

## What Have You Done with Your Female Form?

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This is a question the Goddess asked Shariputra in the Teachings of Vimalakirti. Shariputra had challenged her saying "Why don't you use your magic powers to change yourself into a male so you can be enlightened?" The Goddess promptly trumps him by turning him into a female. She then turns him into herself and herself into him. They go back and forth in gender for a while until at the end she finally asks Shariputra, "What have you done with your female form?"

This is actually a good question for all of us, male and female. Zen practice tells us we contain everything. We all contain the full spectrum of human potential. This means, then, that all of us contain what culture calls both male and female characteristics, but are really just human characteristics. It is culture that assigns them to one gender or another. Here is a quote from a booklet called Men: We know that inherently we are born complete with all the qualities necessary to be fully human. All the qualities we call feminine, all men are born with. All the qualities we call masculine, every woman is born with. So the question, if this is so, and I think it is, is how come women are from Venus and men are from Mars, as the popular book puts it? How did the differences come to exist? The answer is mainly our conditioning.

Another quote from the source says, "It is only through cultural conditioning that the qualities attributed to males and females get sorted into contrived packets of masculine and feminine." Certain qualities get artificially separated and then attached to each gender and prohibited to the other. There isn't just enforcement of masculine onto males and feminine onto females, but also prohibition of feminine qualities onto males and masculine qualities onto females.

Like all conditioning, gender conditioning keeps us from being free. It is so strong and pervasive in our society that it becomes for many people a kind of oppression. The definition of oppression given in the same booklet reads: "the devaluing and disrespect of a person, the blame of a person for the difficulties resulting from their oppression, denial of full humanness because of a person's group identity." Oppression basically comes from the outside. It is what other people and society project onto a person or a group. But what happens with this outside oppression is that it often results in internalized oppression. In other words, the person or the group takes the opinions about them that come from the outside, and unaware that they are doing it, they internalize those ideas about themselves. In other words, as Daidoshi liked to say, they "buy into it."

Internalized oppression can be worked through, of course. But it is not an easy task because at the same time a person is trying to work through the internalized oppression, the oppression from the outside still operates. So the negative ideas are constantly being reinforced. Studies about how people work oppression through show that there are three universal stages in working with it. The first is unawareness. People or groups who are oppressed are unaware that they are oppressed. Once an inkling that they might be the victims of oppression dawns in their minds, the first thing that happens is denial. Nobody wants to think they aren't free. Nobody wants to admit they're oppressed. It's also scary to admit because once you admit that something like

that is operating in your life, you have to decide what to do about it. That's not a comfortable decision. The final stage of dealing with oppression is acceptance of the fact and making efforts to remedy it. If you don't make efforts to change once it is recognized, then what's left is despair, depression, and sometimes violence.

Gender is intimately tied up with our view of self. That's one reason it's important to talk about gender conditioning in a Dharma center. It's why many Buddhist teachings talk about giving up attachment to gender as a true test of selflessness. This is one of the points being made by the Goddess to Shariputra. As you read this talk, I ask you to keep in mind the stages of confronting oppression. Check your own reactions, your own unawareness, and your own denial as I spell out some of the consequences of gender conditioning.

You're probably all thinking, "Here goes Jikyo talking about feminism again." But you are wrong. Today I am going to talk mostly about men, not women. For many women and men it's hard to think about how male gender conditioning hurts males, because in our society men are privileged in many ways. Their gender roles train them to hurt others in many ways so the ways in which they themselves are hurt are less obvious. Actually our society has a kind of mixed view of men. On the one hand, they are privileged and possessed of entitlement, considered better, more reliable, more rational, smarter and stronger. On the other hand, part of their oppression is that they are also considered quite other than women in ways that are not very flattering. They are considered abusive, insensitive, incompetent as parents, and unfeeling. Because men as a group are hurt by their gender role training in similar ways, they take on similar patterns of behavior and reaction.

Let's look at some of the ways men suffer from their gender conditioning. Most of the material I've used here comes from a book called *Raising Cain*, by two male psychologists, Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson. It is basically a book about how boys in our society are suffering from their male conditioning. There are a lot of books out now about men and boys. The topic is suddenly seen to be a kind of crisis in our society. This particular book I've used is a very solid, middle-of-the-road, fairly conservative look at the subject. It is not particularly feminist or radical. So what you're hearing when I give their opinions and statistics is pretty mild. It may sound radical if you've never thought much about the subject, but keep in mind it is not.

The statistics these psychologists provide make the point that boys and men are distorted by their gender conditioning in ways that cause them trouble in many areas. Here are some of the things they say:

- 95% of juvenile homicides are committed by boys
- Boys commit four out of five of juvenile crimes that end up in court.
- Boys are much more likely to be victims of crimes.
- Boys commit nine out of ten of alcohol or drug law violations. They are much more likely than girls to use drugs and alcohol, and as you go up the scale from softer to hard drugs, the ratio of use by boys increases.
- Suicide is the third leading cause of death among boys in their mid to late teens. The two first causes are accidents and homicide. Boys are committing suicide at younger ages. The rates for younger boys have tripled since 1950.
- Boys are much more likely to be disciplined brutally and physically abused. Boys

are seen as not having sensitive feelings; therefore adults and institutions feel free to discipline them harshly.

A study done in Canada found that boys are 50% more likely to be physically abused by parents than are girls, especially so by their fathers. Although boys are less likely to suffer sexual abuse than girls--we are not really sure of the incidence of sexual abuse among boys--they are also less likely to get help. The perpetrators of the abuse of boys are generally men; thus partly out of shame that they have had a homosexual experience, boys are less likely to report sexual abuse. Generally such abuse is either repressed out of memory or not reported. Though boys often do not get help, their pain from sexual abuse is equal to girls.

Even those boys and men who do not fall into the extreme behavior mirrored by these statistics often find themselves in trouble. In general, men work too hard. They ignore their own pain and illness, often to the point of death. They do not find comfort and nourishment in close relationships. They hurt others by their own insensitivity and lack of knowledge about emotions, and then they suffer agonies of regret. These are some of the most obvious effects of male gender conditioning. Next we'll take a look at the training that produces these results. Male gender role training assumes that masculinity is an achievement; that manhood is a prize to be won through struggle. As a result, everything men or boys do and think is judged on the basis of strength or weakness, judged as masculine or not masculine. One writer calls this performance-based masculinity and points to the no-win quality of it in these words: Feeling like a man is unachievable no matter how you fulfill the conditions because the conditions are artificial and have nothing to do with your real manhood. In fact, you are already male. You were born male. There is nothing you can do or not do including being a homosexual to be any less of a man than you already are.

The pressure to appear masculine means that boys and men feel equally intense pressure not to appear feminine. Masculinity is defined as the opposite of femininity and any trait labeled feminine is attacked and rejected by boys and men both in themselves and others. These include such traits as tenderness, empathy, and compassion--in fact, any show of emotional vulnerability. Because of this training boys and men devalue girls and women and part of this training includes seeing sexual relationships as domination. Domination is a central point of mainstream, heterosexual pornography which eroticizes male domination and female submission. To be labeled a "girl," or any of the other words boys use to warn each other that they have gone too far in being feminine, is the worst thing that can happen to a boy. It signals that the prize of manhood has been withheld from that person.

The following is a quote from a book by Carol Lee Flinders, *At the Root of this Longing: Reconciling a Spiritual Hunger with a Feminist Thirst*. She says:

Sexism comes from exactly the same place and consciousness that racism does, and that is the belief that a sense of self is something you build and consolidate over time by defeating or disempowering other selves. I use the word belief intentionally because something very like religious faith is involved here. The faith that I will be confident and secure and by extension more fully a subject and human in proportion to the number of individuals I have defeated and disempowered, or know I could defeat if I wanted to. Knowing there are people I

can beat at racquetball, others who do not make as much money as I do, or are six inches shorter helps. If entire categories of people can be understood by definition to be other, an entire gender or whole races or nations, that is all the better because it provides a kind of baseline below which you can only sink by really working at it.

So one of the important things about gender training is that it becomes a kind of tyranny for men. And as Flinders implies, it is closely tied up with other systems of oppression. I'd like to stress here its connections to sexism and homophobia. Gender role training for men is deeply complicit in homophobia as this accusation is used to keep men in line, to threaten them if they step out of the masculine role.

The general training in heterosexual sex which boys and men are given allows more sexual privilege, more opportunities for sexual expression in our society, but this conditioning also harms them in some ways, in that men and boys are often seen as inherently sexually compulsive. It is true that many men do act compulsively sexual, but it is not inherent. It is the result of gender role conditioning. Their conditioning directs men to be the sexual aggressors, always in control sexually, always ready for sex. If boys and men do not live out this role, they are accused of being homosexual. A male therapist friend who works exclusively with men once told me that he was amazed at the number of men who would tell him in private sessions that they often do not feel like having sex. They often numb themselves so that they can. Yet these are men who if you asked them publicly would say, "Who me? I'm always ready." My therapist friend added that from the outside a lot of these men were living out what looked to be a life of insatiable sexual appetite--the life of stereotypical compulsive male sexuality. So the issue of sexuality and sexual performance is fraught for men.

If we look at how boys and men are trained, it is really no wonder that many are sexually compulsive. Part of their training denies them physical affection from parents and other adults early on. Studies show that parents stop touching and holding boys at a much younger age than they do girls. For boys and men, physical contact with women, unless it is sexual, is pretty much forbidden. And the homophobia of their training imposes a kind of touch taboo between each other as well. So it is no wonder, really, that men sometimes become desperate around the one activity that allows them closeness and physical touch.

Let's look now at the major components of male gender role conditioning. The major component is violence. Nowhere is the differential behavior between boys and girls larger than in the measure of physical violence. Boys are socialized to see the world as a threatening, hostile place. They are taught that they need to nip any disrespect in the bud. Their training teaches them to startle at shadows, to see disrespect and insult everywhere, and to expect attack at all times. This mindset then, allows them to view their anger and violence as a defense. They see their aggression as necessary to protect themselves, and miss that they themselves foster aggression.

Male violence also occurs because of masculine emotional illiteracy. Boys are often bad at reading emotional signals from others. One of the studies of this aspect of male training described an experiment in which both boys and girls were shown photographs of faces expressing emotional reactions. They were then asked what the feeling registered on each face was. It turned out that girls were much better at this than boys.

Again, it is not because girls are born that way, but because their gender training educates them about emotions, whereas the gender training of boys points them away from this kind of knowledge. This lack of emotional literacy in men and boys imposes suffering on others, but it also costs men themselves dearly. It leaves them meeting most situations with a very impoverished bag of approved emotional responses such as, anger, aggression, withdrawal, and silence.

The second major component of gender training for boys and men is stoicism, or lack of feeling. Violence and lack of feeling feed each other so there is some overlap in their dynamics. Boys are led to believe that being men means being strong and that this therefore requires them not to feel. Studies show that newborn boys are on average more emotional or reactive than girls. They cry more, show more frustration, more upset. But as they get older they show less emotion than girls. Does this mean that boys feel less as they get older? No, actually, that has been measured. Experimenters tested heart rate, skin conductivity, and other physiological responses to emotion. In testing both boys and girls exposed to material that is highly emotionally charged, they found that there actually was no difference between them in these measurements. The surface expression of emotion that boys showed was very low key whereas girls were more obviously emotive. Yet their physiological reactions were the same.

Thus it seems that boys and men are steered away from emotional development and girls are encouraged to take the responsibility for emotions and relationships by the culture, not by biology. Here is another quote from Carol Flinders, the mother of a boy. I am not the mother of a boy but I feel deeply with her when she says: "To watch a boy you love move unsuspectingly from childhood into adolescence, flesh of your flesh, bone of your bone, and then come up against the unbelievably arid and limiting vision of manhood that this culture offers is to see at once the full extent of male privilege and its terrible, terrible costs."

Because boys and men are steered into showing only a tiny range of emotions, when they do show reactions quite within the normal range, but disapproved by their gender training, they are often treated as though their feelings are not normal. One of the stories told by psychologists Kindlon and Thompson is about a family who move to a new house. They have three children, two girls and a boy. One of the bedrooms in the house is downstairs; the other bedrooms are upstairs. There is some discussion among them about who is going to have the bedroom downstairs. None of the kids want it because they want to be upstairs with the parents. The family decides that they'll give it to the boy who then cries and says he is scared to stay downstairs by himself. Basically he is told by his parents, "You're a big guy. You can't be scared. Little girls can't sleep downstairs. alone." This kind of experience teaches boys to turn off their more vulnerable feelings. Teaching them stoicism tells boys not to seek help, not to seek comfort. As a result when men and boys are in real trouble--trouble with their health, mental trouble, depression, substance abuse--they rarely recognize that there is a problem and rarely seek help. Usually when a male in any of those situations gets help, it is because someone else has seen the problem and sought help for them.

Are all these things the result of gender conditioning or are they simply the result of biological differences, the doings of the famous testosterone? If we take a look at how boys and men are trained in these qualities of violence and stoicism, we can see that there are definite ways in which they are taught, not only taught, but enforced. One of

the main ways gender roles are taught to men is through what the authors of this book call the "Culture of Cruelty." The other major way male gender training is taught is through Dads. The Culture of Cruelty is what these two psychologists call it. I have also heard it called "The Boy Code." It is basically a masculine pecking order. Among themselves, boys engage in continual psychological warfare. There is a kind of pack psychology. The strong pick on the weak, conformers pick on deviants.

Therefore, all boys live in fear of the Culture of Cruelty because it offers no security. There is no permanent top-dogged-ness. Some boys are picked on more than others routinely. But all it takes is one mistake and the pack will turn. Any one member of the group can become the victim. Thus boys are under constant pressure to assert their power, or be labeled weaklings and have power used against them. This Culture of Cruelty demands that boys place allegiance to the group above allegiance to friends and they are expected to suffer in silence and witness the suffering of others without protest. The existence of this so-called Culture of Cruelty is actually the most effective answer to the question of whether the differences between men and women are biological or cultural. If male patterns were just the result of nature, then society could just leave them alone to grow up and men would routinely replicate these patterns. But the fact that there is so much draconian pressure on boys to conform shows us that their stereotyped patterns are not inherent. They are trained by the Culture of Cruelty in dominance, fear, betrayal, emotional guardedness, and wariness in relationships. What boys lose are trust, empathy, and relatedness. This training is part of what makes friendships among men so difficult.

The other main enforcer of gender role conditioning is dads--fathers. Studies show that fathers are more rigid than mothers in steering boys along traditional gender lines. Fathers tend to think they will create cry-babies by coddling their sons. They think they have to toughen up boys for a tough world. The truth is that the most resilient and resourceful boys are those whose fathers care for them and show it in comforting and consistent ways. Those fathers are in the minority. Why do so many men have disastrous relationships with their fathers? Part of the answer is that in our society, relationship work is assigned to women and so men somehow feel they are exempt from learning how to relate well to their children. Fathers then often revert with their sons to what they were taught in their own boyhood by the Culture of Cruelty. They compete, control, and criticize their sons. The preponderance of criticism as well as the absence of positive support hurts boys. Kindlon and Thompson sum up the relationship between fathers and sons by saying:

When a grown man cries in therapy it is almost always about his father. Fathers and sons are players in a tale of unrequited love, a story told in yearning, in anger, sadness and shame.

What does all this have to do with Zen practice? In most of Western Buddhism we are no longer at the place where we tell women they need to be reborn with a penis in order to be enlightened. We no longer maintain that the existence of nuns sets back the practice five hundred years. But does this mean there is no gender problem in Western Buddhism? The power structure of Buddhism has been historically, and still is, even in the West, largely male. My question is: Could this male dominance have shaped and maintained Buddhism in a way that conforms with male gender conditioning? It is this subtle level of unconscious incorporation of the male point of view into practice that I

want to question. The more common way of looking at sexism in Buddhism is to examine how male privilege and entitlement acts itself out in various Buddhist traditions. But my question is slightly different. So let's look at how male gender conditioning might have shaped Buddhism and how this might be changed, if change is needed.

One of the often implied claims of Zen practice is that everything unbalanced or distorted about us is taken care of through practice. Presumably our male and female gender conditioning can be taken care of in that way as well. But in my opinion, this is a kind of myth, or at least an exaggeration. It is true that men and women can deal with their limiting gender roles through practice, but it does not happen automatically. Dealing with gender roles requires a specific awareness of this kind of conditioning and a specific kind of work to free ourselves from it. Remember the first two stages of confronting oppression talked about earlier: unawareness and denial. They both affect our ability to deal with gender roles through practice. If gender role conditioning is automatically taken care of through practice, how come Buddhism has remained largely sexist for two thousand years? Weren't those old patriarchs practicing hard enough?

I would like to stress here before I get into some of my specific questions about gender role training and practice, that I don't know the answers to the questions I'm raising. I don't even know if the specific examples I bring up are the most necessary or important ones. There may be many other aspects of practice that reflect male gender conditioning. You may think of better instances than I do. I am just asking, just entertaining the great doubt. I am just pointing out that certain "Zen" values look very suspicious viewed in the light of male gender conditioning.

We have seen that one of the chief aspects of the male gender role is violence. Is there anything in the institutional life of Zen that reflects this gender conditioning? It strikes me as an important question at this specific time in this specific culture. Violence is so pervasive in the media and in our lives that people have become very desensitized to it. What about the violence and aggression in Zen language and metaphors? Shugen Sensei brought this up briefly in a talk not too long ago. We all know what the metaphors are, swords, sticks, blows, killing, dying, hitting, shouting, etc. They are only metaphors but are they harmless? Recently we have been reminded how metaphors get carried over into historical action. We have had a book by Brian Victoria, *Zen at War*, in which he chronicles how the Zen elite of Japan trained troops and basically blessed the Japanese war effort. Another example of this happening is in Kamakura Japan when Zen training became the servant of bushido, the way of the warrior, the training of samurai. Could the violent metaphors in our tradition ever get co-opted again? Could they become real? Do they encourage aggression and violence in our own practice? I don't know. What about the *kyosaku*? Is this a kind of violence or is it, as billed, a kindly encouragement? Do we need to question it? Do we need to get rid of it? I don't know. Personally, I am ambivalent about it. I know that many people welcome it as a true act of compassion, so I am not saying, "Yes, we should get rid of it." I am just asking.

What about the limited emotional range that is part of male gender training? What about the emphasis on anger and aggression, dominance, control? Does this play itself out in Zen? We have seen that male gender role conditioning inhibits men from expressing their more vulnerable feelings. Do we, in fact, see the Zen men of koan history, of the present, expressing their vulnerability with as much frequency and ease as they express

their anger, their aggression, their dominance? Are the feelings expressed in our training restricted to the male-approved emotions? Or is a full range of emotional response encouraged? I don't know. We have seen that male training for toughness causes a kind of paranoia about softness and weakness, a fear of coddling. Do we see this aspect of the male gender role played out in Zen institutions? I don't know.

What about the aspect of male gender role that encourages men to be tough, to work too hard, to ignore their bodies, their pain, their exhaustion? Does this play itself out in Zen training? What about the endless stories and myths of arms cut off, legs broken, sesshins in which the monks sit so long without sleep that they are like zombies. Actually, this is one of my favorite stories because it is funny on one level, but on another level it is really not so funny. A story about Korean monks tells how they stay awake for nights and nights until they are literally asleep on their feet. They get up to do kinhin around the zendo. In Korea the walls of the zendo are shoji screens, made out of paper. One monk is such a zombie that he does not make the turn at the corner of the room and he walks right through the wall. So it is funny. But what is the point of getting that tired? Is that good sitting? I don't know. Another story from the Korean tradition tells of a Zen master who did a solitary retreat far up in the mountains and completely ruined his stomach by eating ground up pine needles. Is there encouragement to ignore our bodies, to ignore our personal health? Again, I don't know.

What about the rejection of female traits, and by extension of females, that underlies male training in toughness? Has this fear and dislike of femininity been partly to blame for the centuries of sexism in institutionalized Buddhism? What about male training in sexuality? Have we seen this conditioning played out in the patterns of compulsive sexuality within Buddhist traditions? Will it continue to be played out if individual and institutional gender role training is not worked through? I don't know, but I would think so.

When we add to the possible effects of male gender conditioning on practice the fact that many practitioners are women--not enough, I might add--women who have a completely different and opposite gender conditioning, we have to ask if some aspects of practice are useful for women and to ask if they work for women, even though they may work for men. Perhaps Rinzai would not be the most appropriate teacher for someone who has been told from the get-go that she is a second-class citizen and is already feeling vulnerable and unassertive. As I say, I don't really have any answers. We don't really know what a training that works skillfully with women's conditioning would look like. But I think it is worth asking questions and exploring. In order to explore these issues we will need to look closely at the oppression of men's gender roles, the oppression of women's gender roles. We have not talked much about women's gender training here. It gets a lot of discussion elsewhere, though not enough, I might say. And we will need to look at the oppression of homosexuals because these systems of oppression are tied together.

The source of oppression is, of course, in the hearts of each one of us. But also it is not just a personal problem. Many racists claimed during the civil rights movement that the federal government should not enforce integration because prejudice is, after all, personal--in the human heart--and you cannot change the heart by law. Was this a useful view? I don't think so. It seems to me that, yes, the oppressions within Buddhism are personal. But, yes, they are also institutional.



We can use practice to change both our hearts and our institutions by seeing clearly, by rejecting denial, by planning change, and by working together so no one is oppressed. Buddhism in the West is growing and becoming more established. As an institution we should be secure and strong enough, I think, to ask questions. We do not need to be defensive. We do not need to rush in to provide the correct Dharma answers to any questions brought up. We do not need to protect and defend every single jot and tittle of our tradition. In the process of questioning, we have to trust ourselves to know what is good and what needs to stay and what might need change.

So I challenge men to see into their gender role conditioning, see the way it limits and harms them and others. This is men's work; women cannot help. But I challenge both men and women to work together, to look at the possible ways that these limiting aspects of male gender role conditioning might have become institutionalized in our practice. I challenge us to work together to make sure that practice wears a human form, not an exclusively male form. For Zen practice, the question remains unanswered: What have you done with your female form?

### **Postscript:**

Looking back on this piece, with years of teaching under my belt, I would add that much of the atmosphere of training and the techniques used in modern American Zen are, of course, traditional and thus adapted in our case from Japanese culture. I think we can all see that this culture with its many beauties and strengths also has a problematic side--as does our own. I ask readers to remember that Japanese culture has created the "salary man"--a whole sub'culture of people who work too hard and die too young because they don't take care of themselves or ever admit weakness or need for rest. It is also the culture that during the recent tsunami allowed nuclear waste to go unacknowledged because many employees at these nuclear plants did not want to challenge superiors by giving them bad news. I don't think these are qualities we want to incorporate into Zen training. I remember that once in the monastery zendo someone broke a kyusaku by banging it on the floor while yelling at someone to sit still or be quiet--one of the many times that students were admonished in very aggressive ways--and I would guess for some--scary ways.

I have to say that I have never once raised my voice, nor have any of my students who happened to be in charge, yelling at people to sit still. Yet I do not have a zendo full of squirmers. New people wiggle but then they see that no one else does, and after a bit they settle down. My point here is that these very hyper-masculine, disciplinary training methods do not need to be imported or based on home-grown masculinity. Zen training is not, after all, boot camp. The struggles are real and the grit it takes necessary. But most people enter Zen practice because they want to practice and so much external pressure is often counterproductive.

I think we know more than the ancient Japanese about how people are actually enabled to learn. I would say that living with constant criticism and fear of making a mistake, does not work so well. When people feel supported and relaxed, they learn. Do we provide that atmosphere in most Zen training?