

# Ayya Khema: the Dhamma Direct, without Pretension

More than 25 years ago, Buddhist nun Ayya Khema authorized Sylvia Kolk as a dhamma teacher. For *Ursache\Wirkung* magazine, [Mechthild Klein spoke with Sylvia Kolk](#) on the occasion of what would have been Ayya Khema's 100th birthday.

## **U\W: What type of person was Ayya Khema?**

Sylvia Kolk: During a talk Ayya Khema once said: "We are all on the same path..." I thought, yes, that's how it is. I felt some belonging with those on the path to awakening. Then Ayya's voice from the front cut through my thoughts: "... to the grave!"

Ouch! I hadn't counted on that.

But before my mistake could make me go red in the face, Ayya spoke again: „So why the hurry?“

With that, she had me! I loved her for the grave humor, the humorous gravity.

## **What characteristics do you associate with Ayya?**

Kolk: Her mental clarity was outstanding. Likewise her straightforward intentions, her direct speech. She didn't mince words, but she never snubbed anyone. She was fearless — and 100 percent focused on the dharma. She said: "When I became a nun, I joined the pros."

She knew how to motivate us, to give clear instructions. Pragmatic. We students had to do the rest ourselves. She was unpretentious, free of any guru airs and outrageously smart. Within a few years of her ordination in 1979 she became a world-famous meditation teacher.

## **What are her best-known projects?**

Kolk: She built the [Buddha Haus](#) retreat center and a [forest monastery](#) in Allgäu. These places gave her the opportunity to bring to the world what was close to her heart, to anchor the full depth of Buddhist teaching and practice in the West.

## **Ayya Khema is credited with being able to get things done.**

Kolk: Yes. She was 1.56 meters [5'1"] tall, but she was a bundle of willpower. Her charisma filled large halls. Her words touched people directly and existentially.

## **As a nun, what motivated Ayya?**

Kolk: She was once asked what the most important thing in her life was. “My whole life has been willpower,” she replied. With “willpower” she was referring to the Buddhist term *Viriya*. This is openness and relaxed alertness combined with trust — the strength within us that does not shy away from obstacles or difficulties.

### **Why and/or how did you become her student?**

Kolk: I was writing my dissertation, and I was stuck. I needed some inner distance from my thoughts, which were running in circles. I was seeking quiet so that I could think deeply. In the spring of 1989, I signed up for a ten-day silent retreat with Ayya Khema. “If I’m going to do it, then I want to go all in!” I said to myself. So I drove to Kempton. In my backpack were two books by [Hannah Arendt](#), including *Denken*. I wasn’t particularly interested in Buddhism. Above all, I wanted to learn to meditate. The instructions on the first evening were a bit of a shock: we weren’t supposed to read anything during the retreat! “Always keep looking inwards and collect your mind.” But Ayya’s presence inspired me so much that I followed the instructions. And I increasingly experienced what Ayya taught — and gained confidence.

### **Without Ayya, what would have become of you?**

Kolk: Ayya Khema changed my life. There are gates you go through where there is no turning back. As a female figure of authority, Ayya Khema was a role model for many women to confidently and fearlessly follow their own path. Thanks, Ayya, also for this. Speaking of which: I wanted to thank her directly once. She looked at me with a smile and said, “Don’t thank me, thank the Buddha.” That’s how she was.

### **What exactly did Ayya Khema teach?**

Kolk: For one, she placed a focus on the Samatha practice of Theravada Buddhism. Samatha is the concentration of the mind. In meditation, a sequence of eight states of consciousness can be experienced, which are accompanied by very pleasant feelings and deep states of calm. Anyone who is able to experience these is literally drawn into meditation. She also placed great value on developing the heart — compassion and goodwill toward others. The third area relates to awakening to reality, to recognized experience.

### **What was particularly helpful in her teaching?**

Kolk: She pointed out to us where we continually deceive ourselves and create our own suffering. We identify with our thoughts and with our suffering. And in the end, where do we end up? How do we live our lives? With a liberated, unconfused, clear view of ourselves and the world? Or blinded, defenseless and equipped with an ego that ultimately catches us up everywhere and causes enormous damage!? And like many spiritual teachers from all traditions, she placed great emphasis on becoming aware of impermanence and realizing, through insight — *vipassana* — that nothing remains. So we can use our own mortality as inspiration for living in the here and now.

### **Everything is impermanent.**

Kolk: Ayya Khema had cancer. As the disease progressed, she was asked what it was like for her to have cancer and have to die. “I have to die of something,” she replied. Full stop. “Anyone who

believes that dying is a tragedy has not comprehended things!" Such statements usually kicked off a longer exposition of Buddha's teachings. She taught the way into our innermost being clearly and openly, without any secrets. Above all, she gave us courage — gave us heart. We have tremendous abilities, which are beneficial for ourselves and for those around us.

### **What remains of Ayya Khema's spiritual legacy?**

Kolk: Ayya Khema's work lives on in several practice centers: in Berlin, Hamburg, Munich and Stuttgart. And in Allgäu in the Buddha Haus retreat center and in the Metta-Vihara monastery. There are numerous books, and instructional videos on YouTube. Her teaching is passed on in Germany by authorized teachers and their students. There are also teachers in Ayya Khema's lineage in the United States.

### **What would Ayya Khema focus on today?**

Kolk: What she had already focused on during her years of teaching: reaching as many people as possible in order to pass on that which gave her refuge and security. A pragmatic path to inner peace. Buddha's path.

*Sylvia Kolk, PhD, was authorized by the honorable Ayya Khema to teach the dhamma. In 2004 she founded a [buddhist practice center](#) in Hamburg. Sie betrachtet ihre Arbeit als einen Beitrag zur Transformation des Bewusstseins als Antwort auf die drängenden Fragen und Krisen unserer Zeit. Unmittelbar greift sie dies in ihrer Onlinecommunity „Wir geben der Welt die Tiefe zurück“ auf. For more (in German), visit [www.sylvia-kolk.de](http://www.sylvia-kolk.de)*

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