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## FEMININE SPIRITUAL VALUES AND THE PROBLEM OF FEMINIHILISM

### 1. Rethinking the meaning of Tradition

All great religious traditions embrace a complex system of interplay between masculinity and femininity in which these two aspects are seen as different, yet equal, in the symbolic domain of spiritual psychology. Whether we look at the philosophy of the I Ching,<sup>1</sup> or the Tao of Lao Tzu,<sup>2</sup> at Rumi or Ibn-Arabi in Islam, Christian Church history, Mahayana Tantric Buddhism,<sup>3</sup> to give just a few examples, the texts of each tradition embodies a notion of complementary masculinity/femininity which are considered equal in importance in terms of the depth perspective of spiritual insight and actualization. Why then does the social embodiment of these traditions invariably not only neglect, to the point of forgetting, its own exhortations to respect and appreciate the equi-originary status of these domains, but outright suppress the feminine on the social/political level and favours men at the expense of women? That this is the case needs no further substantiation, since feminist and other literature around the world, as well as our own experience, abound with proof of this. Is it advisable then to throw out, reject, suppress tradition altogether? Clearly, we must rethink the meaning of tradition and hook up the past with the present and future within an understanding of the temporal or changing character of all phenomena, including stability, in such a way that it does not stand separate from us, over and against ourselves, controlling and oppressing us. Rather than going into a direct critique of the

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1. I. Cing, *Das Buch Der Wandlungen*, transl. by Richard Wilhelm, Düsseldorf, 1956.
  2. Henry Wei, Wheaton, 111, *The Guiding Light of Lao Tzu*, 1982.
  3. Kelsang Gyatso, *Clear Light of Bliss* (London: 1982), Ch. 8, 9, 10.

abstract divisions of linear time underlying "Western history",<sup>4</sup> I will try to open up a different perspective by describing the temporal nature of the Buddhist understanding of a meaningful way to live life.

Furthermore, we have to rethink the problematic connection between the symbolic/spiritual domain and its social/political embodiment. From within a framework in which history is understood as divided into separable realms of unchangeable past, apocalyptic future, and the present as conformity to the *status quo* underlying Western industrial/technological "first world" approaches to global problems, the connection between the symbolic and its social embodiment necessarily is one of simple isomorphism, or by analogy based on the principle of identity (i.e.  $A=A$  which implies that things are constituted by a self-identity of self-sameness).<sup>5</sup> This abstract notion of time underlying "Western history" precludes a view of history as embodied events. But a condition for understanding history as embodied (temporal) events is to understand the connection between mind/body, the symbolic/social as empty of categorically fixed distinctions and as "dependently arising" in the Madhyamika sense. Events in "Western history", on the other hand, are organized through a conceptual framework based on an essentialist form/matter distinction and a linear, progressive notion of time which can inform ultimately only its own structure, affirm its own pre-suppositions aimed at *controlling* external forces.

## 2. Ontology of Change

The problems indicated here is of such magnitude that it is very difficult to find a way to make sense of them in terms of human values.<sup>6</sup>

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4. The replacement of Western history with world history which passes unquestioned in most Western fields of knowledge is a not so subtle way of intellectual colonialism, reflecting the military/industrial hegemony of "first world" political strategies. In protest against this illicit identification I will use the term "Western history" in quotations to remind the reader of this and that there are other ways of understanding history.

5. I have dealt with this complex epistemological problem in another paper, "From Categorical Limits of Rationalistic models to Temporal Horizontality in the Philosophical Methodology of Religious Studies" (not published).

6. I am not advocating anthropocentrism here; I am fully aware of the problematic that would arise. I am merely concerned with shifting of focus and that in the technological world-view that which is *uniquely* human gets forgotten and covered over by mechanical-like repetitiveness.

In this paper I want to rethink the notion of tradition and the connection between the spiritual/symbolic and the social/political domains from a Mahayana Buddhist perspective with the help of Nagarjuna's four-cornered-reasoning as interpreted by the Kadampa tradition<sup>7</sup> of Tibetan Buddhism. The latter point is impossible without the former, in part because without tradition we would not have culture at all. The latter is important for a discussion of feminine spiritual values because the analogical move from the symbolic into the social by way of a reification of the symbolic, which is by the way never justified or advocated by any tradition, is the locus of the most fundamental mistaken views which give rise to systematic suppression of feminine power. I am calling suppression—for whatever reasons suppression might take place—of feminine power feminihilism. I am also calling a feminist prioritizing of feminine values at the expense of masculine ones feminihilism because such a move necessarily involves a kind of absolutization based on a reification of views which are contrary to an ontology of change:

What I call an ontology of change can be found in Buddhist texts as translated with "all things are impermanent."<sup>8</sup> If one understands all phenomena as changing from moment to moment, then being struck on either believing in fixed identities or another form of absolutizing is contrary to how things are and the source of real problems. Thus both a predominantly male oriented suppression of feminine values and power, as well as their reified superiority, gets labelled as the problem of feminihilism in this context. From the perspective of Nagarjuna's middle path philosophy (Madhyamaka) both extremes of nihilism on the one hand and fundamentalism and idealism on the other are to be avoided. That is, the middle path, actively constituted by understanding how these extremes give rise to all man-made problems and sufferings and by ascertaining how things, events, expressions empty of these extremes, lets them be what they really are. Here meaning of emptiness is "dependent arising."<sup>9</sup> Since Nagarjuna's four-cornered-reasoning has been effectively used in a Buddhist con-

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7. I am using this term throughout the paper to cover both the old and the new Kadampas, the latter mostly being called Gelugpas today.

8. My stress on an ontology of change might give rise to various criticisms. I am aware of this but cannot anticipate all of them in this paper.

9. Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, *The key to the Middle Way*, (London : 1975).

text to refute various kinds of nihilism I think it an appropriate way by which to criticize different kinds of feminihilism.

### 3. Feminine in Kadampa Tradition

I will now speak about the role of the feminine in Buddhism from the perspective of the Kadampa tradition. But here it is necessary to point first of all to the different interpretations possible, dependings upon the level of practice and theory under discussion. There is not one uniform way of treating this most complex subject-matter, not just *one* feminine principle. And this has philosophical justifications; it is not simply because there are so many different forms of Buddhism. Just as in the I Ching where we find different combinations of *yin* and *yang* lines and different configurations of the feminine according to whether we are talking about the natural (hexagram 2),<sup>10</sup> the cultural (hexagram 30),<sup>11</sup> a form of the social (hexagram 54),<sup>12</sup> or the various kinds of family relations in which the feminine plays a dominant role, so in Buddhism too, the function differs according to the context, where the context is the stages of the path to enlightenment. Concerning the steps on the path, I will discuss the different levels of vows prominent in the Kadampa tradition even today because it is through this focus that institutionalized attitudes towards feminine values and the connection between the symbolic and social domains come into relief.

#### a) *Historical note*

A historical note concerning the tradition discussed here: Buddhism had been established in Tibet from the 7th to the 9th centuries and was subsequently destroyed by King Lang Dharma who ruled from 901-906. With Atisha Dipamkarasrijnana (982-1054), considered by this tradition the last great Indian Buddhist scholar who was invited to Tibet to help reinstate Buddhism in the 11th century, originated the Kadampa tradition. He formulated a way of organizing the existing Buddhist practices and all the various forms of Buddhism known at that time, which was later systematized further, greatly expanded, and

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10. I Ching, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 199.

developed by Tsong Khapa (1357-1419).<sup>13</sup> This system, in brief, called the stages and paths to enlightenment was to unify Hinyana, Sutra-Mahayana, and Tantra-Mahayana in such a way that by following this path with the three levels of motivation as their organizing principles, an individual could achieve enlightenment in one life time. Another way of characterizing the Kadampa tradition is that its practitioners practise the Sutra level externally, as the "cause vehicle" and the Tantra level of practice internally, or secretly, since Tantra is esoteric Buddhism, also called the "resultant vehicle". This they claim is necessarily in accordance with the meaning of the ultimate nature of reality, emptiness, which they interpret to be the multiplicity of "dependent arisings". The Kadampas are very much committed to neither disparaging any of the Buddhist traditions, some of which hold contradictory views, but try to make sense of them all, nor disparaging any other religion, for that matter.

b) *On Enlightenment*

The path to enlightenment, as conceived by them, can be summarized into its three principal aspects: Power, wisdom and compassion<sup>14</sup> unified by the Buddha's activity.<sup>15</sup> Because a Buddha is always a human being who actualized his or her human potential to the fullest possible extent, aspects of the path are personified. Each aspect then symbolizes complete Buddhahood, but in accordance with the primary focus through which that person actualized it, it gets portrayed differently. Thus to invoke one of these aspects in its perfected form in a personified way, power becomes Vajrapani, a wrathful manifestation of the Buddha; wisdom becomes Manjushri who carries a sword symbolic of discriminating wisdom which cuts through ignorance; and compassion become Avalokitesvara, the lotus born.<sup>16</sup> Thus Buddha's activity which describes the path is personified as Tara, the female Buddha.

13. Tulku Thondup, *Buddhist-Civilization in Tibet*, 1982, p. 37.

14. R. Thurman, ed. *Life and Teachings of Tsong Khapa*, (Dharmasala: 1982), p. 57.

15. 'Thrin. las (Tib.) In the famous twenty-one Tara prayer she is called *dux. ksum. sangs. rgyas. 'thrin. las. ma*: she who embodies the activity of the Buddhas of the three times.

16. Depending on the text or practice these can be talked about as *bodhisattvas* still on the path, or as fully enlightened Buddha manifesting in the form of a *bodhisattva*.

There are many stories and legends about Tara before she became and the manner on which she became a fully enlightened Buddha. One of the famous Tibetan historians, Taranatha (1575-?) recounts the following,

.. some monks said to her, 'If you pray that your deeds accord with the teachings, then indeed on that account you will change your form to that of a man, as is befitting.' After much discourse she finally replied, 'In this life there is no such distinction as "male" and "Female", neither of "self identity", a "person" nor any perception (of such), and therefore attachment to ideas of "male" and "female" is quite worthless. Weak-minded worldlings are always deluded by this.' And so she vowed, "There are many who wish to gain enlightenment in a man's form, and there are but few who wish to work for the welfare of sentient beings in a female form. Therefore may I, in a female body, work for the welfare of beings right until *samsara* has been emptied."<sup>17</sup>

Since the Buddhist traditions come out of an ontology of radical change, an ontology which is temporal through and through, transcendence does not mean the same thing as we commonly conceive it in the West. Transcendence here means an overcoming not of self, but of specific kinds of misconceptions of self which are both learned and innate and which are overcome by the path to enlightenment. So a Buddha is always that which is transformed from an ordinary human being's psycho/physical constituents into the *mandala* of the five Buddha wisdoms. The basis of the path by which this transformation takes place is a non-isomorphic, non-dialectical duplicity of the two truths: the conventional truth which includes all non-static phenomena, and their final mode of being, that they lack inherent existence, or fixed identities etc., is their ultimate truth. The path also shares this peculiar non-isomorphic duplicity: its actions are constituted by method and wisdom, or *bodhicitta* and *sunyata*. *Bodhicitta* is the awakening mind which is a positive mind, the wish to achieve enlightenment for the sake of all living beings which is to be cultivated with ever increasing strength and force, while *sunyata*, or emptiness, is a non-affirming negation. It is a non-affirming negation because it negates miscon-

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17. Taranatha, transl. by David Templeman, *The Origin of the Tara Tantra* (Dharmasala: 1981), p. 11-12.

septions (of static identities) about phenomena, not the actual phenomena themselves. These misconceptions project onto existing things the added notion that they exist independently of causes and conditions and in their own right. It is *the way* an object appears as though it had a fixed identity which is to be negate . As it turns out, objects never existed that way from the beginning and hence, by having negated the misconceptions about them, we ascertain the way things really are: empty of fixed identities. Clearly, since the world is constantly changing from moment to moment, even if not perceptible to all on all levels alike, e.g. the atomic level, how could things have fixed identities? The result then of transforming one's views, and motivating these activities with the concern for all living beings as well as actually engaging actively in benefitting others, is Buddhahood. But Buddhahood is also not to be conceived of as a static state. Buddhahood as a static state could only be projected by a category. But enlightenment is not a category; rather, it is an ongoing enlightened activity which operates appropriately in each situation and in accordance with each living being's need.

Since there is no *a priori* fixed structure of a causal nexus but rather we make our world in accordance with our motives and actions, the cultivation of appropriate motivations becomes of greatest importance in this tradition of Buddhism. This is done by vows and promises. I send my life in an entirely different direction through the power of my commitment, exemplified by a promise which acts as a guide through the rapids of a radically temporal world in which I must project a conceptual view of enlightenment, but which itself obviously is unreachable in that way, since, again, enlightenment in this tradition is seen as an ongoing activity. One can truly appreciate this point, that spiritual powers can be generated only on the basis of vows and commitment, only against the temporal horizon of understanding one's own life as impermanent, as changing from moment to moment, as running out constantly, running towards death. So likewise we can appreciate the meanings of tradition as changing only in accordance with the interest, motivation, capacities, and approach of the individual against an open horizon of a multiplicity of methods and ways.

#### **4. Levels of Vows in Kadampas**

A person who lives in the practice of the path as characterized by the Kadampas usually carries three levels of vows: the Hinayana,

level of the *vinaya* which is usually interpreted literally, not killing stealing, etc. abstaining from basic non-virtuous actions to be found globally in all major religious traditions. The second level is that of the *bodhisattva* vows. They are to be understood positively, since they are to help cultivate the will to achieve enlightenment. This will is the result of having practised equanimity (to be understood temporally and not categorically), love, compassion, thinking of the kindness of others and repaying it etc., which can be perfected only after very long and intense practice. The next level is determined by the *Tantric* vows which are exceedingly difficult to keep since that requires such incredible awareness of what is going on inside and around oneself on all the multiple levels at any moment, that hardly anyone can keep them. Breaking one of these vows simultaneously breaks the transmission or the initiation into the practice. Once broken, however, these vows can be completely restored by taking a Tantric empowerment into one of the personified Buddha practices from a qualified person.

Each of the three levels of vows is more difficult to keep, respectively. It is clear that if one does not have the power to keep the basic ones, which are intended for the duller and slower types of consciousness, one clearly cannot expect to be able to keep the ones on the higher, that is more subtle, levels. As I mentioned before, the reason why I am discussing the vows is that for Buddhists they are so important, not only because it is they which drive a pier into the river of one's life and determine our future in an important way, but they will make it easier to understand the different conceptions of the feminine.

The Hinayana or *vinaya* vows must be divided into two: those of the monks and nuns and those of householders. Monks and nuns keep between 200 and 300 vows and householders only up to five; but the difference between them is one of intensity and refinement, not of kind. Since the former are celibate, the model of the feminine, seen on this level of practice not separate from social embodiment, for them is limited to mothers and sisters, symbols for giving and generosity. For householders the model gets extended to include women who are virtuous, that is, who stay within the rules said to have been legislated by the Buddha and the early community of Buddhist followers. But since the morality of the monks is the ideal, i.e. considered higher than

that of householders, there does not seem to be too much of a difference in basic attitude towards women.

Practising celibacy, of course, requires distancing oneself from the other sex. Since in early Buddhism most of the practitioners were men negatively this meant that women were seen as distracting influence and were therefore dangerous and to be treated with caution. But since Buddhism does not subscribe to a theory of original sin which identifies or, at least, connects evil and the fall from a higher state of being with femininity, we do not find a philosophically justified identification of evil with women. The necessary distance from the other sex when celibate is for the purpose of protecting one's vows and spiritual commitments because the sexual drive is the most powerful drive. But this is a reason different from the one metaphysically identifying women with evil. Obviously, to externalize one's incapacities and blame others for one's weaknesses, which became institutionalized in so many Buddhist cultures and a widespread social practice around the world, only testifies to one's own ignorance and weakness.

### 5. Teaching on emptiness and Goal

It is the *bodhicitta*, the commitment to strive for complete enlightenment for the sake of all living beings which differentiates Hinayana from Mahayana Buddhism. The object of practice is common to all living beings; that includes not only men and women, but animals and other beings as well (ghosts and gods, for example). In many Mahayana Sutras, for example, in the "Heart of Wisdom Sutra", practitioners are talked about as "whatever son or daughter of noble lineage wants to practice the profound wisdom . . ." <sup>18</sup> or as "monks and nuns". The most famous Mahayana Sutras, the *prajna paramita* Sutras of which the "Heart of Wisdom" is said to be the most condensed version, teach emptiness directly. Concerning emptiness, briefly, the analytic mind that investigates the meaning of reality and which cuts through the misconceptions of fixed identities is symbolized by Manjushri's sword, but the resultant unity of the wisdom consciousness with its object,

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18. Cf. *Heart of Wisdom Sutra*, (Dharmasala: 1977). *bla. ma'i. rnal. 'byor. dang. yi. dam. kag. gl. bdag. bskyet. soks. shal. 'don. kches. btus. bshuks. so.*, p. 543.

emptiness, is always symbolized by feminine embodiment. Thus the fully enlightened Buddha in the aspect of *prajna paramita*, the wisdom gone beyond, is always personified and portrayed in female form. She is considered the mother of all the Buddhas. When the transformative path becomes the wisdom of emptiness, it generates or gives birth to the fully enlightened ones. In other words, the realization that emptiness is the condition for the possibility for there to be anything at all is a necessary condition for enlightenment.

The *bodhicitta* aspect of the path, that is, the will and active striving towards enlightenment for the sake of all living beings is talked about as equivalent to skilful means or the multiplicity of methods necessary to be mastered if, indeed, one wishes to bring benefit to others effectively. These methods must cover the range of benefiting on the material, social, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual levels. This aspect of the path, which includes the positive cultivation of strategies which benefit and cause the development of techniques, is symbolized by the masculine, while the wisdom aspect of the path is symbolized by the feminine. Obviously, both are essential to achieve the goal, enlightenment, and when one is suppressed at the expense of the other, then all kinds of strange and perverted results will follow. For example, the skilful method performed without wisdom, which knows the appropriate level on which to act, can be ineffective or dangerous, because inappropriate. This is called idiot compassion by some Tibetans. But wisdom without compassion can be cruel and dangerous, because it can shock and terrorize the individual not yet sufficiently prepared to see the extent and ramifications of his or her own depth of existence. This is dangerous because such premature shock of having seen too much, without having paid one's dues, so to speak, or without the protection of the powerful positive virtuous activity (i.e. of the *bodhicitta*), can freeze the terrified individual into inaction. The usual consequence is that such a person mistakes emptiness for nothingness, and thus has lost the path which is an ongoing activity (of a special kind). By dogmatically insisting on this nihilistic position as being true this person will become so entrenched in nihilism that he or she closes the door to any form of redemption or saving grace the path has to offer. It is not easy to stay on in the middle path staying clear of idealism and nihilism, a path comparable to a bird whose wings are method and wisdom and whose flight leaves no tracks in the sky.

The wisdom of primordial unity is what becomes thematized in Tantric practice. Since the real practice of Tantra involves the most subtle levels of consciousness which ordinary people do not have immediate access to and only experience, at best, in dreams, one can imagine how difficult it is to keep the Tantric vows. But it is understood by those who take them that without keeping the vows it is impossible to develop any powers and insights. Again, the reason is that in a radically temporal world where no ground to stand on other than ignorance is given, one has to *create* the ground of practice, and the only way to do this is by means of vows, and the power of commitment.

## **6. The Tantric Empowerment and Women**

These vows are given together with Tantric empowerment and are not to be disclosed to non-practitioners. Hence, except for a handful of highly realized individuals, anyone who freely talks about Tantric subjects does not practise, because he is breaking the vow of secrecy. In justifying myself for talking about a highly esoteric practice publicly I do not want to imply underhandedly that I am practising Tantra. But I do find it justifiable to adumbrate the value of Tantra, since there are so many misconceptions about it everywhere—and not only in the West. For example, included in these vows is a commitment towards not abandoning love for any living being but, what is most interesting for this discussion, there is a commitment not to degrade women. This is interpreted to mean that one is required neither to disparage any individual woman, nor women in general in thought, speech, or deed.

While from the Sutra-Mahayana perspective the *prajna paramita* wisdom was still the mother giving birth to the Buddhas, in the Tantric tradition that wisdom in union with skilful means becomes the consort embraced by compassion. It is the simultaneity of method and wisdom, constituting their primordial union on the most subtle levels of practice, which evokes the presence of the fully enlightened being and, hence, this practice is called taking the result, namely Buddhahood, the path. Because unity of wisdom and compassion can never be simply collapsed into one entity—if the understanding of the meaning of emptiness as dependent arising is to be upheld—it is symbolized by male/female embrace. The difference in primordial union preser-

ves the meaning of the ultimate nature of reality (emptiness of inherent existence) to be dependent arising and affirms thus an ontology of momentary change as the play, or dance, of male and female. But, again, to really actualize Tantric practices wisdom of emptiness and *bodhicitta* and the power of commitment to transformative spiritual values are a necessary prerequisite. Only then can Tantric practitioners use physical substances, activities, etc. which are necessary constituents of Tantric practice authentically. Hence, embodiment which comes out of an understanding of the meaning of emptiness as dependent arising (which, as I have tried to outline here, can be and must be understood on many levels) becomes thematized in Tantric practice. Thus, from this level of Tantric practice women are necessarily seen as equal.

From the perspective of the Kadampa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism it is on this most subtle and profound level of practice that *the kind* of relation understood to exist between symbolic levels of feminine and masculine in the spiritual domain and its psycho/social embodiment is no longer driven into the horizon of conscious enactment by prejudice and stereotyping. This is based on the view that prejudice and stereotypes can really be overcome only with non-conceptual understanding of emptiness.

## 7. Emptiness as lack of Independent I

The philosophical positions of the Hinayana concerning emptiness interpret emptiness to mean lack of self-sufficient independent I, that is, lack of fixed identity of the person, of oneself, but not of other phenomena. This is a problematic position because it is easy to reify the other in ways that attribute substantial existence to him or her. If it is philosophically justified that the other is a substantial entity in relation to oneself, then it becomes much easier to justify not only a distancing from women but, moreover, for the belief that women are not related to oneself in an essential way, but that they are different in kind, and hence inferior or dangerous to one's spiritual progress for such a belief to become a social institution. That some distancing from the other sex is necessary on this level of morality was already shown, but the added steps of suppressing one's essential human relatedness that can only play itself out in the domain of social equality, and of reifying the other into a categorical other (inherently inferior to one-

self, clearly are inferences resulting from ignorance. But it is also clear that without powerful awareness and watchfulness—which can unfortunately not be legislated—it is easy to make such ignorant inferences and base one's life on them, particularly when everything in one's culture supports these views. They amount to a kind of culturally established feminihilism. It can be overcome by severing the connection of the mistaken inference from a temporary distancing, understood as a method for effectively engaging in the path, to a categorized other, believed to be inherently inferior. As long as distancing via the categorization of the other is seen as a temporary method, which does not suppress the essential relatedness of self and other, no harm is done. But as soon as that distinction in its categorical form serves to permanently hierarchitize positions, then living beings are harmed for which there are abundant examples in the history of wars. From the Buddhist point of view they are harmed because, due to a dogmatic position, they are prevented from progressing on the path towards enlightenment. Enlightenment cannot be generated from oneself independently of others (i.e. women for men and men for women) and, unless one can overcome this misconception within one's own understanding and help others to do the same, spiritual growth is impossible. From this it should be clear that training in critical awareness—which is, of course, what the training in Madhyamaka in the great monastic universities in Tibet was all about—becomes a social responsibility.

On the Sutra-Mahayana level of practice where developing an understanding of emptiness becomes so important, nihilism runs rampant. This is exaggerated to an extreme in the West where Buddhism virtually becomes equated with nihilism.<sup>19</sup> Emptiness is a hidden object<sup>20</sup> which means that it does not reveal itself to our views without

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19. At least in the academic tradition

20. *Ikog. gyur.* in the sense of that which is not evident. This is not to be understood along the line of traditional Western bifurcation of appearance and reality. Emptiness and the wisdom which cognizes can neither be said to be present, nor not to be present to an uninquiring mind. Emptiness, in a sense, is always there, since it is the final mode of being of all phenomena, including emptiness. It is ignorance which means in this context grasping for true or inherent existence which covers or hides that which is always already there, what is closest to us but concealed.

some work, investigation, involvement, giving up something, on our part. But because it is hidden and not easily accessible, it is likened to the female, the gateless gate,<sup>21</sup> through which all life must pass to be life at all. The dangers and risks, courage and the incredible amount of work to gain access to this hidden "object" are so intense that for those without sufficient power or positive energy, the hidden is simply not found, and hence becomes equated with nothingness, and so nihilism arises. It takes an extraordinarily powerful mind to ascertain emptiness. Thus for one whose powers are not sufficient, who falls short of this ascertainment, the feminine simply does not exist, although he was born from her, is sustained by her and guided by her. He is misguided because he makes his own ignorant inference about the hidden as non-existent, simply because he cannot find it, into a dogma upon which, moreover, he is very proud. On this unreal basis he builds his castles in the sky and is surprised that it hurts when they collapse and he falls down. Of course, it is the tragic condition of being-in-the-world that we have shortcomings, that we have neither the power nor an accurate enough map to find the hidden treasure, but then to insist on the truth of the added claim that the hidden does not exist is the ignorant connection to be severed here.

Another form of nihilistic ignorance from the Mahayana perspective is to reify the unfindability of the hidden into an absolute negativity seen as absolute otherness and believed to be the sacred ground of all things. But enlightenment cannot be generated from otherness alone. From a Mahayana perspective it is absurd to think that the self can be objectified into pure otherness, into absolute negativity. Rather, this view is seen as a form of laziness and lack of courage, unable to admit its own shortcomings. Such absolutization of negativity, like all absolutizations, is the object to be negated in the analysis of emptiness, and hence seen as purely intellectual fantasy, born of arrogance and pride. In the Mahayana tradition this can only be overcome by getting your hands dirty, so to speak, by engaging in the *bodhisattva* practices and thereby increasing the power of the positive *bodhicitta*, the will to enlighten all living beings.

Thus enlightenment arises neither from self, nor from others, nor from both and yet, enlightenment is possible. It is generated in the

21. Sekida, transl. Mumonkan And Hegikanroku, *Two Zen Classics* (Tokyo: 1983).

play of wisdom and compassion personified as male and female aspects of Buddhahood always manifesting in a world exemplified by Tantric practice. Here the connectedness with others is neither monological nor dialectical<sup>22</sup> but, because empty of fixed identities, it is dependently arising and hence *appropriate* to each individual situation.

### **8. Vow not to disparage Women**

The social embodiment of spiritual and philosophical positions always looks quite different. It is sad that almost always the ignorant<sup>23</sup> connections dominate the social domain. In Buddhist countries where Hinayana was practised exclusively such as Burma, Thailand, Sri Lanka, the inferiority of women is an unproblematic and accepted social attitude. In countries where the Mahayana was practised such as Tibet, Japan, China, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos the social configurations are far more complex. Since Tibet is the only country which continued to practise all four levels of Tantric Buddhism (Japan's Shingon Buddhism is a Tantric form but does not embrace all four levels of Tantra) it is a special case. One can safely generalize and say that all Tibetans have taken Tantric initiations and hence at least know about the vow not to disparage women. Consequently, there is a great deal of generosity towards women who are interested in spiritual practice. But since very few people are actually qualified to really practise Tantra this generosity is not as pervasive as one would expect from a society full of people who claim publicly to practise Tantra. Only when one realizes that these all too frequent public proclamations testify to the lack of understanding of the Tantric mode, does one come to suspect in this context too that ignorance is the only thing equally distributed around the globe.

22. I have elaborated on the meaning of this subject in a paper: "The role of Paradox East and West" (not published).
23. By ignorance in this context is not merely meant stupidity, errors, mistakes, dullness, but specifically the way we project fixed identities onto existing objects, as though they existed independently in and of themselves. It is the process of reification of temporal objects, distinctions, connections, understanding etc. into static phenomena. In Mahayana Buddhism it is this specific kind of ignorance or bewilderment with regard to how things exist which is the source of all problems, suffering and dissatisfaction. The illusory static object of ignorance or ignorant grasping, superimposed onto existing temporal event-like objects which change from moment to moment, becomes the "objects to be refuted" in the analysis of emptiness.

Feminihilism, like most forms of nihilism, then, is an expression of ignorance—ignorance of how things really are. It has especially pernicious consequences when sexuality *per se* becomes identified with the female, and where sexuality is metaphysically identified with evil. Ignorance here manifests as fear of the chaos created by one's own sexual energy gone out of control, and when this lack of courage is identified with women *per se* it becomes feminihilism. Does constructive control which makes social order possible always have to be based on this type of ignorance? I really do not know. If historical events were proof, one would have to say 'yes'. But that would simultaneously testify to one's own ignorance and, worse, we would condemn ourselves to ignorance forever by affirming such a view. Sadly enough, to a culture which tacitly holds to an identity of truth and conformity to the *status quo*, as the technological mass cultures of the "first world" do, this must seem an unproblematic issue.

Let us look at two examples that take the dominant/dominating fear of going out of control into account in their portrayal of the feminine, one from the I Ching and one from within Tantric Buddhism. The hexagram 54, "The Marrying Maiden", exemplifies the ambigurtly associated with the power of women or femininity. From a spiritual point of view this hexagram is most interesting and powerful because it symbolizes the beginning and end of mankind, north, south, east, and west come together in the eternal return of the circle of becoming.<sup>24</sup> One could roughly parallel this account with that of the wisdom of emptiness in the sense that they both have the power to illuminate everything including all the faults and lies. Yet in the social domain this is extremely dangerous because the existing social systems are necessarily based on lies, of fixed higher and lower positions etc. If one were to allow oneself to be seduced by the truth of the beginningless end, then there would be no motivation to follow social rules. But social rules, although created by human beings, have to be taken as absolutely true by enough members of the society for that society to be well-functioning.

The judgment of this hexagram contains an exhortation not to act, to remain passive, otherwise there will be misfortune.<sup>25</sup> Here the

24. I Ching, *op. cit.*, p. 587.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 200.

woman is literally given secondary status even to the main wife of the household, because her love for the man of the house cannot be captured by social rules. Here are the relations of the heart which, if followed, spell danger, precisely because they do not coincide with society's rules. It is amazing that this type of relationship was institutionalized at all, even though it is in this highly controlled manner. Thus we can see that the spiritual power revealed by the feminine is most profound on the spiritual level but, because it is so direct and powerful, it is seen to interfere with the maintenance of social order.

### 9. Concluding Observations

Within Tantric Buddhism there is a division into primarily male Tantra and primarily female Tantric practices. The former concentrate more on the skilful means aspect as the main access to the path, the latter on the wisdom aspect. It is said that the latter is the fastest, most powerful, and hence most dangerous path to enlightenment. Clearly, someone who responds to the demands of the spiritual path and does not attribute primary importance to the rules of the social order can see the artificiality, the lies and contradictions of the social system, and how impoverished those people are who live their lives exclusively determined by this domain. But for such a person the social domain acts as a constraint which, by fighting its lies, makes him or her stronger spiritually. It provides ever new opportunities and challenges for his or her power of transformation and skilful means. It is the testing ground for his/her intelligence. Without depending on this aspect of the path one would be practising another form of feminihilism, of reifying and raising to an absolute the feminine wisdom aspect of the path, thus indulging in ignorance, and thereby losing the real feminine wisdom. Absolute priority of masculine values over feminine ones or of feminine values over masculine ones is an expression of ignorance which has harmful consequences. But to actualize the view of their equi-originary empty character is very difficult, and people who have done so are extremely rare.

I have tried to show how different philosophical connections present themselves from within the horizon of change and impermanence and that from this perspective any schema of absolutizing and hierarchized differences designed to order, in the sense of control, and to maintain the *status quo* must be based on ignorance which gives rise

to mistaken views and consequences harmful to living beings: misuse of power in the form of nuclear energy to protect and further self-interest at the expense of other nations, races etc., misuse of powerful chemical compounds for poisoning the water and food supplies in the process of gaining control over nature, to name just two examples.

To think of the connection between the symbolic/spiritual and the social/political domains other than by a simple isomorphism requires a massive commitment to undermine this kind of ignorance with a criticism which necessarily must include self-criticism; a criticism that attacks habitual identifications of high and low with male and female. This criticism inspired by Nagarjuna's four-cornered-reasoning attacks categorical distinctions believed to be "natural", hence unchangeable, and analogical substitutive identifications. Moreover, a merely externally legislated equality imposed upon all does not sufficiently do justice to diverse kinds of human concerns, because such legislation must take place in terms of only one set of values, the dominant one, i.e. the masculine. It cannot capture, represent, express that which gets hidden by such legislation, but which is nevertheless of utmost importance not only for life to be meaningful, but possibly for life to be at all, to survive. In undermining the suppression of one set of values by the other this kind of criticism clears the ground for appreciating masculine and feminine values both in their dependently arising nature. But this kind of criticism which necessarily must include self-criticism cannot be legislated, it can only be inspired.