

women on the

# buddhist

path



## Martine Batchelor

"Martine Batchelor has recorded unique and beautiful voices of feminine Dharma, bringing alive the blessings and true medicine of the Buddha."

JACK KORNFIELD

## introduction

'How can I meditate when I am so busy with my work and family?' 'How can I reconcile activity with stillness?' 'Are there any Buddhist nuns?' 'Can you find great female spiritual teachers in the Buddhist tradition?'

As a meditation teacher and former Buddhist nun, I have been asked these questions countless times. So I decided to compile a book drawn from the living experiences of contemporary women, showing how a meditative attitude can influence a diverse range of lifestyles and activities. Indeed, I discovered many great nuns and Buddhist women teachers today.

From conception to completion this book was a long drawn-out adventure. I had to believe I could do it and find the financial support to make it happen. I wrote to two grant-giving organizations, but not much happened, so I gave up. Then suddenly, after a long time, both grants came together within a week, plus a further grant from another organization. I was stunned; and I had to do it!

My travels took me from my doorstep, where I interviewed Western women, to the roots of Buddhism in Korea, Japan, Taiwan and Thailand. I was amazed and elated by the riches and array of lifestyles I found. Some women I knew already and had corresponded with, but I encountered so many more it became difficult to choose who would be in the book. I had 40 interviews, all with quite extraordinary women, but realized I had to confine myself to 18, for reasons of space, and the quality of each interview became the decisive factor. However, in a certain way they all speak for each other.

When I interviewed people I felt like a beginner, asking simple, relevant and practical questions. Some interviews were in English; the easiest to deal with. Many were in Korean; I hope my translation conveys the person behind the words. Others were translated by someone else at the time from Japanese, Chinese and Thai. Every chapter tells a story and gives advice on meditation in the personal voice and through the distinctive experience of each woman.

Meeting these Buddhist women was a learning process which kept developing as I worked on the interviews, translating, transcribing, typing and editing. I never became bored because there was so much freshness and wisdom; such good stories. I still wonder if I would have the courage and faith of Ani Tenzin Palmo when faced by a blizzard in the Himalayas, or Ayya Khema's calm acceptance when confronted with cancer.

I remain inspired by Haeju Sunim, who tells us we are all Buddhas and the only way to live is to display the compassion and wisdom of a Buddha; no need to wait for another time, another retreat, another life. I am still enthused by I Tsao Fashih, who tried convincing me to pray to be reborn in the Pure Land. She could see I was not very keen, but was so joyful, generous and funny that I left her feeling perhaps I might be walking on lotus flowers, and wouldn't life be amazing experienced that way!

I chuckle again at the insouciance with which Maechee Pathomwan regarded a snake appearing on her lap, compared to the fear a ghost would have caused her. I marvel at the surrealist imagination of Yahne Le Toumelin. I am touched by the simplicity of Zen painter Okbong Sunim and the compassion of Jonmok Sunim, a nun disc jockey and social worker.

Some of their experiences are similar to mine. Like Sister Chan Khong, I was told to pray to be reborn as a man; like her I discard it as nonsense and do not think it relevant advice, however kindly meant by however saintly and enlightened a

person. But we must not forget the Buddha was revolutionary when he said everybody was equal in awakening. This book proves his point by showing women taking hold of their spiritual path and displaying a wide spectrum of meditative achievements.

Many books have been written about women and Buddhism from a feminist, sociological, religious, cultural or historical point of view. I wanted to approach this subject from a different angle, that of meditative experience and everyday life. Some of the women in this book are at the forefront of the debate in the West. But I wanted to know more about their actual lives than their ideas; how did they live day to day as Buddhists? What did it mean for them at an experiential level to be a Buddhist woman practitioner?

In the East whenever I broached the subject of women and Buddhism or nuns versus monks, the women felt they were equal. Myongsong Sunim, for example, says that monks and nuns are the two wings of a bird – the bird needs both wings in order to fly. And indeed, in their experience they have been equal, achieving the same as any man or monk in their practice and status. Even when conditions seemed to be against them, like in Thailand, this did not stop Maechee Pathomwan from becoming a nun, practising and becoming a respected teacher.

I need to say something about the status of nuns in Buddhism. This varies according to the social and historical conditions in each country and makes too long a story to relate here. So I have abbreviated it thus: Korean nuns are 90 per cent equal to monks, Japanese nuns 60 per cent, Taiwanese nuns 85 per cent, Thai nuns 15 per cent, Tibetan nuns 45 per cent. For example, Korean nuns take the full ordination with 338 precepts, whilst Thai nuns barely have an ordination at all, with only eight or 10 precepts.

Unsurprisingly, the Korean nuns are better supported and have more opportunities for training and studying. But what

## Women on the Buddhist Path

impressed and reassured me was that no matter how difficult and poor the conditions, the women practitioners I met were able to transcend them, lead full lives and become teachers in their own right, like Maechee Pathomwan in Thailand and Pang Kwihi, a paraplegic novelist in Korea.

I tried to include many Buddhist traditions to show the wide range of meditative techniques, and I found a multiplicity of approaches and possibilities. The Buddhist path is diverse; there is a little of everything for everybody. However, the common thread running through this book is *mindfulness*, a creative awareness which if applied and cultivated helps us to see clearly, transforming the way we are and how we live.

These women's lives tell us to believe in ourselves and our potential, whether we are a woman or a man, have a high or low status, are healthy or handicapped. The message is we can but give it a good try. These women made me laugh, cry and ponder; made me wiser and more open to the inexhaustible possibilities life offers on the spiritual path. I hope they touch your lives in the same way.