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# Buddhism Beyond Gender: Liberation from Attachment to Identity

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RITA GROSS, *Buddhism Beyond Gender: Liberation from Attachment to Identity*. Boulder: Shambhala, 2018. 161 pp. CAN \$33.95 (pb). ISBN 9781611802375

In *Buddhism Beyond Gender*, Rita Gross provides her final and most candid assessment of the state of gender dynamics within Buddhism. Arguing from squarely within her own Vajrayāna tradition, she claims that egolessness and emptiness are absolute, undeniable truths that (ought to) necessarily dissolve the constructed boundaries of gender. These truths, she argues, should serve as a rubric for investigating, discerning, and eventually transcending what she calls the “prison of gender roles” that confine Buddhists and, more ultimately, human society at large. This book stands to contribute to ongoing discussions in Buddhist and Gender Studies surrounding the possibility and necessity of equity between men and women, but it also contributes to Gross’s own oeuvre by combining formal and informal rhetorical styles that have individually marked her past work.

Her book contains six chapters across which Gross takes a graduated approach in building her argument. Broadly, her goals are to 1) call attention to widespread attachment to gender roles among Western Buddhists, 2) indicate how, despite some contrary claims from within the tradition itself, Buddhism remains an androcentric enterprise, and 3) argue that introspective egolessness is the key to transcending the “prison of gender roles.” Early on, Gross deploys the medieval Zen monk Dōgen’s well-known injunction to “study the self so that it can be forgotten” (1), which she uses as a model for dismantling constructions of gender roles within Buddhism throughout her book. “Study” is the imperative term here, for she claims that Buddhists (Western and otherwise)

tend to view gender only through worldly conventions rather than through the lens of Buddhist teachings (7); studying gender as a convention, therefore, is the first step in “forgetting,” or transcending, the hold it has over the lives of Buddhists.

Chapter 3, “The Prison of Gender Roles,” is the longest and most substantive chapter and serves as the core argument. In her use of “prison” to describe gender roles, she implies that these constructed roles confine and delimit our potential as social contributors (e.g. women as *only* child-rearers and men as *only* household earners), while they simultaneously wall-off the external world of our meaningful and transcendent potential as human beings (e.g. men as equally contributive parents and women as equally contributive earners). In this way, Gross contends that imprisonment in these gender roles is truly a sentence served; we pass the time, unaware of our potential to share in the responsibility for and pride in the roles not socially deemed our own. We remain in social bondage and we are our own wardens.

Gross is clear about her intended audience in her final chapter, “My Intended Audience and Purpose.” She states outright that her book is meant for Western Buddhists (131). Second in line are her audiences among Asian Buddhists, Engaged Buddhists, and those in Gender Studies. This primary intention comes through in her prose, as she makes references to Western women in power (40), Western media (48), “Western generic masculinity” (78) in contrast to early Buddhist female advocacy (or, “indigenous Buddhist feminism”) oft-ignored by scholars (a form of “storytelling,” 129), and alludes, in nearly every chapter, to her own (often difficult) experiences of giving talks on such topics to Western audiences.

One unintended success of her book lies in its potential to transcend those audiences she targets. While she oriented her groundbreaking work, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, toward specialists in the field of

Buddhist Studies, this final book strikes a clean balance between speciality and generality.<sup>1</sup> As in her earlier work, she includes endnotes, which contextualize cited sutra literature and refer to supplemental secondary scholarship, as well as an index of key terms and phrases.<sup>2</sup> Her prose in *Buddhism Beyond Gender*, however, is much more candid and casual. In fact, with the number of exclamatory remarks, asides, and anecdotal references, this work tends to adopt the tenor of a transcribed talk. This combination of formality and informality allows the work to cut through audience divisions; it would find equal application among a small, temple reading group as it would in a university seminar.

As the publisher notes, Gross left several sections unfinished and had planned to include a discussion of transgender issues, as well as additional primary materials. While we cannot know what this book might offer with these unfinished sections, it feels cohesive and comprehensive in its scope as it is. As for the editorial quality, I encountered a few instances of missing punctuation and words.

In our current socio-political climate of “identity politics” (taken up in Chapter 2), *Buddhism Beyond Gender* feels especially poignant. While she positions attachment to gender roles as the dominant social and ontological obstruction to equity, she gestures more broadly to the problem of attachment to identity of any kind. Indeed, clinging to identities as though they are absolute realities constitutes yet another pitfall associated with greater suffering. Social justice in the name of marginalized identities, therefore, while a righteous inroad to “studying the self,” does no work to truly “forget the self.” Gross’s ability to push beyond the confines of her own argument by recognizing that transcending gender

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<sup>1</sup> *Buddhism After Patriarchy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> She relies on an array of English-language translations for her citation of sutra literature.

alone is only a partial step toward self-liberation signals her keen awareness of the epistemological boundaries that dot the path of practice. In these areas she writes, not as a scholar trained in Gender Studies but as a modern Buddhist aware of the socio-political trends at play in our current world.

In many ways this encouragement to transcend identity altogether seems fitting for her final work. Whereas she aimed to “repair,” “restore,” or “revalorize” the Buddhist tradition through much of her work in her early career, her final book attempts to expose the fundamental misperceptions of the practitioners therein. If anything, this book feels as much as a scholarly culmination as it does a call to arms.