Who has not been faced with the torturous request to recommend one book that could successfully introduce Buddhism to an inquiring mind? Into the Heart of Life, a new book by Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, the most senior Western Tibetan Buddhist nun alive today, just may be the solution to this quandary.

This series of well-edited Dharma talks followed by brief Q&A, is highly readable, intentionally practical, and short (under 200 pages). Into the Heart of Life offers page after page of core Buddhist teachings that are relevant for anybody who seeks greater sanity and ease in daily life. Tenzin Palmo repeatedly asserts that the real test of Buddhist practice is found in the stuff of daily life, which she illustrates with elegant examples from her “ordinary extraordinary” life.

“Challenges are the spiritual path,” she states throughout the book. She reviews essential topics such as impermanence, karma, renunciation, the six perfections, lojong, faith, and devotion with the trademark humor and good cheer of the highest Buddhist teachers.

The Buddha identified monkey mind long before there was television, she says, and the eight worldly concerns should be called “the eight worldly hang-ups!” She makes the teachings accessible, vital, and contemporary. But the book’s simplicity belies a distillation of sophisticated teachings that will serve even the most experienced practitioner.

The brilliance of this book is almost overshadowed by the story of its author. Cave in the Snow, the internationally bestselling biography by Vicki Mackenzie, tells the story of Tenzin Palmo’s journey from a London childhood to her arrival in India in 1964 to her twelve-year retreat, beginning in 1976, in a small cave at 13,200 feet. The rest is truly history.

While Cave in the Snow is not prerequisite reading for Into the Heart of Life, it deepens one’s appreciation for Tenzin Palmo’s courage and dedication. Her accomplishments are vast, not just her spiritual warriorship in meeting the rigors of intensive retreats, but in enduring hardships and isolation when she challenged the male hierarchy of Tibetan Buddhism. Despite numerous obstructions, she was determined to receive the teachings directly from her guru, the Drupka Kagyu lama, Dongyu Nyima, H.E. the Eighth Khamtrul Rinpoche.

The story of her sheer survival and now-famous retreat in that remote Himalayan cave rank among the finest works in the literary genre of armchair spirituality.

Tenzin Palmo’s achievement as a Western woman carries double significance in the development of women’s recognition within a deeply rooted patriarchal tradition, but also as further testimony that even Westerners are capable of unwavering commitment and formidable accomplishment on the Dharma path.

Stories of Westerners who embrace teachings of the Dharma and achieve even glimmers of illumination are few and far between. It is common for many Western students who encounter teachers born into Eastern spiritual lineages to willingly suspend our disbelief about the fact of their enlightenment because it was their birthright. Easy for them, right? But we Westerners typically hold on to a sliver of doubt regarding our own potential.

Tenzin Palmo’s vow “to achieve enlightenment in female form—no matter how many lifetimes it takes,” is as historically significant as it is culturally profound. Ordained in a Chinese temple, she is a fully ordained bhikkhuni. Full ordination for nuns of the Bhikkhuni Order, which traces its origins to the time of the Buddha, has been accepted in China and Korea but not in Tibet. The majority of Tibetan nuns are perpetual novices and relegated to second-class status behind the monks.

Tenzin Palmo’s voice has been influential in efforts to introduce full ordination for women in the Tibetan tradition, noting that resistance is often based on cultural attitudes towards women, rather than the Buddha’s teachings. According to scripture, the Buddha said, “women are equal to men...
in their potential to achieve enlightenment.”

According to Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Associate Professor of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of San Diego, president of Sakyadhita: International Association of Buddhist Women, and director of Jamyang Foundation, which provides educational opportunities for Himalayan women, the issue of bhikshuni ordination in the Tibetan tradition remains unresolved. She said Tenzin Palmo serves on the Committee on Bhikshuni Ordination in the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition under the administration of H.H. Dalai Lama, which he organized in 2005.

For the last fifteen years, Tenzin Palmo has worked to promote the education of Himalayan women. In 2000, she founded the Dongyu Gatsal Ling Nunnery in Tashi Jong, India, for young nuns of the Drukpa Kagyu lineage. There are currently twenty-one nuns who received their novice initiation as Togdenmas, which means realized ones. They are among the few in the region who have an opportunity to follow their dreams for spiritual development with institutional support and formal teachings.

In February 2008, Tenzin Palmo was given the rare title of Jetsunma, which means Venerable Master, by H.H. the 12th Gualwang Drukpa, Drukpa Kagyu lineage head, in recognition of her spiritual achievements and her efforts to improve the status of female practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism.

Into the Heart of Life is a book to share with everybody who is curious about Dharma practice or who would benefit from practical wisdom that addresses the tasks of daily life. In Louis Malle’s 1981 film classic, My Dinner With Andre, Andre Gregory recounts his exotic global adventures in search of spiritual awakening. His friend, trenchant New Yorker Wallace Shawn, asks Andre about the possibility of meaningful experience for the rest of us, since “everybody can’t be taken to Everest!” In the same way that most of us will not endeavor an undertaking such as Tenzin Palmo’s cave retreat, her book Into the Heart of Life may serve us almost as well.
The 2nd Annual International Bhikkhuni Day Meditation Pledge-a-thon September 29, 2012

This second annual global celebration and fundraiser will honor Sanghamitta Theri, the enlightened bhikkhuni who brought the Bhikkhuni Sangha to Sri Lanka. From this island nation, the Bhikkhuni Sangha has spread to distant countries and survives to this day. All ordained women remain in Sanghamitta’s debt.

In addition to learning about Sanghamitta Theri and her courageous journey, we will also be honoring prominent bhikkhnis as well as laywomen who have inspired us.

Please visit our site in the coming months for talks and articles, designed to foster a memorable day of meditation, reflection, and discussion. Similar to last year, we will give you all the tools needed to construct a portable, do-it-yourself retreat or workshop that anyone can create in their center, temple, living room, or backyard.

Please mark your calendar now to join our expanding global community. Only through a combined effort can we safeguard the Bhikkhuni Sangha and ensure that it flourishes!