

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

### **3 WOMEN AND MEN**

When a woman takes up buddhist teachings and practices, attending lectures and courses, she enters a world of male symbols and male power, and she might begin to think about the consequences of such a setting. She hears that a female incarnation is disadvantageous according to some of the writings. A Tibetan word for "woman" means literally "lower birth" (kye men).

The Tibetan tradition lists eight positive characteristics which support a spiritual life, and the seventh is a male body.<sup>1</sup> It is logical that such statements would be made in the course of a patriarchal social- and religious history. It becomes a problem, however, if they are then preserved, cherished and taught uncritically in the tradition. For example, I remember two Western monks in the early 80's who naively confided to me: "I feel so sorry for you. I have finally succeeded in becoming a man in this life. But you can pray for a male incarnation in your next life." In 1977 Nepal I met a Western nun who beamingly exclaimed that she was praying for a male reincarnation, and she was born in Hollywood, California!

#### **Nuns and monks**

Monks receive much more financial support than nuns in many buddhist countries in Asia. Donations to monks are believed to be more effective, so that rich women and men are more likely to finance monks than nuns since they believe they will thus receive more points on their "karma" account and create good conditions for a happy future.

There are many well-known reasons why nuns have a lower position in the buddhist world. Buddha himself first founded an order for monks and repeatedly rejected proposals to establish an order for nuns, agreeing to it only after continued pressure. His cousin and personal servant Ananda stood up for the needs of women in the face of great resistance. When

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<sup>1</sup> Eight positive characteristics for the spiritual path: a long life, beauty, a good family of origin, wealth, trustworthy speech, power and reputation, a male incarnation with a strong intellect and body. In the meantime, some Tibetan teachers interpret the last characteristic gender-neutrally as "self-confidence and courage to stand up publicly." Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey formulated it that way at the end of the 1970s in Dharamsala.

Buddha's foster-mother and aunt Mahapajapati went to him to request that he found an order for nuns she was accompanied by a large group of noblewomen dressed in orange robes with shaven heads, and the Buddha's cousin and personal attendant Ananda supported them. A Western buddhist teacher interpreted the women's march to Buddha as the first demonstration for equal rights for women. Women today can still learn from their sisters two and a half thousand years ago that they will not get anything handed to them on a silver platter. Nevertheless, they can still reach their goals in the face of resistance if they unite and present their interests as a group, and they can usually reckon with some support from the male side.

In accordance with the social structure of the time, which required that women be subordinated to men, Buddha placed the newly-founded nuns' order under the control of the monks. Then and now every monastery is responsible for its own administration; the abbot is elected, and decisions are made by consensus. Nunneries are generally directed by an abbess but the subordination of the nuns to the monks is prescribed in eight additional rules for fully ordained nuns.<sup>2</sup> The rules of life for the ordained nuns (S. Bhikshuni) and monks (S. Bhikshu) are found in the Vinaya.<sup>3</sup> The monks have about 250 rules to abide by, which support their mindfulness. Fully-ordained nuns have about 100 additional rules to follow.

At the time Buddhism was introduced in the Asian world there were many fully ordained nuns and later many active nunneries everywhere. Today, because of the traditional rule that along with monks nuns with many years of practice participate in the full ordination of nuns, there are no fully-ordained nuns in many countries, only novices or de facto nuns.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> One of the eight additional nun's rules states as follows: "A Bhikshuni, even if she has been ordained for 100 years, upon meeting a newly-ordained Bhiksu, must stand up, bow to him and pay him tribute." Compare, Sakyadhita. Töchter des Buddha, Diederichs 1993. p. 223, N. 2. (Daughters of the Buddha. Snow Lion 1998).

In Tibetan nunneries in Indian exile and in the West there is a rule which is strange for Western women, that nunneries must have a "male abbess", who sometimes lives on the grounds with the nuns, along with his servants. Since up until now there are almost no fully-ordained Tibetan nuns, a monk has this position. When we visited a Gelug-nunnery in Dharamsala in October 1997, the nuns did not seem to have any problem with this. They were happy that they had a qualified teacher to instruct them.

<sup>3</sup> Vinaya, the collection of the Buddha's instructions on Ethics. Compare Sakyadhita, supra Ch. 4 and No. 70, p.312, on lines of tradition and literature (in German), and Daughters of the Buddha, supra, Ch. 4(in English).

<sup>4</sup> Some researchers assume that there were once fully-ordained nuns (s. bhikshuni) in Tibet but that the line died out. Others believe that there were always only novices (s. sramanerika)in Tibet because novices can be ordained by monks alone. Full-ordination,

Women do not participate in the ordination of men, on the other hand. The argument is such: This has nothing to do with discrimination or preference for one sex over the other, but simply reflects the historical precedence: the first monks were ordained by a man, the historical Buddha; later a group of several monks who had been ordained for many years took further colleagues into their group. The first women were also ordained by a group of men, and later, experienced nuns joined the ordination ceremony. Today, nuns can only be fully-ordained in those lands in which there are still fully-ordained nuns who can carry out the ritual with their spiritual brothers.

Since the 1980's, Western and Asian novices and de-facto-nuns, supported by their different traditions, have been turning to the large nunneries in Taiwan and Korea in order to receive full ordination. After ten years, they can then participate in the full ordination of nuns in their own traditions.<sup>5</sup> In 1987 in Bodhgaya the First International Conference on Buddhist Nuns was held, inspired and organized by Western and Asian women together. Thirteen years later there were more than 200 fully ordained nuns in Sri Lanka in the year 2000, ordained with support of a sufficient number of their monk brothers. This comes close to a miracle, as the Theravada Monks' Sangha in Sri Lanka is very conservative.

Sometimes Lamas of the Tibetan tradition justify preferential treatment of monks with the argument that those who have more rules to observe, lead a more valuable life. They refer with such comments to the fact that there are no fully-ordained nuns in Tibet, only novices, who had fewer rules to follow than fully-ordained monks. Female novices observe 36 rules, just like their male colleagues who are not fully-ordained. We could also conclude from the foregoing argument that fully-ordained nuns are more valuable than monks, since they take more vows. But the argument is not applied here. It seems only to be used where it strengthens the existing patriarchal structures.

The assumption that life as a woman has less value than that of a man has many consequences. The study, preservation and passing on of the

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however, requires both monks and fully-ordained nuns. According to these researchers, since ten fully-ordained nuns have never made the difficult journey from India to Tibet, there never existed a lineage of fully ordained Bhikshunis in Tibet.

<sup>5</sup> Compare, *Daughters of the Buddha*, supra. In 1991 a large ordination ceremony for women took place in the Chinese Cloister of the Thousand Buddhas south of Los Angeles. Many Western nuns of different traditions participated, including the German-born Theravada-Nun Ayya Khema. By the year 2000 there are more than 200 fully ordained Bhiskhunis in Sri Lanka.

teachings were and are above all under male control in all Buddhist countries, even though there were always well-known female practitioners and teachers. Women play a role only in those countries in which there are strong nun orders, such as Taiwan and Korea. It is not a coincidence that those are also the countries in which Western ideas of equal rights, which accompanied economic development, have a particularly strong influence.

Male domination of the teachings has visible consequences on many levels, above all in connection with a tradition of accepted indifference to gender roles or even a clear contempt for women. One result, for example, is the open or subtle, conscious or unconscious disdain on the part of monks and of the male laity for women, whether nuns or laywomen. There are still too many who more or less look down on women and at the same time express the opinion that the question of gender is unimportant.

A further consequence is the lack of female models. Buddhist temples and centers contain almost no pictures or images of female Buddhas and Bodhisattvas or of Arhantis and female masters, and there are only a few stories told and cherished about famous female practitioners of the past. When questioned, some teachers stress that there were always and everywhere famous female practitioners and teachers but that the male members who passed down the traditional information had obviously less interest in writing these stories or passing them down.<sup>6</sup>

This male-biased slant of the teachings and exercises has a particularly grave effect on male practitioners. If women have only a very small or no role at all in an institution, then the life-experiences of women and their possibly different approach to life will not be considered or be a subject of discussion. Even today, the teachings and practices of Buddhism in all traditions are mainly focused on the male practitioner – the male model, the traditional male role conditioning.

At the risk of oversimplifying, we are talking about the following values: celibacy and asceticism, the life of a monk, methodical exercises,

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<sup>6</sup> Compare Tsultrim Allione, *Women of Wisdom* (Snow Lion 2000). Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment*, supra describes the contribution of women to the development of the tantric tradition of Buddhism in India. Her very optimistic research report ends, however, with the 12th century. From that time onwards, the men were also successful in reducing the role of women in the tantric Buddhist tradition to that of useful assistants who help the men to awaken energies in specific exercises but who otherwise are to stay in the background.

traditional scriptures and studies, hierarchies and schools, monasteries and lineages. The path leads away from everyday life and into the pure world of the mind. It is all about abstract ideas, an absolute level of reality, an ideal of perfection which the (male) superhuman will reach at some later point.

Women's values are often exactly the opposite: in the forefront are relationships and life in this world; small, daily things and activities; personal experiences; personal paths and communion in groups. This path leads into life. It is about the body, the earth and a feeling of completeness here and now. Practitioners (and teachers) are people with weaknesses, flaws and breaks, who concern themselves with the relative level of concrete life.

Religious movements and in general societies are generally lively when the so-called "female values" are seen and valued. They are present in all religions, more or less, and they inspire many women and men. Female values can only develop and come out of their shadow existence, however, when women regain their inner power and begin to play a role in institutions.

Things are changing: Buddhist institutions in the West also reflect more and more our views and values, although they have been and still are strongly influenced by the cultural and social values of their respective Asian traditions. Some women and men in the West take their Western background seriously and experiment with democratic rules, trying to accept and work with the differing values of the two genders. We oversimplify, however, if we simply play out democracy and equal rights in the West against the feudalistic and patriarchal structures of Buddhism. Religious institutions contain hierarchical elements per se, and hierarchies of power are clearly existing in democratic institutions and societies as well. Nevertheless, Buddhism in the West will stay in its exotic corner as long as its traditional ceremonies and feudal hierarchies from the Dark Ages are in the foreground.

### **What is a woman?**

What is a woman? What is a "real" woman? The Mahayana-tradition argues in the teachings of dependent arising as follows: all dependent phenomena arise on the basis of four factors: causes, parts, conditions

and the labelling – the concept which one attributes to a phenomena.<sup>7</sup> These exist for a time and then cease to exist, when the conditions are no longer there. The phenomenon woman or phenomenon man function exactly in the same way. Women and men “arise” dependent upon these four factors, and they also change again according to the respective conditions.

### **Dependent arising**

What are the causes for existence as a woman? If one argues according to biology, the cause for a female body is the XX-pair of chromosomes. If the chromosome pair is XY, a male body arises.

What are the elements of a woman? Biologically speaking, a female body has certain primary and secondary sexual characteristics. Women with a beard and men with breasts differ from the norm and could be the subject of jokes, ridicule or rejection. It is not difficult to know about biological differences. It is much more difficult to notice and understand their social consequences.

What are the conditions for existence as a woman? Every society we know of has more or less clearly defined gender roles for their female and male members, which are based on particular economic and social structures and cultural values. A distinction should be made between general conditions – social structure, religious values, psychological mechanisms – and the concept of a woman, because there always were and always can be differing expectations surrounding a female existence, even under similar social and cultural conditions.

Role models for women (and men) today are no longer as rigid as they were in earlier times, so that the spectrum of possible behaviors has widened. For example, when we look at fashion as an expression of changing gender roles, we see that women are allowed to adapt themselves to the male model. They can wear pants, suits, blazers and

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<sup>7</sup> With these four conditions, all phenomena can be analyzed and their dependent arising determined. In time, one recognizes that everything – people, things, situations, thoughts, feelings, social structures, etc. – arise conditionally, exist for a time and then pass away, when the conditions are no longer at hand. It is very enlightening to fundamentally examine central concepts such as family, relationship, work, etc. Once we have discovered their relativity, we do not suffer so when we cannot or will not follow the expectations of others, whether individuals or groups, to live in a certain way. Compare Geshe Rabten, *The Essential Nectar: Meditation on the Buddhist Path* (Wisdom Pub. 1992); Dalai Lama, *Yoga des Geistes*, pp. 49 et seq. (Dharma Edition, Hamburg 1989) (in German).

ties, and they can cut their hair short. The adaptation of men to the role of women, however, is still taboo. Men in colourful dresses or suits, in high heels with a fresh permanent in their hair, with red lips and eye shadow, are only applauded in transvestite shows.

When gender roles are less strict, this does not automatically make us more free. Women and men are feeling increasingly insecure, recoiling into their private lives and only concerning themselves with their individual development. At the end, every woman must find out for herself which role expectations and which ideas about being a woman she will actually accept and she can live by. She must see for herself which ideas she finds inspiring, how she wants to live and what she actually can live.

The good news of the teachings of dependent arising for women: A woman is whatever she does, says and thinks at a specific time. It depends upon her point of orientation. As long as we believe in the existence somewhere of the "true being" of a "real" woman (or man), we tend to follow (mostly male) authorities and to believe their teachings in patriarchal historical writings, religion and psychotherapy, that men are the subject of history and that "real" women stand supportingly by them – clever and charming and, if at all possible, in the background. Eve was born from Adam's rib; women are "the dark continent" (Sigmund Freud), and "they do not know what they want" (Jaques Lacan).

If we apply the teachings of dependent arising to categories such as woman, man, family, relationship, work, society, etc., we are greatly relieved to find that there can clearly be no "real" women and men because female and male roles arise dependent upon particular social and cultural conditions and values, stay a certain time and then quickly change again. A large part of the suffering in relationships today arises because women and men are either clinging to old roles: They are believing there is something like a "real" man or woman which they want to find, or they are thinking up new models with which they put themselves and others under pressure.

### **The emptiness trap**

Some clever women and men avoid even thinking about gender roles with the claim that "since no true being of women or men exists, gender roles are unimportant." Even the Dalai Lama rejected this argument in a discussion about sexism in Buddhism with Western teachers. He said that

it is not correct to ignore discrimination by referring to emptiness.<sup>8</sup> We live in time and space and we must deal with our social and cultural situation. A well-known buddhist lay practitioner from Vietnam suggested during a panel discussion about Buddhism and Democracy in Berlin, that “we can meditate on emptiness and experience it. That is the absolute level of reality. But we still live on the relative level of reality, in time and space, and have a particular point of view which we must be faithful to, knowing at the same time that everything can change again.”<sup>9</sup> When we understand better the relative conditions which influence our thinking, speaking and behaving, we also know the areas we have to work with.

## **Women and Men**

Today many women and men are experimenting with their relationships. They are trying to find a model which is neither based on subordination nor on adaptation. The model of two different sexes and genders leaves ample room for different behaviour and different values on the part of both sexes which are both valid. This open attitude is very compatible with the buddhist view of dependent arising: everything changes, including the gender roles. The great task of our times is to recognize the differences between the genders, to accept them and to live with their equal validity. This task is not easy and to a certain extent very painful, since old certainties are destroyed.

The French philosopher Luce Irigaray even held the opinion that we can only deal productively with any kind of difference – for example with people of other cultures – when woman and man can perceive and accept each other as different but of equal value.<sup>10</sup>

As long as we think in categories of sex and gender, as long as our self-image, emotional patterns and behavior strategies are shaped by our biological sex and social gender, it is necessary that we become aware of this shaping. We will be conscious of this only when we carefully observe it, exactly perceive it and take it seriously. Only then can we dissolve that

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<sup>8</sup> First Western Buddhist Teachers Conference, Dharamsala, India, March 1993. Compare Note 1, Foreword.

<sup>9</sup> Mr. Pham during the panel discussion “Buddhism and Democracy” with Asian and German Buddhists living in Berlin, on November 13, 1997, as part of the conference “Dialogue among the Cultures”, which was held in Berlin on November 12-14 1997, under the patronage of the German Federal President, Roman Herzog.

<sup>10</sup> Compare Irigaray, *Genealogie supra*, pp. 291, 316- 317 (German) and *Sexes and Genealogies, supra* (English).

which causes suffering and retain or practice anew what leads to happiness for all concerned.

We will not transcend our social conditioning as women and men by ignoring it, even though many believe that and say "but we're all androgynous; we all have male and female qualities in us. Let's just be humans." Every approach which ignores "actually existing" gender conditioning is in danger of either supporting the old hierarchical differences or promoting the adaptation of the female model to that of the male.

It will be a lot of work to examine statements regarding that which is "generally human" in light of this model. Many "diagnoses and therapies" of Buddhism have been developed on the model of the male practitioner and put into the hands of the "general" human without reflection or comment. Many women, with their depressions, their helper syndromes and their feelings of being unable to cope, wonder why they cannot find themselves in the Buddhist scriptures. There, the discussion is always about angry, extroverted people who are advised to develop patience, to look inward and to love their neighbors like themselves.

One of the contributions of Western Buddhism will be hopefully be to perceive, reflect and comment upon the differences between women and men on the level of their self-images, emotional strategies and patterns of behavior.