Free from the Prison of Gender Roles

A GARLAND OF FEMINIST REFLECTIONS
Forty Years of Religious Exploration
By Rita Gross
University of California Press, 2009; 352 pp.; $60 (cloth), $24.95 (paper)

REVIEWED BY JOAN SUTHERLAND

PAINTING BY CYNTHIA MOKU

FOR DECADES, RITA GROSS HAS BEEN a unique and provocative voice in religious studies and feminist theology. The title of one of her books, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, was a bright jolt, the simple juxtaposition of those words obliging us to take a hard look at the relationship of one to the other.

This new collection of essays places her writing about Buddhism in the context of a lifetime of thinking about religious studies and feminist theology. A couple of autobiographical pieces also look at what it's like to be both an uncompromising critic and a devoted practitioner of a tradition like Tibetan Buddhism.

Dr. Gross has argued forcefully for what she calls the feminist paradigm shift. She initially defined feminism as "the radical proposition that women are human beings." In scholarship, the paradigm shift comes when you fully include the thoughts and experiences of women in whatever you're studying, rather than assuming, as one of her professors put it, that the generic masculine covered and included the feminine. She explains in her introduction to *A Garland of Feminist Reflections*:

> Truly "getting" the feminist paradigm shift is like putting on a new pair of glasses crafted with a vastly improved prescription. Everything looks different—what we thought we knew about the culture or religion in general, what we thought we knew about men, and certainly what we knew, or more usually, did *not* know, about women.

Two sections of the book apply this feminist paradigm shift to scholarly method, and then use that method to examine subjects from menstruation rituals among Native Australians to the Hindu pantheon. A third section focuses on feminist theology, looking at Judaism, Hinduism, Vajrayana Buddhism, and the feminist theology movement itself.

Yet over time Gross has shifted her focus from feminism as academic method to feminism as social vision. It has become about "life free from the prison of gender roles," a definition that grew out of her experience of Buddhism, with its exploration of the causes of suffering and its promise of liberation. Yet even as Gross applies the methods and insights of Buddhist philosophy, she challenges Buddhist institutions and practitioners to live up to them:

> How could a religion that has such a clear understanding of nonduality, such a strong realization that gender is illusory and unreal, get things so completely wrong on the ground, in the everyday world, and in its institutional life?… Though Buddhism has the best tools I know of to deconstruct and dismantle attachment to gender roles, to demonstrate their dysfunctionality, and to demonstrate how they cause suffering, Buddhists have yet to apply those tools to their own literature and institutions in any consistent and thoroughgoing fashion.

This failure has a profound effect. It constricts and deforms Buddhist practice, which means it has the potential to constrict and deform practitioners, and that's a pretty big moral issue. It denies the tradition a richer range of wisdom and skillful means by limiting women's participation, repelling women who might have a lot to contribute, and marginalizing nonconforming women. It's becoming apparent that some pretty interesting things are happening out on the margins, where there's some benefit to a

---

JOAN SUTHERLAND is founder of The Open Source. Before becoming a Zen teacher, she worked as a scholar and teacher in the field of archaeomythology, and for nonprofit organizations in the feminist anti-violence and environmental movements.

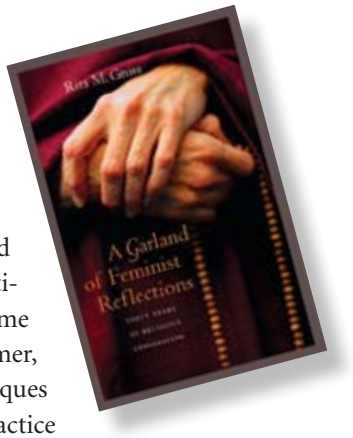
more open creative field, but this hasn't yet had much of an impact on mainstream Buddhist culture, and that's a loss.

In the fifth and longest section of the book, "Buddhist Feminism, Feminist Buddhism," Gross takes up the failures and the potentials of contemporary Buddhism and suggests some ways forward. The section opens with "The Clarity of Anger," one of her best-known and most helpful essays. She discusses ambivalent Buddhist attitudes toward political and social action and then her own experience of how meditation transformed intense aversive anger into clarity. She suggests that practices that help us maintain equanimity while caring about a cause, in the midst of conflict and in the face of failure, are among the most important contributions Buddhism can make to political discussion.

The next chapter is "Why (Engaged) Buddhists Should Care about Gender Issues." Short answer: because gender issues are social justice issues, and attending to them is essential if Buddhism is to live up to its transformative potential. "The Dharma of Gender" examines the fundamental emptiness of gender, the uses and misuses of gender in Buddhism as it's practiced—for example, the difference between transcending something and ignoring it—and a critique of essentialism, which is the belief that each gender has inherent attributes such as relatedness or aggression. The chapter on the Tibetan figure Yeshe Tsogyal is an inspired and inspirational telling of the great teacher's life. The way Gross sees it, this is a story about an extraordinary woman who rejected traditional roles and found her own way in both awakening and relationship.

An insightful essay on Buddhist women teachers explores the tension between dharmic authority and Western egalitarianism, and the great loss to practitioners and the tradition when women's experiences, viewpoints, and particular paths to realization aren't part of the teaching. From her perspective, the lack of women teachers remains the key feminist issue in Buddhism.

"Is the Glass Half-Empty or Half-Full?" looks at the current state of Buddhism from a feminist perspective. Much has been accomplished—books on Buddhist women, a worldwide Buddhist women's movement, more women teachers, and "a growing consensus that the traditional male dominance of Buddhism is a problem"—but institutional changes have been slow, and Buddhism's tremendous potential for deconstructing gender has not been fully realized. There's an interesting discussion of what happened when the first generation of Western convert Buddhists started to have children and the women declined to withdraw from formal practice to raise them. A welcome survey of Buddhist women around the world reminds us that just as there are actually many Buddhisms, Buddhist women's circumstances vary greatly from culture to culture and tradition to tradition.



It's a virtue of this collection that each piece stands alone, containing everything the reader needs to follow the discussion. But when the pieces are read together this also leads to a lot of repetition, as chapter after chapter make the same or similar arguments. Gross is a reformer, not a revolutionary. She makes her critiques from within an academic discipline or practice tradition with the hope of spurring it to live up to its potential. A reformer first has to point out what's wrong, often repeatedly and over a long period of time. This can be a lonely position, and while her work has been welcomed by many, it's also been met with indifference and hostility. There's an embattled quality to some of the writing that's heightened by repetition, and it would be too bad if some readers grow weary of it and fall away.

> Gross has a keen eye for how certain meditative investigations are powerfully deconstructive of our ideas about the self, and how helpful it would be to turn that deconstructive light on our ideas about gender.

Successful reformers need to be certain about the merits of their cause, and when certainty meets a natural forcefulness of temperament, as it does in Dr. Gross, the result can be a gem like "feminism is the radical proposition that women are human beings." It can also be a sweeping generalization. For example, the chapter "What Went Wrong?" opens with a moving quote from Elie Wiesel about how "the liberation of the one [is] bound to the liberation of the other," followed by Gross' intriguing idea that freedom from rigid gender roles in Western societies has stalled because women have gone about as far as they can under the current circumstances. For things to continue to change, men will have to make as radical a shift as women have. But then the argument unfolds in a series of generalizations that miss the nuances and complexities of life as most people experience it. Here and elsewhere she contends that "most of the unnecessary suffering in human life … is due to the prison of gender roles..." But for decades many women of color have been saying that, in their experience, racism looms at least as large as sexism.

This is followed by a series of pronouncements on how men have failed to free themselves from the prison of gender. Here's the problem: It just isn't true that, while women have been taking on male traits, "…there has been no corresponding eagerness on the part of men to escape the prison of the male gender role." Gross concludes, "It is men who are trailing behind in their self-inflicted prison of fear and avoidance of anything feminine in themselves."

All men? Neither of these statements comes anywhere near being a universal truth, and they do a kind of violence both to the people they purport to describe and to the arguments they're meant to support. Later in the essay she does acknowledge that "what men, and those who aspire to the male gender role, take on is astounding; what we, as a culture do to men and to surrogate men, is inhumane…" While we're still in the realm of generalizations, statements like this do provide a welcome sense of complexity when they're added to the mix.

At such moments the reader might wish for less repetition of this kind of argument and for more exploration of remedies, because some of Gross' insights are wonderful. She talks about the Vajrayana deconstruction of a person into body, speech, and mind, and how a lot of Vajrayana practice is about transforming them from a temporary state of confusion into a manifestation of true clarity. But to the extent that women's fates have been determined largely by their bodies, development of their speech and mind has suffered, and our cultures have been impoverished. This is a fresh way of looking at things, possible only because Gross looks at feminism with Buddhist eyes and Buddhism with feminist eyes.

She also has a keen eye for how Buddhist practices could help liberate us from the rigidity of gender roles—how certain meditative investigations are powerfully deconstructive of our ideas about the self, and how helpful it would be to turn that deconstructive light on our ideas about gender. Sometimes one of her seemingly off-handed remarks lands like a lightning bolt. She says, for example, that we've grown tired of the gender conversation between actual men and women, so we've turned to discussions of "feminine" and "masculine" energies because that's easier, and also fun for our egos to play with.

In this book, the reader absorbs the intelligence of Rita Gross' mind, the frustrations and sorrows of her role as a reformer, her perseverance and her yearning. She's living the very kind of life she's been devoted to making visible to everyone. She was the girl who wondered why she had a high IQ and a great love of learning if she wasn't going to be allowed to use them. She's been the scholar who explains why she took up the challenges she did by saying, "Someone has to go out on a limb when something important has been ignored!" She's the practitioner who believes the most significant thing she's said about Buddhism and feminism is her "surprising discovery that anger about one's own perceived unjust situation is not helpful to anyone."

And so it's particularly poignant to read that she didn't set out to study androcentrism or gender prisons. She was first drawn to religious studies "as a quest for personal understanding of how life and the world work." But there were, she soon discovered, these problems, and they had to be addressed before she could pursue her passions. She made a sacrifice, and because she did, several academic disciplines and at least one major religion are changing. As a Zen teacher about half a generation younger than Dr. Gross, I'm keenly aware of the debt of gratitude we owe her. And so it's a joy to read that her lifelong spiritual quest seems to have been fulfilled. At the very end of the book, in "Being a North American Buddhist Woman," she says:

> In sum, what is it about being a Buddhist that delights me so much? The profundity of its view, the transformative power of its spiritual disciplines, and the results—real change, a transformation from unhappiness to contentment.

And perhaps she's heartened to think that some women have managed to arrange things so we're no longer in daily struggle with the difficulties she so eloquently describes. In our lifetimes, it *is* possible to experience Buddhism after patriarchy. ♦