

Book Review

## Buddhism beyond Gender: Liberation from Attachment to Identity

By Rita Gross. Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala Publications, 2018, 192 pages, ISBN 9781611802375 (paperback), \$24.95.

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**B**uddhism *Beyond Gender* was published posthumously after Rita Gross's sudden and untimely death in 2015. Although her major publication, *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (1992), is now over twenty-five years old, Gross's work is still a touchpoint for discussions of gender and Buddhism, especially among those coming to the discussion from outside of that subfield. Gross's major thesis in *Buddhism Beyond Gender* is that true Buddhist liberation necessarily includes liberation from the "prison of gender" (2015: 10). Inspired by the language of the thirteenth-century Japanese master, Dōgen, Gross argues that accomplishing such a liberation requires a "study of the [gendered] self" in order to "forget the [gendered] self" (3). These ideas repeat a central argument from *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, applying Buddhist philosophical deconstructions of the self to the notion of gender, thus revealing the fundamental 'feminism' of Buddhist thought. Gross aims what is essentially a theological (rather than historical) argument at two groups of interlocutors. Addressing dharma practitioners and teachers, she defends against the view that speaking of gender is un-dharmic or somehow introduces irrelevancies into practice-oriented discourse about Buddhism. Gross herself was recognized as a senior teacher by Jetsun Khandro Rinpoche in 2005 and many of the experiences and conversations she draws from in her book take place within dharma settings. She simultaneously takes Buddhist studies scholars to task for being androcentric and ignoring the 'Indigenous' feminism of what she often refers to, somewhat ambiguously, as 'traditional' Buddhism.

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Gross's reputation as an important feminist scholar in the field of Buddhist studies rests largely on *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, which is frequently referenced in scholarly works focused on issues of gender in Buddhism and has been assigned in many a Buddhist Studies classroom. This earlier work provides a clear account of its feminist methodology and attempts an overview of the history of women and gender in classical Indian and Tibetan Buddhism, grounded in a broad selection of premodern Buddhist sources. *Buddhism After Patriarchy* can be grouped with I. B. Horner's pioneering *Women Under Primitive Buddhism: Laywomen and Almswomen* (1936) and Diana Paul's *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in the Mahāyāna Tradition* (1979) as classics in the subfield. Unfortunately however, *Buddhism Beyond Gender* fails to further advance the study of gender and Buddhism. Specifically, it tethers feminist approaches in Buddhist studies to certain intellectually underdeveloped or overtly polemical threads in feminist discourse that the broader field of feminist scholarship has moved well past. As such, if there are such persons as would still argue that a probing examination of gender is irrelevant to the study of Buddhism or Buddhist practitioners, Gross's last book may do little to persuade them otherwise, especially younger readers. It is simply too problematic, dated, and limited a work. I find it troubling to criticize in print the work of an important senior scholar who can no longer answer back. Nonetheless, while I may be wrong-headed in this view, I write this frank review based on the assumption that I do more justice to her legacy, and incorporate her contributions more fully into the ongoing work of Buddhist Studies, by honoring this last work of hers with a serious reading, rather than simply issuing a paean.

In *Buddhism Beyond Gender*, Gross develops her arguments over six chapters. Chapter one, "Buddhism as Studying the Self and Forgetting the Self," introduces the book's argument about the importance of examining the gendered self as a means of releasing oneself from "the prison of gender roles." Chapter two, "Identity, Egolessness, and Enlightenment," lays out the general topic of identity and the demands of the conventional self from a Buddhist point of view. Chapter three, "The Prison of Gender Roles," is the longest chapter in the book by far. In it, Gross investigates the particular forms of suffering that accompany gendered identity, both from Western and from Buddhist points of view. This chapter includes sections on woman as mother, woman as sexual object, and the suffering that accompanies a male gender identity. Chapter four, "Freedom from the Prison of Gender Roles," provides a primer on Buddhist no-self teachings and explores deeply etched emotional attachments to gender identity and how to overcome them. Chapter five, "Indigenous Buddhist Feminism," argues that the assertion of gender equality and praise of an enlightened state that goes beyond gender is evidence that premodern Buddhism can be regarded as an "indigenous" feminism. In this chapter, Gross further claims that the androcentric nature of Buddhist studies scholarship has obscured the inherent feminism of Buddhist traditions. Chapter six, "My Audience and Purpose," states Gross's desire to steer the future of Buddhism toward a more gender-liberatory direction by communicating her message about escape from the prison of gender as a primary form of Buddhist enlightenment, first to Western dharma practitioners, and secondarily to Asian teachers and Western scholars.

While Gross's mastery of the methodologies of text-historical scholarship is not in dispute, she seems to break free of those scholarly methodologies in *Buddhism Beyond Gender*. Perhaps she earned her freedom to do so in the final years of her career, and, as stated above, this last book is primarily critical-constructive Buddhist theology, not a work of historical scholarship. Still, her eschewal of scholarly methodologies is intellectually problematic and introduces distortions, especially since many readers will know her credentials and trust her scholarly authority. For instance, Gross advances a number of generalizations about Buddhism versus other religions without providing documentation or engaging in an exploration of sources. Gross's non-comparative discussions of Buddhist texts and traditions are more substantial, but here, too, Gross often allows herself to advance generalizations without adequate documentation or research, failing to address disjunctures, subtleties, or variations within Buddhist tradition and history. To take just one example, she asserts the view, without providing evidence, that Vajrayāna practitioners identify themselves with both male and female deities, and that the practitioner's own gender is irrelevant to their practice of deity yoga (87). She makes this point to bolster her argument that Buddhism can release us from "the prison of gender." In fact, a number of recent studies of female teachers and communities in Tibet and Bhutan have explored the special importance that female deities and religious exemplars hold for female practitioners of Vajrayāna. Here and elsewhere, Gross flattens the Buddhist landscape in service to her polemic, potentially introducing distortions into her readers' understanding of how Buddhist discourse and Buddhist people have coped with the social or psychological experience of gender. Similarly, as noted above, Gross makes some broad and sweeping statements about the androcentric nature of Buddhist Studies scholarship, which she claims has obscured the Indigenous feminism of Buddhist traditions. While this may once have been the case, it is no longer accurate to characterize scholarship in Buddhist studies as androcentric. Making such an assertion ignores a growing corpus of work by Gross's fellow scholars that richly explores the lives of Buddhist women and concepts of gender in premodern, modern, and contemporary Buddhisms.

Just as seriously, considering the overtly feminist goals of the book, Gross also neglects traditions of feminist thought. In fact, Gross appears to be uninterested in feminism as an intellectual tradition, eschewing a serious engagement with the last three-quarters-century of feminist theory for a simplistic encounter with feminism as a blunt-headed ideology. This is unfortunate since, as far back as 1949, Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist analysis of the objectification of women had already supplied a more nuanced explanation of gendered oppression than does Gross's analysis, which tends to present it simplistically as men controlling women as a result of gender roles. Furthermore, while Gross professes, at one point, a "great sympathy for postmodern perspectives," they play little part in her argument and, when they are mentioned, are mischaracterized as a sort of nihilistic ethical relativism (137). In fact, her prison-of-gender concept is deeply problematic from the perspective of important postmodern strands of feminist theory. For instance, Judith Butler's influential notion of a discursively constructed and iterative embodied self that performs (rather than receives the

imprint of) gender—sometimes in a transgressive and agentive manner—presents a serious challenge to Gross’s notion of gender as consisting of oppressive norms that are imposed from without. For Butler, gender is the stuff through which one experiences and lives the embodied self, whether it be in liberation or in oppression. For Gross, gender has little to do with the body, and is a merely a false cultural construct that bewitches ignorant minds. A more serious engagement with theorists like Butler would have enabled Gross to develop and better defend her own Buddhist-inflected analysis of gender identity and gender oppression.

From the perspective of postcolonial feminist theory, Gross’s notion of an indigenous Buddhist feminism, while interesting, misses the point. The most intellectually coherent way to understand feminism is as a broad, varied, and internally conflicting thought tradition that, while at times taking inspiration from ancient sources, is historically rooted in the modern period. To speak of Indigenous Buddhist feminism, except in modernity where cross-fertilization between Buddhist and feminist forms of thought have thrived, is, from this perspective, intellectually incoherent. At the very least, a person advocating for the idea of an indigenous ancient Buddhist feminism must explain and justify the backwards projection of contemporary terminology (“feminism”) onto the premodern past. Even then, one must still critically consider whether the lens of feminism provides the best hermeneutic for understanding ancient teachings on women and female freedom, female leadership, and female potential. To be fair, Gross is not, in this book, keenly interested in a probing analysis of Buddhist history or exploring orthodox claims to authority within “traditional” Buddhist communities as she was in *Buddhism After Patriarchy*. As she explicitly states in the final chapter of this book, her primary target audience comprises contemporary Western Buddhists and, secondarily, modernizing Asian Buddhist leaders, all of whom she wishes to persuade to create a more egalitarian Buddhism. Although she does so frequently, addressing the scholarly audience is also lower down in her explicitly stated priorities. Gross’s academic credentials notwithstanding, *Buddhism After Gender* is first and foremost a polemic advanced in the interests of social transformation, not at heart a work of academic scholarship.

Gross’s analysis of gendered oppression also fails to take into account vital conversations within intersectional feminism. Rather than exploring differentials of oppression—the multiple and distinct experiences of oppression that emerge when gender intersects with other axes of social and cultural positioning—Gross instead shies away from seriously addressing issues related to race, class, gender nonbinary status, or sexual orientation. She does so first by mischaracterizing those interested in intersectional realities of oppression as merely participating in a “race to the bottom” or as making a “claim to be the most victimized of all” (143). She then indexes a Buddhist concept she sources from the *Samdhinirmocana Sūtra*, that “liberating one liberates all,” in order to assert that no differential intersectional analysis is, in fact, required (145). Rather, she claims, the same principles apply in all manifestations of oppression; so, if one understands gender oppression, one also understands forms of oppression related to race, class, and sexual identity or orientation. Finally, Gross complains that she cannot be expected to address all relevant social justice issues as “there are practical

limitations to how much time and energy one can put into the many causes and issues that are all worthy” (145). These lines of reasoning display a lack of insight into the core message of intersectional feminism; namely, that gender oppression is not a constant across variations in social position. Ignoring differentials linked to race, class, or sexual identity when analyzing gender turns what is meant to be a liberative discourse into one that is just the opposite. Gross’s arguments will make little sense to Millennial and Gen Z Buddhists fiercely engaged in critiques of inherent racism in American Buddhism. They will also disappoint queer theorists and members of the LGBTQI Buddhist community who question both a dualistic understanding of gender, and the usefulness of simply denying the existence of gender identity. (A publisher’s note at the beginning of the book does, however, bring to the reader’s attention Gross’s apparent plans to include a treatment of transgender issues, a section she was not able to write before her death.) In these contexts, the youth become the teachers of the elders, revealing the speciousness of appeals to bodily transcendence when it comes to identity-based forms of oppression.

While intellectually problematic, *Buddhism Beyond Gender* may appeal to certain audiences; namely, second-wave-oriented feminists interested in Buddhism, and individuals new to thinking about the vector of gender within Buddhism. It is important, however, as much for Gross’s legacy as for the ongoing vitality of feminist studies in Buddhism, to frankly acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses of her work, and to forge new pathways based on that critique. Only then will her significance as a foundational scholar in the study of gender and Buddhism be realized. Ignoring traditional Buddhist conventions of ritual purity and hierarchy, it is customary that we in the scholarly community sometimes stand on the shoulders of our precious teachers and reach beyond them.