

LOTUS REALM

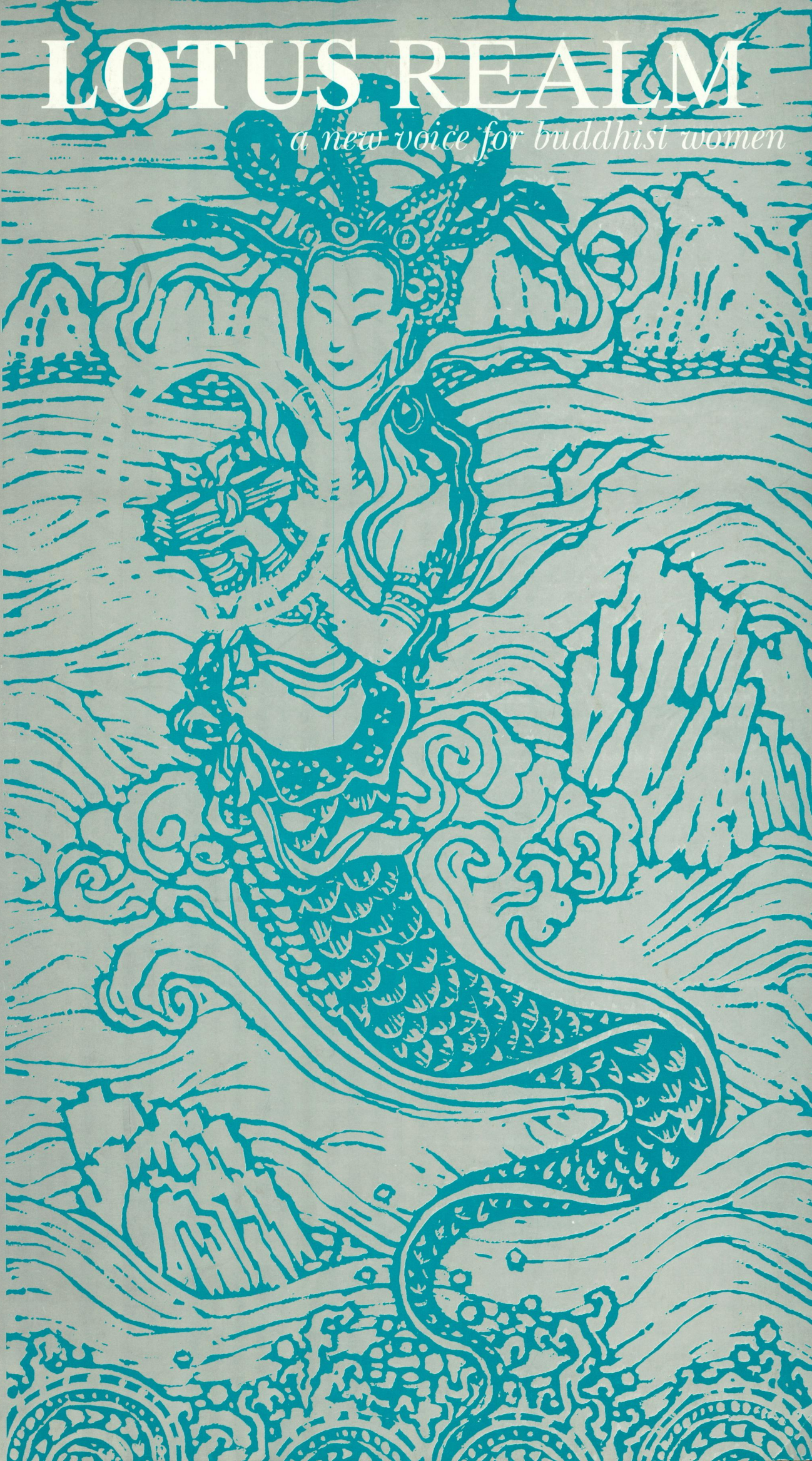
a new voice for buddhist women

Poets and Painters

7

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Naga Princess with Perfection of
Wisdom Sutras

LOTUS REALM
is produced by women members of
the Western Buddhist Order and
their friends. It appears three times a year in
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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 engaged 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.

Poets and Painters

'The best but live what once the poet dreamed...'

IN THE LAST ISSUE OF *Lotus Realm* we looked at various social projects run by women Buddhists in

places as far afield as San Francisco, Pune and London. Work itself can be a spiritual practice, especially when it is motivated by a genuine and healthy desire to alleviate suffering in the world. Here in Manchester a group of people have been meeting regularly with a view to setting up another social work project, Metta Unlimited, which will create Right Livelihood ventures within the social care 'industry' (as that part of the public sector is referred to these days, apparently.) Those involved in Metta Unlimited are only too keenly aware of the

wrong motivations that so often undermine the efforts of people who are trying to 'do good'. From a Buddhist point of view it all depends on one's perspective. You cannot really help others unless you are trying to grow in awareness and understanding yourself. It takes all the wisdom of the wise to undo the harm done by the merely good.'

Deepening awareness and understanding is not, of course, a merely intellectual exercise. It means coming to a continually new and fresh view of the world. A life that is evolving, that is to say a spiritual life, is one that constantly transcends itself; it seeks again and yet again to 'conquer new worlds from nescience and night'. Those worlds are not far distant planets on the other side of the galaxy - nor even far-flung countries on the other side of the earth. We don't need a star-ship, nor an expedition to discover them. They are the worlds in which we presently find ourselves, but which we perceive 'through a glass darkly', our own inner darkness occluding and obscuring our view of 'the startiness of things.'

An old saying from the native American tradition declares: *When the legends die, the dreams end. When the dreams end there is no more greatness.* It has been the poets and artists down the ages who have dreamt the dreams, told the legends, seen more than the average man a glimpse of 'the startiness of things' and tried to give it expression. Poets and artists reach upward to contact a higher vision which they then express for the benefit of anyone who can hear or see; or you might as easily say they reach down, plumbing the depths of the human mind for its greater understanding, its hidden treasures.

In the Mahayana tradition, it is said that the great sage Nagarjuna was given the *Perfection of Wisdom* Sutras by a naga princess who lived at the bottom of the ocean. The *Perfection of Wisdom* Sutras represent the highest vision of all. They are the expression in words of the profoundest realizations known to humanity. A society that is healthy, that is spiritually vigorous, depends partly for its good health on the existence

Poets and Painters

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Correction:

The following dates were misprinted in the article on Dr Ambedkar in the last issue of *Lotus Realm*:

The women's conference in Nagpur took place in July 1942 (not 1922). The drafting of the new Indian constitution took place in 1948 (not, of course, 1928!)

The editor apologises for any confusion these misprints may have caused.

□ *Kalyanaprabha*

within it of artists and poets. Likewise a spiritual community that seeks to maintain its vigour and good health needs to encompass both administrators and artists, 'social workers' and sculptors, printers and poets. For this issue of *Lotus Realm* we have invited a number of artists to write about their work within the context of spiritual life.

In Beauty May

SOME TIME AGO I saw a

horror movie called *The Stepford*

Wives, a tale of American subur-

bia. A young couple and their

children move to Stepford

where the husband takes up a

new job in a large electronics

firm. Their new home is in a

prosperous neighbourhood - a

suburban heaven. The woman

makes friends with another

woman new to the area, and,

since it is the '70's, the two

decide to start a consciousness-

raising group as the other

women in the neighbourhood

are interested only in being

perfect housewives.

To cut a long story short, it transpires that

all the Stepford wives are in fact robotic versions

of real (now dead) women. They are indeed

'perfect housewives' having been redesigned

and rebuilt according to their husbands'

requirements. They are uncomplaining domes-

tic slaves, and under their long, feminine dress-

es they are physically perfect too. The film is a

feminist horror story. I found it disturbing, par-

ticularly because of the distorted notion of

human perfection, with machines replacing liv-

ing, breathing women. The heroine herself ends

up strangled, replaced by her robotic substitute.

Like another film, *Blade Runner*, which also

concerns android, non-human characters, *The*

Stepford Wives raises interesting questions about

what makes a human being human. The

android 'replicants' as they are called in

Blade Runner, are programmed with human

speech and behavioural patterns - even 'memo-

ries' of childhood (which of course they have

never experienced.) A sinister development in

the *Blade Runner* story is the creation of androids

that don't even know they are not human. The

replicants are manufactured simply to fulfil par-

ticular functions. They do work that is physically

demanding or dangerous - work that human

beings don't want to do. They become in effect

disposable human beings. Their raison d'être is purely utilitarian. No programmer could design a package that truly recreates a human being with that distinctively human characteristic, the imagination. It is the existence of our imaginations that makes

Srivati, a
graduate in
English litera-
ture, worked
for a time
with a touring
community
theatre - as
actor and
stage manager
- and later
trained as an
English and
Drama
teacher. She
was ordained
in 1993 and
is now
Director of the
London
Buddhist Arts
Centre.



us human, and means that we need not be con-
fined to a wholly utilitarian relationship with the
world. The imagination, or 'imaginal faculty' as
Sangharakshita has referred to it (borrowing a
term coined by Coleridge) is a synthesis of rea-
son and emotion, a higher faculty transcending
and transforming the two. Sangharakshita corre-
lates the imaginal faculty with shradha or
'faith' - for it is with this faculty that we feel
intelligently and think with our hearts. In *The*
Meaning of Buddhism and the Value of Art, he
writes:
'Like the two wings of a bird, reason and emotion
are both indispensable to the spiritual flights of
man... The spiritual aspirant is like Shelley's sky-lark:
while his understanding soars, his emotions sing.'
While machines can be programmed to reg-
ister mathematical, mechanical and other quan-
tifiable data from the world, only human beings
have the imagination with which to experience
beauty, to perceive truly. Perception in this
sense means not just seeing objects in a utilitari-
an way, but seeing things for themselves, seeing
things as symbols for other levels of meaning. As
the poet John Keats wrote in a letter, 'what the
imagination seizes as beauty must be truth.'
Cultivating the imagination, learning to live in
the realm of archetype, myth and symbol, can
lift us from being merely human animals into
the human realm.

THE GREATER MANDALA OF AESTHETIC APPRECIATION

It could be said that the goal of the spiritual
aspirant is to dwell at all times in 'the greater
mandala of aesthetic appreciation.' This
'greater mandala of aesthetic appreciation' rep-
resents a total shift in our perception.
Guenther defines prajna as 'analytical apprecia-
tive understanding'. Sangharakshita, in *Wisdom*
Beyond Words, takes this as a starting point to
look at the Bodhisattva's experience in terms of
'vidya' or 'aesthetic appreciation', describing it
as 'a sort of relishing of things, a harmony with
the world.' Bodhisattvas, free of desires, are left
only with an aesthetic appreciation of the world.
For us aesthetic enjoyment is only too often a
mere pocket of our experience - perhaps some-
thing we keep for the visit to the art gallery on
Sunday afternoons. But according to
Sangharakshita, 'our overall attitude, our overall
response to life should be purely aesthetic.' In
this way, as aspiring Bodhisattvas, the whole

I Walk

Srivati

world is reorganized to become a mandala. (To create a mandala is defined as 'to take any prominent aspect of reality and surround it with beauty.'³)

As Buddhists we commit ourselves to such a total shift of perception. We set up conditions and take up practices which help us move from a predominantly materialist world-view dominated by our desires, to seeing things with wisdom and compassion. We usually dwell in the kamaloka, the realm of sensuous desire - and yet surely our deeper aspiration is to dwell in the rupaloka, or realm of archetypal form or beyond that the arupaloka, or beyond them all the Unconditioned itself..

One way we can think of our spiritual endeavours and the path to the Unconditioned is to see it as a path of beauty. This is not a separate or specialist path for those who like the fine arts. All routes leading to Enlightenment lead to the Beautiful. But it may be more appealing to some of us to think in terms of reaching for the Beautiful, or traversing the path of ever greater contact with and appreciation of Beauty: seeking to develop the Buddha's eye where everything is seen as beautiful because unobstructed or unfiltered by the distorting lenses of craving, hatred and delusion. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, William Blake wrote:

'If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.'

We can cleanse the doors of our perception by developing our aesthetic appreciation: awareness that is beautiful in that it sees beauty and sees beautifully.

But what is beauty? It seems in the nature of beauty that it is difficult to define. John Keats in "Ode On A Grecian Urn" famously said, '*Beauty is truth, truth beauty.*' According to Thomas Aquinas, '*the beautiful is that which when seen, delights.*' John Ruskin wrote, '*Remember that the most beautiful things in the world are the most useless; peacocks and lilies for instance.*'⁴ The word 'beautiful' (like the Pali word '*kalyana*') is defined in dictionaries in terms of loveliness perceived, or delight experienced through both the physical and moral sense. The American philosopher George Santayana defined beauty as 'pleasure regarded as the quality of a thing', 'pleasure objectified.'⁵

So beauty, we can say, unites pleasure and meaning. When our awareness is aesthetically

appreciative, it is characterized by delight and a sense of significance; there is present both emotion and some kind of understanding. It is there in Siddhartha's recollection of his experience under the rose-apple tree when a boy. It is his memory of this spontaneous experience of meditative absorption 'accompanied by thinking and exploring with happiness and pleasure born of seclusion' that leads him to discover the way to Enlightenment.⁶ He realized that there are certain kinds of pleasure which he has no reason to avoid or be afraid of. For me this key moment symbolises the path of beauty.

To tread a path of beauty, means to actively seek out beauty. As Kathleen Raine says in her essay, 'On the Use of the Beautiful', '*we can learn about beauty only from beauty.*' We become lovers in pursuit of the beloved and, like besotted lovers, if we let it, beauty will turn our worlds upside down. Experiencing beauty can be profoundly unsettling. We can find ourselves in the midst of nature, standing before a painting, reading a poem, absorbed in a symphony, faced with something totally new to our experience that we don't know what to do with. We find we're not sure who we are any more. Such an experience can shock and shake us to the core.

In *The Religion of Art*, between a deceptively meek pair of brackets, Sangharakshita states:

*'Death and art are terrible for the same reason: both represent change.'*⁸

To tread a path of beauty, to step into the mandala of aesthetic appreciation is to become - metaphorically at least - a poet. Our world, seen through a poet's eyes, becomes more and more vivid, significant - even playful. The question therefore arises: How do we cultivate this

John Keats



"Like the two wings of a bird, reason and emotion are both indispensable to the spiritual flights of man... The spiritual aspirant is like Shelley's skylark: while his understanding soars, his emotions sing."

appreciative aspect of wisdom in terms of developing a poetic sensibility, even if we have no interest in actually writing poetry?

Robert Bly talks about this 'poetic perception' in his introduction to William Stafford's *Holding onto the Grass*:

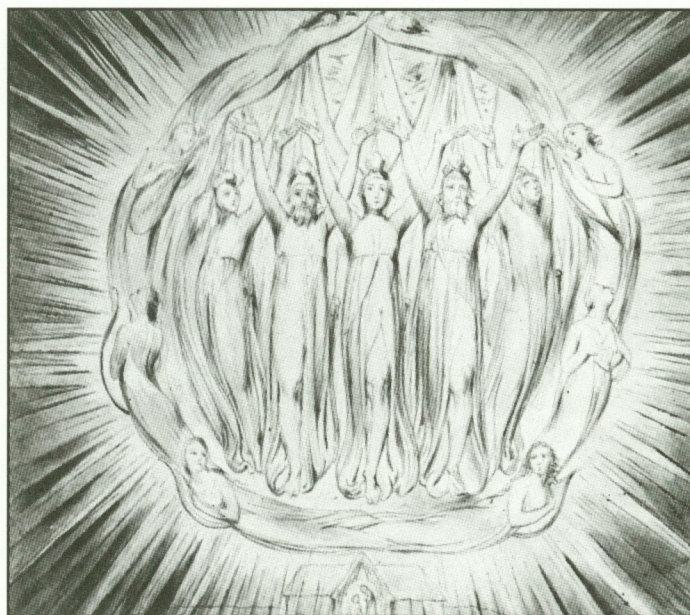
'One of [Stafford's] most amazing gifts to poetry was his theme of the golden thread. He believed that whenever you set a detail down in language, it became the end of a thread...and every detail - the sound of a lawn mower, the memory of your father's hands, a crack you once heard in lake ice, the jogger hurtling herself past your window - will lead to amazing riches. William Blake said,

*I give you the end of a golden string,
Only wind it into a ball.*

*It will lead you in at Heaven's gate
Built in Jerusalem's wall.*

*I asked Stafford one day, "Do you believe that every golden thread will lead us through Jerusalem's wall, or do you love particular threads?"...he said 'Any little impulse is accepted and enhanced...The stance to take, reading or writing is neutral, ready, susceptible to now...Only the golden string knows where it is going, and the role for the writer or reader is one of following, not imposing. If every detail can be by careful handling...lead us in, then we live in a sacred universe.'*⁹

In his essay, *Advice to a Young Poet*,¹⁰ Sangharakshita points to five necessary qualities to be developed by the Young Poet. These five qualities develop the substance or emotional experience of poetry; but they can be applied not only by the developing poet, (poets being born, not made, according to Horace) but by all those seeking to develop their aesthetic sense,



William Blake : Angels

that is to say, all those seeking to develop spiritually. They give us a very useful model for looking at how to develop that aesthetic awareness that is synonymous with a spiritual outlook. These five are: observation, sensitiveness, sympathy, solitude and reflection.

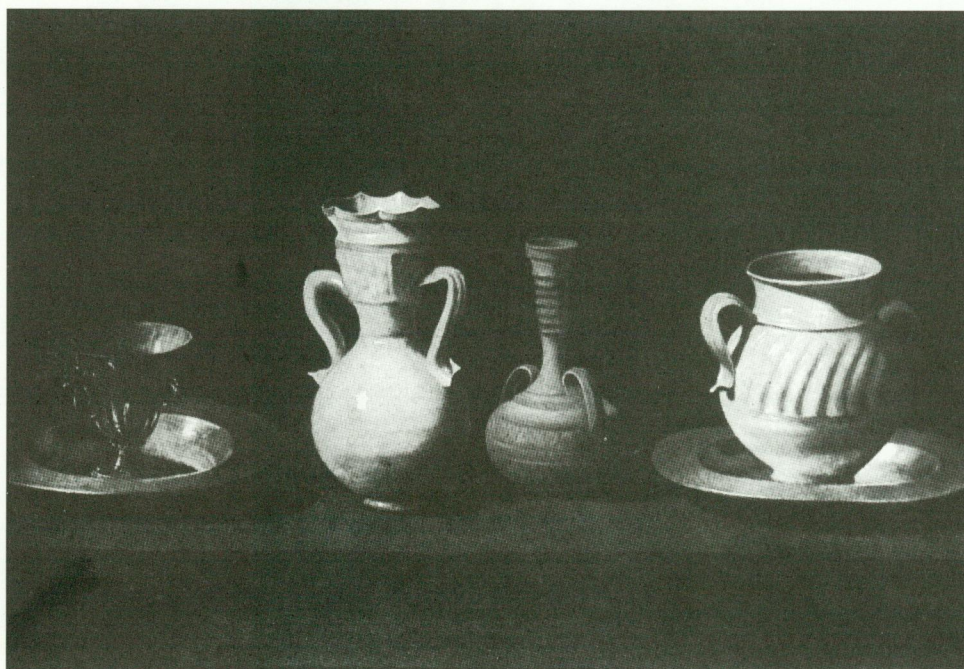
OBSERVATION

Our understanding - and indeed all art - seems to begin with what we perceive through our senses, so we start with 'observation' which Sangharakshita defines as, '*a vivid awareness of the unique individuality of things.*'

This may mean moving a little more slowly through the world, taking the time to look, to be receptive to what's around us; giving the things around us the chance to look back. Those involved in the visual arts are familiar with the challenge of taking time to really look

at something. But for others, too, putting in 'just looking pauses' enriches our experience. Our capacity to observe is nowhere more encouraged than by putting ourselves in or in front of beauty - immersing ourselves in nature, or standing before the paintings of the great artists. In some ways it is simply a matter of re-contacting the curiosity we felt as children - the child picks up and plays with the half-hidden shell or the fallen leaf; or gazes enraptured by the spider's web. Our poetic eye or aesthetic awareness brings magic and enjoyment - as if our emotions just have to run out and play in such a world. As Shakespeare wrote in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

*The lunatic, the lover, and the poet,
Are of imagination all compact.*



Still Life, Francisco de Zurbarán

SENSITIVENESS

This refers to a strengthening and subtilizing of our feelings. what he describes is an asceticism of art, that is, a conscious checking or sublimation (not repression) of emotion:

Emotion is essentially a force, and has a natural tendency to express itself in some outward form. If this force is consciously checked, so that it is no longer able to express itself in the normal manner, the inhibited energy will assume a subtler and more powerful form, and therefore tend to find expressions on a higher plane of experience. Feelings are like fountains, in which the water, unable to find an outlet on its own level, shoots up through a narrow aperture to leap a hundred feet into the air.¹¹

This creative checking of our emotions renders us more receptive to beauty because our feelings are flowing, not scattered and hungrily hunting. In terms of making art, this practice of sensitiveness is to do with waiting and choosing to express ourselves through a particular medium, struggling with its - and our - limitations to do so. The poet desires to give something expression. The expression requires a particular form. Each word has to be the right one, in the right place for the poem to work. It is like ethics: aesthetics are like the ethics of the imagination - ethical living requires us to be more conscious of the effect of what we do, say and think, as well as what we take in through the doors of the senses. So with greater aesthetic awareness we will be more contained and yet somehow more passionate in our speech and actions, because our feelings will be full-hearted and focused and appropriate. Like each of the seventeen syllables in the poetic form of the haiku, every little bit counts. Ryokan, returning to his hermitage to discover he had been robbed of virtually his only possessions - his old, torn sleeping quilt and his meditation cushion - wrote the following magical and famous haiku:

*The thief left it behind -
The moon
At the window.¹²*

SYMPATHY

By 'sympathy' is meant the projecting out into the feelings of another, empathy, knowing the feelings of someone else as our own: necessary for the poet and for spiritual practice. This is put very well by Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry*:

'The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; must put himself in the place of another and of many others. The pains and pleasures of his species must become his own.'¹³

Rilke, in *'The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge'* write about gathering *'sense and sweetness for a whole lifetime, and a long one if possible, and then, at*



the very end, you might perhaps be able to write ten good lines...'¹⁴

For those of us working to dwell in the greater mandala, and using the poet as our archetypal guide, this gathering of 'sense and sweetness' means really engaging with people, places and things. The Bodhisattvas see everything with metta, loving awareness, consistently all the time. Our poet guide is interested, curious about life - not in a cold, detached way: if, with our imaginations we put ourselves in another's shoes, we know that they suffer and hope as we do, and so we feel sympathy, care, love.

With these first three qualities we see an augmentative pattern: observation leads to sensitiveness, out of which flows sympathy. Feelings become transparent when our attention is allowed to settle and focus on one object. From this awakening of the heart, we can go out emotionally, imaginatively into the experience of others, beyond just our own concerns.

But before the work of poetic creation can begin, the diverse elements of observation, sensitiveness and sympathy must be 'mingled and fused as elements are fused in a crucible...the crucible is solitude, the fire reflection.'



SOLITUDE

Solitude is not just 'physical withdrawal from human activities and interests' but an 'inner isolation' too. In this context of cultivating our poetic outlook or appreciative mode of understanding, we can see solitude as our crucible. This is especially important when so many of us lead such busy and active lives. The power of the pause is not to be under-estimated whether it is a two week solitary retreat or ten minutes alone at the window during a busy day at work. There is also maintaining a sense of inner solitude - becoming more self-contained - without at all becoming less friendly!

REFLECTION

Sangharakshita says little on this subject except that, '*the fire of reflection must be kindled as often, and kept burning for as long as possible.*' Again, this 'flame of slow, quiet musing' - for the poet at least - can be kept going all the time, but is best fanned up in a blaze of solitude.



ENGAGING IN THE ARTS

By engaging in the arts as artists or through appreciation of artistic creation, we can develop the imaginal faculty and thereby our capacity to experience faith in the Three Jewels. The arts speak to us in the language of images, myths, symbols and archetypes. Through the arts we can become more fluent in this language, more at home in the archetypal realm. The arts speak to our hearts, engage our emotions, which fuel our spiritual lives. As Subhuti says, 'it is not enough to be clear. One must be moved.'¹⁵ If our feelings aren't available to fire our spiritual aspirations, then we don't go anywhere. Jeanette Winterson writes, 'art is aerobic.' Art brings oxygen to our hearts. She also says (in her usual categorical manner): 'Art doesn't imitate life. Art anticipates life.'¹⁶

By reading, watching, looking at and listening to art, great art in particular, we can experience - however briefly - a deeper perception of life or an uplifted state. The arts can strike resonances with what we didn't know we knew or hadn't been able to articulate ourselves. Not all art, however, does this. Sangharakshita defines art as:

*'The organisation of sensuous impressions into pleasurable formal relations that express the artist's sensibility and communicates to his audience a sense of values that can transform their lives.'*¹⁷

This for many people nowadays is a provocative statement. Some interpret it as 'being told what they should like'. But in fact what is implied is that there is a hierarchy of art whereby art can be judged according to its ability to positively change us. The very idea of the existence of objective values against which we can evaluate art, or that there is a hierarchy of greatness in art is anathema to those who believe in the essential validity of all art on its own terms.

But what is our relationship with the arts and culture? Are they an important part of our lives, of little interest or simply the way we spend our leisure time? Oscar Wilde, in the Preface to *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* writes, 'All art is quite useless.' To me this is what makes the arts both so delightful and dangerous: because the arts are useless they are a way - especially for adults - to play. Playing is doing something for its own pleasure. Enjoyment of the arts loosens us up, allows the imagination to stretch itself, enriches our experience. The danger of the uselessness of the arts is when they are associated with escape from full consciousness. There is nothing wrong with finding a respite from the dubious rigours of the Protestant work ethic, a respite that brings rest and relaxation to support our efforts in the spiritual life. But in terms of spiritual practice there is no such thing as 'time off'. The whole secret of spiritual life is to continually maintain our mindfulness. How conscious are we in our enjoyment of the arts? Do we guard the doors of our senses or, as Keats puts it to the

Nightingale, do we seek to 'fade far away, dissolve and quite forget'? What we are looking for is the positive experience of uselessness in which awareness or consciousness is heightened.

How much do we exercise our appreciative muscle and play in the arts? How much do we guard the doors of the senses in terms of what we allow into our mind through what we read, watch or listen to? If aesthetics, appreciation of the beautiful, is an ethics of the imagination, we can purify our imaginations, that is, ourselves, by improving and beautifying our imaginative diet.

Of course we cannot force ourselves to enjoy a diet of Michelangelo, Mozart and Milton if at present our natural inclination is for magazines, Mantovani and Mills and Boon! But we can experiment, relish what we like and introduce ourselves occasionally to something new, something we have a flicker of interest in which seems to come nearer to fulfilling the criteria of Sangharakshita's definition of art.

I found this in trying to come to an appreciation of Rainer Maria Rilke. I was struck by a quotation from one of his poems, so rather uncertainly I picked up his *Duino Elegies*. The very first one blew me away! I was caught by the very first lines:

*'Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels' hierarchies? and if one of them pressed me suddenly against his heart I would be consumed in that overwhelming existence. For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, which we still are just able to endure, and we are so awed because it serenely disdains to annihilate us. Every angel is terrifying.'*¹⁸

Coming into contact with great works of art means we can perhaps, if briefly, touch that greatness, more profound understanding, compassion or energy. That greatness may not be visible in the lives of artists. If it is, that is a bonus. It is the works of art themselves that speak to us, the artist expressing the highest of which he himself is capable. It is to that we give our attention. Herbert Read says,

*'It has always been the function of art to stretch the mind some distance beyond the limits of the understanding.'*¹⁹

We can go looking for that experience, take the risk of letting great works of art show us something new, even make us anew. The path of beauty is a path of adventure and magic. But we have to be willing to follow it. Like a lover or a poet, we need to be willing to make 'a conscious surrender to the beautiful'.

The Religion of Art is an essay about egolessness. According to Sangharakshita, religion is 'essentially a life of egolessness; and egolessness...is fundamentally a willingness to accept new experiences.'²⁰

By stepping in to the greater mandala of aesthetic appreciation, we can learn to surrender to the beautiful and experience newness more

and more, letting those experiences chip away at our 'thick wall of selfhood' and so be changed.

We don't all have to be writers, artists or musicians, but we can all be metaphorical poets: looking for the end of the golden thread in our ordinary experience so that it can lead us to Reality. If we cultivate our powers of observation, sensitiveness and sympathy and hold them in solitude, fired by reflection, we will find that we speak poetry. Our imaginations will be more alive and we will experience life as richer in meaning and significance. Everything will be a symbol, pointing to something higher, as we live in a mythic context. We will begin to experience the joy and delight of getting out of our own way and seeing things as they Really Are.

Notes:

1. Sangharakshita, 'The Meaning of Buddhism and the Value of Art' in *The Religion of Art*, Windhorse, Glasgow 1988, p57
2. Keats, Letter to Benjamin Bailey, quoted in *The Penguin Dictionary of Quotations*, Penguin, Middlesex 1974
3. Sangharakshita, *Wisdom Beyond Words*, Windhorse, Glasgow 1993, pp186-8
4. John Ruskin, quoted in *The Penguin Dictionary of Quotations*
5. George Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty*, Dover, New York 1955, p31 & 33
6. *Majjhima-Nikaya* 36, Mahasaccakasutta
7. Kathleen Raine, 'The Use of the Beautiful' in *Defending Ancient Springs*, Golgonooza Press, Ipswich 1985
8. *The Religion of Art*, p93
9. Robert Bly in Introduction to William Stafford, *Holding onto the Grass*, Weatherlight press, Bristol 1994, p1-2
10. Sangharakshita, 'Advice to a Young Poet' in *The Religion of Art*,
11. *ibid.*, p131
12. Ryokan, transl. John Stevens, *One Robe, One Bowl*, Weatherhill, New York 1977, p75
13. Shelley, 'In Defence of Poetry' quoted in *The Religion of Art*, p133
14. Rilke, translated and edited by Stephen Mitchell, *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, Picador, London 1987, p91
15. Subhuti, *Sangharakshita: A New Voice in the Buddhist Tradition*, Windhorse, Birmingham 1994, p295
16. Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects*, vintage, London 1995, pp18 & 40
17. Sangharakshita, *The Religion of Art*, p84-5
18. Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, *ibid.* p151
19. Herbert Read, quoted in *The Religion of Art*, p110
20. *The Religion of Art*, p93

The very idea of the existence of objective values against which we can evaluate art, or that there is a hierarchy of greatness in art is anathema to those who believe in the essential validity of all art on its own terms.

Magic Paint Box

Karunachitta

Karunachitta lives in a women's community in Norwich and is a full-time art student. She joined the Western Buddhist Order in 1990.



Karunachitta

**"I discovered
it was a
magic paint
box. The
colours shone
out like
rainbow light,
illuminating
my face. The
light seemed
to clamour to
get out of the
box and light
up the sur-
roundings."**

MANY YEARS AGO I had a dream in which I visited a strange wise woman in a cave on a lonely hillside. I could ask her just one question, so I asked how I should proceed with my life. What I really wanted to know was how could I be truly and authentically myself, and at the same time transform and expand myself and my field of influence in a meaningful way. How could I grow and how could I contribute to transforming the world? This was no trivial question but one I often pondered whilst bringing up my two children and exploring and deepening my practice

of the Dharma.

The wise woman made no reply. Instead she mysteriously handed me a small black box - and then disappeared. I realized what she had given me was very precious. It didn't seem to be the right time to open it just then, so I continued on my journey. When I did open it, I discovered it was a magic paint box. The colours shone out like rainbow light, illuminating my face. The light seemed to clamour to get out of the box and light up the surroundings.

Years have passed since I had my dream - during which I was ordained and given the name 'Karunachitta' which means 'compassionate heart'. The question I posed to the wise woman of the dream is as relevant as ever. Now it sometimes comes to me as: how can I develop my compassionate heart?

Since my ordination I have spent a number of years busily engaged with teaching both yoga and the Dharma. Today, my children having grown up and left home, I find myself at an art college, exploring the magic paint box. What does that have to do with developing a compassionate heart?

I see myself as a bird winging its way through the sky. True sometimes I am able to fly high whilst at other times I barely clear the ground,

but I find through constant practice my two wings, art and meditation, keep me aloft. My buoyant tail feathers are the Dharma directing my flight towards the goal of Wisdom and Compassion.

The connection between the two wings has become more obvious - and more important to me over the years, and my flight is gaining more momentum. I was encouraged to pursue my chosen lifestyle when I read Sangharakshita's account of the conclusions he came to on the subject of art and spiritual life after his meeting with the Buddhist artist Lama Govinda (with whom he felt a strong connection:)

*'For him as for me the painting of pictures and the writing of poems was an integral part of the spiritual life itself. The relation between Buddhism and the spiritual life, on the one hand, and literature and the fine arts, on the other, was not, therefore, one that was merely external, as between different material objects. On the contrary, there was a deep inner connection between them. For this reason there could be no question of the cultivation of literature and the fine arts being inconsistent with the practice of Buddhism and the living of the spiritual life, as I had for some time supposed (or had been led to suppose) much less still of the one being actually inimical to the other.'*¹

So there need be no inconsistency between the life of the artist and following the Bodhisattva Ideal, the altruistic Ideal which seeks to gain Enlightenment for the sake of all living beings. This is what has inspired me to take my art further.

DIRECTIONS

Just as we meditate to transform ourselves - not just to have good meditations, so the aspiring Bodhisattva artist paints to transform self and communicate to the world images that arise out of this transformation: images that speak out of the depths of spiritual practice, which reflect in some way the value of that experience, and not to just produce 'good' or 'nice' paintings.

Embarking on the path of the higher evolution, the spiral path, we will eventually become a true individual characterized by emotional positivity, creativity, spontaneity, imagination and insight. If we keep up our efforts, we can be confident in this because actions have consequences, and our efforts to develop these

qualities will inevitably eventually bear fruit. Pursuing the higher evolution requires the transformation of every level of our being, so our life needs to include things that really inspire us and engages as much of our energy as possible. So we need to ask ourselves, what is it that really fires us - really moves us? I felt that I could not leave out my life-long engagement with art. I had to make more of it and include it in my spiritual life. They need not be mutually exclusive: my love of beauty and colour feeds directly into my meditation practice. After some years in which I could not devote much time to art, I found I no longer wanted to just dabble in it. Going to an art class once a week was jarring: just as I was beginning to connect with something, it was time to change gear and do something else. Eventually I came to the conclusion it was time to simplify my life and concentrate on what was really important in order to deepen my own spiritual practice.

Sangharakshita has always urged his Western students to '*study seriously their own higher culture, as much as they do traditional expressions of the Dharma.*'² This is what I am doing. In the FWBO we have talked of the '3C's' - that is public Centres, residential communities and what used to be called co-operatives (now team-based Right Livelihood businesses). Now the fourth 'C' - culture - is becoming more established as a way of engaging people from the sangha in an effective path of practice.

CONTEXT

The Buddhist artist has a clear context within which to work. The Dharma gives meaning, direction and purpose. The Sangha provides opportunities for communication and interaction. Just as the alchemist works on transforming base metal into gold, using fire, so the aspiring Bodhisattva artist works in the fire of the Bodhisattva Ideal, dedicating the merits of practice to the welfare of all sentient beings.

The life of the artist means entering deeply into the magic of images, of light and colour, discovering those realms in which we can meet archetypal forms which refine our being. Finding images of heroes and heroines, and mythical beings, looking at colours, gazing at light - anything that helps us enter the archetypal realms are as important for the Buddhist artist as getting familiar with the medium - the paints, brushes and other tools of the painter.

The Bodhisattva speaks the values of Nirvana, of how to break through the limits of our mundane, illusory 'reality' into the awakening of Transcendental Reality. The aspiring Bodhisattva artist seeks new ways to communicate that vision. Traditionally those images include the stupa; the mandala, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Dakinis, vajras, the wheel and the spiral - they all represent something of the Buddhist vision of existence. Buddhist artists

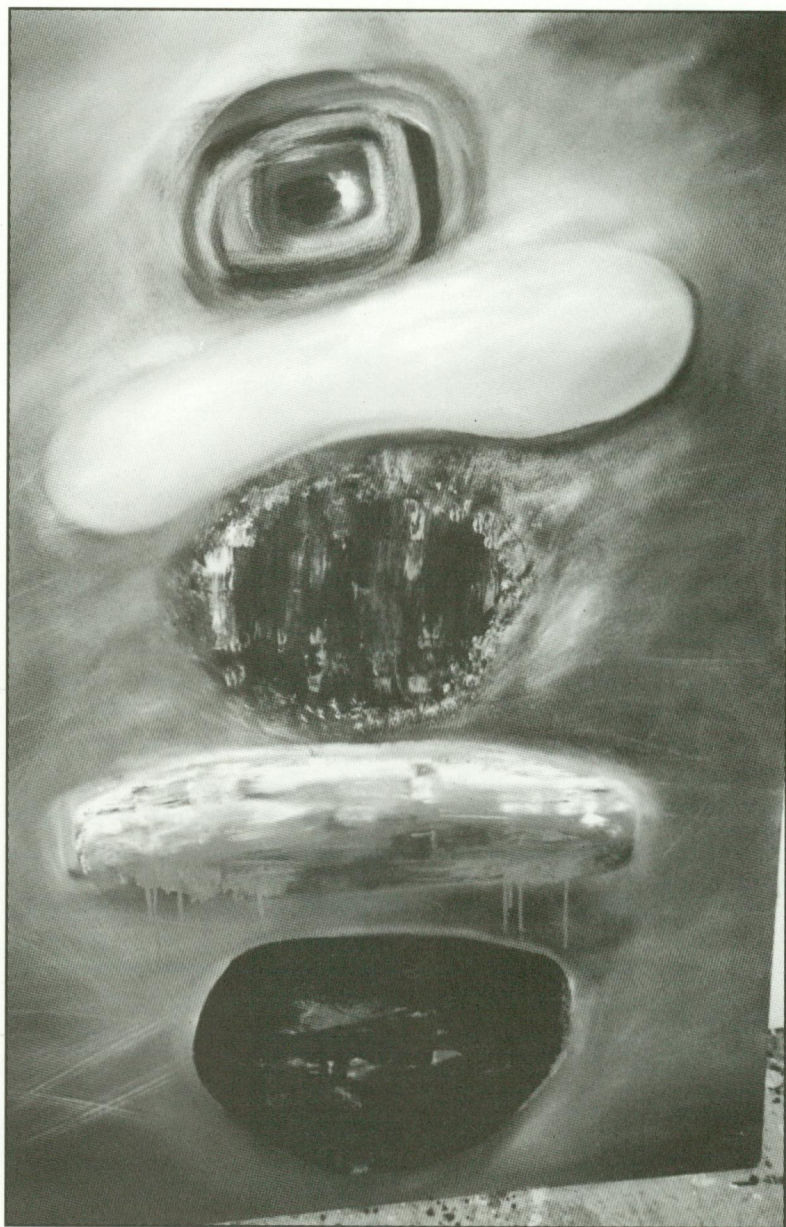
need to find ways of creating from their own practice images that speak the language of western culture.

TRANSFORMATION: HOW DOES IT WORK?

In the process of painting I work with the physical elements of paint and canvas. They are symbols of change and open-ended possibilities. They become the alchemical tools which can change me and my relationship to Reality. Art is an illusion. We know it is paint on canvas but nevertheless we can enter into those evocative worlds and let them speak to our emotions and engage our imaginations. We can respond creatively to this illusion just as we do when we tackle our 'fixed self-view' when we meditate. Our imagination is our higher, potent sense of what is possible.

Meditation





The 5 Elements

How does it artistic endeavour become spiritual practice? It's just like meditating! First we apply the primer to the raw canvas. (Aspiring Bodhisattvas do not use the traditional rabbit-skin glue, but a vegetarian, polymer alternative.) This is like building up the blue sky at the beginning of a sadhana meditation - the blue sky which becomes the stage and background to the unfolding of mythic events.³ The oil paint squeezed from the tubes is mixed with turpentine with its evocative smell, or with linseed oil. This mixing process is like earthing oneself, centring oneself. The names of the colours are evocative: Naples Yellow or Burnt Sienna, their pigments made from the earth element. Cobalt Blue is reminiscent of vistas of azure skies; and there is ancient renaissance Gold.

I do not paint from my head or even my hand but with my whole body: All of me is engaged in the process, just as in meditation one centres on body awareness as an essential starting point. I may work quickly, I may work

slowly. I may have some idea of what I want or I may not, but gradually something builds up on the canvas to which I then respond, assess and interact with. I can change any part of it. I could wipe the whole thing off or I could paint over it - or put it to one side. But no, that would be like walking out of the shrine room. If I feel like that, what's happening? What hindrance am I indulging that is preventing me from bringing all my attention to my work and engaging my imagination?

Sometimes a painting seems to have a life of its own and paints itself without 'me' getting in the way. Then I feel as though I'm plugging in to something much bigger than myself, and this is an important part of the process. Shapes and colours seem to flow and change even before I've made up my mind to change them - in response, I think, to my underlying aspiration to 'go with the flow of reality' and share whatever may come through from my sadhana practice - or simply from my imagination and sense of purpose. Confidence in this process comes from building up my relationship with my yidam during my meditation practice, and then integrating it into all areas of my life so that it is constantly a part of my experience - not something I am in touch with just when on the cushion.

The painting is like a meditation in which the inner experience is depicted before our very eyes. The mind focuses on the canvas, upon which layers of the elements and stratas of consciousness have been put down. On one level it is quite clear what is going on - pigment is being placed upon canvas; on another any explanation of what is happening is impossible! I was lucky enough to attend a drawing class with the artist Dennis Creffield who said that '*creativity is a daring learning nakedness to oneself.*' This hits the nail right on the head. You have to be daring to stretch into the unknown and you have to be daring to communicate what you find there.

To me the paints are the physical medium and the context of my painting is my commitment to the Three Jewels. The painting studio is equivalent to the shrine room. The shrine room contains images that encourage faith to arise - that which is ultimate in us responds to what is ultimate in the universe. The shrine room is a beautiful space in which one contacts energy and imagination to become more oneself. Likewise the artist's studio is an open space in which he or she can connect and communicate with the mythic dimension with its vast, unplumbed depths. Art is not random exploration but directed exploration - directed from our relationship with our inner world and the ceaselessly changing events of existence.

'In order to appeal to the whole man, it isn't enough to appeal just to the conscious, rational intelligence that floats upon the surface. We have to appeal to something more, and this means that we have to speak an entirely different language than the

language of concepts, of abstract thought; we have to speak the language of images, of concrete form.”⁴ Archetypal form expresses itself in images such as the radiant and colourful Bodhisattvas which conjure up in our imaginations ourselves as we could become. If we can unite with these images through our imagination we can eventually be transformed by them. Our imagination can ascend through higher and higher levels and lead us ultimately to prajna or wisdom. ‘Imagination in the highest sense apprehends sunyata or truth in the highest sense, through the medium of form - that is to say beauty in the highest sense. It apprehends truth and beauty together.’⁵

For the dance of transformation to occur, the aspiring bodhisattva artist works with uniting imagination, with the hands-on challenge of real, honest present experience using his chosen medium.

THE FUTURE OF BUDDHIST ART

I find at my own art college that while able to make full use of the technical help available to improve technique, much that goes on in the name of art has little relevance to a Buddhist whose aim is to leave the world of sense desire and ascend into higher and purer realms of experience. Without a path of vision such as the Dharma brings, art is always in danger of becoming ‘art for art’s sake’, and clarity of purpose and meaning is lost.

If we are to communicate ever more widely the universally valid principles of the Dharma, then we need powerful images from our own practice as Westerners that speak to the heart, reintegrating us with nature, interconnectedness and the Wisdom of the Transcendental. I would like to see Buddhist Art Schools being established, dedicated to bringing the Three Jewels of Buddhism into Western culture. Works created at those art schools could be displayed not only in art galleries and Buddhist Centres but in hospitals, schools and hospices for the dying.

THE PATH NOW

Meanwhile we have a growing number of Buddhist arts centres and arts activities which we may be able to attend. We can expose ourselves more and more to images that stretch us beyond our present limits of appreciation of beauty and colour. We can find artists whose work we resonate with. We can learn to look more deeply into our own associations with art, be that as practitioner or one who enjoys art, or both, and use it creatively to fire our meditation practice. We can develop our awareness of pure, beautiful colours and discover their effect on our psyches. We can give more time to really look at light, beams of light, clouds, water, rocks, anything to spark off our imagination and connect us with myth and symbol.

It is no coincidence that residing over the realm of the beautiful is the Buddha

Ratnasambhava who holds in his left hand the Wish-Fulfilling Jewel that grants all skilful wishes, while his right hand is stretched out in the gesture of Supreme Generosity. The arts are a way of connecting with this generosity and of becoming more richly and abundantly ourselves.

Notes:

1. Subhuti, *Sangharakshita: A New Voice for the Buddhist Tradition*, Windhorse, Birmingham 1994, p 270
2. *ibid.*, p272
3. *Sadhana practice* is a meditation centring on the visualization of a Buddha or Bodhisattva form (sometimes referred to as one’s ‘yidam’). In the FWBO these practices are taken up by Order members at the time of their ordinations.
4. Subhuti, *ibid.* p274
5. *ibid.*, p281

“The life of the artist means entering deeply into the magic of images, of light and colour, discovering those realms in which we can meet archetypal forms which refine our being.”



Out of Time : This is about time not being linear. The figure is Titians Ariadne - she gave Theseus a ball of string to keep him safe in the underworld

Illustrating Dharma

Varaprabha

Varaprabha has trained in both art and sculpture. Since her ordination into the Western Buddhist Order in 1988, she has continued to work as an artist, as well as bringing up two children. In 1992 she was commissioned to produce illustrations for a book by Sangharakshita: *The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment, Parables, Myths and Symbols of the White Lotus Sutra*.

She talks here about her work:

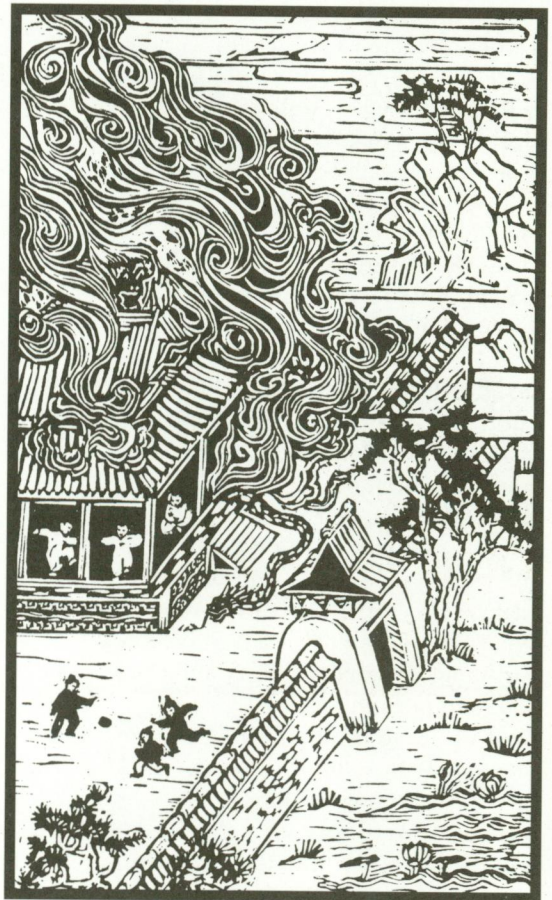
WHEN I WAS AT college I found I was very interested in printing. After I left I didn't have access to a printing press or other technical equipment I needed so I looked for alternative methods for reproducing images such as mono-types and stencils.

I particularly like lino cuts. That medium has a distinctively 3-D quality - in terms of technique you are working in 3-D although what you produce is a 2-D image. It is hard work, it has a vigorous quality - this has an effect on the image you produce. Unlike drawing in which you can work over and over each line, lino work has a sort of immediate and uncompromising aspect to it - you cut, and that's it: there is the line, you can't work over it. You can't afford to make mistakes. Another attraction of working with lino-cuts is that you are working with black and white images - the contrast gives a kind of brilliance to the images with their sharp edges.

I was very pleased when I was asked to illustrate Sangharakshita's book on the *White Lotus Sutra*. For one thing I was delighted to be of some service to Sangharakshita who is, my teacher and preceptor. I was especially glad to help make some of his teaching accessible to more people through my interest in illustration.

Another interesting aspect of the work for the book was working in conjunction with the Windhorse Publications team. Mostly I work on my own so I enjoyed the opportunity of collaborating with others and getting a taste of what it could be like to work in a team-based Right Livelihood.

Creating illustrations to go with the text from the Sutra was inspiring. I picked out an image for each chapter which seemed to be particularly redolent of the theme of that section. Then I spent hours researching, surrounded by many pictures from various cultures depicting some of the stories and parables from the Sutra. My pictures are composites from many of these images. Working on specifically Buddhist themes has a striking effect on my being - I find myself uplifted and better able to maintain positive states of mind. Doing this kind of work I am fully engaged - my hands, eyes, as well as my mind. It's a very effective spiritual practice.



*Suppose there is an elder
Who has a large house...
Falling and decayed,
With lofty halls in dangerous condition...
That house
Of a sudden catches fire.
All at once, in every direction,
Its flames are in full blaze...
The elder
In alarm enters the burning house,
With intent to save [his children].
The children, unheeding...
Remain attached to their pleasures
And do not stop their play.
Thereupon the elder...
Arranges a device...*

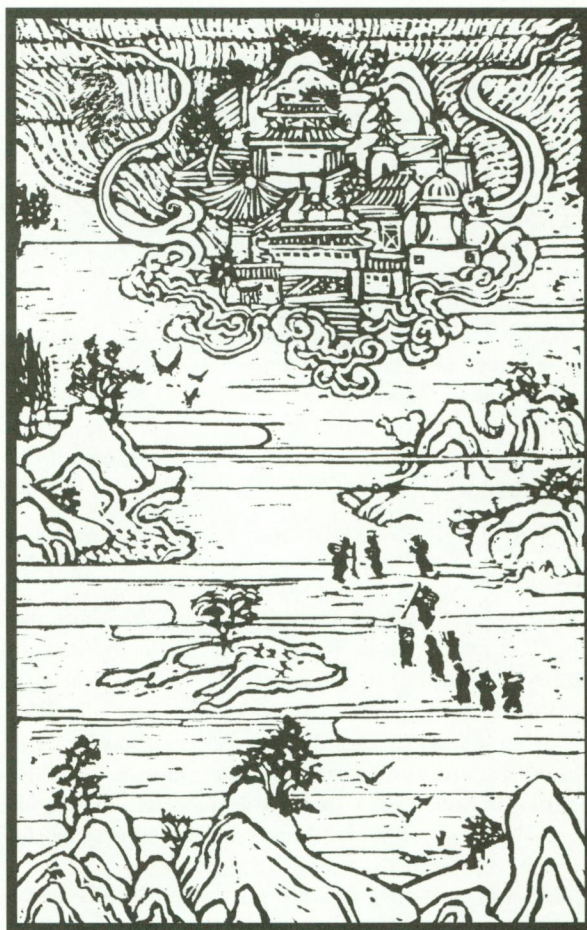
(Reproduction of illustrations are by kind permission of the artist and Windhorse Publications.)



*It is like a great cloud
 Rising above the world,
 Its rain everywhere equally
 Descends on all sides,
 Streaming and pouring without stint...
 Plants, trees, thickets, forests,
 According to their need, receive moisture...
 Superior, middle, inferior, all...
 'I appear in the world
 Just like a great cloud,
 to pour enrichment on all
 Parched living beings,
 To free them all from misery
 And so attain the joy of peace...*

*'Let me exert supernatural power
 And make a great magic city
 Splendidly adorned with houses,
 Surrounded with gardens and groves,
 Streamlets and bathing pools,
 Massive gates and lofty towers...'*

*When those people had entered the city,
 Their hearts were full of joy;
 All thought only of rest and ease
 And considered they had been saved.
 When the leader knew they were rested,
 He assembled and addressed them, saying:
 'Let all of you push forward!
 This was only an illusory city...
 Do you now diligently advance
 Together to the Place of Jewels.*



A LIFE IN VERSE

Sridevi



Sridevi was born and grew up in Finland. She joined the Western Buddhist Order in 1978. After many years living in England, she returned to her native country where she now helps to run the Helsinki Buddhist Centre.

**I HAVE
BEEN
WRITING**
poetry,

mainly in English, since 1967 when I was twenty-one. I had recently entered university to study English literature. What an opening up of inner worlds that was! It sparked off in me an excitement for verbal expression: I realized it was possible to express strong emotions with intensity and to learn about them in the process.

I remember being amazed by the richness of language and by the flow of words which could describe my strong youthful feelings. I was deeply moved to discover Shakespeare and T.S.Eliot and felt greatly privileged to be in contact with such minds. It was a privilege to talk with people who lived in more literary worlds and to share my youthful attempts to express myself. I was excited and flattered when one tutor gave me a poetry book at his departure and a sonnet he had written for me! Having been to America for fourteen months after my first year at university, I had gained a fluency in English which was rare in a small new English department in the north of Finland.

With a BA degree, I left my home town and moved south to Helsinki. I could find work only as a secretary and soon decided to continue my studies at the university. I found Chaucer rather tough going but there were exciting lectures on

John Donne and Milton as well as Shakespeare, and of course some modern authors. I also learnt about English music; and became involved in a creative writing group which was to produce a magazine in English. I started reading contemporary Finnish poetry and embarked on an MA thesis on the subject of translating poetry into English. At this time I made contact with the well-known Finnish poet Pontti Saarikoski, himself a translator who had even succeeded in a Finnish rendering of Joyce's *Ulysses*.

In some ways it is more difficult to faithfully translate one's own work so that it is still good poetry. For example, instead of my rather stiff rendering of one of his verses:

*The strait soon frozen.
The clouds heavy on my mind.*

*Snow falling down grey.
Always and everywhere
I have spoken a foreign tongue.*

Saarikoski himself suggested:

*The strait, freezing.
The clouds heavy, pressing.
Everywhere
going to these places
I spoke my tongue.*

He also wrote in the same collection (*The Happy Time*, 1971):

*From birds we could have learnt
freedom does not exist.*

*But we seek the wind.
That is what we
try to grasp.*

(transl. Sridevi)

Saarikoski was an original genius (he died in 1983) and a great bohemian who had a unique sense of the Finnish language as well as English and classical Greek literature.

According to my thesis, contemporary Finnish poetry can be said to be characterized, as one critic put it, by 'fearless spontaneity, sensuousness, universal and political awareness.' He distinguished the main trends as 'the humanized naturalist' and 'the urbanized visionary'. A good example of the latter trend can be found in the poetry of Lassi Sinkkonen (*From You Till Tomorrow*, 1967)

Early in the Morning

It is not difficult
to imagine how
at this very moment
when the birds start singing
somewhere a man is killed.

He is pierced by a bullet
or he explodes.
Around him
the air becomes a knife
enters his eyes
with a last flash.
It does not matter
who he was where he came from.
but better for a man

to die in his bed
early in the morning
with birdsong around him.
(transl. Sridevi)

I moved to England in 1978.
My encounter with Buddhism
brought about an even more
intense inner life. I wrote verse to
make some sense of what was
going on, to 'let off steam', and to
communicate. It was later that I
became aware of the phenomenon
called projection in some of these
poems: although I was writing
about other people, really they
were about me!

The Keep

Within
the high brick walls
you guard
the tight bud
of a sick rose.

You have conquered
your father,
the divine king.

But his inheritance,
the pride, the grief,
are for you
to keep.

Your obstinate resistance
does not see
outside
your fortress.

Where the mist of grace
rising from the rich black soil
is waiting to embrace
your opening.

(1981)

That year we held a fund-
raising event for the prospective
women's retreat centre (now
Taraloka) in London, reading
women's poetry interspersed with
music. Pamela Stevenson, a
professional actress interested in
meditation, rehearsed with us. The
theme was the Six Realms from the
Wheel of Life. One of the poems
performed was by Sylvia Plath. It
sparked off serious heart-searching
in me:

Sugar Daddy

My childish heart

has lost
its other half

and bargains
in the toyshops
of the world.

Time and again
rehearsing

a little speech
for someone big high up

who owns them
all.

(1981)

I was exploring intensely what
it means to be a woman and a
Buddhist, living and working with
women, attending retreats for
women, run by women. I was also
participating in retreats on the
continent, and becoming aware of
the European spiritual heritage. I
was looking for heroines and
found impressive mediaeval figures
such as the German Hildegard von
Bingen and the Dutch Hadewych.

Hadewych

In the hideous half-cluttered
rooms
of the modern art school in
Arnhem

she shows me beauty:
light, space, air created
in her large canvasses.

Emptiness of form,
mystical perception
with the inward eye extended out.

Later, in her own harmonious
uncluttered room
she reads to me in Old Dutch, of
Hadewych,
who knew the paradox of divine
love
and purity of longing:

how to send the message of desire
upstream
in a green vase.

(1985)

Friendships with women were
becoming an issue and in increas-
ingly successful competitor to
romantic involvements with men.

A Friend's Room

In her room's air
dust particles
are stars.

Always slowly
moving.

Momentarily
sparkling.

The sun alive
In Degas' women
combing their long
hair.

(1984)

I love the mystery of catching a
moment in words, the paradox of
living impermanence more fully by
preserving an experience in a
poem. It can bring back my past
life; but once I have finished a
poem, it also has an independent
life of its own. Showing my work to
others and doing public readings
are always interesting: I discover to
what extent my subjective experi-
ence is objective.

In some ways I was amazed to
find myself involved in perform-
ing. Reading my poems to an audi-
ence is one of the most terrifying
things I have ever done, and one
of the most satisfying. I was aware
that not using my mother tongue
was an extra hurdle to jump.

One of my most treasured
memories is a poetry reading I did
with Sangharakshita and other
Order members in Norwich in
1986 (we were still fund-raising -
this time for the newly-established
Taraloka!) There is something very
special about the openness of an
audience at a poetry reading.

I attended other poetry read-
ings and discovered that not all
poets are able to read their own
work well. Brian Patten was one of
the best. I also liked his poems.

The Translation

Lady it is evident by the rain
gathering in your eyes
how easily our loving
has translated into pain
and from its nest among moments
a slow, sad bird has flown,
it perches on my words
and sings this refrain:

'From my nest among moments
Where I keep a spinning world
I stole one crumb of joy
But lost it coming here.'

Lady it is evident by the rain
gathered in your eyes
how puzzled by a sudden loss
the world disintegrates,
and when it's done with loving
the heart breaks into squares,
it floats behind your eyes
and it gibbers everywhere:

'From my nest among moments
Where I keep a spinning world,
I stole one crumb of joy
But lost it coming here.'
(*Love Poems*)

Love and impermanence must
be the most common and universal
themes in poetry everywhere.
In many of my poems I seem to
explore passion and through trying
to understand it, attempt to
escape being overwhelmed. To
non-Buddhist readers some of my
poems are probably quite obscure.

Choice

As I wander the old lanes
of Cambridge where John Donne
and others sauntered,
their thought breeding verse,

for a lingering instant
like a flash from a lighthouse,
a choice exists.

Then,
my feeling, thought,
and all of me,
all choose
you.

A fish swimming with
the seething shoal,
I am caught at the market stalls

by Prosper's bait: Miranda
entering a white square
as a pawn.
Fickle feeling cannot choose,
but still things:

'O to have chosen
the right form
the right time
the right move

and be chosen
by you.'

(1987)

Going back to Finland once a year,
I confronted my previous conditioning - as well as my father's
advancing illness (he died in
1987). Sibelius helped.

Valse Triste

I receive a gift
of music
from a young girl with
budding breasts,
lively eyes,

to accompany
the old man's halting
steps round a chair, guided
by my arm.

Outside,
the ancient spruce
have gone quiet.

The snow has settled into
burial mounds.

(1986)

I can't read or play an instrument. However, I have often had strong connections with people who are involved with music and have sometimes had intense experiences through listening. It is fascinating to bring music (or painting or dance) into poetry.

I have delighted in getting to know people who write poetry, particularly those who also practice the Dharma. I was excited when I had the opportunity to meet Ananda, one of the longest-standing members of the Western Buddhist Order. He had already been writing for a long time when we met and worked together for a while in the eighties. He had also

been a Buddhist for two decades! Ananda informed and encouraged me, got together a performance group, workshops and an anthology: *Letting the Silence Speak* finally came out in 1991.

Among its authors were several friends of mine. One of the best poems (to me) is Karunachittai's
The bird mask.

The bird mask

Safe in the gallery
you might think
the last remaining soul from the
Ivory Coast
or the spirit of Guinea
has long since melted away,
lost to those who see but do not
feel.

But no. That last exhibit.
Its power vibrates through the
glass alive
from the whites of its eyes, tinged
pink and glaring,
to its beak grinning and snarling
with life.

We are not just body,
we are not just clay.
We are too large to be contained.

Three of my own poems were included in the anthology. I was very pleased to be in print! One of them was about Julian of Norwich, the mediaeval woman mystic. I was continuing to work out my relationship with the European spiritual tradition. I was beginning to feel I was a link in a long chain of women practitioners and that we were making history collectively at Taraloka, developing our Buddhist practice on retreats. My inner life intensified on retreat: the result was often a poem. On one retreat I had a kind of vision of the Tibetan woman tantric, Machig Lapdron:

Taraloka: Machig Lapdron

The sun's impending whiteness
arising vibrant
as birds' wings clear away
the dawn clouds.

Machig,
you dance
a white dance
of terrible and beautiful
loneliness
which acceptance transforms
into ecstasy.

You point to the moon
to the door left gently open
to the bone
bleached among nettles.

You teach me to look
at the cows
content with their relaxed life
of no tomorrow.

And the calm patience
of the snail
moistly tenderly advancing
with caresses along the earth
the frail shell
her almighty protection.

Machig,
you dance the wisdom of Tara:
love love love.

(1989)

I moved back to Finland in 1991 and have continued to write although not as much as before. Sometimes I still write in English, sometimes I translate what I have written in Finnish. I no longer feel that it is easier for me to express myself in a 'bigger' language.

My strongest connection among the Finnish poets is still with Edith Södergran, who died in 1923. After her death she was recognized as a pioneer of modern verse. Her complete poems were published in English in 1984. She lived an intense, quiet life communing with nature in a small village near the Russian border. However, she went to school in St Petersburg and when she contracted tuberculosis at the age of sixteen, spent some time in sanatoria in Switzerland. She had a broad education and an international outlook: Nietzsche was one of her heroes. She was fluent in several languages and had some difficulty in deciding which language she wanted to write in. She only published in Swedish: five collections during her life; one came out posthumously. Poetry for her was

ethical striving, to create something of herself.

Resolve

I am a very mature person,
but no one knows me.
My friends have a false picture of
me.

I am not tame.
I have weighed tameness in my
eagle's claws and know it well.
O eagle, what sweetness in the
flight of your wings.
Will you be silent like everything
else?
Will you write poetry perhaps? You
shall write no more poetry.
Every poem shall be the tearing-up
of a poem,
not a poem but clawmarks.¹

Like Edith Södergran, I feel writing poetry is a method of spiritual striving. I want to find my way through deep roots to the universal, my way to more *shraddha*, faith in myself to express the Dharma through my life. I am determined to find my own tongue in this lifetime - no matter how long it might take. I am learning patience.

Kshanti

Running past
the little church yard

Why not sit
on the warm bench
and contemplate
the upright and fallen
tomb stones,
time passing and
passed?

Jogging further
on the up-winding lane.

Why not halt
and gaze
at the wild rose bush,
full of pink buds,
one flower half-open
and one gloriously
blooming?

stopping to feel
the faithful ripening
warmth of the morning sun.

(Tiratanaoka Retreat
Centre, 1996)

Note:

1. Edith Södergran,
Complete Poems, transl.
David McDuff,
Bloodaxe Books, 1984



Eye, Hand and Mind:

drawing as a gateway to awareness

Dharmottara

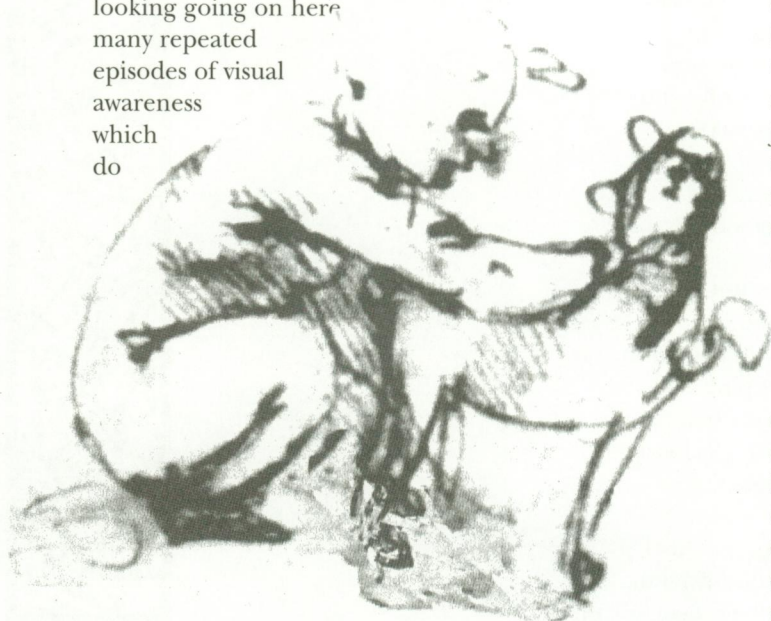


Dharmottara spent many years lecturing in art history. Since taking early retirement she has been involved in teaching meditation and Dharma classes at both the Liverpool and Manchester Buddhist Centres. She was ordained in 1996.

HOW CAN A SERIES of marks on a piece of paper be a gateway to awareness? I am going to suggest a few answers to this question, for the person who looks attentively at drawings as well as for the one who picks up a pencil, a thick and velvety stick of charcoal, a pigment-loaded brush or any other mark-making instrument, and sets about presenting a piece of our world with it.

Call to mind the image of the artist at work, maybe out of doors or in a museum or gallery, maybe in the life room of an art school before the model. You probably see someone whose head tilts continually, up and down, as their gaze moves from the subject of their drawing to the drawing itself and back again. There is a very particular kind of

looking going on here
many repeated
episodes of visual
awareness
which
do



not happen when we use our eyes as part of our survival technique in moving around the world. Doing what safety calls for a panning across our whole visual field, selecting certain outlined or moving shapes for out immediate practical purposes, and ignoring others. We do this with impressive speed and accuracy but we select out far more than we pull into our consciousness. When we sit down and try to draw an object we focus in on it closely and repeatedly, laying visual event over visual event hundreds or even thousands of times.

Some artists, particularly at certain periods in China and Japan, have found this intense visual experience so valuable that they advise the student to look in this way for a long time *before* setting down a single mark. 'If you want to learn to paint bamboos, first learn to see bamboos.'¹ Frederick Franck expands this point: 'In the how-to books you will find horses reduced to their ibasic formsi, to systems of ellipses or rectangles. In its own way this may be useful for a picture manufacturer, but it deprives you of knowing what a horse really looks like. In order to draw a horse, draw horses until you practically become a horse - not ihorses in generali but always that particular horse you are drawing at a given moment. Until you feel the tense curving of its neck in your own neck!'²

Drawing can do more than sharpen our awareness of appearances. Paradoxically, it can show us the limitations of that awareness too. When we start to draw, let's say, a tulip, we may be trying to establish the relative position of each petal. We soon find that these are slippery, impossible to pin down, because the relationship of one form to another appears to alter as we move our head and change our angle of sight. The ageing Cezanne was asked why he was still painting the quarry at Bibemus. Surely after all these years a change of subject might be a good thing? He replied that even from the same spot, if he moved his head four inches to the right or the left, he had an entirely new motif. It is a simple matter to test this out for oneself. Then again, our tulip which we thought of as a pale shape may suddenly look dark if the light changes or if its background alters. Sustained and detailed observation of an object reveals that it cannot be seen as a thing-in-itself, that its appearance is always the result of many conditions which surround it. These conditions of course include the eye and the mind of the observer; how would the tulip appear if we had the faceted eyes of an insect? Trying to draw a representation of an object in our world will eventually reveal the limitations of our sense of sight. We become aware of the visible signs of the interconnectedness of all phenomena, as



we see how light affects appearance, how heat or lack of water or simply the passing of time affect the shape of our tulip....we may extend our reflections to interconnectedness, to the insubstantiality of phenomena, to conditioned co-production...

...as a consequence of trying to draw a tulip!

Drawings are often made with the most minimal of technical means, dark marks on a lighter ground. Some of the most economical, abbreviated drawings, those with few marks and lots of untouched paper, can be the ones which are most rewarding and fascinating for the viewer. This is because they reveal to us our extraordinary ability to 'fill in the gaps', to reconstruct a slice of our world from very few clues indeed. Leonardo's cat is surely the essence of the feline because we are given only selected elements, the salient points which carry that sensation of concavity in the back and sinewy sliding. When we look at the marks themselves, individually they bear no resemblance to what they 'represent'. Or again, when we see the clasped hands of Rembrandt's seated woman in the context of the whole figure, we decipher those abstract scrawls and abrupt marks without any difficulty. Viewed alone, they are indecipherable. The tracks of our perception are very evident here. The unhesitating brushmarks of a Japanese drawing in the 'thrifty brush' style is another example of using minimal marks. The eye and mind of the viewer collaborate with the draftsman to produce such convincing images, particularly of that elusive but ever present phenomenon, movement. 'The palette of the mind is richer than that of the brush.'³ The minimal means of drawing call forth the activity of the mind and lay it bare. If we look thoughtfully at drawings, our mind is given a rare opportunity to watch itself at work, and we can, albeit in a limited and specialised arena, increase our self-awareness.

There is a further consequence of all this mental activity prompted by drawing's 'incompleteness'. Our minds seem to enjoy the exercise, we are given individual scope for interpretation, we make an investment of our energy and so our emotions become engaged. The pursuit of a suggested appearance is like a hunt for answers to a question, we are active searchers rather than passive recipients. The underlying principle here is comparable, again on a limited scale, to that of the first two of the three levels of wisdom, the principle of progressing from 'hearing' (or seeing) to 'reflecting', to making the thought (or image) one's own. The Zen master does not give the practitioner the answer to their koan; this would be to rob the student of the vital opportunity of their own experience.

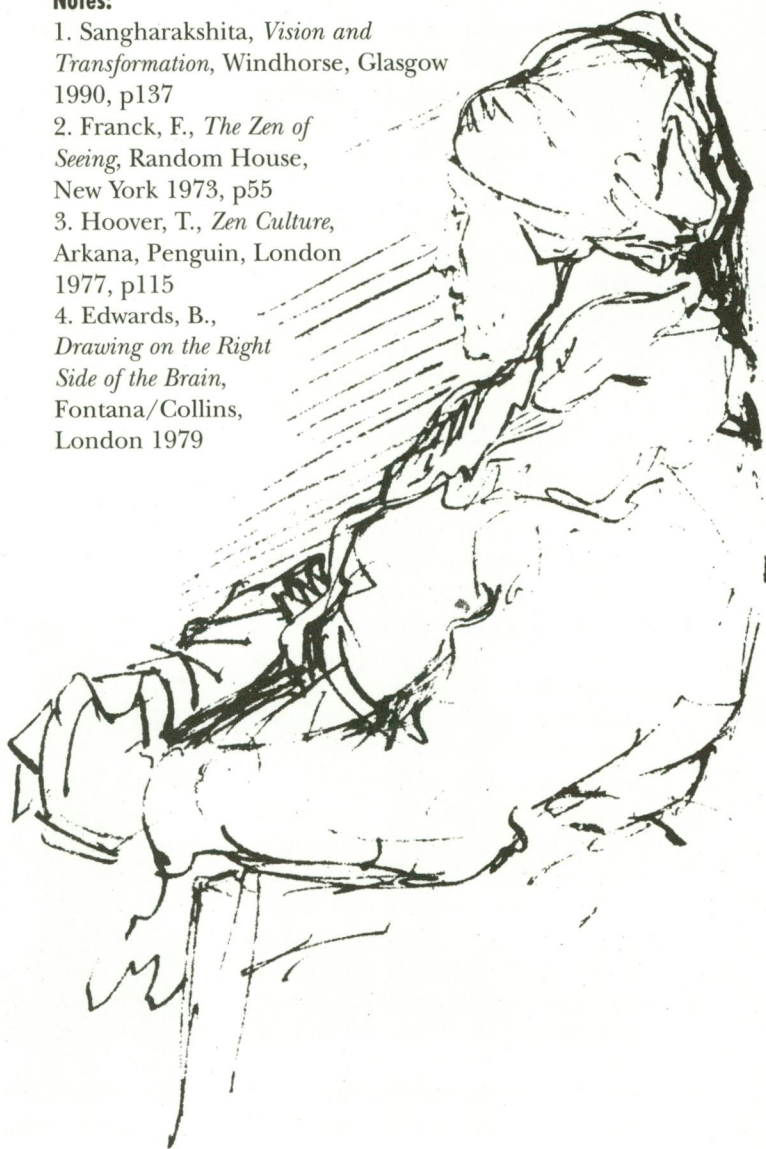
Many of us harbour the idea that we can't, and never will be able to draw. We are probably right, if we have the levels of attainment of the great masters in mind. But all of us can surprise and delight ourselves by discovering that we can order marks on a piece of paper so as to produce interesting, pleasing or maybe beautiful results. There are many traditional methods

for teaching people how to represent objects more or less convincingly, but the currently popular 'blinding' techniques presented by Betty Edwards⁴ are much more successful in destroying the self-view if can't draw. If your eyes are closed while you draw, or you look only at the object and not at the moving point of your pencil, inhibitions are removed because it is clearly impossible for anyone to achieve a 'good' representational drawing under such circumstances. People astonish themselves with the results of such experiments.

All this shows how restrained many of us are by the fear of public 'failure' with its expected consequence, criticism or even ridicule. Visual art is inherently public, and making a drawing presents some of us with a quite literally nerve-racking ordeal. How wonderful, then, to break through these well established fears and to find them to be unnecessary. If seeing through a lack of confidence even in this small area proves to be enjoyable, we may try to extend the experience to other fields... Who knows where it will end? The world around us, our own mental activities, even our fixed self-views, can all come into clearer focus if we look at the drawings of others thoughtfully, or dare to take up the pencil ourselves.

Notes:

1. Sangharakshita, *Vision and Transformation*, Windhorse, Glasgow 1990, p137
2. Franck, F., *The Zen of Seeing*, Random House, New York 1973, p55
3. Hoover, T., *Zen Culture*, Arkana, Penguin, London 1977, p115
4. Edwards, B., *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, Fontana/Collins, London 1979



Dharma Practitioners at Taraloka

IN MAY, Taraloka Retreat Centre for Women hosted a small gathering of women Dharma practitioners from different Buddhist groups in the UK. Initiated by Dayanandi and Sanghadevi, the idea behind the gathering was to provide a forum in which such women could meet informally to share their experience and begin to get to know one another. This was the first time that such a gathering had been organized in the UK (American women Buddhists have already come together in such a way on several occasions.)

Five women attended the weekend: Shenpen Hookham, one of two senior teachers of the Longchen Foundation of the Tibetan Kagyu Nyingma tradition; Denny Long (Den-e-ji-myo) of the International Zen Association UK (Soto Zen tradition), one of the teachers of the Bristol Zen Dojo; Jenny Warne, a member of Soka Gakkai International of the Nicheren tradition; Dharmacharini Sanghadevi of the FWBO (a member of the College of Public Preceptors); and Dharmacharini Dayanandi (Chairwoman of Taraloka.)

The first morning began with introductions, each person recounting the story of their initial meeting with Buddhism, giving a brief account of the particular tradition in which they were practising and their own field of activity within it. This was informative and wide-ranging, covering as it did four very different traditions.

Various topics emerged as possibilities for discussion during the course of the weekend but the one which aroused most interest was that of building spiritual community and spiritual friendship. The participants recounted the very different attitudes to sangha and friendship that existed in their own traditions. In the Zen tradition, friendship, it seemed, was

almost discouraged. Within Soka Gakkai, on the other hand, the giving of support and fellowship is seen as an important function of members. In Tibetan Buddhism there is the intense focus on the relationship between guru and disciple. In the FWBO there are the well-established systems which encourage spiritual friendship at all levels of involvement. Sanghadevi spoke at some length on the FWBO's understanding of the importance of spiritual friendship in pursuing a spiritual path. A point that emerged from subsequent discussion was that to successfully create links of spiritual friendship and community depends a great deal on a common practice of ethics and is aided by the practice of metta bhavana (the development of loving kindness meditation.) Without these, attempts to develop spiritual community often foundered.

Many other topics were discussed during the course of the weekend, both formally and informally. These included the relative success of mixed sex and single sex communities; women and spiritual life; the preservation of the Dharma from generation to generation, especially when it involves passing on a 'transmission' from

guru to disciple if the guru is Eastern and the disciple Western; and the usefulness (or otherwise) of practice based on the idea that we are 'already Buddhas'.

One of the main inspirations of the weekend was the shared shrine-room practice, in particular two sessions sharing chants, verses and readings that individuals offered from their particular traditions. It included chanting of part of a Tibetan Puja, Nicheren verses and chanting, part of the *Heart Sutra* in Japanese-Sanskrit with drum and bell, the first verse of the Dhammapada and, to conclude the event, *The Last Vandana*, verses compiled partly from the *Dhammapada* by Dr Ambedkar which were chanted in call and response as part of a final shrine-room ritual, a moving conclusion to what was a very stimulating, interesting and harmonious weekend. Links had been forged and ideas exchanged. It was decided it would be well worthwhile to repeat the event in 1999. In the meantime, Sanghadevi is organizing (with Vidyavati) a similar event to be held for American women Dharma teachers in the FWBO's Aryaloka Retreat Center, New Hampshire, in the Autumn.



L-R: Sanghadevi, Shenpen Hookham, Dayanandi, Jenny Warne, Denny Long

Links of Friendship

On 13th January 1997 Karunamaya and Taraka left their London base and flew to Bombay for a three-and-a-half month visit to India where they made contact with women involved in TMSG (as the FWBO is known there.) This report from Taraka:

Our base was a the women's community in Pune which is attached to a girl's hostel run by Bahujan Hitay (see *Lotus Realm* 6). Many of the women in the community work as hostel wardens looking after the girls who are either orphans or whose families are too poor to keep them.

Our programme at each of the TMSG Centres we visited was to team up with local women Order members and run day retreats or workshops for women. We communicated through translators - or using mime - and even managed to use a little of our minimal Hindi!

Most of the women we met on the retreats were wives and mothers - although some did go out to work. The questions they asked were, 'How can I meditate when my teenage son always wants to play loud Hindi music?'

'How can I go on retreat if my brother refuses to let me?'

'What can I do when my parents want me to marry someone with a good education but who is unsympathetic to Buddhism?'

These were the kinds of dilemmas facing people as they tried to deepen their practice of the Dharma.

Karunamaya and I have as yet only a limited and superficial understanding of Indian culture. We had no glib answers. There will be a lot of learning and listening to do if we decide to keep up regular visits to India.

But despite differences of language and culture, despite the rigours of climate, and despite suffering a fair amount of ill-health, we were able to meet and make connections with many Indian women. Our common practice of the Dharma provided a deep link and point of



Taraka (back) with Jnanasuri (back right) and friends at Aurangabad Centre

reference. During our stay in India, I often reflected on Sangharakshita's words:

'I believe it is possible for any human being to communicate with any other human being, to feel for any other human being, to be friends with any other human being. This is what I truly and deeply believe.'

I hope that through this visit and others in the future, the links of friendship and understanding through our common commitment to the Three Jewels, will deepen and grow.

Spirit of Stewardship

Dharanasri reports on the purchase of four buildings to house women's communities in the East End of London.

After three years of negotiation, the London Buddhist Centre has recently bought four large houses on nearby Approach Road which will accommodate four women's communities. Standing in a row of terraces with a shared back garden, the houses are situated within five minutes walk of the Buddhist Centre. Currently they house four communities with twenty-four members between them.

The purchase of the buildings was made from the Phoenix Housing Co-operative for the unprecedented sum of just £478,000! This remarkably low price represented quite a victory for the LBC and was the outcome of substantial negotiations.

The cost has been raised through a mortgage from Triodos, the ethical bank, with a shortfall of £90,000 raised through the generosity of those associated with the London Buddhist Centre.

Ownership of the buildings means that the communities are free both to look after the buildings as well as possible and to choose who lives in them. Since Phoenix began tightening up on its housing policy, this had become something of a problem. Communities did not necessarily have the freedom to choose their members as regards sex, religion or lifestyle - which could have given rise to considerable complications!

The communities see

themselves as stewards of the houses, looking after them for future generations of Buddhists to use: they offer the opportunity for women to live closely with others who are practising the Dharma, to deepen friendships and provide a context within which those who wish to can prepare for ordination.



16-22 Approach Road

Taraloka: vision for the future

Dayanandi

IT IS CRUCIAL FOR the continuing spiritual vitality of the FWBO that individuals within it gain Insight. To help bring this into being, an ever-deepening understanding of the Dharma is necessary. We need situations and teaching that will take us beyond ourselves over and over again, to new and further understandings. Recent developments at Taraloka mark the unfolding of a long-term vision to create such a situation.

During the latter part of 1996, two teams formed within the Taraloka community: the Retreat Team and the Support Team. The Retreat Team comprises experienced Order members whose main function is to teach the Dharma and meditation on

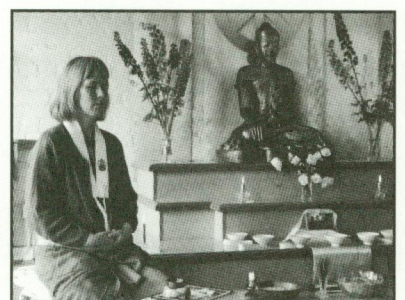
retreats throughout the year. The current team - Dayanandi, Ratnasuri and Punyamegha - will be joined by Vajragita from Amsterdam in October this year, and Sarvabhadri from West London in September 1998. The Retreat Team members will be developing a lifestyle that will allow them to deepen their personal practice of meditation and study. Women throughout the movement will undoubtedly benefit from this development as the team seeks to make retreats ever more relevant to those aspiring to deepen their practice of the Dharma. This is indeed an exciting and radical step forward - both for Taraloka and for the women's wing of the FWBO.

The Taraloka Support Team is responsible for the smooth and harmonious running of the Retreat Centre in all its practical aspects. Within this context, the Support Team will explore work as spiritual practice and the ways in which a dynamic working situation can express a lifestyle of both simplicity and depth.

The women at Taraloka will continue to live as one community, a

community that will benefit from the differing lifestyle and orientation of the two teams. Fund-raising has recently begun to raise £50,000 towards building an extension to the Taraloka community house. The extension will comprise four bedrooms, a larger shrine room (so that the entire community can continue to meditate together), a bathroom and kitchenette, and a study-library in which the Retreat Team will prepare for retreats. In addition the Retreat Centre will be improved with the building of a new entrance and utility room. Work is scheduled to begin in January 1998.

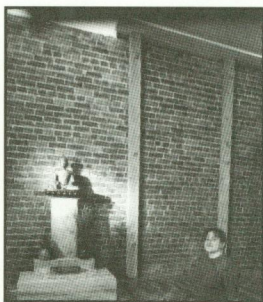
Please give generously to help Taraloka realize its exciting new vision for the future.



Hauling concrete is Spiritual Life!

The renovation of the San Francisco Buddhist Center

Susan Michael



WHEN YOU FIRST STARTED meditating, did anyone mention that hauling concrete might be

part of the spiritual life? Or building stud walls, holding ladders, painting ceilings, or grouting bolt holes? I had a thing or two to learn about spiritual commitment as we embarked on a project to renovate the San Francisco Buddhist Center!

The vision - and the work - for our Center began over three years ago. We bought a typical older-style house in the Mission District. We knew from the beginning that it needed structural work to withstand 'seismic activity' - earthquakes! When jolted, mortar and

bricks tumble, so we were required to extensively brace the brick walls and strengthen their connection to the wooden structure above.

The structural upgrade was only part of the renovation project. We also re-designed the entire first floor. The designs started off somewhat dreamy and ambitious, but eventually coalesced into what we thought would be modest and affordable. But after reviewing construction bids we had to go back to the drawing board to design something that was truly modest and really affordable!

Construction went slowly but smoothly. What we thought would take six weeks extended into six months. We were surprised that we were able to buy a building at all and then that we had the audacity to attempt a major renovation project. Who knew what we were capable of? Every day our expectations of what was possible had to adjust in the face

of reality. Gradually the entire sangha found ways of contributing: big jobs, little jobs, building, demolishing, organizing, designing, making lunch, buying supplies - all were essential and important and provided opportunities for friendship and trust.

We had created a place that would not only facilitate the spiritual needs of our present sangha, but would also reach well beyond it, in both time and space. In that moment, on that day, I realized how important our efforts had been and how fitting are the words of the Shrine Dedication Ceremony:

*Here seated, here practising,
May our mind become Buddha,
May our thought become Dharma,
May our communication with one another
be Sangha.
For the happiness of all beings.
For the benefit of all beings,
With body, speech and mind,
We dedicate this place.*

Opening for Artists

SIOBHAN HEALY is a full-time art student and a mitra associated with the Manchester Buddhist Centre. She has recently been considering her future:

I finish my painting degree in June next year. What I would like to do is work as an artist alongside other Buddhist artists in a positive and creative environment. At first what I envisaged was finding a space for six or ten studios where artists could pursue their own practice but where there was also scope for working together. However, talking about my idea with others made the idea grow! Why not have a workshop space so that artists could run events for the general public or for fellow Buddhists? Why not have a gallery? Initially I had thought in terms of the visual arts, but now I began to think in broader terms: bringing together artists from a wide variety of disciplines. I began to think in terms of creating a Buddhist Arts

Centre.

Manchester seems to be an ideal place for such a project. The Manchester Buddhist Centre, the largest urban Buddhist Centre in Europe, is thriving and includes already quite a number of diverse projects run by members of the sangha. The Centre is situated in the city's Northern Quarter which, according to one brochure, is 'fast becoming Manchester's cultural and artistic centre.' It would be excellent to see a Buddhist Arts Centre thriving in the area. The City Council is keen to see arts projects getting off the ground and funding for a project such as ours could be available both from the City Council and from the North-west Arts Council.

If you are interested in getting involved with the project (which will need both artists and administrators) or would like to know more, please get in touch with me at the Manchester Buddhist Centre.

Ordination Retreat

Seventeen women left their homes in early June to journey to Tiratanaloka Retreat Centre, Wales where the 1997 ordination retreat for women is taking place. Amongst those attending are Christa Kunert from South Africa (see *Lotus Realm* 5) and Evonne Chen from San Francisco. The private ordination ceremonies are being conducted by five different private preceptors, members of the ordination team. The public ordination ceremony (which will take place as this issue goes to print) will be conducted by Srimala. Next year's retreat is scheduled to take place in Tuscany.

A Women's Book?

Review by Dharmachandra

*The Moon and Flowers
a woman's path to enlightenment.
Kalyanavaca (ed.)
Windhorse Publications,
Birmingham, 1997
£11.99/\$23.95 p/b*

WE KNOW FROM THE *Therigatha* that among the Buddha's disciples were women of the highest spiritual attainment. But as Buddhist tradition unfolded down the centuries, the voices of women appear to have fallen relatively silent, judging by those few texts that have survived to the present. We can speculate about the reasons for this, but in the late

Twentieth Century many of the constraints on our forebears no longer apply. With equal rights come equal responsibilities, as I. B. Horner recognized when writing about the early bhikkhunis:

*'If women shared with men the privilege of hearing the Dhamma preached to them in exactly similar terms...Both must be prepared to hand on the torch, and spread the teaching wide in the land. The rights and obligations of the sexes in this highly important matter were undifferentiated...'*²

The responsibility for ensuring that women are more audible in the future Buddhist tradition rests with us as women practitioners. This book - a compilation by



the moon and
flowers

women members of the Western Buddhist Order - represents one response to this challenge.

Vidyavati's articulate introduction places the book in the context of the changing role of women in Western society and Buddhism's own revolution as it comes West. She clearly outlines the challenges this poses for Western women, though she skips rather cursorily over some big questions about women's conditioning and spiritual development: for example, the relative contributions of biological and social factors in gender conditioning, and the complex factors which have led to fewer women members of the Western Buddhist Order - represents one response to this challenge.

Vidyavati's articulate introduction places the book in the context of the changing role of women in Western society and Buddhism's own revolution as it comes West. She clearly outlines the challenges this poses for Western women, though she skips rather cursorily over some big questions about women's conditioning and spiritual development: for example, the relative contributions of biological and social factors in gender conditioning, and the complex factors which have led to fewer women being ordained into the Western Buddhist Order. One can hardly disagree with the suggestion that 'this may be due to a combination of social, cultural and biological conditioning'; but the reader is left wondering how Vidyavati would assess the relative weight of each.

The first four chapters provide an introductory overview of various aspects of Buddhism and will be useful to readers who are relatively new to the subject. I particularly enjoyed Kalyanavaca's beautiful and inviting overview of the Five Precepts, and Vidyadevi's clarity on the distinction between Buddhism's characteristic tolerance and the 'stretch-to-fit' tendency of hazy New Age teachings. However, this section lacks depth, attempting to cover large areas in a few pages. Passing reference is made to some important issues with insufficient qualification or explanation: the brief mention of single sex study groups might beg

rather a lot of questions for those unfamiliar with the FWBO.

One of Kalyanavaca's reasons for producing *The Moon and Flowers* (the title is from Ryokan) was to offer a response to questions frequently asked on women's retreats about the Buddhist approach to concerns of contemporary women such as motherhood, abortion, career and feminism. The rest of the book focuses on specific issues of this kind, arranged under the broad headings of 'Buddhism and Womanhood', 'Skillful Relationships', 'At Work in the World' and 'Buddhism in Different Cultures'. Here the book is at its most successful. The relatively narrower topics permit more depth of exposition, and the personalities and experiences of the writers shine through more fully.

I was moved by Varasuri's deeply honest account of her struggle to make sense of Buddhist views of women. She includes a useful caution against the 'error of inflation' by which we might mistake mundane qualities of energy or nurturing for the spiritual virtues of virya and compassion respectively. I would have liked a deeper exploration of the statement that Buddhism 'considers women to be...at a disadvantage' - does 'Buddhism' here mean the Dharma or the tradition as handed down over 25 centuries and influenced by Asian cultural attitudes? This question is nowhere explored in the book.

Maitreyi's excellent chapter on 'Feminism and Buddhism' clarifies some of the various ideas and values that are too often lumped under the umbrella term 'feminism'. She does not try to argue simplistically 'for' or 'against' feminism, but clearly differentiates the ideals and benefits of women's liberation in a mundane sense from the much higher possibilities of spiritual emancipation.

Muditasi succinctly covers some complex issues about racial diversity, including straightforward common-sense about the power of language - a subject whose complexity is often obscured by facile debates about 'political correct-

ness'. There are also interesting glimpses of Buddhist women's lives and practice in India and the USA. Overall, however, the final section does not really live up to its title, perhaps because the FWBO has not yet penetrated many different cultures.

Other chapters include Navachitta's balanced account of the thorny topic of abortion; Dhammadinna's stimulating exploration of women's friendship; Vajrapushpa's articulate discussion of motherhood and the spiritual life, and much more. As with any compilation, chapters vary in style and quality. But the general standard is impressive with contributions arranged into a coherent and lucid whole. Kalyanavaca is to be congratulated for inspiring eighteen women to express their experience and ideas on paper. It is to be hoped many of them will be encouraged to write more.

This however begs a question. Should women Buddhists write mainly about women's issues, or about the Dharma in general? In Buddhism, as in many fields, one often finds that men write about a subject, whereas women tend to write about the woman's perspective on that subject. The danger is that the male perspective is then seen as the norm. There are, of course, issues in the spiritual life that particularly concern women and it is likely that they will be more helpfully addressed by other women than by men, as here. But I hope that men will not dismiss *The Moon and Flowers* as a 'women's book' - many chapters raise topics that are relevant to all Buddhist practitioners. I also look forward to further writing from its contributors on all aspects of the Dharma.

Notes:

1. transl. Mrs C. A. F. Rhys Davids, *Poems of Early Buddhist Nuns (Therigatha)*, Pali Text Society, Oxford 1989
2. I.B. Horner, *Women Under Primitive Buddhism*, Dutton, New York 1930 p 280

WOMEN'S AND MIXED RETREATS AT
DHANAKOSA

THE SCOTTISH RETREAT CENTRE
AUTUMN/WINTER 1997

July

Summer Open Retreat 5 - 18
Touching Earth: Environmental Seminar 18 - 25
Reflexology and Meditation Retreat 25 - 1 Aug

August

Tai Chi Retreat 1 - 7
Families Retreat 8 - 15
Hillwalking Retreat 15 - 22
The Path of Magic and Energy* 22 - 29
Women's Intensive Meditation Retreat* 29 - 5 Sep

September

Painting Retreat: Meditating with Nature 5 - 12
Yoga and Meditation Retreat 12 - 19
Hillwalking Retreat 19 - 26
Singing and Meditation 26 - 3 Oct

October

Autumn Open Retreat 3 - 10
Women's Yoga, Meditation, and Massage
Retreat* 10 - 17
Women's Weekend* 17 - 19
Yoga and Meditation Retreat 31 - 7 Nov

November

Creating the Freedom to Choose 14 - 16
Families Weekend 21 - 23

December

Winter Open Retreat 6 - 13
Women's Winter Retreat* 27 - 4 Jan 1998

*These retreats are single sex

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The Boundless Heart: Metta.

7-12 September.

Led by Punyamegha.

Journey Into Stillness: Sesshin.

26 September - 3 October.

Led by Dayanandi.

Metta / Karuna / Mudita.

9 - 16 October.

Led by Dayanandi



Taraloka

Buddhist Retreat Centre for Women

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