

THE HEART OF THE LOTUS

*A Buddhist Perspective
on Women's inner and outer Liberation*

by Sylvia Wetzel



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The Book

Why do present day women take an interest in a “middle age” religion? Buddhism like Christianity was founded by a male teacher and was organised, transmitted and interpreted by men. This book is “a protocol of an encounter”. A contemporary woman has read the teachings of the Buddha “against the grain” and has found some first answers and many more questions. In order for a religion to stay “alive” it has to be rediscovered by every generation anew. Just to follow tradition is not enough. Whenever women take interest in a traditional religion – be it Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism or Islam – they are given a double task: We are looking for a contemporary expression of an old teaching. Many contemporary male Buddhists from the West and some from Asia are working on this task. Women have to read patriarchal teachings critically “with the eyes of a woman”. *The Heart of the Lotus* presents central teachings of Buddhism and describes traps we fall into, if we don not consider our cultural background and our biological sex and social gender. It takes up typical questions women are asking and presents first results: concepts and exercises which can support contemporary women (and men) on their path to inner and outer freedom.

The Author (See also page →)

Sylvia Wetzels was born 1949, practises Buddhism since 1977, mainly in the Tibetan tradition. With her critical approach to and creative interpretation of European culture and gender issues the author and Buddhist meditation teacher is one of the pioneers of Buddhism in Europe since the mid-eighties.

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Introduction

You've picked up this book because you are curious about the title or because you already know something about Buddhism: perhaps you've read one of Thich Nhat Hanh's books on Buddhist meditation or you've seen the Dalai Lama or the German-American nun Ayya Khema on television. Perhaps you've seen a film on Tibet or spent your last vacation in Thailand or Sri Lanka. Perhaps a friend recommended this book to you. You may also be wondering why a modern woman should concern herself at all with a strange medieval religion which, like Christianity, has been passed down, administered and interpreted by men? Or you want to know how an insider woman sees Buddhism?

I encountered Tibetan Buddhism in northern India in 1977. Since then, the teachings of the Buddha have remained the great inspiration of my life. My heart is moved by the teachings on love and compassion and the clear instructions challenge my intellect to its limits. Meditation practice allows me to discover new levels of perception and shows me the limits of our conceptual view of the world. The encounter with the Green Tara, a Buddha figure of the Indian and Tibetan tradition, gives me courage as a woman to go the path to awakening which Buddhism describes.

The subtitle "*Women and Buddhism*" was chosen purposefully. This book does not give an overview of the role of women in Buddhism. Instead, it is a protocol of the encounter of a contemporary woman with the Buddha's teachings. With my questions about the meaning and the place of women in Buddhism I have read the teachings "against the grain" and found some preliminary answers and many further questions. Bringing the "thoughts and experiences of women" (Luce Irigaray) to Buddhism is a

long process. I would like to challenge women (and men) in the West to take their questions about Buddhism seriously, to move them in their hearts and bring them to Buddhist teachers from the East and West. That does not damage Buddhism. It keeps it alive.

Asian men and women of every generation and culture have rediscovered the teachings over two and a half thousand years. Simply following the tradition as passed down is not enough. A saying in the Tibetan tradition is “if the students are not better than the teacher, the tradition dies.” For that reason, women and men in the West must study and practice the teachings “from the bottoms of their hearts and with all their power” so that a form of Buddhism can arise which reflects the conditions of our time and culture.

It is not easy to rediscover a religion over and over again. We can be successful if we try to rediscover Buddhism in the Asian traditions. To create a Western, an American or a European Buddhism in which women can find themselves, is a tight-rope walk. Without enough clarity and depth, the teachings become banal or watered down or stuck in rigid traditional forms. We can only find the middle path by exploring the extremes on either side, and in order to do that we need courage and trust, much knowledge and deep experiences in meditation. We also need to understand our Western culture, to maintain contact with experienced traditional teachers and a continuous exchange with practitioners and teachers of the different traditions in the West. A western Buddhism for men *and* women cannot be thought out around a coffee table or constructed “from the gut.”

People who try something new are by nature heretics, and they make mistakes. They are, justifiably, viewed by the established traditions with mistrust – we only know afterwards whether we have applied the teachings to our time and culture or whether we have simply watered them

down and conformed them to contemporary tastes. With the ideas or theses and practices in this book I would like to encourage women and men in the West to come into contact with the teachings and practices of Buddha and to examine them with their hearts.

Women have a double-task: We must search for a timely form for old teachings, and many Western and Asian men work with us on this task. We must also view a patriarchal religion critically, “with the eyes of a woman.” In the first two parts of this book, the central teachings and practices of Buddhism are presented and there are descriptions of some of the situations in which we can be misled if we fail to consider our cultural background and our gender. The [third part](#) takes up typical questions which contemporary women have about the teachings and interprets the teachings, with the help of these questions, “against the grain.” A fantasy trip into a Buddhist world dominated by women sharpens our awareness of the extent of male dominance in Buddhism and of the consequences for teachers and practitioners. The [fourth part](#) presents the first practical result: theses and exercises which can support women along the path into inner and outer freedom. We still have much work to do before Buddhist teachings have been worked through in terms of gender issues and Western culture.

To approach this book: You can either first read the chapters which interest you particularly or read the book through chapter by chapter. Every chapter is connected with the others on many levels. There are many repetitions. This cannot and should not be avoided. They are part of the living tradition and are also useful. The basic statements in the teachings are connected to each other in many ways, and we approach them over and over again with different questions. Buddha did not teach a finished system. Instead, he answered the questions of his contemporaries and chose the style and the symbols which were appropriate to them. These spontaneous instructions were then passed down in

an oral tradition for several hundred years before they were put into writing shortly before the turn of the millennium. These are the Buddha's teachings, upon which all later interpretations and commentaries are based. Their structure can only be grasped after approaching those teachings intensively, both intellectually and in meditation. Without personal experience with the contents of the teachings, the central statements can only be superficially grasped and are like a skeleton - without flesh and blood.

Acknowledgments

Many people, circumstances and teachings have contributed to this book. Here I would like to thank some of those who have decisively influenced my thinking and feelings about life. The Tibetan Lama Thubten Yeshe (1936-1984) opened my heart for Buddhism and communicated the essence of the teachings to me with practical lessons, openness, humor, compassion and great skill. His alert interest for questions and his trust in the serious interest of his Western students encouraged me to try the teachings out and to experiment with them. One of his visions was the presentation of the Buddhist teachings without using any “Buddhist” terminology. We haven’t arrived there yet but are on the way. Lama Yeshe was one of the few Tibetan Lamas I heard about who was a woman in his last life. This Tibetan nun was abbess of a nunnery near Lhasa. Perhaps that was why it was easy for Lama Yeshe to take women and their questions seriously and to encourage them to seriously confront the tradition. I was introduced to the teachings and learned to treasure them through two other teachers from the Gelug-tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, Lama Thubten Zopa Rinpoche and Geshe Tegchok.

After Lama Yeshe died in 1984 I was looking for a female Buddhist teacher. For a few years, I was accompanied on the path by the women Rinzai-Zen-Master Gesshin Prabhasadharma Roshi (1931-1999). She supported me without suggesting that I should leave my Tibetan path. The Theravada-nun Ayya Khema introduced me to the sermons of the Buddha, taught me the Stages of Absorption (P. *jhana*) and continuously inspired me to put complex teachings into practice in practical exercises. Both women teachers were born in Germany and we could communicate

quite deeply in my mother tongue. Since 1955 I have been studying the teachings and exercises of the general Mahayana tradition and the Tibetan Kagyu- and Nyingma-tradition with the English teacher Rigdzin Shikpo (Michael Hookham).

Many Western people were and are inspiring me in integrating the Buddhist teachings in my daily life in the West. The cultural philosophy of Jean Gebser opened my vision for the close connection between religious forms and spiritual development and between cultural images and the essence of the spiritual path. This creative philosopher from Bohemia has indelibly inspired many contemporary thinkers, such as the musician Michael Vetter and cultural philosopher Ken Wilber. C.G. Jung and his student Erich Neumann sharpened my view for the dark sides of the spiritual path and encouraged me to stick to and follow my heretical questions and to discuss them again and again with Eastern and Western teachers and representatives of established Buddhism. The French philosopher and psychologist Luce Irigaray and the Italian philosopher Luisa Murray offered me the gift of their model of “gender difference” (Italian: *differenza sessuale*). It has proven to be the key to discovering the “male model” behind all so-called general human teachings, to questioning the accompanying “female model” and to finding a way out of the patriarchal one-sidedness.

I happily recall those well-known names. However, just as important are the less well-known fellow practitioners and teachers from the East and the West. I studied the Buddhist teachings with them and we deepened them together in meditation. I took up the works of European thinkers and discussed them with Western friends and colleagues, male and female. Since 1986 I have passed on my experiences in lectures and meditation courses, and many Western women (and men) feel inspired and supported by my style of teaching and practising. Their positive responses have

consistently strengthened my resolve to follow my questions further, even when there are no quick answers in sight. Thank you all who had and have the courage to search for and try out new ways with me.

The collegial support of many Western Buddhist teachers has been and is a great inspiration to me. I have presented my “feminist Buddhism” to them since 1993 at international, European and national conferences, and they encouraged me to seek and go my own way.¹

My warmest thanks, finally, to Dr. Viola Altrichter, Dr. Adelheid Herrmann-Pfandt, Dr. Barbara Knab, Dr. Sylvia Kolk and Marie Mannschatz. Each goes her own path and our exchange has enriched my life. They have each read the manuscript and given suggestions which led to more clarity and less Buddhist “insider” language. Thank you also to my editor Tanja Reindel of Fischer Verlag, who competently handled this project from the very beginning.

Jütchendorf

Spring 1998 for the German edition

Sylvia Wetzel

Acknowledgments for the English version 2015

I would like to express my gratitude to my translator Jane Anhold. I met this wonderful US-American lawyer at a public talk in the British-American Club in Berlin in October 2001. We had much fun in discussing terms and topics and - she took up meditating right away when she started translating the book in the winter of 2001-2002.

It took more than thirteen years to find a publisher, as one publisher in USA whom i contacted and who considered publishing it found it too old-fashioned feminist. Other publishers in USA and UK did not even consider publishing it. Fortunately we have now the chance to publish it through the books-on-demand.

Jütchendorf

Easter 2015 for this English edition

Sylvia Wetzel

Introduction to the revised edition 2010

“Ten years after”, I am looking back in great joy, mostly at least. Sometimes the tear in one eye and the smile in the other are simultaneously seeking attention. I handed in the manuscript to the Fischer Publishers in Frankfurt in person in May 1998. In January 1999 the first edition was published with the (not quite correct) subtitle: Women and Freedom. How the caption of the fourth and last section of the book made its way onto the cover as the subtitle we never found out. The amended subtitle appeared then, for the second edition as originally planned - Women and Buddhism. Ten years and four editions later Fischer took the book off its list. Some years previously the rather delightful series Fischer Spirit had already been discontinued. I am very happy that the recently founded publisher edition steinrich in Berlin is going to publish the book in a revised, extended and beautifully designed, new edition.

Is the book still relevant? Has the topic not been dealt with? I don't think so. Many things have been set in motion over the last ten years and this process may well continue. Blindness towards gender roles is not just an issue of religions in general or Buddhism in particular. Within the postmodern democratic societies of the west there is still much room for emancipation of both women and men from well-worn roles. In a new chapter I have taken stock and will introduce a model of how we can initiate necessary change. I believe that women and freedom go together and so do women, men and freedom - but only if we fully commit to it with passion, humour and a very long breath.

To tune into this here comes a little, but true story. During a conference on gender-mainstreaming three people are sitting in a café. The topic of the conversation is equal rights

on all levels in society. Two women occupy one table, a man the table next to them. One of the women asks the other: "What do you see when you look in the mirror in the morning?" "Well, a tired looking woman with messy hair." "Now, there's the difference: I see a black woman." The man at the next table has overheard the dialogue and for him suddenly the penny drops: the prevalent skin colour stays invisible. Being a bright man he also understands something else: "I see a person in the mirror. The prevalent gender is and remains invisible."

May this book contribute to the voices of women in Buddhism being clearly heard. This will fundamentally change Buddhism in the West and in the East.

May all beings benefit.

Jütchendorf, Christmas 2009

Sylvia Wetzel

Acknowledgements 2010

My thanks go to Sabine Hayoz Kalff in Zollikon, Thomas Bisswanger-Heim in Freiburg and Peter Gäng in Berlin for their suggestions for the new chapter. Thanks to Peter Gäng for so thoroughly checking the book and thanks to the participants of my courses for the many conversations on the topic which have shaped the new chapter.

Ten years after: Taking stock

Movements in the East

Many things in Buddhism have been set in motion, in the East as well as in the West. Let us firstly look towards Asia. There, the public role and the social status of nuns are rather significant, less so the prominence of so-called laywomen who practice and teach. Twenty-two years ago, in 1987, the First International Buddhist Nuns' Conference was held in Bodhgaya, North India, initiated by three brave women: The University Professor Dr. Chatsumam Kabilsingh and two German nuns, Venerable Ayya Khema and Jampa Tsedrön (Carola Roloff). All three women later received the full Bhikshuni ordination. Twenty-two years on from this historical conference for nuns there are now over five hundred fully ordained nuns in Sri Lanka.

This is a huge success. It was made possible because the West has had a spirited women's movement for over a century, which affects all levels of society, including every established religions and which also radiates as far as Asia. This is how this first historical encounter of confident and brave Buddhist women from the West and Asia came about. From then on every two years, a further nuns' conference has been held, mostly in Asia and organized by Sakyadhita, "Buddha's Daughters". These conferences maintain a spirited interest in the subject, and many women and some men are offering support for nuns by sponsoring their education and maintenance costs. The visible result of all this work was the International Nuns' Conference in Hamburg in the summer 2007.

From 2001 onwards, an international committee of Buddhist women in Thailand has awarded prizes to outstanding women in Buddhism. At the start of the new millennium two nuns, Dr. Lee from the US and Dr. Rattanauali from Thailand, had a true idea for a millennium. They decided no longer to complain about the poor treatment of Buddhist women in Asia and antiquated attitudes of monks in Thailand who consider the full ordination of women to be absurd. Instead they wanted to honour smart and brave, ingenious and successful women by awarding them a prize. The inspiration for this originated from the practice in Thailand to give awards to successful women in politics, business and society, which was introduced a few years before.

With the friendly support of the UN-office in Bangkok up to twenty female Buddhists from Asia, Europe and the Americas receive the "Outstanding Woman in Buddhism Award" each year. The award goes to younger and older women, to aristocrats and politicians, to laywomen, to the ordained and virtually ordained. The official ceremony, well attended by the media, is held in close proximity to the International Women's Day on the 8th of March and the women celebrate their mutual appreciation and encourage each other. Also on March the 8th brave monks do give the full ordination to some women. For me this date is also a wonderful expression of the creativity in encounters of women from the East and the West.

When I received this award in Bangkok in 2008 I was deeply impressed by this approach. I could only marvel at the courage and at the creativity of these wonderful nuns and laywomen from Korea and Taiwan, from Sri Lanka and Thailand and other countries in the East and West - and at their achievements far.

My impression was that these women are going to push the full ordination of women in Thailand and the rest of Asia

through. This approach to celebrate successful women publicly should also be adopted in the West. You can find more on these projects on the relevant web pages listed in the appendix.

Movements in the West

What does it look like in the West? The question regarding nuns in the West is merely a peripheral issue. The majority of practitioners and teachers in the West are not ordained. Within European and American Buddhism it is more about the encounter of tradition and the modern and about how medieval tradition meets modern times. It is about the cultural incorporation of traditional models of Asian Buddhism into secular societies, which have been shaped by the Age of Enlightenment, democracy, equal rights and technological progress. As the majority of women in the West have access to education and property they do play an important role in the Buddhist world of the West. This mirrors the historical situation in Asia. The role of women in Buddhism has been and still is reflected in the social and cultural role of women in their societies in all cultures and at all times. But what the increase in numbers of women in Buddhism means for the women themselves and for Buddhism, is pondered on rather little. This is not different from anywhere else in society. Women do play a role, but the reflection on this role lags behind, which hinders the esteem and full development of abilities of *both* genders. Within the First International Conference of Western Buddhist Teachers in 1993 in Dharamsala, North India, we were five women and twenty-two men from Europe and the United States – so roughly one fifth were women. Observers and guests were mainly Tibetan Lamas, all of them men, and a few laypersons from the West. Attending the third conference in 1996, again in Dharamsala, over a quarter

were women, eight out of thirty participants. At the fourth conference in the year 2000 in California over a half of the 250 attendants were women.

A very important step for Buddhist women in Germany and Europe towards reaching the greater public was the conference “Women and Buddhism” in Cologne in spring 2000, which was initiated by Sylvia Kolk and myself. The idea for this conference developed while we two Sylvias took a long walk in the rain. We had both been active in the Women’s Movement and found once again that our work as Buddhist teachers complemented that perfectly. Put in a somewhat exaggerated way Sylvia Kolk takes Buddhism into the feminist scene and I take gender roles into the Buddhist scene.

Well over a thousand women and some men attended the introductory evening on the Thursday and over two and a half days more than thirty female teachers covered a huge bandwidth of topics in their lectures and workshops. Many participants felt they experienced the onset of a third Women’s Movement that was originating this time from women in spiritual practice. I will describe the spirited and manifold movement associated with my courses towards the end of the chapter.

My conclusion is – women are practitioners and teachers, women are instructors and women are managers of Buddhist institutions and practice centers in Europe and in the Americas. For almost a decade the German Buddhist Union has had a female chair. For a long time I myself used to hold the position of vice chair and then chair of this Buddhist umbrella organisation. Although the percentage of female teachers in Europe and particularly in Eastern Europe is lower than in North America even here women are teaching more than ever.

Opportunities for the future

These are promising indications. But my wish list regarding reflection of gender roles is still quite long. Roughly every ten years a special edition of the German Buddhist Union's magazine is published on the wider subject of "Women in Buddhism". I was in charge of the first two special editions, when the magazine was still named "Lotusblätter - Lotus Leaves". The third was published in 2009 under its new name "Buddhismus aktuell - Buddhism up to date". Each time my concern had been that women *and men* reflected on their role through their contributions. What then did get published were mainly contributions on the position of women in Buddhism. For the unambiguous title "Women and Men, Female and Male" of the special edition in 1999 I had asked Buddhist teachers personally to examine the texts of their choice in regards to the image of men they presented. Still what I received were contributions on the position of women in Zen-Koans, the role of nuns in Sri Lanka, China or Tibet.

I would like to state my concern here again very clearly. I am - generally, in this book, in my courses and lectures - *not primarily* concerned with the role of *women* in Buddhism or with the affinity of women to Buddhism (and vice versa). I am primarily concerned with the reflection of the gender roles by men and women in Buddhism and everywhere in society, culture and politics. I wish for men to examine Buddhist texts regarding the image of men that they convey. I wish for male Buddhist teachers to offer courses for men and for them to examine together with their students their self-image as men. I wish for teaching women and men to observe their language and to acknowledge their often mainly female audience audibly. Is that so difficult? It seems that way.

I wish for women and men not to accept the patriarchal "facts" without comment or dismiss with a joke. I am asking again: Does it go together, women and freedom? For many young women and men this does not seem to be a question