

Buddhist Women:

With determination & solidarity towards more equality

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(European Alliance of Catholic women's Organisation)

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I first heard about Buddhism through my father. After the Second World War, he was looking for answers to many questions, including: why so much suffering, what is the meaning of this life? He found a small English booklet by a Buddhist monk about karma, which gave him the strength to go on living and to reorganise his life.

Already at the age of 12 I was also searching for the meaning of life and suffering, because after the separation of my parents my life had become quite difficult.

As I loved reading since I was a child, I also looked for answers in books, starting with my children's Bible, Native American literature and works on archaeology. The book Siddhartha by Hermann Hesse came very close to what I felt inside me and set the direction in which I then continued my search.

The situation of my mother parenting alone was extremely difficult. Separated from my father, I was feeling sad. I experienced the following two stepfathers more as a threat. So, when I was about 16, I decided to find my own way and initially found it in a Buddhist ashram. I stayed there until I was 20 years old.

After that, it was time to lead a more "normal" life, both professionally and privately. So I married a French youth friend in the 80s and ended up in Strasbourg. There I started working in the tourism sector and as an assistant to a member of the European Parliament from Hamburg.

In autumn 1996, I unexpectedly encountered the Dalai Lama there. He had been invited by the Tibet Intergroup to a meeting of the European Parliament. This led to contacts and a meeting with my beloved Tibetan Buddhist teacher Khenchen Sherab Gyaltzen Amipa. He had founded the European Institute for Tibetan Buddhism in Kuttolsheim near Strasbourg. There I was able to learn Buddhist basics and many meditation practices for over 18 years. I am still deeply grateful to him today.

My commitment to the situation of Tibetans in exile in India also increasingly moved into my focus. As a volunteer coordinator for the Tibet Intergroup (TIG), I began to organise and accompany study trips for TIG delegations to India and Dharamsala. We met members of the Tibetan government-in-exile, were received by the Dalai Lama and had lively exchanges with political and spiritual dignitaries. We also visited impressive Buddhist temples and monasteries.

Influenced by the wise words of my teacher that all beings have Buddha nature inside and can attain enlightenment if they practise seriously enough, I was confronted with a different reality in many places. I was amazed to realise how male-dominated Asian



society is. When I asked where the nunneries were located, I first observed a somewhat embarrassing scramble. In Dharamsala, there was a flagship nunnery for all four Tibetan Buddhist traditions, but there were far more nuns living in very poor conditions.

When I asked my teacher after returning home: "You taught us about the equality of all beings, the teachings of karma and rebirth. How would you feel if you were reborn in a woman's body and didn't have the same opportunities to receive an education and access to the teachings? He laughed and said: "You take care of the nunnery".

My understanding at the time was that the lack of support for the nuns in the case of our Tibetan Sakya tradition was primarily a lack of finances. So I started to look for all possible support for the development and expansion of the Sakya Nunnery and to raise money.

In 2006, I founded Sakyadhita France, the French branch of the International Association for Buddhist Women with friends in order to be able to process donations transparently. In the years that followed, I learnt more and more about the situation of women and nuns in Buddhism. With the donations we raised, we were able to make a significant contribution to the inauguration of the Sakya Nunnery temple in 2009. Later, a Sakya Nuns College was added. During this time, I got married again and am very grateful to my husband Hans-Erich for his support of my endeavours.

Now I would like to talk about the situation of women in Buddhism

What is the Buddha's teaching all about in a nutshell

- Abstain from everything that is harmful or unwholesome.
- Do what is beneficial or wholesome.
- Purify and train your mind

The Buddha's teaching is based on the exploration of one's own mind, on experience, and is addressed to all living beings, without exception. He showed the path to ultimate liberation, which can be followed by men and women alike.

[The text of the Samyutta Nikaya, I, 5, 6 says: "Only the vehicle is important / Whether man or woman / Everyone who takes the vehicle / reaches Nirvana."](#)

I was asked to say something about the creation. There are very few texts in the ancient Buddhist canon that deal with the question of origins. There is no creation in the sense in which it is understood in monotheistic religions. According to Buddhist cosmology, the universes follow one another in a cycle of growth and degeneration over an indefinite period of time. [There is no beginning, and Buddha himself says: "One cannot know the origin of this incessant cycle of birth and death, this whole mountain of suffering...". But you can free yourself from it, and that is all that matters.](#)

In the Buddhist teachings there is nothing about a creator, but everything arises from conditional origination. This is because that is... It is important to recognise this and act accordingly.

In the **Aggañña-sutta**, however, there is an interesting description of the origin, which has not yet been officially translated.

The French Buddhist Dominique Trotignon, co-author of the book "La Femme", which focuses on the status of women in religions, has summarised the "conditioned emergence" from this sutra: [„There is initially no hierarchisation of the sexes, no particular emphasis on the masculine: the gender distinction of initially undifferentiated](#)

beings emerges as one phenomenon among others, as a result of evolution progressing through dualistic differentiation, following a process strangely reminiscent of that of cell division! This is the "order of things", phenomena arise when certain conditions are met, usually linked to the emergence of desires that irrevocably lead to the appearance of new forms of desire. They are also characterised by duality: Desire or aversion, pride or contempt, attraction or rejection.... Thus, a complex system of "conventions" gradually emerges, which itself evolves over time." (ANM.1)

The Buddha recognised that suffering arises when we are trapped in the ignorant view of duality (I & others, good/bad, wanting to have/not wanting anything, etc.), known as samsara. Liberation from suffering and ignorance is called nirvana. This applies equally to all beings - both men and women - and ideally one realises that the absolute reality (the divine?) is non-duality.

Developing a universal perspective is also important because it relieves us: suffering is avoidable and it doesn't just affect me alone.

The Buddha and other awakened beings cannot free us from suffering or its causes (craving, greed, hatred, ignorance), which entangle us in an incessant cycle of rebirths. They do, however, show us the way and methods we can use to find our way out of this cycle. The Buddhist path of mind training is the same for men and women. This also applies to the law of karma. According to Buddha, the law of cause and effect is not an inevitable fate. The precious human body (male or female) gives us the opportunity to assume responsibility for our lives, to develop our awareness and to experience the interconnectedness with all beings.

Padhmasambhava, a great awakened Tibetan master, explained that women are perhaps even more capable: "The human body is the basis for the realisation of wisdom. The bodies of men and women are equally qualified to attain enlightenment. However, if a woman has developed a firm will for enlightenment, she has a higher potential." (Anm.2)

The communities of monks and nuns are dependent on the society in which they live in order to fulfil their basic needs such as food, medicine, clothing, etc. The members of the early Sangha went to the villages every day for alms. In return, they offered people prayers, teachings, advice and spiritual support.

Although women were very important on the Buddha's path to awakening, he initially only had male disciples after his enlightenment. About five years after he founded the monk sangha, the women's sangha came into being.

His godmother Mahaprajapati, his wife Yasodhara and many women from the Shakya clan walked from Kappilavatthu to Vaishali under difficult conditions to ask him to accept them into the community and ordain them as nuns.

According to legend, Mahaprajapati asked the Buddha three times to accept women into the community of the ordained, but he initially refused. His close disciple Ananda compassionately asked the Buddha whether a woman could attain liberation and become an arahant (enlightened one). The Buddha told him that this was undoubtedly possible, but again denied admission. He presumably realised that accepting women as part of his Sangha and granting them full ordination would represent a revolutionary change for society. The Buddha's aim was not to revolutionise society, but to teach beings how to develop and awaken their minds.

It is important to bear in mind the situation of women in India +/- 2500 years ago, which has not changed significantly since then. A woman was under the guardianship of her

father until the day of her traditionally arranged marriage and then under that of her husband. She only had to take care of the household, have children (preferably male) and be at the service of the entire family-in-law. In a Hindu society, only a son was allowed to preside over the parents' cremation ceremonies and was therefore essential for the parents' salvation. A dowry was always (and still is) a huge burden for a family to bear. Thus, a woman was considered of no great value and in no way belonged to herself.

The demand of Mahaprajapati and the women accompanying her to lead a life without residence, travelling without a male companion, looking after their own interests, however noble it may have seemed, was dangerous and represented a revolution without equal for society at the time (only Jainism had granted women a similar status to men, +/- 250 years before Buddha). I would even say it represented the loss of comfortable labour slaves. These first Buddhist women were strong, free and attained full awakening. Their powerful stories and poems are preserved in the THERIGATHA poems (**ANM. 2a**)

The Buddha presumably also saw that his male disciples had only embarked on the path, but also the potential of women. So he finally granted them ordination, but imposed the condition that they had to follow the "8 Great Rules", which - on closer inspection - all of them amounted to the subordination of the nuns (bhikkhuni) to the monks (bhikkhus).

More recent research, among others by Bhikkhu Analayo, has shown that the origin of the 8 "Garudhamma" can be attributed to a later period than that of the Buddha (**ANM. 3**). The teachings of religious founders are actually reinterpreted and arranged in a more male way in all religions over the course of time.

Just to illustrate briefly, 2 of the rules Mahaprajapati had to accept:

- A nun, even if she was ordained a hundred years ago, should greet every monk respectfully, even if he was ordained on the same day, rise in his presence, bow to him and do him all honour.
- The higher ordination for a nun (Upasampada ordination) can only be received by both Sangha. Women have 2 levels of novitiate. They must first observe 6 vows for 2 years and only then can they become novices. (Not so the men).

When Mahaprajapati learnt about these 8 rules, she agreed and was ordained as the first bhikkhuni of the Buddhist Sangha.

Depending on the tradition, monks keep +/- 217 vows and nuns +/- 311 vows. It should be noted that vows always arose after incidents and misbehaviour that were reported to the Buddha. In order to avoid this in the future, he recommended certain behaviour, i.e. a vow. Thus, the first nuns had to take the vows of the monks of the first 5 years. However, the higher number of vows for nuns was also created to protect them (only leaving the monastery in pairs, only living in a hut in pairs, etc.).

Ordination has been transmitted in an unbroken line of qualified bhikkhus and bhikkhunis since the time of the Buddha. It is traditional to record the names of all those who pass on full ordination. This also applies to teachings on mediation practices. If a transmission lineage has been interrupted, the teaching or ordination cannot be continued. Either a lineage still exists or it is considered lost.

In terms of full ordination, there were originally around 6 major transmission lineages. Only the lineages of **Theravada** (e.g. in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos), **Mulasarvastivada** (e.g. in Tibet, Nepal, India) and **Dharmagupta** (e.g. in China, Taiwan, Korea, Vietnam) still exist today. Of these 3 lineages, only the transmission of full ordination for women of the Dharmagupta has "survived"

The major debate is whether and how full ordination for women can be (re)introduced in the (Tibetan) Mulasarvastivada tradition. Can it be granted directly by monks, as was customary in the time of the Buddha, or by nuns of a different lineage? Many well-known Buddhist women and men have campaigned for years in favour of full ordination.

It was only in June 2022 that the extraordinary and historic event of full ordination for women in the Mulasarvastivada tradition took place in Bhutan. This happened thanks to the determination and solidarity of women and the royal family. There is much more to exchange about this subject, but more info can be found on the Sakyadhita France website: <https://sakyadhitafrance.org/wdwd/>

I have always wondered why Buddhists of our time misinterpret the original teachings of the Buddha and other teachers and continue to discriminate against and exclude women.

The Buddha was completely free of any discriminatory attitude. **But why do inequalities and discrimination against women and nuns persist in (Buddhist) society?**

One of the reasons for this is probably that people shy away from change, follow ingrained thought patterns and cling to their habits in order to delude themselves into believing that they are stable. However, this denies the reality that life circumstances are constantly changing and everything is subject to impermanence.

It would be far more beneficial to confront emotional patterns and fears and ensure that our behaviours are in line with the teachings of Buddha, Jesus and other awakened teachers. If they are not, it is the task of our generation to correct and improve behaviours for the benefit of future generations.

The situation of women - regardless of which religion they belong to - is similarly difficult. Women at the time of the Buddha achieved their goal of being accepted into the Sangha thanks to courageous determination and, above all, solidarity across all social classes. Albeit with some compromises (8 rules). Determination and solidarity have also proved their worth with regard to the reintroduction of the full ordination of nuns in Bhutan in more recent history.

Based on this experience and in the knowledge of the interrelatedness and interdependence of all living beings, it was a matter of concern to me and actually made perfect sense for Sakyadhita to become a member of the European Buddhist Union. Sakyadhita France joined the EBU in 2007.

Right at the first Annual General Meeting, I was asked by the EBU to find out how the EBU could become involved in the European institutions. After some searching and discussions, the EBU was offered the opportunity in 2008 to apply for participant status in the Council of Europe. I have been involved in this process from the very beginning and represent the EBU in the Conference of Non-Governmental Organisations since then (CINGO).

Work in the Council of Europe in the Conference of INGOs (CINGO)

At the conference of INGOs, we began our activities in the Human Rights Committee and our involvement in the report "**Human Rights and Religions**". This was and is a very topical issue, as religions have become the focus of current concerns.

Religious diversity is inseparably linked to cultural diversity, which has become an inevitable issue in our society as a result of globalisation. A central component of all religions is love of fellow human beings. But how is it that misogynistic, fanatical and murderous ideas emerge among certain groups of religious followers, triggering so many current conflicts? The four years of work on the rather extensive report - in which the human rights of women in religions also received a chapter - was published in a much too short compilation: <https://rm.coe.int/16806f546c>

In the three years of work that followed, I decided to look further into the subject and was able to do so within the framework of the CINGO Education Committee in a working group on "Intercultural Cities" <https://www.coe.int/en/web/interculturalcities>
The title of the work and the report is: **Reducing anxiety in order to avoid exclusion and violence by developing emotional balance and communication skill. (ANM.4)**

After extensive research and discussions, our working group came to the conclusion that it is above all unconscious fears and a lack of communication skills that most commonly lead to uncontrolled emotional outbursts, discrimination and aggressive misbehaviour.

People in today's urban agglomerations face major challenges. Population density is steadily increasing, people from different cultures are confronted with unfamiliar religious practices and social behaviour. At the same time, people are increasingly suffering from precarious working and living situations, their housing rents are rising, their resources are diminishing, and there is also stress caused by rapid digitalisation and many other factors of insecurity.

All of this can lead to inner destabilisation and severe anxiety. The temptation is then great to blame others and the outside world in order to distract from these unpleasant feelings and the associated helplessness. This increasingly creates a breeding ground for discrimination, populism, hate speech, fundamentalism, violence and terrorism.

A healing antidote is to develop inner wisdom

From a Buddhist perspective, however, the uncertain ground that many people are so afraid of - change and impermanence - is precisely the fundamental reality of this world. The challenge is to accept this and learn to stop seeing change as a threat. How about embracing the inevitable and enjoying the journey?

The political and legal framework alone is obviously not enough to help us to cope with reality. In order for all members of our society to live together more peacefully, we need easily accessible offers of support in difficult life situations, competent dialogue partners and non-judgmental solidarity.

Wisdom, compassion and openness are, as Buddhist and many other teachings emphasise, among the naturally inherent qualities of every human being. In order to rediscover and develop our inner goodness, we need access to effective methods and authentic role models to develop them.

Fear-based discrimination and the violence that often results from it can only be prevented if people learn to perceive their own inner processes more clearly, recognise

misinterpretations such as scapegoat projections and behave in a more appropriate/healthier way.

The working group introduced techniques and methods such as empathic, ethnic or non-violent communication and CEB (Cultivating Emotional Balance). However, for them to be effective, so-called "safe spaces" are needed in which fears, concerns and problems can be addressed openly and in confidence. The working group also collected background knowledge and materials on this aspect.

The Conference of Non-Governmental Organisations (CINGO) has also undergone change. **In 2021-2022, a new strategic plan and a comprehensive reorganisation were implemented.** Like-minded INGOs were able to submit a committee on relevant topics for the first time.

These committees are set up for a three-year term and focus on examining and discussing a specific topical issue relevant to the work and agenda of the Council of Europe. They prepare reports and draft declarations, recommendations and resolutions which are then submitted to the CINGO General Assembly for a vote.

On the initiative of the European Buddhist Union (EBU), the Conference of European Churches (CEC), and other religious (including Catholic) INGOs, **"The Committee for Interreligious & Interconvictional Dialogue (CIRICD)"** was adopted by the Conference of Non-Governmental Organisations (CINGO) in April 2021 by a majority vote. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/ingo/committees>

We base our work on the recommendation of the Parliamentary Assembly **REC-2080 (2015)** entitled "Religious freedom and coexistence in a democratic society" and urge the implementation of point 3 of this recommendation on the **creation of a permanent platform for dialogue between representatives of religions and non-confessional organisations in the Council of Europe.**

In comparison, the European Union has enshrined a dialogue with churches, religious associations or communities, philosophical and non-confessional organisations in Article 17 of the Lisbon Treaty. Only around half of the 47 member states of the Council of Europe benefit from this legislation. It is therefore crucial that the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe follows the recommendation of the Parliamentary Assembly and creates such a platform for dialogue.

The terrible events in the Middle East and their repercussions in Europe show precisely how much a genuine, inclusive and interreligious dialogue is needed, especially when fears are reinforced by conspiracy theories, anti-democratic propaganda etc. through the interplay of political and religious power ambitions.

The aim of our dialogue committee is therefore to put the necessary exchange into practice at all levels, to live it and to compile effective dialogue practices and pass them on to all members of society.

However, credible and constructive interreligious and "interconvictional" dialogue cannot be limited to spiritual leaders. It must involve all parts of society and in particular people from all walks of life, be concretely interfaith/ideological & intercultural in order to bring about real progress.

Everyone follows learnt values, a religion or a world view, which guide them in all areas of life and at different levels of society. Our daily actions are consciously or unconsciously based on these values and are influenced by them. The willingness to question these values and allow an open dialogue are essential for a peaceful society. Values are the motivation and the motor with which everyone engages in society -

positively or destructively. In my opinion, it is illusory to believe that people act in a completely neutral and value-free manner.

Education therefore plays a key role in a much broader sense. The aim of our committee is to collect non-formal education and training programmes for dialogue formats. We aim to support the exchange and application of inspiring dialogue practices to promote mutual understanding and reduce discrimination, for a more peaceful society and within religious and inter-religious organisations. This work could also contribute to a better coordination and cooperation of formal and non-formal educational approaches in the sense of a coalition for "living together in dignity on equal terms".

Our Dialogue Committee is already a living example of interreligious and interconvictional cooperation within the Council of Europe and beyond. We jointly prepare **webinars** on topics such as: "Identity-Formation", "Importance of education for interreligious & interconvictional Dialogue" etc. and publish them afterwards under Publications on our website:

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/ingo/interreligious-and-interconvictional-dialogue>

We are also open to collaborating with other committees, such as the next webinar on 20 November 2023: The Interreligious & Interconfessional Dimension in the Integration of Migrants, Refugees and Asylum Seekers: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/ingo/-/the-interreligious-and-interconvictional-dimension-of-welcoming-migrants-refugees-and-asylum-seekers>

In spring 2024, a webinar on the **situation of women in religions** will take place. The title, topic, content and speakers are currently being discussed.

The principle of **Interconvictionality** - derives from the English word "conviction" - is very important to us. A dialogue should be open to all people/beliefs, serve personal development, social cohesion and peaceful coexistence in a multi-religious society or organisation. The basic idea of Interconvictionality is to promote a sincere discourse between people of different beliefs and, if necessary, to encourage them to "tackle the issue".

This applies in particular to the situation of women in religions. This topic deserves - as in this forum this weekend - to finally be treated properly and sustainably. According to a survey conducted in 2023, 60% of Europeans and even 70% of Germans believe that religion is a cause of domestic violence.

<https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/166496/umfrage/meinung-ueber-religion-als-ursache-fuer-haeusliche-gewalt-gegen-frauen/>

Universal human rights should also include a right to spiritual/mental development, a global ethic that also considers people in their spiritual dimension.

Article 18 of the Declaration of Universal Human Rights states, among other things: The right to freedom of thought and conscience is the right of everyone to form his thoughts and conscience autonomously without undue outside influence. Any interference, such as brainwashing or the use of drugs to manipulate the conscious or subconscious mind, is prohibited.

It's time for us all to get out of our mental gender traps and mental ruts and free ourselves from them. I am available to answer any questions you may have.

ANMERKUNGEN/ REMARKS:

The above speech was given in German and has been translated with deepl.com into English

ANM.1: The beginning of all things

" At this time, beings were not born into this world. They were created by their own thoughts, nourished by joy and radiating their own light. This world then consisted only of a huge layer of water, in complete darkness: the moon and the sun did not manifest themselves; neither do women and men manifest themselves; the beings were simply seen as beings"

First, in dramatic manner, a savoury substance appears on the surface of the water, "like the foam that forms on the surface of boiled milk when it has cooled". A being tastes it and finds it pleasant. The desire arises in him. Other beings do the same and also find it pleasant after tasting it. And desire enters them. Then the beings feed on this substance. When they do so, their bodies lose their own radiant light, the moon and the sun appear, then the night and the day, the months, the seasons and the years. There comes a time when the beings who nourish themselves experience that their bodies become rough, and some have a beautiful body and others an ugly one. The beautiful ones are proud of themselves, and when they have this pride, the savoury substance disappears and they exclaim, "What a savoury taste! This is a pleasure", and they miss it."

Other food appeared and disappeared again: delicious mushrooms, then delicate lianas and finally rice, which the creatures ate morning and evening without having to grow it. "And their bodies became coarser and coarser... The female sex appeared in the woman and the male sex in the man. The woman and the man gazed at each other long and closely and sensual desire arose in them. Burning passion entered their bodies and some of them mated. Others who saw them threw sand, ashes or dung at them and said: "Get lost, you unclean creature! How can a being be able to do such a thing to another being?!!"

Thus, things that were once conventionally considered part of the disorder of things are now conventionally considered compatible with the order of things."

Dominique Trotignon, from the book "La Femme", under the direction of Evelyne Martini (with Malek Chebel, Vasundhara Filiozat, Arlette Fontan, Philippe Haddad, Elisabeth Parmentier, Dominique Trotignon), collection "Ce qu'en disent les religions", Editions de l'Atelier, Paris 2002

ANM.2: Zur Debatte N° 215 75 F - 2/2013 page 39 (from a magazine of the Catholic Academy in Bavaria, in the article "Buddha's feminine side"), Author Vajramala S. Thielow.

ANM. 2A: Book references: First Buddhist Women: Songs and Stories from the Therigatha, Susan Murcott (Parallax Press, ISBN 0-938077-42-2. - The Gathering: A Story of the First Buddhist Women, Dr. V. R. Sasson, Equinox Publishing 978-1800503403

ANM.3: The Legality of Bhikkhuni Ordination by Bhikkhu Analayo, center for Buddhist studies, University of Hamburg, in Journal of Buddhists Ethics, ISSN 1076-9005
<http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/category/volume-20-2013/>

ANM.4: Sakyadhita France Website <https://sakyadhitafrance.org/sakyadhita-et-lebu/>

„Reducing anxiety to avoid exclusion & violence by developing emotional balance and communication skills.“ Download: <https://sakyadhitafrance.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Report-Reducing-AnxietyExclusion-GB.pdf> , Text also available in French.



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