

by Rita Gross

## **Pouring Water into Water**

**by Rita Gross**

Many people assume that the relationship between Buddhism and feminism is something like that between oil and water: They don't mix very well. But I want to propose the possibility that the relationship is more like that of water poured into water, which is a metaphor that's used in some of the Tibetan texts for talking about individual enlightenment merging with universally enlightened mind. When water is poured into water, the waters become indistinguishable. Maybe that's the proper way to talk about the relationship between Buddhism and feminism.

To illustrate this point, I'll draw a little from my own experience and background. I was a reasonably well-known young feminist scholar some time before I became involved in Buddhist practice. In fact, I was a fairly angry feminist, as many of us were in the late '60s and '70s. It was pretty hard not to be very angry about the things we were discovering at that time.

So I was a feminist first. But then I got involved in meditation and, despite some initial resistance, I became involved in Buddhism. At first I thought I was going to have two tracks in my life: my feminist track and my Buddhist practice track. I didn't particularly see them merging or affecting one another, in part because I still had two sets of friends. My feminist friends thought that I had lost my marbles, and my Buddhist friends were saying, "When you become mature in your practice, you'll give up this whole feminist thing. It's just an attachment." But believe it or not, very soon these two tracks were no longer parallel; they started to merge to an extent that I could no longer pull them apart.

So maybe the metaphor for Buddhism and feminism is not exactly water poured into water, but colored water poured into water of another color. Each color is transformed, each is changed by the other. When you pour Buddhism and feminism into the same vessel, each is transformed in ways that are helpful and positive for the other. It's not that Buddhism needs to be "fixed" by feminism, or that feminism needs to be "fixed" by Buddhism. Both are true.

### **Feminism Defined**

I have learned that it's not very wise to talk about feminism without defining what one means by it, because people have a lot of projections. I have two definitions that I use routinely. The longer definition is that feminism is the radical practice of the co-humanity of women and men.

That definition, of course, has been influenced by Buddhism in that I regard feminism as a practice. It's not just a belief system. I'm not interested in people who say they believe in the equality of men and women. I actually want to see the practice, because one's life does change once you understand things in terms of the prison of gender roles. There's no question that one's life is going to change if you really get it, and there's a practice to it. By "radical" I mean simply that we must go to the root of things.

My other definition of feminism is much simpler: Feminism is freedom from the prison of gender roles. When I look at my own life, it seems quite clear that most of the unnecessary suffering in my life has been due to the prison of gender roles. Certainly there is suffering in our lives that has nothing to do with our sex, and feminism isn't going to cure it. But the unnecessary suffering, the suffering we humans create, has in my own case been largely due to the prison of gender roles, to making these little boxes and then squashing people into them.

Notice that neither of these definitions is about men versus women, or women against men. That's not what feminism is about. There may be a time in one's feminist development when you go through that phase, but feminism fundamentally is about more equitable, more sane, more enlightened relationships for all of us. In fact, when you look at the prison of gender roles, there are a lot of ways in which men are in a prison of gender, too.

In terms of Buddhism, what is important is the emphasis on practice. I didn't come to Buddhism as a religion by the way of belief or theory, but by practice, and especially the practice of the bodhisattva path, the practice of compassion in engaged, worldly ways. For critiquing the prison of gender is part of the practice of compassion.

### **Buddhism In Feminist Perspective**

There are two views about women in Buddhism, and these views run throughout the history of the tradition, from the Pali canon all the way up to the present. The more common view is that women just don't have the right stuff, and that the best hope for women is that they'll get to be reborn as men in their next lives. In fact, the first paper I ever gave on Buddhism and feminism was at a Buddhist-Christian conference in 1980. The Japanese Buddhist delegates' reactions were typical. They argued that maybe there was a need for a feminist movement in Christianity, but there was no problem in Buddhism. Buddhists had already taken care of that problem, because worthy women will be reborn as men in their next lives.

The other view that is found in the Buddhist tradition is that gender is irrelevant, gender is empty, gender is a convenient designation, a label. It doesn't tell us anything about what a person can do. This view is manifested in a famous traditional story about a woman who has been studying Buddhism for 12 years and is confronted by a very conservative male: If she has such great understanding, he asks, why doesn't she change into a man? (In fact, there are lots of stories about how very advanced women suddenly

change anatomically into men.) But she says to him, “What are you talking about? What is this thing you call a man? What is this thing you call a woman?” And then she changes him into a woman, and he suddenly understands that this is a label, nothing more.

It strikes me that the view that gender is irrelevant is more normative, more in accord with the basic teachings of Buddhism. It’s easy to see that taking pride in gender identity is an aspect of ego. Buddhism is very keen in its analysis of ego, or self-centeredness. But unfortunately, Buddhists have not always noticed the extent to which pride in gender can be a form of ego. After all, how can you become egoless, or enlightened, if you’re still clinging to your human form in that very crude way?

Simply put, I contend that gender hierarchy cannot be justified through any of the basic concepts of Buddhism. It simply cannot be done, and it never has been done. If you look at the basic concepts—the practice of non-harming, ego and egolessness, emptiness, Buddha nature, and all the rest—they all are antithetical to gender hierarchy. Historically, practices of gender hierarchy in the Buddhist world have usually been justified by social custom—it’s what everybody else is doing—which is simply a good argument for Buddhists to be more involved in social change.

Unfortunately, there’s a contradiction in traditional Buddhism between the teaching, which is gender-free, and the practice, which is not. The practice of Buddhism that we’ve inherited is largely male-dominated, male-centered. Most of the positions of leadership, most of the teachers, and the best educations, have been mainly for men. Traditionally, women who wanted to do serious study and practice had a much harder time, and in many parts of the world they still do.

### **Women As Teachers**

So the question is, what are we going to do about it? I’ve had a lot to say about this question over the years, but the point I keep coming back to is that we need to find, train, empower, and trust women teachers the way we have always found, trained, empowered, and trusted men teachers. Because without a deity to turn to, the teacher is especially important in Buddhism.

We need to empower and trust well-trained, well-practiced, articulate women teachers who are not male-identified. All of those qualifications are important. Women must not be empowered as teachers just because they’re women. They have to be well-trained and well-practiced, and they have to have a sense of Buddhist practice and Buddhist transformation deep in their bones, and they have to be able to teach that.

Why do I emphasize the word “articulate”? Because in Buddhist history, and I’m most familiar with this in the Tibetan tradition, there were a lot of women who did a lot of practice, but not much in the way of study. The academic curricula tended to be in the monasteries, and women didn’t do so well in the monasteries. Many women became very highly respected as meditators, but they usually didn’t teach, and so they didn’t influence the translation of the tradition. For the most part, their lives weren’t even recorded, and

they've been forgotten. So if we're to effect change in the practice of Buddhism, we need to have women who are willing to be articulate, to speak out effectively.

By not being male-identified, I mean we need women teachers who are willing to focus on the specifics of gender and not blur everything into a generic masculine. When you have very male-dominated institutions, women who do make it through the ranks usually end up sounding like men, and that isn't what we need. We also need men to start talking about the specifics of masculinity, so that women aren't the only ones talking about what gender means, while men are just generic humans. That's the essence of androcentrism—that men are regarded as normal and women are regarded as a different species. If we're to ever get out of this prison of gender roles we have to be able to talk about the specifics of being women, and of being men, and the kinds of conditioning we've gone through. We need women teachers who will talk about the actual obstacles, problems, and possibilities that women encounter as a result of their social and cultural imprinting.

### **Sangha as Dharma**

In fact, it is in the realm of just this cultural imprinting that we can look for ideas about what articulate women teachers might talk about. A lot of people say, "What's the big deal about women teachers? Dharma is Dharma. It doesn't matter whether it's a man or a woman who says it—it's all the same." Yes, Dharma is Dharma in the absolute realm, but there isn't much speech in the absolute realm. As soon as we start to talk, we're talking in acculturated, social terms. That being the case, one of the things women teachers may well talk about is the importance of friendship, community, and relationships as spiritual practice.

It often seems to me that of the three refuges the sangha comes in as kind of a poor third. There's a lot of emphasis on Buddha—a lot of art work, liturgies, devotion. And certainly there's a lot of emphasis on Dharma. And then there's the sangha. What do we do with that? I think that, especially in our society, where there's so much alienation and loneliness, the issue of community—of sangha—is absolutely essential. This is just one of the possibilities I see as likely to come out of the teachings of women gurus who are not male-identified.

As you see, when we take a pitcher of water called feminism and pour it into Buddhism, a lot changes. Buddhism doesn't get debased or degraded in the process. If anything, the opposite. We're going to have a Buddhism that is a more adequate Buddhism.

### **Feminism From a Buddhist Perspective**

Is the opposite also true? I would say, very definitely, yes.

It strikes me, for instance, that feminists are prone to adopting habits and attitudes that don't actually work very well. And I'm observing this from my own experience. One

of those things is anger, the hot rage that you feel when you begin to realize how much your life is diminished by somebody else's ideas of the little boxes you should fit into. If that isn't worth getting angry about, what is? Before I started to practice, I had a very short fuse. I loved to be really sarcastic and cutting with my rhetoric and to put people down in a very aggressive way. I liked to rant and rave some, too.

But after a while I noticed that I couldn't sustain that kind of sarcastic anger anymore. And that was scary, because I had spent so long defining myself as an "angry-feminist." I thought, "Uh-oh, maybe my Buddhist friends are right. Maybe I'm not going to care about feminism anymore." But what I discovered was that I could still talk about feminist issues, and instead of talking with sarcastic anger, I was talking with a dispassionate tone and some actual clarity, and much more gentleness. And interestingly enough, I found that people listened a lot better. People could actually hear what I was saying in a way that they never had been able to before, when I ranted and raved.

It was at about that time that I read one of Chögyam Trungpa's books about how the kleshas, the conflicting emotions, transmute through practice. So anger transmutes into clarity. The energy is not a problem; it's how we work with it, how we manifest it. If it comes out all sarcastic and aggressive, it's like murky water. Nobody can see anything. If it comes out in a clear, calm way, then people can actually see it. For me, that was a very important lesson about the Buddhist transformation of feminism.

Similarly, one of the most common expressions of anger is ideology—having a very strong ideological fix on the world. You know what's right, and you know what's wrong, and you're very certain about it. But ideology doesn't work very well, either, and when anger starts to transmute into clarity, ideology begins to melt. It seems to me completely clear that the middle path of Buddhist practice is the clarity of being able to talk about what we're experiencing without turning other people away from us, and that that's what we need a lot more of.

I really believe that one of the reasons I've been able to maintain an active feminist stance for over 30 years is because I discovered Buddhist practice. Without the kind of equanimity that comes through Buddhist practice my own anger would have burned me up a long time ago, and who knows what I would have become. That happens to a lot of people who become very involved in causes with a lot of ideology and a lot of self-righteousness. They just burn up. I think Buddhist practice is key to maintaining our commitment, our passion.

## **Gender and Engaged Buddhism**

Having poured the water into the water, I want to conclude with an observation about feminism and engaged Buddhism, and in fact all liberation movements. One can't help being somewhat disappointed with how little attention the issue of gender oppression has received from the engaged Buddhist movement, including the program at Naropa and most of the books that have come out over recent years. There has been very

little appreciation for how much the issue of gender oppression underlies a lot of the other things.