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Lotus Realm

A new voice for Buddhist women

Responding to the Four Sights

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MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

Dharmacharinis Viryaprabha, Kalyanaprabha
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EDITORS

Vajrapushpa and Kalyanaprabha

NEWS EDITOR Viryaprabha

REVIEWS EDITOR Vajrapushpa

PICTURE RESEARCH AND PRODUCTION Penny Morris

DESIGN AND LAYOUT Sophie Brown

COVER ILLUSTRATIONS Varaprabha

ADMINISTRATION TEAM Jackie Cole

Penny Morris, Meg St.Pierre

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LOTUS REALM *A New Voice for Buddhist Women*

"Just as in a pond of blue, red or white lotuses some lotuses grow in the water, some rest on the water's surface and some come right up out of the water..."

So the ancient texts describe the Buddha's vision of humanity – individuals struggling to grow beyond the circumstances of their births towards that complete unfoldment which is Enlightenment.

A symbol of spiritual growth and development, the image of the lotus is known throughout Buddhist tradition. We think not only of the Buddha's great vision after his Enlightenment, but of Mahapajapati Gotami joyfully taking up the eight 'rules of training' 'like a wreath of blue lotus'; and we are reminded of the many Bodhisattva figures of the Mahayana tradition, young, beautiful, bedecked with jewels and seated on lotus thrones.

The realm of the lotus is the realm where spiritual values reign supreme: where all the circumstances of life, both individual and collective, conduce to spiritual development. Buddhist tradition depicts such a realm in a mythical way in its descriptions of the archetypal Pure Land, Sukhavati.

In 1967 Sangharakshita founded a new Buddhist Movement, the **Friends of the Western Buddhist Order** (FWBO or TBMSG as it is known in India). At its heart is the **Western Buddhist Order**, a spiritual community of men and women committed to furthering their own and others' spiritual development through traditional practices of meditation, devotion, study and the development of spiritual friendship, within the context of a germinal New Society which the Movement seeks to bring into being. Order members, Mitras (those wishing to further their involvement with the Movement and the Order) and Friends (those who participate in any way in the activities of the FWBO) often live together in residential men's or women's communities; work together in team-based Right Livelihood businesses and co-operate together to run rural retreat Centres and city-based Buddhist Centres where people can come into contact with the Dharma. Some of those involved in the movement are concerned with the development of the arts; whilst others – especially in India – are involved in social work projects.

In living out Buddhist values in the midst of contemporary society, members of the Western Buddhist Order and their friends hope not only to bring about radical change within themselves, but also to effect a change in contemporary life through their efforts to bring into being a 'lotus realm'.

Since the time of the Buddha women have Gone for Refuge to the Three Jewels, living a life committed to the practice of the Dharma. However, their numbers have been few (in comparison to men) and records of their lives and realizations even fewer.

The technological and other changes in the modern world have made it more possible than ever before for women to take up the challenge of spiritual life. Dharmacharinis, women members of the Western Buddhist Order, who have participated fully with their Dharma-brothers in pioneering this new Buddhist Movement, have gained considerable experience in the leading of the spiritual life under modern conditions. It is this experience which they hope to share through the pages of this magazine – for the benefit and interest of all who may choose to read it.

Old Age, Disease and Death...

OLD AGE, DISEASE AND DEATH – these facts of life stung the young prince Siddhartha into radical action. Inspired by the example of a wandering holy man, he left the comfort and security of his home to go in search of 'the deathless.' According to Buddhist tradition, of course, he found it – after six years of struggle – in his experience of Enlightenment.

'a safe refuge'
'a cool cave'
'the further shore'

It is not just awareness of the inevitable deterioration and eventual destruction of the body that goads us into seeking something else. Human suffering in all its forms – whether our own or that of others – poses us a question that begs a solution.

I have spent quite a lot of the last few weeks immersed in nineteenth century Europe where the Napoleonic wars are slaughtering young men by the hundreds of thousands, and hundreds of thousands of peasants suffer pillage, loss of home, land, family and so on. In his great novel, *War and Peace*, Tolstoy poses the question again and again: how is it that supposedly Christian people who espouse Christ's message of love are willing to perpetrate such cruelties against one another?

War, of course, is with us all the time in various parts of the globe and represents an extreme of violence and suffering which, nevertheless, for some people, becomes a means to learning compassion – as it was for the ancient king Ashoka, and for the modern poet Wilfred Owen. Owen wanted his poetry to communicate something of 'war, the pity of war, the pity war distils.'

For women, war usually means loss of loved ones. Bereavement, too, is for some the catalyst which causes us to go forth from our old life and seek out that something which at last can be

relied upon as a sure refuge. The Buddha sometimes spoke of the state of Enlightenment as just that, 'a safe refuge', 'a cool cave', 'the further shore'.

Here in the northern hemisphere Autumn with her lovely colours is beckoning us towards Winter. We cannot avoid those colder, darker days, but we can meet them knowing that it is in the cold dark earth of the bleak and frosty season that the seeds of Spring lie hidden. □

Kalyanaprabha

RESPONDING TO THE FOUR SIGHTS

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TIMES OF TRANSITION

Ratnashuri



**Ratnashuri has
been a member
of the Western
Buddhist Order
since 1983.
She is one of
currently three
women precep-
tors who perform
women's
ordinations.**

LEGEND HAS IT that when he was a young prince the Buddha went out one day with his charioteer and came across an old man frail and bent, walking with the help of a stick. As he looked at the old man, it crossed the young prince's mind that he, too, would one day become old and frail, although he was young and strong and full of vigour. The realization that he, too, was subject to ageing came as a considerable shock.

How rarely when we are young and strong do we stop to realize that one day we will be old. Even when we see our grandparents ageing, or our parents' hair turning grey before our very eyes, we remain intoxicated by our youth and think we will always be young. These old people with their wrinkles, white hair and tottering steps have nothing to do with us!

I myself am now an old woman. I am aware of my wrinkled skin and my hair turning white. I notice other changes too: I have more difficulty turning on taps and I need to sleep during the day.

Those I live with in my community at Taraloka are all twenty to thirty years younger than me. But despite my age, I can still get up in the morning with the others to meditate. I can do my share of the cooking and the various chores around the house. I attend meetings. I can still learn new things – like learning how to use a computer! But it may well take me longer than the younger members of the community. Of course physically I am weaker than the others. I am not likely to try to run and jump these days! But I do go for walks and swim, even if I am slower than I used to be.

Living with younger people helps to keep my mind alert and I am generally happy living with my community, though I would like it if there was one person who was nearer my age. My friend Aniketa came to live here for about two years. Though we come from different sides of the globe, it doesn't make any difference to our friendship. We are from a common generation and we have our common commitment to Buddhism. There is a lot of understanding between us. And of course we are both aware of the ageing process.

I notice I feel freer these days than I used to – I live more in the moment. I don't feel like thinking of what I shall be doing in a year's time – though of course I do still have to plan my time.

Some time ago I was seriously ill and underwent a major operation. I cancelled everything and concentrated on getting better. At first I was too weak to meditate properly so I chanted my mantra. I think my illness made me want to lead a more reflective life.

SUNDARI-NANDA

Of course the Buddha's disciples had to deal with the facts of life, old age, illness and so on in the same way that we do. There is a lovely story of a nun called Sundari-Nanda. (Her name means 'delighting in beauty'.) She came from the same clan as the Buddha, the Shakya clan. She joined the Order of nuns not out of genuine faith and devotion but, as Mrs Rhys Davids puts it, 'from love of her kin' – because many members of her family had already joined it! Sundari-Nanda was intoxicated by her own beauty. Apparently she was reluctant to go into the Buddha's presence because she feared he might rebuke her. When she did eventually meet him, he conjured up in front of her eyes a beautiful female figure. This gave her a tremendous shock – she was even more beautiful than Sundari-Nanda! But what was happening to this beautiful lady? She was changing before Sundari-Nanda's very eyes! Gradually her beautiful smooth skin was becoming lined, her hair going grey, her figure started to sag, her teeth became crooked and fell out, her bones stuck out, the once beautiful thick black hair was now white and wispy. Her confident stride sank to a faltering step. Her eyes, no longer bright, were dull and poor of sight. Such a shock was this to the youthful Sundari-Nanda that she realized the fact of impermanence and the suffering it can bring with it when we cling to what eventually has to change. Her mind turned to meditation and, with this as her path, she eventually became Enlightened.¹

For me, having reached the age of seventy-two, with my hair going white, my skin ageing

and wrinkled, not yet tottering, though sometimes very shaky, I am aware of the suffering of old age. I am aware of the impermanence of all life. Age, in a way, has forced me to see it. Where has my life gone? Almost, it seems, as quickly as the scene which the Buddha showed to Sundari-Nanda. How many more years have I got left? I don't know, but to me every year after my three-score-years-and-ten is a bonus. A bonus for the pursuit of Enlightenment.

SUMANA

I am encouraged in my quest by reading the poems of the early Buddhist nuns. Sumana waited until her grandmother died, caring for her until the end before she left home. Taking with her presents of carpets and shawls to give to the Order, she went to where they were staying. Hearing the Buddha preach she attained the stage of Insight called 'the fruit of no return'

balance and fell. Making that mishap a basis for reflection, she gained Arahantship or full Enlightenment. In triumph she uttered this verse:

*Far had I wandered for my daily food;
Weary with shaking limbs I reached my rest,
Leaning upon my staff, when even there
I fell to earth. Lo! all the misery
Besetting this poor mortal frame lay bare
To inward vision. Prone the body lay;
The heart of me rose up in liberty.³*

What a woman! To take advantage of a fall to gain Insight! No doubt she had worked on herself in her meditations for some time already so that this experience was like the proverbial hundredth blow that finally breaks the rock. I suspect most of us would just feel shaken by the fall and wonder if we had broken any limbs! Dhamma reminds us that when we are ready,



and asked for ordination into the order of nuns. The Buddha realized the maturity of her mind and recited these words to her (we should, perhaps, overlook the archaic translation):

*Happily rest, thou venerable dame!
Rest thee, wrapt in the cloak thyself has made.
Stilled are the passions that have raged within.
Cool art thou now, knowing Nibbana's peace.²*

DHAMMA

Now Dhamma had to wait until after her husband's death before she could go forth as he would not give his consent when alive. One day, returning from her almsround to the vihara where she lived with the other nuns, she lost her

when the fruit of our efforts has ripened, we can use any situation to gain Insight. The older we become the more urgent it becomes to gain Insight, and we need to take advantage of whatever happens.

CITTA

Citta came from the city of Rajagaha and was ordained by the Buddha's aunt, Pajapati the Gotamid.

In her old age she climbed the vulture's peak above Rajagaha and after performing some meditation exercises, she, too, became an Arahant, fully Enlightened. Reflecting on her experience, she gave utterance to this poem:

*Though I be suffering and weak, and all
My youthful spring be gone, yet have I climbed,
Leaning upon my staff, the mountain crest.
Thrown from my shoulder hangs my cloak, o'er-*
turned

*My little bowl. So 'gainst the rock I lean
And prop this self of me, and break away
The wildering gloom that long had closed me in.⁴*

Citta is no longer bound by ignorance. She has broken through to Enlightenment. She is free – free after many lifetimes, and in her old age too. What joy this brings her! One can almost see her on the crest of the mountain, her cloak thrown off her shoulder, her bowl turned upside down.

Although we are told that it is possible to gain Enlightenment at any age, it is encouraging to learn from these stories that older women really have done so. Perhaps, after all, it is not so surprising. When we are older we have had much experience of life. We are hopefully wiser than in our giddy youth. We have learnt from experience that life is full of suffering, that life is a series of changes, that life itself is change. We can have faith in the Buddha's teaching that all is impermanent, because we have had much experience that tells us that this indeed is how life is.

AMBAPALI

Ambapali, who gave her house and gardens to the Buddha and the Order, realized this in her old age. Reflecting on and studying the visible signs of impermanence of her own body she realized the same mark of impermanence in all phenomena in the whole of existence. This led her to realize not only the transience of life, but that there is no fixed, unchanging self. This realization gave her great faith in the Buddha's teaching.

A TRANSITIONAL STAGE

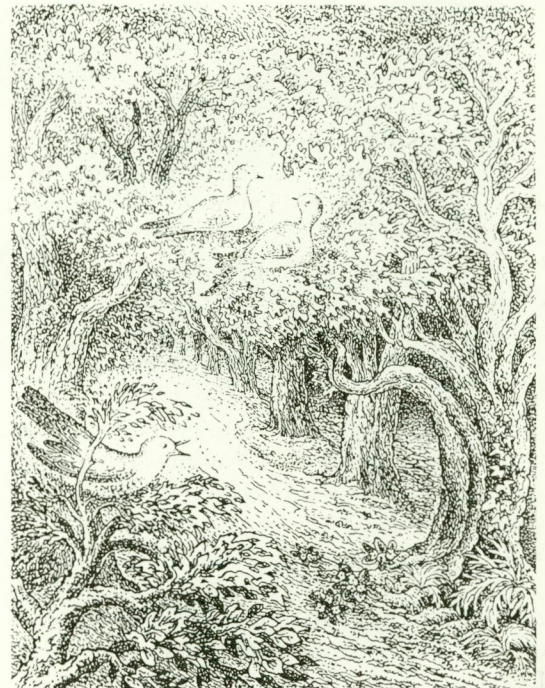
The very young who find it difficult to conceive of themselves as ever becoming old, being intoxicated with their youth and beauty, need to reflect on the indisputable fact that they will not live for ever. They will grow old as their parents and grandparents have, their bodies will no longer be supple, their skin no longer glow. Some people of course try to stem the tide of time by face-lifts or dyeing their hair to disguise the fading colour, but it makes no difference in the end. Even if they look young on the surface, such people are still ageing just as fast as those who do not fight their age. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try to keep as fit as possible in our old age. Older people as well as the young need to ensure they stay fit and healthy with a good diet.

Though anyone can die at any age due to accident, sudden illness or even murder, it is

obvious that as we grow older, death approaches ever nearer, so we would do well to use our old age to prepare for it. We can reflect on the fact that we will die so that we are able to accept it when it comes. We can reflect on the fact that we are dying every moment. We can look around and truly see the transience of the whole of life, not making any exceptions, even about ourselves.

We can think of old age as a transitional stage, a kind of 'bardo' preparing us for a new stage, a spiritual rebirth. I think we would all like that classic death when we would have time to say what we want to to our friends and relatives, to say we are sorry if we need to, and to say goodbye. But it is impossible to count on that kind of death – so why don't we make those apologies now, leaving no loose ends to our lives. It's a bit like that old idea of wearing clean underwear in case you are involved in an accident! We don't know when we are going to die. We only know that we are going to.

Old age is a more peaceful time of life. There is much less angst. Yes, we are stiffer in body than we used to be, but that doesn't stop our minds from being flexible. We can change. We know what change is about. Old age need not be all suffering if we begin to realize that all phenomena are impermanent. Then we will no longer be attached to this ageing body, no longer attached to what is mine. We will be truly free. And we can have fun. □



NOTES

1. *Poems of Early Buddhist Nuns*, transl. Mrs C.A.F. Rhys Davids, The Pali Text Society 1989, p44
2. op. cit. p15
3. op. cit. p16
4. op. cit. p21



Beyond the Pain

Sobhana

THE SECOND of Siddhartha Gautama's Four Sights – that of sickness – is graphically portrayed in Sir Edwin Arnold's epic poem, *The Light of Asia*. Siddhartha, dressed as a merchant, and his charioteer Channa, dressed as a clerk, go out by foot into the city.

"When from the roadside moaned a mournful voice...

*A stricken wretch it was, whose quivering frame,
Caught by some deadly plague, lay in the dust
Writhing, with fiery purple blotches specked:
The chill sweat beaded on his brow, his mouth
Was dragged awry with twitchings of sore pain,
The wild eyes swam with inward agony."*

Siddhartha, never having seen a sick person before, asks Channa what is wrong and Channa replies:

This is a sick man with the fit upon him.

And in answer to more questioning he goes on, ...*this comes*

*In many forms to all men; griefs and wounds
Sickness and tetter, palsies, leprosies,
Hot fevers, watery wastings, issues, blains
Be fall all flesh and enter everywhere.¹*

Here we see the Buddha-to-be learning that sickness is a fact of life. We cannot expect to be always well and healthy. Those of us who are well at the moment and have not known much ill-health cannot take for granted that this will continue – though when well, it is hard to imagine what it is like to be sick.

SICKNESS IS SUFFERING

The Buddhist texts have quite a lot to say on the topic of sickness. Sickness, after all, is a form of suffering, of unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), and *dukkha* is the first of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths.

The Buddha points to the experience of *dukkha* as the starting point for spiritual development. *Dukkha* is a universal experience. Everyone, every being, experiences pain, suffering or unsatisfactoriness.

The Buddha's teaching does not stop at *dukkha* though. In his teaching on the spiral path of conditionality we learn that in dependence upon suffering arises faith. In dependence upon faith arises joy and so on until the arising

of Knowledge and Vision of things as they Really Are – at which point we enter onto the Transcendental Path. If we reflect on it, the experience of suffering or sickness can, in fact, propel us towards the gaining of Insight.

Another reason for the Buddhist texts to have something to say on the subject of sickness is that pain and ill-health can easily cloud or weaken the mind. The mind of course is the vehicle to liberation or Enlightenment. Our spiritual life is devoted to the development of the mind, to gaining greater clarity, and therefore everything possible should be done to alleviate the dull or clouded mind. The body is the vehicle of the mind. It is "the precious human body" as Gampopa calls it, and as such needs to be taken care of.

SICKNESS IN EARLY BUDDHIST TEXTS

In the early Buddhist texts of the Pali canon there are numbers of references to illness and medicine, which Raoul Birnbaum refers to in his excellent book, *The Healing Buddha*.² There are the 'four requisites' considered necessary to those taking up the life of a Buddhist monk or nun: robes, food, lodging and medicine.³ On several occasions the Buddha suggests that the maintenance of health is especially related to a sensible and moderate diet.⁴ Five principal medicines were sanctioned for use by the monks and nuns, all of which were common dietary elements, including ghee, fresh butter, oil, honey and molasses.⁵ He advised against gluttony, suggesting to the King of Savatthi that moderating his intake of food would help him to attain a long and healthy span of life.⁶ Other methods of healing are also mentioned in the texts. Heat treatments were employed and some surgical practices were also apparently acceptable, although the only mention of them is to forbid treatments such as lancing within a distance of two finger-breadths of the private parts.⁷

Elsewhere, however, where unacceptable forms of livelihood are enumerated by the Buddha, several of these pertain to healing. Raoul Birnbaum suggests that this is not a prohibition of medicine per se, but a warning

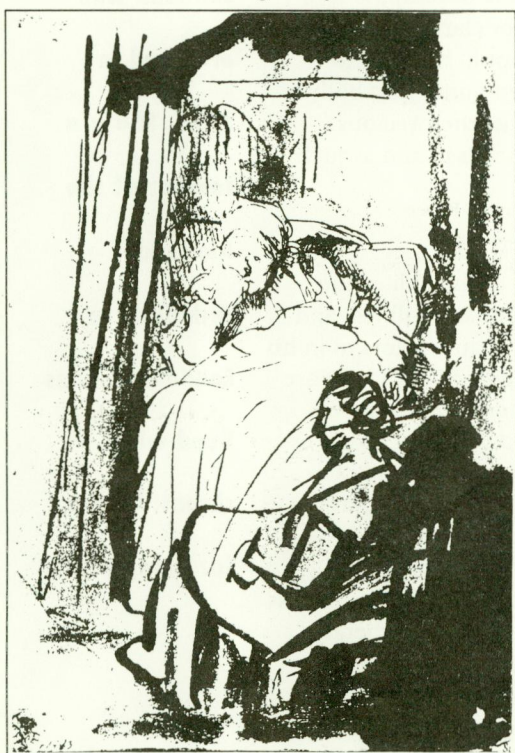


**Sobhana was
ordained in
1985. She is a
teacher of the
Alexander
Technique in
London. She has
lived with
chronic illness
for many years.**

against habitual treatment of laymen by the monks (especially for the sake of alms): a warning against becoming a doctor rather than devoting time to the spiritual exercises of Buddhist practice.⁸

It would seem that whenever the Buddha came across a monk or a nun who was incurably ill, he would give teachings on the theme of impermanence. This is what happened in the story of the monk Assaji who told the Buddha he could not enter into higher states of meditative consciousness (*dhyana*) because of breathing difficulties; and also in the case of an 'unknown novice' who lay ill, to whom Buddha posed successive questions on the nature of impermanence. In this way, being gradually led from realization to realization, finally "in that brother arose the pure and flawless eye of the Norm (so that he saw) whatsoever is of a nature to arise, all that is of a nature to cease."⁹

Birnbaum comments that, *'the Buddha's emphasis on these teachings (of impermanence) as final meditations in the earthly incarnation highlights their essential and fundamental importance as gateways to Liberation.'*¹⁰



'Woman ill in bed'
Rembrandt

If an illness could be cured, the Buddha taught the sufferer the Seven Limbs of Enlightenment (Bodhyangas) to be used as successive stages for meditation. These are: recollection or awareness; investigation of mental states; energy or vigour; rapture; tension release; concentration and tranquility.

Birnbaum quotes from the *Samyutta Nikaya*, showing that both Moggallana and Kassapa were healed by such teachings:

'Receiving and accepting the full teaching of the Seven Limbs, Kassapa, thereupon...rose up from

*that sickness. There and then that sickness of the venerable Kassapa the Great was abandoned.'*¹¹ It is even said that one time when ill, Shakyamuni Buddha asked one of his disciples to enumerate the Seven Bodhyangas to him.

The prescription of meditative exercises as a cure for sickness indicates that illnesses, according to the Buddha, are intimately connected to mental states gone awry. Certainly it would seem that, no matter what the physical manifestations of illness are, it is important to work on one's mental states, on developing and maintaining a

positive state of mind, as well as doing whatever one can to alleviate the physical symptoms. If we are in the company of a sick person we should do what we can to create a positive emotional atmosphere around them.

From the stories of the Buddha's disciples we can see that even though the experience of sickness and ill-health is undoubtedly a difficult situation, it can have positive, liberating potential. When I went to see Sangharakshita, my teacher, recently (having been in pain for almost a year), he said to me (amongst other things), "Just think of all those unskillful actions you are unable to perform." This struck me quite forcibly. What may, at face value, seem to be a disadvantageous situation could be turned around and taken advantage of from a spiritual point of view.

SICKNESS IN THE MAHAYANA

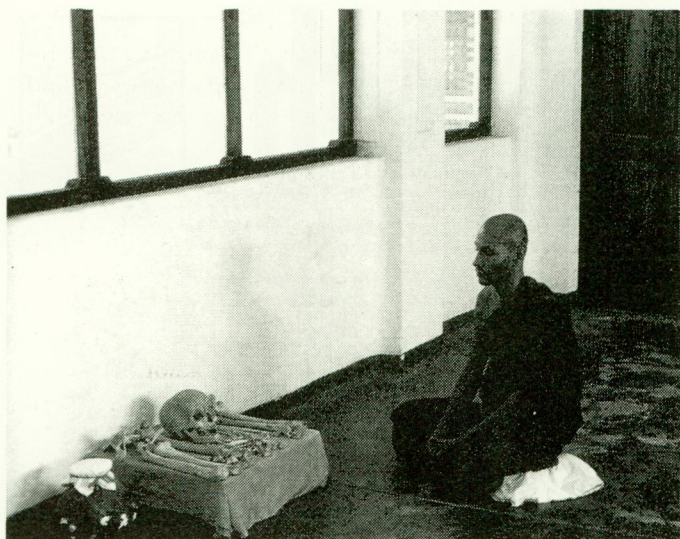
The topics of sickness, healing and medicine also appear in the Mahayana Sutras. Two chapters of the *Sutra of Golden Light* are devoted to healing and medicine. They describe how Shakyamuni, in a past life, studied all the principles of medicine in order to aid his contemporaries. In the *Vimalakirti-nirdesa*, Vimalakirti instructs the Bodhisattvas to convert the experience of illness into something positive, to generate the wholesome, the skilful in the face of suffering:

*'He should encourage his empathy for all living beings on account of his own sickness, his remembrance of suffering experienced from beginningless time, and his consciousness of working for the welfare of living beings. He should encourage him not to be distressed, but to manifest the roots of virtue, to maintain the primal purity and the lack of craving, and thus to always strive to become the king of healers, who can cure all sicknesses.'*¹²

The Buddha did not just give teachings on impermanence and the Seven Bodhyangas to those who were sick. He took a personal interest in his sick disciples. He was unfailingly kind and helped them in whatever way was appropriate.

CARING FOR ONE ANOTHER

In his lecture *A Case of Dysentery*, Sangharakshita tells the moving story of a sick monk who lay where he had fallen down in his own excrement, abandoned by the other monks. The Buddha and his attendant Ananda, fetched water, washed him and laid him on the bed.¹³ There are many ways in which we can give practical help to someone who is sick. When I am ill, ordinary everyday activities such as shopping, cooking, cleaning and washing-up can become very difficult or impossible to perform. On one occasion I had been lying in pain in bed for several days, noticing how dirty the floor in my room was and unable to do anything about it. A friend came round to visit



The transience of human life

and without a word from me and with no fuss, took out the vacuum cleaner and started hoovering. My state of mind was immediately lifted.

It is worth remembering that if someone is really ill it might not be possible for them to get to the phone and ask for help. That requires energy, effort and mobility, which the person may not have.

The monk with dysentery said to the Buddha, *'I am useless to the brethren, Lord, therefore the brethren do not care for me.'* As Sangharakshita rightly points out, this is a shocking statement. Perhaps we need to examine our own consciences in this regard. Do we forget about someone when they are ill because they are no longer working with us, no longer able to attend a meditation class, or no longer able to go to the theatre or cinema, or even to go out for a walk? In the same passage from the Pali Canon, the Buddha says to the rest of the monks: *'Bhikkhus, he who would wait on me, let him wait on the sick.'*¹⁴

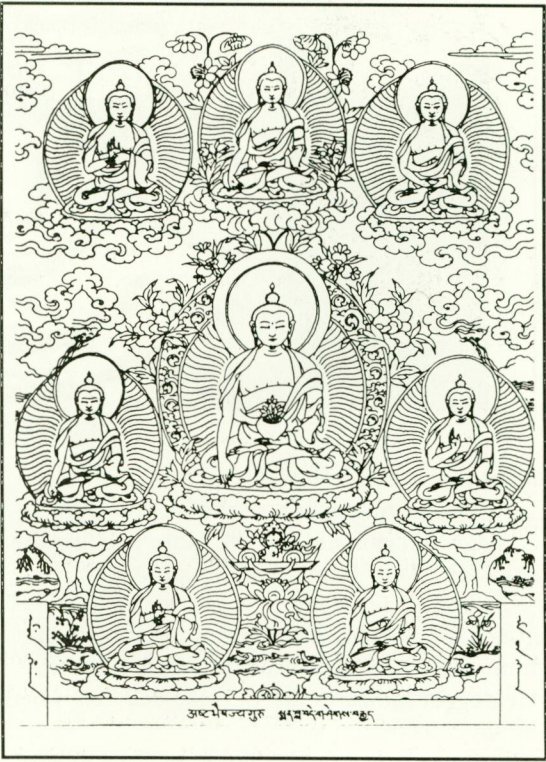
THE MEDICINE BUDDHA

Maybe we can call upon the archetypal Buddha of Healing, Bhaisajya-guru to help ourselves and others when sick. He was popular particularly in China in the 3rd-5th centuries CE. His skin is the colour of the deep blue of lapis lazuli, shimmering with intense, deep blue rays, accentuated here and there by a golden light. In his hands he holds the symbols of his healing function: the lapis lazuli bowl of amrita, the divine nectar of Enlightenment in his left hand, and the yellow myrobalan healing fruit in his right. Joining him in his Pure Land in the Eastern region are two Bodhisattvas, All-pervading Solar Radiance (Suryaprabha) and All-pervading Lunar Radiance (Chandraprabha.)

In calling upon the Buddha of Healing we can also reflect that sickness is a fact of life. We have to accept it. Let's accept the challenge and use it as an opportunity that takes us further towards higher spiritual attainment. □

NOTES

- ¹ Sir Edwin Arnold, *The Light of Asia*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971, p47-8
- ² Raoul Birnbaum, *The Healing Buddha*, Rider 1980
- ³ op. cit. p3
- ⁴ op. cit. p4
- ⁵ *Vinaya Pitaka Vol II*, transl. I.B. Horner cit. Birnbaum, p4
- ⁶ *Samyutta Nikaya, Vol I*, transl. Caroline Rhys Davids, cit. Birnbaum p4
- ⁷ *Vinaya Mahavagga, Vol XIV*, transl. I.B. Horner, cit. Birnbaum p5
- ⁸ Birnbaum, p5
- ⁹ *Book of Kindred Sayings*, transl. F.L. Woodward, cit. Birnbaum p10
- ¹⁰ Birnbaum, p10
- ¹¹ op. cit. p11
- ¹² *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti*, transl. Robert A. F. Thurman, Pennsylvania State University, 1976 p44
- ¹³ Sangharakshita, "A Case of Dysentery" in *The Buddha's Victory*, Windhorse 1991
- ¹⁴ op. cit. p63



Medicine Buddhas

Life before Death



Parami



Parami is co-chairman of FWBO Valencia, Spain. For several years she worked with people suffering from AIDS and HIV in London.

MOST OF US are probably not so ignorant of death as Prince Siddhartha was when he left the palace to visit the city, against his father's wishes, and caught his first sight of a corpse. Nevertheless, many of us are spiritually blind to the implications of death.

Our society tries, just like the father of the future Buddha, to shield us from death. We live in a cosmetic age in which we try to fight the ageing process itself. It is an age in which death has overtaken sex as the great taboo. It is thought to be too morbid even to discuss. Of course we can see death every day on the cinema screen and on television. But its treat-

ment there often skims the surface, on the one hand overstating with horrendously detailed carnage and violence, on the other robbing the situation of any honest emotional weight.

reality. The concern about reality is ultimately a concern over death. Human existence is therefore fundamentally a "Being towards death." ' In Plato's *Phaedo*, Socrates comments that: 'it is a fact, O Simmias, that true philosophers make death and dying their profession.'

DEATH AND THE FACT OF IMPERMANENCE

When Siddhartha finally had his first sighting of death (whether we take it literally as his first glimpse of a corpse or more metaphorically that he was seeing as though for the first time) his response was profound. He was so deeply affected that, when he saw a wandering mendi-



Tibetan skull dancer

ment there often skims the surface, on the one hand overstating with horrendously detailed carnage and violence, on the other robbing the situation of any honest emotional weight.

Although death is one of our society's great taboos, it has always been the subject of humanity's philosophical and religious quest. Heidegger indicates this in *Being and Time* when he suggests that:

'Human existence is reality concerned about its own

cant, he decided that he, too, would leave home and look for the truth. An understanding of death and the impermanent nature of all phenomena was the essence of his later Enlightenment experience. The Buddha described this vision in the conceptual formula known as the principle of universal conditionality. This is stated as: 'this being, that becomes: from the arising of this, that arises; this not becoming, that does not become; from the ceasing of this, that ceases.'

This means, in other words, that the universe is a series of processes, each of which arises in dependence upon a network of conditions. When the conditions which have brought about any particular process are no longer present, the process ceases. The Buddha saw the world and humanity as a complex of these inter-related processes. Impermanence is an obvious manifestation of the law of conditionality and death is the most obvious manifestation of impermanence.

DEATH AND DENIAL

Obvious or not, it is not easy to accept death – be it our own or the loss of a loved one. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, whose work in the area of thanatology has been radical, discusses five stages in the bereavement process, the final one being acceptance. She suggests that before that, most people will go through experiences of denial, anger, bargaining and depression. Much could be said about each of these stages. However, I want to concentrate on the first, the stage of denial.

It is really not surprising that, when faced with something that threatens our ego, the ego's response is to deny it. When we are told of the death of someone we love, or when we hear of the possibility of our own death, we may well simply refuse to believe it. We hear the words, we understand the meaning of the words, but our heart, our very being refuses to accept it.

FACING DEATH

When I worked as a volunteer bereavement counsellor with a large AIDS organization and ran meditation and relaxation workshops for people affected by the HIV virus, I saw people struggling with varying degrees of success to come to terms with life-threatening illnesses. I saw people reel with shock at being given a positive diagnosis. I saw mothers having to bury their children. Often I was inspired by the remarkable courage and directness with which they faced up to the shock and the grief, and, indeed by the humour and lightness which many people brought to the task. I also witnessed in others (and experienced in myself) deep reservoirs of pain and anger. Through helping others to come to terms with their bewilderment and loss, I began to deal with my own losses, which had been considerable.

It is perhaps worth emphasizing that many of the people I worked with were not dying – no more nor less than anyone else. They had been diagnosed HIV positive but many were well and healthy. The main difference was that they were aware of death and impermanence in a way which many people are simply not privileged to be. They were aware of a fact of life that is true for all of us – but which many of us manage to

ignore – the fact of our own mortality.

Simon Watney, a British writer and AIDS activist, has talked of *'the most fundamental / acknowledgement of all, our shared mortality, and our susceptibility to sickness and disease. Those of us who think of ourselves as "well" live our lives under the shadow of an immense forgetfulness.'*

This "immense forgetfulness" takes many forms. One form is to try to run away from death. Perhaps the most important thing I have learned, both from my work with people living



English cemetery angel

© Sue Fox

with potentially life-threatening diseases, and from my practice and understanding of the Dharma, is that in order to live a fully creative life we need to stop running away from death and accept it fully as part of life.

One illustration of this acceptance is to be found in a story from the Pali canon. This is the story of a woman who lived at the time of the Buddha called Kisa Gotami.

KISA GOTAMI

Kisa Gotami was a widow whose only son died. Stricken with grief and unable to accept the child's death, Kisa Gotami carried her dead baby from person to person looking for medicine to cure him. Various healers told her the same thing: *woman, your child is dead*. Distraught with grief she continued to search for help. Someone told her that Gautama the Buddha was preaching nearby. Perhaps he could help her. Kisa Gotami approached the Buddha who told her that, yes, he could help but she had first to find some mustard seed and that this must come from a house where no-one had ever died.

Kisa Gotami, overjoyed, went from house to house in search of mustard seed. At each house the same thing happened. People were very happy to be of help, but when she told them the mustard seed must come from a house where no-one had ever died, they all gave the same

reply: *the dead are many and the living are few.* Every house had the same story to tell: the dead are many and the living are few.

Finally Kisa Gotami realized the truth: that death comes to everyone. She was able to bury her dead child and return to the Buddha, becoming one of his disciples.

What exactly does Kisa Gotami accept? It is not that death goes away, nor that she stops feeling grief. She realizes that she is not alone in her suffering and that while her pain is unique and particular to her, it is not exceptional. There is a solidarity in the fact that all human beings experience loss and bereavement. Paradoxically, in the midst of her isolation she realizes her inter-connectedness with the whole human race. She realizes that death and impermanence are a necessary and inevitable part of human experience.

Kisa Gotami sees that there is a way through the suffering she experiences. It is not that death does not exist but that her view of death changes. Her perspective broadens and she is able to see death as a part of life, as part of the process of becoming. The way which she perceives is the way of the Buddha.

VIEWING DEATH – THE MIDDLE WAY

Philosophically speaking, Buddhism is a Middle Way between the poles of eternalism, the belief in a soul or an entity which continues unchanging after death, and nihilism which asserts that everything comes to an end at death. Avoiding these two extremes, the Middle Way shows that

impermanence is not only liberating but the basis for a truly spiritual and ethical life. As we experience ourselves as less fixed and static, we experience ourselves as a part of the continuing and ever-changing flux and flow of life. We experience our solidarity with all that lives and breathes, with all sentient life, and it is out of that sensitivity that we are moved to act ethically towards others.

The question of rebirth is often raised in connection with Buddhism. There is much literature dealing with the subject, often in an alarmingly simplistic way. But instead of asking, is there life after death? we should perhaps be asking is there life before death? How fully do we live our lives? How passionately do we love our fellow human beings? Or do we see them simply as a means to fulfilling our own inner emptiness and desolation? Do we care for our environment or do we continue to write cheques that will bankrupt future generations?

Psychologically speaking, the way that Kisa Gotami discovered is a Middle Way between attachment and non-involvement. If we had a deep insight into the truth of impermanence we would not become attached to people and things. We would stop seeking ultimate satisfaction from sources which cannot provide it. Neither would we cease to love. We would not abandon the world.

LIVING WITH DEATH

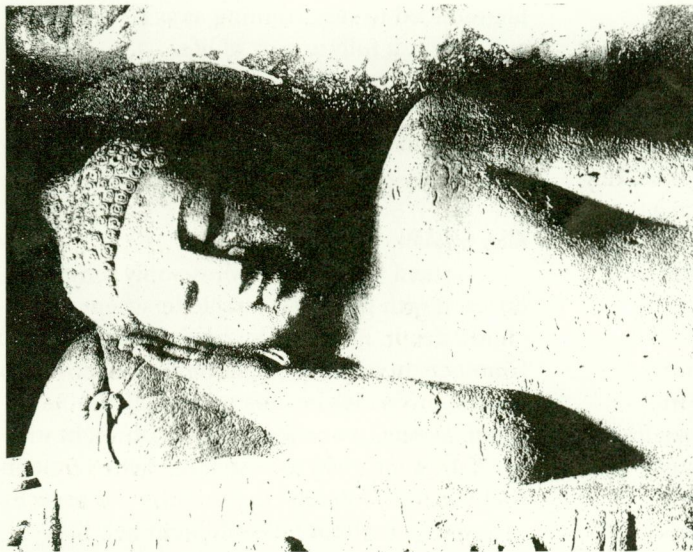
We are like Kisa Gotami. We too carry around our dead children. We are often burdened by unfinished business. We carry resentments for things that happened, or regrets for things that did not happen as we would have liked. We relive the past and feel fear about the future.

When we allow our hearts to open to the truth of impermanence, we can lay down the weight of our unfinished business and live in the moment. Many people, when faced with life-threatening illnesses, are prompted to deal with their unfinished business. This allows them to prepare for death.

It is a shame that we need to wait for such extreme circumstances to resolve situations which cause pain

to ourselves or others.

For many people AIDS has brought death out of the closet. The taboo is being broken, the subject discussed. Will we continue to run away from death, or, like the future Buddha, will we look death in the face, resolve to end suffering and strive to gain Enlightenment for the sake of sentient beings? As Buddhist practitioners we must choose the latter. □



Buddha's Parinirvana

there is both continuity and change within the process of life and death.

The truth of impermanence may seem very threatening. How much more comforting the idea of eternal bliss, resting with our creator and enjoying the benefits of having lived a good life here on earth. Without this as an ideal, why live a good life at all? On what are we to base our ethics? In fact, however, a real understanding of



Led by Inspiration

Jayaprabha

2500 YEARS AGO Siddhartha Gotama renounced everything that was holding him back from his spiritual quest: kingdom, wife, child, servants, a life of luxury and ease where old age, sickness and death were hard to see. He left them to set out on a search for the Truth that would go beyond all suffering.

The story is familiar – how Siddhartha, visiting the city that had long been forbidden him, sees for the first time an old man, a sick man and a corpse. He is deeply disturbed by these sights and finds himself reflecting long and deeply on the afflictions that beset mankind. On a fourth journey, out in his chariot, he has his fourth vision: he sees a wandering holy man with shaven head and orange robe. From his charioteer (or, as some versions tell us, from the wanderer himself) Siddhartha learns that the robed man has ‘gone forth’, he has abandoned the household life to live harmlessly with an attitude of kindness to all living beings, seeking deliverance from the rounds of birth and death. There and then, Siddhartha resolves to do the same.

His father, the King Shuddhodana, tries to dissuade him, offering to take up the Holy Life in his stead so that his son can rule. But Shuddhodana cannot promise that life will not end in death, nor that health would not one day give way to sickness, nor that age would not eventually follow on the heels of youth, nor that misfortune would not destroy present prosperity and so he fails to alter Siddhartha’s resolve. Instead his son says to him:

‘The day comes, inevitably, when we must leave this world, but what merit is there in a forced separation? A voluntary separation is far better. Death would carry me out of the world before I had reached my goal, before I had satisfied my ardour. The world is a prison: would that I could free those beings who are prisoners of desire!’

Although this story may belong to the realm of myth rather than historical fact, it gives us a moving and vivid picture of an inner realization which we, too, can experience through our spiritual lives, not just once, but over and over again.

THE TRUTH OF SUFFERING

The first step – for us as for Siddhartha – is to

recognize suffering. That is the basis for our going forth. But that is easier said than done – we are so adept at covering it up.

The fact of suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering and the path that leads away from suffering are the Four Noble Truths. We can all expect to meet suffering in our lives. There are, of course, different kinds of suffering: physical suffering, psychological suffering (as when we worry about losing something we are attached to), and metaphysical suffering (the fact that conditioned existence can’t completely satisfy us however much we want it to do so.) Depending on how we respond to suffering, we either experience more suffering or find renewed faith in that which goes beyond it. Through our senses we have pleasant, unpleasant or seemingly neutral experiences. If we respond with craving, either to keep things as they are, or to change them to suit us better, we are looking for fulfilment on a level where ultimate fulfilment is not possible because all conditioned things are impermanent and ultimately unsatisfactory. Putting it positively, there is that within us that can only be satisfied through transcendence.

VISION AND THE PATH OF TRANSCENDENCE

The wandering holy man represents a positive response to the fact of suffering: the response of actively searching for a deeper meaning to life. It is significant that the sight of the orange-robed figure follows the sights of old age, sickness and death. The wanderer symbolizes the Path, he represents that which inspires us, inviting us to follow him, to become – at least metaphorically – a homeless wanderer.

If we want to follow in the Buddha’s footsteps, if we want to experience for ourselves the Transcendental, we must expect our tiny worlds to fall apart. That is bound to be painful at times, but if we are positive enough to ride those times through, we can begin to see more clearly where our false refuges lie. If we find ourselves sitting amongst the ashes of a formerly treasured world, perhaps we can reflect on the experience of Siddhartha as he saw his world become transparent and painfully impermanent. And we can remember that is not all he saw. He also saw the wandering holy man, and that, we are told,



Jayaprabha

lives in Essen,

Germany where

she is currently

involved in

establishing

the FWBO.

made him rejoice. It was a vision of existence that transcends the pain of the mundane; a vision of freedom from suffering, a vision which Siddhartha fully realized when he became the Buddha.

When we reflect on all that Siddhartha went through during his six years of struggle to realize his goal, we can deduce that his vision



when he saw the robed wanderer was not an ordinary, faint feeling of inspiration. The vision that led to his going forth must have been more like the emergence of a blazing sun in a world that had suddenly gone dark.

It enabled Siddhartha not only to take the first steps towards realizing the “unsurpassed, peaceful, most excellent state”, but it sustained him through years of trial and error as he pursued his goal. It sustained him until he finally sat himself down under the Bodhi tree with the resolve that: *‘even if my hand should wither, even if my bones should crumble into dust, until I have attained supreme knowledge, I shall not move from this seat.’*

For most of us neither a vision of Enlightenment, nor disillusionment with the unsatisfactoriness of ordinary life are clear and alive enough to sustain our going forth for very long. The blazing sun is hidden behind the fog and clouds of our befuddled thinking so that, far from walking away from the ashes of our former dreams, we linger there, trying to make sense of it all.

RENUNCIATION – THE WAY TO FREEDOM

We may, indeed, become aware of our suffering, and even talk about it – but are we prepared to give anything up, to change who or what we are, to become a different person, to take up the

path of renunciation that leads away from suffering? Sometimes we prefer to simply remain with our suffering. Perhaps we don’t really believe that there is anything outside our habitual ways of reacting to things. Or perhaps we are so used to a vague feeling of dissatisfaction that we are not really aware that it is something we can break through. Because it is

not enough just to recognize the suffering, we also need to renounce the false expectation, the views and so on that cause us to put our hopes on false refuges that let us down.

SUFFERING: PART OF SPIRITUAL LIFE AND A MEANS TO TRANSCENDENCE

I often wonder how much pain those who have decided to follow a spiritual path cause themselves by still holding to the belief that suffering should not be part of their experience or that somewhere, somehow, there must be some kind of mundane, ordinary existence without suffering. If we have this view at the back of our minds, then when we experience pain or the unsatisfactoriness of life,

or a sense of emptiness, it can shake our faith in ourselves (what am I doing wrong?) as well as our faith in the Dharma, and our faith in the effectiveness of our Dharma practice. We may react by trying to avoid the experience of suffering – but what we need to do is to rise above it, and to do that, we have first to face it.

Sometimes we find ourselves looking for reasons why our illusory world fell to ruins. We can always find some reason to justify our experience of suffering. “I am unhappy because...” But in fact the reasons for our present experience are so many and so complex that it is not possible, and often not really relevant to know why we are unhappy.

We become like the man with the poisoned arrow in his eye who refused to have it removed before he knew from where it came, who had shot it, what it was made of and so on. In the meantime the poison from the tip worked its way into the bloodstream and the man died. The poison is the suffering we are experiencing. Constant questioning, why? can be a false refuge if it means we thereby fail to act.

DISCOVERING INSPIRATION

The sight of the wanderer enabled Siddhartha to go forth. Vision gives us a new, a higher perspective from which to view our lives. If our inspiration is rather weak, like a cloud-covered

sun, only a glimpse, an intuition of something beyond our everyday busyness, we need to take it seriously, make space for it, reflect on it, allow it to burn brighter in our lives.

Inspiration comes to different people in different ways. It might come through conceptual thought – some people are inspired by ideas – and through the study of the Dharma. For others inspiration may come from Nature, through meditation, through participation in



the Fine Arts, or through contact with a person more spiritually developed than themselves, through contemplation of a Buddha image, or reflection on the life of the Buddha or the lives of other heroes and heroines.

LEAVING 'THE HOUSEHOLD LIFE'

Siddhartha literally left home. But the experi-

ence he had was first and foremost an inner renunciation of the sublimest kind which impelled him into a particular course of action. We needn't think that in order to practice the spiritual life we will inevitably leave our children, give away all our possessions and abandon all worldly responsibilities (though some of those things may be necessary.) But it is worthwhile trying to see what 'the household life' which Siddhartha leaves behind, might mean for us. Siddhartha's father kept him within the palace

walls to prevent him from seeing reality. Without knowing it, he had been kept in prison. We could ask ourselves, what is our prison, and what is it masquerading as? Who and what are the guards? what have we got to lose if we go forth? What are the fine robes and regal jewels which we proudly wear? We should also ask ourselves, what do we want to move towards? What lifts our heart and brings us gladness?

SUFFERING AS A PATH TO EMPATHY WITH ALL BEINGS

In the *Vimalakirti-nirdesa*, we find Vimalakirti, that great Bodhisattva, asked by Manjusri, 'Householder, whence came this sickness of yours?' to which Vimalakirti replies, 'Manjusri, my sickness comes from ignorance and the thirst for existence and it will last as long as do the sicknesses of all living beings.'

He goes on to say that a Bodhisattva should develop 'empathy for all living beings on account of his own sickness, his remembrance of suffering experienced from beginningless time, and his consciousness of working for the welfare of living beings.'¹

Through the experience of suffering we can cultivate empathy for all living beings. This way we are not limited by suffering but expanded by it. We, too, like Siddhartha, can see into the impermanent, unsatisfactory nature of conditioned existence and go forth, not just

for our own liberation, but for the sake of all those who suffer because old age, sickness and death exist. □

NOTE

¹ *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti*, trans. Robert A. F. Thurman, Pennsylvania State University, 1967

TAKING UP THE CHALLENGE

women and spiritual life

A REVIEW BY HELEN SIERODA WITH A REPLY FROM KALYANAPRABHA

In September an article arrived unsolicited at the Lotus Realm office. It turned out to be a review of my article, "Taking Up the Challenge: Women and Spiritual Life" by a Ms Helen Sieroda. In a covering letter the author challenged us to print the article in the next issue of the magazine. This we are pleased to do (with some cuts for reasons of space.) It appears below, along with my reply. I received, in fact, several letters in response to my article, some applauding it, others decrying it. For those who have voiced criticisms, or who found that my article "disturbed and saddened" them, I hope what I write here will go some way to further clarify the issues which the article addressed.

Helen Sieroda writes:

This Summer I was delighted to hear that women in the FWBO had launched *Lotus Realm*...I wholeheartedly welcome an exploration by women of their experience and understanding of Buddhism and Buddhist practice...however, I was both disturbed and saddened... [by]... Kalyanaprabha's leading article...In it she argues that 'women are more dominated than men by the pulls of the lower evolution, by their biological nature.' She goes on to state that the solution to this is to cultivate masculine qualities and aspire to Sangharakshita's ideal of 'The True Individual'. True Individuality, we are told, calls for greater objectivity and the transformation and transcendence of our womanly limitations as well as in 'denouncing the demon of domesticity'. Kalyanaprabha concludes with the stirring call, 'Let us throw off womanly weakness and trepidation and commit ourselves to the heroic task of the Higher Evolution.' Although Kalyanaprabha makes many references to 'experience' certain aspects of this article deny the truth and reality of women's lived experience and as such it marginalizes, excludes and subordinates women's experience and values.

Kalyanaprabha calls on women to seek and act on the truth behind the gender debate in Buddhism... This is a sound attitude with which I have no argument. Unfortunately I believe she neglects her own good advice and fails to look deeply for the truth. In the article I find no evidence of serious discernment or reappraisal of who we believe or who determines authority. Instead I find an uncritical acceptance of authority from above (Sangharakshita) which falls into the trap of accepting the old dualistic notions of matter/spirit, nature/culture, private/public, body/mind, emotion/reason, subjective/objective, connec-

tion/detachment. In this model so-called 'feminine' qualities are clearly negatively evaluated. Inherently hindered by our reproductive function, women are dismissed for a self-preoccupation with domestic or relational interests or for tending to passivity. I agree that women and men are "wired up differently" but I do not accept the conclusion that this makes women evolutionally lower or subordinate to men.....

Rather than urging women to conform with a masculine-heroic ideal of True Individuality, we should support and encourage each other to uncover a woman centred identity, which is grounded in, rather than divorced from a woman's experience... The form of masculine rationality being championed by Kalyanaprabha and Sangharakshita assumes that knowledge can only be "true" if it is objective, detached, and disembodied. This knowledge depends on us separating ourselves from the whole context and ground of our being: body, emotions, relationships, history, and culture. It glorifies independence but overlooks our radical interdependence. An alternative embodied way of knowing is to include context, place and process. This approach values rather than dismisses the strength which comes from relatedness, communication and the experience of connectedness with other beings...

I am not convinced that "slaying the demon of domesticity" and adopting a male oriented individuality leads to liberation. I fear it leads to repression and rejection of important values and qualities. I believe that the truth is more likely to be found in the truly heroic challenge of looking deeply into our lives and experiences as women as well as men, in listening deeply to the voices and values of women as well as men, and in touching deeply the female sides of our nature as well as the male. □

Kalyanaprabha replies:

Helen Sieroda takes me to task both for 'uncritical acceptance of authority from above' and denying 'women's lived experience' (does she realize I am a woman myself, I couldn't help wondering?) I came to concern myself with the issue of gender and spiritual life as a consequence of working closely over a number of years with women who wished to join the Western Buddhist Order. It was the practical situation of trying to help women become ready for ordination, and coming up against the obstacles with which they had to

work, it was my involvement with the women's wing of the WBO, and of course my own personal experience of leading the spiritual life that forced me to think about the issues which I refer to in my article. I am rather embarrassed to say that I only thought of trying to find out exactly what Sangharakshita might have said on the topic of women and spiritual life after I had come to certain tentative conclusions myself. In reading through various seminar transcriptions in which he referred to women and spiritual life, I found my own thinking and observations coincided broadly with his. I refer to Sangharakshita in my article because he is a recognized authority, at least recognized by some, whereas I am not. Furthermore, his ideas about women and spiritual life are set in a far greater understanding of spiritual life than I could claim to have.

As far as I am concerned Sangharakshita is a spiritual authority whose views I listen to and respect, although I do not, I hope, accept them uncritically – but then there is no call to do so. Sangharakshita has always expected his disciples to think for themselves.

VALUING THE FEMININE – THE TRUE INDIVIDUAL

For reasons of space I can do no more than pass over those points where the progression of Ms Sieroda's thinking eludes me. Why, for instance, in the specific dualistic model she claims I have taken up, (and that in itself is rather a big leap of inference), does she think I have given feminine qualities a negative evaluation?

Here as elsewhere e.g. when she refers to my 'masculine' conception of the True Individual, she seems to have missed the point. A True individual combines the qualities of both masculine and feminine. Do I not describe the True Individual as being both 'independent' and 'creative' – (arguably) more masculine qualities, as well as 'sensitive' and 'sympathetic' – surely those very feminine qualities which our reviewer claims I dismiss. Not at all, I value kindness, sensitivity, emotional awareness as much as independence, self-confidence and initiative. If I emphasize the latter in my article it is because, in my experience and observation, it is those qualities that women are more often lacking and which they need to develop to become more individual, fuller human beings.

I think it can be helpful to distinguish between 'biological femaleness' with its associated psychological tendencies to passivity, preoccupation with the domestic etc. and human qualities we may denote 'feminine' such as empathy, care and so on. I think the first is something women have to transcend, whereas the second need to be developed by both men and women. The natural interest women have in the relational aspect of experience does enable us, I think, to develop those qualities of care and empathy more easily, though of course one has to avoid the pit-fall of smothering others with one's concern, or feeling overly responsible for them.

THE DEMONS OF DOMESTICITY

My warning against falling prey to the demons of domesticity comes again from my experience of living and working with women (not to speak of being a

woman myself!) If we are trying to create Sangha, an association of individuals whose concern is to develop greater awareness and sensitivity – rather like an association of artists – the tendency to preoccupation with the minutiae of life, to creating a cosy nest, to endless talk about health, food and family etc, if those things get the upper hand, it spells death to any higher association. Of course I don't mean we shouldn't give expression to natural home-making urges, or self-consciously avoid all talk about every day matters, but let them not take us over and drown out interest and concern with other things!

TRUE KNOWLEDGE

I can't reply in any depth to Ms Sieroda's points on knowledge since epistemology is something I know little about. However, I can say that neither I nor Sangharakshita think that 'knowledge can only be "true" if it is objective, detached and disembodied.' Such knowledge really sounds rather nasty, and I do not quite know what she means by it.

Ultimately, of course, for Buddhists knowledge is beyond the rational, it is found in Intuitive Wisdom, Prajna, but to get there we have to first clarify our thinking.

FINDING A WOMAN'S WAY

Having said this, I do sympathise with Helen Sieroda's desire to give due recognition to the way women approach life, their natural inclination to 'relatedness, communication and the experience of connectedness'. Certainly our approach to spiritual life needs to include an awareness of this natural inclination – if it doesn't and if we as women simply go about things as if we were men, we will only strain our souls (if I might use the word poetically). Sangharakshita speaks of the hierarchy of consciousness: woman, man, artist, angel, and encourages men and women alike to develop the sensitivity and awareness of the artist, and to strive for the spiritual androgyny of the angel. For women the path does not lie in first becoming a man!

TAKING UP THE CHALLENGE

Personally I feel that as women Buddhists we are faced with quite a challenge: to discover and articulate what it is to be a woman practising spiritual life, to be a woman moving from the lower to the higher evolution of consciousness. No doubt women have achieved this evolution before, but so little has been recorded about it. In discovering and articulating what we can about it, we will not only be of service to other women wanting to take up spiritual life, but we may make a valuable contribution to the whole gender debate of modern times, and do something to help alleviate the discomfort of modern woman who finds herself faced with an identity crisis such as, perhaps, there has never been. I hope that debates such as this one will help us on the way. □

(The article reviewed by Ms Sieroda was published in the first issue of Lotus Realm and is available from the UK and US addresses listed on the inside front cover.)

SANGHARAKSHITA

CELEBRATES HIS 70th BIRTHDAY

Sangharakshita, founder of the FWBO/TBMSG and the WBO/TBMS, celebrated his seventieth birthday this Summer. Born in Tooting, London, between the two World Wars, his quietly unusual childhood is recorded in the first volume of his memoirs, *Learning to Walk*. It was at the age of sixteen that he first came across Buddhism when he read *The Diamond Sutra*

and kept up with numerous disciples, friends and acquaintances. During this time he became involved with the work of Dr Ambedkar, who had dedicated his life to the uplift of the community of Untouchables from which he himself came. When Dr Ambedkar died shortly after hundreds of thousands of Untouchables had converted

ment which has touched the lives of hundreds of thousands of people around the world.

There is much one could say in appreciation of Sangharakshita – as scholar, as teacher, as poet, as visionary, as organizer par excellence. There are the many anecdotes – the sort friends like to tell friends of their encounters with him – stories recounting his wit, his incisive mind, his refusal to collude, his great kindness and consideration for others and so on.

In these pages, however, perhaps we should content ourselves with pausing to consider Sangharakshita's particular contribution to Women's Liberation. At a gathering of Order members recently, Sangharakshita quipped that if he was asked in India if he was a Feminist, he would say, 'Oh yes.' If he was asked in Britain he would say – quietly but firmly – 'Oh no.' But if he was asked in America he would say (thumping the table!) 'NO!' Sangharakshita is man who is not afraid to speak his mind, not even when it comes to Feminism!



Birthday celebrations: Sangharakshita signs his "Collected Poems"

and *The Sutra of Wei Lang* and realized that he was a Buddhist 'and always had been.'

Despite his childhood ill-health, he was conscripted into the army and found himself in India where he stayed after the end of the Second World War. For two years he wandered around the great sub-continent with a friend, living the traditional life of a wandering *bhikkhu*. He was eventually ordained into the Theravadin monastic Order; and later also took Bodhisattva Ordination from the Tibetan lama, Dhardo Rimpoche.

Sangharakshita spent fourteen years in the Himalayan town of Kalimpong where he founded a non-sectarian vihara, edited a Buddhist magazine, *Stepping-Stones*,

with him to Buddhism (thereby repudiating all claims of caste), Sangharakshita did what he could to encourage and support the new Buddhists in the understanding and practice of their new religion.

In 1964 an invitation from British Buddhists brought him to London. The course of events led him to the conclusion that what was needed in the West was an entirely new Buddhist Movement. Thus on April 6th 1967 he founded the FWBO and, a year later, ordained the first men and women as members of the Western Buddhist Order. Since that time his life has been dedicated to teaching, administering, and guiding the Move-

In founding the Western Buddhist Order with its single – and identical – ordination for men and women, Sangharakshita opened up for women a path in which they would be free to pursue their spiritual careers without the frustration and sense of impasse which dogs those who wish to follow a spiritual path within traditions where women's ordination has died out, or where women are obliged to be subordinate to their male peers – a set-up which one cannot but wonder at in modern times. (Is such a set up either necessary or helpful to the women or the men of those traditions?)

In the same way positions of responsibility within the FWBO are open equally to men and women,

Ordinations at Tiratanaloka



New Dharmacharinis with their Preceptors

from Public Preceptors to Chairmen of Centres, women can and do take the same responsibility as men (albeit that so far there are fewer women Order members, and fewer able or willing to take up positions of responsibility.)

One of the great gifts Sangharakshita has bestowed upon his women disciples is the recognition that to gain freedom and confidence women need to 'go it alone', away from men. It was Sangharakshita's urging that galvanized women Order members to take the initiative and found the first women's retreat Centre (the first of its kind in the world, in fact). Taraloka, as it was named, has had a decisive impact on the women's wing of the FWBO and the WBO, and enabled thousands of women to experience the benefits of living and working together away from the tensions which mixed activities so often bring with them.

Perhaps we have still to arrive at an appreciation of Sangharakshita's teaching on spiritual hierarchy which is currently at the centre of some hot debate. To my mind, anyway, it is something of a 'terton' – a hidden treasure – which will prove to be of great benefit as we struggle in this twentieth century to come to an understanding of what it means to be a woman, and to what it is we should aspire.

The Western Buddhist Order celebrated Sangharakshita's birthday during its biennial Convention in August with stories, musical offerings, comic turns and eulogies. A second celebration took place in Birmingham on September 10th when, as well as more of the same, Sangharakshita was presented with the hard-back version of his *Collected Poems* which had recently been published by Windhorse Publications to coincide with the occasion. A special cake –

In June, twenty women were ordained at Tiratanaloka Retreat Centre, the largest number of women to join the Western Buddhist Order at one time. The ordination retreat was co-led by Preceptors Ratnashuri and Sanghadevi and had three distinct phases: preparation or spiritual death; the private ordinations or spiritual rebirth; and the public ordination ceremony. In her opening talk Sanghadevi reminded the retreatants that ordination is a recognition of the effectiveness of a person's Going for Refuge. This is recognized by the ordinand herself, by her preceptor and by those Order members who know her. With this commitment she can strive to transform effective Going for Refuge into Real Going for Refuge (which is equivalent to gaining Transcendental Insight.)

All those ordained in June had already been on retreats with the ordination team. Their ordinations marked the culmination of their participation in the new ordination process for women. The new Dharmacharinis come from a variety of backgrounds, including three women from the US and one from Germany. Their ages range from early thirties to seventy. They include married women with young children, women who work in Right Livelihood businesses and live in communities, and women who are in full-time professional work such as physiotherapy and clinical psychology. For each of the twenty women, their ordination marks a significant stage in their spiritual life. In such large numbers they will no doubt have quite an impact on the Order as a whole.

or rather several cakes – had been decorated with the Four Gifts of Sangharakshita's poem.

As Sangharakshita hands over his remaining organizational responsibilities to his senior disciples and turns to the writing and travelling to which he hopes to dedicate the next years of his life, we wish him health, happiness and long life.

Kalyanaprabha

*I come to you with four gifts.
The first is a lotus-flower.
Do you understand?
My second gift is a golden net.
Can you recognize it?
My third gift is a shepherd's round-dance.
Do your feet know how to dance?
My fourth gift is a garden planted in a wilderness.
Could you work there?
I come to you with four gifts.
Dare you accept them?*



DAUGHTERS OF THE BUDDHA MEET ON TOP OF THE WORLD

In August, Punyamegha, who lives and works at Taraloka Retreat Centre in Shropshire, England, and Gill Crabbe, a Mitra from London, travelled to Ladakh to attend the Fourth International Shakyadhita Conference on Buddhist Women. Shakyadhita (Daughters of the Buddha) is the International Association of Buddhist Women which was formed after the first international conference of Buddhist nuns held at Bodhgaya in 1987.

Gill Crabbe reports:

THE FOURTH International Shakyadhita Conference attracted more than 70 delegates from the US, Europe and Australasia, and up to 200 from Asian countries,

and snow-capped mountains, but also for the inspiration such a meeting must have given to our Ladakhi hosts and to all those who were able to attend.

The conference took place under a huge, brightly-coloured awning at the Mahabodhi International Meditation Centre just outside Ladakh's capital, Leh. It began with a spectacular greeting from Ladakhi drummers and musicians in traditional dress who were lined up along a corridor of fluttering prayer flags and multi-coloured bunting leading to the site.

This formed the start of the opening ceremony, which was attended by various Ladakhi

The seven-day event usually began each day with early morning meditation, followed by breakfast, a veritable marathon presentation of papers, lunch, more papers, finally finishing with chanting from various Buddhist traditions around 6 pm. The subjects for papers ranged from Tibetan women practitioners past and present to the history of the loss of the bhikkhuni order in the Theravada tradition. There were in all 27 presentations, plus discussion groups, a video, and evening entertainment from traditional Ladakhi dancers.

One of the first presentations was from Punyamegha who spoke on 'Harmonies in the Dharma'. She focused on what is common to the different schools and traditions of Buddhism. If we take Going for Refuge as the unifying principle of Buddhism, then concepts such as Stream Entry, the arising of Insight, and the arising of the Bodhichitta can be seen as enriching the central concept of Going for Refuge.

A unity among the different schools of Buddhism could be perceived at several levels. For example, in the common recognition of the Buddha's Enlightenment experience as the source and the goal, there is a Transcendental unity of Buddhism. In so far as all Buddhists recognize the Dharma is a means to Enlightenment, there is also a methodological unity of Buddhism.

The core teachings that are common to all Buddhist schools, such as the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, give a doctrinal unity; and more specifically, the doctrine of conditioned co-production provides a metaphysical unity of Buddhism.

Punyamegha went on to explore in more detail the different levels of Going for Refuge (cultural, provisional, effective, real and absolute) as the unifying principle of Buddhism. In conclusion she



including Korea, Myanmar, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and North East India. This seemed an heroic turnout given the geographical remoteness of Ladakh and the difficulties many people encountered in getting there. Ladakh is situated in the Western Himalayas, west of Tibet. The average height of the mountains in the Ladakh range is 5,800 metres (19,000 feet). It was certainly worth the effort, not only for the striking surroundings of desert landscape

dignitaries, including the Rani of Stok (the Queen of Ladakh) and a number of Rimpoches. We were also introduced to members of the Shakyadhita committee who had helped to put on the conference, in particular Karma Lekshe Tsomo who had been working to the early hours of the morning for some time in the run-up to the opening. It was she who read out His Holiness the Dalai Lama's message of encouragement and support.

said, *'Going for Refuge is not an isolated act, we repeat it at every stage of our spiritual life and growth, revealing ever more aspects and dimensions. Although we Go for Refuge as individuals, we come into ever more significant contact with other individuals who are also Going for Refuge...If we can see Going for Refuge as a unifying principle, it resolves deep divisions within the different Buddhist schools, sects and communities with their various ways of understanding the spiritual community and its membership; it gives us harmony.'*

A fascinating glimpse of Ladakhi nunhood came from Harvard PhD student Kim Gutschow, who talked about life in a Zanskar nunnery. Ms Gutschow spent three winters researching at Karsha nunnery – a considerable feat of endurance since temperatures of up to -40 degrees Celsius are not unusual.

She described how nearly 50 years ago two nuns went to live on a cliff above Karsha village, building meditation cells on the site of a ruined temple that housed an eleven-headed Avalokiteshvara. Over the years, other nuns joined them until in 1972 there were 10 residents.

In that year Geshe Lobzang Zopa from Thikse travelled to Karsha to give them a series of initiations. Subsequently a new assembly hall was built which was finally completed in 1990.

Besides focusing on Buddhism and social development, the conference also spent a day considering Buddhism and women's health. Papers included an extensive account of Buddhism and the problem of prostitution in Thailand from Dr Chatsumarn Kabilsingh from the University of Bangkok, as well as papers on the health of Ladakhi women and discussion groups on death and dying, domestic violence, birth control, Aids and First Aid.

Dr Geetha Mendis spoke on the meeting of Buddhism and Psychotherapy. Dr Mendis is a psychotherapist from Western Australia who practises in the Theravadin tradition.

In her work as a therapist she took the view that *'one needs to have an integrated self in order to move towards the realization of not-self.'* A fragmented, insecure sense of self is not conducive to tranquility and deeper insight as one is constantly struggling to maintain a relatively coherent sense of self-identity in order to survive. These issues, she said, hinder progress for people practising the Dharma.

Karma Lekshe Tsomo's paper entitled *Tradition and Adaptation: The Western Buddhist Acculturation of Buddhism* addressed recent trends in the West. Many western

Buddhists were attracted to Buddhism because of its obvious practical value in providing a method of coping psychologically and spiritually with an increasingly complex world. However, in taking on the methods but rejecting the 'cultural baggage' of Buddhist tradition she suggested that – in the US at least – in many Dharma Centres one hardly dare mention the word Buddhism. Everything except the meditation cushions – in some cases even the basic Buddhist doctrine – had been thrown out. But, she pointed out, in rejecting what is not comfortable, we run the risk of rejecting what is essential. Westerners wanted something that was not only comfortable, but immediately accessible. The idea of spending ten years learning the language of the traditional teachings (as, for example, some Tibetan students are expected to do) was for most people unthinkable.

Western Buddhists tended to gravitate towards those traditions which emphasized meditation practice, such as Vipassana and Zen. She observed that *'after 30 years of living and visiting Western Dharma Centres in those with regular, silent meditation, the practitioners seem more harmonious and mature.'*

All in all the conference provided a rare and fascinating forum for discussion of Buddhism in East and West. □

A NEW WING FOR TARALOKA

The new wing at Taraloka Women's Retreat Centre is at last complete, fully furnished and already being put to good use. It was officially opened on September 24th at a special ceremony to which all 40 'old members' of Taraloka Community were invited, as well as friends of Taraloka from all over the country. In July, Taraloka ran a four-week painting project in which forty women participated.

Our work was to create beautiful surroundings in which retreats will

take place. We also focused on our own practice, bringing mindfulness and co-operation to our shared work experience.

At the end of each day's work, dusty and tired, we gathered in front of the shrine to chant the verses dedicating our work to the benefit of all living beings.

While the Order members were away on the Conventions, four experienced Mitras led the work team and the shrine-room activities. There was a special

ritual to dedicate the new shrine room during which a mandala of mantras was laid on the floor before it was covered by a plush red carpet.

Walking round the building today it's already hard to remember what it looked like just a few months ago. Those once derelict barns have become part of Tara's Realm, that realm which we are creating here at Taraloka. □

Saddhanandi

1995 Women's Order Convention

The biennial conventions of the Western Buddhist Order took place this Summer at Wymondham College in Norfolk, England. This is the second time the conventions have been held at Wymondham and the staff went out of their way to create a pleasant and friendly atmosphere for a rather unusual gathering. The conventions are in three parts: a ten-day women's convention followed by a four-day mixed convention, and then a ten-day men's convention. Over one hundred Dharmacharinis (women Order members) were able to attend most of the women's convention, the largest such gathering ever. The women's convention was led by the public preceptors, Sanghadevi, Ratnashuri and Shrimala, and the Ordination Team. The theme for all three conventions was *Kalyana Mitrata*. *Kalyana* means morally good, spiritual, beautiful, helpful; *mitra* is friend. So *Kalyana Mitrata* is friendship with the beautiful and spiritual. Altogether there were eight talks on this theme ranging from



our special relationship with our founder and teacher Sangharakshita as Kalyana Mitra; the practice of Kalyana Mitrata in the Order; to the practical requirements and qualities needed to become a Kalyana Mitra to women who have requested ordination. On most

days the programme consisted of periods of meditation, study groups, a talk and puja. There was also plenty of time to catch up with friends from around the world: women came to the conventions from Europe, Australia, New Zealand, the US, the UK and, for the first time, India.

FIRST WOMEN'S CHAPTER IN THE US

From left:
Dayalochana
Viriyagita
Vidyavati



Every week, all over the world, groups of Order members gather together in their localities for 'Chapter meetings'. Chapter meetings are forums in which Order members can engage with each other purely on the basis of their common spiritual aspirations and commitment providing

for each other that encouragement, help, support and challenge which are generally indispensable to following a spiritual path. The first women's Chapter in America has come into being with the ordination of Viriyagita and Dayalochana. They join Vidyavati, a New Zealander, who moved to New Hampshire five years ago with the vision of establishing the women's wing of the Order on this vast continent.

It has been Viriyagita who has

consistently paved the way for women at Aryaloka to become involved with the Movement from her first encounter with the FWBO in 1985. She formed the first women's group, became the first woman Mitra and, in 1987, was the first woman in the US to request ordination into the Western Buddhist Order.

Dayalochana came across the FWBO through an outreach meditation course held in her home town in 1988. From the point when she requested ordination in 1992, her deepening friendship with Viriyagita became an important element in that process. Indeed close friendships between all three women characterizes the newest Chapter of the women's wing of the WBO.

SPECIAL VISITOR FROM INDIA

This year for the first time an Indian Dharmacharini was able to attend the Order conventions. Altogether Prajnamata spent three months in the UK visiting FWBO Centres and meeting people. During the women's convention she gave a moving and inspiring talk about her life. She is a retired lecturer who lives in Bombay with her husband and daughter. Along with six other Indian women, she was ordained by Shrimala in January 1994. She talked of her early life when she combined the full-time duties of Indian wife-hood with studying for a degree; and of how her interest in Buddhism came



Prajnamata

about through her involvement with Theosophy. As well as explaining the principles of Theosophy, Prajnamata spoke of two lectures by Sangharakshita that she attended at Theosophy Hall in Bombay. His presence and his words were to change her life and eventually led her to come into contact with Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha Sahayak (TBMSG, as the FWBO is known in India.)

During her three-month stay, Prajnamata visited city Centres in Norwich, Cambridge, London, Brighton and Croydon, as well as attending retreats at Tiratanaloka and Taraloka Retreat Centres.

She gave many talks during her visit, speaking with great humour and frankness about the differences she noted between India and the UK. □

Revolutionary Enough?

Book Review by Dhammadassini

Loving Kindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness

Sharon Salzberg

Shambhala, Boston and London 1995, pp193, £12.99/\$18.00

Sharon Salzberg is co-founder of the Insight Meditation Society, a Vipassana-based organization in Massachusetts, USA, who cites Jack Kornfield and Joseph Goldstein as her mentors.

Salzberg's book, whose title captured my imagination, explores the metta meditation practice. Metta or loving kindness is the primary 'Brahma Vihara' one of four positive mental states which can be cultivated through meditation (the others being compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity).

Salzberg looks at metta in general, putting it in its spiritual context as the means whereby we overcome the 'illusion of separateness' which is the 'fundamental error' we make about ourselves and the world. The experience of metta is one of connectedness. It brings with it a sense of 'unification, confidence, safety.' She goes on to look at the mental hindrances which can arise during meditation, speaks briefly about the law of karma, and then looks at the other three Brahma Viharas. The book concludes with a chapter on Buddhist ethics. Each chapter ends with several short meditation exercises. These lead one step-by-step through the metta practice, as one learns to develop loving kindness to oneself, a 'benefactor', a good friend, a 'neutral' person, and an enemy. The final stage, in which all beings are included in our metta, is not introduced until half way through the book.

The author's intention is clearly to make the metta practice accessible. The simplicity and sincerity of the author's words will probably have this effect. I did, however, find myself wondering whether her approach might make the practice

seem deceptively easy. She has a notion of an apparently reliable instinct within us for wholeness and integrity – Jon Kabat-Zinn calls it 'core goodness' in his Foreword – which, in spite of all life may have brought us, is 'inviolable'. This emphasis seemed to overlook the need there is in meditation to work against equally innate tendencies to laziness, greed, aversion, pride, and confusion. Is it good enough to leave us to choose a neutral person for the third stage of the practice only 'if you can think of one'? This leaves us running the risk of falling in with the very emotional laziness which the stage is designed to counteract. Is it advisable to suggest that one might 'most easily feel metta for a difficult person if one imagines them as a vulnerable infant, or on their deathbed? (Notwithstanding the rider 'but not with eager anticipation – be careful'.)

The emphasis on making oneself feel safe when generating metta towards an enemy overlooks the fact that this stage in particular is the crucible of the practice, the 'dangerous point' even, where one's strongest tendencies to self-protection are at work. I'm tempted to say it *should* feel dangerous – dangerous to our safe little worlds of cherished hurt and nursed grudges and to our limited views of ourselves and other people. Shouldn't we be working to develop the robustness that metta offers, rather than wanting to be wrapped in cotton wool?

Salzberg's words need to be leavened with more talk of responsibility and choice – nowhere does she say you can choose how you respond to what you are feeling – surely the most essential point that can be made with regard to this practice.

Similarly, her language of healing, an extended metaphor

(continued on page 25)

CONTEMPLATING THE DIFFERENCE

Review by Vajrapushpa

WOMEN, MEN & ANGELS

An Inquiry Concerning the Relative Spiritual Aptitudes of Men and Women

Subhuti

Windhorse, Birmingham 1995, pp101, £4.99/\$9.99

Women, Men and Angels is a book written largely as a response to the comments on the section 'Women and Spiritual Life' in Subhuti's previous book, *Sangharakshita*. It is a book that invites, even urges the reader to respond and to consider its message with honesty and openness. No more missing the point, please.

The book explores two main ideas which have arisen out of

'history reveals the consistent oppression and enslavement of women by men.' Subhuti explains these ideas clearly, protecting his arguments skilfully against an unthinking response (not avoiding some repetition.)

Although the book leaves many gaps and lacks a certain depth (not least because the angels are almost absent from its

pages), it does make the reader ponder carefully on what has been said. Much of the message flies in the face of some contemporary (feminist) ideology, particularly its expectation of and demands for the kind of equality that refuses to contemplate seriously the differences between the sexes and the way these differences fit in with the idea of a spiritual hierarchy.

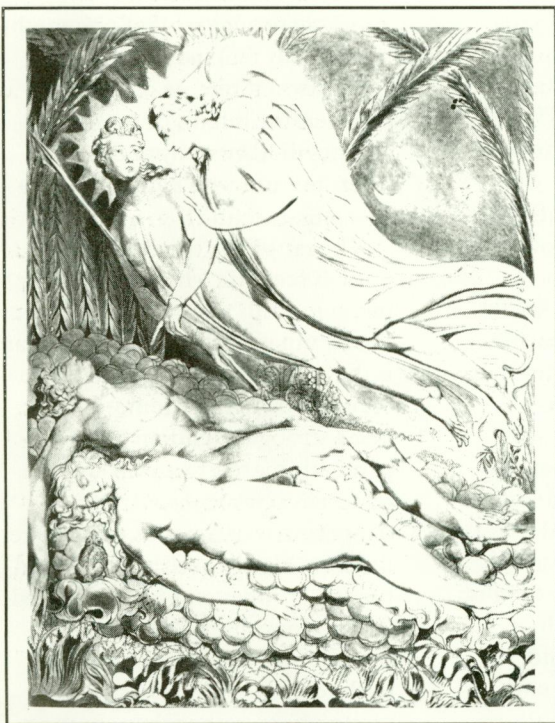
The reasons given for the disadvantage lie in woman's psycho-physical complex, with its feminine tendencies

and imagination, to move from the known to the unknown. Stated as generalizations, the differences between the sexes are stark, particularly as Subhuti emphasizes – for the sake of the central argument – the 'negative' in the feminine and the 'positive' in the masculine.

Subhuti asserts that both men and women need the masculine spirit to move forward, to break new ground: the masculine leads the way. A similar idea has been expressed in terms of Jungian psychology by Irene de Castillejo when she talks about the importance of the 'logos' for woman's self-development: logos, the 'masculine', focussed consciousness, the capacity for self-awareness, the power to discriminate, to formulate, is the 'essential first step' towards her becoming fully conscious of herself. I agree with Subhuti that, as women, we need to summon up, from time to time, the masculine spirit (and respect it in men!), but we need to do so in conjunction with our feminine qualities. I wonder if we have to worry too much about our 'feminine' concerns and interests so long as we cultivate a spirit that takes us beyond our present way of being.

It is this process of integration which is the real working ground for most women. Subhuti devotes a lot of space to describing the starting place we collectively share as women, and its place in the hierarchy of spiritual development. Of course the reality for many women is that they don't find complete satisfaction in the role and position shaped by biological imperatives – but they may not

'Adam and Eve Sleeping'
William Blake



Sangharakshita's understanding of the Buddhist tradition and his own experience with his female disciples. The first idea, whilst affirming the ability of women to gain full Enlightenment, asserts that women are 'generally at somewhat of a disadvantage, at least at the commencement of spiritual life.' Secondly, Sangharakshita regards as a 'feminist myth' the claim that

of nurturing, enduring, opting for safety and familiarity, preoccupation with the body and emotions – tendencies which have 'little affinity with spiritual life'. The kind of effort needed to bring about spiritual development, initially at least, is masculine in nature, based on the masculine ability to take initiative, to summon up will

know how best to deal with those female tendencies that 'hold them back'.

Women's entry into the work place and the availability of contraception have created conditions which raise new questions about what it means to be a woman. As contemporary French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray puts it, these conditions do not necessarily solve the problem and may even paradoxically be 'returning (woman) to that impossible role: being a woman'. That may be confusing. Subhuti, too, talks about the, '*fascinating and bewildering identity crisis of women*'. Towards the end of the book he asks, '*Women are different – yet where is there left that they can express that difference creatively?*' I think it would be more interesting to ask *how* they can express that difference – in the domestic realm, the work place, the public domain.

Personally I don't think that the reason women fail to achieve their aims and transcend the present is simply because they are bound by their biological conditioning (are women really 'far more anchored in the lower evolution' than men as Subhuti suggests?) or because they don't try hard enough, or because men prevent them from doing so. Women's 'oppression' cannot be explained by finding a victim and a perpetrator but is due rather to a complex network of factors. Subhuti's book may be a rather one-sided exposition of complex issues but this doesn't excuse us from facing and taking responsibility for some of the fundamental tendencies that we share, in varying

degrees, as women.

A useful reading of the book would be to ask ourselves, for instance, what our weaknesses are and whether they have any connection with the arguments put forward. Do we veer towards practical conservatism instead of cultivating will and imagination? Do we over-identify with our emotions to the exclusion of a more rational and considered response? Do we over-identify with what is 'feminine' in us, or do we emulate men because we feel uncomfortable and insecure about our identity as women?

The wider context in which women are living their lives today has been shaped by feminism (and I think Subhuti dismisses the Women's Liberation Movement a little bit too lightly). Julia Kristeva identifies three phases in twentieth century feminism: during the first phase women tried to conform to a masculine ideal: it was believed that sex didn't determine destinies whereas gender did, and that gender, being a social construct, was capable of change. The second phase, which spanned the 60's and 70's, was characterized by a celebration, even a glorification of the 'feminine', of motherhood and female sexuality. The 1980's centred around the essentialism/anti-essentialism debate: where essentialism asserts sexual difference and acknowledges the uniquely female characteristics, the opposite view refutes the idea that women can simply be explained by their

'innate' tendencies as this would leave little room for transforming women's potential. An intelligent Buddhist position would have to combine and transcend the two views: on the one hand recognizing and working with the 'innate' and 'biological', and on the other questioning and changing, when necessary and appropriate, the cultural and social imperatives. And finally aiming for individuality which is not limited in its essential spiritual aspirations by sex or by gender.

Virginia Woolf decided famously to kill the 'Angel of the House', the angel that whispered in her ear, 'never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own'. In fact the angel was a phantom, but '*it is harder to kill a phantom than a reality*.' Angels, those 'guardians of free passage', are supposed to bring messages from the higher realms and not deliver falsehoods.

It is often said that what holds women back most in their spiritual development is their lack of confidence. Subhuti's book puts this in an interesting context: whilst we need to tackle, without feeling undermined, our weaknesses, we also need to kill the messengers that whisper falsehoods in our ear – falsehoods that stop us from developing our individuality and rejoicing in our own and each other's achievements.

Angels embody what is best in masculinity and femininity. That is an ideal – and perhaps only guided by that vision we can summon up our will and imagination and find ways of 'absorbing and transcending' our female conditioning. □

(Review by Dhammadassin continued)

throughout the book (and seemingly popular generally with contemporary American writers on Buddhism), is primarily designed to be non-threatening, to reassure, and to bring one to a point of comfortableness with oneself; but this is not necessarily the same as self-metta. Forgiveness as an expression of metta ('to self-release the burden of guilt') is only half the picture. No mention is

made of its complementary pole, confession. And is Salzberg's starting point, "What do I need right now in order to be happy?" really the most valuable question one can ask oneself when trying to cultivate metta? Fine if we are beyond rationalization, but are we?

I find Salzberg at her most effective in the exercises she suggest for developing metta.

Here, her voice is kind and practical with the authority of experience. She is less effective in the often unmemorable main text. However, reading the book provoked me to ask questions.

Those questions may stay with me longer than Sharon Salzberg's actual text, but in trying to answer them I may well come to a deeper understanding of loving kindness and its revolutionary potential. □

When Guidance is Needed

Review by Vidyavati

The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying

Sogyal Rinpoche

Harper Collins pp425, hb £16.99 \$24, pb £9.99

Death is our common, unavoidable heritage. Modern western attitudes shroud it in mystery, fear and denial. Where possible we avoid the topic. However, as the baby boomer generation stands on the threshold of their fifties, bookshop shelves are reflecting a growing interest in death and dying. Sogyal Rinpoche's book is therefore both timely and a book of the times. For those who have attempted *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, here is the indispensable companion guide. For westerners, here are the answers to many of those taboo questions concerning death.

The book's strength lies in Sogyal Rinpoche's knowledge and practice gained within the Tibetan (Nyingma) tradition, combined with years of experience working with the dying. Current writing in this area tends to focus more on caring for the dying than providing a framework to understanding death itself. *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* does both. His stated aim is 'to inspire a quiet revolution in the whole way we look at death and care for the dying, and the whole way we look at life and care for the living.' With his conception of dying and living as part of the same existence, he skilfully draws out how the way we live is significant to what happens after death.

The book is structured around the bardos described in the *Bardo Thodol* (more usually known as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.) These bardos, or in-between states, are the bardos of life, (including the dream bardo and the meditation bardo), dying, after-death and re-becoming. The confidence and conviction with which he describes these passing states draws on a tradition which doesn't just present a philosophical framework, but also rests on practice and direct experience.

Without assuming readers have any prior knowledge of Buddhism, nor under-estimating some readers' depth of practice, he communicates fundamental principles largely in non-Buddhist terms in a fresh and engaging manner. For practising Buddhists this refreshing re-statement may spark off ideas for new ways of communicating on this subject with others. For non-Buddhists, the book opens the door to a completely different understanding of life and death that is neither threatening nor sentimentalized.

However, the accessibility of Sogyal Rinpoche's teaching style as he explains the process of dying and the stages in the after-death state may seduce the reader into thinking that the spiritual practices and techniques he describes are appropriate to them. Here we encounter a dilemma inherent more generally in the translation of Tibetan Buddhism to the West. Tibetan Buddhism is based on a graduated discipline of practices undertaken over several years under the guidance of a

spiritually experienced teacher. Many of the practices described in this book are from Dzogchen. Dzogchen teachers are still rare in the West. One cannot but wonder whether it is useful or helpful to offer these practices to the uninitiated and unprepared, who do not have access to a teacher, especially given the acquisitive attitude of the western mind which may find these practices fascinating indeed. One has to question the author's opinion that 'the practice of Dzogchen is the clearest, most effective, most relevant to the environment and needs of today.' If the book had stayed with what it does well: communicating basic principles and some simple and appropriate practices for westerners largely new to the Tibetan Buddhist approach, it would, I think, have been more effective.

The practices of *Tonglen* (taking on others' suffering and giving our well-being to them) and *Phowa* (Transference of Consciousness at the time of Death) are of most concern. The first because without a real understanding of the principles behind the practice, and the necessity of first developing a basis of strong emotional positivity, taking on the pain and suffering of others and giving them your happiness, well-being and peace of mind may be overwhelming and even psychologically disturbing. More than sufficient for general readership are the other practices he offers earlier in the chapter, "Developing Loving Kindness": Considering Yourself the Same as Others; Exchanging Yourself for Others; Using a Friend to Generate Compassion. Sogyal Rinpoche does at least caution the reader against taking up the traditional *Phowa* practice 'without the proper guidance...of a qualified master,' but only after he has described it in some detail in the previous chapter!

The chapter *Nature of Mind* also raises some concerns. 'Then there is the very nature of mind, its innermost essence, which is absolutely and always unchanged by change or death. At present it is hidden within our own mind, our sem (the mind that thinks, plots, desires, manipulates...), enveloped and obscured by the mental scurry of our thoughts and emotions.' And later, *We too are buddhas*. This language of immanence is easily misunderstood in a culture conditioned by a theistic framework where an "innermost essence...unchanged by change or death" becomes the Christian 'soul'. I think this language is to be employed with caution.

Another concern is Sogyal Rinpoche's attempt to build appealing but insubstantial bridges to other religious traditions and societies. 'When Tibetans hear of such people' (Gandhi, Einstein, Abraham Lincoln, Mother Teresa, Shakespeare, St Francis, Beethoven and Michelangelo) 'they immediately say they are Bodhisattvas.' While it may be comforting – even flattering – to

westerners to be told that some of our great figures were 'buddhas and masters that emanate to liberate beings and better the world,' can we really be sure that these people had attained Transcendental Wisdom and Compassion? Did their actions really emanate from the experience of voidness, of sunyata – or from an imaginative, but more ordinary response to human suffering and human need?

Read with discernment, this book can be a useful manual, guide, work of reference and a source of inspiration. It is a book to dip into, but even better read cover to cover to appreciate Sogyal Rimpoche's gradual step-by-step approach to understanding the bardos. Don't be daunted by its length. Short chapters, frequent headings, anecdotes, personal biography and a playful sense of humour draw you on. The chapters on Impermanence and Rebirth are particularly good. Sogyal is alert to the arrogance and delusion of the unenlightened mind and periodically challenges the reader, 'have you actually understood and realized, the truth (of impermanence)?'

If this book encourages you to reflect more on living and dying, it will have begun its quiet revolution. However, if its effect is that people take up practices – as it seems they have been doing – for which they are not really ready, and teaching them to others without sufficient depth of understanding, the revolution may be thwarted. □

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