

The Feminine in Buddhism

The following is a report of a one-day conference held at Providence Zen Center in June, 1983 on "The Feminine in Zen Buddhism." This and the Naropa Institute conferences of the previous two summers have been among the few public forums to focus on women's roles in American Buddhism. Excerpts from some of the talks at this conference were published in the Winter 1983 issue of Kahawai, Journal of Women and Zen.

A few of the first generation of American women Buddhist teachers, uniting the Vipassana tradition and Japanese and Korean Zen traditions, came together for an all-day conference at the Providence Zen Center on Saturday, June 11, 1983. Over 70 guests joined the PZC family for a relaxed and friendly day of lectures, workshops, and an informal lunch by the pond.

Jacqueline Schwartz, a Vipassana teacher from the Insight Meditation Society, opened the program with a guided meditation.

Power and integrity were key points in the talk given by Jacqueline Schwartz. She said she finds herself in the position of wanting to help empower women. "What the Dharma has to offer to ourselves and to power is integrity, i.e. freedom from greed, ignorance, and delusion... In the moment of awareness, we are free of these." She told a story about a woman teacher from India who travels by herself a great deal, in a country and culture where this is not very acceptable for women. Asked how she dealt with people who would limit her, this teacher replied, "I just de-authorize them!"

The afternoon featured workshops run by five speakers. In Maurine Freedgood Roshi's group the participants were asked to speak to the question, "How do you act with compassion and wisdom in your everyday, practical life?" During the hour of discussion, Roshi answered many personal questions about whether to live at a Zen Center or not, having patience with oneself—always striking the heart of the

question—and questioner.

Trudy Goodman, a child psychotherapist and Zen student, led the workshop on "Work and Family Life." "The whole question of family life is the work of lineage and transmission..." "Finding our lineage and deciding what it is that we want to transmit is an important step." "Our lineage is not something that only happens in beautiful calligraphies in the Dharma room, starting with the Buddha and ending with the Zen Master. It's in our family albums and our family photographs right now..." In a very moving ritual, she chanted the names of many important women in her life, adding after each name a Japanese honorific. "Practice and work are not something that we impose on ourselves so that we have to be someone other than who we are. If we take a really good look at ourselves, we can try to find work which expresses who we are."

Susan Murcott's "Sexuality and Buddhism" workshop provided a format for people to discuss the difficulties they encountered with sexuality in Buddhist communities. "In some Zen communities," she said, "there has been an inability to speak openly about sexuality." One participant summed up the workshop, saying, "Zen practice needs to integrate, not repress, our very real needs for intimacy in various ways, and open discussion should be encouraged in community life."

Barbara Rhodes gave some of the background of the Providence Zen Center community in the workshop on "Community Living." Zen Master Seung Sahn came from a monastic system, where monks or nuns lived together and had a regular daily practice. For the first time in his life he encouraged lay people to live together under one roof. "In a very simple way community living—in supporting a spiritual practice—helps you let go of your personal opinions and desires and helps you to be exposed to many different ideas. It's fuel to learn about yourself." Group members aired their concerns about problems of families living with single people, and how to create the time and energy to nurture a marriage.



l. to r. Barbara Rhodes, Jacqueline Schwartz, Susan Murcott and Maurine Freedgood Roshi.

Jacqueline Schwartz led the workshop on "Empowerment and Personal Acceptance." Group members were asked to mention qualities that they had been working on that empowered them and difficulties which were still ongoing.

Susan Murcott delivered the closing talk on "The Feminine in Buddhism." She was concerned with the "male-oriented imagery, myth and teaching in our Zen form," because "we live (to some extent) according to the myths we choose..." "Much can be gained from immersing oneself in the practice of an inherited tradition. But we have the power, even the responsibility, especially as the first Buddhist generation in the West, to shape our own forms, to translate and interpret from that inheritance in the context of our own culture, creating a practice that truly fits." "I've sat zazen for years in the tropics with a gentle old man. I've sat zazen with the heavy Rinzaï style of no sleep and bitter cold. It's all Zen. It doesn't matter. We can shape our style."

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Maurine Freedgood Roshi of the Cambridge Buddhist Association gave a powerful opening talk. Some quotes follow. "Within our own time...and in our own American culture, we are making a work of art...we must know our backgrounds—Korean, Japanese, or Theravadin—and have been trained in them thoroughly, and then we will be free to make our own American expression, either as men or women."

"We are not here to imitate each other. One of the frightening things I see sometimes is people who are destroying differences. What a pity. To reduce everything to a sameness in the cause of equality is foolish. We are here to speak about the feminine in Buddhism, which in no way excludes the masculine."

Roshi, who has been a concert pianist for many years, strode back and forth in front of the audience as she answered questions. The audience, which included a number of men, responded with lively attention and laughter.

When someone asked, "Roshi, does your spouse meditate?" she replied, "No, he does not. Once upon a time I was away at sesshin and somebody said, 'Does your family engage in this?' And I said somewhat shamefacedly, 'I'm sorry; they do not.' And Soen Roshi (her teacher) jumped up and said, 'One in the family is enough!'"

Master Dharma Teacher Barbara Rhodes gave a talk on "Nurturing Ourselves and Our Families." With some delightful stories about her own life, she talked of the many important teachers she has had, who helped her accept both the masculine and the feminine in herself. She said, "Nurturing ourselves (and our families) is hard. We can't nurture ourselves unless we know who we are, and we can't know ourselves unless we let ourselves be. That can come about through sitting practice, but it also means opening up to the teachers that are here right now, whether they are Zen Masters or not." In conclusion, she said, "Find that state of mind where we are no longer comparing, no longer feeling like a self, but being with what we are experiencing."

On September 15 and 16, 1984, the Providence Zen Center will be hosting a two-day conference on the role of women in the evolution of American Buddhism. The conference will focus on their contributions, hopes, problems, and potential, and will include talks, group discussion, work, and practice together. Dharma Teacher Suzanne Bowman, conference organizer, said that so far, the following have accepted the invitation to come and speak: Maurine Freedgood Roshi, Toni Packer Sensei, Ruth Denison, Jan Chosen Soule Sensei, Jacqueline Schwartz, and Master Dharma Teacher Barbara Rhodes. More women teachers are being contacted. If you are interested in attending, reserve these dates on your calendar and send your suggestions for the conference to Suzanne Bowman, c/o Providence Zen Center, 528 Pound Road, Cumberland, RI 02864.

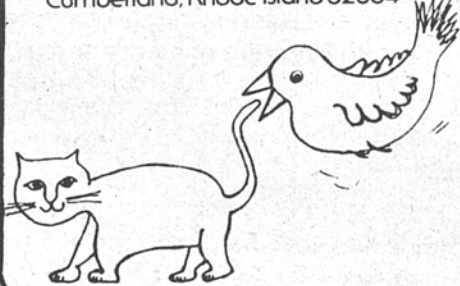
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Bodhisattva

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as separate from anything. Only completely perceive; believe in what you have already. You are already Buddha. Just give yourself to everything.

We make hindrances for ourselves. We also make "The entire universe is suffering." What does it mean to ask, "How can I save all people?" There is a story about one of Buddha's disciples. One day, as he was meditating, this man had an intuition that the Kapila Kingdom would be destroyed by a war in seven days. He wanted desperately to stop that war. He said to Buddha, "Do you know that next week many of your people are going to be killed?"

"Yes."
 "Then why don't you save them?"
 "I can't."
 "But you have magical powers. Why can't you save them?"
 But Buddha said, his mind not moving at all, "You can't make merited karma disappear."
 But Buddha said, his mind not moving at all, "You can't make merited karma disappear."

Then the man did an incredible thing with his wisdom and power. He shrunk the whole kingdom, put them in a small bowl and took them up to a high heaven where it was very safe. After seven days when he thought it was safe, he brought the bowl back to earth. But when he took the cover off and looked inside, he saw that the miniature country had been destroyed by a miniature war.

Buddha's Enlightenment Day—1983

*In deep night—cannot see green tree.
 In deep mountain—cannot hear bird's song.
 In deep mind—only complete stillness.
 Then why does the star sparkle in space?
 Why is the sky blue by day and dark at night?
 Who made that?*

*If you have eyes but no light—cannot see.
 If you have ears but no air—cannot hear.
 If you have nose but no wind—cannot smell.
 You and something make everything.
 Subject plus object equal Enlightenment.
 Not special. Very simple.*

*You plus sky equal what?
 You plus dog equal what?
 You plus sugar equal what?
 You already understand.
 But understanding cannot help you.
 Must become yours!*

*What is Yours?
 Did you get it?
 The stone lion is scornful.
 Heh! Heh! Heh!
 Calendar reads December 8.
 Buddha's Enlightenment for you.*

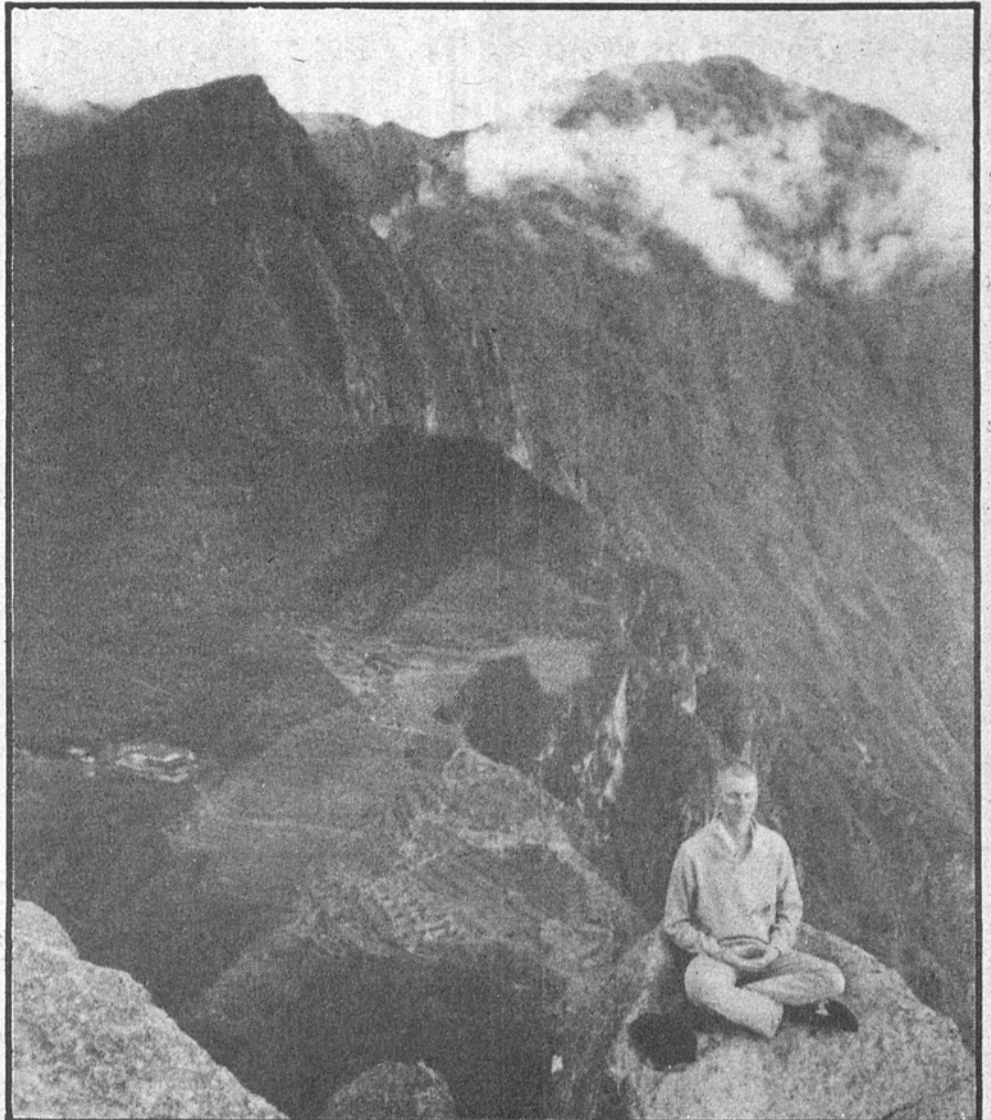
by Zen Master Seung Sahn

understand his life.

This is why the question, "How can I keep this mind that wants to help?" impressed me so much. The student who asked it really wanted to learn. We don't have to worry about losing that mind, because we already have it. Complete sincerity is all that's necessary. As we practice more, we learn to see what helping means. I can see now that there is no way we can intellectually grasp how to save all beings from suffering. It's a waste of time even to try to measure whether it's possible. As Soen Sa Nim says, "I hope you soon get enlightenment and save all beings from suffering." I grab that once in a while, but we don't even have to think about it. We just have to try becoming empty mind and get correct view and correct practice.

At work I am trying to become more of a correct nurse. Last week I saw how I could be doing more, and it's on such a simple scale. I often think of work as being 5 or 6 hours of busy work, and then an hour or so of free time. I've started to see what nonsense that is. I get paid for 8 hours, so why don't I give the nursing home the whole 8 hours? If I don't do that at work, there's no way I'm doing it anywhere else. So last week I started to do that—be more of a correct nurse. That night driving home was a complete experience. I wasn't feeling guilty about anything; I was just driving home. I knew I had done a good job that day. Having that mind, you are ready for the next step. If someone appears in front of your car, you're ready to put on the brakes. You have to give yourself to each situation: correct view, correct practice.

I work with a lot of under-educated people at the nursing home. Some of them steal and cheat and fight each other. It would be ridiculous for me to preach to them. Some of the people know I'm a Zen teacher, but they're too embarrassed to ask about it. A lot of them think it's cultish or that I'm a real goody-goody. So when a girl at work asked me for advice one day, I was excited about it, but I tried not to say too much. She is a hyperactive sort of person and gets things confused, so I told her to try taking just 10 minutes a day to relax and



Diana Clark

SOUTH AMERICAN TEACHING TOUR

In November Soen Sa Nim and his traveling staff visited Mexico City to meet with a number of professional and business people interested in Zen practice. Their host was Michelle Barnett, sister of Robin Selby, one of Soen Sa Nim's New York students. The group visited the famed Pyramid of the Sun in Teotihuacan, among other sightseeing highlights.

Hosts in Rio de Janeiro were Linda and Albano Carvalho, who have started a Zen group, soon to become a Zen Center. Soen Sa Nim gave a public talk in Rio and then flew to Sao Paulo, one of Brazil's largest cities, "a blend of Europe and the Orient" according to trip director Diana Clark, who is staying in Rio to coordinate development of the Brazilian Zen program. Soen Sa Nim was met at the airport by an enthusiastic crowd of Koreans, including the Korean consulate. He visited the only Korean Buddhist temple in Sao Paulo, and gave several well-attended public talks and a retreat at the Tai Chi Academy of Roque Severino. Brazilian Zen students have translated Dropping Ashes on the Buddha into Portuguese and are looking for a publisher.

reflect on her life a little, to see what's happening. She said, "Yeah, that's a good idea." The next day as I walked by her I overheard her complaining to somebody about how she always got confused. I said, "Well, don't you remember what I told you to do?" She had completely forgotten what I had said!

It was good teaching for me. I was really hoping that finally, after working at this place for eight years, somebody was going to ask me for advice and get helped by it. I used to be on the day shift and people still come to me and say, "You were the best nurse we ever had on the day shift. I wish you would come back." Then I realize that my practice has helped people just by making the quality of life a little better.

It's our lazy mind that makes this idea of saving all people something difficult. We don't want to realize that we can do it, and that it's right in front of us. As long as we think it's something far away that only special people can do, we don't take the responsibility for doing it. If you can completely be here right now and give energy to your practice, you can do it any

time. Don't try to measure how long you will live, or how big is the universe. It's completely impossible.

When I was little I used to think there must be a wall somewhere with nothing on the other side. How could life and time be infinite? We don't understand where we're going and where we come from, and we don't need to. We just need (claps her hands) to hear that, then we know. So keep listening. ■

Feminine
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The day ended with a brief practice representing each of the Buddhist schools at the conference: A loving kindness meditation led by Jacqueline Schwartz, the four great vows, chanted by Roshi in Japanese, and the four great vows in English led by Barbara Rhodes as all held hands in a circle. After the conference, many people lingered on the grounds and stayed for dinner. The relaxed feeling from earlier in the day remained. Many people asked that the conference be repeated, perhaps for an entire weekend next time. ■



Mike Olak

I was very relieved when I first heard that story, because it pointed out that even special magical powers can't help people if they aren't ready. This story taught me that we don't need to develop special abilities or perform miracles. Becoming a Billy Graham isn't going to help, either. Even if you have tremendous charisma, the other person has to want to practice. Buddha said, "You can hand somebody medicine but you can't make him take it. Soen Sa Nim has said, "The only way to make karma disappear is for your consciousness to become empty; then there are no miracles, only correct view and correct practice. This is the true miracle."

We often hear: "correct view, correct practice." But until our mind completely digests it and knows there is nothing beyond that, we aren't going to be able to do what we can in this lifetime. There is a story about a man in India who came from a caste that slaughtered cattle. His grandfather did it, his father did it. His job was to hit the cattle over the head with a hammer and kill them. But his mind was very pure. He always asked himself, "What is this? Why am I...?" He hated the job, but he had this question all the time. One day, at the instant he killed a cow, he got enlightenment. From the outside, his life looked miserable; all day long he slaughtered sentient beings. But his outside action wasn't important; it was how he kept his mind. He wanted to help people and



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