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Western female dharma teachers<sup>2</sup> hold a particular ability to cultivate presence and mindfulness<sup>3</sup> as a result of their unique life experiences. This paper follows examples from the lives of two first generation Western Buddhist nuns. These two women, Bhiksuni Thubten Chodron and Venerable Ayya Khema represent the embodiment of dharma in action<sup>4</sup>. They are capable of this as a result of both their life experiences as the obstacles they face as female monastics in the West. Their life experiences and the insight they gained from them also provides a context to the dharma that makes it relatable to followers in the West. Western female lay teachers also, exhibit a sense of equanimity in their teaching by using new and innovative methods that make the dharma relevant for Westerners, as well as in the compassion they convey to their students in doing so. Their experience and expanded perspective spanning several continents has allowed them to develop a presence to the dharma that they might otherwise not have gained. It is the cultivation of presence and equanimity that will bring fluidity to the dharma within the ever changing social climates of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By contrast, the community of Buddhist & feminist scholars has provided a typically Western response to combating the institutionalized oppression of women by examining doctrine to find misogyny and restructuring classic interpretations for a more balanced view of gender.<sup>5</sup> Academia requires that we take a position; we divide ideas and concepts in order to prove a point. It does not often require that we be present and non-dualistic.

Before exploring the feminine embodiment of the dharma in action, it is important to examine what occurs within a dualistic perception of doctrine. Effects of a dualistic viewpoint have proven particularly divisive between the doctrines of Ancient Indian<sup>6</sup> and Mahayana Buddhism. The beginnings of Mahayana Buddhism are often disputed, but we know that much of Mahayana doctrine suggests a strong resistance to ancient Indian

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<sup>1</sup> I am a Westerner and a female, raised Catholic, and a new observer to Buddhist doctrine and philosophy. My understanding of the dharma is largely experiential. Having little formal Buddhist education and not having spent my any part of my life in a Buddhist culture or in a Buddhist household in which particular doctrine is enforced has provided me a certain freedom to encounter the Buddha's teachings as they pertain to my personal experiences. I have spent years of informal Buddhist education and meditative practice without specific reference to doctrine. After years of internalizing what I believed to be the Buddha's teachings through meditative practice, I recently sought out formal instruction through classroom education and reading commentary on Buddhism and sacred texts. The terminology that I use, due to my unique perception and experiences, will not be exclusive to one school or doctrine.

<sup>2</sup> The term, western female dharma teachers, as it is used, encapsulates both female monastics and female lay teachers. The term western female dharma practitioners will be used to describe female practitioners who focus primarily on meditative practice and, in some instances, less on traditional religious training.

<sup>3</sup> Mindfulness is synonymous with presence, equanimity, and meditation in Zen Buddhism. Mindfulness occurs through meditation. Meditation is the process of looking deeply into the heart of things. Therefore, meditation, in this sense, does not refer to the commonly understood physical practice of sitting with the eyes closed and therefore can be practiced during any physical activity. The use of a Zen text does not implicate judgment by the author that the other schools of Buddhism do not have congruent ideologies. Nhat Hanh, Thich, True Love: A Practice for Awakening the Heart (Shambala Publications 2006) pg. 3& 50.

<sup>4</sup> The term dharma in action, as it is used, essentially, is another term for presence. 'Action', in this sense, does not mean physical or phonetic activity, but rather, the still activity of being, cultivated within one's heart, which innately fosters a naturally inclusive and loving, outward environmental relationship that results from mindfulness.

<sup>5</sup> Gross, R. Buddhism after Patriarchy (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1993) pg.3

<sup>6</sup> Ancient Indian Buddhism in this context is not to be interpreted as identical to today's Theravada Buddhism in ideological beliefs. Gross, R.M., Buddhism after Patriarchy (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1993)

Buddhist doctrine<sup>7</sup>. A highly polemic Mahayana response to ancient Indian Buddhism began to incorporate the use of women. Mainly in mystical form, these women were not of flesh, but rather, fictitious characters that were used allegorically to prove ideological beliefs. Female figures began appearing in certain Mahayana doctrines as powerful and enlightened teachers. Not only were the female protagonists often young, uneducated, and not ordained, they came in stark contrast to their ancient Indian Buddhist counterparts who acted as their unenlightened, unwise, and unworthy opposition. In some cases, these monks were even depictions of famous monks of Indian Buddhism.<sup>8</sup> The Mahayana believed that their new insight into doctrine “unfolded the manifestation of the Buddha’s original message, making manifest what had not been made clear”<sup>9</sup> by ancient Indian Buddhism in orthodox doctrine. The effects of this were two-fold.

First, the doctrines were written in a way that naturally determined a division between the groups as they implicate the Mahayana’s desire to have entirely new and separate teachings from the older forms of Buddhism. Secondly, this led to widened dissent among the groups, fostering defensive relations and attitudes toward one another, resulting in further division among them. This also created a fight for power and avoidance, and by definition, broadened the spectrum of duality rather than minimizing it. This is one example of the way in which dualistic viewpoints work to divide relationship. This leads to the conclusion that relying on doctrine or academic text to validate or determine the true meaning of the Buddha’s teachings can be problematic. In this case, not only because the contributions of Buddhism’s women today dismantle the value of such contention, but because the text, from whichever doctrine is used, will more than likely be considered the true and full message of the Buddha<sup>10</sup> by only a percentage of the Buddhist community and the breadth of influence may be minimized significantly. In the same way, the Buddhist feminist then runs the risk of being influential to an even smaller proportion. And furthermore, the use of doctrine as it pertains to Western Buddhist feminism is particularly problematic in terms of creating a balanced or restored view of “the feminine” in Buddhism, because it relies on textual evidence that is naturally unbalanced in a dualistic state.

To further complicate matters, feminism, utilized alone, finds relevance only in doctrinal interpretations as they relate to women. For even feminism requires that every situation be viewed through a particular lens and with a particular filter. While many scholars lean also on their Buddhist and scholastic training for well-rounded interpretations<sup>11</sup>, the doctrine, ultimately, is still examined for logical relevance and presented in an intellectual context. While it should be noted that the confluence of feminism and Buddhism has produced several generations of women who looked to Buddhism with a genuine spiritual appetite, openness, and inspiration to lead,<sup>12</sup> overall, it is in one’s ability to cultivate presence to themselves and to the Buddha’s teachings that has the potential to leave the longest lasting and far-reaching effect in the West and to bring them fluidity within the ever-changing global religious climate. It seems that the more we begin to divide or compartmentalize ideas and concepts, particularly with regard

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<sup>7</sup> Refer to anti-Hinayana\* rhetoric. Gross, R.M., *Buddhism after Patriarchy* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1993) pg.55

<sup>8</sup> This example is used by the Rita Gross to point out the shift in doctrinal teaching, as it pertains to the perception of the feminine, from Ancient Indian to Mahayana Buddhism. It is not necessarily intended to pinpoint the effects of the dissent among the schools.(Gross, R.M., *Buddhism after Patriarchy* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 57-58

<sup>9</sup> Gross, R.M., *Buddhism after Patriarchy* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1993) pg. 56

<sup>10</sup> .Gross, R. *Buddhism after Patriarchy* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1993) pg. 56

<sup>11</sup> Gross, R. *Buddhism after Patriarchy* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1993) pg.5

<sup>12</sup> Wetzel S., *Westward Dharma Buddhism Beyond Asia*, article: Neither Monk nor Nun Western Buddhists as Full-time Practitioners. (London, England: University of California Press, Ltd.2002) pg. 279. Endotes pg. 312

to Buddhist teaching, whether it is doctrinal or academic, the greater the risk of Buddhism as a whole being caught within the confines of Western academic consciousness. Buddhist academia also runs the risk of blending in with other Western religious discourse. Therefore, academia cannot raise the collective consciousness of the western world as it can only perpetuate division already innate within a largely individualistic society.

If utilized as the primary method of transferring Buddhist values and principles to the West, then the true value of the dharma, the innate messages of the Buddha's teaching, can easily become moot in the translation. While academia is certainly good and can introduce the dharma to Westerners unable or unwilling to experience the fullness of the dharma through practice, as Western culture is already highly intellectualized, Buddhist practices must be taught and implemented in order to bring presence and integrity to the dharma in the West where spiritual practice and transformation are not deeply engrained in the common culture. This makes Western female dharma teachers particularly valuable to the livelihood of Buddhism in the West, making it fresh within a newly expanding Western religious milieu. As mentioned above, this paper will examine the ways in which two Western women: Bhiksuni Thubton Chodron and Venerable Ayya Khema, represent the dharma in action. First, we will examine the unique circumstances that led them to the cultivation of the dharma within themselves.

Buddhist women in the West exhibit a new and unorthodox set of requirements in terms of what is to be gained from Buddhist practice. Often, they are in search of a genuine internal balance and liberation, sometimes stemming from experiences of suffering and uncertainty, sometimes with the desire for a deeper sense of environmental liberation from the familial and societal pressures that women often face in the Western culture<sup>13</sup>. While it may be easy to believe that contemporary Western Buddhist women bring with them a great deal of life experience that has undeniably influenced the course of Buddhism's integration into Western religious culture, being a Buddhist nun in Western culture carries with it a unique set of challenges. These are compounded by the fact that monastic women, in particular, are faced with the two-sided coin of discrimination in a Western world that does not always necessarily understand or appreciate them. The result of this is two-fold for some teachers. The reality of this can prompt feelings of insecurity and become a cause of discomfort for Western nuns. In short, in the Western world, nuns are consistently required to be present to their emotions and reactions, denying them the luxury of cultivating their internal liberation at a later date.

Bhiksuni Thubten Chodron is a Western nun who lives within this tension. As a monastic nun, she does not have the luxury of blending in with her environment. Although not always the case, she often faces stigmatization and condemnation by westerners who do not agree or understand her lifestyle. She could choose to view this backlash as an invitation for responding with righteous anger, or at least harboring it. Instead, she chooses to recognize the value in these uncomfortable experiences in that they not only hold her accountable for her emotions, but that they require her to look within herself to cultivate her own liberation from the insecurities that arise.<sup>14</sup> Her choice to be mindful of her emotions is self-evident of her devotion to dharma in action. The benefits of monasticism itself as a whole, particularly female monasticism are also

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<sup>13</sup> Wetzel S., *Westward Dharma Buddhism Beyond Asia*, article: *Neither Monk nor Nun Western Buddhists as Full-time Practitioners*. (London, England: University of California Press, Ltd.2002) pg. 314

<sup>14</sup> Chodron, Bhiksu Thubten, *Buddhist Women on the Edge*, article: *You're Becoming a What? Living as a Western Buddhist Nun* (Berkeley Ca, North Atlantic Books 1996) pg. 231, 232

questioned in the West and provide another opportunity for Western female monastics to deepen their practice.

Being a Buddhist monastic in the West, where disillusionment from monasticism is widely prevalent, Western female teachers are often judged as “conservative and traditional” both qualities maligned by Western egalitarian social codes. Monasticism is often viewed in the West as hierarchal and repressive in nature. Thubten Chodron has encountered the effects of this social ideology first hand. For example, monastic women are often judged as being afraid of the emotional challenges of intimacy, avoiding the topic altogether by becoming a nun, and therefore, are sexually repressed. Westerners who think that monastics are lazy and who question the value of meditation over the consumer values of the West, often label monastics simply as resource consumers that do not give back to society.<sup>15</sup> This affected Thubten Chodron personally when the difficulty of having lived as a foreigner in Asia for many years created in her a genuine desire to be at home in Western dharma circles. Upon her return to the states, however, she found that she was sometimes marginalized for being part of, what many Westerners believe, is an oppressive and overtly patriarchal system. Nevertheless, she views this as a prime opportunity to deepen her practice:

I have had to reexamine my reasons for being a monastic, she says. The reasons remain valid and the monastic lifestyle definitely benefits me. It has become clear to me that my discomfort from the judgment was due to my attachment to other’s acceptance to which, part of my practice is to subdue such attachment.<sup>16</sup>

Again, while she could view these struggles as a reason to disrobe, instead she uses them as a way to strengthen her practice of self-meditation, allowing her to remain steadfast in her lifestyle choice and leading her to develop a deeper sense of presence and equanimity. Resulting from these circumstances, she further recognizes that some people think that the monastic model is overemphasized in Asia; but she still recognizes the need to resist swinging to the other extreme by presenting only a lay version of Buddhism to the West. She notes, “Because people have different dispositions and tendencies, all lifestyles must be accepted in the panorama of practitioners.”<sup>17</sup> From this example, her evolution of consciousness and insight are made evident. Her decision to be present to her own responses, when faced with this stigmatism, reflects not only her commitment to her own development but to the dharma itself. These situations require Western nuns in particular, to be present to their internal dialogue requiring them again and again to reflect upon the teachings from a place of presence and equanimity.

Living in the West where upholding certain precepts can also present a challenge, nuns from certain traditions carefully study the Venaya to discover the Buddha’s purposes for creating each precept in order to find the true message that the Buddha was teaching. This requires the nuns again to meditate deeply on the messages within the precepts as they do not have the option of following them to the letter. They do this to experience how the dharma is active in the context of their own lives. Chodron explains how this has affected her personally:

If we followed the precept [that nuns cannot ride in a vehicle] literally, it would be very difficult to go to receive or give teachings. The Buddha’s concern in creating

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<sup>15</sup> Chodron, Bhiksu Thubten, *Buddhist Women on the Edge*, article: You’re Becoming a What? Living as a Western Buddhist Nun (Berkeley Ca, North Atlantic Books 1996) pg.231

<sup>16</sup> Chodron, Bhiksu Thubten, *Buddhist Women on the Edge*, article: You’re Becoming a What? Living as a Western Buddhist Nun (Berkeley Ca, North Atlantic Books 1996) pg.232

<sup>17</sup> Chodron, Bhiksu Thubten, *Buddhist Women on the Edge*, article: You’re Becoming a What? Living as a Western Buddhist Nun (Berkeley Ca, North Atlantic Books 1996) pg.232

this precept was for nuns to avoid causing suffering to others or cultivating arrogance. We adapt this precept by not riding in expensive vehicles and to avoid becoming proud if someone drives us in one.<sup>18</sup>

This reflection provides validity and context for the world of the Western monastic woman, cultivating and inherent sense of equanimity and allowing her to see the value of the Western lifestyle as it pertains to Buddhism as a whole as well as the universal nature of the Buddha's teachings. This allows her to be more accepting and present to the needs of differing social structures like those of other Buddhist countries and the West. She demonstrates this when she goes on to explain that, whereas interpretations of these precepts vary by individual and tradition, "we need to be tolerant of these differences and use them to motivate us to reflect on the precepts more deeply".<sup>19</sup> Not unlike Bhiksuni Thubten Chodron who was ordained in the Tibetan tradition, Venerable Ayya Khema, ordained a Theravada nun, cultivated presence as a result of her challenging and diverse experiences both as a Western woman and nun.

Before her passing in 1997, Ayya Khema was ordained nun at the age of 55. By that time in her life, she had been a mother, a grandmother, and former wife. She had lived a comfortable and sheltered life as a child, she had been both wealthy and poor as an adult, and in the course of a few years, she had traveled through South America, India, Pakistan, Nepal, Kashmir, and Hunza. Her devotion to the dharma in action was evidenced in her unflinching willingness to leave the leniency of attachment to the external world behind, in favor of the dharma, bringing her life-long search for inner liberation, full circle.<sup>20</sup> Highly diversified life experiences and copious traveling are particular to Western Buddhist nun because typically, Asian nuns are ordained at young and malleable ages with very little life experience and their relationship to the dharma is limited to the structural ideology of one school.<sup>21</sup> Ayya Khema's experiences and reflection made the dharma real for her even before she became a nun. Her experience of the dharma at that time was largely experiential and cultivated, and so was not something unattainable or limited to the study of one discipline of doctrine, of which she had little knowledge, but something found innate within herself and her experiences.

Therefore, like Bhiksuni Thubten Chodron, this gave her the opportunity to develop a presence to the teachings as they pertained to her life, that would ultimately lead her to the knowledge that the dharma was not only within her, but found also within the discipline of doctrinal study and practice. This indicates the balance and the depth of her full circle journey. Through this, she realized that the dharma she experienced within her was a reflection of the truths held within the sacred texts, but may have never discovered this if she had not had the opportunity to discover the dharma within herself first. This is why her experience of the dharma was so important; it led her to choose Buddhism on her own accord because she recognized the teachings as inherent within her, making sense of their inner personal experiences. This made her devotion to the dharma that much deeper and profound. As all Western nuns become ordained by choice, including Bhiksuni Thubten Chodron, this is another gift of the Western female nun both to her students and to the flourishing of the dharma in the West. By the time she was ordained, she had already discovered that the "world could not bring one inner peace and

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<sup>18</sup> Chodron, Bhiksu Thubten, *Women's Buddhism/Buddhism's Women*, article: *Western Buddhist Nuns: A New Phenomenon in an Ancient Tradition* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications 2000) pg. 87

<sup>19</sup> Chodron, Bhiksu Thubten, *Women's Buddhism/Buddhism's Women*, article: *Western Buddhist Nuns: A New Phenomenon in an Ancient Tradition* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications 2000) pg. 87

<sup>20</sup> Khema, Ayya, *I Give you My Life: The Autobiography of a Western Nun* (Boston & London: Shambala Publications 1998) pg. 3

<sup>21</sup> Chodron, Bhiksu Thubten, *Women's Buddhism/Buddhism's Women*, article: *Western Buddhist Nuns: A New Phenomenon in an Ancient Tradition* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications 2000) pg. 81

inner happiness, because everything that happens in the world is impermanent”<sup>22</sup> With this it was clear that her final journey in life was to be the journey within herself. The opportunity for these diverse life experiences and challenges, created a resulting insight and thus, a particular advantage to the Western female nun as they provide added opportunity to develop presence, equanimity and impermanence. One such experience occurred during the time of her worldly travels, when she was together with her husband and son, living in their caravan Jeep. They had decided to park and stay one night in the Automobile Club in Calcutta. Upon spotting a man on the corner selling oranges, she, still named Ilse at the time because she had yet many years to go before she would be ordained, gave her son 5 rupees and instructed him to buy a bag from the man on the street. When he left and never returned, Ilse and her husband went into panic:

Maybe Jeff had misunderstood me and gone to the market...In Calcutta; we had the additional worry that children here were kidnapped and then: trained as beggars and made to live as part of beggar families. In any case, we were terribly frightened.<sup>23</sup>

Just as the motorcyclists from the automobile club were set to comb the streets for Ilse’s missing boy, Jeff re-appeared nonchalant carrying the bag of oranges his mother had instructed him to buy. In frenzy, both Ilse and her husband Gerd jumped all over Jeffrey. They pleaded with him for the answers to his tardiness. He innocently explained to them that as he was buying oranges, a man with a cow came by. The man would milk the cow on the street and then sell the freshly drawn pitcher of milk to the woman of the house. Jeff explained to them how he tagged along, helping the man tend the cow, eventually milking the cow himself and selling the pitchers of milk to the housewives. And that, in the four hours that this had gone on, he never once noticed the time.<sup>24</sup> Upon seeing Jeffrey’s freedom and security, Ilse decided that it was time that she resolved to:

Do away with the constant pursuit of the child in my thoughts as well as my ongoing fear for his life. Because these things made it impossible to take joy in this life....I wanted to get rid of this constant state of fetter...I loved my children and still do, but my attachment and fear could only have a negative effect on my love. My children do not belong to me, they belong to themselves. I am not their keeper. We are linked to each other but not bound to each other-that is a huge difference.<sup>25</sup>

By this example, we can see how her uncertainty and fear, brought with it, presence and clarity to Ilse as well. Her pain and diverse experiences helped her gain a sense of impermanence and resulting equanimity. These types of fearful situations were not uncommon for Ayya Khema in her early life. As a Jewish child in war-torn Germany, she experienced consistent uncertainty, which developed in her a desire to keep looking for the answer to internal peace. When her parents were forced to leave her behind in Germany, in order to escape, she accompanied them to the train station to see them off, but harbored an immense fear and pain at the loss of them:

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<sup>22</sup> Khema, Ayya, *I Give you My Life: The Autobiography of a Western Nun* (Boston & London: Shambala Publications 1998) pg. 146

<sup>23</sup> Khema, Ayya, *I Give you My Life: The Autobiography of a Western Nun* (Boston & London: Shambala Publications 1998) pg. 115

<sup>24</sup> Khema, Ayya, *I Give you My Life: The Autobiography of a Western Nun* (Boston & London: Shambala Publications 1998) pg. 115

<sup>25</sup> Khema, Ayya, *I Give you My Life: The Autobiography of a Western Nun* (Boston & London: Shambala Publications 1998) pg. 116

Hardly had my mother reached her compartment [of the train] when she fainted. I stood outside; my father waved at the window. I would have loved to have fainted myself, I was so afraid being left alone in Berlin...There was still a few friends left. But there was also fear-what would happen if the Nazi's came to get me? ...Every day, I felt this fear more strongly.<sup>26</sup>

As Hitler's regime began its take-over in Germany, well before; then Ilse, would be left on her own, the Nazis instituted the Jewish poll tax. Since her family was extremely well-to-do, her father's earned fortune was extracted almost entirely:

I went with my father to the ministry of finance office; as he left the room, he broke into tears. That was the first time I ever saw my father cry. At that moment my sense of security was shattered once and for all. From then on, I knew that the world was not safe and secure.<sup>27</sup>

With this statement, the full circle of her awareness is made clear. From a childhood riddled with immense struggle, to the realization of her freedom from almost paralyzing fear, she recalls the developing consciousness that linked the two together:

Today, I see that my past has led me onto this path. My experiences made it possible for me to let go of a great deal of personal fear, fear for my own life and fear for my fellow human beings. I have seen that it is possible to deal with any situation in life, whether it is in the Amazon basin or the thin air of Hunza. You can get through anything if you just go with the flow of events.<sup>28</sup>

It is certain that these struggles; her pain and suffering, planted also the seed for the cultivation of her internal freedom and presence, serving as convincing evidence that she was at a distinct advantage as a result of having had them. Thus, she held a distinct advantage for gaining presence and through her experiences as a Westerner, making her a valuable and relatable teacher in the Western world. The compilation of events that led her to seek out her inner journey, culminated in her full mindfulness of her fear, bringing her to a state of equanimity and non-attachment to the external world:

I was 55 years old and I had seen the world...What does the world still have to offer me? The moment had come to say goodbye to the world...But we cannot withdraw entirely from the world. As long as we have a body, we have to talk; we have to have contact with people. When you teach, the students who come to you bring the world with them. By saying goodbye to the world, I only mean entering into a new phase in which you experience the world as an observer, not as one who continues to be drawn into its passions.<sup>29</sup>

She both teaches and confirms here that her compassion and clarity were also cultivated within the presence of equanimity and non-attachment as she goes on to state,

The observer has a lot of sympathy and love for the people around him, but he no longer permits himself to become entangled in their feelings and destinies."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Khema, Ayya, *I Give you My Life: The Autobiography of a Western Nun* (Boston & London: Shambala Publications 1998) pg. 14

<sup>27</sup> Khema, Ayya, *I Give you My Life: The Autobiography of a Western Nun* (Boston & London: Shambala Publications 1998) pg. 13

<sup>28</sup> Khema, Ayya, *I Give you My Life: The Autobiography of a Western Nun* (Boston & London: Shambala Publications 1998) pg. 149

<sup>29</sup> Khema, Ayya, *I Give you My Life: The Autobiography of a Western Nun* (Boston & London: Shambala Publications 1998) pg. 148

<sup>30</sup> Khema, Ayya, *I Give you My Life: The Autobiography of a Western Nun* (Boston & London: Shambala Publications 1998) pg. 148

There is a beautiful word: compassion. At the beginning, one has empathy for those who have passions. But the goal of Buddhist teaching is to get rid of these passions. Teachers try to communicate this to their students, and in teaching they themselves learn it ever more deeply. Only if in teaching you experience yourself as still learning can you have what people call authority. Only if that is the case do you touch people's hearts.<sup>31</sup>

What Ayya Khema teaches us at the culmination of her story is that ultimately, the prerequisite for helping others is that one must first cultivate presence; mindfulness and compassion for themselves, in order to cultivate a loving presence to the other.<sup>32</sup> And with this, in the present communication from teacher to student, the love of the dharma transforms not only the heart of the student, but the teacher as well, serving as an awakening, an invitation, sparking a deeper and deeper cultivation of the dharma inherent within each of them, revealing the universality of the dharma. This is what is meant by dharma in action.

For both women, their ability to assimilate their life experiences with the doctrine and discipline of monastic life is a reflection of their mindfulness and internal balance. Ayya Khema noted:

[Students] have to feel that this teacher who talks so cleverly has been through learning himself, and has accomplished something I can emulate; this person does not talk like a book, but from the heart.<sup>33</sup>

Here, the value of the dharma in action, or in other words, presence, when teaching the dharma is made clear as well as the value of both Thubten Chodron and Ayya Khema as they manifest the dharma in action as a result of their life experiences both as Western women and nuns. This is why the cultivation of presence is so essential to the flourishing of the dharma in the West; because it makes the dharma inherently relatable, carrying with it the love and fluidity of the Buddha's teachings that is naturally present within the loving exchange between people who are grounded and present to themselves and each other. In this way, it is effortless and natural, and is therefore not bound by new and ever changing social and cultural constructs. This relatability between teacher and student makes the dharma a part of the human experience, something attainable by students rather than something only cultivated and practiced by monastics. This, in itself, brings fluidity to the dharma in the West and beyond that, in that it can potentially be realized and upheld by all sentient beings. However, the structure of Asian monastic and lay communities will not translate relatable to Western culture. Therefore, the development of the dharma in the West will rely heavily on experiential practice. Additionally then, the formal monastic training and study of the nuns is necessary in providing a grounding and integrity to the teachings in the West where they are new, and where spiritual development is not heavily engrained into family, community, or cultural expectations.

Their experiences, their presence, and formal training both in the East and the West, naturally provided them a unique balance and comprehensive understanding of the dharma allowing them to be powerful role models and leaders for others nuns, and making them valuable in the formation and development of a functioning Western

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<sup>31</sup> Khema, Ayya, *I Give you My Life: The Autobiography of a Western Nun* (Boston & London: Shambala Publications 1998) pg. 148

<sup>32</sup> To love, in the context of Buddhism, is to be there. This is cultivated by one bringing their true presence to the here and now, often developed with meditative practice. Nhat Hanh, Thich, *True Love: A Practice for Awakening the Heart* (Shambala Publications 2006) pg. 5&6

<sup>33</sup> Khema, Ayya, *I Give you My Life: The Autobiography of a Western Nun* (Boston & London: Shambala Publications 1998) pg. 148

sangha. Thubten Chodron's founding of Sravasti Abbey, for example, addresses the need for monastic gender equality in order for Buddhism to survive in the West by incorporating the value that men and women train side by side as equals. She also utilizes Western technology such as audio and video recordings for easy access to her dharma talks.<sup>34</sup> She emphasizes the practical application of Buddha's teachings in daily life and is especially skilled at explaining them in ways easily understood and practiced by Westerners, and is well-known for her warm, humorous, and lucid teachings.<sup>35</sup> Ayya Khema developed the Buddha-Haus in Allagu, Germany where she lived and held seminars and retreats for hundreds of people in her time there leading up to her death in 1997. Some of her retreats were also held at the St. Albert Dominican monastery, much to her delight, as she had the intention of developing ecumenical dialogue and encouraging the awareness that presence is available within all traditions.<sup>36</sup> This again demonstrates her presence and equanimity which again, undoubtedly helped provide context and a pathway for the acceptance and validation of Buddhist practice within Western spiritual traditions.

She also wrote 25 books during her life time that are written for both Pali, German, and English speaking students as to serve her desire for the dharma to be spread to as many people as possible.<sup>37</sup> Ayya Khema was one of three women chosen by H.H. The Dalai Lama in 1987 to form the first conference of the Sakyadhita, now also the International Association of Buddhist Women, which did and still does work as a Buddhist women's support network, also encouraging gender equality and leadership among Buddhist women both lay and monastic. Among many other tasks, Sakyadhita helps women become fully ordained Bhikkhunis in both the Theravada and Tibetan traditions, they help nuns develop leadership roles within their sangha, and help to alleviate struggles and promote the health and well-being of nuns living in poverty worldwide.<sup>38</sup>

In their experiences and challenges, they are given an almost inherent gift, being Western nuns, for strengthening their inward practice and presence which is apparent and culminates in the manifestation of programs and teachings that blend both Eastern and Western ideologies, valuing the contributions of both equally, and cultivating a balance and equanimity that allows each to support the purpose of the other. Undoubtedly, their challenges and rewards are experienced by many monastic women in the West. Thubten Chodron describes her challenges; not limiting them only to her, but as challenges common for Western nuns in general.<sup>39</sup> As Ayya Khema cultivated freedom and an internal awareness of the dharma well before she was ordained a nun, her story in particular serves as evidence that mindfulness and subsequently, an internal cultivation of the dharma is available through experience and reflection. Therefore, one's ability to

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<sup>34</sup>Chodron, T. (n.d.). <http://www.sravastiabbey.org/index.html>. Retrieved Feb 4, 2012, from Sravasti Abbey: A Buddhist Monastic Community: <http://www.sravastiabbey.org/index.html>- Thubten Chodron was also a resident teacher at Amithaba Buddhist Center in Singapore, she studied three years at Dorje Pamo Monastery in France, and was a teacher at Dharma Friendship Foundation in Seattle, WA. for 10 years.

<sup>35</sup> Chodron, B. T. (n.d.). *Biography*. Retrieved Feb 4, 2012, from Venerable Thubten Chodron's Home Page: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/Biography/index.html>

<sup>36</sup> Khema, Ayya, *I Give you My Life: The Autobiography of a Western Nun* (Boston & London: Shambala Publications 1998) pg.189

<sup>37</sup> Khema, Ayya, *I Give you My Life: The Autobiography of a Western Nun* (Boston & London: Shambala Publications 1998) pg. 192

<sup>38</sup>Khema, Ayya, *I Give you My Life: The Autobiography of a Western Nun* (Boston & London: Shambala Publications 1998) pg. 181- Sakydhita provides a plethora of other contributions to Buddhist women, both lay and monastic that are not named here. Refer to: *Women's Buddhism/Buddhism's Women*, article: Wurst, R., Sakyadhita in Western Europe: A Personal Perspective (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications 2000) pg. 100

<sup>39</sup> Chodrun, Bhiksu Thubten, *Women's Buddhism/Buddhism's Women*, article: Western Buddhist Nuns: A New Phenomenon in an Ancient Tradition (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications 2000) pg. 81-87

cultivate the dharma within their own heart and to be transformed by it is not exclusive and transcends the practice and ideological parameters of any one doctrine, school, or social structure. This reveals the dharma to be a universal truth and therefore, reflective of a larger fundamental human potential. For this reason it is understandable that Buddhist practice is becoming more desired, relevant, and applicable to Western culture and why it was inevitable that the dharma spread throughout the West in the first place. As we have seen with the presence and training of Western monastics like Venerable Thubten Chodron and Venerable Ayya Khema, this also means that the Buddha's teachings hold true even as they merge with new lands and new ideologies. Therefore, new and changing, culturally relevant expressions of active dharma, the cultivation of this potential, non-exclusive and superseding the boundaries of preconceived notions, ideologies, and widely differing cultural environments; is not so much an evolution or a dismantling of the Buddha's teachings, but another expression of them; an acceptance of the Buddha's teachings; an intrinsic expression of them, giving proof of the fundamental truth of their universality and ability to transcend divisions and cultural boundaries with compassion and love. It is this that enables the dharma congruency and practicality in the Western world.

Western female lay practitioners are also good at supporting Buddhism's permeation into the West. Like female monastic teachers, their perspective spanning both Eastern and Western ideologies and social codes, accompanied by experiences that are typical to secularly focused cultures like those of many western countries; provide western female lay practitioners the insight that allows them to be compassionate to the non-traditional expectations of the Western religious milieu. As Buddhism begins to move into secular settings in the West, many western students are coming to Buddhism for reasons other than to form a religious path. In fact, Buddhism in the West is frequently not practiced as a religion and many Westerners who engage in Buddhist practices are not Buddhist converts.<sup>40</sup> Although most lay dharma practitioners are trained in the teachings of one tradition or sub-school<sup>41</sup>, secularly focused meditative practices are often more relevant to the lifestyles and needs of western students. While not religiously focused, the balance of this teaching is found in their ability to be compassionate to the needs of their students and to merge both experiential and pragmatic methods into their teaching styles.

Their compassion and understanding, along with their ability to adjust traditional teaching methods in order to focus on the innovative, experiential and pragmatic methods that are the most relevant and desired by western students is an external reflection of their internal balance, compassion, and dedication to the dharma. The culmination of these factors allows the integration of the dharma into western culture. And, while male lay teachers too can certainly understand the needs and desires of western students, for western students who are seeking ways in which to apply Buddhist principles pragmatically through Buddhist meditative practices into their daily lives, lay female dharma teachers seem to be better able to relate to students, "because women tend to teach more on practical levels and put less emphasis on traditional and dogmatic aspects of the teachings."<sup>42</sup> This in fact, works to the advantage of these western students because the dharma is as a result, largely expressed physically and through the senses. Students are therefore given the opportunity to recognize the dharma as it permeates

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<sup>40</sup> Wallace A., *Westward Dharma Buddhism Beyond Asia*, article: *The Spectrum of Buddhist Practice in the West*. (London, England: University of California Press, Ltd.2002) pg. 35

<sup>41</sup> Wetzel S., *Westward Dharma Buddhism Beyond Asia*, article: *Neither Monk nor Nun Western Buddhists as Full-time Practitioners*. (London, England: University of California Press, Ltd.2002) pg. 278&279

<sup>42</sup> Wetzel S., *Westward Dharma Buddhism Beyond Asia*, article: *Neither Monk nor Nun Western Buddhists as Full-time Practitioners*. (London, England: University of California Press, Ltd.2002) pg. 278 & 279

through their own experiences. This makes the dharma attainable and relatable for these western students to cultivate in their daily lives and not only a set of unreachable and esoteric concepts.

Because meditative practice is physical and experiential, and concentrates on the development of mindfulness, the focus of the teaching of the lay female dharma practitioner also becomes primarily communicative and inward focused. Mindfulness falls then on emotions and internal responses to the practice, again, allowing for an active and experiential context to the teaching, helping new Western students to become mindful of their emotions, rather than again, externalizing the teachings as something not active within themselves. This is demonstrated in the fact that these teachers also tend to work with the feelings, emotions, and relationships of their students:

They have a process of nurturing and feeding positive qualities, with an acceptance of imperfection; emphasis on completeness and connectivity within the world; spontaneous rituals, and networking. In general, women seem less concerned with status, temples, and titles; and with schools and traditional teachings.<sup>43</sup>

They also tend to focus on the communication styles of students bringing their awareness to the fact that they are part of a larger environment, helping them to cultivate presence to themselves, others, and their environment, which is important in individualistic societies:

Female lay teachers also tend to focus both on spoken word and nonverbal communication, and they work with the senses by means, for example, of chanting and movement."<sup>44</sup>

Female dharma practitioners may also integrate innovative and unique teachings methods to make the teaching relatable to students who might otherwise be unfamiliar with the discipline of meditative practice or who might have difficulty understanding challenging text. As a result, they are also inclined to try new and innovative teachings methods such as:

Sitting in a circle, developing small discussion groups, painting, writing, even dancing and role playing. A woman Zen master regularly made walking outings with her students, teaching meditative practice. A Theravada teacher regularly goes to hot springs with her students and teaches mindful swimming. Other teachers have introduced charts and flip charts in teaching sessions.<sup>45</sup>

Naturally, the teaching methods used in the West, place the teachings in a context in which Western students can engage it as a part of their daily activities making it possible for them to view it as something tangible and real even outside of their religious institution or Sunday rituals. What this signifies is that while most female lay practitioners focus almost solely on experiential teaching, they make the experience active and real through the integration of the experience through activity based practices that coincide with the daily activities of western students, thus making it more pragmatic and relatable for their purposes. The use of flip charts also helps to provide a pragmatic element to the more mystical component of meditative practice providing context to their

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<sup>43</sup> Wetzel S., *Westward Dharma Buddhism Beyond Asia*, article: *Neither Monk nor Nun Western Buddhists as Full-time Practitioners*. (London, England: University of California Press, Ltd.2002) pg.282

<sup>44</sup> Wetzel S., *Westward Dharma Buddhism Beyond Asia*, *Neither Monk nor Nun Western Buddhists as Full-time Practitioners*. (London, England: University of California Press, Ltd.2002) pg.279; refer to endnotes pg. 284

<sup>45</sup> Wetzel S., *Westward Dharma Buddhism Beyond Asia*, article: *Neither Monk nor Nun Western Buddhists as Full-time Practitioners*. (London, England: University of California Press, Ltd.2002) pg. 279- refer to footnotes pg. 284

experiences making the teachings understood in a foreign land. These methods also indicate that the lay female practitioner is primarily more concerned and sees more value in connecting with the student, being present to the student, and allowing the student to cultivate their own sense of presence through a variety of methods both incorporating experience and practical teachings. This is no doubt, the influence of first generation Western monastic nuns like Venerable Thubten Chodron and Venerable Ayya Khema. The methods and perspectives of both monastic and lay teachers will be necessary in bringing about a restructuring of Western spirituality.

This echoes the innate equanimity and universality within the Buddha's teachings affirming that they hold relevance and truth even in vastly differing social climates. Acceptance and support of these expressions is therefore, an act of understanding and equanimity, and an expression of the Buddha's teachings themselves. Because Western methods are non-traditional and secularly focused, and Western female Buddhist nuns and lay teachers hold different positions and obligations, it also becomes clear that it is the connection between people, the teacher's ability to be present and compassionate to herself and to the needs of her students, that provides this kind of universal translation of the dharma from one person to another. Presence; one's ability to bring their true self to the here and now, is the way in which one can love truly.<sup>46</sup> This is what is meant by active dharma.

As love is universal, this serves as evidence that it is the innate love and presence within the dharma that does and will continue to allow the teachings of the Buddha to flourish in the future, innately balanced even within ever changing cultural interpretations. This leads to the possibility that all persons, both teachers and students; Eastern and Westerners will be able to cultivate active dharma within themselves, presence; potentially making the dharma fluid within the greater human consciousness, bringing a realization to the teachings of the Buddha in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One's ability to be present to both Eastern and Western ideologies will prove most beneficial to the global human consciousness in the future. As the West is more influenced by Eastern religion and culture, it is easy to believe that Eastern culture is so too influenced by American values that are largely separate from a sense of spiritual grounding and therefore, as well from a true sense of deep compassion, unity, love, and connectedness. This means that it is necessary for the teaching of the dharma and the spiritual awakening to become grounded in the West. This makes the Western female monastic and lay teacher profoundly valuable as together they make the dharma relatable and desirable to such a large percentage of Westerners as well as because they serve as a mid-way point between both realities. This again requires them to be deeply present and an asset to what may become a more global sense of spirituality, providing in that, a gift both the dharma and to humanity.

Therefore, the development of active dharma is the most influential, and inherent expression of the Buddha's teaching. It not only gives life to the naturally loving and inclusive message of the Buddha's teachings, but allows the dharma to integrate and expand in ways that allow it to thrive necessary in new lands. The dharma is present to us through the teachings of the Buddha both within the written word of doctrine and in the experiences of our daily lives. However, active dharma requires that we in turn are present to the teachings, allowing them to transform our hearts and minds, our lives, as well as our environment. Therefore, the cultivation of the dharma in action; or presence, is the greatest gift we can give to the teachings because as social structures and ideologies will always remain impermanent, the love within the Buddha's teaching will remain

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<sup>46</sup> Nhat Hanh, Thich, True Love: A Practice for Awakening the Heart (Shambala Publications 2006) pg. 5&6

constant supporting the transformation of all that is out of alignment with the integrity of love, compassion, understanding, and equanimity.

