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Santacitta Bhikkhuni

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Panel: Women Changing Buddhism

'Inner and Outer Journey'

**Monastic women create their own institutions
and
call on the Earth to witness an urgent need for change.**

I speak from my experience as the co-founder of Aloka Vihara, a small independent bhikkhuni monastery in San Francisco, where I have lived since 2009. In early 2011, together with Ayya Anandabodhi, I left my former community in order to ordain as bhikkhuni. We had been trained for 18 years as part of the Siladhara Community of Amaravati / Chithurst Monasteries in England under the guidance of Ajahn Sumedho.

This transition was very delicate and at the same time a potent learning process for both of us. In order to find a way forward, we needed first of all to work through a wide spectrum of powerful emotions, such as anger and helplessness, as well as gratitude, sadness and excitement. We needed to say good bye to our sisters and brothers, some of whom we had been living together with for almost 2 decades, trust our own observations and venture into uncharted territory.

Reflecting in hindsight, it was the confidence in my ability for transformation and the trust that everything could be included into practice, which gave me the courage to step out from my old, relatively secure way of life. The other strong impetus which motivated me to step out, is the steadily mounting environmental crisis, the result of our actions as a global community. I am particularly aware of the profound link between the oppression of women and the feminine principle in general, and the oppression of nature. Patriarchy and its institutions are no longer able to respond to the challenges we are facing. We urgently need fresh input and to see with fresh eyes – in short, we need more women in positions of leadership.

Vandana Shiva, one of today's leading eco-feminists explains this very well. She draws a picture of a stream in a forest and says that in our society, this stream is perceived as unproductive if it is simply there fulfilling the needs for water for families and communities, until engineers come along and tinker with that stream, damming it and using it to generate electricity. The same is true of the forest. For many, a forest is seen as unproductive, if it is not producing something to export for monetary value. Our society has totally lost sight of the many important functions of natural ecosystems. Everything is seen in terms of resource and commerce. Actually, a forest protects groundwater, generates oxygen, provides fuel, fruit and craft materials, allows habitat for animals and above all, maintains ecological balance - all of which are crucial for our well-being and the well-being of many other species¹.

We urgently need to revision these deeply dysfunctional values solely based on commerce

and regain our balance. After focusing on goals of the patriarchal mind set for several thousand years, we have become increasingly disconnected from nature and deeply impoverished. This disconnection from nature breeds much addiction in our world today, precisely because we have lost touch with that which truly nourishes us.

One of the most shocking examples of the dysfunction of contemporary culture is the 'Pacific Garbage Patch', a huge area of floating plastic particles, estimated to be twice the size of Texas, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean between North America and Asia. Albatross living on Midway Island, the furthest island from any continent, feed their young with cigarette lighters, tooth brushes and plastic bottle tops - mistaking them for fish. Their young die from starvation, dehydration and punctured stomachs, leaving the island littered with dead bodies filled with all kinds of plastic debris, simply because we are unaware of the consequences of our actions.²

This reminds me of a story about the Buddha's life. When sitting under the Bodhi tree on the eve of his enlightenment, the Buddha was challenged by Mara and responded by calling the Earth to witness his right to be here and practice. In the scriptural transmission of the Buddha's teaching, the significance of this call to witness has not been mentioned much and does appear only in the Jataka Nidana³, a commentary on the Jataka Stories. For me this passage is a powerful symbol, which reminds me of the interdependence of humans and all other sentient beings with our mother - Earth. We are all part of her and she is part of us.

Right now this passage seems to repeat itself, and the limitations of the Earth Herself push us to look at what we have set in motion, or else we will not be here for much longer. The Earth is our teacher and we better listen up to what She has to say. We can no longer afford to ignore Her calls; we must respond by taking this information to heart.

Traditionally it is the function of religions to inspire in people the resilience to look at what they are doing and what needs to be changed. Patriarchal religious institutions the world over don't seem to be very successful with this work, at least lately. I suggest that we need confident women to inspire and model a different approach - an approach grounded in the understanding of our interdependence with the Earth Herself and all that lives as part of Her.

It's difficult for many women to find their own voice and stand for their truth, because we have been pushed into the background for thousands of years – and sadly, we have gotten used to it. 'Internalized oppression' is widespread and it takes a lot of courage to challenge some of these, superficially seen, convenient assumptions. Women are still receiving lots of praise for serving and supporting quietly and it takes a lot of guts to break free from this conditioning. I have seen this very clearly earlier on in my life as a nun, when non-questioning was seen as a desirable spiritual quality, so deeply internalized in the community, that it became invisible - to both - women and men.

Our male counterparts just got the opposite message from the culture, something along the lines that they have to lead and take responsibility for everything. The result is male domination in all institutions, including and I must say especially, in the Monastic Sangha. Over generations this has become our second nature and it starts to feel downright wrong to act differently.

Once we wake up to the fact that patriarchal structures are not something chiselled in rock, but rather a temporary stage in our evolution towards ever greater complexity and

inclusion, then it starts to get interesting. We suddenly realize that we do have a choice, and with that realization comes the call to grow up and take responsibility for ourselves and the future of life on this planet. Women need to build their own institutions which can stand up against the existing structures, who would like us to stay in the background and be content with the secondary role of quietly backing the old systems, as they busy themselves by using the Earth as a warehouse and a sewer.

In order to support the healing of the Earth right now, we need to make an effort and come out from under these internalized projections of the old paradigm - both women and men need to do that - and find new ways of living in harmony with the Earth and the laws of nature. If we no longer cooperate with and uphold the old systems, we will become a lever for change.

This is the context which inspired me to step out and leave the old, so called 'security' behind. By making the space for wisdom to come through and follow up by acting on what we know to be true, we can become truly alive. Our creativity wakes up and the unexpected happens. Crisis holds the potential to generate transformation and innovation, unleashing powerful energies and uniting people to achieve what was previously considered impossible.

The synergy amongst migrating geese is a good example for what can be created by working together for a common goal. By flying in a 'V' formation, each goose flaps its wings and creates an uplift for the birds that follow. The whole flock generates a much greater flying range than if each bird flew alone. By sharing a common goal and sense of community, they can get to where they are going much more quickly and easily, because they are travelling on the uplift of one another. While flying, they take turns in being the leader and honk to encourage those in front to keep up their speed. There is a lot of power in mutual encouragement to keep on course, long before the final destination is reached.

I have seen this very clearly in our own project in San Francisco and all the changes we have gone through since we were invited to visit the American West Coast for the first time. It all started with a handful of people wanting to support nuns from England to teach in the US and over time this idea grew into what it is now the beginnings of an independent nuns' monastery. We need to start small and bring our insights into daily life - by living and being them - one step at a time, acting on what we want to see happening. Courage does not mean that there is no fear, but rather that we know fear intimately for what it is, while following our vision with steady dedication.

We need to learn to trust that our deep interdependence with the Earth holds what we need to know, in order to respond wisely and compassionately to the challenges of our time. We need to remember what is basic and simple - what we can't live without. There are so many great women alive right now and we can draw on each others' insights.

I would like to share with you a 5-point-check-list drawn up by the well known American eco-philosopher Joanna Macy, to keep us all on track with this great work. She calls it the 'Great Turning', the only sane response at this point in time, where the old paradigm of materialism and reductionism gives way to the indisputable evidence of a living universe – very much worthy of our awe, respect and service.

- come from gratitude
- don't fear the dark
- dare to vision

- link arms
- act your age (14 billion years)⁴

Now you might ask: 'What should I do with all of this information?'

Let it ripple through you and see what really moves your heart. If our hearts, heads and hands work together, then the environmental challenges we face are preparing us for the necessary perceptual shifts, we need to master collectively. The old ideals of the Industrial Growth Society need to be left behind for more sustainable ways of living. This collective awakening is happening right now all over the globe and we need especially the women to come forward and contribute their wisdom and capacity for empathy, for this transition to take place before it is too late.

HH the Dalai Lama has mentioned on several occasions that we need far more women in leadership positions, if we are going to live in a more caring and compassionate world.⁵ The Earth is our most precious teacher now and we need to listen to Her message. The message is all around us - for those with little dust in their eyes.

1

Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India*, London: Zed Books Ltd, 1988

2

Chris Jordan, The Midway Project, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-M9t2fm__K0

3

Jataka Nidana, *Jātaka-a□□hakathā* I 74, PTS edition, 1990-91

4

Joanna Macy, <http://www.joannamacy.net/thegreatturning/personal-guidelines-t.html>

5

<http://womensissues.about.com/b/2009/10/19/the-dalai-lama-the-world-will-be-saved-by-the-western-woman.html>