

Sakyadhita Conference Keynote Address

This keynote address was delivered by Roshi Susan Murphy to the 16th Sakyadhita International Conference for Buddhist Women held in the Blue Mountains, outside of Sydney.

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I am humbled and honoured by the invitation to offer the opening keynote address to such an important and luminous gathering of women!

Twenty minutes is a very short time in which to address the obvious fact and impact of the silencing and marginalizing of women in the Buddhist tradition for the last several thousand years -- and its studied indifference towards the venerable enlightened women who actually managed, against the odds, to break past such formidable barriers to practice, teach and inspire others.

It is of course impossible to reconcile this act of deep injury to the lives of hundreds of generations of women, with the *actual* core insights of the Buddhist path itself -- which is waking up into direct awareness of the undivided and indivisible nature of mind and reality. This we find to be the very source of the natural flow of un-self-conscious compassion that cannot help but respond to the cries of the world!

But it surely is possible to open a way to heal this historic split that has been forced, right at the heart of what it is to be fully human, and to begin to enable the full flourishing of women in the expression of Dharma, and the full flourishing of Dharma in the lives of women.

Right now, at such a dangerous moment in human and planetary history, it is vitally important to bring across into the world something that's been sorely missing for far too long.

I mean the expression of Dharma sourced in the embodied life experience of women -- at last bringing to light the particular gifts of expressive wisdom that can flow out only from the awake *female* body-and-mind, to defend and care for the life of the Earth. .

For at least the last two and a half thousand years of human history it has been vigorously held by all the great religions of what has been called the 'Axial Age', including not only Buddhism and the Judeo-Christian religions, but also the golden age of Greek philosophy --- that mind and spirit is definitively male in character, while flesh and all that comes with humbling bodily life, is definitively, and regrettably, female.

It hardly needs stating that this unapologetic hostility towards bodily life demeans and harms women – in fact harms life itself. And it is plain that this patriarchal mind-set has been wielded for centuries as a weapon to exclude women from full religious participation and expression.

Perhaps what is now sharply coming into focus is that it is actually dangerous to miss out on the vital perspective of women's spiritual experience and insight, at this critical moment in the history not just of our human world, but of the Earth herself, in which the relentless pressure of human demands upon the planet has already reached catastrophic levels, sending more than a million species into extinction and threatening a further holocaust of extinctions that, unchecked, may well take us with it.

Let's start with the fact that any direct experience and understanding of the undivided nature of mind and reality that lies at the very heart of all genuine Buddhist practice and realization, *plainly* reveals that any gendered characterization of the human capacity to awaken is baseless.

To say otherwise has been to place an artificial obstacle in the path of Buddhist women to deliberately limit our full participation in practice from the earliest beginning.

When mind is deeply settled and radiantly open, the essential nature of our heart and mind cannot be found or said to be fundamentally 'male' or 'female'; in fact a separate 'self' or 'other' cannot be found in any substantial or enduring form. Such direct experience – it's called waking up - verifies the undivided and indivisible true nature of reality and mind.

This direct experience lies beyond the reach of explanatory words, and yet we must work to express and share the deeply caring wisdom of practice that flows from it. But whenever we try to return the direct experience to words, we find ourselves forced back towards a dualistic consciousness.

This is the relative mind that language transmits -- the capacity of our minds that is so useful in distinguishing what kind of mind-state and conduct shares the good, and how to avoid the mind-states and conduct that harm ourselves, together with the many beings.

But this dualistic consciousness is equally the one that splits what it is to be human into categories of greater and lesser value, according to gender. It is the mind that proliferates harmful value judgments that depend on and perpetuate the painful delusion of separateness.

The mind of 'me in here, and you out there' is a mind asleep to this undivided reality, in which it is possible only to gladly admit that '*you* are not other than *myself*'.

If the historic splitting of the category 'human' into valued 'male' and devalued 'female' is left unchecked at every point by failing to ask, 'What does this mean, and how does it stand, in the light of the essential oneness of reality and consciousness?' then we agree to perpetuate a delusory mind of separateness and institute it right at the heart of Buddhist doctrine and institutions.

Traditionally every sutra begins with '*Thus I have heard*'. The Buddha *spoke* his teachings – they were teachings formed within a directly transmitted oral tradition. He would probably find the vast and dazzling array of Buddhist sects and styles almost unrecognizable. What would he make of the great body of revered written sutras and commentaries that have stemmed from the historic moment of his life, and profound enlightenment?

This is a question worth asking, since wherever women are denied education and literacy, a formidable barrier is created to women's full agency, influence and participation in the public sphere. By contrast, a tradition of teaching based in oral transmission cannot so easily rule out women's access to spiritual practice and authority.

We find the barrier to women's participation erected and fortified in the same way for most of the history of the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions, too, of course. The Axial Age produced astonishing revolutions and revelations in spiritual consciousness – but perhaps the *most* astonishing revelation of the age turned out to be the watertight male assumption that women have no natural place in that consciousness at all!

We're lucky to live at a time when women are no longer prepared to endure being a silenced and restricted majority, but are pushing back against the historic injustice of dismissal from the spiritual realm.

A patriarchal mind-set has of course been limiting not only for women. Any dogma that seeks to re-divide the essentially undivided mind and heart of awakening also does violence to the flourishing and full expression of Buddhist practice and wisdom for men.

Men too are forced to struggle with hierarchical inequalities and oppression. Dogma so deeply mistrustful - and even openly hateful - towards half the human race, and

so clearly based in unexamined anxiety, fear and ignorance, is punishing also for men. To divide the spiritual life of human beings along lines of gender you have to lean heavily on a studied ignorance towards the very realization that lies at the heart of Buddhism.

In this gathering, the details of how this mind-set injures the path of practice need little rehearsing: they have been thoroughly lived, by most of the people present here today.

But let me present just a little taste, from a 20th century Chinese Tripitaka 'master':

'First we will discuss the five obstructions. The first is that women are not able to become the great Brahma lord because that position is accomplished through purity and the body of a woman has a great many impurities. Second, women cannot become Chakra. Upon reaching the heavens their bodies must become male because only the males can be lords of the heavens. Although Chakra has some desire remaining, that desire is quite light. Women on the other hand are extremely libidinous. ... Wise kings have hearts of great compassion and kindness. They teach people to maintain the Five Precepts and the Ten Good Deeds. Whenever women see something good occur to others they become jealous and this keeps them from having great compassion. Fifth, they cannot become Buddhas. Buddhas have ten thousand virtues, women have many evils. They are jealous and obstructive, and their hearts are about the size of a sesame seed...'

If this was a rare and isolated example of religious teaching about women we could laugh it off as the absurdity that it is. But no -- there's plenty more where that came from. Centuries of it.

At the same time, seeing into and right through the assumptions that underlie power structures that have normalized injustice over such long stretches of time takes mental effort. It can be a long struggle to perceive and up-end ancient assumptions, and to draw the powerful into self-awareness. All around our world, we can see how much injustice is kept silently in place by realistic fear of a backlash that can be truly savage.

So it would be unwise to expect applause or gratitude from the powerful, when we begin to question or disturb the deeply established sense of innate male entitlement that has limited the religious life of women in Buddhism for so long.

We must instead skillfully invite and steadily draw men into willingly *sharing* the rich, productive space of waking up, recognizing that it is equally beneficial for them to heal this ancient split in consciousness. Meanwhile, we must take care also to

discern our own hand in the process of tying ourselves up, or holding ourselves back.

There is a living oral tradition of vivid and immediate teacher-student engagement central to transmission of the teaching in Chan/Zen Buddhism, that by the 10th and 11th century in China became collected as encounter narratives called *kungans* (Ch.) or *koans* (J.) meaning ‘public cases’, and taken up as a focus of meditation and realization, a way to come to intimately share the enlightened mind of the old teachers.

One such comes from the record of Shítóu Xīqiān, an 8th-century Chinese Chán Buddhist teacher, when a student asked Shitou, ‘How do I get free?’

Shitou answered with a question that never stops inviting our practice of inquiry and open response. “*Who has bound you?*” he asked.

I think everyone recognises that one. So then the work begins, to see just *how* (and how well) we are binding ourselves!

One useful move in the process of confronting gender inequality is to notice some of the unexpected advantages in being placed *outside* blind forms of privilege.

Outsiders to power actually enjoy a valuable perspective upon an oppressive situation (and the suffering of its victims) that can offer 20-20 clarity of vision denied to its perpetrators. It is rather like possessing an extra ten to twenty IQ points of intelligence and depth of insight, relative to those wielding and enmeshed in institutional power!

Another easily overlooked gift is the sharing of insightful laughter at the obvious impostures of male-only power – and such shared laughter, free of ill-will, but sharp with clear seeing, creates a kind of community-forming intelligence and force for change, that’s often been the special preserve of women.

Both can help in moving past the oppressive, outward facts of ‘*Who has bound you?*’ to begin to catch sight of the more inward ways we can internalise, accept and accommodate our sense of being bound as natural.

It is possible even to offer a kind of spirited *welcome* to this kind of historic difficulty. The mind of ‘Welcome’, as we know from our practice, is exactly the strong, open ground on which to study our own minds and from which to respond -- for in offering ‘Welcome’, we place ourselves firmly at home, right where we are. We take the role of friendly host, not victimised guest, of the difficult situation.

Perhaps we glimpse another way that painful circumstances can radically open our minds, in another moment from the Chan/Zen records – this time, involving the wonderful 9th century master, Dongshan Liangjie.

Dongshan was down at the monastery creek quietly washing his bowls together with a young monk, when suddenly, the exquisite little frog sitting on a rock right in front of them was torn apart by two hungry birds who swept down at the same moment and then flew off in opposite directions.

The young monk cried out in anguish, ‘Why does it come to this!’

Dongshan replied -- mysteriously and yet not mysteriously, when you let his words search you more deeply --- ‘*It is only for your benefit, Achariya*’.

Notice that he addresses this monk lost in anguish with the honorific title of Achariya, ‘wise one’. Wisdom surely grows in accord with truly penetrating and realizing the vast, interconnected ‘benefit’ presented moment by moment by unfolding events – that does not leave out moments of terrible tearing and loss - and can transform into the realization of ‘*all beings, one body*’. Which is the very source of selfless compassion, at the very heart of reality.

What realization of compassion can possibly arise except through experience of our own suffering and that of others, and the truth it ultimately opens up – of one great shared body of being?

As Aunty Beryl Carmichael, a wise indigenous elder of the Nyampii people in the Menindee Lakes/Broken Hill area of Australia once made clear: “Reality is connectedness.”

“If you’re not in connectedness,” she said, “You’re not *in* reality.”

In that cry, ‘*Why does it come to this!*’ we can hear the unreserved and unself-conscious complete sharing of the reality of the suffering of another being. The young monk’s chance for dawning wisdom born of his genuine grief in that very situation is also being acknowledged. Genuine grief has the power to become informing and transforming at the deepest level, for it is based in truth, and realized as love.

In another of these live and lively teacher-student encounters, also in 9th century China, we find an exceptionally clear awakened older woman – sadly her name remained unrecorded, as was customary - living not far from the humble temple of the great and very old teacher, Zhaozhou.

Deeply enlightened though she was, when her beloved granddaughter suddenly died, she wept openly and loudly in front of her many followers.

They were shocked! 'A master like you, and you weep? Impermanence is just impermanence, why mourn like this?' they cried, anxiously demanding that she stop. As though a display of personal immunity from grief might tidy away the threat of all harm and suffering for everybody.

Instead, she scolded them soundly, saying, 'Of course I weep! These cries are for all beings. Listen, *listen!*'

Later, Zhaozhou heard about this. He simply asked, '*How can anyone lose by crying out?*' A great question to carry forward into our perilous time.

The cries of the world after all bring Guanyin/Avalokitesvara into being, ushering compassion into the world, manifesting the benefit of all beings.

Can we also detect some special qualities of the Dharma in its vivid female expressive power, here in this story? Can we perhaps find that in the old woman's presentation of the value of unself-conscious and unrestrained care for life – and its deep source in an open meeting with suffering and loss?

Surely, such expressive, clear response that stems not from despair but from an unquestioning care for life is especially valuable in meeting the peril we face in our world right now. Poised as we are on a cliff-edge of indecision, watching the unfolding of profound climate tragedy. Agonized as we are by awareness of the avalanche of suffering and extinctions now clearly underway. Resolved as we must be to use every means we can find to meet this huge challenge of our time.

How coincidental is it that it was the very young *female* voice of Greta Thunberg that struck such a penetrating, resounding note in calling to account the forces of 'predatory denialism' (as it is has begun to be called) of the huge, corporate forces of greed that are mindlessly devouring the life of the Earth.

Those very forces are awakening an impassioned youth-led rebellion with a high preponderance of female leaders, demanding action to ameliorate and transform the tragedy in which we are all now players.

Is it the fact that it is the female body that carries life, and intimate caring for life, into the world? Is this what lets us seem to know so innately, almost beyond words, that the precious Earth is *not other* than our own precious body-and-mind?

Throughout its history there has been a striking natural ease of recognition between Buddhism and the various forms of indigenous spirituality, grounded in close accord with the terms of the Earth, that it has encountered as it spread eastwards – for example, Tibetan Bon, Chinese Dao, Japanese Shinto.

Where did the Buddha finally reconcile this human body-and-mind with boundless reality? It was in the resolute act of sitting down, on the earth, under a tree.

So let me conclude with a koan that sprang to life on this very continent, Australia, on one of the many times I was accompanying the remarkable Aboriginal elder, Uncle Max Harrison, Dulumunmun, on a teaching walk into country, on the south coast of New South Wales.

A 'walk into country' is a walk with an Aboriginal Elder that gradually draws you past your habitual categories of mind into a more indigenous understanding of the utterly interwoven nature of human consciousness with all the life forms, and land formations, into a profound form of belonging – inseparable – that has a tap-root tens of thousands of years deep in time and exacting place.

This is what conditions the very Australian sense of the word, 'country'. *Country* has human custodians, but no hard borders, no bosses, no post-code, and no map *outside* of the human heart and mind.

The other people present on that occasion were members of a movement called 'ANTAAR' - Australians for (recognition of) Native Title and Aboriginal Reconciliation - all keen to drink in a deeper sense of *country* while openly acknowledging the grievous historical harm imposed by a settler society upon the oldest continuous human culture on the earth.

But at a certain moment, Uncle Max stopped everyone in their tracks by suddenly saying, "You know, I don't hold with this word 'reconciliation'." People were shocked into silence, hearts beating.

He asked, "How can you talk about reconciliation, when there has never been any *relationship* in the first place?"

A powerful truth was forming in the air. But then he took it so much further. He bent down and picked up a handful of earth and held it out to everyone.

"I just tell both mobs (both 'white-fellas' and 'black-fellas') – *reconcile with this.*"

The great work right now is reconciliation with the earth, before we are too late to notice we are not just living in a house on fire but knowingly setting that fire with our own hands.

The implication of this deep Dharma teaching from Uncle Max, Dulumunmun, is plain: in every contending situation, *both* mobs – whether black and white, or male and female, or rich and poor – will find themselves profoundly equal and fully reconciled with each other and with reality only when they truly enter and go all the

way through the process, likely to be a hard one, of establishing genuine relationship and reconciliation with the Earth, herself.

This generous, life-giving Earth, that is so clearly demanding that we now wake up, study, know, and more closely watch our minds.

True reconciliation is the realization that each of us is inseparable from one great body, one benefit, of awake compassion and care. That in fundamental reality, there is no 'self' to be found that stands alone, and against some so-called 'other'.

That the life of any awake human being is one ongoing work of reconciliation with this mysterious 'not-two' nature of fundamental reality. And that we are here to dissolve the endless delusory sense of separation with which we injure and divide ourselves, and pit ourselves so dangerously against the living Earth.

Let us no longer permit the shameful waste of all we have to offer as women of the way. Let us freely develop and bring forth to the world our deeply natural female expression of the Dharma (that ultimately finds no male or female quality to be separated out).

One Dharma, one reality, that bends always towards shouldering a simply human and natural custodial responsibility and care, for the numberless and deeply vulnerable beings of this world.