

☯ The Balancing of American Buddhism ☯

The Saturday Night Panel Discussion

(Always a high point of the conference, the panel discussion gave participants the chance to engage all four teachers at once in a lively and thoughtful way. Because of limited space, we can present just some of the highlights. For a full transcript of the discussion, contact the Director of the Providence Zen Center.)

Q: I feel a little disappointed in the content of the conference so far. I've come to the last two and it's been important to me in exploring the new edges of Buddhism in America. My interpretation of this conference is that it's a continuation of the last two years of talking about the new edge in Buddhism and feminism. Why was feminism not mentioned today? Is it tomorrow's agenda?

"Buddhism as we live it is not a dead structure or a dogma."

Prabhasa Dharma

Ruth Denison: I didn't go into it because I referred to the bottom line, the teachings of the Buddha, how he gave pure ground rules and how we can follow them and perhaps manifest them more easily and with a little haste. If we attend to the teachings, feminism is not a separate issue any more. At the same time, going to the source is not overlooking or ruling out the details. As a teacher I represent the Women's Sangha in Berkeley and there too, we always go to the basic teachings and relate them to daily problems which may arise. If you have a special issue or question within feminism, I can go into that. In general, if we are well-equipped and see balance, insight and wisdom growing in ourselves, we will be getting a lot of answers from our own insides and our own security.

Q: Going into almost every training center in this country, there's a man teacher in charge. It's pretty easy to see a certain favoritism for a man, and an approach to power that is not equilateral. It's not a sharing or consensus approach, it's very hierarchal.

Prabhasa Dharma: We cannot generalize about that because there are cases where women have become the leaders of centers. In my own case, I had to just follow my own strongly arising intuition and wisdom. There is such a thing as cutting the umbilical cord. Go away from the teacher when you are ready, and be on your own. A lot of people are afraid of that. Maybe there isn't enough experience or trust in oneself to do that.

Based on reality, there have to be male and female teachers. They're evolving. They're here. If we look at the relative world, there are male and female bodies and different energies and different ways of expressing that. But basically, Zen doesn't deal with issues, but with the individual, to make you free whether you are a man or a woman so that you can be the master of yourself and give your own answers to your questions. Zen practice is to live by what you have learned. You have to have willpower and trust and the energy you get from meditation. Then you can do anything in this world.

Q: I'd like to give the analogy of the racial situation. There's no doubt that specific blacks were absolutely mistreated by Americans and other white countries a hundred years ago. But we blame them for being stupid, when in fact it was illegal a hundred years ago for a black person to get an education. The situation in most countries now is that women do have that power and they don't seem very anxious to continue that power.

Prabhasa Dharma: You must first deal with yourself, your own problem, and get clear about that. Then you'll be able to help others, but not before that. That is what I did. For something like 18 years I practiced very hard. I didn't go out much to teach or try to do something about the world. We are taught by the Buddha first to understand the nature of self and the world, and to realize they are not two different things. When that has occurred, then we are more useful to the world. You can help just by being present.

We have overly sophisticated the discriminating consciousness. We try to do everything with that consciousness, politically,

socially, whatever. It is quite correct that we have compassion for others, but it's not true compassion if it's based on discrimination, even the discrimination of "me" and "other." Compassion is important, but it's dangerous to act too soon.

Joanna Macy: I'd like to add a historical note. I see Buddhism as a tradition having suffered under several thousand years of patriarchy. As a movement of Buddhism, in Vipassana there is a return, a balancing within the Buddhadharmas to seeing more clearly the male-dominated, hierarchal patterns that had arisen in the last two millennia. You can trace this specifically in historical developments.

This is happening in other cultures too. I've been working with the Sarvodaya movement, a Buddhist-inspired community development program in South Asia, very big in about 5000 villages. Women are coming to the fore in this movement. There is also a conscious return, which scholars are participating in, to reclaim the role that women had in early pre-Theravadin Buddhism. It's a little harder than in Christianity, because there are misogynist passages written right into the sutras, but you can show by language and text analysis that these were later additions.



RUTH DENISON and PRABHASA DHARMA

Photo by Sonia Alexander

I want to say that as American women opening to the Dharma, we're participating in something beyond our own little scenarios. I believe we are finding ourselves reclaiming the equality of the sexes in the Buddhadharmas. We're participating in a balancing of Buddhism that has great historic significance, and I think we can take a sense of amplitude in that. We're not just fighting our own little battles here, but we're righting or balancing history. It feels good! (Laughter)

children and this creature. It's a totally different approach to the science fiction of outer space.

The Dharma has these two aspects. Male, active, manifesting, matter—these are the labels we have put on this forward creating movement. The same movement when it goes back, within, home, one could label as spiritual or dissolving matter. It is usually associated with the feminine and even called negative or death. So the universe is always in balance. When it has manifested

"Bad teacher, good teacher, that's a teacher."

Pema Chodron: If you look at the history of mankind, there's always been this natural evolution of balancing. Things get out of balance, people feel it, then things get balanced again. It keeps going back and forth, in longer or shorter periods of time. It's not just at the personal level that so many women feel things are out of balance. Things are out of balance! (Laughter) It's not just some personal little weight that you are carrying around because someone is out to get you. It's a historical time when actually it's very positive.

so much matter, it has to go back and provide the balance, that is a more feminine energy in the forefront. It shouldn't mean feminism. It should mean that we're all participating in it.

We have to let go of this over-producing, matter kind of hardware world. In the world of computers, you have to have hardware and software. (Laughter) So it's not out of balance, but our viewing of it that's out of balance. This is what the Buddha gave us the right and power to do. He said, "The Dharma is in you just as it is in me." So you begin to act and live in it.

Q: One of the issues that's most painful to talk about, for women who go through training, is having had male teachers. Although the Buddhist teachings are fair and equal, all teachers do not manifest this teaching in a fair way. All teachers do not challenge the biases within and the male ego they carry with them, because they are not challenged by their teachers to do so. I and maybe other women too have had to leave teachers because of direct and indirect abuse.

Pema Chodron: So what did you do?

Q: I left.

Pema Chodron: And then? You're still alive.

Q: And I'm continuing to practice. But there are people who are teaching, who taught me, who practiced for 20 years and still ripped me off.

Prabhasa Dharma: What you were saying about your personal story, I deeply feel with you because I went through that myself. I'm here as an example of what one can do with that. Maybe you can do something different with it. I don't think we can make rules about this to solve the problem. That is why we always go so deep and say that basically, we must become whole and healed. Then we find our role and will evolve as a teacher, no matter what we do, even if we become bakers or something, we will be a teacher. We will find a way to manifest what we most want to be. This is what I believe in.

Q: Ideally all things are in balance. But that person is still causing pain to other people. I can heal and go to practice, but what happens to the others?

Pema Chodron: I think it's a question of how you relate to injustice in the world, any injustice, even if it's someone hurting your cat. How do you relate to things not being right? It brings up self-doubt. Otherwise, why wouldn't you just blast out in a nonaggressive way? (Laughter) If you have confidence.

Q: This is your Buddha teacher. You've taken vows with this person. This person is experienced and has more sitting wisdom, intuition coming forth than you. And this person does something to you. Certainly you grow a lot, but I don't think you ever get to be sure.

Pema Chodron: When you stand in the hallway outside this room, you can see the calligraphy that says, Bodhidharma sat for nine years and in spite, he killed the Buddha. Then you say, that's what it means.

Q: The problem of isolation is one I've felt most acutely. I've come to a conference like this specifically to hear things brought up because I spend a lot of my time alone. I'm a single mother with two small children. It's actually a battle to make that time to sit every day. Last year Jan Chozen spoke with such beautiful humor about being in the bathroom and having a kid pounding on the door. It's enough to run into a situation of daily life, never mind injustice, when you have no community around you to say, "Yes, we felt this too and what you've gone through is very troubling." I wonder why we're afraid to say the name of a person who's causing trouble. Somehow we need to have a network.

Prabhasa Dharma: There are already a lot of women teachers in this country. If you have problems with men teachers, just go to the women teachers.

Q: And let them continue using people? Just ignore them and go away?

Prabhasa Dharma: One thing I've learned in this country is that businesses go out of business when you don't buy their product. (Laughter and applause) But we have to be very, very careful. The Buddha said, hatred is not appeased by hatred. If we find something wrong and take the same measures and attitudes and weapons to strike back, then we're no better. We're in the same club.

Q: Which guru or rinpoche or whatever is doing this? We'll put up a list here. I think that would be great. If people have had these experiences, I think it should be out immediately. We all love truth, don't we? That's why we're here. Seriously, let's look the Buddha right in the face. I'm not saying you shouldn't have compassion, but does that mean you have compassion for the cat who eats the mouse, and for the mouse who dies, so you stand by and watch? "Ah, nature! Dukha!" When does one take political action, and when does one sit and meditate?

Ruth Denison: On such issues, one can use one's intelligence and the quality of observing closely, which has kind of an objective attitude. First you get a bit of distance. Then you will be able to see in that space what possibility there is for you to directly touch that problem. That is my way of dealing with problems. I have a lot of criticism about injustice, but I don't allow myself to be contaminated by any reaction to it.

Some kind of objectivity is necessary because I allow myself to be too much involved with criticism, I am too much in the process and have no energy left to see my opportunity for helping. As Prabhava already said, because of that momentary impact, it's impossible for you to help or do anything without accumulating some other karma or contaminating your heart with anger. We need an immediate relaxing and pacifying. I fall back to the First Noble Truth. Why do you think the Buddha spoke as a result of his enlightenment? To give a truth, the truth of suffering and imperfection and what we have to go through.

If you can, just keep the energies alive and awake and train a bit more for what is necessary, until you are more capable. Most of why we are not able to get into this, but stand back and talk about injustice, is we're not capable or we doubt ourselves. As Pema said, strike! Provided you have immaculately investigated your possible effectiveness so that you can now not just grossly enter that event, but sensitively. It doesn't need to be big compassion, but just a little. Be modest, take the crumbs and don't wait for the whole loaf, or until it is your enlightenment. We will never make it. Meanwhile, we will be destroyed. Use the moment to moment opportunity with the possibilities you have.

I can give you many little examples where I took the crumbs and brought about changes in attitude about wrong-doing in my neighbors and students. I am very involved in environmental help. Two nights a week, at least, I have this suitcase full of requests for help from environmental societies. I cannot give to every one. And if I cannot, I will sit down and write, "I appreciate your efforts in diminishing the suffering of our friends the animals, or for the protection of the wilderness," and so on. At least I can give encouragement. That is a little crumb that I can do.

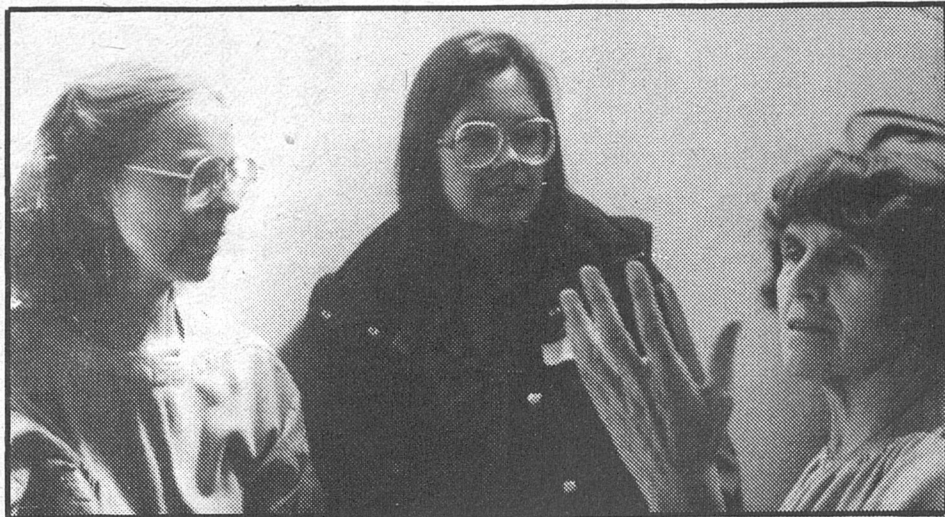
We have to work with what's here, and to incessantly, untiringly work and sleep only 3-4 hours. Work hard. Only this way will we get over the evil here. Train your mind with recollection. See where you can be practical. Never function on generalities and the hypothetical. That doesn't mean you can't look at issues and deal with them on an intellectual level—don't let this aspect slip. Too much involvement will take away energies from looking at things the way they really are. Then you might have had a chance but you didn't see it. The world is always full of opportunity for us to help.

Think of that First Noble Truth. It is deep. The world is full of suffering and was 2500 years ago. It is more staggering now. Dukha is fat! See the place where you can help, carrying this dukha with your little love and touching. Help the mother or goddess of the earth with your crumb, your little love. I think you can produce a lot.

Q: I wanted to say something without taking anything away from what people have said about being abused by a teacher. It's been an opportunity for growth for me, to examine bad experiences with Dharma teachers and other people to whom I've given authority. What was it in me that chose someone and gave power to someone

who would abuse me in some way? What was it in my and that other person's conditioning that put us together in a place where we would use each other in that way?

It's true that if someone is a teacher, you have a right to expect them to be more responsible than you, to know more than you. Nevertheless, I have observed in myself a willingness to absolve myself of responsibilities, a naive willingness to believe that this person is something bigger than human. I've had to re-examine what is a master and what do I want from a master. Although one has a right to expect (to put it mildly) good behavior from a master, in places where there was someone to whom I have given power, I have given up responsibility for what happens in that relationship.



RUTH DENISON and interested students.

It is give and take with a teacher and no matter how badly I've been hurt, every time I've had a bad experience, I've learned. That's part of what happens with growing up and with any relationship. You get hurt and then you learn and come to terms with the ways in which you were responsible for a part of what happened. It doesn't just happen with Dharma teachers or just with women. It happens to men too. I know a lot of men who have been deeply hurt in relationships with Dharma teachers.

This kind of abuse happens when there is someone to whom a lot of power is given and someone who doesn't take responsibility. Male-female relationships, relationships with Dharma teachers, are ripe for that because of our long-term conditioning in which men have more power and are taught to use it, and women are taught to give in to it. Nonetheless, that person is a victim of the same conditioning and on some level is being hurt by what they're doing. Bad teacher, good teacher, that's a teacher. You have learned and there's some level on which you can be grateful for what has happened, when the pain goes away.

There is teaching in everything. Even when there's no abuse involved within the Dharma, the teaching process is frequently painful on some emotional level.

Joanna Macy: You have raised a point which is critically important, the connection between being victimized and understanding what power is. In this time in which we're living, particularly those of us who have such good karma as to have been exposed to the Dharma are challenged to help people within and without the Buddhasangha redefine what power is. The teachers who are abusing are often people who have been isolated and put into a position of power. It takes two to tango.

I mentioned the Sarvodaya movement. I did assertiveness training there, put in Buddhist terms. We didn't call it assertiveness training (this was just for Sri Lankan and Singaporean Buddhist women), we called it the Middle Path. (Laughter and applause) That's the middle path between belligerence and submission. We had such a good time. (Laughter) And it came right down to seeing how central is our understanding of power. The Sarvodaya movement talks about the goal of building people's power. But goodness, we don't have to buy into hierarchal understandings of what power is, because we've got the central teaching of the Lord Buddha himself, of dependent co-arising, that power is essentially relational and reciprocal.

So this is a plea for all of us now to re-think and re-image power so that we don't fall into the hierarchal games. The Dharma has clearer directions and foundations than

any other system of thought that I know about. That's why women have such a strong role to play now for all Buddhists, male or female. It's because (to use Carol Gilligan's term) we are socialized to be very sensitive to relationship.

Q: Teachers are human. We see teachers behaving in certain ways out of their human need, and they're a little mad at us because they think we have too high expectations. I'm glad to hear you say that new students and new teachers can alter that structure. How do you view the role of teachers? Sometimes I think they do want it all ways, like yuppies, they want to be wonderful mothers and have great sex relationships and be successful in their jobs. (Laughter) How deeply do you feel you owe your students exemplary behavior?

egolessness and not having anything to hold on to. It also teaches you about the flimsiness of "us" and "them." I can see a lot of the behavior that's causing such pain as coming out of not being educated enough about that role and how to play it.

Q: Is it necessary to be "us" and "them?"

Pema Chodren: Maybe it's not necessary, but since it exists in the world, not universally, it's interesting to learn about. If there's going to be enlightened society, you have to understand these things. Then what we pass on would be enlightened rather than neurotic.

Q: What I keep hearing from all of you is, we want to study Buddhism and walk the path and teachers may oppress us, but just be more assertive and work within the system. I keep wanting to see women teachers come out and get rid of the hierarchal focus and misuse of power.

Pema Chodren: The way things change is, you work with now. Revolutions usually are replaced by something of the same nature from the other side. So the way things change, for health's sake, is to work with right now.

Q: I lived at Zen Center in San Francisco for six years. I feel there's a tremendous confusion about where a hierarchy is appropriate in a monastic life or in a student-teacher relationship. In visiting other centers, I found confusion on questions of daily life and the formal tradition in the zendo. It's very precious for people to dedicate their lives to keep it going, and for people to spend part of their lives to practice more intensely. But there's a lack of clarity and definition, and there's resistance to people leaving communities, of knowing when it's time for them to expand their practice and enter (the outside) community in a responsible clear way. Is hierarchy necessary in a monastic training situation?

Prabhava Dharma: In Japan, I ended up in a monastery with only men, because the women's monastery had too few nuns and they couldn't do full-time practice. The structure was clear and it worked well. From the outside, if you were a foreigner and not experienced in Zen, you would think that being the Roshi was a powerful role and all the monks would shake (in fear) about it. But when I was interviewed, the Roshi gave me permission to practice with the monks. It was the first time they had let a woman in, but it was not his decision alone.

He called in the head monks, five of them, to drink tea with me. I was not told that it was a test, but it was. They watched me, how I drank tea, how I related to them, then they had to give their approval. The Roshi alone could not decide that. This was totally new to me. I thought he was the all-powerful Abbot, but he had to obey the monks as much as they had to obey him. All the monks must go through different positions of responsibility in governing the monastery. It's clearly laid out.

Pema Chodren: I had had the good fortune to have a teacher who is famous for his bad behavior. (Laughter) Also he likes hierarchy a lot. We have an extremely hierarchal organization. It's interesting what that does to your mind when you're brought up in that tradition. The first thing it teaches you is that you have to be yourself. Maybe a lot of people have the misfortune to think they should copy him, but I was fortunate. I never had the opportunity to even think about imitating him because I was a nun. From the beginning I always knew it didn't have anything to do with imitating anybody.

There's nothing that you can hold on to. That's the job of the teacher to teach you that, so if they do, power to them. Then you use the world as it is.

Prabhava Dharma: Because Buddhism and the Zen tradition is a living tradition, it adapts itself everywhere, in every country. We may have to add to or change the rules. The Buddha did not start out saying there had to be 250 rules. He took situation by situation. For example, there was a monk who was the only son and he left home. In India people are married or promised early in marriage. His mother was worried that because he had become a monk, they would not have an heir to continue the family. She persuaded her son, she cried and begged

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Joanna Macy

him. "Please, let me bring your wife here. you can go into the bushes somewhere, but we need this child." So he broke the understanding that the monks had to live as celibates. Soon everyone knew what had happened. A meeting was called and a rule was made about that.

Buddhism as we live it is not a dead structure or a dogma. New situations arise and we have to find a way, a structure of how to deal with things.

Pema Chodren: In the very hierarchal sangha we have with my teacher, you learn what it means to be put into that position of hierarchy. Lots of people are put into it. It's part of your education in the sangha to play that role and find out what it feels like. Most people are extremely reluctant to take that seat, mostly because they've been criticizing "them" so long...Also there is enormous loneliness, which teaches you about

In America, it's a unique situation because we have mixed our communities, monks and laypeople practicing together. It is painful for those in training to be monks to have to do it "in public," so to speak. You have to go through a lot of steps, and you are pushed much harder because you are becoming a teacher. You should be able to do that in privacy, behind the walls of a monastery. I didn't have the luxury of that protection here. But we have a situation which is perhaps wonderful in this respect, that Zen and Vipassana and the other centers are open. Practice is available to everyone (not just monks and nuns).

This is our American situation. We'll have to call meetings where we sit down together, monks and laypeople, and decide how we're going to do this. It can't be solved by following teachers who don't have the experience of men and women together.