



WOMEN AND BUDDHISM IN AMERICA

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I am very happy to be here at this women's conference. I am also very happy to see some men here. I am always at a loss for titles for my talks. Because I don't prepare talks, I never know what is going to come through. So it was easiest to take the theme of the conference, then maybe I could say anything!

The truth is I don't know anything about women and Buddhism in America. The only woman I know is this one. So when I talk, I can only talk about myself, and I truthfully think this self is any one of us. Whatever we do and look at is really self looking at self.

Whenever we look at a thing from a certain vantage point, it is to the exclusion of all other aspects of that thing. That means, it is not the total aspect of a thing. When we simply talk as women in the relative world, it would not be the Buddhist practice or way. After all, what Shakymuni revealed to us is the way out of discrimination and conflict. Therefore he was a liberator and not a person who gave us more problems.

In fact, when we look at the universe or what we call the Dharma or ultimate reality, there are no problems. All problems are man- or woman- or human-made, and therefore they can only be resolved by us. We have individual karma, we also have collective karma, and we must look at it. If we think we have a problem, we must look at it from various positions or dimensions. One of the communication problems of the world is people talking from different dimensions or levels and assuming they are all speaking on the same level.

I went to a conference once at Roanoke College in Virginia as one of three speakers. The conference theme was "Beyond Apathy." (The organizers first called it 'Apathy' and then thought that was too dismal.) There was a sequestered meeting for three days and on the last day it was open to the general student body. In the closed meeting were 20 panelists sitting in a circle. For two days I merely listened to the papers that the various panelists brought, about their understanding of apathy in universities. The panel was made up of local clergy, politicians and business people as well as faculty from the university. The leader was the dean of the chapel.

After two days they noticed I hadn't said a word the whole time, so they asked me if I had anything to say. I said, my preparations for this conference were quite different from yours. I noticed

you all brought well-prepared papers. I do just the opposite. I sit in the morning in my room and try to forget everything that's on my mind. So I came here with an empty mind. I have no opinions or views. I really don't even know what apathy is. But I was able to hear you all talking and what I hear is this: you're talking this way and that you don't really meet.

The complaints were that the businessman's children had left home. This was during the hippie time and they were not interested in his business. They despised his big home and Cadillac and felt threatened. The politician, who was a woman, also had complaints because the students were not interested in her particular form of politics. And so it went, with the churches and so forth.

Of course most of the panelists lived in town and slept in their homes. Several other speakers had requested hotel rooms. I was offered a little apartment in a dormitory and spent my time with the students, having my meals with them. I found them a most lively and interested bunch. Of course, they took great notice of me in (monk's) outfit. We had wonderful conversations together and I did not have the impression that they were apathetic.

I told the panel this and said what I had noticed was that the students did not share the panelist's particular programs. They have their own ideas and programs. Maybe you should look at their ideas and see if there is anything you can share, and not feel threatened by the fact that they don't buy your religious and political programs. In fact, I said, your children that have run away from home are living in our Zen centers! So I could tell them a little bit of what some of their kids were really into.

I think the problems we create in the world are when we get stuck, on anything — a thing or an idea. The Buddha was in the same situation we are, faced with a religious and social structure that didn't sound right, didn't feel right to him. Also he had no role models. Therefore he went and sat alone under a tree. He even left the religious community he had joined and went out by himself.

So did Jesus. Even though we usually see Jesus nailed to the cross, I tell Christians, "You forget that he spent 40 days in the desert. What did he do there? He meditated, he was alone."

Every Zen master has emphatically told us or is telling us that only your own inner reality must be looked at. Do not seek anything extra. Every knowledge, every science, every wisdom we have in this world in fact comes out of meditation. If you look at anything at all in this world and trace it to its source, you must end up doing zazen.

That's the path I've taken. In my case it evolved naturally. I spontaneously meditated as a child. About 17 or 18 years ago I learned about the form of zazen. I did not come to zazen because I was searching, but as a result of experiences I had. I found the way of the Buddha to be identical with my experiences and I could relate to it, but



not so much in the way it has been developed by various traditions and cultures.

I always have a tendency to go back to the root. You can do this in stages. Perhaps first you examine the root of your own lineage or tradition. Somehow I have always felt closer to the Chinese masters than the ones in my own lineage, which was Japanese. I see the beginning of Zen as having occurred in China. I can relate to that because we have the same situation here.

The way is the inner path. When we look at something, we must view it from at least two positions. One that we naturally do is the one of the relative world, what we call the common ordinary world of phenomena or manifestation. Most people only take this position, ignorant of the fact of the underlying essence (the truth). I don't have to tell you this because most of you as practicing Buddhists know very well what we call ultimate reality, or the absolute or the unborn or the Buddha nature. We all know in the absolute there is no discernment whatsoever. Nothing is distinguished. There is equality.

So how can the Buddha, who profoundly realized this and gave us a living example, be said to have made rules that discriminate between this and that? The discrimination and the scriptures which give us problems were made by others, later. The beginnings of women's liberation were probably during Buddha's time. You know that in the pre-Buddhist era women had no place in society. They were wives meant to bear sons to their husbands. If they didn't their husband was free to take another wife that might bear him sons, because the prevailing view was that only a son could close the dead man's eyes. In the Hindu tradition, the law of Manu stated that a woman was first subject to the father, next to the husband, and when the husband died, to her son.

It was at that time and place in history that the Buddha appeared and liberated women from his bondage. In the Dharma there is no discrimination of sexes or of anything. However, in the world of form, where this essence manifests as form, there are differences. There are men and women and millions of other manifested forms. What we have to see is that which is equal and free of discrimination, is simultaneously in its manifested form, equal and different.

So the Buddha liberated women. It's

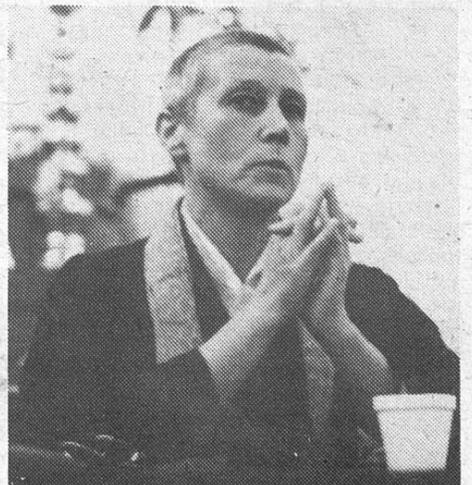
said that he always addressed his followers with something like "Men and women of good families", or maybe in correct English it would be "Ladies and gentlemen". It was probably highly unusual for any spiritual leader of his time to do this.

He ordained women, but not readily at first. He declined not because he considered them incapable but because he foresaw physical problems for women traveling around the countryside at that time in India. Because there were no established monasteries, there was no housing for monks. There were many practical reasons. Merely out of a desire to protect women and not to expose women to hardship, Buddha first took that position.

However, our beloved Ananda, his cousin, had a great heart for women. He saw the Buddha's foster mother and his wife appear with bloody feet and shaved



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heads having walked a great distance to join the Buddha and his sangha. After the Buddha had declined to ordain them, Ananda in his wisdom sought another approach. He asked the Buddha, "Venerable lord, are women capable of reaching Nirvana and arhatship?" And the Buddha said: "Yes, they are capable of highest attainment." Then Ananda made a second request for ordaining women, and the Buddha admitted his foster mother and his wife as the first ordained nuns to the sangha.

He gave them a special set of rules which were based on the conditions of the sangha at that time and place. It is said these rules were made for the



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protection of the men; not because Buddha thought the women were weak, but because men were weak. All the rules that evolved in Buddha's lifetime were not made by him when he first came out of his enlightenment. Later he said, "This human kind needs a set of rules to live by."

First he proclaimed the truth, the Dharma, the equality of all things, the impermanence of all things, and cause and effect. Then as they were living together as a sangha, being incompleting human beings, certain situations arose. So the rules and regulations that we have today for sangha were made at a specific time for specific circumstances.

If you study Buddhism deeply, in the Prajna Paramita Sutra (the great Perfection of Wisdom Sutra which is one of the texts we study in the Zen tradition) you will find that the Buddha instructs his disciples (which he calls Bodhisattvas, Mahasattvas, the great enlightened beings, which is really every one of you, because you are on the same path whether you are aware of it or not), he instructs them this way: A Bodhisattva does not have the notion of a person or a being. A Bodhisattva does not take his stand on anything.

So what does this mean for us? We should not have the notion of a person, being a woman or a man. We should not take our stand on anything! That is the highest path, the path of transcendental wisdom. Of course, the Buddha also taught in accordance with the needs and realizations of individuals. We have many examples, parables, of how he taught. We also know that the Buddha did not only teach with words. He gave koans, a practice to do.

If you read sutras like the Diamond Sutra, you see that Buddha had a way of asking a question again and again. For instance in the Surangama Sutra, he asked Ananda, "Is the light of the lamp coming to your eye, or is your eye going to the light of the lamp? Is the sound of this bell going to your ears, or does your ear go to the sound?" If we went to know anything at all, we must go beyond the thing.

If we really want to know what Buddhism is for America, we have to sit down and forget both the old and the new. We all come, those of us who practice, from some tradition. And for the first time in the history of Buddhism, I think, we have all the Buddhist traditions in one country. In the United States we have the possibility of exploring and experiencing every tradition that has been developed in Buddhism — the Tibetan, the Chinese, the Korean, and so forth. If you don't have them here, come to Los Angeles! We have all of them.

That is also partly what is confusing to a lot of us, that we hear various interpretations. We see many different

robes and hear chanting in many different languages. So we have to sit down and look at ourselves. When you are in one tradition, there is a tendency to think, "This is the way." This is one of the hindrances in this country, that on the one hand we have all these traditions, which is a benefit and can be a great education, but on the other hand, there is a tendency among these teachers (which of course is their calling) to continue their lineage and their tradition. I understand this very deeply and was involved in it myself. I see their need to continue that lineage and tradition.

But what is tradition? How do we get tradition? By breaking traditions, right? Why do we have Rinzai Zen? Because Rinzai was different from Unmon and Joshu and other masters. They were flourishing schools of Zen and all established themselves as a tradition. When you look at how Buddhist monks dress, you can see that in every country they have evolved their own style of robe or interpretation of what the Buddha designated as the proper clothing for a monk. (Incidentally, when I say monk, I mean both male and female monks.) Therefore we must look at ourselves and see what is most appropriate for us.

In terms of women and society, when we look at history as a whole, I think more change has occurred in the last 50 years than in the 2500 before. I think the changes are more and more rapid. When I was a young art student, I always had a difficult time relating to ancient ways of painting, like the Venetian School or the Renaissance. I could see it, but somehow I did not feel very close to it. The same is true in religion. Religion that remains in the churches and the scriptures is useless, because it's dead.

We have to look at spirituality and the law of Manu that was for women in the Hindu world. Maybe some of the regulations that were made after the Buddha's death need to be investigated from the spiritual point of view, not from the letter but from the spirit of the law. The Buddha showed us the way. He really did not lay down anything. He did not even establish a monastery. At the end of his life he said, if you want to do that you can, but that was not my calling.

So each one of us is free to live the kind of life that we each want to make for ourselves. But freedom does not mean just willfully to do anything that comes into our minds. It is to be free from being stuck in the conditioned world, free to follow the Dharma, to be one with the Dharma. When the Buddha awakened from his great samadhi, he said, "Now I have found the deathless. I am the Dharma. When you see the Dharma, you see me. And when you see me, you see the Dharma."

It is my personal endeavor to live up to that as closely as I can. What that means in my life is to become transparent. There is no greater joy than to strip yourself of all the stuff, to take virtually everything off. You can only do that when you have realized that which is indestructible — your true nature. The true nature cannot be talked down or up, or destroyed or enhanced by anything. Therefore you can become vulnerable, because that which can be destroyed should go. That's what you want to get rid of, so let them take it.

I don't care what the Theravadin monks or the books say about women. I have to live my life in my own conscience, and that has to be aligned with the universe. That's the job I have to do in this life. That is my responsibility to myself, but in reality that means I am taking responsibility for all of you. That is the full meaning of the four Bodhisattva vows we chant. "I vow to save all sentient beings" — that is impossible if you look at it merely from the relative point of view.

When you realize yourself truly, you have realized all. Then you can stand up and say like Jesus said, "I am the Way. No one comes to truth but through me." That means the Dharma. The Buddha also said, "I am the Dharma. Between heaven and earth I am the only authority." Each one of you should get yourself in the position where you realize this and can manifest it in the world. Then we are free from notions of man and woman. We'll be humans that appear as male or female.

Language is a very important factor in our conditioning. I don't know where the English word 'woman' comes from, maybe from 'wooving man'? I don't know if there is another language where the word for woman or female contains a reference to man. There's usually a separate word for it. So you see perhaps the minds of Americans or English-speaking people are more conditioned, or are conditioned in a different way than in other countries.

I teach in Europe and part of my teaching is in German. I realized just recently when I give teishos on koans, that in English the koans are broken up into introduction, the case, the commentary and verse. The case in German is called 'bispiel'. "Spiel" is to play and 'bi' means next to it or beside it. Also in German when we speak of living — 'laubenspiel zag auf' — life plays itself off. There is always the word 'play' in it.

I had a great awakening in the middle of a talk and said to all these German people, "Do you realize you have forgotten how to play? Now life is a drudgery. You work hard and you have problems. A koan is like another play that runs alongside of my play. Here's another example, another play, is how



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we should preface all koans. Life is like this. We are here in the world to play with the universe, to enjoy our true nature."

When we enter Zen practice it seems in the beginning to be so difficult, particularly in my case when I trained with strong young men in the Rinzai tradition. For some masters that tradition has a lot of power and shouting and beating. That's the general impression people have of Rinzai tradition.

One of our major sesshins is Rohatsu in December, which is very severe with very little sleep and a lot of sitting. There were about 50 people in the zendo and I had practiced at that time maybe 2 or 3 years, when my master asked me to take the jikki jitsu position. I had done this many times before, but this was my first Rohatsu responsibility. I will never forget the first time I stood up from my seat, holding the kyosaku, the stick, in my hands and prepared to make my rounds through the zendo.

In the Rinzai monastery if there's the slightest move or even the sound of breathing, the jikki jitsu shouts. I reflected on myself. All my role models then were male, but I didn't feel like I could do that many times. It didn't feel right to me. It wasn't my nature. I didn't have the kind of musculature and bone and psychic structure that was required for that kind of action.

So what could I do? I was a woman. Was there any possibility in this for a woman? How would a woman do this? I didn't have any women to look at, so I had to look at myself.

While I was standing there I was totally helpless. Then it came to me. It is necessary to be firm and strong inside, but my nature is gentle and kind, so be both. Be gentle and kind on the outside but firm and strong inside, because you cannot let 50 people down on the third day when they all get crazy, confused, tired or want to give up. You have to uphold them not with shouting around the zendo but with your own awareness and strength, your own spiritual strength and practice.

I'm telling you this because from then on I knew my way very clearly within my own limits. As a human being and a woman I have limits, and I have to work within them, because after all, the Dharma also manifests as the female as well as the male.

I would love to go more into this, but unfortunately our time is up. Thank you.

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