

"ENCOURAGING, INSPIRING, AND PROFOUNDLY USEFUL."

—Jane Hirshfield

ZEN WOMEN

BEYOND
TEA LADIES,
IRON MAIDENS,
— *and* —
MACHO MASTERS

GRACE SCHIRESON

FOREWORD BY MIRIAM LEVERING
author of *Retbinking Scripture* and *Zen Inspirations*



Buddha Realm in Everyday Western Life

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Life's Everyday Teaching

THE WORLD of women's Zen is a world that embraces a variety of awakenings, in which each woman finds her own way in her own circumstances—just as we must learn to do in Western Zen training centers and lay life today. Our study of different women's training experiences and convent styles gives us the examples we need to develop training institutions that appropriately serve Western practitioners male and female, their families, and their communities. We need institutions that offer us realistic training—guidelines that deepen our acceptance of how we actually live right here in this culture rather than encouraging us to look for enlightenment somewhere else. The training we receive should help us bring peace and sustenance to our communities.

We need to train in ways that take Zen out of its Asian institutional containers and pour it into our own teacup: into our own working life which values and is valued by our communities. We need to develop Western Zen institutions that do not imitate ancient Asian monastic images but instead support the integration of practice into our own vernacular.

Zen Training and Worldly Work

In Asia, monasteries have historically enjoyed a broad basis for financial support—temples have been supported by large congregations, governments and corporations. Early Western Zen aimed at building

training monasteries, which were supported largely by private donors and the work of their members. Many Zen institutions now find themselves facing financial crisis with inadequate community, institutional, or cultural support for their mission. One reason for this state of crisis is the perception of Zen Buddhists as marginal or insignificant to Western culture—or even worse, as strange or harmful. These perceptions, obviously, do not encourage donations. Western Zen needs to widen its basis for support. It will not survive through just building training monasteries that serve practitioners. Large training monasteries need to redirect more of their efforts to establishing their value to the community in order to transplant Zen to the West.

Some suggestions about how the Buddhist mission might extend to a larger population, and possibly stave off decline, come from Clark Strand writing in the *Wall Street Journal*.²⁷⁹ Besides including children and families, the Buddhist community might offer useful community services, developed and enhanced by practice. Here again, we may take a page from the female ancestors who found ways to finance their temples through services to their community and beyond.

Female Zen masters developed practices and skills to support themselves financially—in fields like art, writing, and teaching. Currently, Chinese Buddhist monks and nuns are pioneering the integration of worldly work and monastic life by building hospitals and training priests and nuns in the helping professions—as teachers, social workers, doctors, and nurses. Western Buddhists need to honor the early Buddhist injunctions against attachment to wealth and work as a distraction from practice, but at the same time they must face the realities of what is required to develop and support contemporary Buddhism. The practice of female Zen masters offers assurance that we can integrate financial support without sacrificing enlightenment.

The tendency to avoid personal development through seclusion in monastic life can result in the economic dependency of Zen practitioners. The penchant to avoid work in the world, to rely entirely on an institution that is in its infancy, is destructive of institutions and unwholesome for practitioners. If Zen centers unwittingly allow their students to devote their entire adult lives to serving only the monastic community, they will need to be prepared to support these students through their retirement years. And this is beginning to look like an unrealistic if not impossible financial task.

Zen students who do not develop their personal gifts, and who do not thereby mature through work in the world, are also missing an important task of adult development and adjustment. Western psychologists have emphasized the adult task of individuation, becoming more fully oneself, as crucial to finding meaning. Honing one's work abilities and friendships, one continues to develop psychologically and to feel and to be productive in society at large. Monastic seclusion and relationships confined to this specialized setting may not fully facilitate adult development. Avoiding worldly work can be seen as another type of spiritual bypass.

If Zen centers provide long-term residence as compensation they risk encouraging students to become financially dependent, they risk staffing their residential centers with people who are there for some of the wrong reasons—people who stay at the centers because they have lost their ability to support themselves financially in the world. Global financial uncertainty and technological change may make it even more difficult for long-term Zen students to reenter the marketplace. They may become dependent and resentful of the very institution within which they feel trapped.

As the female Zen masters demonstrate, exchanging the fruits of practice for financial support with the community offers a way to engage with the world outside and to remain financially solvent. Zen centers that offer services will draw a greater number of people to our practice. When a monastic schedule makes it difficult to work in the world, a more appropriate schedule might be devised that would still accommodate group practice. Female ancestors formed smaller group homes—a more economically sustainable model that could offer a schedule appropriate for work in the world. This should be encouraged today.

By developing personal gifts and bringing these gifts to the community, individual practitioners can practice nonattachment in their own lives. Work in the world presents occasions for the arising of competitiveness, pride, envy, and resentment. Learning to apply buddha-mind in the midst of worldly turmoil is a wonderful teaching that awaits explicit development for Western practitioners.²⁸⁰ The understanding of how our female ancestors commonly fused work with Zen helps us value this aspect of our tradition and validate our efforts to integrate Zen training and work in the world.

The Graying of the Zen Center

Some Western Zen centers, having made use of their practitioners' labor over the course of many years, are finding themselves in a bind as these practitioners age and reach retirement. This bind has two key dimensions: declining financial opportunities and declining health. Asian Zen counterparts have had centuries to develop financial support; Western Zen centers do not currently have the means to offer retirement funds, medical coverage, and housing to the large numbers of Zen students who populate their residential centers and are reaching retirement age.

Many students who have faithfully faced the rigors of little sleep, a low-protein community diet, and an absence of rigorous daily exercise find themselves physically and emotionally depleted and sometimes with chronic degenerative diseases related to their Zen lifestyles. Zen centers that have benefited from the long-term commitment of residential students may now find themselves unable to sustain their centers while supporting and housing large numbers of aging students. Some older residents are being asked to leave; those that need medical attention may find their needs unmet.

If Western Zen students examine current Asian models, they will see that monastic training requiring little sleep, early morning arising, and long periods of seated meditation is usually sustained only for a few years. In Japan monastic training is for the young monk only; it is not practiced into old age. Zen monks train for a few years in a strict monastic environment, and then return home to live in a city or village temple with a family-serving community. Western Zen centers encourage practitioners to simply follow monastic training guidelines even as one ages—a practice that may create health problems and shorten the life span. Just as we should not idealize Zen masters, we should not idealize monastic training as a perfect lifestyle for all ages. Medical research suggests that getting enough sleep and a diet appropriate to one's personal needs is important for sustaining health. We should not cultivate attachment to health and fitness, nor should we waste this body that is itself a precious Dharma resource.

Looking to the female ancestors, we find a more sustainable and wholesome model. We find ordained nuns living at home and also in convents where space was created for the elderly as part of their community.

Sustaining health and correcting excesses with healing have often been the domain of female ancestors and female spirituality. To help their students practice appropriately as they age, residential Zen centers in the West may encourage the formation of small group homes for the elderly. Such homes may also enhance a Zen center's economic viability.