

A CELEBRATION OF WOMEN IN BUDDHIST PRACTICE

San Francisco Bay Area
Conference
March 14 and 15, 1987

By Julie Wester

It was clear from the beginning that this conference was to be radically different from any we had known. We had no models. Yet our shared vision was so ripe and present among us that it carried a diverse group of 12 women from varied Buddhist experiences and backgrounds through six months of intense planning. Our collaboration resulted in an essentially leaderless format which allowed Bay Area women from Zen, Tibetan and Vipassana communities to join together for two days of shared meditation practice and intimate small group conversation.

It was not surprising that such an event should emerge in the Berkeley hills, overlooking San Francisco Bay, a epicenter for the women's movement of the past 15 years. This gathering marked a coming together of women bearing within themselves the two powerful forces of grounded feminist consciousness and maturing Buddhist awareness.

It was integral to the vision that we came together as equal participants. As the meetings of the planning group progressed, it also became clear to us that our process in this small group was creating a model for the conference itself, just as the conference would become a model for future gatherings. We worked together with great intensity and ease, watching with some amazement as the leadership moved among us quite naturally, with first one, then another, speaking the words that were appropriate at any moment. It became clear that each of us had different pieces of the information and insight we needed in order to manifest the vision.

Such a conference was unprecedented: never before had women from the major

[Buddhist] traditions been called together. Would they come? As we sent out the invitations to women on Bay Area sangha mailing lists, we did not know what would happen. Weeks before the March dates, the 150 available spaces were filled. By the end, we had extended the capacity to 165 and 50 women remained on the waiting list. We were right on time.

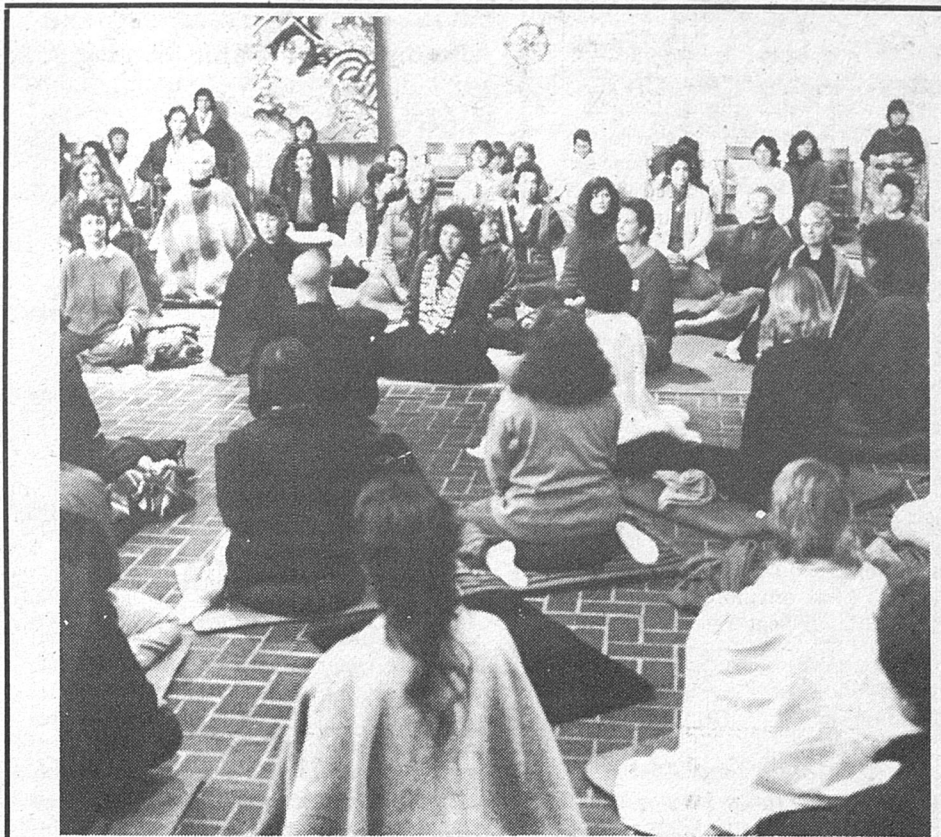
The first morning began with silent meditation, the entire group sitting together in concentric circles surrounded by bright Tibetan banners and large dakini murals recently painted by Zen practitioner and artist Mayumi Oda, a participant in the conference. The conference began as four women stood within the circle to speak of their personal spiritual journeys, modeling a depth of honesty and openness in their sharing, transmitting to the group the spirit and opportunity of the gathering. We then moved into Home Groups of 10 women each in which each woman's unique yet often familiar story could be heard. These Home Groups met together daily, allowing continuity and a building sense of community.

Two periods each day were scheduled as topic-oriented groups. Facilitators functioning primarily as participants were present in each circle, as women chose the

"We felt like pioneers"

areas of particular interest to them. The pervasive issue of authority/power was addressed in four different groups: Acknowledging Inner Authority, The Teacher-Student Relationship, Expressions of Feminine Power and Being A Spiritual Guide. Other groups addressed our relationship to Social Service And Political Action, Women's Relationship With The Natural World, Intimate Relationships/Sexuality, Forms Of Practice, Movement And Sounding, Addictive Behavior, Healing, Psychotherapy, Creativity, Right Livelihood, Money, and Intensive Practice. There were also gatherings of Mothers, Crones (older women), Lesbians and unaffiliated women (those practicing without the support of a traditional Buddhist community).

As women sat together they listened and spoke out of the silence born of deep practice. There was an aura of tremendous presence as well as respect and appreciation for the truth of each individual. We shared our questions and fears as well as our wisdom. We did not always agree. U.C. Davis art professor and conference planning committee member Cornelia Schulz described it: "This was a non-hierarchical structure, a safe container in which women could relate to each other on an equal basis, regardless of their status in their sanghas or the outside world." For women who usually function as teachers and leaders within their sanghas, it was an opportunity to hear truth spoken by other voices, as well as what was for



At the present time, a Western form of Buddhism is emerging which will reflect our culture and its values. Historically, women's experience in Buddhist tradition has been largely untold and unacknowledged. In the absence of models, we experience stress, confusion, as well as growing excitement and creative opportunity. This conference is a forum for women engaged in Buddhist practice to participate in defining the shape of Buddhism in America.

Purposes of the conference:

- to share and explore the experience of women practicing Buddhism
- to empower ourselves and each other to trust our visions and experiences
- to support each other in shaping a spiritual tradition which includes women's realities
- to provide the opportunity for community and exchange among Bay Area women engaged in the many expressions of Buddhist practice

Conference Statement

some a rare opportunity to speak openly of their own honest humanness. Others who had rarely if ever spoken were invited to give voice to their own experience.

On Saturday evening we shared a Full Moon ceremony and Sunday noon a "Ladies Luncheon and Buddhist Fashion Show" where we laughed at ourselves as women modeled traditional Zen robes, Vipassana blankets and Tibetan prostration gear.

Perhaps the primary significance of this event was that the gathering itself was an expression of the values that were being explored. This also points to a key contribution of women in the creation of new contexts for Buddhist practice in the West. There is among women an insistence on an integrated practice, one which can be embodied, which can be lived, and which honors the earth, the human body, and the experience of women. As political activist and conference participant Kathleen Deffendorf put it: "We were actually living our ideals for two days. It was amazing how

well it worked." Writing for the *Inquiring Mind*, a journal of the Vipassana community, Nelly Kaufer and Carol Newhouse said it powerfully: "For two days we embodied a new form of Buddhism in which the relative truth of feminism and the absolute truth of Buddhism supported and informed each other. We felt like pioneers."

The March conference has spawned many small on-going circles of women, as well as ongoing monthly women's sittings in the Bay Area. There are plans for seasonal gatherings on the Solstices and Equinox to again call together women from all traditions. There are tentative plans for a national conference late in the summer of 1988. To be placed on a mailing list for a future national conference, you may write to CWBP, 3832 Cerrito Avenue, Oakland, CA 94611. ☐

Julie Wester has been a student and practitioner of Vipassana meditation for 15 years, and currently leads retreats on the West Coast.



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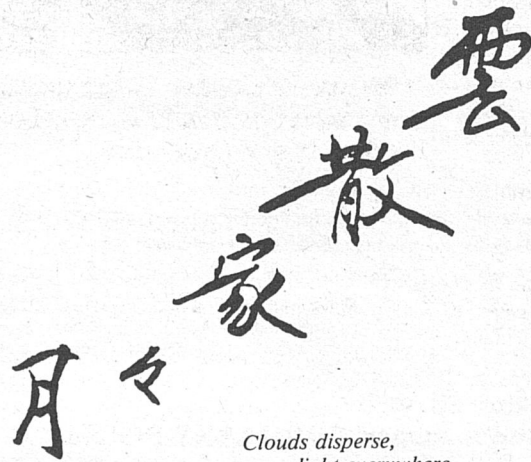
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