The Feminine Face of Awakening

Rita Marie Robinson, M.A.

For the first time in thousands of years, women spiritual teachers are emerging. And their perspective is unique. Yes, on an absolute level, there is no real difference between men and women. But on a relative level, there is indeed a difference between the feminine and the masculine expression. And “thank God,” was the way Pamela Wilson put it. “I am all for sameness, but the expression of uniqueness is so delicious!”

Pamela Wilson is not what you imagine a spiritual teacher to look like. When I met her three years ago, it was a delight and a surprise. In my many years of spiritual seeking and studying, I had never met a self-realized woman face-to-face. What was most extraordinary about the meeting is that she was so ordinary. Pamela is 50-something-years-old, been in a few relationships, has a normal name. She wears jeans, likes to hike, and loves her dog.

It was Pamela who introduced me to the teachings of Ramana Maharshi and Advaita, the ancient Hindu philosophy of nonduality. But it wasn’t the past traditions that spoke most deeply to me. It was the here-and-now reality she offered: you are that which you seek. When I first heard that phrase, something in me stopped, sighed, and relaxed. Sometimes referred to as the direct path of awakening, this term encompasses a wide range of teachings and teachers.

I soon discovered that there are many women like Pamela—women who have had an awakening, and now share their wisdom as teachers, but continue to live ordinary lives. Some are well-known, many are “under the radar.” My natural curiosity about the women who embody the direct path resulted in my own journey, talking to women teachers who were self-realized and writing a book about their insights. Some of the teachers have roots in the Advaita tradition; some are students of Adyashanti (a former Zen practitioner and now an articulate spokesman for the direct path); others have no specific tradition or teacher. Though I use the word teacher for the sake of convenience, the women I interviewed do not refer to themselves as such. The word implies that they know something we don’t. Instead, they call themselves “friends” as a way to further dispel the illusion of separation.

The feminine is characterized by a natural movement towards down-and-in, in contrast to the masculine orientation of up-and-out. The masculine movement could be called transcendence; the feminine, embodiment. I want to emphasize that this distinction is not about men and women because there are notable male teachers like Adyashanti who embrace the feminine movement of embodiment, and female teachers who lean towards transcendence. But in general, I have found that women teachers have a natural understanding of the human journey. They are not afraid to talk about divorce, sex, illness, fear, anger, all the ups-and-downs of ordinary life.
Sharon Landrith is a mother and a grandmother from a small town in Kansas. She spent her life on a spiritual search until her experience of recognition or awakening with Adyashanti who asked her to teach a few years ago. Sharon sees no separation between the spiritual and the mundane. “How does it work as you’re doing dishes, being with a friend, driving, as you’re cleaning your house? It’s the Mystery, the revealing, the liberation, the love—all of that is totally present in the most ordinary events.”

And in the most difficult of events. Dorothy Hunt (who was also asked by Adyashanti to teach) described her experience as she faced the fact that she had breast cancer. “We apparently want a human experience, right? We often say we are humans looking for the divine, but the divine is here having a human experience, not just for the good part but the whole of it.” As she lay waiting for the surgery to begin, she described how there was no fear, just a complete curiosity. “This is the Mystery having a human experience and everything is OK and everything is present.” Afterwards, when it’s time for her check-ups, she explains “that there is anxiety at times waiting for results of the tests, but the freedom is in not wanting the anxiety to be different.”

A spirituality grounded in the feminine celebrates both the human and the divine. Everything is welcome, whatever is arising—sadness, anxiety, anger. Chameli Gad Ardagh reminds us that “there will not be a time when we have meditated enough, done enough therapy, enough affirmations so that life will be smooth, quiet, harmonious. So when you start to see life like that, the choice you have is either to resist or to welcome it. When I say ‘welcome’, it’s not in an abstract or conceptual way, it’s real in that we bring a willingness to stay present with whatever occurs. It’s about the practice to embody this presence, coming back into love even (and especially) in the midst of whatever is happening.”

Chameli, who teaches relationship workshops with her husband Arjuna Ardagh, works with women, helping them trust their own heart and their own wisdom. “I meet many women who have had a background with masculine paths, and they see feelings as a distraction to truth. Masculine spirituality has taught us for centuries to get away from feelings, to distance yourself. Instead, we dive completely into feelings, leaving behind the addiction to the story, just staying in the innocent, raw feelings without resistance.”

Karen McPhee takes this idea of “welcoming what is” one step further. It was with her friend and teacher Eckhart Tolle that Karen suddenly knew who she was—the Universe,” as she describes that moment. “It was peaceful, and so vast, so enormous…beyond any personhood.” When talking about the idea of welcoming what is, she warns that we can get the message that we have to welcome or accept everything. “Somehow,” she says, “there is the assumption that these feelings are less than or are just to be tolerated. But all aspects of our human nature are not only to be welcomed, but celebrated. It’s enough of just surviving. It’s time to
dance! Everything you are is welcome! I often say now that a human being is an art form, a magnificent creation.”

Sexuality is also welcome. Another student of Adyashanti’s, Marlies Cocheret de la Moriniere is not afraid to talk about “women, sex, and love.” She told me that she doesn’t want to be a teacher “who talks about truth only in the sense of emptiness.” At a recent women’s retreat, she challenged the participants, “I’m here to shake everybody’s booty.” As someone who has been sexually abused and has gone through her own healing process, Marlies says that it’s not enough to just be in the heart. “You wake up, and you have this emptiness that’s being experienced here in the chest. The heart opens, and it’s really warm and loving, but it’s cut off. What happens down here?” she asked, gesturing below her waist. As a result of Marlies’ invitation, many women started sharing about their sexuality, commenting that they “didn’t know you could talk about sexuality at satsang. We always just talk about awakeness.” The need for integration is crucial, says Marlies who believes that “this is a time when women need to take their seat. This is the root, the first and second chakra, our ground. We need to come into our power or else nothing is going to change here.”

On a global level, Catherine Ingram sees the need for the feminine perspective to bring balance to the world. Catherine, who helped found the Insight Meditation Society in 1976, described how her early years of practice left her “feeling somewhat dry. I didn’t feel much joy or particularly connected in a kind of juicy sense to this reality…I always yearned for much more of a heart connection, a more full-bodied way of being. I became disillusioned and fell into a deep depression.” Catherine ended her search when she met Papaji (H.W.L. Poonja, a disciple of Ramana). She described her week with him as “a release of madness with the story of my life, my history, what was missing, what should be, what might have been. And in its place was a deep appreciation for being alive without asking for anything else. That produced a great sense of freedom.”

As she looks back, Catherine sees her earlier striving for emptiness from a new perspective. “I see a lot of those transcendent views as patriarchal...let’s transcend into the outer limits, into space, into nothingness, into mind only. But no, that’s not working and hasn’t ever worked,” she laughed. “The only divinity we know is right here in this body and this earth.”

As a well-known teacher and author who visits many countries around the world, I asked Catherine what she sees in her travels. “The march of force, destruction and violence that’s going on now is so out of balance. The feminine perspective is family, harmony, interdependence and communication. With the quieting of the heart comes one of the natural qualities of tenderness. The masculine force is terrified of tenderness. It shuts it out; it’s too much feeling. But we’re going to have to get into feeling together if we’re going to save this particular species and the many others who are going down because of us.”
It seems that it is clearly time, both globally and personally for the feminine way. This is about a perspective, not about gender, a view that is inclusive, where all is welcome and embraced—the dark as well as the light, the relative as well as the absolute, the human as well as the divine. Many of the women I interviewed agreed that that’s the kind of spirituality we now need—a spirituality grounded in the here-and-now, fully engaged in the world.

Though it’s not about gender, there is no question that women teachers do have something different to offer. When I am in the presence of a woman (rather than a man) who is fully-realized and awake—something in me wakes up. Especially a woman who is ordinary, who is “just like me.” I see my Self in her eyes and there is this deep recognition of our essential sameness. I am moved to ask: if she can be fully awake and fully human—why not me? And why not you?

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