

# Book Review

## *Buddhism beyond Gender: Liberation from Attachment to Identity*

By Rita M. Gross

Shambhala Publications, 2018

Review by Zen Master Bon Hae (Judy Roitman)

There have been three stages in the Western Buddhist attitude toward gender in Buddhism. The first was what we now see as an embarrassing combination of ignorance and arrogance, best summarized by Gary Snyder's offhand remark in a newsletter that his sangha had just completed a retreat in which the majority of the participants were women. According to Snyder, this was the first time such a retreat had happened in all of Buddhist history. People actually went around saying that the West's contribution to Buddhism was going to be that women were going to be able to practice as seriously as men.

I hope you cringe hearing that.

Especially in light of the second (still ongoing) stage: the discovery by Western Buddhists that women have been practicing seriously from the beginning, despite patriarchal and downright misogynist attitudes. There is so much scholarship in this area that I couldn't begin to list it all, but one of the pioneering books is Rita Gross' *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*, published in 1993. *Buddhism after Patriarchy* illuminates Buddhist attitudes toward gender in a wide range of texts, from abstract philosophical discussions to narratives in which women or female beings appear as characters. Her chapter titles are provocative: "Do Innate Female Traits and Characteristics Exist?"; "The Feminine Principle"; "Androgynous Institutions." This book pays equal attention to the factual—for example, restrictive rules and customs—and the fantastic—Padmasambhava's consort, Yeshe Tsogyel, and the instant attainment of enlightenment by the eight-year-old Naga princess in the *Lotus Sutra*. *Buddhism after Patriarchy* is not primarily concerned with history but with images and theories about women within Buddhism. Gross argues that Buddhist texts themselves provide a firm basis for the conclusion that women have no more dharmic hindrances than men. But her egalitarian vision is still based on a notion, however attenuated, of gender distinction: men and women need to support each other's practice and dharmic aspirations, but even without conventional gender roles, men are still men and women are still women.

*Buddhism beyond Gender* belongs to (and perhaps inaugurates) the third stage, which seeks to abolish gender as a category of intrinsic interest while recognizing the profound effects of gender assignment on our actual lives. Here Gross goes beyond her earlier book to argue that clinging to our gender identities causes as much suffering as clinging to any other form of identity. We might say (she doesn't) that male and female have no self-nature.

This is a delicate balance. On the one hand, she is in-

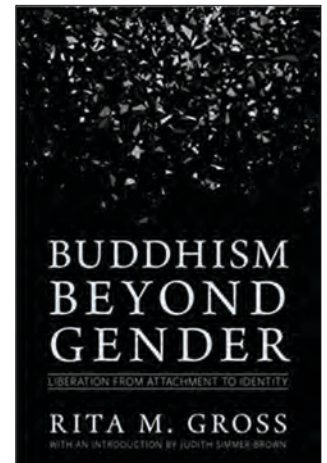
dignant at the smug assertion, whenever anyone complains about actual gender roles, that the enlightened mind is beyond gender, so why concern yourself with it? She recognizes this rightly as yet another self-righteous way to keep women down. On the other hand, she wants us to truly recognize the uselessness of gender as a category within a Buddhist context. She threads her way through this seeming conundrum by invoking Dogen's famous dictum: "To study the way of enlightenment is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things." The way to overcome the prison of gender roles (a phrase that permeates this book) is to meticulously examine gender and see how it is actually actualized. Only then can we shuck it off. Otherwise the dismissal of gender is just another example of the androcentrism (the notion that maleness is normative) that has warped our vision in so many ways for so very long.

The heart of Gross's argument that we should not cling to our gender identities is a careful inspection of texts—the earlier the better—to find formulations in which gender is irrelevant. For example, in the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, Buddha states the tasks that must be completed before he enters final nibbana (that is, nirvana). Here's the template, with a space for the key nouns.

I will not take final Nibbana till I have \_\_\_\_\_ who are accomplished, trained, skilled, learned, knowers of the Dhamma, trained in conformity with the Dhamma, correctly trained and walking in the path of the Dhamma, who will pass on what they have gained from their Teacher, teach it, declare it, establish it, expound it, analyse it, make it clear . . .

This template is repeated four times, where the blank is filled in by (1) monks and disciples, (2) nuns and female disciples, (3) laymen followers and (4) laywomen followers. This is the fourfold sangha, and its frequent invocation in Buddhist literature is an important piece of evidence. She cites the separate stories of Shakyamuni's wife, Yasodhara, and his stepmother, Pajapati, in which each woman enters nirvana before the Buddha, who declares their achievements equal to his own. She notes parallel passages in which men and women are described in the same way. Thus, the passage "I do not see even one other form that so obsesses the mind of a man as the form of a woman. The form of a woman obsesses the mind of a man" is paralleled by a passage in which the genders are simply switched. Androcentric language, she observes, is often avoided in traditional Buddhist texts—for example, the phrase "whether a man or woman" appears

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often in the Pali canon when human beings are referred to. One particularly convincing example she cites is a passage recommending that a man transcend his masculinity, which is paralleled by a passage recommending that a woman transcend her femininity. Gross also adopts a comparative view of Buddhist attitudes toward gender: she contrasts the unequal Western view of parenthood (for millennia, it was assumed that the woman who gave birth was a passive recipient of the male life force with no generative contribution) to the many Buddhist passages in which mothers and fathers are equally venerated and to whom the child owes equal debt. Western monotheistic religions, she argues, consider women to be literally the second sex, while the Buddhist description of humanity from the beginning consists of two sexes.

Gross was a pioneer at the intersection of women's studies and religious studies, with a deep knowledge of Buddhism both as scholarship and as practice: originally a student of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, she was ordained as a senior teacher in the Karma Kagyu tradition in 2005. The tense of the previous sentence is crucial here. She died of a massive stroke in 2015, leaving *Buddhism beyond Gender* far from finished. It was missing chapters that she had spoken about writing, in particular a chapter on gender fluidity and transsexuals. Her friend and colleague Judith Simmer-Brown did the final organizing and editing of the manuscripts that Gross left behind. Not knowing what Simmer-Brown faced, I can't comment on whether she could have done better. But many sections of this book are not worthy of the subtle and

important points that are embedded in it. When she moves into contemporary material, Gross loses focus, oversimplifies, and becomes a somewhat testy cultural critic. I wish this book had been edited with a heavier hand, although I can easily understand why Simmer-Brown was hesitant to do so.

And the organization seems strange. Smack in the middle come the most powerful lines, which should have been its conclusion.

What does all this “gender talk” have to do with “real dharma”? Everything! “Gender talk” is not fundamentally a project of social liberation, although it also facilitates social liberation. It is an extremely close and deep way of studying the self, which, we are told, is the only way to forget the self and thus attain “the way of enlightenment.” Therefore, I conclude that all the Buddhists who claimed they believed in egolessness but were better Buddhists than me because they had no issues with conventional gender arrangements simply had never taken seriously the Buddha's instruction about every conditioned phenomenon, “This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.” “When you have abandoned it, that will lead to your welfare and happiness.”

To make this point, to extend this point past the individual and to the communal, and to base it in classical Buddhist texts, is a major contribution to contemporary Buddhist discourse. I hope we all heed it. ♦

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eternity, nirvana. It defies any attempt at human control. This is the moment to which Mazu is calling our attention.

Anyone who has much experience swimming or boating in moving water knows that, on a practical level, it's simply not true that “flow is the same . . . regardless of how fast the water is flowing.” Sometimes “flow” is a river at flood stage; sometimes it's a barely perceptible trickle in a tiny rivulet in the desert. Even if it were a helpful observation, however, Professor Yamada's commentary misses the point of kong-an practice, which is about realization, not explication. What does Magu see right now? How can you show it to me?

Here's another wonderful Mazu kong-an that was new to me:

Someone asked, “What is the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the West?”

Mazu responded, “What does this mean, here and now?”

This is another instance where no single translation will suffice. Mazu's response is probably best translated literally as, “What is the meaning of this present moment?” or “What is the meaning of what's happening right now?”

Mazu's response is pure Zen teaching that really shouldn't require any commentary at all; and Yamada says, correctly but superfluously, “The meaning [of Bodhidharma's coming from the West] is not that of an event in the distant past; it's the meaning of your present state of being.”

*Master Ma's Ordinary Mind* is a much-needed book, in that it makes all of Mazu's kong-ans available in one place and in print; it also includes a brief biographical sketch by Andy Ferguson, author of the indispensable *Zen's Chinese Heritage* (Wisdom, 2011). (It doesn't contain Mazu's longer dharma discourses, which are translated in *Sun-Face Buddha*.) But it would be a more useful book for Zen students—obviously, the primary audience—if it had commentary from a contemporary Zen master, or more detailed material on the relationship between Mazu, his teachers, and his many dharma heirs. My advice to my fellow students is to stick with the kong-ans themselves—and bring them into the interview room, where Master Ma's mind is always at work. ♦

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Jess Row is a dharma teacher at Chogye International Zen Center and the new books and culture editor of *Primary Point*. He's a novelist and teaches writing at NYU and the College of New Jersey. His latest book, *White Flights*, a collection of essays about race and the American imagination, will be published in 2019.