

The quest for parity



Being born female is the result of bad karma. Women are innately inferior to men in wisdom and other spiritual qualities. The male form is the better vehicle for spiritual progress. These are the traditional — deeply rooted and arguably still widely held — views found in many Buddhist countries, Thailand included, despite there being no dispute of the Buddha's own unequivocal confirmation that women are also capable of being enlightened.

Here we speak to Venerable Tenzin Palmo to hear her perspectives on women's spiritual potential and role in Buddhism.

Born in England in 1943, at the age of 20 she embarked on a spiritual journey to India and became one of the first Westerners to be ordained as a Tibetan nun and later fully-ordained bhikkhuni.

As part of her path she spent 12 years in solitary retreat in a Himalayan cave, as documented in the popular book *Cave in the Snow* by Vicki Mackenzie. To fulfill a request made by her late teacher, the 8th Khamtrul Rinpoche, in the 1990's she started the work of building a nunnery to provide much-needed, high-quality monastic education and facilities for women. Today, Dongyu Gatsal Ling (Garden of the Authentic Lineage) Nunnery in northern India is home to more than 70 nuns. In 2008, she was conferred the rare title of Jetsunma, or Venerable Master, by His Holiness the 12th Gyalwang Drukpa, head of the Drukpa Kagyu lineage in honour of her spiritual achievements and work to uplift female practitioners in Tibetan Buddhism.

❖ **Could there be some grounds to the idea that women are generally born with less wisdom than men in that they may have spent many lifetimes reborn as women, who historically have had less opportunity to receive formal education in dharma?**

No, I don't think so. I think one doesn't necessarily need to have much formal dharma education to achieve realisation. There's a kind of wisdom that comes without having anything to do with the intellectual process, which might even stand in the way sometimes. For example, when I met with Sayadaw U. Pandita, the great Burmese vipassana teacher, he told me his best students were the village women because when he told them what to do, they would go away and do it and get the realisations. Whereas the monks would just intellectually play around with [his teachings] and didn't just take the jump and do it.

But nonetheless, I doubt if any of those village women, no matter how much insight they got, then themselves became meditation teachers because they were not *pandita* (learned ones). Similarly, in Tibet there were, and there still are today, many great female meditators who have great accomplishments themselves. But they have very little voice for helping others because they don't have the education behind it — the language and intellectual structure to be able to express what they've realised. But they have realised.

What we are trying to do for women now is to give them the intellectual underpinning so they themselves can become teachers.

I do think the female has an important voice. But we don't what it is because we haven't heard it yet.

❖ **Whether or not it is true that women are innately inferior to men, it is hard to dispute that in most countries women are born into societal structures where they still have less opportunity for education, professional advancement, and leadership roles in society. Do you think this is because of negative karma they have made in the past?**

I'm not sure that it's negative karma per se. I don't think it is because we somehow did something wrong and are being punished by being reborn as women. I think obviously I did something right, so I came back in a female body, thank goodness!

I think that actually to be born in a female body can be an enormous advantage. Men have tremendous problems with their male bodies, as we all

English-born Buddhist nun leads women on the path of spiritual enlightenment

STORY: SAMANERI NISSARA



Venerable Tenzin Palmo

know, and end up making a lot of bad karma for themselves and creating a lot of havoc in the world. I'm not sure it's an advantage to be born male.

But certainly from a society point of view, women have definitely been disadvantaged. [Even so] they certainly don't look to me like they are somehow an expression of anything which is inferior. Because with many women, even though outwardly it doesn't look like [their lives amounted to much] as they didn't write the books and didn't become the teachers, nonetheless they led very beautiful lives. Unsung and un-regarded, but nonetheless very beautiful. Very self-sacrificing, very compassionate, often having an innate wisdom which may not be an intellectual wisdom, but is nonetheless a very clear seeing and very self-less seeing. And after all, what are we aiming for?

❖ **Yes, but women still do not have all the educational resources males do.**

And this is why we are working towards helping that to happen.

❖ **On the other hand, one could feel happy to be a woman to be able to intimately help in that effort. It's like being born a woman provides the opportunity to do this kind of service that a man wouldn't have. So in a way, it's good!**

Exactly!

❖ **But it's rare to hear such a sentiment expressed in the traditional discourse on being born a woman.**

Why? Because the women have been told by the males that they're inferior. So if the whole of society is telling you you're inferior, then you believe you're inferior. But in fact you might not be inferior at all. It depends. What are the criterion by which we are judging superiority or inferiority?]

❖ **A common trope: Most governments, companies, etc. are led by men, which suggests that there is something innately superior about the physical male form that lends itself to leadership in society.**

Well, men are bigger than women, and if the women don't agree, they can beat them up!

But now at this point, we don't all have to go around like gorillas. And when intelligence counts more, and as women become more educated, the important thing now is for women to start respecting women and supporting women, because

to my mind what has really kept women down is not so much the men as other women. And if women don't support each other, who will support us?

❖ **What do you think it will take for women to start supporting each other more?**

I think they themselves have to start feeling more self-respect and self-esteem. As they start to have more confidence within, then they will be able to give it out to their sisters. As long as they consider themselves inferior and unworthy, then they will also regard all the other women as inferior and the result of bad karma and therefore the only thing to do is to worship the male form.

❖ **And hope that in their next life they will be reborn a male.**

Pray hard!

So what has to be done is to recognise that actually we are both two sides of the coin. No matter which side of the coin you're on, it's the same coin. We're all human.

❖ **It looks like it might take quite a while before women and men are really on level playing ground. Sometimes one wonders if it is even really possible. But it's happening. It is happening.**

Women have made a quantum leap in the past hundred years. You look, in the West, before, women didn't have the vote. Women didn't become doctors, lawyers, architects — it was inconceivable that they would.

And now, I was just reading recently in the newspaper in India that there's a big worry — I'm not worried, they're worried — that the majority of people graduating from medical school are women.

It doesn't take long. And once it starts to happen in the secular world, then it highlights how retrograde things are in the Buddhist world. And how it is ridiculous to think nuns should not be educated because their poor little brains would fry if they had to think too hard because we can see that in the secular world women are intellectually extremely bright, actually. When women are given the opportunity, they have proven that they perform just as well, if not better, than the men.

Education is education. And the point is that it's not like anything is being taken away from the monks. The monks can carry on doing their monk thing. But the nuns can actually help. Because in the future, if the Sangha doesn't get themselves together, they're going to find themselves totally irrelevant. As the Buddhist lay people in the future become more educated than the monks themselves, the monks have to rethink their role. And nuns can help very much in this because the nuns have more of a sense of social outreach and can reinvent the whole role of dharma for helping to really make a contribution to society.

❖ **Is it true you made a vow to become a female Buddha? Why?**

In order to help women. After all, there are so many men out there already helping males. Then it makes more sense to come back as a female to help women. But of course, in the future if the balance changes and then instead of a patriarchy we have a matriarchy and the males are left stranded and neglected and overlooked, then one could come back as a male and help them out.

To find out more about and/or support the nunnery project, visit www.tenzinpalmo.com or www.gatsal.org.