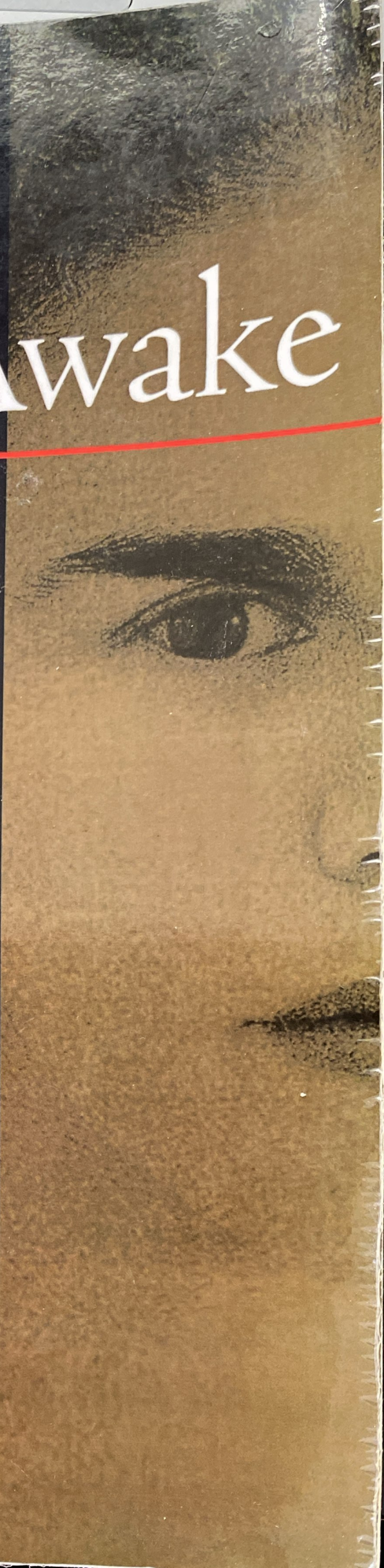


Woman Awake



WOMEN
PRACTICING
BUDDHISM

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◆ Introduction

A WOMAN EMBARKING on a spiritual journey travels a path on which there are few sure guides to inspire and affirm her. The institutions and traditions we are heirs to have been primarily formulated, structured, and maintained by men, with their own vision and application of spirituality. Each of these authorities offers a sanctioned pathway to living and being. Each pathway has its own expectations, values, and models to strive for. There is an underlying message common to all of these voices—to conform is to be offered safety, acceptance, and, most of all, love. To step outside of these institutions is to lose approval and shelter, and to be alone.

This situation is exacerbated by the fact that we carry with us a history of learning to listen outwardly rather than inwardly. As children we have thrust upon us the values of others telling us how we should be, what a nice and good person is. We respond to these demands in order to win a degree of affirmation, approval, and safety in our lives, and the pattern becomes set. Through fear and inner alienation, we form static relationships to authority. It is perceived as all-powerful and also infallible.

Not surprisingly, when we begin on a spiritual path we find ourselves looking outwardly to tradition and authority, for they appear to hold the answers we are seeking. Thus we acquire approval and safety in the conformity that these spiritual authorities require, only to discover that approval and safety are poor substitutes for freedom. There is no tradition or person who is qualified to tell us who we should be, what we must strive for or achieve. Established religions have repeatedly armored themselves against women, seeking to silence their voices. Our blind acceptance of models and expectations, and the inner denial and division they represent, can only serve to suffocate the inner spiritual vision from which our freedom is born.

We need to be willing to risk the loss of external affirmation and approval if we are to know ourselves deeply. We need to be willing to risk listening

to ourselves as well as others. The validity of our spiritual path can only be qualified by our own experience and understanding. Through a path of contemplation and meditation, we can untangle the conditioning that leads us to prostrate ourselves before authority. By cultivating a deep inner aloneness, we can nurture our inner resources of awareness and understanding. A vision of our uniqueness is born, an authentic vision of who we are, as opposed to who we have been told we should be.

We discover a freedom not limited by models, or dichotomies, by divisions between inner and outer, mind and body, spiritual and worldly. Instead, a vision—and a path of spirituality—arises that affirms and celebrates the interconnectedness of all life. This is not to reject outright and with hostility religion and tradition. Tradition is rich in experience and has the power to inspire us and guide us. But we need to be vigilant in our listening, so as not to repeat the errors of the past. We must find the balance between, on the one hand, being able to listen outwardly and not to be overwhelmed by what we hear and, on the other, the ability to learn without feeling compelled to conform. With sensitivity we can listen to and learn from the richness of tradition, while still cherishing, preserving, and nurturing the integrity of listening within ourselves.

For me, spirituality is awakening. This awakened seeing embraces a vision of oneness, truth, and reality that transcends difference, division, and separation. Spiritual vision is a mystical one—cut free of linear space or time—which frees us to extend ourselves with love to every area of our lives. A spiritual life is a celebration of inner wholeness, joy, connectedness, and serenity. The love that is born of this vision of oneness impels us to act and to direct our lives with sensitivity and integrity. The spiritual woman is a woman of joy, who knows what it means to trust in herself. She lives her spirituality and, free from fear, she rejoices in her own uniqueness.