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## I Give You My Life

By Kate Lila Wheeler

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### **I Give You My Life** **The Autobiography of a Western Buddhist Nun**

Ayya Khema

Translated by Sherab Chodzin Kohn

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240 pp.; \$22.00 (cloth)

By the end of Ayya Khema's autobiography, one envies this woman who has lived many lives and who has the gift of absolute conviction. Born Ilse Rosenthal to a prosperous German Jewish family in 1923, Khema becomes refugee, housewife, mother, divorcee, world traveler, and even a farmer before finding Buddhism in middle age and diving into it with typical decisiveness.

Most of her relatives are murdered by Nazis, but in 1939 Khema escapes to Scotland, where a Jewish family takes her in as a servant. Soon she's left them, circumnavigating the war-torn seas on a Japanese freighter to reunite with her parents in China. She survives bombing and her father's death. After the war, she begins a "totally normal life" in California. Readers may be forgiven for thinking she's lived through enough dramas already, but this is only the third chapter.

"Life takes its own strange paths," Khema explains when an old male friend from her childhood in Germany reenters her life. "In Buddhism, we speak in cases like these of karmic links. At our first meeting, [Gerd and I] already saw that we were both on a quest for meaning in life. This encounter gave me deep courage... I decided to take the big step of facing things on my own." She leaves her first husband for Gerd. With her youngest child, they drive through South America, run aground in the Amazon, build a dam in Pakistan, and eventually breed ponies in Australia.

It is a rich life, and Khema writes it well (one of her many jobs was as a journalist). Her style is personal, lively, opinionated, and informative. Though she delights in surfaces, one senses that outward adventures are only a means for developing her inner life. "I have learned to find certainty within myself wherever I go," she declares. "And I have learned that people are the same everywhere. All of them want to be happy and none of them are... Life is a long process of letting go." In Australia, she meets her first meditation teacher, a Buddhist monk named Phra Khantipalo, and takes to Buddhism. "This becomes my ruling idea," she tells us, and she now embraces Buddhism over devotion to her husband, who eventually leaves her.

Khema interprets her life with a resounding certainty. Of course, to establish the meanings of one's life is the right and obligation of any autobiographer. Still, readers will wonder how character, ego, and circumstance may have influenced her discoveries and may see these meanings as influenced choices, rather than as inevitably discovered truths (as Khema seems to do).

She disposes of her internal problems with singular efficiency. She sees that hating Germans for the Holocaust would damage her, fill her with negative emotion—so she simply does not hate them. Readers may envy her clarity and muse about how good it is when will, joined with Buddhist philosophy, becomes a potent medicine against loss, uncertainty, despair, and doubt. Strangely, though, Khema's obduracy also inspires us to wonder whether there's a shadow story to be told about all that was crushed and left behind as this formidable

character has steamed through life. One might even ask why she felt such a need to employ her uncompromising will. Perhaps her vulnerability is disguised within decisiveness itself.

Having sated herself with adventures, husbands, travel, children, and occupations, Khema is already a grandmother when she takes the robes of a Buddhist nun in 1979. Renouncing the world seems an appropriate gesture, not only because she has discovered her true path, but also as the final exploration of an adventuress. She is a dynamic renunciante, founding a nunnery, reviving concentration practices, and working to support women's rights within traditional Buddhist orders. Eventually she takes full ordination as a bhikkhuni.

Clearly, her strength of mind has served her, not only as an individual who must, like all of us, face and negotiate the vicissitudes of life, but also as an autobiographer. Khema can be lyrical and amusing, but she never gets lost in the sound of her own voice. Her evaluations of herself and of others are decisive and unapologetic: "It was hard to see him as an enlightened person," she says at one point of an Indian saint. This makes the reading of her life extremely entertaining. Though one may not always agree with her, one always has the feeling that Khema is trustworthy in giving us her best. She would not presume to waste our time, just as she did not waste her own.

Kate Lila Wheeler is a contributing editor to *Tricycle* and the author of *Not Where I Started From*.