

GLIMPSES OF SPACE: THE GIFT OF THE FEMININE PRINCIPLE

by Alice Haspray

What is the gift of feminine principle in our world? How do we receive that gift? That feminine energy may be misunderstood, ignored, or feared, has deep significance for the lives of both men and women and for any aspirations we have to create a better world. In the words of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, to experience feminine principle directly, you must first “take off your roof”. That is exactly what he invites us to do in his remarkable book, *Glimpses of Space: Feminine Principle & Evam* (Vajradhatu Publications, Halifax 1999—edited by Judy Lief). *Glimpses of Space* is a book that challenges us to think bigger, to give up tiny, constricted viewpoints about who we are both as women and as men. Perhaps the book’s most provocative insight is that masculine and feminine principles are indivisible. Each of us—as a man or as a woman—possesses both principles. As human beings, our path is to engage these energies in a dynamic and healthy way. It is crucial to remember that this is not a discussion of gender. The exploration of the inseparability feminine and masculine principles may raise more questions than it answers, and I hope we can engage playfully with the uncertainty that arises.

What is the essence of each—of feminine principle and of masculine principle? From the vast perspective that Trungpa Rinpoche presents in *Glimpses of Space*, feminine and masculine principles are none other than space and wisdom (feminine) and energy/activity and skillful means within that space (masculine). Accommodation is the feminine aspect. Activity is the masculine. Like a container that creates the space for the content—the container is the feminine principle. What is placed in the container (like tea in a teacup or soup in a bowl) represents the tangible energy of the masculine principle. The intangible elements are feminine principle. When we use words like *tangible* and *intangible* (as Trungpa Rinpoche does in *Glimpses of Space*) we can get beyond our hang-ups about gender. When we tune into the subtle play of tangible and intangible elements in our daily lives, we start to see the bigger picture of what is really happening in our world. That experience is liberating—and it is a cause for celebration.

The invitation to “take off your roof” is really that—an invitation to let go of tight, fixed views, and to take a fresh look at ourselves and at what is happening around us. With respect to becoming vividly aware of our feminine and masculine aspects, we could ask some question like: Do we need more space in our lives? Or, do we need more activity and things? I think we will discover that most of the time what we need is more space, more feminine energy. Taking off our respective roofs allows us to let go of preconceptions and simply be in a vast space of uncertainty. When we first enter a situation we tend to just jump the gun. We act without taking in the whole picture, without appreciating the space of that moment. We instantly want something or we want to push something away. We just react. We want to increase and protect our territory. We are constantly getting hooked into doing something. So, how do we let all this busy-ness go and just BE in the space and relax? The mother lineage, the embodiment of the feminine principle, offers us an open invitation to do just that.

In the Shambhala tradition as taught by Chögyam Trungpa, Great Eastern Sun is the feminine principle of *prajna* or inquisitiveness. It is the essence of why we as human beings continue to live at all. It is the Great Eastern Sun that inspires each of us to get up in the morning, to brush our teeth, to change our clothes, to go to our jobs, to go to some amazing celebration, to help our dying lover, to humor our irritating relative, or to say good bye to a dear friend. Great Eastern Sun is the essence of the human heart—it is our inspiration to reach out and live. It is connected with our basic goodness as human beings. Basic goodness, the essence of our humanity, means that whatever is happening is workable. We can connect to whatever is going on; we can keep moving forward with it and keep leaning into it. As Trungpa Rinpoche said, “We don’t need to be afraid of who we are.” It is the wisdom of basic goodness and Great Eastern Sun that teaches us that obstacles are temporary and that they dissolve into space. That space is the essence of the feminine principle of accommodation, openness, and inquisitiveness.

From the point of view of the Shambhala path, feminine and masculine principles are indivisible. We each have both. The physical manifestation of these two energies is our gender. A man may have more masculine energy and a woman more feminine energy. But this is not always the case, and the energy varies according to the person. The point is to engage the two energies—realize the dynamic inseparability. If masculine and feminine energies are not balanced in a vibrant and healthy way—when one dominates at the expense of the other—dis-harmony and dis-ease are the result. When we close ourselves to the feminine energy of space, when we are caught up in the flashiness and speed of activity and things, our minds become very tiny and tight. Then, when we experience space, we lose our ground, we lose our coherent story line, and we, perhaps, lose our minds. On the other hand, when we are too lost in the space, we are literally “spaced out”; we can not accomplish what we need to do without skillful means. We need both the wisdom of the feminine principle and the ability to act skillfully that is the gift of the masculine principle.

I think it is safe to say that masculine energy has dominated our society for a long, long time. We can also say that masculine energy, in the sense of activity, tangibility, and materiality, has become over-valued at the expense of the intangible elements of the feminine principle. We see that very literally in what has happened to our earth and our oceans. We see the loss of open space and the erosion and degradation of our earth and water. Progress is often defined in a narrow way; it is too often related solely to that which makes an economy work on a material level along. The intangible elements—like art and culture and true celebration—tend not to be valued as much. The intangible elements of a situation create enormous power, nourishment, and magic as we well know. So, it is vital not to overlook them. That is the power of feminine energy.

Whenever or wherever there is an empty space, we have a tendency to fill it up. Whenever there is a gap, we want to put something into it. The push and pull between openness and activity is the immediate play of feminine and masculine energy. We can contemplate this dance in our lives each day. How comfortable are we with letting there be more space—a space where nothing is apparently happening? Can we hold that space, or do we have to fill it up with an activity immediately? On a basic level this discussion is

about you and me. It is about how we might incorporate and balance these principles in our lives. What is the masculine energy that we carry? What is the feminine energy we carry? How do they dance together? When we say we need space, where do we find it? Right in the midst of all that energy is space itself. When there is too much energy, space is right there. When there is too much space, energy is right there. It isn't anywhere else. Where else could it be? When we feel claustrophobic, how do we find space to breathe?

Trungpa Rinpoche wrote a *Supplication to the Mother Lineage*, which is included in one of the anthologies of his poetry called *Timely Rain* (Shambhala Publications, Boston 1998). When I hear it, the last line always seems to hang in the air. It reads: "Please help us to become gentle and tough!" Gentleness is the accommodating quality of space; toughness is the path quality of working with our minds and of being without deception. There is no escape from that. That is tough! The juxtaposition of gentleness and toughness is provocative. Toughness is the discipline of being on the dot, of being fully present in the moment, and of letting go of our tendency always to want life to be a different way. This gentle and tough aspect of feminine principle permeates everything. The space is really open; but it is mind itself that we are working with. How can we bring our awareness fully to each moment? That is the tough question.

A great deal of human suffering can be related to the loss of our connection to sacred outlook, to the intangible aspects of our world that have nurtured us in the past. Now, we seem to be dazzled and caught by the highlights or sound bites. We are always going for the super-tangible things that we can see and physically grasp. It's a kind of a cheap shot that we go for constantly. We don't appreciate the behind-the-camera effort that goes into making the movie, or into the cooking of a hot bowl of soup, for that matter. We may not notice the subtle intelligence of the intangible, which is the binding factor that makes creation possible. The easy thing to do is to make the grand gesture that is noticed by everyone. But that is not necessarily where the real energy and wisdom manifests. If we see only the grand gesture, we over-emphasize masculine principle, the energetic side of action. There is always so much energy humming and buzzing about that we may lose sight of space. When that happens, we are no longer accommodating and there is no container.

Fortunately, there is always the opportunity to go directly into any situation. Once we do that on the spot, no matter how claustrophobic things may seem, an enormous space opens up. This space manifests on both outer and inner levels. Exploring feminine principle takes us into the open space surrounding us and into the space of basic goodness of our own hearts. That is the promise and the invitation of the mother lineage of gentleness.

Alice Haspray began practicing Zen meditation with Shunryu Suzuki Roshi in 1969. Following Suzuki Roshi's death in December 1971, she and her husband Richard became students of Trungpa Rinpoche. Alice currently lives in Halifax, where she is a writer. She also serves as Vice-Chair of the Shambhala Commission on the Status of Women and Feminine Principle. This article is an edited version of a talk offered to the staff at Karmé Chöling on July 14, 2000.

**Excerpt from *Glimpses of Space: The Feminine Principle and EVAM*
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Excerpt from *Talk Four: The Chicken and the Egg* (page 64)

In the sitting practice of meditation there is basic openness. Somehow, strangely, there is also basic uncertainty. If your discipline is completely certain and you know what you are doing, then there is no journey. The uncertainty that takes place in the sitting practice of meditation is the *VAM* principle. The *E* principle is the general attitude, the general atmosphere that is always there. Putting them together makes a complete work of art, so to speak. The desolate situation of life is brought together [with that uncertainty]. Together they present our work, our life, our existence, as being somewhat pushed into the teaching.

In the buddhist tradition, the notion of renunciation means realizing the truth about suffering and understanding how much we have fooled ourselves. How we have been captivated by our own garbage, so to speak. Our own cobweb, our own thread, has imprisoned us constantly. And when we feel more imprisoned, helpless, chaotic, and terrible—that is the space actually. Whether you like to believe that or not, it's a fact. The more we feel claustrophobia, the more we feel that we are completely cluttered with stuff, that we are caught in the middle of a traffic jam completely. Those kinds of little, or even big, things are all around us. We are being surrounded by that situation and we cannot get out of it at all. When we try to get out of such a situation, we have to produce or manufacture more stuff in order to get out of it. And that stuff in itself starts to get in the way all the time. All that is actually space, the *E* principle.

Because of that, we begin to look for something else, another space-type situation, other refreshing possibilities—and unable to find anything better at all, we begin to sit and practice, meditate. The practice of meditation begins to give us some perspective: that the claustrophobia is the space, or *E*; and the inspiration to work with the claustrophobia is the dynamic possibilities, or *VAM*; so *E* and *VAM* put together. The sitting practice of meditation is like that. It's seemingly quite simple, actually. It's very, very basic, extremely basic. The general principle is that there is always a container and what is contained. That is always taking place in practice of any kind, according to the buddhadharma.

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