

Women and Enlightenment:
The Teachings of Dr. Frederick Lenz

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I. Introduction

Dr. Frederick Lenz, known to his many followers as Rama, was a spiritual teacher, author, music producer, athlete, and entrepreneur who brought accessible Buddhist teachings to countless people across the world. Although Dr. Lenz taught on a variety of subjects, he was passionate about one in particular: the enlightenment of women. In fact, according to Liz Lewinson, a student and biographer of Dr. Lenz, “Rama stated that the main focus of his teaching in this life was the enlightenment of women.”¹ In this paper, I outline these teachings, their powerful influence on a personal level and in the Buddhist world at large, and the ways in which their legacy is carried on through The Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism.

II. Biography of Dr. Lenz

Dr. Frederick Lenz, or Rama, was an American Buddhist teacher dedicated to helping his students reach enlightenment. One of those students, Liz Lewinson, writes in her biography of him that “Rama was a teacher of the mystical, the spiritual and the practical, who regained his past life enlightenment...at age 31...and then went on to go further in realization.”² He was “on a mission - to find his past life students and help reawaken them to the higher mind-states they had known in other lives so that they could attain samadhi in this life...”³ This dedication endeared him to the tens of thousands of students across the world who encountered his teachings, many of whom were drawn to his intelligence, compassion, skillful transmission of the Dharma, and his display of *siddhis*, or extraordinary powers that manifest in higher states of spiritual

¹ Liz Lewinson, *American Buddhist Rebel: The Story of Rama - Dr. Frederick Lenz* (Skye Pearl Press, 2020), 191.

² Lewinson, *American Buddhist Rebel*, 6-7.

³ Lewinson, *American Buddhist Rebel*, 7.

awareness. Dr. Lenz described these powers as “the fun of enlightenment,”⁴ not goals in and of themselves, but means of inspiring faith in the teacher and the teachings, and encouraging self-discovery. As Lewinson writes, “His mantra was, ‘If I can do this, so can you.’”⁵

Born in 1950, Dr. Lenz’s life was characterized by attainments on both the spiritual and material planes. After graduating magna cum laude from the University of Connecticut with a major in English and a minor in Philosophy, he earned his Ph.D. in English Literature from the State University of New York at Stony Brook under the supervision of Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Louis Simpson. From there, Dr. Lenz studied with the Hindu/Vedanta teacher Sri Chinmoy, receiving the spiritual name of Atmananda, meaning “bliss of the soul.”⁶ He traveled widely, lecturing and teaching meditation at universities around the world, and in the early 1980s became “Rama,” with his own school of American Buddhism that focused on “the practice of meditation and mindfulness, the enlightenment of women, and the development of a successful, independent life and mindstate.”⁷ On the topic of women and enlightenment in particular, Dr. Lenz demonstrated how to embody one’s values by “intentionally plac[ing] women in key leadership roles in his business and teaching organizations” and “only accept[ing] male students who would not seek to diminish the power of his women students.”⁸

Underscoring his teachings on following a spiritual path as a layperson in the modern world, Dr. Lenz was himself a successful, self-made entrepreneur in a variety of fields. He produced music for meditation practice, authored a number of popular spiritual books, led successful software design companies, and excelled at intense sports and activities such as

⁴ Lewinson, *American Buddhist Rebel*, 11.

⁵ Lewinson, *American Buddhist Rebel*, 7.

⁶ “Dr. Frederick P. Lenz,” The Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism, accessed June 3, 2025, <https://fredericklenzfoundation.org/about/dr-frederick-p-lenz/>.

⁷ “Dr. Frederick P. Lenz,” The Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism.

⁸ “Women and Enlightenment,” Rama Meditation Society, accessed June 3, 2025, <https://www.ramameditationsociety.org/american-buddhism/women-and-enlightenment/>.

diving, snowboarding, and martial arts. He also supported a wide range of humanitarian and environmental causes that were close to his heart. After his death on April 12, 1998, his estate formed The Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism, which continues to support the flourishing of Buddhism in America today.

III. Women and enlightenment

A. Understanding enlightenment

Before exploring Dr. Lenz's teachings on women and enlightenment, one must consider his conception of enlightenment itself. In *The Enlightenment Cycle*, he describes this process as:

...the complete awareness of life without mental modifications. Enlightenment is the state of awareness we reach when our consciousness is one with infinity, with the infinite consciousness of life itself. Enlightenment is not a state of mind, although all states of mind are contained within it. It is the best of all things, the brightest of all lights. It is union with immortality, timelessness, and with the temporal, with all the myriad worlds, planes and things that simply can't be put into words.⁹

Dr. Lenz explains that enlightenment is not a state of mind, but a journey - towards wakefulness, understanding, and awareness. These qualities are accessible to everyone, and yet we often overlook them. In order to develop our capacity for noticing and developing our enlightened qualities, Dr. Lenz prescribes three essential ingredients: meditation, a skilled teacher, and spiritual friends, which reflects the Buddha's teachings on the importance of taking refuge in the triple gems of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Ultimately, Dr. Lenz says that "what matters most is that you have a sincere love of truth."¹⁰ The Buddha's teachings are again reflected here, as when, in the *Kālāma Sutta*, he encourages practitioners to pursue the truth for themselves, through personal investigation and free inquiry, rather than by "reports, by legends,

⁹ Frederick Lenz, *The Enlightenment Cycle: Teachings on Meditation and Enlightenment* (Living Flow, 2020), 101.

¹⁰ Lenz, *The Enlightenment Cycle*, 111.

by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, 'This contemplative is our teacher.'"¹¹ In other words, “*Ehipassiko*”...“Come and see for yourself.”¹²

B. Women and enlightenment

Given Dr. Lenz’s teaching that “the pathway to enlightenment is your life,”¹³ it is no surprise that he cared deeply about practical matters such as career pathways and women’s empowerment. Throughout his own career, Dr. Lenz was an outspoken advocate for women’s spiritual advancement and gender equality, believing it to be “the key to creating an enlightened American society.”¹⁴ In 1982, the year Dr. Lenz began recording *The Lakshmi Series* lectures, women in the United States earned an average of 65% of men’s earnings. Today that wage gap has narrowed to 85%¹⁵, which is certainly an improvement, although nowhere near parity. Similarly, women the world over continue to face gender disparities in terms of employment, earning, representation in politics and leadership, domestic responsibilities, sexual violence, and general well-being.¹⁶ By focusing on these issues, Dr. Lenz played a pivotal role in bringing women’s rights and considerations to spiritual spaces, an area where there was also - and continues to be - significant gender disparity.

¹¹ “Kalama Sutta: To the Kalamas (AN 3.65),” trans. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Access to Insight, 1994, <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/soma/wheel008.html>.

¹² Bhikkhu Bodhi, “The Buddha and His Dhamma,” Access to Insight, 2006, <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/wheel433.html>.

¹³ Lenz, *The Enlightenment Cycle*, 103.

¹⁴ “Women in Buddhism,” The Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism, accessed June 3, 2025, <https://fredericklenzfoundation.org/our-work/women-in-buddhism/>.

¹⁵ Richard Fry and Carolina Aragão, “Gender pay gap in U.S. has narrowed slightly over 2 decades,” Pew Research Center, March 4, 2025,

<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/03/04/gender-pay-gap-in-us-has-narrowed-slightly-over-2-decades/>.

¹⁶ Caspar Kaiser et al., “Two paradoxes in women’s well-being,” *Science Advances* 11, no. 10 (2025), DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.adt1646.

The crux of Dr. Lenz's teachings on this topic centers around a crucial question: Why don't more women attain enlightenment? By way of response, his work takes us on a journey through spirit and culture that connects the ultimate, non-dual truth of reality to the relative, dualistic truth of our lived experiences. On the ultimate level, Dr. Lenz establishes that "there is no difference between men and women."¹⁷ Indeed, the categories of "man" and "woman" are just concepts that have been formed through cultural conditioning. When we can go "beyond the physical...what we see is that all of us are androgynous."¹⁸

Dr. Lenz's observations align with Buddhist teachings, as well as with feminist Buddhist scholarship. The foundational Buddhist concept of no-self (*anattā*) is at its core an invitation to understand our identities - including gender - as non-fixed collections of impermanent and interdependent aggregates (*skandhas*) that have no findable essence. This is echoed by feminist Buddhist scholars, who highlight the "soteriological androgyny"¹⁹ of Buddhist teachings and gender-fluid bodhisattvas such as Tārā, Kuan Yin, and Avalokiteshvara. Similarly, Rita Gross writes that "the dharma is neither male nor female,"²⁰ and that "clinging to gender identity subverts enlightenment"²¹ because it traps us in a "prison of gender roles."²²

However, while on an ultimate level gender is merely an illusion, on a relative level it is a very real and socially-reinforced reality. As part of this reality, men "have suppressed women - since the beginning of our history,"²³ in sexual, economic, political, social, ideological, and spiritual ways. What's more, women are taught that they are less powerful than men, when in

¹⁷ Frederick Lenz, *The Lakshmi Series* (Mystic Buddha Publishing House, 2016), 269.

¹⁸ Frederick Lenz, *Insights: Talks on the Nature of Existence* (Living Flow, 2021), 261.

¹⁹ Alan Sponberg, "Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism," in *Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender*, ed. José Ignacio Cabezón (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 3–36.

²⁰ Rita Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993) 178.

²¹ Rita Gross, *Buddhism Beyond Gender* (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2018), 1.

²² Gross, *Buddhism Beyond Gender*, 27.

²³ Lenz, *Insights*, 262.

fact the opposite is true. Dr. Lenz writes that “women are essentially much more powerful than men are. The kundalini flows through them much more readily...”²⁴ and their “subtle physical body conducts light very, very well.”²⁵ This means that it is actually “much easier for women to attain spiritual liberation than it is for men to do so.”²⁶

Why, then, do more women not attain enlightenment? Dr. Lenz proposes that this is not due to anything innate, but rather a result of pervasive and enduring socio-cultural factors including widespread misogyny and patriarchy, men’s fear of women’s power, men’s fear of their own femininity, women’s internalized stories about themselves, and the fact that “women have been systematically pushed out of spirituality by men.”²⁷ Indeed, spiritual and religious spaces - Buddhist and otherwise - have been and continue to be dominated by men, although progress is happening slowly.

Over the course of thousands of years, these conditions have forced women to develop what Dr. Lenz calls “the second attention.” He writes, “Each one of us has a second attention. That is to say, there is another part of our being which is nonphysical, which is extremely powerful, which is capable of doing incredible things. This side of our being evolves through mediation, sometimes accidentally, through shock.”²⁸ For women, the evolution of the second attention has historically been a matter of survival. Women have been forced by society, and men in particular, to channel their power into sexuality in order to secure the safety and survival of themselves and their children. In turn, this has limited women’s ability to use their second attention for the purposes of spiritual liberation. However, we are now living in a moment in

²⁴ Lenz, *The Lakshmi Series*, 270.

²⁵ Lenz, *Insights*, 273.

²⁶ Lenz, *The Lakshmi Series*, 269.

²⁷ Lenz, *Insights*, 276.

²⁸ Lenz, *Insights*, 264.

history where this is no longer necessary for some, though not all, women. As Dr. Lenz writes, “this is still the age of men,” but “the age of women is around the corner.”²⁹

The radical change that is necessary to bring about this “age of women” is nothing short of the undoing of millennia of societal and psychological conditioning on the part of people of all genders, along with the learning of new ways of being. For women, Dr. Lenz teaches that this entails developing confidence in one’s own power and independence, whereas for men it involves developing one’s gentleness, compassion, creativity, and femininity. Meditation is a powerful tool for cultivating these beneficial qualities, while simultaneously investigating and unlearning harmful ones. During meditation, Dr. Lenz suggests asking oneself, “What does it mean to be a man? What does it mean to be a woman?” In doing so, one will come to realize that “it’s not what I thought.”³⁰ For women, this means “review[ing] your description of the world, what it is to be a woman, and see[ing] how inadequate it is. See[ing] how it’s a philosophy that’s been handed to you by a bunch of men who were afraid.”³¹ Ultimately, this process of unlearning and relearning is not about swinging from one extreme to another, but instead about finding balance and harmony in one’s physical and spiritual energies.

Deconstructing fixed and socially-reinforced notions of reality is powerful, necessary, and challenging work. It requires deep introspection and honesty, along with a desire for truth and transformation. It is also the only way to bring about positive change. As Dr. Lenz teaches, “the repression of women, violence against women, and the gender imbalance in our world today is the main reason for disharmony throughout the globe. When women regain their innate

²⁹ Lenz, *The Lakshmi Series*, 276.

³⁰ Lenz, *The Lakshmi Series*, 283.

³¹ Lenz, *Insights*, 288.

capabilities to express and utilize power, and men focus on love and humility, the planet will return to a more peaceful state.”³² The importance of this issue should not be understated.

IV. Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism

Today, the legacy of Dr. Lenz’s work is carried on through the Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism (the Lenz Foundation), which places an emphasis on uplifting and empowering women in Buddhism. Although much progress has been made over the years, there is still what Gross calls “an intolerable contradiction between [classical Buddhism’s] gender-neutral and gender-egalitarian teachings and its male-dominant institutions.”³³ The Lenz Foundation addresses this contradiction by “recognizing the hierarchical and male-dominated nature of imported Buddhist culture,” and “champion[ing] the cause of women’s leadership in American Buddhist communities and organizations.”³⁴

In years past, the Lenz Foundation has honored women’s leadership by making numerous grants to organizations and programs ranging from retreats for BIPOC women at the Garrison Institute in New York, to a Zen meditation and boxing program at Chozen-ji International Zen Dojo of Hawaii. For their current (2024-2025) Women Leaders In Buddhism Grant theme, the Lenz Foundation asks, “It is no longer a rarity to find Buddhist women leaders and role models, but is enough being done? How are female leaders inspired and cultivated? What kinds of Buddhist leadership do these women exhibit, and how do they serve sentient beings? How can this trend develop and grow?”³⁵ In asking and responding to these questions, the Lenz

³² “Women and Enlightenment,” Rama Meditation Society.

³³ Gross, *Buddhism Beyond Gender*, 25.

³⁴ “Women in Buddhism,” The Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism.

³⁵ “Women in Buddhism,” The Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism.

Foundation is not only honoring Dr. Lenz's legacy, but also demonstrating its commitment to the future of female Buddhist leadership.

V. Personal reflections and considerations

It has been both inspiring and illuminating to engage more deeply with Dr. Lenz's teachings on women and Buddhism. His emphasis on this topic was progressive for the time in which he taught it and is still just as relevant today. My introduction to these issues came in the form of a college class called Women in Buddhism, taught by Dr. Janet Gyatso at Harvard Divinity School. This class opened my eyes to various themes under this broad umbrella, including feminist Buddhist scholarship, the struggles and triumphs of Buddhist lay women and monastics around the world, and representations of Buddhist women throughout history. After graduating, I was incredibly fortunate to receive a scholarship to travel for a year in Tibet, Nepal, and India. While in Tibet, I lived at a Buddhist nunnery in a remote area of the Amdo region for two months, and it was there that I saw firsthand what I had learned in my class - both the incredible dedication, spirit, and bond of the nuns there, along with the glaring gender-based inequalities that they faced on a daily basis.

It was also during that year that I first read *Cave in the Snow*, an account of Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo's journey from "the daughter of a fishmonger from London's East End" to "a Buddhist legend and a champion for the rights of women to attain spiritual enlightenment."³⁶ I was incredibly inspired by Tenzin Palmo's story, which included enduring not only the harsh winters and solitude of meditating by herself in a cave for 12 years, but also the widespread sexism and marginalization of women in the male-dominated Tibetan Buddhist monastic system.

³⁶ Vicki Mackenzie, *Cave in the Snow: Tenzin Palmo's Quest for Enlightenment* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1998), back cover.

Her long meditation retreat was a form of protest against this patriarchal system, as well as a way of demonstrating that women are equally capable of attaining enlightenment as men, and inspiring other women to do the same. Just as the bodhisattva Tārā had done before her, she made a vow to attain enlightenment in a woman's body, saying, "Of course being male or female is all relative, but at this moment we are living on a relative plane and the point is that there is such a great dearth of female spiritual teachers. So at this time being a female is more helpful."³⁷ She went on to become one of the first Western women to be ordained as a Tibetan Buddhist nun, eventually founding a nunnery in India and continuing to advocate for the rights of Buddhist women. It is meaningful for me to see how Dr. Lenz taught in this same spirit and with the same urgency, and how the work of the Lenz Foundation now carries this cause forward.

I have also found Dr. Lenz's teachings to be meaningful in how they relate to my experiences as a queer and non-binary person. Although he did not teach exclusively on this topic, his progressive vision for women contributed to laying the foundation for the later, and still emergent, field of queer Buddhist studies, as well as for the lived experiences of people with expansive and non-normative genders and sexualities. As Lewinson writes in her biography of Dr. Lenz, "Sexual preference whether heterosexual or homosexual was a non-issue," and had "no bearing whatsoever on a person's ability to attain higher states of awareness and enlightenment."³⁸

Dr. Lenz himself stated that, "As either a man or a woman or neither or both you need to harmonize yourself with eternity. Whether you're heterosexual or gay or whatever it really doesn't matter a bit. What matters as a man and woman is that you see that you're both, and that you create a balance of both sides of your being."³⁹ What I appreciate about this particular

³⁷ Mackenzie, *Cave in the Snow*, 58.

³⁸ Lewinson, *American Buddhist Rebel*, 194.

³⁹ Lenz, *The Lakshmi Series*, 281.

teaching is the way in which Dr. Lenz acknowledges both the ultimate reality that is beyond the constructs of gender, and the relative reality that includes people of all genders and sexualities. The message is both an inclusive and expansive one that encourages balance amongst all of one's energies and identities. Ultimately, Dr. Lenz encouraged authenticity in one's self-expression, teaching that "it's necessary to be yourself and if you're yourself, who could ask for more?"⁴⁰

VI. Conclusion

Dr. Lenz was a visionary Buddhist teacher dedicated to the spiritual advancement and well-being of his students. Instead of bypassing worldly concerns in his teachings, he highlighted their challenges and complexities. His emphasis on women and enlightenment underscored his sensitivity to a subject that is just as relevant today as it was thousands of years ago. The change necessary for more women to attain enlightenment is not simple, but it is possible, and Dr. Lenz provides a path forward. This issue, which he calls the subject that "all subjects in our world are predicated upon,"⁴¹ is one we cannot afford to ignore. Ultimately, he implores us to be open to the transformation that is coming: "Don't be afraid to change. Be open to being something that you haven't been again and again and again - you'll change, until finally you become everything and nothing."⁴²

⁴⁰ Lenz, *The Lakshmi Series*, 280.

⁴¹ Lenz, *Insights*, 260.

⁴² Lenz, *The Lakshmi Series*, 283.

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