

A Gathering of Spirit

Women Teaching in American Buddhism



Going Back Into The World

By Dr. Joanna Macy

This is our last session. Already our minds are turning to going home, thinking about the families that we are going to reconnect with, and what's up for us tomorrow morning. So it's fitting that in this last session we look directly at our being in the world.

Each of us carries within us an awareness of the suffering of our fellow beings and of what is happening to our planet. Whether we've just started on the Path or have been on it a long time, whether we consider ourselves (as a sister put it so delightfully this morning) a "spiritual mongrel" or have a clear label for our practice and belief system, there is, at some level within us, an awareness that we're not just doing it for ourselves. We sense that the great good fortune that is ours of having encountered the Buddha Dharma, in whatever form we have, has been granted to us for more than our own peace of mind, enlightenment, beautification, what have you. There is, perhaps more than at any time when people have come to the Dharma, an awareness that we are doing this practice for the sake of other beings and our world and our planet.

After all these millenia of the human journey on this particular planet, we find ourselves alive in a time when the world can end. This is not a matter of apocalyptic belief but of sober scientific projections and probabilities, given the current behaviors of our species and the forces they have unleashed. Whatever our politics are, we carry that knowledge with us. And what a teacher it is! The very perils of our time can help us to peel back stunning dimensions of the meaning of the Dharma.

Let's bring right up to the front of our minds those knowings in us about what is happening in our world, and what is being prepared, in terms of violence and de-

vastation. We live in a time when, according to the polls, over half the people in this country expect that nuclear war will occur, and that they will not survive it. The psychological implications of that alone are staggering.

We also live in a time when we are destroying our life support system. That is not a potential danger, but a present fact, as is evident in our soil, and in the poisoning of our air, our seas, and in deforestation, desertification, and the extinction of plant and animal species at the rate of three a day. We get these signals not just from television and the press, but in the air we breathe, the water we drink, and what we see around us.

The currents of information that encircle our globe bring us dire warning signals. We are aware of the enormous suffering that is occurring right now with our fellow beings, humans and non-humans. There has probably not been a time in human history when so large a proportion of humanity was without the means for a decent and healthy life.

All this is relevant to our encounter with the Dharma, and we want to take this into account. We don't want our practice to be an escape, but still as we prepare to sit, we sometimes hear an inner voice saying, "Maybe this is a luxury, I should be out and doing." So let's look at what the practice means for our being alive, now.

One of the key teachings of the Buddha is that we have choice. That's what distinguishes humans from all other realms of life: the gods, the devas, the animals. Only humans can change their karma; that is why a human birth is so precious. One of us was talking last night about what it meant to her to think that she had chosen her parents. She felt both empowered and forgiving. Sometimes when we work together on a

special project we have the sense of having been brought here by appointment, as if there is some cosmic collusion to our being here alive at this extraordinary time. It's important to get in touch with that sense of privilege and that capacity for choice; it helps us get over any feelings of being victims. It's boring to be a victim.

(At this point Dr. Macy led the participants in a fantasy of choosing their particular reincarnation, a fantasy created by Psychiatrist Carol Woolman for helping people deal with the psychological fact of living with nuclear weapons. Dr. Macy closed the meditation by saying, "You are the gift this world has given itself.")

Choosing To Be Born A Woman

Last night we were talking about some of the implications of having chosen to be born women this time around. I believe that whatever oppression or abuse may have been our lot as a result of that are so many credentials for us. They equip us to heal our world. It's really important in this planet-time to have some inside track on what it's like to be oppressed. It's good to look at oppression that way, because it's easy to get attached to being a victim. As I said before, that's essentially boring.

"It's really hard to be a man in a dying patriarchy."

It's also important to remember that those who chose to be men in this time have their own dukkha (suffering). In our group this morning one of the men said he had wondered why he came to this conference. But then he knew; it was so that he could heal his anger with women. There's a lot of work to do together. I thank him for having chosen to be born a man. I'm a wife of one and the mother of two, and I'm telling you, it's really hard to be a man in a dying patriarchy.

One of the things I really love about the Dharma is the way it faces straight on what Ruth was reminding us of yesterday, dukkha. Imagine starting out as a religious teacher and the first thing you say to people is they are suffering! The Buddha did that! Both feet smack on the floor: life hurts!

That's a good place to begin as we work in the world, whether we are working with the big issues like hunger and war or the countless little conflicts, injustices, frustrations in our immediate environment.

It's good to begin with the dukkha because we can really believe it. We believe it because we feel it—and because who would have invented it? There's a lot of pain out there, even among the people who look very successful, competent, affluent, white, middleclass, college-educated. They too know pain.

The Saravodaya Movement in Sri Lanka similarly begins with that First Noble Truth (that life hurts) when they go into a village to organize. They don't go in without having first been invited. And when they do, they don't come in with blueprints and solutions. Rather they come in and ask people where they hurt. They draw the villagers together into what they call a "family gathering" and invite them to specify their needs. In the process, the villagers experience their own expertise: they are experts on what is not working for them.

If there's one thing that's similar between our life in the post-industrial West and village life in Southeast Asia, it's a feeling of powerlessness. You begin overcoming that right away by noting your own expertise

about what's wrong. Who's the expert on your needs? **You** are!

So we can begin at the same place in our culture. I have been doing that with the despair and empowerment work here and in other countries. This work helps people get in touch with their own painful responses to what is happening to our planet. Responses to being alive in a world that can include grief, the sorrow that arises when you look at the face of your child, or when you want to have a child. They include fear—dread of what's in store for us and what we're creating. They include anger, a stifled rage that we have let it come to this, and they include disbelief and guilt.

Those responses are natural, they are normal and even wholesome, but our culture as a whole is stuck in place of not want-

ing to experience them. That's what is called "psychic numbing." Our culture will do almost anything to not experience the grief, anger, fear and sorrow that is right there below the surface of business-as-usual. The buying sprees and hedonism, the rise in suicide rates and drug abuse, the blaming, cultism, fundamentalism, name-calling, and hate-filled diatribes against the victims of your choice—blacks, Jews, homosexuals, women, you name it—all of that stems from not wanting to look at the hurt that's inside, the dukkha.

Intrinsic to that denial is a semiconscious fear that we might break or shatter if we allow ourselves to experience that pain. So it's very important for us to have an experience of the Buddha Dharma so that we don't break when we experience suffering. With Dharma practice we need not be afraid of experiencing sorrow and fear, we need not run from them, we're not fragile, skin-encapsulated egos.

The Great Compassion

Thich Nhat Hahn says that what we most need to do right now is hear within ourselves the sounds of the earth crying. That pain is product and proof of our interrelatedness with all beings. Dukkha can open us right into the heart of reality where all beings coexist, inter-exist like jewels in the net of Indra.

"Life hurts! That's a good place to begin as we work in the world."

What you discover when you open to the suffering of our time is that you are encountering your own compassion. Only it isn't your own, it's the great compassion, the Mahakaruna. This is important to remember: you wouldn't be feeling it if we were not intricately connected, and if you were not, thanks to these connections, compassionate. It's like signs of life from that body which is your larger body.

The pain you feel for those in the hunger camps, the refugee camps, the prison camps, the war rooms, the missile silos, the barracks, the nursing homes, the school rooms, or even the face in the mirror, it is like the sensation in a phantom limb. It is

said that when you have a leg amputated, you still feel twinges and that is called a "phantom limb." What I'm talking about is phantom limb in reverse. We have been raised thinking that our body ended here, with this bag of skin, or with our possessions or our education or house. Now we begin to realize that our body is the world. Our pain tells us that.

As you experience grief with the grief of others, so can you know joy with the joy of others. The Buddhist name for this is "mudita." As we open to our interexistence as fellow beings, we open not only to their suffering, but also to their resources, their gifts, and to the power going through them. This is really important for Westerners to get.

In the Western religious traditions we honor compassion, but we're not very good at the flip side, mudita. That's one of the first things that delighted me in Buddhism. Mudita, by the way, is a great antidote to envy. It allows you to look at your fellow beings and open to their power and beauty and resources—gifts and resources you can draw from like money in the bank.

The courage of a Mohandas K. Gandhi or a Martin Luther King or a Dorothy Day didn't die with them. We live in a holographic universe, or as imaged by Buddhists, the jeweled net of Indra. No acts are lost. We can train ourselves to draw on the resources that are already there. We didn't

come into this universe alone, we have all these brothers and sisters and we can take their gumption, ingenuity, faithfulness, endurance, and let it flow into and through us. Whew, what a relief! We don't need to dredge up from ourselves all the courage and love that is needed. The very deprivation and exhaustion that we may feel can be the opportunity to open to our interexistence with others.

It's like grace. In the Christian tradition, grace comes largely from God. The Buddhists show us that each of us is the occasion of grace, a resource.

Turning the Wheel

I want to talk a moment about turning. In the Buddhist tradition, we talk about the turning of the wheel of Dharma. When the old Buddhist teachings came in new form in Mahayana Buddhism, it was called the second turning of the wheel. This balancing of Buddhism in the late twentieth century (not just in America but for Buddhists around the world) is another turning of the wheel.

For a wheel to turn, it must be empty in the middle.

The Dharma, in that regards, offers a fresh source of imagery of the feminine. One image in particular has been very powerful for me: Prajnaparamita, the Perfection of Wisdom, the mother of all the Buddhas. She first emerged over two thousand years ago in the earliest of Mahayana texts.

"Our culture will do almost anything not to experience grief, anger, fear and sorrow...."

These texts set forth the Bodhisattva path, that is, the path of one who, at the gates of Nirvana, turns and comes back again, vowing to keep returning to this side of reality until all beings are enlightened—for the Bodhisattva knows he or she is not separate from all beings. I like Prajnaparamita because she doesn't fit into the kind of masculine-feminine imagery you get in most other cultures, which posits a sky = father and earth = mother, setting up opposition between feeling and intellect, between mind and matter.

We have been raised in a culture where female is to male as nature is to cultures, as earth is to sky, etc. I'm really bored with it! One of the gifts that Buddhist women can bring to the women's movement is to tell them to get off it about equating the feminine with emotionality and the masculine with reason. The Perfection of Wisdom is **wisdom**, and she's the mother of the Buddhas. She's not sky or earth, she's symbolized by space. A term that is used for her is "deep space." She is a deep space in which, as the old texts say, the Bodhisattva flies like a bird, where there is nothing to hang onto, no crutches or easy answers, no quick

or guaranteed solutions.

It is the space you discover when you let yourself stop hanging onto your self-images and neuroses, when you stop taking yourself so seriously, when you stop clutching at the self whether it's to improve or punish it, to mortify it or sacrifice it. I was fascinated to discover a treatise on mathematics explaining the origin of "zero." Zero was a revolutionary development, a quantum leap in human understanding. Before that, no concept or sign existed to mark and hold the empty decimal place, sorely limiting the capacity to compute. It originated in India, I learned, brought to Europe by Moslem traders who put it into the Arabic numeral system. In ancient India, zero was known by names before a symbol for it developed. There were several names: **sunya** (empty), **purna** (full), **nada** (navel), **akasa** (space), and **ka**. At this point in my reading I almost

shouted in astonishment and glee because these very terms were, I recognized, how the early Mahayana texts characterized Prajnaparamita; they were her attributes! The mother of the Buddha was also the mother of zero, revolutionizing mathematics.

Furthermore, **ka**, the last term mentioned, means the hole in the hub of the wheel through which the axle passes. It must be empty and round like an O, like a vagina, if the wheel is to turn. Only by letting go into the apparent emptiness beyond ego can the wheel of the Dharma turn again in one time. It is an emptiness that is a fullness (**purna**) too, because in it we awaken to our interrelatedness with all beings, or as Thich Nhat Hahn calls it, our "interbeing." That is what the Buddha woke up to under the bodhi tree, the dependent co-arising of all phenomena; and that vividly intricate interplay is what later Mahayanists imaged in the jeweled net of Indra.

I suggest to you who have chosen to be women in this incarnation and have been fortunate enough to encounter the Dharma, that we have a particularly rewarding mission. We can bring to our time—to our practice and our world—this heightened

sense of interrelatedness. By our conditioning as well as our biology, we tune to relationships, can intuitively grasp the relational nature of the universe, the net of Indra.

As we go out into the world, we can let every encounter, every relationship, become an occasion for flying within the deep space of the Perfection of Wisdom. Each event can become the occasion for experiencing the power of interdependence and the practicality of peace.

You may remember that in the early scriptures the Buddha was asked, "Do we need to perform sacrifices to get to the realm of the Brahma?" (This was the chief Vedic god.) The Buddha said, "You can be there already by practicing metta (loving kindness), karuna (compassion), mudita (joy in the joy of others), and uppeka (equanimity)." In the Sarvodaya movement, these qualities are conveyed in ways that help people take charge of their lives and then move right out to work together in



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organizing for community development. That's what I mean when I speak of this being an historic time for Buddhism.

Some of you may be familiar with liberation theology in the Christian tradition, widespread in South and Central America. It emphasizes the revolutionary teachings of Jesus and uses them to empower people to work for liberation and social change. This is an epic development, and I can see the same thing happening in Buddhism. The social teachings of the Buddha, which can be seen as economically and politically revolutionary, were institutionalized into static hierarchies. Now the potency of his teachings for social change is being brought

to the fore. I should put in a plug here for the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, a force for "engaged Buddhism," and I hope you will get to know the work of Thich Nhat Hahn.

Your lives are woven inextricably in the jeweled net of Indra, as interwoven as neurons in the mind of a great being. You cannot fall out of that web. No stupidity, cowardice or failure can ever separate you from that living net, because that is what you are. Rest in that knowing, come home to it. In that is the Great Peace. Out of that you can risk everything, knowing that each encounter can be a coming home again to that Great Peace. Indeed, it is so. □