

## **The Feminine Face of Awakening**

**by Rita Marie Robinson, M.A.**

A detached and kind of blissful state no longer has the appeal it once had back in the 1970s when I was a spiritual seeker looking for what was then considered to be the ultimate goal: enlightenment. I was younger and naively thought that if I could just have that experience of oneness, then all struggle and pain would melt away and be replaced by infinite love and wisdom. While it is true that realization of the formless or the Absolute is an important part of the journey, the real question is what comes next. Westerners in particular want a spirituality grounded in the practical.

This practical approach is what I was looking for when I recently met the first person in my life that I could call enlightened, though I hesitate to use that term because of all the past baggage it carries. For that reason, I often say self-realized or awakened. These terms are interchangeable—they describe a genuine, profound shift in the way a person experiences life. The sense of a separate self dissolves. What I notice about someone who is awakened, is that nothing gets in the way of the full expression of love and wisdom, attributes of our true nature at the core of each and every one of us.

When I initially saw Pamela Wilson, I had a hard time believing that she was the teacher. She wore jeans and a flannel shirt; her long blonde hair hung loose around her shoulders. She looked much younger than her 50-something years. What made the biggest impression on me is the way Pamela was the same whether cooking oatmeal or sitting in front of a group answering questions — there was no change in her warm, loving presence.

After meeting Pamela, I began to wonder—are there other teachers like her, women who haven't left "real" life but who have awakened to their true nature. I was delighted to find that the answer is "yes". My search eventually led to writing a book based on interviews with over a dozen women spiritual teachers. Though their backgrounds are diverse, their lives look very much like everyone else's. They have normal names (with a couple of exceptions). Some have kids, husbands, dogs, bills to pay. In each case, after their awakening, they went back to living life in all its humanness. Instead of resisting the mundane, these women embrace — even celebrate — the ordinariness of daily life.

For years, spiritual wisdom has been predominantly expressed through male teachers. So it is not surprising that I once understood the spiritual path as a transcendent movement, up and out of life—reaching for a more detached and above-it-all view. But now with the emergence of more and more female teachers, the feminine perspective has a stronger voice—this is the second half of

the spiritual journey, which is characterized by a down-and-in movement, a return home to the here-and-now of daily life, the world of form. For most of the women I spoke with, first there was a realization of the absolute, the changeless, the formless. Then there arose a natural desire to return to life—relationships, work, the ups-and-downs of our human world. This return is often called embodiment.

While there is no *ultimate* difference between men and women, it has been my experience that women teachers have a natural understanding of what it means to be fully awake *and* fully human. Which makes sense, just by the very fact that women inhabit a female body that is aligned with the rhythms of the earth. And our roles as mothers, wives, daughters—require us to pay attention to relationship, feelings, and to the practical matters of everyday life.

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, and this hierarchy creates more separation. They emphasize our sameness — that there is no separation, no meaningful distinction between awakened or not, teacher or student.

I was curious to find out what it was like to live from this awakened perspective—what is the difference between my typical day and theirs. When I asked Pamela, she shrugged. “It’s still clean the house, make the food — it’s

exactly the same as life before — but worry has been reduced by 90 percent, sense of separation has been reduced by 98 percent. There's a total knowing. I can't even call it trust because it is so much stronger than that. 'Life' is totally taking care of everything. Who I am, who everyone is — is Life." She smiled and sighed. "We can relax and let Life do all the work." Pamela doesn't use the word enlightened. Instead, she refers to that shift as someone being completely at rest.

Sharon Landrith is a mother and grandmother who lived most of her life in a small town in Kansas. After years on a spiritual quest, the search ended when she experienced her awakening with Adyashanti, a well known "embodiment teacher" from the San Francisco area. Sharon sees no separation between the spiritual and the mundane. "How does it work as you're doing the dishes, being with a friend, 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."

Including and especially in relationship. Sharon has been married for 20-some years. Shortly after her realization, she was struggling with a familiar issue in her relationship and decided to talk to Adyashanti about it. "I've not ever been heard, especially by the males in my life, and there's a lot of resentment about that, a lot of defense."

Adya laughed and said, "What's new? Every woman I've talked to says the same thing. It's true, isn't it?" Sharon admitted that it was true. He told her,

“Until you can give that to yourself, you will always look for it outside and it will never happen.” For days, Sharon was furious. “It was the rage, I think, of all women through the centuries,” she acknowledged. “And I knew it. I knew to keep my mouth shut. I just stayed and stayed with it. It was so huge there wasn’t any escaping it. Then it passed. One morning I woke up and it was gone. And I never ever asked my husband for that again. No more was I looking to him to do that for me. It’s like asking for love from everyone, and it cannot happen until there’s a pouring of the love into oneself.”

Karen McPhee of Calgary was with her teacher and friend Eckhart Tolle (author of *The Power of Now*) when she realized her true nature. Karen claims that she is now as much in love with form as she is with the formless. “The first phase is that you withdraw to some degree from normal worldly stuff and go within. You die into stillness, you die into true nature, and you hang out there as long as required. Then the self wants to know its manifestation, to participate in the human experience *as* the self.”

Karen is emphatic about celebrating our humanness. She warns that “a lot of the spiritual teachings, whether intentionally or not, somehow lead to the idea that we’re supposed to transcend the body, the personality. This so often leads to repression or denial. We get the message we have to work on ourselves, improve ourselves. Yet that never leads to freedom. That which is considered unpleasant

or what we don't want to go through, I now worship . . . anger, pain, loss, grief. I celebrate it."

This is an important aspect of a spirituality grounded in the feminine.

*Everything* is welcome, whatever feeling is arising—sadness, anxiety, anger.

When asked what you do with strong feelings, Muni Fluss of Nelson, B.C. said simply, "Just let them be." Muni, asked by Adyashanti to teach, placed her hand on her heart and said, "here anger arises, sadness arises, there's a touching of the heart. The human being is here, it doesn't want to be excluded and neither do any of these emotions. We are *meant* to feel."

Sexuality is also welcome. Marlies Cocheret de la Moriniere (also asked to teach by Adyashanti) 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 bootie." 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, 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.

In response to Marlies' invitation, many women started sharing about their sexuality, commenting that they "didn't know you could talk about sexuality

here. 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, a key figure in nondual teachings). 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."

Many of the women I interviewed agreed that this is the kind of spirituality we now need—a spirituality grounded in the here-and-now, fully engaged in the world. This is a view that is inclusive, where all is welcome and embraced—the dark and the light, the relative and the absolute, the human and the divine. And of course, masculine *and* feminine.

While it is not about gender, there is no question that women teachers do have something unique to offer. When I am in the presence of a woman 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? Why not now? And why not you?

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**[Sidebar]**

## TO CONTACT THE WOMEN IN THE ARTICLE

If you'd like to learn more about the women interviewed in this article, you can find details and/or contact them at the following websites and e-mail addresses. You may also find out more about the book by visiting [www.extraordinarywisdom.net](http://www.extraordinarywisdom.net).

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