

# **Tearing Open the Dark**

inquiries into being female  
in the friends of the western Buddhist order

Introduction 2

The End 3

Inquiries 5

Power 6

Clarity out of Anger 7

The Wish 9

What is Buddhist Doctrine? 10

Retrospect 11

The Trouble with Karma 12

What Sangharakshita Actually Says 13

Gratitude 14

Beginning 15

Notes 17

## **Introduction**

Recently I mentioned to some friends that some time ago I wrote a response to Sangharakshita's writing on the subject of the spiritual capacity of women. The kinds of views he expressed seemed to be accepted by many members of his Order until the last few years, though it seems that support has been public, dissent, private (for example within the private journal of the Order.) Anyway one friend told me that she had found the article I wrote very useful and suggested that if I were to make it generally available, it might be helpful to other people becoming involved with the FWBO.

It's about 16 pages. I have updated it to correspond to my current thinking, which comes 10 or so years after the original writing. By the way Sangharakshita read an earlier version of it some years ago and said he enjoyed it! May it be of use...

Dh. Suvarnaprabha  
San Francisco  
August, 2008

## The End

Years ago, while I sat gazing at the gentle gold Buddhas of Thailand, faith arose in me. It was an inborn faith in beauty and in peace one remove from matters of practicality. I had been traveling around Asia for many months, and wherever I saw Buddhists, wearing robes or with kesas around their necks, I knew I wanted what they had. Rather, I wanted to be in some way how they were. I started reading about Buddhism, and, in Kathmandu, learned to meditate. When I returned to San Francisco, I started practicing with the FWBO, and later, requested ordination.

Then one day I happened upon one line in the *Sutra of Golden Light* that would prove to be the driving—or more precisely, the nagging—force behind my development and thinking as a Buddhist for many years. Within a comprehensive and very moving series of benevolent blessings appeared the simple wish

*May all women constantly become men*

The first time I came across this relic I hardly paused, so thorough was my indifference. Then I read a commentary in which Sangharakshita<sup>1</sup> presented something akin to the following explanation for it: *that the female constitution and its associated traits cause women to be at somewhat of a spiritual disadvantage to men.* To put it another way, slightly inferior psycho-physical 'components' will coalesce in the womb as female. He suggests that, since women are biologically "built to produce children" and usually aren't happy unless they are involved with that process, it is harder for women to summon the initiative to reorient their lives beyond the sphere of the mundane.<sup>2</sup>

Now, it's hard to convey the runaway-train-like force with which reading this struck me. By way of background, I grew up in the '70's in a suburb of Los Angeles, where each day was much like the next, and everyone was equal—only some were better-looking. I had heard that some people, somewhere, thought less of women, but this way of thinking was as remote to me as...probably Utah, or even further away. It had never occurred to me, at least consciously, that there might be differences between women and men other than the ones imposed upon us by society. Since I had only sisters, there weren't many gender lines to be drawn in my family, and my parents weren't interested in drawing them anyway. So I learned to throw a football with my dad, and so did Malibu Barbie. I cooked meals, went backpacking in the Sierras, mowed the lawn, did laundry. I loved my Barbies, perhaps slightly more than I loved my pet reptiles. But that is a very close call.

As I have found out more about women from other places and families, I have discovered the extent to which the early years of my development were remarkably free from the culturally-conditioned restrictions and discrimination that often accompany female life. Don't get me wrong: there were plenty of utterly stifling constraints of a different sort. I'll get to those later. But I am lucky, at any rate, to have had a father with a positive and appreciative attitude toward women, and a mother who refused, to some extent anyway, to conform to the often suffocating expectations of how women ought to behave. While she was sometimes a matter of embarrassment to me back on the cul-de-sac, I cannot live in the suburbs now the same reason that she appeared to be slightly strange there. My parents, perhaps for different reasons, wanted for my sisters and I to be free. In particular, they wanted us to be free in the ways that women tend not to be free.

I'm not suggesting that Sangharakshita feels that as a woman I should not be free, or that as a girl I should not have been permitted to mow the lawn. I am just providing a background snapshot of the person who was traumatized by his impressions of women. The fact that reading his exposition proved to be so harrowing shows that, among many other things, I hadn't been out much. Perhaps I had benefited so much from the work of

<sup>1</sup> The English monk who founded the Western Buddhist Order (WBO) and the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) in the late '60's in England.

<sup>2</sup> Sangharakshita, *Transforming Self and World*

feminists that I had had no need to be aware of them. At any rate, the muddled and angry conclusion I was able to draw at the time of reading the commentary on the *Sutra of Golden Light*, was that Sangharakshita, while highly evolved and compassionate, could not or did not extend that benevolence toward women. Indeed, I thought he must be an evil man.

I lasted a couple more years, occasionally encountering a few of his disciples' poorly executed attempts to address the issue. When a scathing review of one of these appeared in Tricycle Magazine, I thought: How did I end up in a group whose founder conjectures that because of its reproductive function, the female form is spiritually inferior to the male? I was deeply embarrassed by it. Why am I still here wasting my energy on this, when I could be engaging in actual Buddhist practice? I could not let it go.

Various Order members assured me that I was welcome to disagree with it, as if this should settle the matter once and for all. If someone hands you a copy of *Mein Kampf*, do you simply say that it doesn't seem right, and continue your goose step? Invitation to dissent is some consolation, but the fact that one's own cool breeze could produce such a stench—it was not possible to fathom. You may protest that to compare anything about Sangharakshita to Hitler is outrageous. Agreed. But the reference means only to illustrate, how, for a time, Sangharakshita appeared to me.

And the knowledge that his writings on the subject of women did not represent a collective view of the Western Buddhist Order did not reduce my embarrassment and horror at them. The woman who would later ordain me suggested that I might be identifying too strongly with what I was reading. After all, how could I be embarrassed by something that I did not write, that I was welcome to disagree with, and that was not intended to represent my point of view? I couldn't answer that question, and I suspected that something about my reaction was evading me—but I had to get away. I wrote the following in my journal:

I withdrew my request for ordination yesterday. It feels now like, say, I was caught in a trap so I had to chew off my leg in order to free myself. My leg which is gone now is a bunch of people who had become a part of me and with whom I have severed a supremely sweet kind of contact. The trap was the last, I hope, of a long series of traps, each of which drove me mad with sorrow.

Greatly relieved of the tension between what I had thought to be the highest good, and what seemed to be the blatant contradiction of it, I emerged squinting from the cool cave of the institutions created by Sangharakshita. I resolved to take a step out and evaluate Buddhism, other Buddhists in the area in which I live, and the thinking of Sangharakshita, on the basis of something more broad than intuitive affinity.

One of the things I discovered is that spiritual practice on my own, without external support and structures, is simply implausible. It isn't that I desire structure. In fact, I very much dislike it. But I couldn't help but notice that when left to my own propensities, I get swept away in the 'gravitational pull' of ordinary life, and start to forget about spiritual matters. Slowly, I started recognizing at least the efficacy of community, and of learning real-time tolerance.

What was the point of cultivating 'universal loving-kindness' if I could not revere the humanity of someone who seemed to be insulting me—but perhaps wasn't? What was the purpose of good will if I could not live closely with actual human beings? While I could have chosen from some other local communities—whose leaders were unlikely ever to offend me by anything other than blandness—I could never convince myself I wanted to do this. I never felt sure that starting over elsewhere would be an improvement, that I wouldn't be trading one set of problems for another.

Two years after that journal entry, I attended a weekend retreat in Berkeley with Pema Chodron, an American woman Buddhist toward whom I felt a great deal of devotion. Meditating in a gymnasium with 300 people, it dawned on me that human life, all human life I have ever known, is fraught with error and conflict—and that I would encounter these things wherever I went. I might go somewhere else and find one thing that I liked, and

another thing that I did not like—but I would find human ignorance and suffering everywhere there was progress, peace and devotion. The choice it seemed was between encountering only suffering, or both suffering and its inspiring counterparts. This constituted the resolution, or the beginning of the resolution, of my confusion. I requested ordination again, and continued with the necessity of unraveling the personal riddle of my own form.

### **Inquiries**

This was not an easy undertaking, nor could it be finished. I had never thought in any depth about being a woman. I didn't think I identified much with being a woman. I remembered being about eight years old and a continual source of frustration to my best friend, who tried in vain to evoke from me an interest in my own clothing. Even now I find any sort of shopping a terrible chore. I felt and still feel to a lesser extent that this separates me from most of the rest of my gender. It may seem a superficial kind of thing to associate with femaleness. Be assured that I'm not trying to present any earth-shattering revelations by bringing it up. It is simply the first experience related to gender I remember.

A further complication was the fact that I do not feel wholly female, and only occasionally feel myself to have any singular identity at all. I seem to house a collection of beings—reptiles, men, women, and angels—in that order—and to move about between them. To say that I am a woman is to in some way over-generalize. I am a pile of puzzle pieces on a card table in a centrifuge.

It would seem that evolved people are flexible and can embrace the qualities of both these poles of human existence. Isn't that ability more significant than the type of body one has? It must be—but then, one's gender may still have some significance. But how can one identify its specific influence, the aspects of one's self that are caused by one's physical femaleness? Were we talking about estrogen? In fact, the observation about women itself didn't rattle my cage nearly so violently as the 'biological' explanation of it. One's body is just so *basic*—or so it seemed.

I just had a thought: Was it a woman's thought? If I prove inadequate at some task, to which constituency of myself should I attribute the failure? Could it be female biology that drives women to adorn themselves and to shop? If so, why don't I do these things? Could these questions be relevant here in San Francisco, where big macho men put on false eyelashes and nun's habits and roller skate down Market Street?

One of the ways I attempted to address these questions, and many others, was by being alone for extended periods of time. I think going on solitary retreat is basically an esoteric experience that can't really be conveyed, but I will say that when I have no contact with other people for a while, without speech, my mind becomes a kind of vast stillness. It is much easier for me to reflect under these conditions, and to get a concentrated sense of myself, which is available in no other way. I begin to notice that all the qualities (and I mean *all* of them) I ordinarily attribute to other people are actually qualities of my own mind. It started becoming much easier for me to get along with people, to love people, when I started learning how to be alone.

I stayed in the woods of Montana, alone, for three weeks. Walking along the Blackfoot River, I spent many an hour reflecting on my own form, dropping various ideas into the laboratory of my mind, and observing the ripple effect. I realized on that beautiful river that I had started feeling like I was trapped inside a defective package. A mist of depression passed into me.

Is it possible to contemplate only the gender-influence of one's body? Is such contemplation depressing because it is true that a female form is somehow more 'limited' than a male form? Or, was it because focusing on the drawbacks of one's current condition is a depressing activity? Or is just having a body a depressing situation when seen or experienced from a certain spacious perspective?

I remembered a meditation experience from a group retreat many years prior: for a few minutes, my body turned into light, was poised with its 'foot' in a position of stepping out, as in a statue of Green Tara. I couldn't sustain this god's body, and my awareness would come back into the body I am more familiar with, a painful transition. It was like falling down—back into solid form. And I could see, I could feel, how painful it is just to have a body like this. My awareness went back and forth a few times, between being a radiant mist-of-light and being in this, more substantial form. It was an amazing experience, and I remember thinking that, relatively speaking, wow, bodies really *hurt!*

## Power

Someone in the west who takes up Buddhist practice has probably been the victim of a kind of altruistic bait-and-switch operation. That is, once we surpass the assumption that Buddhism is the worship of a portly Chinese god, we may have another notion that it is all New Age and groovy—and completely non-hierarchical. Hopefully by the time we discover that it *is* hierarchical, we will have already seen that ideally what that means bears no resemblance to the concept we are used to. It is not a question of power, or not power in the sense that we usually mean it, that is, manipulative or otherwise malevolent will. Power in Buddhism is the power of transpersonal, ever-widening, simultaneous total independence from, and connection with, life and all else that is or ever was or will be. Power for the Buddhist is wisdom—an intuitive, appreciative understanding of...everything.

But what do power and hierarchy mean to most of us? Confusion about power seems to contribute to a lot of westerners having a terrible time operating within groups. We experience almost any group situation as 'pressure'—to conform, to give, to believe, to agree. I have noticed too over the years how some people, over time, gradually assign more and more of their personal dissatisfaction to the institutions with which they have contact. Certainly some institutions do expect conformity, but I daresay that some people without knowing it feel their own compulsion to conform. It's a childish way to relate to a group, and very common among Americans, or at least the kind who aren't typical perhaps and end up being Buddhists.

An anorexic supermodel who seems to cause 'regular' women feel bad about themselves—does not. She provides the occasion for dormant negativity to be invoked, which in women—well, American women anyway—is often attached to our bodies and our appearance. In my case, Sangharakshita's writing about women had the same effect: I interpreted the occasion of my negativity, the rearing of the ugly head of *dukkha*, as a cause, and felt myself to be a victim of it, of him and of the organization he created. According to Buddhism, it is a misinterpretation of conditions to say that someone else is responsible for our pain, or our anger—or our happiness. It is correct to say that there are many *factors* that contribute to our mental state, but the main one is always what we have made of our own mind.

I don't want to suggest that there aren't many other influences on our body image or on group dynamics. My point is, to the extent that we take a victim's stance, no opportunity for positive change exists. In fact, thinking of oneself as a victim can in itself be a way to shirk responsibility. A victim—in the way I am using the term at the moment—has no influence, no perceived responsibility for her mind, and no power.

And what can we really say constitutes a threat? This is not a rhetorical question. Is it anything said by a misogynist—or simply by anyone who does not transparently adore us? People can be defensive to the point of hostility.

According to Buddhism, since we generally cannot always have people and things behave in the way we would like them to, what we have is a choice between responses motivated by love, or responses motivated by other things. God grant me the courage to change the things I can. As it were. Blind or partially myopic rage against perceived or potential injustice may seem like an improvement over ignoring it—but is equally ineffectual. When we embrace our own integrity, we can no longer be bitter toward others as a masquerade for our own

disappointing—and often unsolicited—compromises. Are we unconsciously 'going along' with the group? Or are we just as randomly going against it?

Some of us feel that if we let down our guard for one second, if we concede even the remotest possibility of being receptive, even intelligently receptive, then all is lost—we will be trampled upon. While this may be true in some arenas, in the context within which I have been practicing Buddhism for some years, it is paranoia.

Is it *impossible* that women may be slightly less talented regarding any specific task? Or do we simply refuse to consider it? Is the fact that an idea is spectacularly out of fashion good criterion for dismissal? Can we disregard what Sangharakshita has written about women because it reminds us of something else said by someone else—someone terribly conservative or even violent—who meant something different and who had a completely different motivation? These may be the only kind of people we have ever known to say such things; they are distinctly aggravating in America, where we are all reputedly created equal. I invite you to consider the astounding possibility that the motivation for pointing out differences can be love. But that love is expressed in words by a person, and these things arose from certain conditions.

### Clarity out of Anger

One of the imperfections we must overcome in order to progress on the Buddhist path is called (in Pali) *palassa* which Sangharakshita defines as a spiteful, defensive reaction to criticism, even the kind-hearted, constructive kind. It follows then that in order to progress we must cultivate confidence and maturity as people, as women, as practicing Buddhists, to such a degree that we are not blown over by words, any words—even those of our teachers.

It can be complicated, charged even, for a man to say that an association with birth/children/families is not intrinsically spiritual. But why? This is something to ponder: Why is this a threat? I'm sure my mother thinks that having children is a spiritual experience, although she has her own definition of spiritual! To use Sangharakshita's definition, can having children provide the conditions for the arising of higher states of consciousness? There is no doubt that it can. But does it *usually*, does it *necessarily*? How could it be a hindrance to spiritual development? In what way could it be useful to establish childrearing as a non-essentially spiritual activity?

Criticizing things that women tend to do isn't culturally accepted these days. What's more, not only are women meant to be treated equally to men, but sometimes that they are superior to them. I have repeatedly noticed that men-bashing jokes and stories can be very popular, get loads of laughs, whereas equivalent statements about women would bring about a tsunami of indignation—if anyone had the courage to make them. These days, around here anyway, what doesn't represent a total affirmation of a given woman's behavior is often called misogyny. Perhaps we should remind ourselves that a misogynist *hates women because they are women*. Misogyny—common parlance notwithstanding—is a big accusation, for a Buddhist anyway. If you are annoyed at someone, if you do not understand them, if you do not appreciate them enough—is that the same as hating them? I don't deny that misogyny exists, but the word is used so lightly sometimes, it's hard to know where the real ones are.

Some of us cannot accept anything other than 'external' causes for women's behavior. We are so thoroughly pre-convinced that there is no possible biological basis to differences between men and women that we cannot take in the actual words that Sangharakshita has written. If we don't want to, of course we are welcome not to, but we can at least notice our febrile attachment to our views. We may keep certain views in a strangle hold, and rest our identity—or at least our contentment—upon them. And perhaps society, sometimes, supports these views. Both of these things, among many others, make it harder for us to even know what we think, and why.

When we glorify women and the feminine we may do so as a reaction to—to compensate for—a long history of oppression, and sometimes hatred, toward women. It is a turned table, and may be helpful in some ways. But

these facts of life do not make it 'true.' The same of course goes for a negative, dismissive view of women—and of men.

Those of us who are hotheads often feel that our anger is justified or even wise, especially if it's in response to an apparent injustice. Only occasionally do we feel responsible for our spite. This attitude is contrary to Buddhist ethics. Contrary to reality, you could say. Hostility and insecurity simply provide a veil that hangs between us and the meaning behind words. I'm not proposing that we 'suspend disbelief' on this or any other issue. I'm saying that, if what Sangharakshita writes about women gets your knickers in a twist, as the English say, you may want to find out what he is actually saying, if you have any interest in knowing. To do it may require acknowledging the distorting influence of anger and suspicion—and of feeling that we have something to defend.

I'm also emphatically not proposing that we ignore our anger, which can be the leading edge of a stream of energy that can be put to use. Practically speaking, repressing anger is likely to produce other, more confusing, problems. For some of us, working with our anger, and the fuel that propels it, is an inextricable part of our path. However, we must be willing to look at it in the light, should we ever find it there. We must be willing to look deeply at it—or at least see that it is not objective! And look at its object, while calm—that is a way to really see something and respond appropriately.

Anger can be just anger and unencumbered by prejudices and the irrational judgments we unconsciously apply to it. We can be completely conscious when we respond to anger, with kindness.

We may not agree with Sangharakshita. We may feel that a predominantly biological explanation for the aptitude of any complex being, without even a nod to the society in which that being finds itself, is not likely to be true. We may even think what he says in this regard is ludicrous, or at best, is diplomatic suicide—but it is not misogyny. Such thoughts as his can be thought with a clear and kindly intention. I know that to at least some readers this will seem impossible, as it did to me, for a long time. If we're not willing to concede the possibility that Sangharakshita is right, or that there is some truth to what he has said, let us at least make some effort to be *clear*.

I always assumed that there was a direct correspondence between my emotional state and Sangharakshita's motivation. That is, "the way I feel is the truth." But it's not always true! Rather, it may be true that we feel a certain way, but what else can one be sure of? We also may cry while watching a movie, even one that is badly executed and we on some level don't even 'believe'. While it's very important to acknowledge and experience one's feelings, it's also crucially important to admit the possibility of errors of interpretation. The natural human tendency is to recoil from pain and to assign the name of evil to its supposed cause.

We may discover, too, that we were angry after having misinterpreted a situation. I remember getting very riled up about the study material used on one of our annual retreats for women preparing for ordination. The material was written by a male disciple of Sangharakshita—for a male audience, and included comments, for example, about how women may get pregnant in order to trap men into marriage. It was appalling. So I despised the man who wrote it.

Later, someone pointed out to me that the writer never intended it to be read on women's retreats. In fact, it was the Women's Ordination team who had decided to use the same material the men use, presumably instead of starting from scratch. This knowledge rather took the wind out of the sails of my anger. Since then, I've also managed to concede that some women *do* get pregnant to try to keep their man. It isn't as if it never happens! Unfortunately these days this isn't such a reliable method. Being a more modern sort of woman, I find that a simple set of handcuffs works fabulously. But I digress.

The hatred that arose in me in response to Sangharakshita's writing about women was my hatred, was mine—was me. It follows then, as the cart follows the hoof of the ox, that it was me who suffered from it more than anyone else. Unfortunately for us, hatred is poison primarily for the bearer of it.

There are so many things to do in life. One of them is to be calm.

We can learn to resonate with humanity, with life, including the life of people who would seem to be hopelessly ignorant, including ourselves. With effort, we can overcome righteous indignation, work creatively with our anger, and rise to the sweet occasion of equanimity.

Hatred can never end hatred. Only love can end hatred. This is the eternal law.<sup>3</sup> There is no exception to it. If you're sure there is, think long and hard about it. Meditate. Prove it.

Fiercely expecting any man (or woman!) to change their attitude toward women is an exercise in futility, and having such an expectation is often only a symptom of neurotic attachment. Not that hysteria in this particular instance isn't perfectly understandable—but it accomplishes nothing: We wake up the next morning in the same old world. A world in which many men despise women, and more importantly, a huge number of us despise ourselves.

Men *can* change their attitude toward us of course, but it should be an embarrassment for us to depend on it. We must learn to be positive about ourselves. Part of the task at hand for most women, probably most Western people in fact, is to cultivate real confidence, self care, and to appreciate our lives. It can be a healthy human desire to want to be loved. However, when that does not occur, and even when it does, the onus is always on us to accept ourselves. This is a great and primary need.

Will we complain that a man, or men—on whose opinions we rest—do not understand us, oppress us, hate us? Are we willing to look at the depth of our attachment—and see if that is the cause of our frustration? Are we angry because we feel powerless? Are we willing to look at the unknown emotion and convictions that may fuel our beliefs?

One way Buddhism defines 'the wise' is to say that they never engage in acrimonious dispute. That is, *never*. This is not because they are passive, or repressed, but because they have nothing to defend and are more interested in the positive impact of skillfully-motivated action than in asserting that they're right.

Can we count ourselves among the wise?

### **The Wish**

The Kalama Sutta recommends many methods to be used simultaneously in teasing out the truth from within a 'jungle of views'. One is to rely entirely on the barometer of one's own experience. This is the method wholeheartedly embraced by many westerners interested in Buddhism, to the exclusion of another valid method: Receptivity to the 'testimony of the wise.' I have tried to employ some balanced combination of these two methods, and any other ones I could think of. But who were the wise? Who were the wise who could help me? I needed to find out, for one thing, what was meant by the wish that all women be reborn as men.

If all women were reborn as men, practically speaking, wouldn't that mean the end of *all* birth? And wouldn't that eliminate the possibility of enlightenment? Or is this to interpret the wish too literally? Maybe it simply meant, as I suspected, that someone was trying to get rid of me.

---

<sup>3</sup> *Dhammapada*

Reading Rita Gross' *Buddhism After Patriarchy* was oddly comforting, like sharing an umbrella with an old friend—a person whose interest in my well-being was obvious. She defines feminism as "cherishing precious human birth in female form."<sup>4</sup> Lovely! She explains that the occasionally occurring blessing that women be reborn as men arises out of the compassionate observation that, on the lives of women "social and religious woes are heaped atop biological woes" such as the pain and danger of childbirth. In other words, this 'blessing' is not trying to suggest how things should be. It is addressing how things are.

Gross' interpretation belies a certain trust, a certain faith, in the writers of the sutra. I imagine that she and I, through experience with Buddhists and the Dharma, share the trust that the supreme and deep wish of the *Sutra of Golden Light* is for everyone to have the best conditions possible—to understand and thereby transcend all conditions. But while kindness and well-wishing are an intrinsic part of Buddhism...I wonder if women's lives really are more difficult than men's, or if they simply present a different set of difficulties that look hideous, for example, to a 6<sup>th</sup> century Indian Buddhist monk. Did women themselves hope to be reborn as men? If so, what were their reasons? Did the influence of the very idea that women are 'lower' influence their dreams?

It would seem that between this blessing and myself there is a great cultural gap. I'm not sure I shall ever manage to get across it. The approach condoned by feminists (and not so reliably by Buddhists) is to try to rectify the social environment that causes or aggravates the difficulties of women. This I can understand. I cannot understand wanting to be a man, or wanting women in general to be men.

### **What is Buddhist Doctrine?**

According to Sangharakshita, many misunderstandings about Buddhism boil down to a misapprehension of the difference between theory (Doctrine) and practice (Method) and their respective functions. Method happens very much within a geography and time period, and is limited by the context in which it takes form. Doctrine, on the other hand, has no limits and is relevant to all cultures in all times. For example, Buddhist doctrine says that our neurotic attachment to changing things causes us pain. Method, or practice, helps us realize this fact and gradually adjust the way we act in the world. Doctrine is universally applicable to all sentient beings, or forms of life with consciousness. Issues related to the Buddhist attitude toward women, if such a thing can even be said to exist, qualify as Method, that is, something adaptable to the demands of time, place and culture.

The Meditation on the Loathsomeness of the Body, for example, which later became the Meditation on the Loathsomeness of the Female Body, is an example of Method, not Doctrine. It is a practical antidote to the suffering of clutching ephemeral things, such as our own bodies and other people's bodies. Practically speaking, it was a rather drastic method used by celibate monks struggling with desire. If the Meditation on the Loathsomeness of the Female Body were doctrine, what would that doctrine be? That the female body is to be hated? This interpretation could not be more disastrously misled. It's also worth mentioning that much of Buddhism presupposes a basically positive self-view. Where that view is absent, as it is for so many of us, it will not be possible to understand what the Buddha taught.

Enlightenment, the human state of supreme and unsurpassable love and understanding, and all things that lead to this state, are what we call 'Buddhism'. When what we call Buddhist practice ceases to have this function, it is no longer Buddhist practice, and we should discard it. Eternal truth shape-shifts appropriately.

The heroic attainment of the historical Buddha occurred within a context quite unlike ours, or unlike mine, in the degree to which it constrained a woman's choice in directing the course her own life. That is the culture in which the Awakened Mind of our era communicated itself, for the benefit of all beings, regardless of category. The view of women as 'other', and the scarcity of women's points of view in Buddhist texts, can be seen in the

---

<sup>4</sup> *On Being Bodies*, ed. Susan Moon.

relative realm of Method, as subject to the function of history and of society, and not of the Doctrine of the Awakened Mind.

And anyway, there is no singular 'Buddhist view of women'. Sangharakshita considers his observations about women to be just that—observations—tentative, not the "Truth", not Doctrine.

So we're talking about Method—about what works. I do not know for certain whether most women, because of biological conditions, have less or more spiritual aptitude than most men. But I do know a few of the conditions in this female body that have enabled me create this spiritually-oriented life. For one thing, birth control. For another, divorce. For another, the influence of my mother's resolve to undo her childhood conditioning, which had taught her that the reason for her life was to assist men. My father, to save us from at least one kind of dependence on men, taught us to strive for financial self-sufficiency. Finally, living in a culture that, overall, demands a relatively lesser degree of servitude and obsequiousness from women.

One can't rightfully deny that it is within the realm of possibility that biological influence could make the spiritual road rockier for most women. More than likely, there is no way to find out. But I suppose the only reason to try is if it will to help us discover who we are, to help us relate more warmly and clearly to other people, to help us understand our human life. If it doesn't do that we can always take under advisement one of the trusty tenets of Alcoholics Anonymous: to take what we can use, and leave the rest.

As a child I was taught in some way that women were as capable as men—I mean, it wasn't even a question—and I believe in my very bones this way of thinking hugely benefits women. Anyway, it has to a large degree made me what, or how, I am. This way of thinking, too, is a new luxury. My situation as a woman has been less constrained, from what I can tell, than those of women in England, and certainly in India, who must constitute most of the women Sangharakshita has known.

### Retrospect

Much to my own surprise, I have discovered by degrees that much of the fuel of my reaction to Sangharakshita was my own negativity—something like hatred—toward myself as a woman, and toward other women. It's one thing to disagree with something. But I found Sangharakshita's writing about women so painful partly because somewhere in my psyche, I agreed with him. More precisely, my own negative attitude resonated with the negative attitude I thought he was expressing. Sometimes it takes a lot of persistence, patience and honesty to get further back in the chain of causes that produce emotional pain. Eventually, if one is willing, the perceived source of the pain may shift—from outside to inside oneself.

So if harmful sexism was mostly absent from my childhood, how did I end up with a negative view of myself as a woman? I very much wish I could say that it came from the 'messages' I received from society, or from men who treated me badly, but while there would probably be some truth to that, I have no feeling for this point of view. Truth is, I had a deeply negative experience of girls when I was a child, which was a subset of a largely negative general experience of life, especially of other people. But the other people in my case were mostly girls, and I felt oppressed by them, primarily by their hostile dissatisfaction with me. The 'message' I continually received from other girls was that I was not all right the way I was, and that I had to be different in order to be accepted into their claustrophobic circles, which I both longed for and despised. Margaret Atwood depicts this dynamic with uncanny accuracy in her controversial novel, *Cat's Eye*.

I hope it is clear that this does not comprehensively explain my relationship to women. I only mention this biased synopsis of my earlier life because it is inextricably tied to my reaction to Sangharakshita. It is also the only reason I can discern as to why sometimes, in groups of women, I feel it may only be a matter of time until they start attacking me. Lurking beneath this fear is a need to be accepted by women, and some sense of inadequacy as a woman. Much of my Buddhist career has consisted in gradually nurturing the qualities that seem to have been stamped out long ago, by other people and the ravages of puberty, among other things.

Around now you might be thinking, here she is painting a Hitler mustache on Sangharakshita, when in fact her very own egalitarian childhood supports his views. It's true that in the largely amoral realm of my parents, I was often surrounded by female 'evil friends'. But I have no wish to claim that they were evil, or relatively more evil, because they were female. Had I spend my early years with three comparably unhappy brothers, would it have been a fantastically healthy environment? Perhaps then my relationship to men might be tinged with the same sort of insecurity or complexity as my relationship to women.

Conjecturing aside, how does all this relate to the assertion that female biology puts one at a spiritual disadvantage? I can't see that it relates in a general way, but it does somehow point to the most personal reason that I have gotten so upset over this matter: I very much do not want to be thought of in any particular way, especially a negative one, because I have a female body, no matter how benevolent the thinker's intention. I need to be seen as a human being. It is most appropriate, most correct, for me to be seen as a human being; that is what I am. You might say that being seen as a woman (or a man) does not preclude being seen as a human being, but I say that it does.

Even though I enjoy being a woman, and the leaders at the San Francisco Buddhist Center FWBO are mostly women, I have no wish, in particular, to be a woman. Nor have I any wish to be a man. As Neruda says, *I happen to be tired of being a man.*<sup>5</sup> I would like not to have a physical body at all, and float around helping people, most of whom could not see me.

### **The Trouble with Karma**

The idea that one's situation is a direct result of what one has done—that everyone has or is what they deserve—can encourage us to act responsibly, but can also discourage an empathetic view of suffering. How much suffering has been caused, in Asia and everywhere, by the repercussions of the idea that inferior karma produces women—an idea that pre-dated Buddhism? An example of this is the fact that for thousands of years all over Asia, generosity toward a Buddhist nun has been seen as producing less merit for the giver than support of a monk. This is commonly thought to have contributed to the sad fact that nuns' orders died out in almost every country in which they used to exist.

You think you're safe with Buddhism. You think, here's a religion that's focused on peace and compassion and personal responsibility, and you go along for years and years and you make progress. Then you find out that one of the reasons you couldn't relate to Christianity is also present in Buddhism, that is, it is *so male* in how it lacks some level of acknowledgment of women and feminine qualities.

Because being regarded, and regarding oneself, from what I would call a severely male perspective, is a disadvantage of the condition of a female body. In the same way, from a female point of view, traits associated with maleness—namely violence and a general irreverence for life—appear to be an egregious problem, a disadvantage even. Not that I have any need to criticize men. I am just pointing out that the whole premise of women being the special case is invalid. Women are not a special case to be viewed from some lofty male objectivity. That is how history has shown us ourselves, but we don't have to see ourselves that way anymore.

This 'new' idea that we are at a disadvantage has great potential to influence the (internal and environmental) conditions with which we live. It can surely influence the attitude of men, especially men who are already so inclined, and negatively impact their interactions with women. It takes some level of maturity on the part of men—a maturity I'm convinced many of them do not have—to keep this view in perspective, not that there is any need for this view at all. It gives men license to bolster their egos, and women an invitation to feel bad about themselves. It invites "honesty" about women's weaknesses, and downplays the importance of the same kind of honesty about men.

---

<sup>5</sup> Neruda, *Walking Around*

A greater factor, perhaps, than physical gender in determining to what degree the circumstance of one's birth is fortunate is the extent to which it can encourage a healthy self-view, and support the simple human wish to be able to direct one's own life on a spiritual course if one wishes to. According to my own ideas (or anyway, ideas that I now have) about what constitutes a disadvantage, women may indeed have one—but pointing to biology as the reason for it is just plain wrong.

### **What Sangharakshita Actually Says**

It may be that we would like to help the Dharma be available to people who are drawn to it. To do that and turn away from this 'heap of broken images', we will need a great deal of energy. The odds are stacked against us, all of us, from turning the direction of our lives toward deep transformation. Sangharakshita says that, overall, the male constitution seems slightly more able to do this, at least initially. It is a simple observation, and insignificant by his own reckoning.

Perhaps Sangharakshita put forth these ideas in order to shock us into examining our conditions. It definitely worked for me, or anyway, upon me. Strong medicine indeed. I don't think the Western world is going to be able to rise to the occasion actually, but I appreciate his willingness to do it. Perhaps he refused to be diverted by the modern specter of 'political correctness'. On the other hand, it would have been delightful if he and his disciples could have done so with arguments that were not themselves (sometimes) fighting idiocy with apparent idiocy. Some people have concluded that the 'doctrine' of the FWBO is to hate women. This is very sad, and not accurate.

Ironically—well it is not really ironic—opportunities for women in the FWBO outshine much of the rest of the Buddhist world. Traditional monastic ordination for women never reached, or has died out in, all but a few countries. This means that an American woman practicing Tibetan Buddhism, for example, must fly to Taiwan, Korea, or Vietnam, in order to receive full ordination.<sup>6</sup> Apparently, even these ordinations are not officially recognized by some Tibetan authorities. Korea is the one place in the world outside the FWBO in which nuns are routinely ordained by women preceptors. In Theravadin-influenced countries, it is presumed impossible that a woman could become enlightened without being reborn as a man.<sup>7</sup> In addition, according to the Vinaya, or traditional monastic code, ordained women are completely subordinate to ordained men. Sangharakshita asks, Is this what women really want?

He emphasizes that what is important is one's commitment, one's practice, one's life—one's Going for Refuge, which "is just the same for men and women, for those who lead monastic lives and for those who lead non-monastic lives...Let there be one ordination for all."<sup>8</sup> He has created a context which gives women full spiritual authority—in which women ordain women—a rare, precious opportunity, historically and in the present day.

In my interactions with Sangharakshita and in those I have heard about, he has shown only kindness and understanding toward women—toward whomever he was with. The structure of the FWBO is further testimony to that. In the years I have been involved (since about 1990), I have not been discriminated against within the FWBO as a woman. This matters—and has arisen in dependence on positive conditions. There is this idea that seems to equal oppression, but does not. A more common experience in the world of course is the reverse: when one feels one is being discriminated against, but no one talks about it. There is no documentation. What we have in the FWBO is documentation—of something—but no oppression, or none I am aware of.

---

<sup>6</sup> Biksuni Thubten Chodron, "Western Buddhist Nuns: A New Phenomenon in an Ancient Tradition" [http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife/western\\_buddhist\\_nuns.html](http://www.thubtenchodron.org/BuddhistNunsMonasticLife/western_buddhist_nuns.html)

<sup>7</sup> Since I first started writing on this subject in 2000, the situation for ordination of women in Theravadin countries has changed, or at least a few women have been fully ordained, although this ordination also is not recognized by everyone.

<sup>8</sup> Dakini magazine, 1993

Sangharakshita is concerned with the aspect of modern Feminism that condones the hatred of men, doesn't see men as individuals, and ignores a man's point of view simply because he is a man. He says, "I can't accept this, because it suggests that there is an immovable barrier to communication and understanding between men and women. I don't believe that there is such a barrier."

The trials and tribulations, the strengths and weaknesses, of women, need to be talked about, written about, by women. The annual retreat at which I complained about the study material is now using study material from talks by women. So it *is* happening, at last. If women don't speak for themselves, men will—and they may do it badly. Whose fault is that?

In the end, whether you are an Internal American or an External American (as Anne Lamott puts it) is an irrelevant focus. Of course Sangharakshita himself is *not at all* focused on it, but some of the rest of us have had a hard time moving on.

### Gratitude

I have no wish to try to justify, or glorify even, what Sangharakshita has written about women. It's just that some years ago I found myself in the odd position of being in the midst of a basically healthy, fertile environment that had proved over many years to be very helpful to me—that suddenly seemed to have been created by a madman. I have had little choice but to try look on the bright side of things as it were, and have learned a great deal from that side, as well as from her sister, the dark. I could have become a Wiccan or a Sufi and forgotten the whole matter, but I am a Buddhist. A Buddhist who was unwilling to start over, and after looking long and hard into the matter, saw no reason to. In fact, saw great reason not to. Practicing Western Buddhism is the only way I have discovered as yet to be happy, to feel that the actions of my life have any meaning, shining a tiny clear light into a miasmatic world.

During the time period of which this essay is a chronicle, I realized what a huge influence Sangharakshita had had on my life. I discovered that I have a very strong and natural faith in friendship and loving-kindness as spiritual practice and this alone constituted a mysterious bond with Sangharakshita, who more than any other teacher I know of whole-heartedly promotes the cultivation of both individuality and spiritual friendship. He has devoted the last 50 years to an intelligent and effective attempt at causing the gentle hands of wisdom to manifest in our world. It is also worth noting that he has read this essay and said he liked it! He is happy to be criticized, so long as the criticism is directed at what he said, and not, as is so often the case, toward the phantoms of one's own reactions.

While this whole investigation had the occasional feeling to me of sliding backward, I did learn, for one thing, how easy it is to confuse the questions *Is it evil?* with *Is it painful?* Because real spiritual progress involves pain. Our limits must be acknowledged, and pushed. People from every era and culture are deluded by common, spurious dreamings of heaven. We imagine that Buddhism, or something else, will bring us to a place where difficulties are eliminated, without our own effort. But this is not possible. Since we can no longer believe in heaven, we choose substitutes, and assign to them the attributes of heaven—where everything is easy and blissful.

The difference between the pain of spiritual practice and the pain we're accustomed to is that we can learn to appreciate the former—at least in hindsight. Because the pain that occurs as a result of a truly spiritual motivation, the pain regarded with some degree of spiritual insight and warmth, is a door to successive stages of total liberation. We may bang our heads against the door, and it may hurt, but if the door is opening, however slowly—what more can we ask? This process constitutes the most satisfying feeling I have ever known. It is the reason in Tibetan Buddhism that enemies and difficulties can be referred to as the 'Tantric Guru'.

My years-long inquiry into womanhood has given me a heightened awareness that I would not have undertaken voluntarily, as it were. It provided the catalyst for me to start cultivating a deep love of my own gender, the

importance of which can hardly be disputed. It has forced me to...be more aware of myself, of women, and of men, and—more profoundly, of bodies in general. It enabled me to recognize patterns in a way formerly blocked by my own unconscious views, to which I was almost violently attached. It has made me happier, and wiser.

Buddhist practice within the context created by Sangharakshita has enabled me to let the woman inside me breathe, a little bit at a time, gradually making myself whole. I am untangling my own complex of negative attitudes toward myself as a person, and as a woman—and trying at the same time to live a life less obsessed by itself. Several of Sangharakshita's disciples have been unfathomably kind and receptive to me throughout this long process, and I am very grateful to them.

### **Beginning**

The system of spiritual development and understanding we call Buddhism includes everything unconscious and conscious, minute and cosmic, named and unnamed. Our gods, Judeo-Christian and pagan alike, are part of its cosmology, an identified sliver in an infinite, though stratified, whole. Our primal urges, our misunderstandings, our desires, are seen as the logical result proceeding from the cage of the human heart.

Its antidote, Buddhism, has been efflorescing for 2600 years. It is the only tradition in the world that includes women's writing in the canonical literature. Rather, it is the only one that has been able and willing to preserve women's contributions to it. The Buddha said, to the extent that we know what he said, that women and men are capable of attaining the highest spiritual state. We have greater potential than gods (including those who fancy themselves our creators!) and beings occupying any other realm. But part of our problem is that we do not wholly realize how fortunate we are to be in human form. We have not cultivated the intelligent faith, confidence, tranquility, and discipline, to realize this. When we do, when our heart knows this in tandem with our mind, all else that is now racing around in our minds....will recede.

Sangharakshita says, "There is nothing in Buddhism to prevent a woman from exercising any spiritual function whatever, and this is the only religion of which one can say that."<sup>9</sup>

The fledgling FWBO in the United States has been sustained mostly by women, by their depth of practice, and their intense commitment and tireless—well not tireless but persevering—devotion to Buddhist ideals. I practice at a Buddhist Center in which most of the energy and inspiration comes from women.

The part of me that is a woman is gentle, intensely creative, and concerned about other people. And I sit here typing, an aspiring Bodhisattva occupying a female body, a female body freer it would seem than most female bodies in history and in other parts of the world.

I have received a rare gift, to live in this age among women from whom shines the light of the potential of the female form.

May we propel ourselves in myriad form toward Buddhahood.

Among the Buddha's contemporaries were respected women who practiced, taught, and embodied Transcendental Wisdom. These women, by virtue of their own unwavering effort, freed themselves from all oppression—personal and societal, objective and imagined, internal and external, physical and metaphysical. Vijaya, an elder nun at the time of the Buddha, finally shows us what the Buddhist tradition says women will achieve when they set themselves upon the task:<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Sangharakshita, *Transforming Self and World*, page 116

<sup>10</sup> From the *Therigatha*

...In the first watch of the night  
I remembered I had been born before  
In the middle watch of the night  
the eye of heaven became clear  
In the last watch of the night  
I tore apart  
the great dark

I lived with joy and happiness  
filling my whole body  
after seven days  
stretched out my feet  
Having torn apart  
the great dark

We must remember that while the Buddha walked around and taught in what is now Northern India so long ago, Buddhism is new. Never has it traveled so quickly to a land such as ours—so distant and so in need of conversion to ideals of concern and peace. We must remember that we are new. Buddhism is new. And whatever form we find ourselves in—whoever we are—as Ikkyu says, we live in a cage of light, an amazing cage of light.

## Notes

- Atwood, Margaret, *Cat's Eye*.
- Banks Findly, ed. "Western Buddhist Nuns: A New Phenomenon in an Ancient Tradition" from *Women's Buddhism, Buddhism's Women*, Wisdom Publications: Boston, 2000
- Blackstone, Kathryn R. *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha*.
- Cabezón, ed. *Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender*. "Attitudes Toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism," Alan Sponberg.
- Gross, Rita. *Buddhism After Patriarchy*.
- Ikkyū
- Kalama Sutta
- Klein, Anne Carolyn. *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*. Beacon Press Books: Boston, 1995.
- MacArthur, Vicky. *A Cave in the Snow*.
- Sangharakshita. *A Survey of Buddhism*.
- Sangharakshita. *Transforming Self and World*.
- Sangharakshita. Interview in *Dakini* magazine, Issue 12 (1993).
- Shantideva, *Bodhicaryavatara*, "Perfection of Forbearance." transl. Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton
- Sutra of Golden Light*
- Therīgāthā*