



# Our Path Is Limitless and Vast

While women may feel constrained by Buddhist institutions, the dharma itself poses no such limitations, says **Joan Sutherland**. By connecting with the vast view of no-self, women can discover their own meaningful expressions of the dharma.



JOAN SUTHERLAND, ROSHI is a Zen koan teacher and the founder of Awakened Life in Santa Fe, New Mexico.



Buddhists, this is meant as a small offering to a large, ongoing conversation. Second, I make a distinction between Buddhism and the dharma. By Buddhism I mean the institutions and orthodoxies that have developed over the last 2,500 years. Even that's tricky, because, as many have commented, we should probably be talking about a constellation of *Buddhisms* rather than something monolithic. By the dharma I mean the fundamental teachings of the tradition, and the ways the expressions of those teachings have evolved over generations and geography. That's *really* tricky, because people tend to define dharma based on what room in the mansion of Buddhism they're standing in. Here I'm looking at dharma from the still-under-construction, cooking-while-we're-building kitchen of Western convert experience.

The fact that we're making a home in this lively, sometimes chaotic kitchen, whose blueprint is covered with sticky notes, is where the potential for women comes in. We can eat; we can cook; we can revise the architectural plans. In other words, as practitioners we can apply the insights and practices refined over millennia to our contemporary lives in what a Chan teacher called "wise digestion"; we can serve the tradition and our companions on the Way as leaders and teachers; and we can offer unprecedented and innovative expressions of the tradition, in everything from how we organize as communities to how we teach the teachings. There is nothing in the dharma—as opposed to some of the institutions of Buddhism—that limits women's participation. On the contrary, as Rita Gross has pointed out, Buddhist institutions are being challenged to live up to the highest ideals and truest meanings of the dharma upon which they were founded. For many, it is deeply meaningful to be part of a process in which the realization of individual women and the realization of the fuller potential of a great tradition are so intimately linked.

We live in a world that needs our hands, our hearts, and our minds. We live in a world that looks like it could use a bit more of what the dharma offers. It is here, in our more fully realized ability to be genuinely helpful as individuals and communities, that the true meal will be served out of our kitchen. As this unfolds, each of us will find her own place on the eat-cook-revise-the-plans continuum. Here are a few

**C**onsider how many sentences you could write containing the words "dharma" and "women." When I put them together, the next word that wants to come into the sentence is "potential." My thoughts on this are inspired by Irshad Manji's comment that some Muslim women are exploring not just what there is to learn, absorb, and follow in their tradition, but what there is to *love* about it.

A couple of provisos: Here I'm speaking largely from the experience of what have been called Western converts—women who have chosen Buddhism rather than been born into it. Since we represent a tiny fraction of the world's female

It is deeply meaningful to be part of a process in which the realization of individual women and the realization of the fuller potential of a great tradition are so intimately linked.

examples of why all this matters, why there is such potential at the intersection of women and the dharma.

When I meet with a group of women for tea to talk about this, we begin with the comment that the teachings and practices of the dharma are a touchstone, a way of making sense of the world and one's existence in it. That theme—how the dharma can illuminate and knit together our inner lives and our lives in the world—threads through the conversation. How are we keeping our balance when the ground beneath our feet feels so unstable? How does that balance help us act on our commitment to the other beings with whom we share this planet and to the generations that will follow us?

As bell hooks expresses it in an essay in *Women Practicing Buddhism*: “Thinking outside the box of dualism and living a practice of equanimity gives my life balance. But more than that, spiritual practice is the circle surrounding [my] work, the force empowering me to open my heart, to be Buddha, to have a practice of compassion that joins rather than separates, that takes the broken bits and pieces of our damaged self and world, bringing them together.”

The women having tea together express what so many others do: Loving the world-as-it-is is both our deepest aspiration and our greatest challenge. There are so many reasons not to. We feel the sorrow and pain deeply but don't know how to respond in a way that would matter. Or we're overwhelmed with just trying to survive in the midst of trouble. Or we're afraid we'll lose the fragile gains in self-determination we've worked so hard for. There's no magic wand in any wisdom tradition to instantly “solve” these dilemmas, because we have to live our way into and through them. These aren't problems to be fixed; they are life itself. How can the dharma be helpful in living our way into reconciling our aspiration and our challenge?

The dharma is a path made of inquiry rather than dogma. From the very beginning, the invitation has been to hold the

teachings up to our experiences and see how they illuminate each other. Because it's non-dogmatic, the dharma is a way of looking that doesn't presuppose what we'll see. It's not trying to impose a worldview but offers tools to relate to the world more realistically, with curiosity and flexibility. We can inhabit rooms in the mansion of Buddhism that are religious, rooms that have no religion in them at all, and rooms that allow us to have religious beliefs in traditions other than Buddhism. It's up to each of us to find our place. In any case, there is no infallible, unchanging Word of God. We have an evolving tradition with a tremendously rich body of philosophy and literature whose insights are proven anew by each practitioner, and the tradition's founder was a person whose awakening is available to us all.

The dharma's lack of dogmatism, which is not always perfectly realized by Buddhism, is a crucial part of any offering we can make to public life. We so clearly see what happens when unbridled passions and tightly held beliefs are reified and sent into contention with each other, in seemingly endless chains of reactions to reactions. An example of what the dharma offers in both our personal and public lives is the ability to differentiate between reaction and response. Reaction is self-centered—its primary interest is what something means to the self. It replaces what's actually happening with how we feel and think about what's happening. We've stepped out of the first order of experience—what's happening—and into a second order—how we react to it—instead of realizing that our reaction is part of the experience itself, but only one part, no more or less important than anything else. This is, of course, magnified exponentially in groups of people. With the practices of meditation and inquiry we're more able to stay in the first order of experience, so that we can respond to circumstances in all their complexity rather than to fixate on our reactions. The inner and outer worlds become less divided, less contentious, even in difficult circumstances.

A question that almost always comes up when women talk about the dharma is how the idea of no-self relates to our ongoing work of examining the expectations, both inner and outer, of what it means to be a woman in a particular culture. If we've worked so hard to reclaim our sense of self—to understand in a truer way our longings and talents, and to clarify what we want to offer and what we won't tolerate anymore—do we have to give all that up?

In *Women Practicing Buddhism*, Hilda Ryūmon Gutiérrez Baldoquín offers a dharmic take on the problem: "It is the nature of oppression to obscure the limitless essence, the vastness of who we are." When we include this with the familiar political, cultural, and psychological analyses of oppression, it opens a new way of seeing. It points to the true meaning of no-self, which isn't that the individual ceases to exist or to matter; it is the absence of our habitual ways of thinking about ourselves, making way for a much larger reality to become visible. We see that the "self" made up of experiences, thoughts, feelings, and sensations is just that—an ever-changing creation of inner and outer conditions.

In the moments when our exclusive identification with that self is loosened, we find that there is also something unconditioned and uncreated about our being. It is limitless, and completely connected. So when we talk about realizing the true Self, just how large is it? It is bees, freeways, skies, galaxies; there is nothing outside it, and when we do good or when we do harm, we realize, there is no self and other, only two expressions of the one Self in relationship.

This vast view of no-self has application to the everyday moments of our lives. For example, the Zen koan tradition speaks of a true person of no rank, which means someone not bound by a sense of their status, and not bound by any other definition arising from job, family relations, political affiliation, etc. Such a true person is not coming from a predetermined position, such as expert or inadequate, helper or helped—and she sees everybody else like that, too. She doesn't yet know the end of the story, and she's interested to *participate* in discovering it.

When we apply this to the question of self-determination, suddenly we're not thinking along a self-sacrifice/self-assertion axis in which we're valiantly intent on replacing damaging roles with healthier ones; we've jumped off that axis into the freedom of having no predetermined role at all. Instead of

trying to reform something, we're radically re-visioning it. A true person of no-self is no longer defined by either inner or outer expectations, or her struggles with them; she encounters situations freshly, without prejudging her role in them or their ultimate outcome.

This is a generous way to live, both inwardly and outwardly. The courage it takes arises from our experience of the "vastness of who we are," which is half of what dharma practice is about. When we bring in the other half—discovering the specific forms that generosity and courage take in each of our lives—we begin to reconcile aspiration and challenge. With less reaction and more responsiveness, with a longer view and a steadier heart, we are better able to remain open to this breathtakingly beautiful and wounded world, and to imagine how we might be helpful.

A true person of no-self is no longer defined by either inner or outer expectations, or her struggles with them; she encounters situations freshly, without prejudicing her role in them.

As we do so, it's immeasurably valuable to be able to stand on the steady ground of tradition. Some of us are satisfied to concentrate on exploring that terrain; some want to help shape the kitchen we're building from it. By differentiating between the dharma and the institutions of Buddhism, we can look with fresh eyes at what forms the dharma's ancient helpfulness wants to take now. Some of the most important opportunities at the intersection of Buddhism and the modern world are exactly where many women aspire to make a contribution—fully including the feeling life; encouraging innovative forms of teaching and learning; redefining what authority means and how it should function; creating new forms of community and engagement with the world, including a commitment to truer diversity in our communities; continuing to reformulate lay practice as a complete realization of spiritual life; and placing at the center of the Way our commitment to all who share this world with us, now and in the future. Dharma, women, potential. Please write your own sentence. **BD**