

*White Tara, one of the principal Vajrayana deities representing enlightened feminine energy. Tara is the liberator whose compassion frees us from the fear and suffering of samsara. Painting by Sanje Elliot.*

# Feminine Principal

The principal figure in Buddhism is the teacher, a role traditionally dominated by men.

**ANDREA MILLER** profiles three women teachers who are changing the face of Buddhism and making the teachings whole.



*Trudy Goodman, Roshi Pat Enkyo O'Hara, and Lama Palden Drolma*

IN A HOSPITAL ROOM in Buffalo, New York, Trudy Goodman had a spiritual experience she had no way to understand.

Goodman was only twenty-one at the time, and her then husband was not much older. So young, so inexperienced, they knew nothing about childbirth. While she was wracked by contractions, he felt helpless and started to read. But it was incongruous—his book, her pain. Goodman lost her patience and told her husband to leave. For the next four hours, she labored alone. Only a nurse checked in on her every hour or so.

In her aloneness, in her intense pain, Goodman discovered a “pinnacle of now-ness,” she says. It was vast. It was deep. It was her realizing her connection to every being who had come before and to every being who would ever follow.

Two years later Goodman was in a hospital in Geneva, Switzerland, with her university professor who was dying. There were six doctors crowded around the tiny, sick body in the bed, and Goodman found herself experiencing another profound opening. After that she started searching for answers, delving into the teachings of mystics and yogis. “They’d say, ‘Eat artichokes,’” she tells me, “they’d say this and that.” But it never felt right. Then her childhood friend Jon Kabat-Zinn invited her to a talk by the Korean Zen master Seung Sahn.

“That first time I heard him speak, I saw that he knew what I knew and he knew what I needed to know,” says Goodman.

It was something in his eyes, rather than anything he said. “In fact,” she continues, “Seung Sahn spoke Pidgin English. He said, ‘The sky is blue, the grass is green.’ Real simple Zen talk, but I remember crying. Just weeping with relief, feeling like I’d come home. That’s how I met the dharma.”

Today, more than three decades later, Trudy Goodman is the founder and guiding teacher of InsightLA, a community in Los Angeles that offers daily sitting groups, weekend retreats, and a variety of Buddhist and secular mindfulness classes. She’s committed to making meditation practice available to people with busy, urban lives, but without turning the practice into what she calls “McMindfulness.” As she describes it, her teaching style is “Vipassana with a strong Zen flavor.”

When Goodman began studying the dharma in the 1970s, there were very few women Buddhist teachers. Among prominent teachers a gender imbalance still exists today, yet it is cause for celebration that here in the West, women are increasingly taking their place at the podium. Some Buddhists claim that to emphasize the importance of women teachers is to genderize the dharma. They believe that the dharma is the dharma and, therefore, it doesn’t matter if it’s a man or a woman teaching it. But if gender doesn’t matter, then why shouldn’t there be more women teachers? Why have women been excluded? As scholar Rita Gross has said of the work of Buddhist feminists,



## La Bienveillance

A teaching by Trudy Goodman.

*BIENVEILLANCE* is the French word for *metta*, often translated as loving-kindness. In the foothills of the Alps, in the tiny village of Fontaine-Vive where my parents lived for thirty-five years, the word exudes the warm fragrance of feathery purple clouds of summer lavender, growing in abundance in every French garden.

*Bienveillance*: watching over, with kindness; like surveillance with friendly, benevolent intention.

Visiting sacred places, doing pilgrimage, can inspire us on our journey. To go back to a place, to a time of life, and feel how it has been transformed is a pilgrimage—diving into the river of change to enter the stream of this inexorable reality, awakening to the truth of our transience. Only a section of my mother’s garden remains; her hollyhocks, dahlias, begonias, sweet peas, and corn are gone. The raspberries don’t taste as sweet, and the old 1788 farmhouse is less rustic, more elegant—enlarged and renovated to fit the family that lives there now.

The Buddha taught that while our lives are ephemeral, how we live and what we do matters and lives on beyond us. Tears come as I experience the utter gone-ness of my parents and that time of my life, vanished yet still here in the timeless realm of my memory and the memories of their friends and neighbors in the village. Although they left fifteen years ago, the way my parents were present remains. The villagers who remember them still joke with me about their expansive American openness, curiosity, and laughter. They still appreciate my parents’ great love for one another and for Fontaine-Vive.

Just as we are drawn to the timeless teachings of the dharma, my parents wanted to live a balanced and joyful life, drawn to the ancient wisdom of the farming countryside, to the old ways that call to us in the midst of our modernity. Going back, I discover a place in the heart where *la bienveillance* is fully alive, flowing still, down the ever-changing stream of *anicca*, impermanence. ♦

“We’re not genderizing the dharma. We’re un-genderizing it. The dharma was genderized thousands of years ago when women were first put in a separate class.”

The Buddha praised his female students for their wisdom and founded an order of nuns. Yet after his death, when a council of five hundred *arhats* (perfected saints) gathered to establish the Buddhist canon, not one *arhati* (female arhat) was among them. Over the millennia there have been women teachers, but seeking them out is like seeking scraps. While Buddhism’s male ancestors fill lists, in each tradition there are only a handful of known female ancestors.

Buddhist culture, however, is not static. It changes with each culture it encounters. India, China, Tibet, Vietnam—the role of Buddhist women has shifted according to place and time, and it has shifted again while taking root in the West. When Buddhism came to America in the 1960s and ’70s, it encountered the burgeoning movement of second-wave feminism. People—both women and men, both Western and Asian—began questioning power dynamics within sanghas. They began working to make chants and liturgy gender neutral, to call for female ordinations where they had previously been denied, and to encourage women to assume leadership roles. Today in the West one of the most celebrated Buddhist teachers is a woman—Pema Chödrön—and there are a host of others who are likewise making a significant contribution to the dharma. Among them are Trudy Goodman, Roshi Pat Enkyo O’Hara, and Lama Palden Drolma.

**Trudy Goodman’s** heart teacher was Maurine Stuart, one of the first female Zen masters in the United States and also a mother of three, a concert pianist, and a piano teacher. “Maurine had a full, balanced life,” says Goodman. “She modeled that it’s possible to do intensive spiritual practice while living as a laywoman and still do your hair and joke about new lipstick. I loved her and did very deep practice with her.”

It was important to Goodman to have a woman teacher because, although she’d been immediately drawn to Buddhism and what she believed was its profound vitality and clarity, she had nonetheless felt that the teachings she’d been receiving from men didn’t relate enough to the things that ordinary women like her really cared about. Things, says Goodman, like “our work in the domestic sphere, our relationships, our family lives, how to balance work and family.”

Goodman found the teachings that sprang up after the time of the Buddha to be the most problematic. For instance, meditation instructions for working with desire became misogynistic over the centuries. The Buddha taught us to imagine what we’d find if we peeled off our skin—to imagine the red mess of our blood, liver, kidneys. The idea was that if we mentally dissect our body, we will cut through our attachment to our own physical form and by extension to the physical form of others. Later teachers, however, sometimes gave instructions to imagine the body of a woman stripped of skin, so it was her disgusting guts revealed, not the male meditator’s. The view of women as sin-



*“As a woman,” says Trudy Goodman, “I’m very interested in the integration of sexuality and relationship in dharma practice.”*

ful and impure served the monastic community, says Goodman, because it helped monks maintain their celibacy.

“It’s a rich area of practice to look at how our gender and sexual orientation affect our perceptions and how these perceptions affect our relationship to the teachings,” Goodman tells me. Very often, she says, sexuality is outside of our awareness; we compartmentalize it. But we can look deeply at our thoughts and actions, and our mindful awareness can encompass our sexual behavior. Do we exempt our sexual fantasies when tracking the ways that attraction, aversion, ignorance, and delusion are affecting our practice? How do we integrate our practice into our relationships? And even when we’re in a celibate phase of our lives, are we aware of how we react to manifestations of sexual behavior in art and the media and have we made peace with our own past behaviors?

“I’m very interested in the integration of sexuality and relationship in dharma practice,” says Goodman. “A sense of being embodied is harder to escape for women. We have periods. We give birth. There’s blood and milk. Our bodies are dynamic and powerful.”

About two years prior to discovering the dharma, Goodman began undergoing psychoanalysis. Then she started sitting and was struck by the synergy between the work she was doing with her analyst and the work she was doing on the cushion. “They’re both awareness practices,” she says. “In meditation we focus more on awareness

of how the mind works, while in therapy we also bring attention to the content of our experience. Sitting and therapy work beautifully together. Together you have a full-spectrum human being.”

Goodman was inspired to become a psychoanalyst and worked in that field for twenty-five years, practicing mindfulness-based psychotherapy even before it was called that. She also led and attended Buddhist retreats and in the process noticed a pattern emerge. On the Monday after a retreat, she’d go back to her office and all her clients would have an opening or breakthrough in their therapy. She says: “At first I thought, wait a minute, how can this be? But it happened over and over. There was no question that when I became freer inside, it allowed everyone who consulted with me to step into that freedom and benefit. I wasn’t practicing just for me.”

Goodman has practiced Theravada, Zen, and Vajrayana and, according to her, early Buddhism, or the Theravada tradition, contains everything that you find in the later teachings of Zen and Vajrayana. “Early Buddhism has it all,” she says. From the koans of Zen to the Dzogchen practices of Vajrayana, the same principles are expressed in different forms, with certain things emphasized more or less. She concludes: “I’ve experienced a lot of joy at seeing the creativity and cultural sensitivity of each tradition.”



*"I think it changes the way communities function when there's female leadership," says Roshi Pat Enkyo O'Hara.*

**Roshi Pat Enkyo O'Hara** is the abbot of the Village Zendo, located in the heart of Manhattan. "If you come to sit with us early in the morning, it's very quiet," says O'Hara. "Then it gets very noisy, and you are never not aware that you are in the middle of one of the biggest cities in the world. When you step out onto Broadway, there are droves of people walking up and down the street—some happy, some sad. You know you're a part of this vast, interconnected universe, and you're aware of your responsibility in the world. I think that's one of the reasons we at the Village Zendo are so socially engaged."

In 1986, O'Hara co-founded the zendo with her partner, Barbara Joshin O'Hara. The couple had been practicing at Zen Mountain Monastery in the Catskills but they wanted a place to sit in the city as well. So it wasn't "a center" per se that they set out to establish, just a community of people who would support each other in their practice. Nonetheless, the community grew exponentially and O'Hara's teachers encouraged her to make it a more formal center. O'Hara complied. Yet, in terms of organizational structure, the original flavor of the sangha has remained. The sangha began as a community effort and this is still true. That's not to say, however, that the Village Zendo is without leaders and decision makers; all organizations need these roles fulfilled in order to function, and the zendo is no exception. O'Hara

is the head teacher, but five other teachers work closely with her on teaching strategy, and each teacher—including O'Hara—has just one vote. "I respect them and they respect me," she says. But "they can vote me down—and have." The zendo also has a democratically run executive committee and a board to deal with the administrative functioning. This relatively flat organizational structure reflects O'Hara's political philosophy.

Before she practiced at Zen Mountain Monastery, O'Hara went to several Buddhist centers that made her uncomfortable. They were too hierarchical, too sober, too restricted. "In various communities you have the people in power and the people not in power," she explains. Of course women are not the only ones adversely affected by these dynamics. But, as a woman, O'Hara is sensitive to power differentials and the damage they can cause. Women are frequently aware of having been pushed aside and, as such, are sensitized to the issue of power. "I think it changes the way communities function when there's female leadership," she says. "Male teachers are often the seat of all the knowledge, all the power, all the talk. You don't see that so much with women teachers."

In her career as a professor, O'Hara was likewise concerned with power differentials. For twenty years, she taught at New York University's Tisch's School of the Arts, where she co-founded a program called interactive media. At the time of its founding,

before the age of the Internet, it was revolutionary. In the beginning the program focused on using split-screen television as a way for people to talk to each other.

“The communication wasn’t one-way,” she says, “and that was the key to a more horizontal power structure, to elevating a population and putting it on an equal status with the people in power. One of the first projects we did was in a little town in Pennsylvania, where we connected all the senior citizen centers to the mayor’s office. Then once a week the seniors would interview the mayor and it would go out on the cable system for the whole county.”

Later O’Hara worked with other marginalized populations, including kids in a drug treatment center to whom she taught videography. For people with drug issues, particularly those dealing with addiction to crack and other hard narcotics, the ability to pay attention has been eroded. In order to interview one another or to hold a camera, O’Hara’s young students first needed a certain level of attention, and so she taught them meditation. They started with a minute or two of trying to follow the breath and built up from there—the incentive of getting to use the camera keeping them going. “I loved that project,” says O’Hara. “In the beginning the kids just talked. They didn’t know how to do an interview.” But in the end they learned to listen to one another.

Another major element of O’Hara’s work at NYU was to mentor new artists—to help students enrolled in the school to develop their voice in media. Today mentoring continues to be important to her. Her focus has shifted, however, to nurturing a new generation of Buddhists engaged in social issues. One example is that she is the spiritual director of the New York Zen Center for Contemplative Care (NYZCCC), a non-profit that offers a Buddhist Chaplaincy Program and provides direct care to the sick and dying.

Koshin Paley Ellison, a co-founder of NYZCCC, has a deep appreciation for O’Hara’s patience with people, process, and unfolding. He says, “Over the past two decades, she’s taught me a lot about trust—trusting that each person will find their practice, that each person will find where they need to go.”

The essence of contemplative care is being with someone where they are and not trying to get them to change. “One of the huge struggles that many of our beginning chaplaincy students have is feeling like they need to ‘do’ something,” Ellison continues. “They feel the need to fix somebody. They need to get busy. But Roshi O’Hara’s teaching is not about that. It’s about being with the moment in an unadorned way.

## Include Everything

*A teaching by Roshi Pat Enkyo O’Hara.*

A GROUP OF TWELVE of us lived on the streets in lower Manhattan for four days, practicing meditation and experiencing how it is to survive without money or cellphones. It was a renunciation and a pilgrimage, a way to give up all our habitual comforts and resources and to open up to reality, to the conditions of the world of which we are a part. What’s it like to live in the city without anything? What’s it like to find that you need to use a phone for some information when you don’t have a quarter?

The week before the retreat, I attended a Soto Zen conference in San Francisco. While there, I met with my beloved dharma sister, Ekyoku Roshi, and she told me something that struck me powerfully. Roshi’s community, Los Angeles Zen Center, is spending a year studying “What is vow?” One of Roshi’s students had decided that for the whole year, her practice would be to investigate the vow “Include everything.”

Just imagine what it would be like if you were to include everything that arises. Usually, all of us only include a certain amount: what we like, what we are willing to see about ourselves and others. We don’t include the things we don’t like about ourselves or about conditions and situations. We push them away. Denial. To constantly include everything that is arising—I was so struck by that—perhaps that was the teaching I needed right then.

So, I took this idea of “include everything” onto the street retreat. To deny nothing, not my disgust:

“Something is touching me—a rat? A bedbug?” (The worst fear of a New Yorker.) Or at the soup kitchen: “Is this man going to throw up on me?” These were some of the thoughts that came to me.

One of the points of the street retreat is that things are right in your face and so there is no way to exclude anything. I would say that every one of us discovered things that we were forced to include. Every one of us had issues come up: “Begging shows me what it’s like to be rejected or given something.” Or, “Living on the street shows me I need to be seen” or “I have my anger.”

Fear was a huge thing. Living on the street is scary. But the minute we include the fear, it’s much less scary because it’s there. You can touch it, you can feel it, and it’s not this black cloud following you around. ♦



*Pat O’Hara co-leading a street retreat in New York’s Washington Square Park.*



and on the surface the lifestyle was picture perfect, yet the beautiful houses and high-powered jobs didn't create happiness. In her early teens, Drolma began to feel an intense spiritual longing. In high school, she studied comparative religion and in university she delved deeply into Zen, esoteric Christianity, and Sufism. Then, when Drolma was twenty-five, a Sufi friend took her to a talk by the Tibetan Buddhist master Kyabje Kalu Rinpoche, and Drolma immediately recognized him as her teacher. That night she took refuge with him and six months later she moved to his monastery in the Himalayas.

Conditions there were rough. "If you washed your clothes—which you had to do in freezing cold water—and then you hung them up in your room, after ten days they would still not be dry," she says. The fog was that thick. As for good food and hot baths, they were a bus-ride away in Darjeeling. Nonetheless, Drolma barely noticed the hardship. Being with her teacher made her feel completely at home.

Kalu Rinpoche often spoke about how religions manifest in different ways, depending on the culture that gives birth to them, but all in their essence are reflections of awakened mind. This teaching resonated with Drolma and she relates it to her belief in a universal awakened feminine. As she puts it, the Virgin Mary, Guanyin, Buffalo Woman, and Tara are all different faces of this same feminine energy.

*Lama Palden Drolma feels the Virgin Mary, Guanyin, Buffalo Woman, and Tara are all faces of the same enlightened feminine energy.*

It's learning how to trust that you are enough. You don't need to go into a patient's room and perform tricks. You just need to show up with your whole body and mind."

O'Hara teaches that the very heart of Zen practice is becoming intimate with yourself. "Once you really know yourself," she says, "then, automatically, you are available to serve the world."

In her early twenties, **Lama Palden Drolma** liked to go to a ramshackle garden in her Californian neighborhood. There, she'd stand facing a statue of the Virgin Mary and pray for help in finding her true teacher.

As long as Drolma could remember, she'd been on a spiritual path. She says that even at age three she had powerful dreams of her past lives—dreams that reminded her of her purpose for this lifetime. Growing up, Drolma was uncomfortable in America. She lived with her family in an affluent neighborhood in the Bay Area,

In 1982, Drolma began a three-year closed retreat under Kalu Rinpoche on Salt Spring Island in British Columbia. "It was the best, most useful thing I have ever done in my life," she says. "It was also extremely challenging. I had to face the difficulty of my own mind, my own aspirations, my own negative habitual patterns. Then my younger brother died and it was excruciatingly hard not to be able to be there with my family. But the hardest thing about my three-year retreat was that my son was ten years old at the time. He stayed with my mother and it was difficult to be apart from him."

This sacrifice of not being with her child made Drolma feel like she had to make the most of her retreat and she practiced with vigor. As a result, a shift occurred in her; the spiritual longing she'd been feeling since her teens dissipated. "My heart reconnected with itself in the deepest way," she explains. "There wasn't anything to long for anymore. There was nothing separate from me spiritually."

A year after the completion of the retreat, Drolma was authorized as a lama, or teacher, making her one of the first Western

female lamas in the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition. She moved to Marin County, California, and began teaching in her living room. But her students quickly outgrew the space and in 1996 she founded Sukhasiddhi Foundation, a center dedicated to the study and practice of Tibetan Buddhism.

“Kalu Rinpoche authorized some women as lamas who have still never really taught,” says Drolma. Vajrayana Buddhism is basically still “a boys’ club,” she continues, so it’s intimidating for women to assume teaching roles. “Women being supported is really a key issue. I think if my parents hadn’t been supportive of me and Kalu Rinpoche and all my other teachers hadn’t been 100 percent supportive, I would never have become a teacher.”

According to Drolma, there’s a difference between rinpoches who have a lot of realization and what she calls the “middle management lamas,” who aren’t as realized and are more culturally bound. The highly realized rinpoches, such as the Dalai Lama and Kalu Rinpoche, tend to treat women students with respect and they’re willing to abandon some arguably sexist traditions. The example Drolma offers from her own experience is that when she was in the Himalayas there were certain sacred rooms where women weren’t supposed to go. But the high masters simply said, “Oh, you can come in,” and they allowed women to live in the monasteries and study.

Drolma is grateful for all the support she has received from her male teachers, but in her opinion women also need women role models; that is, they need to have women teachers and—even more importantly—to see that there are women who are highly realized. “My generation,” says Drolma, “found women role models in history, and sometimes in the flesh, but that was rare.” For women to really feel that it’s possible for them to attain deep realization in this life, they need to know that there are women who have awakened before them.

The Buddha asserted that there is neither male nor female, and ultimately this is true. Yet on the ground—at the relative level—there *are* women and there *are* men. Beyond just having different bodies, we are socialized differently and accorded different roles and privileges. In myriad ways these factors determine how we experience the world and by extension how we experience the spiritual path. So while both male and female teachers can speak on the universal human experience, women can also have a unique perspective that can be helpful to both male and female students. That’s not to say that women teachers are better than male teachers or vice versa. There are simply different ways of expressing the dharma.

Recently, a man approached Drolma after hearing her teach. He was full of emotion. After years of studying Buddhism with male teachers, he was deeply touched by her unique expression of the dharma. She had helped him finally understand the very heart of the tradition. ♦

ANDREA MILLER is deputy editor of the Shambhala Sun and the editor of the anthology Right Here with You: Bringing Mindful Awareness into Our Relationships.

## Tara the Liberator

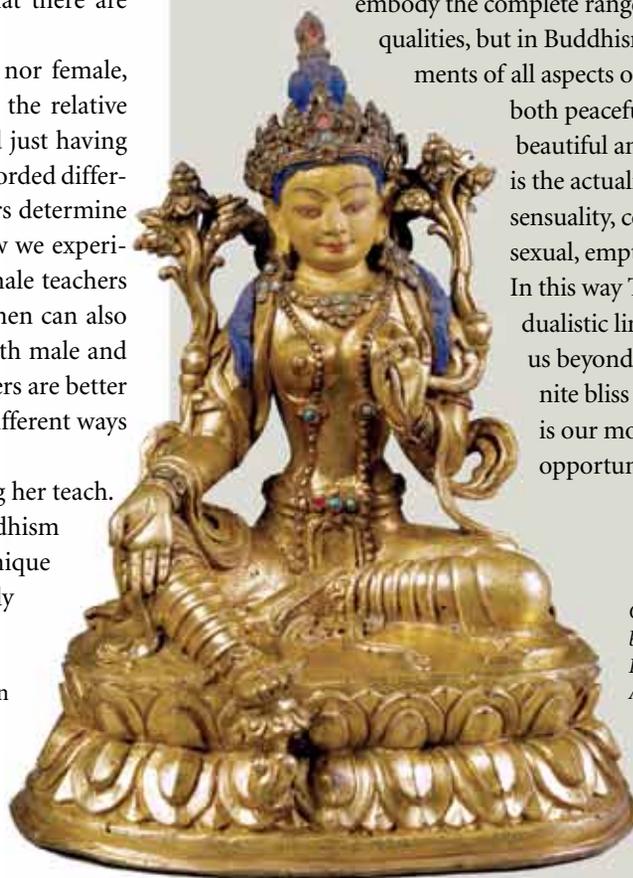
*A teaching by Lama Palden Drolma.*

TARA, THE SAVIORESS, is “she who ferries beings across the ocean of samsara.” Tara is the most beloved by Tibetans of all the female awakened beings. Her praises are sung and she is supplicated in all Tibetan monasteries and by many laypeople as well. Tara is renowned for her swift and compassionate activity. Whether devotees have worldly or spiritual motivation, Tara gives benefit to all and leads people to awakening.

The Tibetans call her Jetsun Drolma. *Drolma* is Tibetan for the Sanskrit word Tara. *Je* means the power to liberate others; *tsun* means that she benefits herself and all others, that she is beyond samsara, and that she has the stainless wisdom body. In other words, Tara is fully enlightened; she is inseparable from the absolute true nature, the dharmakaya. She rushes to the aid of beings when we call upon her with heartfelt devotion. Meditating on her helps us awaken our buddhanature.

In order for Tara to be able to benefit us, we need to approach her with an open heart and mind. Through continued meditation practice on Tara, we can establish a relationship in which we are able to trust and rely on her. It is like getting to know new friends—we have to invite them over to our home many times until we get to know them. The more we are able to open to her, the more she is able to benefit us.

In Western culture, we lack female archetypes that embody the complete range of our potential qualities, but in Buddhism we see embodiments of all aspects of pure form. Tara is both peaceful and wrathful, beautiful and powerful. She is the actuality of wisdom and sensuality, compassionate and sexual, empty yet fully manifest. In this way Tara transcends dualistic limitations. She leads us beyond duality to the infinite bliss and emptiness that is our most precious opportunity. ♦



*Green Tara, the female buddha known as the Buddha of Enlightened Activity.*