



## Treasuring the Feminine in Vajrayana Buddhism Symposium 2021

### Questions from sangha

These questions were gathered from our communities by email to give participants to the symposium a sense of what our sangha members' concerns are. *Questions and messages came from 26 people in 7 countries (Australia, France, Germany, Holland, Ireland, Switzerland and USA).*

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### General

1. As a young western woman who studied Buddhism in Asia in the Tibetan cultural context, I sometimes felt misunderstood when criticising the aspects of Tibetan Buddhism in which I found gender equality was lacking. People seemed to think I wasn't valuing the Dharma and/or wanted to impose some "western agenda". How can we change the expression of Buddhism in a way that includes ideas and ideals such as gender equality that may seem foreign to the Tibetan tradition but are important in our own culture? How can we use ideas that are already

present in (Tibetan) Buddhism as a foundation for building equal rights within the tradition? And how can we address issues like this and express criticism towards the status-quo without the backlash of people feeling that their culture is disrespected (in the worst case even perceiving it as a type of neo-colonialism) or that the dharma is not being valued?

2. How wonderful that you are gathering together to explore, discuss and reveal the Feminine roots and branches in Vajrayana Buddhism. This is long overdue and I sincerely hope you have the courage and stamina to get into the nitty gritty of these topics. In particular:
  - How will we as lineage holders, who happen to be female, crack open and dissolve the centuries old patterns of male teacher, male deity, and male dominance within our tradition?
  - Elevating the feminine and the female is at the heart of the continuation and health of our lineage. We all know the hidden and secret power of the feminine, but it cannot remain in the shadows. The world and its inhabitants need our female teachers to own their power so that the teachings themselves reflect the deep roots of community, love, compassion and healing. As women, who have the blessed karma to be dharma practitioners and the few who have grown into dharma teachers, we are beholden to each other, to our sanghas and to our lineage, to take our rightful seat as leaders and holders; to employ our power

with this motivation and to cultivate our unique qualities without shame or embarrassment. If we want Vajrayana Buddhism to be accessible to more people, particularly women, then it must stretch and adapt.

- Do the ancient cultural norms of the Dakini Principle serve our path as women?
- How can we adapt the feminine so that it represents a modern approach to emptiness and compassion?
- What can we do to dispel the misconception that dakinis are nothing more than sexual objects to a male dominated pedagogy?

3. As time and change are inexorable, Vajrayana Buddhism will necessarily flow with the river of time and will itself transform or be left as a rock in the riverbed. Much that has evolved in Buddhism and in the secular human realm (equality movements, medicine, corporations, governments) has been propelled by the Treasure of the Feminine. What exactly is this Treasure and how can we be true to its fundamental nature without becoming fundamentalist? How can Vajrayana Buddhism be true to its Roots and also root itself within this unfamiliar, contemporary soil?
4. I would be interested in hearing how each of the teachers involved in this conversation has come to deal with what certainly looks like a male-

dominated hierarchical system. Each of the attendees are people who have worked inside the system and come to a certain amount of recognition within it. How do they think about this in their minds? How do they explain it to others who ask? I know that the teachings themselves are gender-free, but when you see folks on stage or at teachings, it is so predominantly male.

5. How do we build a system where we gain authority through our own merit and not only if it is conferred by a male authority?
  
6. In a survey of 64,000 people from 13 different countries, these virtues/values usually associated with the Feminine were named as essential for a healthy society and healthy sanghas. These virtues/values are said to be the “Operating System for Thriving in the 21st Century.” These virtues/values are: empathy, vulnerability, humility, inclusiveness, generosity, balance, patience. My question for the symposium is: How can women in leadership in the Buddhist world make these virtues/values more pervasive in the structures of the sanghas and in the group norms of Buddhist groups?
  
7. As mothers, how can we best introduce the Dharma to our children and teenagers?

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## Gender and the feminine principle in practice, practice texts and imagery

8. Is there a female view in Vajrayana Buddhism?
  
9. Are we to understand that awareness, luminosity, the natural state are beyond feminine and masculine principle? Is realization the same for men and women?
  
10. I am confused about the channels — which is right and which is left. Some say the asana red channel is on the right and the white lalana white channel is on the left. Or vice-versa. And that given the configuration as set out by one's teacher, it's the opposite for women. I'm not really asking what different teachers are telling us so much as: is it different for women, and if so why would that be?
  
11. Our practices entail overcoming the conceptual mind by working with and transforming our own perceptions, and as we can see in society and in ourselves, the gender aspect of identity is a very strong concept which is difficult to transcend. On the other hand, if one feels there is an imbalance on the relative level, it might not be right to outwardly disengage from attending to it. What would be an 'appropriate' ratio of an inner practise where one is not trying to change the outer circumstances

to outwardly acting to address any imbalance one perceives?

12. For my own personal practice when I first learned about Vajrasattva and the female consort I was very confused and I still have not had this explained to me. The point of union is a clear sexual reference however I struggle to conceptualise this as a Buddhist union, is it the same thing with different meaning?
13. In what ways, if any, do you think the feminine principle in Vajrayana may have been misunderstood or perhaps even overlooked in the West? What are some ways that we as Western practitioners can address this?
14. In the Verses of the Eight Noble Auspicious Ones the homage to the Eight Auspicious Goddesses takes up two lines of the text, and these ones do not have names. Instead they are described in stereotypical female terms of beauty etc. In contrast the male Auspicious Ones have names, are 'Noble' and are described as Lord and King. I am completely committed to the Dharma and want to introduce others to it. How do we explain to a Western audience how these texts are not perpetuating gender stereotypes and inequality?
15. Some of the language in our texts is very gendered in ways that seem unnecessary. For example, in practicing the ngöndro I often substitute

gender-neutral language such as 'Humans, gods, animals, hungry ghosts and hell-beings' in the brief version of the four thoughts. Could we consider updating some of this language to be more inclusive?

16. We have just celebrated the 10th Anniversary of Khandro Tsering Chödrön and I was struck once again at being reminded how she was a master who taught not by words but by example, her mere presence and even through non-action. I am wondering about this way of manifesting as a realised practitioner for the benefit of beings, and whether it might have special significance for female practitioners?
17. Given what Khandro Rinpoche said when addressing "offerings" in her July 14 2018 teaching in Lerab Ling about secret offerings being one's identity, including identifying as a man or woman, perhaps I should not be so interested in "the feminine". Doesn't this just reinforce my identity as a woman? And of course I have to give this up like everything else I'm attached to.
18. There are many images of naked women in tangkas and illustrated practice texts. Women are described as seductive. Why is this necessary? This is not true for men in the text. Can the Dharma help us interrupt the objectification of women as sex objects?

19. People, situations, values arise in dependence - on components, causes and conditions and the perceiving consciousness. It also means: Reality is arbitrary because it is devoid of self-existence. Reality changes according to laws and conditions (arising in dependence, karma). What specific conditions do women need to achieve ultimate freedom? What conditions are necessary for this? Do women need different conditions than men? How can we create these conditions in our communities, Sangha?

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## **Gender & Vajrayana: Is addressing the place of women even a relevant topic in Vajrayana?**

20. What is gender according to the contributors to this symposium?

21. Does gender exist? If not, why do we need references to gender, and gendered language?

22. Gender is a very fluid concept in the West these days. What do contributors to the symposium think about this?

23. When we consider the feminine in terms of gender, how does Vajrayana define a woman? This is especially important in the context of transgender people and lesbians.



24. Rather than experiencing a label as something restrictive, I found a lot of joy and openness in acknowledging and taking on a queer label. At the same time, I had to consciously remind myself that this label is not a reason to change anything about myself, nor something to limit myself to, and is also subject to change. How can we acknowledge and value our relative, appearing, changing identities while being less constrained by them and working to recognise the absence of self and our true nature?
25. Like everything else, gender is relational – how do the contributors to the symposium view this?
26. Gender is about men and masculinities as much as it is about women and femininities: How does masculinity manifest in and impact the dharma in your view?
27. Are there more women than men in the dharma? If so, why and how can we encourage more men to join us?
28. How can Buddhist teachers and writers disengage from patriarchal, male-identified conditioning, de-objectify women and encourage a practice of perceiving each other from a non-binary perspective?

29. How are struggles around ego, striving for independence, singularity, and permanence linked to the way masculinity is defined in our cultures? Sogyal Rinpoche tells us about research showing that people who use the language of 'I' and 'me' are more likely to have heart attacks. However, research shows that men use 'I' and 'me' a lot more than women, and men are also more likely to have heart attacks than women. Male anger and violence is normalized in Western cultures, even required in sport and war etc, while female anger and violence is feared. In what ways does the dharma relate to men and masculinity in particular and how can it be used further to help men with the negative habits that they are encouraged to have?
30. Women are ascribed caring roles in countries across the world – how does this impact the way they engage with the dharma? Do women struggle with different obscurations and habitual patterns than men as a result of their caring roles, and as a result of male violence? For example, women are often required to put others first and care for others, and while this does not mean they are necessarily more compassionate than men, they may have different needs with respect to how they learn the dharma and what they need to hear first – e.g. putting others first may sound like just another version of what they are always required to do. How can we address this?
31. Patrick Gaffney has described the 3 poisons as endemic, operating through individuals and in the whole of our society - they get

institutionalized. He noted a Buddhist philosopher from Thailand who said that if we are serious about getting rid of the 3 poisons in ourselves we must ask how we actively and passively take part in perpetuating them. How might we apply this teaching to gender inequality in the Dharma, and Sangha?

32. I sat in a beginners 'class where the language in the presentation was full of 'he', 'him', 'his'. Research has shown that this is alienating for women on various levels. I nervously raised the issue and asked if we could use the language of 's/he', 'him/her 'or 'they 'instead. To my surprise quite a lot of people in the class spoke up and said they'd prefer this too please. I wonder how many newcomers are currently put off by our use of male language, especially in this age of growing gender awareness? Could we use more inclusive language?
  
33. Some of our texts include language that comes across as very negative about women. For example, I think it's in the Bodhicharyavatara where there is a prayer that women will be as strong as men. Is there a place for such prayers these days? What is meant by strength here? Women do more work hours than men in many parts of the world, give birth, and survive violence from men. In what ways are they less strong? And men use their physical strength in many negative ways, relating to violence generally and violence against women. Can we rethink the use of prayers that sound negative about women?

34. During a talk in Melbourne, Elizabeth Mattis Namgyel expressed some concern that the #MeToo movement may have gone too far in reifying the problem of sexual harassment. Yet, just like climate change, it's only when we see the incidents of environmental impact together that we can understand the problem. How can we address gender inequality systematically without blaming anyone or reifying the problem?
35. How can we as the women who have chosen this path extend it to a broader tent of those who may not have either the resources or the platform of acceptance to travel this path? Though we speak of the great good fortune that has allowed us to find the Teachings, is there an element of this that excuses us from the charge of exclusivity?
36. Do the teachings say that a male body is preferable?
37. Is there such a thing as karmic conditioning that I keep being born as a woman? Or does it change with every new reincarnation? If it changes again and again, then does it have a meaning at all, because a life is as short "as the movement of a dance"
38. Isn't it more about using the body as a means of awakening, whether male or female?

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## Honouring Female Vajrayana Practitioners and Teachers of the Past

39. Our lineage prayers almost exclusively include men. Why is this?
40. Who are the women of the lineage and can we honour them in lineage prayers just as we do the men?
41. Are the women 'masters 'in the lineage all there by way of being related to a male master or are some women in the lineage through other avenues?
42. The women in Tibetan Buddhism have often been humble and quiet. How can we best learn from, and receive teachings from them now?
43. How is the power and realization of female masters promoted and presented?
44. A questioning in the form of a suggestion on the homage to the great masters or great figures of the past. How can we enhance the feminine aspect if not by first celebrating Tara who vowed to always be reborn in feminine form until complete Awakening? Faced with the inevitable manifestation of the feminine energy or dimension, would it not be relevant to initiate from this conference, an action to launch within different centers and monasteries in the world, from our lineage but also from other schools of Buddhism, a concerted and coordinated practice of Green Tara? It would be an opportunity to celebrate and transmit, in a positive and open communication, but also to invoke this

energy and its dimension of pacifying protection and liberation in a particularly difficult time for the world, with the fears generated by the pandemic and the upheavals of our time.

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## **Women as Tulkus**

45. Khandro Tsering Chödrön is held up as one of the great modern examples of a female practitioner and there are several swift rebirth prayers for her return. Is anyone looking for her tulku? Is this a topic of discussion anywhere? If she was male would this be different?
  
46. How frequently are male lamas reincarnated as female, and how is this viewed in the Sangha, as there are several references to not wanting to be reincarnated as a woman?
  
47. Are the reincarnations of the male masters always men? How likely is it that Sogyal Rinpoche's reincarnation will be a woman?

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## **Sexuality, Culture & Conduct: What is cultural and what is dharma when it comes to sexuality and conduct?**

48. In terms of culture, conduct, and sexuality mentioned as a topic of the symposium, shouldn't Vajrayana Buddhism be as direct as "corporate America" has found itself being pushed to be, in its disavowal of denigrating/immoral/illegal behavior without becoming puritanical?

49. All cultures appear to be very sexist – Western countries claim to be less sexist than others, and have more visible female leaders, however, they have different manifestations of sexism, for example, pornography using increasingly violent and degrading images of women is everywhere now, impacting societal norms and expectations. How in the Dharma or Sangha might we be perpetuating societal views of women as less valuable than men, or as sex objects for men?
50. We hear of many male figures surrounded by a throng of dakinis. Dakinis are often described as female, but also described as both male and female. Can we learn a little more about this? Why are they so often described as female?
51. When we consider the feminine in terms of sexuality, how does Vajrayana distinguish between heterosexual and homosexual relations? Is there anything explicit in the tradition about the differences between them with regard to the second of the four empowerments?
52. I'd like to hear a basic understanding of a woman's role in assisting a great Lama. For me the line is blurry when it comes to a sexual nature and I have some very personal unresolved questions here.
53. It is wonderful that great Lamas can take a wife without taking monk vows, but I am confused about the role these great women play. They

become great leaders because they are the wife of a great spiritual leader? Can women become a great spiritual leader in our lineage without marrying a male?

54. I'm extremely curious to understand how a woman's sexual energy empowers her in Tibetan Buddhism. From my understanding this is something deeply valued but it is understandably secret. Does studying Tara bring a better understanding of this?
55. Shortly after I found Tibetan Buddhism I heard it said that women have a greater propensity for enlightenment because we are more emotional and receptive. I was inspired by this but also repelled by the stereotype. What are your thoughts on this?
56. I have read *Lady of the Lotus Born - The Life and Enlightenment of Yeshe Tsogyal* several times. What are we to make of the brutal rapes she endures and giving both sex and domestic service to an old, abusive and diseased man who can't otherwise find a sexual partner? How do I respond to questions from students about these incidents?
57. Is the cultural revolution and the trauma it may have caused to Tibetans impacting the way Tibetan Buddhism is taught outside of Tibet? I wonder if the rupture, that the cultural revolution has caused, is considered when discussing the implementation of the teachings in



the west. Tibet's autonomy and the autonomy of its people have been completely eradicated, grave violations of human rights have taken place, and are taking place, but I hardly hear any form of considering the emotional turmoil that that might cause, and has caused, in negotiating the traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. The fundamental right to preserve a native culture might not be the same thing as preserving 'authentic Buddhist values 'or teachings or expressions? How can we differentiate culture from dharma, while respecting culture? How do we get back from 'Tibetan Buddhism 'to "just" dharma? How can a Tibetan lineage become something that we can truly inherit and embody without cultural appropriation?