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Waking the Butterfly: A Feminist/Buddhist Vision of the Self as Social

Marcie Fisher

Honors Thesis

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## Waking the Butterfly: A Feminist/Buddhist Vision of the Self as Social

Wake, Butterfly--  
it's late, we've miles  
to go together

--Basho

If one phrase could summarize or explain the teachings of the Buddha it might possibly be, "Wake Up." The experience of enlightenment-- or being fully awake-- is perhaps *the* central goal of all Buddhist teachings, and though the methodologies differ among various traditions, the insistence on awareness and mindfulness, is a pervasive theme in each.

My first introduction to Buddhism was through Haiku, and the above poem by Basho illustrates, I believe, the quality of awakening, the opportunity for personal metamorphosis, which exists *in tandem* with, and *dependent upon* community. Unlike our Western model of individualism which stresses autonomy through separation, in Buddhism, the move towards self-identification and gnosis is not a solo journey. However, the journey starts with the Self, and the model of Self is not that of the classic, greek hero, Achilles who travels far and wide struggling for freedom and independence, but rather one which concerns itself with an

inner conquest, an inner knowing that happens within society. The Buddha teaches in the *Kalama Sutta*<sup>1</sup>:

Don't believe anyone. Don't believe me. Don't believe the teachers. Don't believe the books and traditions. Rather, look to your own experience. Look within, and see what it is that is conducive to the growth of understanding, wisdom, compassion, and love.

This insistence that one must challenge and critically question tradition, authority, and identity and begin with personal experience is a key element in feminist scholarship as well, and it was the preceding passage which launched a personal inquiry into the possibility of creating a bridge between Buddhist philosophical concepts and feminist theory and practice. What might each offer the other? Though vastly different--one a world religion, the other a political/social ideology, is it possible that certain concepts within Buddhist philosophy might influence and contribute to our understanding of contemporary Western feminism and vice-versa?

This essay attempts to explore the possibility of dialogue between key Buddhist concepts and feminist scholarship concerning the self and the creation of self within society. To explore the entire corpus of Buddhist thought is obviously beyond the scope of my essay. I will instead focus on key Buddhist principles and the post-modernist/essentialist divide within Feminism in order to establish a *conversation* between two

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<sup>1</sup> Rahula, Walpola, *What the Buddha Taught*, 2-3.

very different ideologies. In addition, I will look within Buddhist texts to uncover what Rita Gross calls a “usable past” which *might* provide a new vision, a wider theoretical base, for a modern dialogue on gender construction and sexism in our culture. In order to do this I will select the concepts from both traditions I feel to be the most challenging and potentially in line with this goal.

The question is, then, can we find within Buddhism something that is functional and instrumental to contemporary feminism. Beyond theory, might we find a functional and instrumental discourse for individual women? Again, the aim of my paper is not a reconstruction of feminist theories on subjectivity/identity, nor will I suggest, as Gross does in her work that Buddhism, by virtue of its form, “mandates gender equality.”<sup>2</sup>

In every major world religion we often find misogynistic portrayals of women. In addition we find a gaping fissure between theory and practice, between (sporadic and schizophrenic) textual inclusion of women and social exclusion of women. And while Buddhist institutions are no less suspect or guilty of andro-centric thought-forms and practice, common to its foundation is the idea of non-existence, and that the “Dharma is neither male nor female.”<sup>3</sup> Despite its philosophically egalitarian vision, within Buddhist culture, as within all religions, there has been

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<sup>2</sup> Gross, 221

<sup>3</sup> Gross, 24

institutionalized hierarchy. One of the striking characteristics of Buddhism in the West has been its use by Feminist/Buddhist scholars and practitioners to seriously challenge traditional gender constructions inside of Buddhist practice and in the United States at large.

The question of Identity and how female identity is accounted for within a “master narrative” is a crucial one in feminist scholarship. Within Western feminist theory, discussions of the Self as a political and social construction, the tendency to bifurcate “society” and the “self”, and define “the subject”--woman--either as an innately existing category (essentialist theory) or as a constructed one (as we see in post-modern theory) has created a lofty, internal dialogue which I would argue has caused many women to feel that “feminism” is too theoretical, and inapplicable to their daily, individual lives. In fact, the conversation has become so dry, abstract, and cerebral, that one might wonder if there is any room for the literal woman at whom all of the discussion of liberation is aimed.

I will return to the discussion of feminist ideas on subjectivity and identity shortly, but first it is necessary to establish the general format for my paper and the methodology used to approach Buddhist philosophical thought in relation to feminist theory. In looking at Buddhism and Feminist thought collectively, I am interested in developing a strategy for, what Paul Ricoeur labels, “unmasking the questions behind the answers of

a text or tradition.”<sup>4</sup> For Ricoeur, a hermeneutics of “suspicion,” is the essential tool of inquiry when examining a text or tradition<sup>5</sup>. Yet, criticism and deconstruction can only occur as one recognizes the link between the text and the reader of the text. For the purposes of this paper and particularly for the question of gender, suspicious inquiry into both Buddhism and Feminism is an imperative. How do both construct/deconstruct gender? Further, what questions might be found beneath the texts? Could both feminism and Buddhism offer a reciprocal critique of our notions of the self in relation to society? Ricoeur’s theory further suggests that the purpose of textual questioning, is not to reconnect with the author’s original or intrinsic meaning, but rather to create a “world” that is “in front of” the text.<sup>6</sup> It is this new world, that combines both Buddhist and feminist thought that interests Anne Klein and Rita Gross. As two of the most influential Buddhist/ feminist scholar, both use Buddhism as an philosophical base to better understand and “unmask” contemporary Western gender categorization. In Klein’s book Meeting the Great Bliss Queen, she attempts to explore how Buddhist theories of emptiness, mindfulness and subjectivity might “change the nature of the tension between essentialist and postmodern feminist.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Klein 8

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion on Ricoeur and gender, see Erin White, “Religion and the Hermeneutics of Gender” in Religion and Gender, 77-100.

<sup>6</sup> Ricoeur, quoted in White, “Religion and the Hermeneutics of Gender,” 92.

<sup>7</sup> Klein, “Presence with a Difference: Buddhist and Feminists on Subjectivity” 112

Employing Buddhist ideas on emptiness, taken primarily from the Indo-Tibetan tradition and the Geluk order (newest lineage and lineage of the current Dalai Lama), she attempts to re-examine feminist theories of selfhood. The first part of my paper will be an examination of her analysis of feminist discussions concerning woman as Be-ing/agency/construction, in relation to Buddhist principles of subjectivity and existence.

The second part of my paper will attempt to move from Klein's theoretical/philosophical modification of "self" to Rita Gross's social/political revision of the individual in relation to society, and more specifically, a re-vision/re-modification of a societal base for which women become a necessary component of a functional and whole community. In Buddhism after Patriarchy, Gross uses primarily Mahayana philosophy (of which Zen and Vajrayana Buddhism are derived) to address contemporary Western social implications of Buddhist thought. She questions the "gap



between the vision and practice of Buddhism”<sup>8</sup> and asks how a religion whose theoretical base insists upon the non-dual nature of existence could in practice be so obviously androcentric. Gross is attempting to move Buddhist theory into practice, and in this way, acts as a corollary and an extension to Anne Klein’s work, by showing how the knowledge of Self (or of the limitations of the term) are the prelude to a compassionate social ethic which *could*, after “institutionalizing gender equality,” create a new social paradigm.

Both authors ask who is the “one” waking up? How is she defined? Who does the defining, and can the process of self-development, communicated in Buddhist thought offer a fresh perspective within feminist scholarship concerning questions of identity? Gross takes this dialogue further and suggests that the question of identity and community are intricately intertwined and by re-reading key Buddhist principles through a feminist lens, Westerners *might* discover a point of departure for radical social transformation. I say *might*, simply because claims of truth, appeal to reason, and reformulated epistemologies have yet to create gender equality--inside or outside of the Buddhist world. I will return to this dilemma in closing, and particularly to the issue of what Anne Klein calls “the idolatry of Ideals,” which is especially dangerous within discussions concerning Buddhism because it “pulls one out of the

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<sup>8</sup> Gross, Buddhism after Patriarchy, 183

present"--which is the sight for personal/cultural transformation. This position is equally dangerous within Feminism as it can, while arguing for sisterhood and a collective voice, be blind to the circumstances and needs of individual women. Yet idealism has its place, and should not be thrown out as an altogether manipulative or divisive strategy for approaching the world. What Buddhism offers the social visionary, whether Buddhist or Marxist or Feminist or whatever, is the vantage of mindfulness, which requires one to continually be "aware of alternative possibilities due to the infinity of interconnected events and constitutive elements comprising any given moment"<sup>9</sup>

### Terminology

While I have located Klein and Gross within the Buddhist traditions from which they position their writings, I must now locate them within feminism. Both authors would agree that woman/gender is not a "stable subject" or a "seamless category", but rather a continually shifting framework which marks "a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific set of realities"<sup>10</sup> For both authors feminism acts as an investigative tool which, as an "academic method," allows for questioning into elements of Buddhism in relations to modern gender roles, and as a social vision (which interests Gross more so than Klein)

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<sup>9</sup> Klein, 78

<sup>10</sup> Butler, , Gender Trouble, 10

exposes sex as an irrelevant category for “awarding roles or value” and concludes that patriarchy is a “cultural creation. . .not an inevitable necessity of human biology.”<sup>11</sup> Gross defines feminism as “the radical practice of the co-humanity of women and men”<sup>12</sup> Less concerned with a general definition of feminism, Klein’s discussion centers on the difference between postmodern feminists who see the self entirely as a product of social construction, and “essentialists,” whose “understanding of self assumes an intrinsic and universal woman-hood.”<sup>13</sup> Klein concedes that many feminist scholars fail to fit neatly into the categories of Post-modernist feminism (which is a problematic pairing in and of itself<sup>14</sup>) or essentialist--i.e., Helene Cixious and Luce Irigaray--feminists. She attempts to discuss fundamental principles that are not universal but common to both bodies of scholarship.<sup>15</sup> Within essentialist theory she sees the unifying principle being a belief in an *intrinsic* body knowledge. Essentialists often argue that women are more naturally nurturing, compassionate, community-oriented, and connected to the earth.<sup>16</sup> Post-modernists on the other hand, argue that a body does not make a woman.

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<sup>11</sup> Gross, Buddhism after Patriarchy, 298

<sup>12</sup> Gross, 127

<sup>13</sup> Klein, 5

<sup>14</sup> See Linda Singer’s essay “Feminism and Postmodernism.” Feminists Theorize the Political, 464-475. Singer suggests that these terms are not wedded though they both have “their respective ways of resisting and challenging established forms of power by undermining the legitimacy and validity of the mechanisms by which that power is sustained” (469), and suggests the metaphor of “corporate merger” (471) is a more adequate and honest parallel.

<sup>15</sup> see Notes, 127, “Presence with a Difference: Buddhists and Feminists on Subjectivity”

<sup>16</sup> Writers such as Susan Griffin, Mary Daly, and Adrienne Rich are examples of this ideology.

Rather, culture and society inscribe meaning on a woman's body to "produce gender identification."<sup>17</sup> This identity is salient and varies among cultures and among individual women. Klein's position within feminism is more congruent with Butler and other post-modernist feminists, in that she does not believe in an intrinsic, womanly nature. Yet she also argues that discussion on subjectivity must be explored outside of its relation to language. Language, she asserts, is "hardly a stable anchor for a sense of self" and so, though the formative role of language (particularly as it shapes our ideas about gender) is not to be underestimated, she suggests that a Buddhist perspective on subjectivity/identity which includes the body and the mind, offers a new dimension to the traditional post-modernist/essentialist debate.

In the Introduction of Meeting the Great Bliss Queen, Klein suggests:

Buddhist and feminist perspectives, however, diverse, are dedicated to the fruitful interaction of theory and experience; they both focus on questions of self and identity and, equally significant, have appeared on the Western landscape at approximately the same time. They also share a radically critical view of the status quo.<sup>18</sup>

What the Buddha offered through his teaching was not a system of beliefs, but a method of inquiry into life which must be tried out individually. The Dharma was a practice of noticing the suffering we

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<sup>17</sup> Klein, Meeting the Great Bliss Queen, 7

<sup>18</sup> Klein, *ibid.*, xv..

create as humans by believing in a fixed “self.” Likewise within feminism, the belief in a fixed male and female self causes oppression, inequality and pain. Within both philosophies the ideas of liberation and freedom are central elements. Scholars such as Sandy Boucher, Rita Gross, and Lenore Freidman have suggested that because both the women’s liberation movement and Buddhism developed in the United States at approximately the same time, their ability to dramatically influence each is an organic quality of American Buddhism. Gross goes on to suggest that because “Western Buddhism is the only form of Buddhism subject to significant feminist influence,” it is the “most likely vanguard for Buddhism after patriarchy”<sup>19</sup> analysis as well. For Gross and Klein, the primary question is, “What is the significance of Buddhist thought now--here in<sup>20</sup> the West, and what does it offer women’s studies/feminist scholarship?”

### Self, Subjectivity, and Buddhism

No subject is its own point of departure.

--Judith Butler, “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of Postmodernism”

Without the possibility of a coherent self, liberation becomes impossible.

--Daryl McGowan Tress, “Comment on Jane Flax’s  
“Postmodernism and Gender Relations”

Klein seeks to introduce Buddhist descriptions of the conditioned and unconditioned into post-modernist/essentialist dialogue. She suggests that these two positions re-shaped through Buddhist’s ideas of

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<sup>19</sup> Gross, Buddhism after Patriarchy, 271.

subjectivity, can be read as “far more compatible” than modern feminists assume .

Notions of Individuality or selfhood in Tibetan culture, which I shall use for my examples here, are approached and understood much differently than they are in the Western world. Our understanding of the term “person” usually includes “idiosyncratic traits, personal choices, and unique accomplishment”<sup>21</sup> Tibetans, and many Asian cultures as well do not tend to value “uniqueness” as a vital personal or cultural possession. Furthermore, while there is stress on establishing individual identity, it is the community, not the inner-psyche, which holds greater importance in Tibetan culture. In Religion and Social Theory, Brian Turner suggests that much of Western ideas of selfhood can be understood primarily in terms of: 1) the growth of industrialization in the seventeenth century which stressed individual property ownership and separated the laborer from the means of production, and 2) the Protestant reformation and Calvinism which stressed individual salvation and the sacraments of baptism, confession, and marriage. For Turner, the institutionalization of “individualism” for the sake of progress, social control, and a growing economy has left the individual with a growing sense of separation from not only production (where we get our food, clothing, etc.), but meaning

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<sup>21</sup> Klein, Meeting the Great, 26.

and relationship as well. Klein points to the loss of oral roots and the move towards a literary tradition as a possible explanation of our growing sense of individualization. Regardless of its origins, the link between individuality, personality, and autonomy is a Western phenomenon and not present in Tibet and other Asian cultures.

For women the acquisition and negotiation of self is even more precarious. Can a woman explore her own “capacity for personal and creative choice” as well as her “capacity for connection”<sup>22</sup> inside a very complex social system which requires negotiating a vast range of “discursively constituted identities” including age, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, race, and other cultural identities?<sup>23</sup>

In Tibetan Buddhism questions of “creative choice” and the “capacity for connection” are not at issue for individuals. The mind, the person, is more than its *contents* and understood in relationship to the environment in which they are located. In this way, Indo-Tibetan understandings of the self are similar to post-modernist ideas of subjectivity which examine how knowledge, power, and position are created and imposed on individuals through acculturation. In early Indian Buddhist texts, Self is distinguished in two primary ways: 1) identity that is retained across a series of existences, for which the term “being” is

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<sup>22</sup> Klein, *ibid*, 37.

<sup>23</sup> Butler, 3

used, and 2) the identity of a specific existence. Here Klein makes an interesting point: in Tibetan culture the self is not just a body, an entity placed by a creator-god on the earth, but a located movement within a lineage of creation which she or he is a part of and helps to form. In other words, unlike our Judaic-Christian model which places humanity inside an already created material world, the Indo-Tibetan concept of creation “understands the external world and one’s place in it to be continually created and shifted by one’s thoughts, words, and deeds (this is called karma).”<sup>24</sup> Although this theory holds that each person’s action produces effects (potentially positive or negative), for themselves and for society, “Tibetans do not understand themselves as “individuals” in the contemporary Western social, economic, or psychological sense (40).” This is possibly because “the boundary between self and the cosmos is far more permeable (44).” This idea is generally termed dependent-co-arising and I will return to it later. Before it can be explained however, we must first look at what it means to say “permeable,” and the Buddhist idea of emptiness or selflessness.

### Selflessness, Emptiness, Gender, and the Unconditioned

The concretized “I”, from Buddhist perspective, does not exist, and can only know itself *in relation to* the causes and conditions that surround it. The Sanskrit word for emptiness is *shunyata* which can be translated as

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<sup>24</sup> Klein, Meeting the Great, 39.



both egolessness and emptiness. In Buddhism, ego is the belief in a self-contained be-ing, and it does not have the Freudian connotations it does in the West; it is not something to be built, but rather, an illusion to be destroyed. Selflessness does not mean “without personhood,” but rather without “inherent existence,” and it is the belief in inherent existence, in an unwavering and righteous “I, ” that is “considered by Buddhists to be the lived ontology that underpin all of oppression.”<sup>25</sup>

Having defined self and selflessness within Buddhism, the question now is, how do these ideas affect our understanding of gender relations? If nothing inherently exists, why is it that for the past 2500 years Buddhist discussions on emptiness have never approached gender as a created category? While Klein is “not prepared to suggest how such an inquiry might proceed in Asian countries where Buddhism is practiced,” she does find these questions significant for women in North America.”<sup>26</sup> Buddhist texts have offered some insight into the question of gender. Although in many Mahayana texts women are portrayed as magically transforming into men before attaining enlightenment, in the following discussion, taken from the *Vimalakirtinirdesa Sutra*, the debate centers around the ability of women to achieve spiritual enlightenment, and has a more positive and promising portrayal of women:<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Klein, 201, “Finding a Self”

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, 195.

<sup>27</sup> Gross, *Buddhism*, 72.

Shariputra: Why don't you change your female sex?

Goddess: I have been here twelve years and have looked for the innate characteristics of the female sex and haven't been able to find them. How can I change them? Just as a magician creates an illusion of a woman, if someone asks why don't you change your female sex, what is he asking?

Shariputra: But an illusion is without any determinate innate characteristics, so how could it be changes?

Goddess: All things are also without any determinate innate characteristics, so how could you ask, "Why don't you change your female sex?"

This dialogue could easily situate itself among feminist/post-modernist assertions that the possibility for real and lasting social change can only be imagined when all forms of dualism are discarded.

But this absence that Klein is defining is not nihilism. Emptiness and Nothingness are not synonymous terms. Here Klein departs from post-modernist thought, and argues that subjectivity understood "only in relation to language" is "a particular construction of Western intellectual history" and simply not enough. She suggests that what is needed within both essentialist and post-modernist thought is a "dimension of the mind (152)" which is neither entirely linguistic nor overly simplistic. This space within Buddhism is known as the unconditioned. Klein refers to it as "ontological nondualism" which she defines as the space in which the "conventional and ultimate pervade each other"<sup>28</sup> Here there is no separation between the immanent and the eternal. Rather, they exist as a fluid process and complementary components. What is pre-

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<sup>28</sup> Klein, *Meeting the Great*, 152.

existing/ontological for Klein is non-existence itself, because the within the experience of emptiness, the “true self” is realized. The Sanskrit term in Buddhism is *tathagathagargha* or Buddha-womb, and is the “ultimate, eternal and universal principle of which all things are manifestations<sup>29</sup>.” This place is not developed, but is discovered. It exists outside of language. It is “birthless,” and to know it is to dissolve all dualism, all constructions of “good” and “bad”, “mine” and “yours,” “male” and “female.”<sup>30</sup>

In Tibetan Buddhism this principle of universal expansiveness and non-being is embodied in the female dakini, or “skygoer.” The figure of the dakini is one of the most famous and important images in Tibetan Buddhism, and she personifies an “ever-changing flow of energy” which exists as a part of all of creation.<sup>31</sup> She is described in the Geluk tradition as “beginningless purity.”<sup>32</sup>

This state is described by Heidegger as “groundless ground,” which he describes in “The Origin of the Work of Art:”

In the midst of beings as a whole an open place occurs. There is a clearing, a lighting. Thought of in reference to what is, to beings, this clearing *is* in a greater degree than are beings. This open center is therefore not surrounded by what is; rather, the lighted center itself encircles all that is, like the Nothing that we scarcely

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<sup>29</sup> Watts, *Spirit of Zen*, 29.

<sup>30</sup> Klein, *Meeting the Great*, 163.

<sup>31</sup> Allione, *Tsultrim Women of Wisdom*, 25.

<sup>32</sup> Klein, *Meeting the Great*, 159.

know. . . This clearing in which beings stand is in itself at the same time concealment.<sup>33</sup>

This “clearing” is the site where a “new mode of intellectual activity can be elaborated.” Writers such as Luce Irigaray apply the notion of the spacious “clearing” specifically to women and suggest that it is in this place that women can escape historical/political confinement. No longer existing in a “purely horizontal mode of being,” women could substitute an “aerial mode of being” where “boundaries between the sacred and the profane, dissolve. Though *shunyata* is often portrayed through feminine imagery such as the dakini, the unconditioned dimension from which a more open, holistic self-orientation can arise is genderless and available to both male and females.

Many feminist post-modernist writers are justifiably skeptical of any mention of a coherent, pre-existing quality of being. Judith Butler argues that we must begin “a radical rethinking of the ontological construction of identity” in which we question the need for “a single or abiding ground.”<sup>34</sup> Klein suggests that emptiness is “not the kind of essence that anti-essentialist feminists decry”, because in and of itself it is “characterless.” In Mahayana philosophy “space is the absolutely indispensable vibrant matrix for everything that is,” yet this unconditioned spatiality can only be known through tangible matter.

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<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Berry, “Woman and Space according to Kristeva and Irigaray,” 254-55.

Knowing is not a purely cerebral activity. It includes all aspects of being. Within Tibetan texts, the body and the material world are avenues to enlightenment. The first reminder in the Four Foundations to Vajrayana practice reads: “ Precious human body, free and well-favored, difficult to obtain, easy to lose--now I must do something useful.”<sup>35</sup> The division between “conceptually based knowledge” and “visceral knowledge of the body” which is often apparent in the postmodernist/essentialist debate is absent in Mahayana Buddhist ideas of knowledge, which see the body and the experience therein as crucial to the development of self<sup>36</sup>.

### Mindfulness

What does the practice of mindfulness offer our discussion of subjectivity and the self? The practice of mindfulness, of being fully present, allow the constructedness of Self to come into clearer focus. Mind, body, emotions are no longer concrete categories. For example, if I am feeling angry and I am allowing myself to concentrate completely on the sensation, not just mentally registering the fact, “yes, I am angry,” but *experiencing* the sensations of anger, I will most likely notice that there is no one particular attribute I can label “anger,” but rather a series of sensations that dissolve into each other. The practice of mindfulness lends “coherence to the subject even as it reveals the endless flux of self

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<sup>34</sup> Butler, Gender Trouble, 5

<sup>35</sup> Hanson, tr., Torch of Certainty, pp.29-35

and world.<sup>37</sup> Within Buddhist tradition the mind is “inseparable from the inner currents (*prana*) on which it rides.” Therefore the physical movement (and the physical mover) of the breath, and the awareness of the body, are crucial for a coherent self--“coherence that is not necessarily a narrative or cognitive coherence.”<sup>38</sup> This coherence is not , as is often described within essentialist theory, a consolidating “female essence” offering a uni-lateral sisterhood in order to etch out a new social order.

Mindfulness is the tool that provides the individual with moment to moment focus on mental and physical sensations. By focusing on the impermanence of feelings, thoughts, etc., the individual moves away from concentrating on what is *inside* the mind--emotions, intellect, etc., and towards the experience of each of these categories as subjective states. Mindfulness is a quality Sogyal Rinpoche in The Tibetan Book of the Living and Dying calls “bringing the scattered mind home(61).” It is through the practice of watching your thoughts and remaining open that the mind becomes still and it is “possible to consider the state of the subject without referring to its contents”<sup>39</sup> In Vipassana meditation, the practice of mindful attention, the mind is often described as a mirror, or the clear

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<sup>36</sup> Klein, “Presence with a Difference”, 115

<sup>37</sup> Klein, “Presence,” 118.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, 120.

<sup>39</sup> Klein, Meeting the Great, 63.

sky, and thoughts are to be noticed as clouds just passing through.<sup>40</sup> The practice of staying with the breath or, as Pema Chodron calls it, “keeping your seat,” allows for some sense of continuity amidst the flux of sensations and thoughts. So while I might be aware that what I am experiencing is a continual movement of energy, there is also a “remembering, a bringing together, in the sense that the mind and self are reconstituted for one’s experience.”<sup>41</sup>

Klein’s insistence on the limitations of language in discussions on subjectivity are important. She argues that “persons communicate through language, but also through the flesh, blood, and rushing currents of feeling and energy by which they are also constituted.”<sup>42</sup> For Klein, the post-modernist’s insistence on “context” allows little room for a unified sense of self. Buddhist thought offers the discussion of identity/selfhood some “middle way” between difference(post-modernist thought) and unity(essentialist theory) , in which emptiness “in the self, in the world, and in language,” acts as the basis for a “new and more compassionate stage of human existence.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Practice which derives from the Theravada tradition of Southeast Asia and imported to the United States by Americans. See Jack Kornfield’s A Path with Heart for instructions to the practice.

<sup>41</sup> Klein, Meeting the Great, 67.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, 126.

<sup>43</sup> quoted in Berry, Philippa “Woman and space according to Kristeva and Irigaray.”

Gross on: Dependent co-arising, Compassion, and the Path of the Bodhisattva

Theory-making, certain forms of critical thinking are essential to a process of change. We have been led to believe that we can have change without contemplation. Militant resistance cannot be effective if we do not first enter silence and contemplation to discover--to have a vision--of right action.

bell hooks, "Contemplation  
and Transformation"<sup>44</sup>

For Klein, "contemplation" of the self and the impermanency of that category is a pre-requisite for a new more compassionate society, a prerequisite to "right action"-- which is the central concern in Rita Gross's work. For Gross, the crucial questions in determining the value of Buddhist ideas in society today are: is it liberating for all living things, (i.e. do the ideas translate into a social ethic?), and is it usable? (i.e. Do the texts represent/allow room for all people/voices?)

In Buddhism, to know the intrinsic emptiness, or in feminist terminology, "constructedness" of society, is to realize there is no boundary between the "self" and "other." But what does this knowledge provide? What does it *mean*? This movement or "inter-locking" between the individual and the world in Buddhist terminology is called *dependent co-arising*. Though this concept was developed and vital to earlier Indian Buddhism, it remains a key component to the Mahayana path. Dependent

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<sup>44</sup> bell hooks, "Contemplation and Transformation," Buddhist Women On the Edge, 291-92.



co-arising insists upon the co-emergence and fluidity of all phenomena and asserts that “everything in our field of experience is dependent on cause and conditions, rather than existing absolutely and eternally.”<sup>45</sup> Avatamsaka scholars adopt the allegory of “Indra’s net” to explain this principle. All sentient beings are said to exist as a jewel at each intersection of a vast net of existence. Rather than having their own individual luminosity, each acts as a mirror of the other. In this description “all phenomena are identifiable with the Whole, the One, just as the phenomena which make up specific phenomena are identifiable with it”<sup>46</sup>

On a societal level, this principle suggests that, rather than forming social units based on free-will or free association, where the “individual” remains intact (as in Rousseau’s social contract), all beings exist interdependently and are continually altered by their corresponding environment. It is this inter-relationality and the movement from a conceptual idea of emptiness, to a practice of social engagement and community, that Rita Gross addresses throughout her work.

The ideal of compassion is expressed by the Sanskrit word *bodhichitta*, which means “awakened heart” or “compassionate heart.” For

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<sup>45</sup> Gross, Buddhism after Patriarchy, 212.

<sup>46</sup> Jones Buddhism and Social Activism, p.

the Dalai Lama, this *action* is the “entrance to the Mahayana path”<sup>47</sup> It is important to distinguish our Western ideas of compassion from a Mahayana-Tibetan Buddhist understanding of the word. Unlike our associations with the word, in Buddhism compassion is not as a feeling or a mandate to abandon all boundaries between self and other, but rather it is a cultivating practice and a radical *choice* to acknowledge and accept responsibility for the suffering we collectively create. Feminist skepticism is important here, particularly because women have been historically discouraged from developing any sense of independence, and the psychologically enmeshed, other-oriented, co-dependent “woman” is still a classic image in our culture which underestimates the importance of community. Addressing this concern, Klein argues that, unlike Asian cultures, we tend to place “autonomy” and “relationship” in theoretical opposition to each other.”<sup>48</sup> What Buddhism suggests is not that my “identity is *only* a function of relationship,” but rather, “my personhood is *partly* a function of our relationship”<sup>49</sup> The notion that healthy development occurs through a process of separation and isolation is culturally specific, and. Particularly in the United States we lack an understanding of the self and the development of identity that highlights

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<sup>47</sup> Dalai Lama, The Way of Freedom, 133.

<sup>48</sup> Klein, Meeting the Great, 101.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, 102.

the importance of relationship and provides a sense of who we are as members of a family, a community, and a culture.

In Klein's work we learn that, within Mahayana Philosophy there is no "I" in the world shaping any personal or "unique" experience. Because all phenomena are part of a larger matrix, the Mahayana idea of compassion, and the figure of the Bodhisattva are key elements of Buddhist philosophy. In Mahayana Buddhism one of the central images of the realized human is that of the Bodhisattva who understands individual freedom solely in relation to the greater world. For the Bodhisattva, the world is the self.

I must reiterate that within Buddhism compassion is not an esoteric mental construct, but a literal practice, embodied in the figure of the Bodhisattva. It is this practice which Rita Gross sees as an integral part of making Buddhist ideology "usable" and transformative in the West. She

points out, “caring, by itself, is not enough”<sup>50</sup> When Bodhisattvas take their vows, they promise to work for the liberation of all sentient beings. Gross points out that even within Buddhist culture, the idea of compassion has been reduced to an elusive and disengaged principle, used to achieve personal liberation and disengaged from social concerns. Gross’s reconstruction of key Buddhist concepts are social. She is not introducing a particular and personal practice of “niceness” or filial piety, and within the framework of the Bodhisattva, Gross finds an inlet for social criticism and service. As I have stated previously, Buddhism comes under scrutiny and debate, particularly with feminist and social activists, because of its seeming indifference to/disassociation from society as a whole. The early Theravada Buddhists suggest that *nirvana* is attained only through complete cessation of suffering or *dukkha*, represented by the material world. This is not a theme in later Mahayana/Tibetan texts, where the world, the body, and all of its sensations are avenues to greater awareness. The image of the Bodhisattva is of one bent upon “universal liberation” yet, according to Gross, what Buddhism has lacked thus far is “a will to direct significant amounts of communal energy into social concerns and reconstructions.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Gross, Buddhism after Patriarchy, 182.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

In offering other Buddhist ideals which might re-shape our understanding of relationality in the West, Gross employs feminist thought concerning the importance of relationship to identity,<sup>52</sup> to analyze the basic principles of the three jewels (the most basic concept within each Buddhist tradition)-- the Dharma (teachings of the Buddha), the Buddha, and the Sangha (community of Buddhist practitioners). She points out that historically of the three jewels-- the Sangha has been given a "poor third" status, and is commonly interpreted--particularly in South East Asia--as referring exclusively to monastic life and the order of Buddhist monks. She questions, what does it mean to say "I go for refuge to the Sangha?"<sup>53</sup> Considering the basic notion of dependent co-arising, how can one not understand this to imply that "interdependence is the reality of our lives?" She also points out that while descriptions, literature, and art related to the life of the Buddha and the Dharma abound, few early descriptions of communal life exist.<sup>54</sup> For Gross, the Sangha is not a specific and locatable community of monks, but a metaphor for "the matrix necessary for the accomplishment" of liberation.<sup>55</sup> To relegate this concept to the confines of the monastery, is too literal and renders the

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<sup>52</sup> See Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*, which explores early female socialization.

<sup>53</sup> "Taking Refuge" is the first ceremony for an individual who wants to "officially" enter into the Institution of Buddhism, and it entails a public commitment to these elements of the Buddhist life. A description of the ceremony and significance of taking Refuge, can be found in Chogyam Trungpa, "Taking Refuge," Gaurda V: *Transcending Hesitation* (Boulder, CO: Shambala Publications, 1977), pp.15-31.

<sup>54</sup> Though a number of contemporary scholars have made compelling reconstructions/reinterpretations of this early community.

idea “unusable” to greater society which needs a vision of community where people are physically and psychologically nurtured. To refuse to explore the possibility of an extended/modified understanding of the Sangha is to buy into the often idealized picture of the completely self-contained, self-realized individual who does not *need* relationship.

She argues that this interpretation/mentality is especially “unusable” for women who choose to be married and raise families. A preferred model—one which holds the Sangha as an integral component of the three jewels, and one which could contribute to the self/social divide—is one in which stereotypically feminine traits, such as community, nurturance, and compassion were made the root idea of liberation. Because Buddhism is non-theistic, the source of support and encouragement must come from inside the community itself, so the Sangha is “the thousands of people being alone together, working with their own loneliness.”<sup>55</sup> In her article, “The Feminine Face of the Buddha”, Barbara Graham suggests that the most outstanding feature of American Buddhism is the shift from a strict monastic focus to a practice which is largely supported and defined by the lay community.

Through re-visioning historical understandings of the Sangha, Gross offers a more broad based understanding of *where* spiritual/personal

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<sup>55</sup> Gross, Buddhism after Patriarchy, 258-259.

<sup>56</sup> Chogyam Trungpa, Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism, “Taking Refuge” p. 25.

development is located. It is not, she would argue, limited to the confines of a “higher-order” community, such as the monastery. We need not understand the Sangha as a literal place, but preferably (especially for women) a state of mind in which we see all people and all things (i.e., cooking, raising children, housework) converge to awaken self-awareness.

Dependent co-arising shows us that all beings exist interdependently and are continually and dramatically altered by their corresponding environment. Compassion and the Path of the Bodhisattva offer examples of how this knowledge can be utilized to create a more inclusive and just society and, finally for Gross, the *Sangha* embodies the possibility of community that when valued and strengthened, can create and sustain individual and collective liberation.

### The Idolatry of Ideals

Both Anne Klein and Rita Gross make it clear that they are “not objectively juxtaposing Buddhist and feminist perspectives.”<sup>57</sup> Because of the breadth and complexity of thought and practice entailed in each, this type of synthesis is impossible. Gross does seem to insist however, that Buddhism cannot be true to form unless it “mandates and institutionalizes gender equality.”<sup>58</sup> However, this kind of dogmatic claim of truth seems

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<sup>57</sup> Klein, *Meeting the Great*, 11.

<sup>58</sup> Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy*, 221.

inappropriate to any conversation concerning Buddhism which has no set system of “right” or “wrong.”

I will now move to the question of activism, motives, and “agendas” (which both Anne Klein and Rita Gross agree to having within this discussion). Dharma fundamentals, the teachings of the Buddha, offer tools that can equip modern-day activism and offer liberating images and ideology concerning gender. Yet, how might we steer clear of what Ken Jones labels the “social fallacy” which easily imprisons individuals while earnestly believing that their theory or philosophical dogma can be the social panacea we’ve all been waiting for? These are crucial questions within the realm of both feminism and Buddhism and even more vital as we begin to look for a complementary ethic between. Vietnamese monk and Nobel Peace Prize nominee, Thich Nhat Hanh, reminds us in his first precept for engaged Buddhists<sup>59</sup> that, “One should not be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, any theory, any ideology, including Buddhist ones. Buddhist systems of thought must be guiding means and not absolute truth.”<sup>60</sup>

Questioning the motivation for social action is an imperative. Self-questioning helps to protect Buddhists, feminists, and social activists of all sorts, from becoming so immersed in the problems “out there ” that they

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<sup>59</sup> This term was coined by Thich Nhat Hanh and used initially to describe peace activist work in Southeast Asia beginning in the 1970’s.

<sup>60</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, Peace is Every Step, 126-127.



believe “human well-being is to be achieved primarily or solely through social development.”<sup>61</sup> Beyond any absolute ideology, there is a “middle way,” a “higher third,” that transcends both militancy and dis-engaged quietism which attempts a reciprocal modification of society and the self. This “higher third” is not a *place* or a transcendental, immutable knowledge that produces instantaneous (or even unilateral notions of) harmony. At best, this position helps us to realize that much of the world’s suffering is not inevitable and that no theory, in and of itself, will move us towards a more egalitarian system of power. Yet, returning to hooks, inquiry and theory-making are necessary components to change. Paired with “silence” and self-contemplation, this process can bring to light a new vision “of right action.”

### Psycho-social Transformation

Through Buddhist/Feminist dialogue both Anne Klein and Rita Gross attempt to create what Ken Jones labels a “psycho-social transformation” that not only reinterprets gender constructions and the “self” as understood in Western society, but provides a new model for community.

Yet within Buddhism, even in the West, there is a dynamic tension between a philosophical base which asserts there is no “self” (much less a male and female self ), and a religious/cultural *practice* of gender

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<sup>61</sup> Jones, Buddhism and Social Activism, 119.

oppression. As I have stated earlier in my essay, because Buddhism was taken from its Asian roots and transplanted into the United States at a time when the feminist movement was growing in power, women in the West are having opportunities not previously afforded their Asian counterparts. Western women have the opportunity to radically shift Buddhist practice away from its institutionalized form by questioning the usability of traditional textual interpretations as well as literal practices as they emerge in the West.<sup>62</sup>

Klein finds that through Buddhist ideas of mindfulness and psychological grounding, some sense of self emerges which then allows for conscious engagement in society. She does not suggest that "Buddhist principles or practices be adopted wholesale by modern feminists," yet Buddhist principles can offer a new perspective and an opportunity to rethink our assumptions regarding individuality and interpersonal relationships. She asserts that Buddhism and Post-modern feminist/essentialist discussions, "seek a new way of experiencing self and world," and that what Buddhist ideology can offer to address the divide among feminist theories of self, is a body of thought which proposes that "despite the deep impact of diversity on one's identity, there is a space in

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<sup>62</sup> I suggest that a large portion of Buddhism's popularity and freedom has developed in part because it lacks of cultural roots. Buddhism would not perhaps, be as attractive to a woman in China. Elizabeth Brusco's study on the Evangelical movement in Columbia entitled The Reformation of Machismo further suggest how an "outside" religion might provide freedom and advancement for women.

the self free from this fracturing, a space<sup>63</sup> from which to proclaim what changes must be made?”<sup>64</sup>

Can we find a vantage from which changes can be made in regard to sexism and gender construction? Can Buddhism/feminist dialogue not only *speak to* these questions, but offer a living *practice* in the West? Can we move towards the “radical practice of the co-humanity of existence,” in which woman’s experience and personal development are not replaced or subsumed by a male norm? For me, these are the questions *beneath* the answers of the text. While I am not certain I have moved any closer to a direct or pervasive link between the two philosophies, I do believe I have found within both a complementary questioning of selfhood and the status quo.

In the United States we have an enormous amount of personal freedom which is uncharacteristic of most traditional societies. Yet this freedom often manifests itself negatively in the form of greed, competition, hatred, and indifference. What I see both Buddhism and feminism offering the discussion on individual identity, is a new vision of freedom which is more meaningful and inclusive. Through Klein and Gross’s work, we find a link between personal and social awakening. We find a method (mindfulness), a vantage (emptiness), and a practice

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<sup>63</sup> This is a question for Klein.

<sup>64</sup> Klein, Meeting the Great, 202.

(compassion), all of which act as resources for a contemporary vision of the self, so that the work for social change, and, referring back to Basho's image, the "miles" we must go to get there, can be traveled together.

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