to avoid, to the greatest extent possible, all intense emotions and only harbor friendly feelings for all other beings. Ayya Khema summed up buddhist statements regarding emotions as follows: “The four divine abodes – love, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity – are the only feelings worth having. All other emotions just lead to suffering.” If we are wise, then we renounce rage, anger, envy and jealousy. That is easier said than done. Many women ask themselves whether they even want to.

Women who have learned to always be friendly and harmonious, who have either consciously or unconsciously repressed their dislikes and swallowed their anger out of fear of not being loved, such women usually follow these instructions very willingly. When they do, however, they are in danger of further stabilizing their dependency on affection from others while continuing to suppress all aversions or, worse, directing them against themselves.

On the other hand, women who have finally learned, perhaps in psychotherapy or in women’s groups, to feel their anger and to no longer judge themselves for it may reject this apparent remake of an old pattern. In fact, they may be extremely agitated at this unbelievable suggestion. What could a productive method of dealing with intense feelings such as anger and rage look like?

Feelings and Reactions

There are different grades and ways of expressing anger and rage, all of which stem from aversion. The “teacher’s handbooks” of Buddhism (S. abhidharma) ² identify fifty-one (or fifty two) central mental processes in a classical list. Six of these are the root- or major delusions, which are found in all humans: the desire to possess and greed, the desire not to

² S. Higher Teachings, P. abhidhamma. The Abhidharma-Writings are a systematic collection of the oral teachings of Buddha which were put into writing by later commentators. They include many lists and definitions. For this reason the contemporary author and translator Myrko Fryba calls them “The teachers’ handbooks of Buddhism”. See: Abhidhamma im Überblick. Texte der hohen Lehre des Buddha.(An Overview of Abhidhamma. Texts of the high teachings of Buddha) Research Reports 2 of the Series Buddhistischer Modernismus, Universität Konstanz 1990 (in German). See also, Nyanaponika Thera, Nyanaponika, Bikhu Bodhi, Abhidamma Studies: Buddhist Explorations of Consciousness and Time (Wisdom Pub. 1998).

have and aversion, conceit and arrogance, unawareness and ignorance, doubt and wrong views. In the list of the twenty secondary delusions, four are viewed as being motivated above all by aversion: aggression, hatred or revengefulness, spite and malice. These are all understood to be conscious attitudes.

Five attitudes are connected with lying and consciously keeping something secret: concealment, fraud, hypocrisy, shamelessness (without relation to one's values) and inconsiderateness (without regard for others). The process of suppression is not mentioned, and there is no term for it. In a course on these fifty-one processes, the Tibetan lama Tarab Tulku, who lives in Denmark since the late sixties and is married to a Danish woman, suggested that suppression could be seen as a combination of aversion and lack of mindfulness. Westerners can detect their tendency to suppression easier when they pay attention to physical sensations and learn to listen to the body's signals.³

Every time we react from habit we strengthen the walls of our prison, and we wonder why life is so boring, complicated or bogged down. We make the first step into liberation when we notice that we sit in a prison; when we become aware that we act automatically and not spontaneously; when we notice that our behavior is not based on a rational foundation and that it does not arise spontaneously and intuitively. Instead, we follow ingrained patterns compulsively and unconsciously. Spontaneous behavior arises from inner space. Without an open awareness for the inner and outer spaces in which everything happens, all behavior remains conditioned behavior. This is true for the repetition of ingrained views and opinions or of emotional patterns, even though clever excuses and complex justifications are more acceptable in our culture than emotional reactions.

Negative Feelings

What are negative feelings or unwholesome reactions? Tradition defines unwholesome or excited feelings (S. klesha) as emotional conditions which disturb inner peace. Emotions which accompany greed, aversion and delusion result in suffering and are considered unwholesome. Aversion is usually an automatic reaction to unpleasant feelings. It is accompanied generally with tension and restlessness and causes further feelings such as anger and rage, vengeance and hatred. Every kind of aversion is

³ Tarab Tulku, Abhidharma, Course in Jägerndorf, November, 1988. German course transcript pp. 65 ff.

painful the moment it is experienced, and it is usually followed by further dissatisfaction. The mood is dampened. We and others are irritated and hurt. Anger and rage are almost always expressions of powerlessness: Something is not going as we would like it to. We feel like victims of the circumstances and of the behavior of other people, and we don't know how to help ourselves. We react with anger and rage.

Energy and Clarity

Many people, men and women, consider the expression of anger useful and valuable because they experience themselves thereby as energetic and powerful. A dispute can be positive because it can lead to clarification of differing points of view and to necessary changes being put into action. A well-known statement of the Philosopher Heraclites was: "War is the father of all things." The purpose of ethical behavior is surely not the simple repression of aversion, anger and rage.

The taming of the Warrior

Buddhist teachings place great value on the conscious control of aggressive attitudes and modes of behavior because they usually lead to suffering for all involved. There are almost no suggestions, however, for dealing wisely with self-aversion and suppression or for breaking up depressive structures, and that is understandable from a historical perspective. From the very beginning, buddhist teachings were directed to and centered on the male members of the society. It is thus only logical that they would contain directions to the "normal" male for resolving anger and rage. Women, of course, could also follow the path of the Buddha but they were seen more as a side-audience. Anger and rage were important topics at that time. During the life of the Buddha large and small kingdoms were at war with one another, and insecurity, violence, death and privation were the stuff of daily life. The historical Buddha Siddhartha Gautama belonged to the warrior caste and knew what resulted from aggressive attitudes such as vengefulness, ill will and hatred from stories told in his family and by his contemporaries. One of his father's duties was to speak the law and to mediate between disputing parties. Those were of course usually men.

If up until now men have been the main audience of the teachings, and the teachings were mostly passed down in a male lineage, it is not surprising that a religion in which the starting point is one's own experience, is based above all on the male model. If many Western

women now are interested in Buddhism and not only listen to and translate the teachings and assist male masters but also study and practice Buddhism intensively themselves and start teaching it, it is only logical that women's experiences be taken up and become themes of the teachings. New times require and produce new teachings. That's the way it always was in the history of Buddhism.

Gender Roles

Buddhist teachings on not living out aggressive attitudes come up against very distinct cultural conditions in the west. The education in northern European cultures requires that all members of the society limit specific emotions. Even taking differences among countries and social classes into consideration, the model is still "tough men" and "tender women." Boys are still not supposed to cry and, after they have reached a specific age, are not to express their "soft" feelings anymore. Girls are allowed to cry and express their "soft" feelings but they must be friendly and harmonious; to the greatest extent possible, they should never be aggressive and not express themselves powerfully or with strength. Since it is difficult not to express feelings which we experience, we ban them into an emotional underground. We suppress them.

If it were possible to simply cut away unwanted feelings, thoughts and memories, and to have them disappear forever, there would be no reason to object. But their suppression has further consequences outside of our consciousness, which lead to physical tension and pain and to inappropriate reactions. The more successful we are in dodging intense negative feelings, in suppressing them and no longer sensing them, the more difficult it becomes for us to have pleasant feelings. The emotional high points are gone, and our life is marked by dullness, indifference and superficiality.

When traditionally-raised young boys grow into men, it is difficult for them to put themselves emotionally in the situations of others or to feel and express their own emotions – particularly insecurity, sadness and tenderness. Sometimes they also reject the expression of emotions by the women around them. Women, on the other hand, are glad to conform sensitively to the world around them, and they simply do not "have" any aggressive feelings. If they do feel negative emotions, they are often afraid to express them. Fearing loss of love and fearing rejection, they shy away from open disputes, do not express negative feelings and, at the end, avoid life altogether. Unrecognized aversion leads to loss of energy,

and that is one reason why many women feel so weak, depressed and tired. Pleasant and unpleasant feelings are part of life. If we suppress them, we lose our vitality. If we want to work with them, we have to first learn to recognize them.

Imitation of the other gender

Women and men have tried to change the gender roles for almost a century. The results are still not in, and they are highly uncertain. It is apparently difficult to give up the emotional security connected with clear gender roles. In addition to the search for an acceptable kind of androgynous behaviour, there is also the model in which the negative behavior of the other gender is imitated: women behave like cool, rational men or arrogant machos, and men mime the emotional vamp and the moody, scheming woman. It is clear that the middle way will not be found immediately or through patient thought but only through experimental exploration of the extremes. Here, patience from all sides and humor are more helpful than either malicious arrogance vis-à-vis clumsy behavior or simply holding unimaginatively fast to ingrained gender roles.

Denying and Suppressing

The process of suppressing is not mentioned by any buddhist tradition, and, in the West, suppression was not recognised until Sigmund Freud. Surely women and men of earlier times were psychically different from Western women and men today. Even now, most people in Asia are more strongly connected with the collective than westerners, so that they are not as susceptible or vulnerable psychologically. They know and accept conscious repression or hiding of feelings but they do not know what suppression is. They have neither a term nor a concept for suppression, and older Asian teachers also do not understand what happens inside their Western students in the process.

Teachers from Asia who have lived for a long time in the west and who speak a Western language slowly come to understand the enormous difference between conscious repression and unconscious suppression, and how damaging the latter is for spiritual development. If Western teachers do not accept their suppressed side, they are in danger of blindly imitating Asian customs and consequently hiding their own weaknesses. Western women must be particularly careful here and must not hold back their questions out of false politeness or considerateness, devotion or respect.

Working with suppressed feelings is the central theme of many Western psychotherapies. Some support their clients in becoming more conscious of their intense and aversive feelings by expressing them. Many modern women gained deep insights into their unconscious structures and feelings as they batted with their fists in rage onto mattresses and pillows in Gestalt-Therapy sessions. The goal of this work is to increase consciousness of all feelings and to appropriately express them. That does not include simply living out all feelings, without considering the attitude upon which they are founded or the possibly painful effects on those concerned. That would simply strengthen ingrained habits and attitudes. Since self-recognition is central to Buddhism, many Western teachers of Buddhism agree that the expression of negative and intense feelings is necessary and useful as long as it occurs in a therapeutic setting or is done consciously.

Awareness and acting out

What methods are appropriate to strengthen our awareness of inner processes? The tradition prescribes above all mindfulness to physical processes and the work with ethical guidelines. (Compare Chapters 2 and 5 in Part I) Further, many psychotherapeutic processes work with the controlled expression of suppressed feelings and with a playful, dramatic exaggeration of inner processes, and many Western teachers believe that such therapies can be combined well with buddhist practices of attentiveness.

Mindfulness to physical processes plays a central role in dealing creatively with feelings. Every type of emotional excitement is accompanied by physical tension. Those feelings which disturb the peace of the heart are negative feelings in the buddhist tradition. With some practice, we can really feel this, both physically and spiritually. Our culture places a high value on logical explanations and verbal expressions while ignoring physical and emotional states. Thus we oversee the first signs of physical tension, overhear the first soft voice of aversion and lose ourselves in thoughts: we think about what is "right" or "correct" and conform to the expectations of others.

Since physical tension and unpleasant feelings do not disappear when they are suppressed and overheard, they express themselves someplace else. We completely overreact at the slightest instance and we are surprised at the rage which arises apparently from nothing. After a difficult discussion

we feel suddenly tired and without strength. As prevention, we can practice paying attention to physical tension, whether we can identify what irritated us or not. If we recognize the soft aversion early enough, there is usually still space in which we can change the situation. We end a talk before we are completely exhausted, expressing that we feel overburdened before we fall apart; we sense our borders, and we inform others of them before we are "beside ourselves," so that we have some room to maneuver with our behavior.

Manifest anger or withdrawal in exhaustion and depression are often alarm signals. We pull our emotional emergency brakes because nothing better occurs to us. The more agitated and irritated we become, the more we fall back into compulsive emotional patterns. We become like pubescent youths or stubborn three-year-olds for whom the only alternatives are "all or nothing." The sooner we notice our unpleasant feelings and the irritation which follows, the more skilfully and creatively we can deal with ourselves, with others and with difficult situations.

For people who do not notice feelings of aversion at all or who barely notice them, it may be helpful to act them out in a protected or therapeutic situation. The danger of thereby strengthening compulsive aggressive patterns – a traditional argument against such a behaviour – is very small since these people usually don't act out their negative feelings at all. If the basic motivation for such an exercise is to become conscious of one's own feelings and patterns, then it can be effectively carried out in conjunction with buddhist ethics. Sometimes conscious exaggeration is extremely effective. Dramatically overstating specific emotions, either alone or with persons we trust, is fun and affords many insights into hidden views, patterns and habits.

Self-images and the sense of self

The heart of Buddhism is understanding emptiness: there is nothing upon which one could lay one's finger. Above all, it is said, there is "no real me." That is a difficult theme for the West, where a strong sense of self is considered an essential mark of character. Psychotherapy sees its task in building up of a strong sense of self. And some buddhist psychologist suggest that one must first develop a strong sense of self before one can give it up.

Wanting to be someone other than one is leads to suffering. Wanting to "be someone" at all, is the root of all suffering, according to Buddhism. If

a woman with little self-confidence and a weakly-developed sense of her own value hears such a statement, she might think: yes, that is true. She is familiar with the suffering surrounding the battle for a stable sense of self worth, and she knows how instable her sense of herself is. However, she is in danger of confusing her lack of self-confidence in her own powers with the buddhist thesis of the emptiness of the self.

Buddhism (and Psychology) distinguish between self-confidence and holding fast to a rigid view of one's self. All people need self confidence if they want to follow the path. Unrealistic self images, on the other hand, block everyone's path. The traditional teachings and exercises on "the emptiness of the self" and on "selflessness" are directed more to the traditional male, who over-estimates himself and wants to control the world with his will. In this sense they aim to (mostly) male individuals who more or less see themselves as subjects and the rest of the world as their object.

Many women see themselves more as an object and have less self confidence. Women (and repressed minorities) with object-identities are more helped with teachings about the Buddha-nature and with exercises which help them to come into contact with their good core, their ability to love, their strength and their intuitive wisdom.

Love and romance

Most buddhist schools teach ascetic ideals. The historical Buddha was a monk, and love relationships are traditionally seen as obstacles along the path. Buddha knew, however, as a great pragmatic and compassionate teacher, that only a minority would choose the path of celibacy and asceticism. He recommended for the great majority of his students – the so-called laity – a married life of mutual respect and esteem in a framework of ethical guidelines. However, many buddhist laypeople – both then and now, in the East and the West – believe that a life of celibacy is particularly wholesome. They believe and teach that the interest in physical love, children and family relationships will decrease along the spiritual path.

The tantric tradition of Buddhism on the other hand works directly with the senses, the body and with sexual energy. The statements about tantric relationships which I know see these as functional. Relationships are used "ritually" on the path to enlightenment. "Normal" sexuality and relationships have, as such, not much to do with tantric Buddhism.

The male outlook also largely forms the world's view of present day relationships. Women have children and raise them. Men have a part in the creation of new life but, up until now, no central role in raising children. From this perspective, ascetic lines of thought in religions appear to be metaphysical compensation for the child-bearing envy of men. Perhaps the desire of men for a heaven free of physical bodies and relationships will only be resolved when they become effective social fathers. Nowadays men are not required to work day and night to support the family. They thus have time and space to concern themselves with their wives and children.

Women along the buddhist path (and in other spiritual traditions) concern themselves with "relationships and motherhood as a path," with "senses, meaning and sensuality" and "love, desire and passion along the spiritual path." We have very few examples, and we must experiment and allow ourselves to experiment. If women and men take relationships seriously and learn to be with-themselves and with-others, they start to resolve the unholy opposition of body and soul, heaven and earth, immanence and transcendence. At least, that is the thesis of the French psychoanalyst and philosopher Luce Irigaray. She believes that in living out our gender differences respectfully, we hold the key to learning to deal with all differences in this world.⁴

The role of teachers

What is the role of relationships between teachers and students of both sexes along the spiritual path? We know from our everyday life how important people are for any process of learning. Whether in school, at the university, in our businesses or in sports, the modern media cannot replace personal contact between teacher and student. Not only children learn better from people. There are some people who can learn to play the guitar, to lay out a garden or to speak a foreign language with a book. They are a small minority, though. Books and modern media can support the learning process but they cannot take the place of contact with human role models. No one will be able to heal themselves with a medical handbook or resolve a depression with a book on psychotherapy.

To learn, we need people. In particular if we want to learn something about ourselves. Seeing oneself clearly is one of the most difficult things

⁴ Luce Irigaray, *Genealogie der Geschlechter*, pp. 291, 316-317 (Kore 1988) (in German); See also, Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Geneologies* (Columbia Univ. Press 1993).

in the world. People who are also on the spiritual path can accompany us on our way. Tradition recognizes different categories of teachers. Some give us above all information. They describe the map of the spiritual path. One who can read maps can also tell us something about areas to which she or he has not personally "travelled." Such teachers need correct maps, however, and these are found in an authentic tradition.

If we want to learn to meditate, we should turn to people who meditate themselves. The tradition speaks of "good friends" (S. kalyanamitra) along the path. For this kind of teacher it is enough if they know more about the subject than we do and have more experience in it which they can teach us. They don't have to be Buddhas. The Tibetan tradition assumes, that human examples are more important and more "kind-hearted" than the historical Buddha himself. Why? We can't meet the Buddha today but human teachers can personally show us the path and accompany us. According to tradition, their human faults are a great advantage. If they were perfect, we would never have the courage to follow the path ourselves. Humans with weaknesses show us that imperfect women and men can also follow the path.

Teachers can and do have a range of very different qualities. Some have only a bit more experience and insight than we do, and others are great masters. Some are even enlightened. Unfortunately, we cannot recognize which level of development a particular teacher has attained. In general, we are only able to judge people who are at our "level," with small variations "above" and "below." How, then, can we determine who we can trust and who can direct us along the spiritual path?

The Dalai Lama repeatedly told Western buddhist teachers that religious institutions can only describe and confirm a person's academic qualifications. Institutions cannot create and "authorize" "teachers." A person becomes a teacher whenever we can learn from them. At the end, it is always the students who "make someone into a teacher." We can only follow our heart and see whether we can learn with and from a certain person, and the person's "objective" qualities play only a secondary role in this decision. We know from our daily relationships that a simple phrase which we read or hear can change our lives. The person who makes the statement doesn't have to be a Buddha.

A buddhist maxim can give us a good orientation: Don't rely on the person; rely on what the person teaches. Don't rely on the words, but on

their meanings. Don't rely on their conventional meanings, but on their final meanings.

Gurus and Buddhas

Teachers are particularly important in the tantric and zen traditions. They are the decisive factor along the path, provoking deep insight in their students through wise and often unorthodox behavior. I would like to make a few comments here on the role of the guru in tantra. The effect of a Guru on our lives can only be personally experienced, just as. one can only experience how sugar tastes by tasting it; and one can talk about love but one can only know what it is when one experiences it.

Images of enlightenment play a large role in tantra. We meditate about Buddhas and imagine, in specific exercises, that we ourselves are enlightened. We practice seeing ourselves and all beings as Buddhas, all places as mandalas – dwellings of the Buddhas – and hearing all sounds as mantras. Such exercises speed up the process of enlightenment if carried out with the right attitude and the necessary preparation. Practitioners, in contrast to megalomaniacs, know that they are not yet Buddha. They imagine it, though, and thus prepare themselves for their Buddha-being.

The key to enlightenment in these exercises is the guru, whether female or male. In the ideal situation we have known the guru for a long time. We trust her and know what we are doing. Then we practice seeing her as enlightened. Why? On the tantric path we practice seeing all beings as enlightened, as Buddhas, including ourselves. It is probably easiest to imagine that our guru is enlightened, since we value and honor her. According to tradition, seeing our guru as Buddha is the fastest way to enlightenment.

We fall into a trap and lose our healthy common sense if we believe that our guru is "objectively" enlightened. The guru is the decisive "method" to reach enlightenment and the most effective "aid" along the path. An unenlightened mind full of "greed, hate and delusion" projects an imperfect world. An enlightened mind projects a pure world. If we are able to imagine our guru, a human being with errors and weaknesses, as enlightened, our mind will be pure. It is not so important that the guru be really enlightened. If we can see her as enlightened, we receive the blessing of a Buddha. That's what the tradition says. Ironically, we can only see others as enlightened when we ourselves are enlightened.

Traditionally, one tests the teacher for at least three but better for five and in tantra for twelve years. One practices together with the teacher and determines in this long process, whether one can work with the teacher. It seems to me that most practitioners here in the West do not need a guru at present. They need correct information, clear exercises and "good friends" along the path. With increasing spiritual maturity we discover for ourselves what a guru is. The relationship to teachers is different from a love relationship but in one aspect they are alike: As long as we ask ourselves "is she my teacher or not?" she isn't. When the hearts meet, we know.

Just as with love, there are many variations. Every relationship in which we learn important things is different. Lama Yeshe said "The guru is not a man who sits on a throne and teaches you. The guru is an arrow which hits you in the middle of your heart. Only the very lucky experience that once in their lives. I myself had many wonderful teachers from whom I have learned much. But one only touched me deeply in my heart. That was my heart teacher, my guru."

We can study and practice with the people who inspire us. We don't need to look for the guru. "When the student is ripe, the teacher appears," says the tradition.⁵

⁵ Much is required for a fruitful relationship between a teacher and student. Trust in someone's qualities can mirror the qualities of oneself but it can also be the expression of naïve wishes. Common sense helps us to distinguish between effective spiritual assistance and human weakness. It is particularly important for women to know of the darker chapter on the teacher-student relationship. Compare the respective chapter in: Sandy Boucher, *Turning the Wheel, American Women Creating the New Buddhism* (Harper and Row 1988).