

Today's Lecture

- Some books related to Gross' paper.
- Women and Buddhism

Some books related to the paper

- Boucher, Sandy. 2002. *Opening the Lotus: A Woman's Guide to Buddhism*. Beacon Press. (Excellent book. Raises issues important to Feminist thinkers.)
- Dresser, Marianne, editor. 1996. *Buddhist Women on the Edge: Contemporary perspectives from the Western Frontier*. North Atlantic Books. (An excellent selection of issues and writers. Contains an essay by Janice Willis and an essay by bell hooks.)

Some books related to the paper

- Friedman, Lenore and Susan Moon, eds. 1997. *Being Bodies: Buddhist Women on the Paradox of Embodiment*. Shambhala Publications, Inc.
(Interesting selection of topics, and less heady than the previous anthology. It does not always contain coherent Buddhist views on the relevant topic.)
- Gross, Rita M. 1993. *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*. State University of New York Press.
(Excellent book in Feminist analysis. Well worth the read, both for its intended focus and for providing the space for the reader to reflect deeply on *Buddhadharma*.)

Rita Gross: Women and Buddhism

- For Rita Gross, Feminism is defined as “the radical practice of the co-humanity of women and men” (*Buddhism After Patriarchy*, p. 127).
- Note her (very Buddhist) emphasis on practice in this definition. This definition makes feminism itself a practice. Arguably, this is importantly right.

Rita Gross: Issues in a Feminist Revalorization of Buddhism

- It is Gross' contention that not only *can* Buddhism be revalorized, it *must be* to remain “true to its own vision” (*Course Pack*, p.136).
- She also contends that “the task of the *feminist* historian vis-à-vis the history of religious tradition is best summed up, in my view, as the quest for a record that is both *accurate* and *usable*” (*Course Pack*, p.137).

Rita Gross: Issues for a Feminist History of Buddhism

- Obstacles or pitfalls to this quest.
- (1) “[T]he quadruple androcentricism” (*Course Pack*, p.137) of ‘the’ Buddhist record arising from:
 - (i) the fact that contemporary Buddhist records often concern men rather than (also) women.
 - (ii) the fact that, within Buddhist traditions, much more attention is given to male “heroes” (*Course Pack*, p.137) than those who are female.
 - (iii) the fact that ‘Western’ scholarship has tended to focus on Buddhist men (*Course Pack*, p.137).

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- (iv) the fact that “contemporary Buddhists, both Asian and Western, continue to focus on the tales of male heroes, to the relative downplaying of tales of female heroes, and to be generally unaware of Buddhism’s patriarchal past, its male-dominated institutions, or the problems inherent in such values and behaviors” (*Course Pack*, p.137).

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- (2) The pitfall of “the pit” (*Course Pack*, p.137).
The androcentricism of the Buddhist record gives one the (mistaken) impression that Buddhist Tradition(s) is steeped in misogyny and sexism (*Course Pack*, p.137).
- (3) The pitfall of “compensatory history” (*Course Pack*, p.137). This is a pursuit for those women who in their ‘greatness’ relevantly resemble those ‘great men’ who have been attended to in the record (*Course Pack*, p.137).

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- Summing up, or making generalizations about, the *accurate* record.
- (1) “[I]n every period of Buddhist history, there are at least two views about women, neither of which ever fully wins out. Some texts record fairly negative views of women, even some outright misogyny, which is different from patriarchy or male dominance. Women are viewed as more materialistic, emotional, and sexual than men, less able to renounce desire, and generally less capable of making significant progress on the Buddhist path But, in every period, others stated and argued that women were not inherently deficient or inferior to men in their ability to achieve the calm and insight required to attain Buddhism’s highest goals” (*Course Pack*, p.137).

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- (2) As you move from early through Mahayana and then Vajrayana Buddhism, biased views or attitudes against the spiritual or moral capacities of women become less acceptable (*Course Pack*, p.137).
- (3) Historically, Buddhism fares better than many other religious traditions in the relative lack of misogynist, as opposed to patriarchal, attitudes or values about women (*Course Pack*, p.137).
Androcentricism is, however, “almost unrelieved throughout Buddhist history” (*Course Pack*, p.137).

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- Summing up, or making the generalizations about, the *usable* record.
- “[T]he most usable information that one gains from a deliberate study of the history of Buddhist opinions about women is that there has always been a ‘quasi-feminist’ position in Buddhism, if one can bear the anachronism involved in using a modern term to name earlier attitudes. There has always been controversy about women’s options and abilities, and there has always been important Buddhist thinkers who stated clearly that the practice of some Buddhists to discriminate against women is inappropriate and undharmic. This is useful and important information because so many Buddhists today are naïve and complacent about that history” (*Course Pack*, p.137).

Rita Gross: A Feminist analysis of major Buddhist teaching

- “In my view, Buddhists can make the case very strongly that the core teachings of Buddhism are not sexist because Buddhism lacks two major doctrines, which prove to be extremely difficult for feminists to reconstruct... Because of Buddhist nontheism, there is no gendered Absolute or Supreme Deity valorizing the male sex among humans Additionally, Buddhism lacks a divinely revealed or eternally valid cosmic law code or lifestyle that defines gender roles and gender relationships”
(*Course Pack*, p.138).

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- A teaching that has been used within religion, including Buddhism, to privilege men over women has been the theory of karma.
- Gross writes, “Everyone’s current position is a result of karma from the past. ... Their [i.e. women] inferior social position, biology, and spiritual-intellectual capacities result from negative karma, so they must gracefully bear these liabilities, which will probably produce the future karmic reward of a better (male) rebirth” (*Course Pack*, p.138).

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- Gross has two reasons for why this is unconvincing:
- (1) The lower social status so often accorded women is not intrinsically tied to their female-ness. Rather it reflects the socio-political backdrop in which they live out their lives. This can be extended to the other perceived 'deficiencies' connected with being female (*Course Pack*, p.138).
- Of note here is the inconsistency of the Buddhist rejection of (male) social hierarchy (e.g. in the *varnadharma*) and the social oppression of the underprivileged while, at the same time, maintaining gender privilege.

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- (2) *EVEN IF* karma could *explain* the current status of women in patriarchal societies, it does not *justify* it (*Course Pack*, pp.138-39).

Again, this point would be accepted by Buddhists when it concerns (male) social hierarchy and the social oppression of the underprivileged.

Rita Gross: A Feminist analysis of major Buddhist teaching

- (B) Gross makes two general observations about those teachings that are unique to Buddhism: (i) “None of the major or minor doctrines that articulate the specifically Buddhist outlook has ever, to my knowledge, been called into service to justify male dominance...” (*Course Pack*, p.139) and (ii) “these teachings are always stated in an abstract, nongendered form that would promote the impression that they are intended to address all human beings...” (*Course Pack*, p.139).

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- Do note that Gross' discussion of Buddhist teaching adopts the Vajrayana (or Diamond Vehicle [i.e. Tibetan Buddhist]) reading of *Buddhadharma* (e.g. that there has been three turnings of the Wheel of *Dharma*) (*Course Pack*, p.139).
- Do also note, however, that she does not push a literalist interpretation of the sacred history surrounding the origins of Mahayana teaching (*Course Pack*, p.139).

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- **The Buddhism of the first turning of the wheel of *dharma*:**
- The teaching of *anatman* (what Gross translates as “egolessness” (*Course Pack*, p.139)) applies as much to gender identity as to other types of social or personal identity (*Course Pack*, pp.139, 140-41). That is to say, there is *no relevant dissimilarity* as you move from other types of social or personal identity to gender identity.

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- The methods used to defend the general teaching of *anatman* can, according to Gross, be extended to gender identity ... talk of being male or female enables the continued existence of a self-concept (a concept of 'who I really am') that contributes to the arising of dukkha (*Course Pack*, p.141). It accomplishes this through a conception of the self that separates each of us from the Other, and grounds talk of what is rightfully 'mine' rather than 'yours'.
- What's more, there is nowhere under which such talk can be categorized within a Buddhist framework except under 'Self' (*Course Pack*, p.141).

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- Not only does gender identity, then, fit within the category of ‘Self’, but those Buddhist institutions that continue to perpetuate gender exclusion and privilege are, *ipso facto*, perpetuating attitudes, values and practices that are undharmic...i.e., they hinder the spiritual advancement of all those who accept, or participate in, them (*Course Pack*, p.141).

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- **The Buddhism of the second turning of the wheel of *dharma*:**
- The teaching of *Shunyata* is clearly applied in early Mahayana texts to the issue of whether women can attain the heights of Buddhist spirituality.
- “...[T]he classic Buddhist arguments against automatic gender hierarchy, made almost two millennia ago, argue that since all categories are empty of intrinsic meaning, females cannot be automatically discounted but could understand and manifest the highest goals of Buddhism” (*Course Pack*, p.141).

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- The Mahayana Buddhist teaching on *bodhicitta* (or ‘the enlightened mind’) is also connected to the question of gender identity and the irrelevance of being a woman when pursuing Buddhist soteriological ideals.
- “For a Mahayanist, no other experience is more central than the discovery of *bodhicitta* In this experience, one intuitively self-existing spontaneous compassion in the core of one’s being.... This experience is so inspiring that one is motivated to pursue enlightenment, not merely for one’s self, but for all beings, which is the essence of the famous bodhisattva vow” (*Course Pack*, p.142).

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- *Bodhicitta*, and the Path of the Bodhisattva which it motivates one to embark upon, ground one's sense of 'self' in Interdependent Arising. "One sees one's life as fundamentally and inextricably interlinked with all other lives" (*Course Pack*, p.142). Thus it moves one beyond an identity with dualities (including our duality of gender).
- It would seem that this core teaching of Mahayana Buddhism coincides with core concerns within Feminism, and appears to *require an active resistance* to harmful practices, attitudes and values...like those which perpetuate patriarchal institutions (*Course Pack*, p.143).

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- This reorientation of the individual to care for, and love, all other beings, *resembles* the ethic of care proffered by such Feminist moral psychologists and philosophers as Carol Gilligan and Virginia Held (*Course Pack*, p.142).
- What's more the Buddhist view that such compassion must be first grounded in a right, and nondestructive, view of the self coincides with Feminist concerns about the destructive nature of self-concepts into which females are socialized in patriarchal societies (*Course Pack*, pp.142-43).
- 'Finally', to be socially engaged to better the lives of all beings seems to fall out of the Buddhist emphasis on universal compassion in ways relevantly similar to the social reformist elements of Feminism (*Course Pack*, p.143).

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- **The Buddhism of the third turning of the wheel of *dharma*:**
- The teaching of ‘Buddha-Nature’ or ‘*Tathagatagarbha*’ marks the third turning. *Tathagatagarbha* literally means the “womb of the *Tathagata*” (*Course Pack*, p.143), where *Tathagata* refers to one who is “Thus-gone” (*Asian Philosophies*, p.346). *Tathagata* is a title often used by Buddhists to refer to Gautama Buddha.

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- This term has been used to refer to that which ultimately underlies all beings, or even the physical universe (*Course Pack*, p.143).
- Koller writes, “Although it is beyond all names and descriptions, the reality of things, as they really are, in their fully dynamic and interdependent existence, is provisionally referred to variously as the ‘pure mind,’ ‘undivided being,’ and ‘Buddha-nature.’ Seeing true reality as Buddha-nature, or as pure mind, underlies the Mahayana aim of becoming one with the all-illuminating Buddha-consciousness” (*Asian Philosophies*, p.243).

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- Imagine That which interexists, but without concepts or ideas in which to frame your imagination, pure and undefiled by that to which we refer with terms like ‘*duhkha*’, ‘ignorance’, ‘greed’ and ‘hatred’. That is *Tathagatagarbha*, as imagined by those of us still trapped in *samsaric existence*.
- According to many Mahayana Buddhists, it is the potential of our enlightenment, it is our Buddhahood, obscured by our various personal ‘defilements’ (*Course Pack*, p.143).
- The positive imagery used to describe pure, or undefiled, Interexisting Reality was proffered by those Mahayana Buddhists dissatisfied with the negative connotations of *Shunyata* (*Course Pack*, p.143).

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- Gross is quick, and right, to point out that it is suspicious that *Tathagatagarbha* is so often translated as ‘Buddha-Nature’ rather than the more literal ‘womb of the *Tathagata*’, as the common choice of translation down plays the feminine imagery of the original word (*Course Pack*, p.143).
- The literal translation is more evocative in connoting the (‘inner’) source from which our Buddhahood arises (*Course Pack*, p.143).

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- A note: Gross at one point writes, “Because this enlightenment gene is already there, unborn unceasing, and nondwelling, not subject to causes and conditions, one can become a Buddha completely” (*Course Pack*, p.144).
- This description of the *Tathagatagarbha* seems at variance with the claim that it refers to That which interexists, pure and undefiled. It seems to imply an underlying ground of Buddhahood, an ultimate ground of Being, that is not changing or interexisting. This is a common problem with those Buddhists who talk of the *Tathagatagarbha*, and leads many ‘dissenting’ Buddhists to suspect that these Mahayana Buddhists are ‘sneaking in’ soul-talk back into Buddhist teachings.

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- Importantly, Gross writes, “this Buddha-embryo is generic and common, not personal. It is not to be conflated in any way with personal identity and has no individuality. Certainly it has no gender and is not different in women than in men. Such a statement would be incomprehensible, and has never, to my knowledge, been made in any Buddhist text, important or minor” (*Course Pack*, p.144).

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- Implications of the teaching of *Tathagatagarbha*:
- (1) Given the positive treatment of gestation or pregnancy implied in the term, it is profoundly disingenuous to “valorize these processes symbolically but at the same time to diminish and denigrate those among human beings who are intimately involved with them” (*Course Pack*, p.144).
- (2) Since we are all “fundamentally characterized by Buddha-nature” (*Course Pack*, p.144), a characterization that exists beyond duality, then there is no ground for making a substantial distinction between being a Buddhist man and being a Buddhist woman (*Course Pack*, p.144).

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- (3) That both women and men share the same Buddha-nature, and yet women fare worse than men in the pursuit of supreme, or complete, enlightenment, points to the causal efficacy of *external conditions* in hindering women from spiritual advancement.
- (4) When taken together, the Mahayana teachings of *Shunyata* and *Tathagatagarbha* not only undermine the legitimacy of gender prejudice within Buddhist institutions, they call those on the Bodhisattva Path to an active resistance to such prejudice, both within themselves and others. This will quite easily extend to those Buddhist institutions charged with facilitating spiritual practice (*Course Pack*, p.144).

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- For the sake of time I will leave the material on Vajrayana Buddhism for you to peruse.
- Do note that the most explicit teachings against gender prejudice in Buddhism are found in this form of Mahayana Buddhism (*Course Pack*, p.145).

Rita Gross: Toward a Feminist Reconstruction of Buddhism

- Three general obstacles face Buddhist women in their pursuit of enlightenment:
- (1) Buddhist institutions are “more open to men than to women” (*Course Pack*, p.146).
- (2) Women face the stereotype that they are disinterested and unable to engage in advanced Buddhist practice (*Course Pack*, p.146). This, arguably, enables (1).
- (3) Women’s limited reproductive and familial ‘responsibilities’ severely restrict their hopes of spiritual advancement in ways that do not affect men (*Course Pack*, p.146).

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- There needs to be, according to Gross, two general reformist strategies in the reconstruction of Buddhism.
- (1) Women must be allowed full access to the institutions or practices hitherto restricted to men. They must also be provided with those opportunities, and sources of encouragement, that have enabled men to successfully pursue spiritual advancement (*Course Pack*, p.146). If this is to succeed, this first reformist strategy must redress gender imbalance in monastic, lay and yogic spheres of Buddhist practice (*Course Pack*, p.146).
- (2) Dharmic teaching, including the language and imagery used to communicate *Buddhadharma*, must change so as to reflect the female as well as the male voice and spiritual experience (*Course Pack*, p.146).

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- In reforming Buddhist institutions and practice Gross predicts that three issues will come to the fore:
 - (i) The importance of the *Sangha*, construed broadly or narrowly, to the spiritual advancement of each individual Buddhist practitioner will need to be better emphasized (*Course Pack*, pp.147, 148).
 - (ii) Domestic, or mundane, life will need to be better incorporated into Buddhist practice.
 - (iii) A critical analysis of current spiritual practices must take place, with an eye towards eliminating those practices that do not, and encouraging those practices that do, promote spiritual advancement (*Course Pack*, pp.148-49). This analysis must also wrestle with what kinds of spiritual skills are desirable (*Course Pack*, p.149).

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- An example of much needed institutional reform: The Eight (extra) Precepts for female monastics.
- “[1] A nun who has been ordained even for a century must greet respectfully, rise up from her seat, salute with joined palms and do proper homage to a monk ordained but that very day.
- “[2] A nun must not spend the rains in a residence where there is no monk.
- “[3] Every half month a nun should require two things from the Order of Monks: the date of the Observation day, and the coming for the exhortation.
- “[4] After the rains a nun must ‘invite’ before both Orders in respect of three matters: what has been seen, heard and suspected (to be an offense).

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- “[5] A nun, offending against an important rule, must undergo manatta discipline for a fortnight before both Orders.
- “[6] When, as a probationer, she has trained in the six rules for two years, she should seek ordination from both Orders.
- “[7] A monk must not be abused or reviled in any way by a nun.
- “[8] From today admonition of monks by nuns is forbidden, admonition of nuns by monks is not forbidden.
- “Each of these rules is to be honored, respected, revered, venerated, and is never to be transgressed by a nun during her life.” Conze, Edward, I.B, Horner, David Snellgrove and Arthur Waley. 1997. *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, pp.24-25.