

Androgyny Among Friends*

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Written November 1994; revised July 1995

Abstract

In “Androgyny Among Friends” it is argued that the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order appear to provide an alternative theoretical framework to the one articulated by Rita Gross in *Buddhism After Patriarchy*. Much of the recent literature produced by members of the FWBO is critical of ideological Feminism, especially that which is founded on the myths of patriarchy and androcentrism. Along with other forms of what Sangharakshita calls pseudo-liberalism, ideological Feminism is dismissed as one of the principal false visions (*mithyā-dr̥ṣṭi*) of our age. Most of the writing coming from FWBO members is decidedly conservative and traditionalist and thus contrasts sharply with the reformist spirit of Professor Gross’s work. Despite these theoretical differences, the FWBO appears to have arrived at many of the practical changes in the institutional structure of their community that Professor Gross argues are necessary in order to make the Buddhist community “usable” to women. The structure of the FWBO may confirm Professor Gross’s claim that Buddhism, understood correctly, *is* feminism; but the conservatism of the FWBO may offer a counterpoint to the emphasis she places on the role of what she calls the prophetic voice.

Preamble

When I was invited to offer an assessment of *Buddhism After Patriarchy* from the perspective of a Buddhist tradition, the invitation specified that I reply from the Zen perspective, presumably because there was a time, from 1982 until 1988, when I practised Zen. My post-Zen practice of Buddhism has included contact with the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO). Although I would never claim to be a spokesman for the FWBO, the comments that I have to make on *Buddhism After Patriarchy* have undoubtedly been influenced by my association with members of that Order during the past seven years, and by doing the meditative practices and devotional rituals that Friends of the Western Buddhist Order do. To anyone who has expectations of finding something profoundly Zennish in my words, I can only say, with apologies, that having unrealistic expectations is the root cause of all *duḥkha*.

*I wish to thank Dr. Victor Sōgen Hori, Dharmachari Kamalashila, Dharmachari Manjuvajra, Dharmachari Sāramati (Prof. Alan Sponberg), Dharmacharini Vidyavati and Lucinda Peach, all of whom read earlier drafts of this essay and made helpful suggestions for improvement.

1 Reforming the Buddha-sāsana

Much is said in *Buddhism After Patriarchy* about reconstruction, revalorization and reform. Any discussion of reform within Buddhism invariably reminds me of the deliberation in the *Kathā-vatthu* on the topic of whether or not the Buddhist religion (*buddha-sāsana*) has been or will ever be reformed or renewed (Shwe Zan Aung & Davids, 1915, 351). In dealing with the claim by certain Uttarāpathakas (literally, followers of a superior way) that the three panbuddhist councils had resulted in important reforms, Mogallīputta Tissa Thera, representing the Theravādin position, asks what exactly has been reformed. Are we to understand that the foundations of mindfulness have somehow been modified? Are mental traits that were once considered healthy and beneficial (*kusala*) now considered unhealthy and harmful? Has the great reform resulted in a reevaluation of what mental traits are hindrances, impediments and corrupting influences? Has a fifth noble truth been discovered perhaps, or has it been determined that one of the original four can be eliminated? The unstated conclusion of these questions is that if none of these matters has been altered, then no reform of the Buddha-sāsana has taken place. Conversely, we might now say, whatever changes may have occurred can be seen as modifications in the purely nonessential, perhaps even trivial, worldly (*laukika*) structures that attend Buddhism itself, but the *lokottara dharma* remains entirely intact. In a culture as obsessed as North American society is with questions of reform, it is almost inevitable that sooner or later North American Buddhists will begin to think of themselves as reformers of Buddhism; indeed, Professor Gross has argued that the arrival of Buddhism into a post-Christian setting is likely to result in Buddhists acquiring what she calls a prophetic voice that expresses

protest against misuse of power, vision for a social order more nearly expressing justice and equity, and, most importantly, willingness actively to seek that more just and equitable order through whatever means are appropriate and necessary (Gross, 1993, 134).

Whenever such prophetic voices begin to become audible, it may be constructive to admit at the very outset that not every voice crying in the wilderness is a lion roaring the Dharma. Many of the reforms with which prophets and philosophers are preoccupied may be, from the perspective of what is essential to Buddhism, secondary and perhaps even insignificant. That is to say, these reforms may have much more to do with how we do North Americanism than with how we do Buddhism.

Bearing that caveat in mind, what I intend to examine in the following discussion is a particular set of institutional structures in a Buddhist movement that has evolved mostly (but by no means exclusively) in the English-speaking world. I shall argue that these structures probably accomplish most of the reforms that North Americans in general, and some feminists in particular, seem to perceive as necessary. Next I shall show that these “reforms” have taken place within a doctrinal framework that is self-consciously and overtly critical of Feminism. And finally, I shall reflect on the implications of these observations for the relationship between Buddhist theory and practice.

2 Structure of the FWBO

The Buddhist movement whose institutional structure I intend to discuss is the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO). Founded in England in 1967 by Sangharakshita, the FWBO now has centres in most major urban centres in the United Kingdom. The FWBO eventually spread slowly outside Great Britain and now has several centres in Australia and New Zealand. Within the past fourteen years it has established a few centres in the United States.¹ FWBO centres have also been established in some countries in which the principal language is not English, most notably in India, where it has been active working among scheduled tribes and castes in Maharashtra and other parts of Western India; it has been estimated that by the end of this century, more than half of the approximately one thousand ordained Western Buddhist Order members will be from India, by which time it will have outgrown its name as a principally Western order.²

Sangharakshita describes himself simply as a traditionalist and maintains that anyone who is a traditionalist is *ipso facto* a critic of modernity. Despite this claim to disavow many of the intellectual fashions of modernity, the Buddhist Order founded by Sangharakshita has evolved in ways that most moderns would find fairly satisfactory.

2.1 Dharmic resources

Perhaps the most important feature of the Western Buddhist Order is that people who are ordained into it regard themselves as “quite simply Buddhists” and therefore resist letting themselves be labeled as being specifically Theravādins, Mahāyānists or Vajrayānists. Sangharakshita himself was formally ordained in India as a Theravādin bhikkhu in 1950, but he quickly sought out teachers from other Buddhist traditions as well and eventually took the sixty-four bodhisattva precepts of Mahāyāna as well as several *sādhana* initiations from the dGe-lugs and rNying-ma lineages of Tibetan Vajrayāna. Because he derived great personal benefit from each of these three major traditions of Buddhism but did not find any one of them particularly superior to the others, Sangharakshita eventually found himself resisting the triumphalism that characterized each of the three *yānas* in its own way. “Triumphalism” is a term that Sangharakshita acquired from a study of the Second Vatican Council and which he understands to refer to exulting in purely secular achievements, and especially the shifts of power within the clerical hierarchy, as if these were spiritual achievements (Sangharakshita, 1988, 73–76). He eventually grew openly critical of the Theravādin form of triumphalism, which manifests itself as the assumption that monastic life is inherently more meritorious than lay life. Similarly, he became critical of Mahāyāna triumphalism, which manifests itself in the doctrine that the bodhisattva ideal is inherently more

¹The first FWBO centre was established in the Boston area in 1981. Since then, centres have been founded in Newmarket, New Hampshire; Seattle, Washington; San Francisco, California and Missoula, Montana.

²In this paper, reference will be made to both the WBO and to the FWBO. The WBO is the community of men and women ordained as Order members and has no institutional identity. The FWBO is set of legal institutional entities that own property, establish retreat centres, publish books, found small businesses and so forth. Membership in the FWBO includes not only members of the WBO but also ‘friends’, that is, non-Order members who attend classes and retreats who in some way turn to members of the WBO for friendship, inspiration and guidance.

altruistic than the allegedly selfish arhant ideal and which dismisses the pursuit of the arhant ideal as *hīnayāna*. Finally, Sangharakshita grew critical of the Vajrayāna claim to be the most expeditious method of realizing the loftier goals of Mahāyāna; he also questioned the emphasis on what he saw as nonessential features of tantric *sādhana*s, especially the stress placed on secrecy, initiation and devotion to a personal teacher (*guru-bhakti*). Sangharakshita's conviction that all vehicles of Buddhism are complete in the sense that each has everything necessary to enable people to cultivate virtuous character and develop wisdom and the other aspects of Buddhahood was expressed in the slogan "No higher teachings; just deeper understanding," by which he means that no vehicle or path within Buddhism can legitimately claim to be superior to any other, but that each individual practitioner is bound to arrive at more profound understandings of the Dharma by combining serious study of the teachings of any Buddhist master with consistent and steady practice.

2.2 Ordination

In the same way that people are ordained into the Western Buddhist Order not as Theravādins, Mahāyānists or Vajrayānists but simply as Buddhists, they are also ordained neither as monks, nor nuns, nor novices, nor lay men nor lay women, but, again, "simply as Buddhists." Accordingly, there is but one ordination ceremony, which is exactly the same for men as for women. The decision of when to give ordination to an individual woman is decided exclusively by ordained women, just as the decision of when to give ordination to an individual man is decided exclusively by ordained men; although each gender has control over who receives ordination, the ordination process is the same for both sexes, and all ordained members have the same status. Men or women may at any point in their careers undertake personal vows of poverty or of chastity, but these undertakings are not regarded as higher ordinations, and no special status accrues to those who undertake such supererogatory vows. Many Order members live in communities with other Order members, while others live alone, and still others live with sexual partners of either the same sex or the opposite sex, with whom they may or may not be legally married. All of these possible arrangements in which Order members live reflect Sangharakshita's conviction that in ordination "Commitment to going for refuge to the Three Jewels is primary; life-style is secondary." So long as one's livelihood is guided by the ten Buddhist precepts (*daśa-sīla*, *daśa-sīla*), it makes little difference in principle whether one lives as a monastic or as a lay person. Since it may turn out to be important to an individual to choose a life of poverty and celibacy, this type of life is available within the WBO, but it is not regarded as morally superior or more effective to the householder's life.

This acknowledgment of the centrality of the *triratna* (*tiratana*) is seen as a universal element that every formal act of becoming a Buddhist has in common, whether it is the act of becoming a lay person or of becoming a monk or of becoming the disciple of a tantric *guru* or a Zen master or *dhyānācārya*. Part of this commitment to going for refuge is a commitment to Dharma, which in the Buddhist context is a commitment to both habits of virtuous conduct and to wisdom. Regardless which particular tradition or lineage of Buddhism one follows, argues Sangharakshita, the commitment to virtuous conduct is based on the *daśa-sīla*, which serve as a kind of fundamental code of discipline (*mūla-vinaya*) for monastic life, and for the bodhisattva path and for tantric initiation

and for lay practice in any tradition (Sangharakshita, 1985, 34–41). That is to say, other sets of moral guidelines can be seen either as elaborations or as summaries of these ten basic guidelines. To be “simply a Buddhist” therefore entails making these ten moral principles the centre of one’s conduct in the world and to take them as an object of daily reflection and introspection.

Taking the *dasa-sīla* as moral guidelines is not to understand them as absolute rules that one either follows or fails to follow. Rather, it is to take them as an invitation to reflect on one’s own thoughts, words and bodily actions and to be constantly mindful of the fact that there is always room for improvement and that one can always strive to be at least a little more helpful and a little less injurious in one’s conduct of daily life. This kind of moral reflection is bound to take place at a much more subtle and nuanced level than laws and rules can possibly capture; it is effective only when applied to each individual action, rather than to generalizations and institutions. In the area of sexuality, for example, there is no kind of sexuality (such as extramarital sex, adultery or homosexuality) that is automatically and invariably injurious, nor is there any social institution that automatically renders a sexual relationship healthy and liberating for both partners. Therefore, rather than proscribing certain forms of sexual expression and condoning others in a general way, WBO members are encouraged to reflect on whether their behaviour in relationships of any kind conduces to “stillness, simplicity and contentment” rather than to psychological dependency, encumbrance and distress.

2.3 The centrality of kalyāṇa-mitratā

It is not only in the arena of sexual relationships that people are prone to falling into relationships that do more to foster psychological dependency than healthy self-sufficiency. The dysfunctions that attend purely secular human relationships easily find their ways into human relationships of an allegedly spiritual nature. People who in the secular world might have been destructive and abusive parents or employers or governors are most likely to be destructive and abusive gurus and masters. While it would be silly and irresponsible to say that every parent is necessarily abusive just in virtue of being a parent, it would be equally silly to suggest that every spiritual guide is bound to be abusive and destructive. As North American Buddhists are acutely and painfully aware, however, destructive guru-disciple relationships are much more common than one would expect among followers of a path that is described as Noble (*ārya-mārga*) and a Doctrine that is hailed as Good and True (*sad-dharma*).

In reflecting on the many crises of leadership within Western Buddhism, Sangharakshita has suggested that the key failure of most Buddhist leaders has taken the form of placing far too much emphasis on vertical guidance (such as the disciple’s loyalty and devotion to a teacher or a lineage of teachers) and far too little emphasis on horizontal friendship (simple fellowship among disciples). At nearly every turn during the Western Buddhist Order’s evolution, Sangharakshita has distanced himself from administrative details and has encouraged Order members to work out for themselves the actual institutional structures by which the Dharma will be implemented and administered in Western societies. He is somewhat like a professor who carefully avoided the traps of being made into a dean.

As a result of his early decision to eschew too much of a leadership role for himself or any other individual person in the WBO, Sangharakshita has been somewhat surprised, often quite pleasantly, at the forms that the Order has taken.

There are two features in particular that are germane to the theme that we are discussing today, namely, the position of women within the institutional framework of Buddhism.

2.4 Congregational structure

Because a web of close personal friendships among people who have a shared commitment to the values of Buddhism is the heart of the Sangha, and because it is practically difficult for people to form close friendships with more than a fairly small circle of fellows, the WBO has evolved as a decentralized network of local chapters. Each chapter is autonomous and financially independent of the others. Although there is a common set of rituals and study materials from which WBO chapters may draw, and a common set of contemplative exercises that all FWBO members do, and although there are common patterns of governance, there is considerable variation from one chapter to the next in procedural matters. Within a chapter, practical controversies are normally settled through discussion and consensus whenever possible. There is, in other words, no ecclesiastical hierarchy, and only a minimal institutional structure that serves as a focus of power and influence. This congregationalist structure has allowed the FWBO to avoid most of the problems attendant upon the concentration of power within a more centralized ecclesia.

2.5 Gender-specific communities

Perhaps the most surprising development of all within the FWBO has been the emergence of single-sex institutions. This development took place purely accidentally, for it was assumed from the beginning that all FWBO activities would involve men and women working together. During the first years of the FWBO, all activities did involve both genders working together. On one occasion, Sangharakshita suggested having a study and meditation retreat only for males. This experiment proved to be very successful and was then followed by other single-sex retreats for males and for females. Although single-sex retreats proved to be popular, residential communities continued to be of mixed gender for some time. The first all-male community took place purely by chance, and it was so successful that other communities began to form deliberately on the single-sex model. Eventually most WBO chapters became single-sex institutions, except in areas in which there were insufficient numbers of women to warrant a separate chapter for them. WBO chapters typically contain at least four to five people who have received ordination as Order members. The real heart of the WBO is the friendships among the members of a chapter, and their friendships with people who attend FWBO retreats, workshops and regular meetings of worship. What has been discovered is that the single-sex arrangement tends to provide for the most stable spiritual friendships. Moreover, it has been discovered that single-sex chapters and residential communities tend to allow both males and females to become more truly androgynous. No one is entirely sure why this is so, but Alex Kennedy *alias* Subhūti has surmised that this segregated arrangement encourages people of both genders to develop for themselves characteristics that are stereotypically associated with the other gender. If men cannot rely on women to perform whatever roles and exhibit whatever characteristics they are conditioned by mainstream society to perform and exhibit, then men must learn to act “womanly” themselves; and

if women cannot rely on men, then they are forced to become more “manly” themselves (Subhuti, 1983, 89–90). Although many FWBO activities are gender-segregated, there are also plenty of mixed-gender retreats and functions in the course of a year cosponsored by several chapters. At nearly all WBO retreats and study sessions, the function is led by a team rather than by a single person; at mixed-gender functions, the team nearly always includes both men and women.

2.6 Summary of WBO features favourable to women

Among the issues that I have most often heard raised by North American Buddhist women, one that seems to have a great deal of symbolic importance is that of the ordination of women. That women can no longer be ordained as *bhikkhunis* in some Theravāda countries, combined with the high social status enjoyed by those who have monastic ordination, apparently results in a situation in which women are condemned by birth to a lower status—by purely worldly *laukika*) criteria of status—within the visible Sangha; for some reason, this issue seems to be a matter of concern even to women who would have no intention to receive ordination as Theravādin *bhikkhunis* even if the option were available to them. Within the WBO this allegedly important inequality has been eradicated by eradicating the difference between monk and lay person and by giving women exactly the same ordination as men. Moreover, the fact that WBO chapters have local autonomy, combined with the fact that most chapters choose not to have a membership mixed in gender, has resulted in a situation in which women Order members have full access to whatever resources they need for their practice but are not systematically subordinate to men in any way, whether practically, doctrinally or symbolically. The setting of policies that affect all members of the WBO is done by a committee made up of both men and women.

As an incidental attraction to those women who attach importance to the gender of their role models, it just so happens that one of the Suttas in the Pali Canon that has had the most profound influence on the thinking of Sangharakshita (1968, 108–29), and therefore on many of the people whom he has taught, was delivered not by the Buddha or by Sāriputta or Ānanda, but by Therī Dhammadinnā, celebrated in Theravāda circles as “foremost among nuns who possessed the gift of preaching”³ (Sangharakshita, 1987, 139–42). Within the FWBO, no more significance is attached to Dhammadinnā’s gender than to anyone else’s gender. As we shall see, gender issues tend not to be regarded as matters of central importance in the FWBO, although there have been study retreats that take gender issues as topics of reflection.

3 FWBO Critique of Feminism

What is interesting is that none of these circumstances that are favourable to women within the FWBO took place deliberately or by plan. That is to say, it was never anyone’s explicit purpose to make circumstances favourable especially for women. It all took place as a natural consequence of a conviction that friendship

³See Malalasekera (1983, pp. 1142–3) for an account of this nun, who left her husband to become a nun, eventually became an *arahatī*, and later returned to her home and explained the Dhamma to her somewhat slow-witted husband, Visākha. When the Buddha heard the contents of her various expositions of the Dhamma, he was most laudatory of her skill as a teacher.

among individuals is the most natural expression of Dharma within a religious Sangha. Moreover, it all took place despite a widespread conviction within the movement that as an ideology, Feminism is one of the best modern examples of a wrongheaded view (*micchā-diṭṭhi*, *mithyā-dṛṣṭi*), an outlook that actually impedes one's progress on the Noble Path. Why this is so requires some explanation.

3.1 The Ārya-Saṅgha is not a Buddhist group

Perhaps the best context in which to view the kind of thinking that has been behind the suspicion of Feminism in WBO ranks is the distinction that Sangharakshita has drawn between a Sangha and a social group. A Sangha, a true community, is an association of fully integrated and independent individuals who offer one another friendship but who have no psychological dependencies on one another. A Sangha is made up of individuals who think for themselves and have the courage to speak their convictions without fear of offending or gaining the disfavour of their peers. A group, in contrast, is a set of relatively immature people whose sense of personal identity is significantly dependent upon a sense of solidarity with other people who form an identifiable subset of humanity as a whole. A member of a group is prone to fearing rejection by the group and therefore allows his or her behaviour and patterns of thinking to be molded mostly by peers and role models. This is not to say that belonging to a group is necessarily unhealthy; it can be healthy for an incomplete or dysfunctional person to identify with a group, provided that the overall aim of the group is to help those who join it outgrow their need to belong to any group and to become self-sufficient individuals. In FWBO terminology, a group of people whose aim is to help individuals outgrow their need to identify with groups is called a positive group. Roughly speaking, a positive group is an institution that fosters individuality, whereas a negative group is one that makes individuals subservient to the institution itself.

In traditional Buddhist terms, the Ārya-saṅgha, the Noble Community to which Buddhists go for refuge, comprises only those men and women who have attained at least the status of Stream Entry (*sota-āpatti*); that is, the Noble Community comprises those who have gained an insight into the true nature of things, and especially into the radical insubstantiality of personality, and who have broken free of the habit of performing ritual activities and good works only for the sake of acquiring personal merit through them. In traditional Buddhist terms, most collections of human beings, including the vast majority of those who partake in organized religions such as Buddhism, are not yet part of the Āryasaṅgha but rather are still part of the immature masses of people (*bala-puṭhujjāna*, *bala-prthagjāna*).

Given that the Ārya-saṅgha to which Buddhists go for refuge is a loose collection of individuals who have attained maturity of insight, and given that a proximate (if not ultimate) goal of Buddhists is to join this community as soon as circumstances will permit, there is good reason to be cautious of groups that impede the individual's sense of individuality by conditioning their members to develop a very strong sense of particular group identity. It is on this score that Sangharakshita and various other WBO members have expressed reservations of certain types of feminism. What remains to be seen is which kinds of feminism they have targeted for criticism.

First of all, Sangharakshita has said that if feminism means nothing more than the view that no individual woman should be impeded in her search for wisdom and other key virtues simply because of her gender, then there is no sensible human

being who is not a feminist. Since such people would also presumably hold to the view that no male should be impeded simply because of his gender, it may be more accurate to call such people both feminists and masculinists, or perhaps just humanists; the term “feminist” may, in other words, be somewhat too specific, unless it is made clear that it is being used as a kind of metonymy, rather like the metonymic usage of the term “man” to refer to all human beings. Whatever terminology one finds acceptable, the phenomenon being referred to here can only be regarded as healthy and fully consonant with Buddhist ideals. In this sense, Professor Gross is right on the mark when she says that Buddhism is feminism.

It should be borne in mind, however, that there are some people for whom certain doctrines about gender have become an ideology, a set of doctrines about human nature that are to be defended as staunchly as any dogma. For some people, adherence to certain dogmas has become a criterion for membership in a very particular group, one that has become more or less antagonistic towards other members of the human race. In writing about ideological or doctrinaire stances on matters of gender, Sangharakshita has chosen to designate this family of dogmas by the term “Feminism” (spelled with an upper case ‘F’ to distinguish it from a more general concern for gender equality). It is this Feminism that he has called a good example of a modern “wrongheaded view.”

The most salient characteristic of the form of Feminism about which some WBO members have expressed reservation is what they call the Myth of Patriarchy, the assumption “that history reveals the consistent oppression and enslavement of women by men” (Subhuti, 1994, 168). While agreeing that there is almost always some degree of tension between men and women, Sangharakshita suggests that this continual struggle does not by any means have an invariable outcome; on the contrary, rather minor advantages are gained by one side or the other from time to time, but most of the time it is merely a struggle in which neither side gains a clear advantage for very long, and in which such advantages as are gained tend to be fairly local. Indeed, most of the time, the war of the sexes is conducted at a very local level, such as within a clan or a family. Sangharakshita writes that

the feminist reading of history as the story of Woman’s oppression and exploitation by Man belongs not to history but to mythology, and can be compared with the anti-Semitic reading of history as the story of the world-wide conspiracy on the part of Jews to concentrate wealth and power in their own hands so as to be able to enslave the Gentiles. . . . Men have of course sometimes oppressed women (and women, men), just as Jews have sometimes enslaved Gentiles (and Gentiles, Jews!), but in neither case are the facts sufficient to justify a reading of history in either feminist, or in anti-Semitic, terms: such interpretations are not history but myth (Subhuti, 1994, 168).

Although Sangharakshita has a very high regard for the power of mythology to awaken important human potentials, especially at the emotional level, he also stresses the importance of being mindful of when one is working in a mythological mode and when one is working in an historical mode.

There is no doubt that the line between myth and history has often been blurred by Buddhists, sometimes quite deliberately for political purposes. Instances of such failures to separate myth from history are the doctrine of the *sprul-sku*, in which an historical figure such as an abbot is regarded as the living manifestation of a mythical bodhisattva such as Avalokiteśvara; or the doctrine that a particular

political or military figure is a manifestation of the mythical figure Maitreya; or the belief that a Zen master is the embodiment of the mythical Buddha-mind or Buddha-nature. While such doctrines as these may have a limited value in guiding people to Dharma, they are more frequently misunderstood, often with unpleasant consequences. At the very least, one must acknowledge that one is dealing with a myth that, if abused, could be productive for some people at the expense of being rather dangerous for others. Time alone will tell whether the twin myths of androcentrism and patriarchy, which Professor Gross has adroitly woven with the very best of intentions, will have the salubrious effects on both men and women that she hopes. Similarly, only time will tell whether Sangharakshita is correct when he says that

the FWBO and WBO offer the individual woman incomparably more freedom and scope for personal development than the Woman's Movement (i.e. Feminism, Women's Lib. etc) can possibly do. The FWBO and WBO in fact make the Women's Movement unnecessary (Subhuti, 1994, 170).

4 There She Stands; Here I Sit

Professor Gross has pointed out that "both Buddhism and feminism begin with experience, stress experiential understanding enormously, and move from experience to theory, which becomes the expression of experience" (Gross, 1993, 130). While I would hesitate to make such a sweeping claim, I do think that the case of the (F)WBO has borne out this observation. In looking back over his fifty years as a practising Buddhist, Sangharakshita now says that most of the principles that have become part of the WBO approach to Dharma evolved after certain workable realities emerged. He did not start with a Utopian vision of the perfect Buddhist Order and then try to implement it; rather, he founded an Order that eventually worked out pretty well, and then he and others sought to find explanations for why things had worked out as well as they had. Within the (F)WBO, these theoretical principles are still very much open to discussion and modification; the workable realities to which those theories apply are rather more jealously guarded and preserved in their many workable forms.

As for *Buddhism After Patriarchy* itself, I must confess that I emerged from reading the book with a feeling that it was still rather more theory-driven than it was claiming to be. Professor Gross repeatedly makes the claim that it is extremely important for women to have female role models in their practice of the Dharma. I suppose that Professor Gross states this as more than an autobiographical comment. But given the absence of empirical studies that substantiate this claim, it sounds very much like an *a priori* statement. If her claim is true as a general principle, it must be equally true that it is important for men to have male role models. But I know that this is not always true. Let me illustrate this by being autobiographical, since this is reportedly one of the ways of entering into the feminist spirit. It has been my experience in various places in which I have lived that what passes as exemplary masculinity and exemplary femininity varies greatly with both geographical locale and with time. When I was a young boy growing up in the state of New Mexico, the culturally transmitted portrayal of an ideal man was very different from the portrayal of an ideal man that is being transmitted to me in Québec as I attain the age of fifty. The feature of stories about the Buddha

and ideal Buddhist monks that I personally find most useful to my own practice is precisely the fact that these people are not anything at all like the models of masculinity that I have been conditioned to accept as exemplary. The fact of the matter is, I have never read about any Buddhist role model who reminded me at all of what I have been taught by my culture that a man is supposed to be. Indeed, I have hardly ever read about a Buddhist role model who reminded me of what I have been taught by mainstream society that a human being is supposed to be. Perhaps what makes Buddhist role models so effective is precisely that one cannot identify with them as one presently is. Buddhist ideals, I would argue, are so radically at variance with the values of any ordinary human culture (*laukika-dharma*) that one is bound to be a little shocked by them no matter what part of the world one hails from and no matter which gender one is. The issue of gender, then, becomes quite secondary.

My one reservation about *Buddhism and Patriarchy* is that Professor Gross, by focusing too strongly on these purely *laukika* questions of gender, may quite inadvertently lure women Buddhists into being shocked and outraged at the way that women have been treated and depicted by some male Buddhists, or into being uplifted by the fact that there have been great female characters at both the historical and mythical level. It would be a pity for women to be distracted by gender issues from the much more important task of being suitably shocked and outraged by the fact that the vast majority of women are, like the vast majority of men, still pathetic, worldly human beings, caught up in a web of painful delusions and fantasies, unable to help themselves and mostly worthless to others. It would also be a pity if gender issues distracted people from uplifted by the fact that there are a few people who somehow manage to be healthy and helpful to others who seek contentment.

5 Conclusion

In this presentation, I have argued that the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order appear to provide an alternative theoretical framework to the one articulated by Rita Gross in *Buddhism After Patriarchy*. Much of the recent literature produced by members of the FWBO is critical of ideological Feminism, especially that which is founded on the myths of patriarchy and androcentrism. Along with other forms of what Sangharakshita calls pseudo-liberalism, ideological Feminism is dismissed as one of the principal false visions of our age. Most of the writing coming from FWBO members is decidedly conservative and traditionalist and thus contrasts sharply with the reformist spirit of Professor Gross's work. Despite these theoretical differences, the FWBO appears to have arrived at all of the practical changes in the institutional structure of their community that Professor Gross argues are necessary in order to make the Buddhist community 'usable' to women. The structure of the FWBO may confirm Professor Gross's claim that Buddhism, understood correctly, *is* feminism in the sense of that which seeks to remove impediments to every person's individual development, regardless of gender. On the other hand, the conservatism of the FWBO may offer a counterpoint to the emphasis Professor Gross places on the role of what she calls the prophetic voice.

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6 Buddhism After Buddhism After Patriarchy

While returning home from the conference for which this paper was written, a WBO friend and I reflected on whether either the papers presented at the conference or the ensuing discussions, had altered our views on the issues addressed in *Buddhism after Patriarchy*. As we were in the process of talking about that, one of us raised the following question. Suppose we were to grant that the Buddhist tradition has, whether because of male-dominated institutions or because of various other reasons, become “unusable” to women; would this fact alone diminish the importance of Buddhism as a spiritual discipline or render it in any way less valuable? The answer to this question, we concluded, is clearly no. Even if (just for the sake of argument) it should turn out that the institutions of Buddhism are such that they privilege males and marginalize females, even to the point of excluding women altogether from participating, Buddhism would still be quite valuable as a set of disciplines that have the collective capacity to make men into better men. And the benefit of improving men, by making them more kind-hearted and sensitive and reflective about the consequences of their actions, would not be restricted to men, for women would surely benefit a good deal by living in a world of improved men.

Now it might very well be argued that if Buddhism is a set of spiritual disciplines that benefit males, then Buddhism should also be made available to females. This, of course, would be a compelling claim only if two conditions were met. First, it would have to be shown that doctrines and practices and institutions that benefit males are also of equal benefit to females. And second, it would have to be shown that Buddhism is unique in providing those doctrines and practices so that, by excluding women from Buddhism, one would automatically be excluding them access to beneficial doctrines and practices. Neither of these two conditions, I would argue, is met. Let me demonstrate this by taking the two points in tandem.

Considering the first condition, it has never (to the best of my knowledge) been demonstrated that women benefit from exactly the same spiritual exercises as men. On the contrary, I have been persuaded by the observations of numerous women that some exercises that benefit men are actually detrimental to women. During my days of Zen practice, for example, I became convinced that the traditional practice of briskly hitting a meditator across the shoulders or back generally produced a markedly different result in female than in male practitioners. Similarly, some strategies of dealing with anger that work very well for most men are reportedly much less effective for most women. This is not at all surprising, for men and women tend to have different conditioning, both at the level of basic biology and at the level of socialization. It would be far more surprising if beings with different conditioning responded equally well to precisely the same sets of doctrines, practices and institutions. And so, if it should turn out that most Buddhist practices, having been devised and transmitted mostly by males, are of greatest benefit to males, this fact would not in itself be a call for reforming Buddhist practices. What would make more sense would be for women to develop institutions and practices that serve their needs, leaving the traditions of Buddhism to continue being of service to men.

Considering the second condition, the study of comparative religions has made it abundantly clear that no religious tradition has a monopoly on truth, wisdom or virtue. It would take a remarkably parochial and ignorant person to argue, in the light of available evidence, that Buddhism provides the only, or even the very

best, collection of efficacious spiritual disciplines in the world. Given that there are dozens or scores of more or less equally efficacious systems of belief and practice, all that is necessary for the cause of justice in the world is that everyone in the world have access to at least one of these systems. The requirements of general health are met so long as everyone has access to adequate nutrition; nothing further is gained by giving everyone access to every possible kind of adequate nutrition. Similarly, so long as everyone has access to beneficial traditions nothing further is gained by making every beneficial tradition in the world equally accessible to everyone. So it could very well be the case that even if Buddhist institutions were entirely closed to women, this situation would not in itself constitute an injustice against women.

To return now to the first consideration, it seems to me that what Professor Gross has done quite well in her book is to show that women in modern Western society may not thrive under some forms of traditional Buddhism. This observation seems to have been amply appreciated by several of the women Buddhists who attended the conference and participated in the discussions. Professor Gross has also sketched out various ways in which women might profit by selecting some teachings of the Buddha and his various disciples and complementing them with teachings and practices from various other religious and philosophical systems, and developing institutions that embody those beliefs and practices and transmit them to other women. The notion of a Buddhism with an element of what she calls the “prophetic voice” of social conscience, combined with institutions that better enable women to participate in a spiritual community, seems a very good start in this direction.⁴

In my estimation, the least important question of all in this is whether or not the resulting system of “female-friendly” doctrines and practices can still legitimately be called a form of Buddhism. If women develop a set of practices that are partially or wholly inspired by teachings of the Buddha and that are particularly suited to serve the needs of female practitioners, then it is difficult to imagine that any Buddhist would not welcome this new leaf to an already abundantly foliated tree. The experience of the FWBO has shown that most traditional Buddhists accept this movement as legitimate; once it is understood that WBO ordination is not seen as a replacement for traditional monastic ordination, but simply as an additional way of manifesting the quintessential Buddhist act of going for refuge, resistance to the apparent newness of the FWBO tends to break down very quickly. It is difficult to believe that a largely feminized Buddhist movement would not be similarly well received.

Perhaps the only conditions under which a self-proclaimed ‘reform’ movement would not be accepted within Buddhist circles would be if it set itself up as the sole legitimate form of Buddhism, or if it insisted that its reforms serve as a model for universal reform within Buddhism. An analogy that I have heard different Buddhist teachers give at various times is that Buddhist tradition is like a very complete pharmacy that contains medicines for a wide range of ailments. For any given individual or group of individuals, perhaps only a few of those medicines will be useful, and some may even be harmful. What one should do, therefore,

⁴My experience with Buddhism in North America has been that many of the specific practical measures that Professor Gross sees as desirable reforms have become increasingly the norm, at least among the typically well-educated, financially secure (if not affluent), urban, middle-class men and women who take up meditation as their central Buddhist practice. Thus I would describe her book not so much as leading a new reform as as describing a twenty-five year-old reform that is already well established in most urban centres.

is to make use of those that heal one's particular ailments, leaving the others for people whose ailments will be cured by them. Applying this advice to anyone who speaks of Buddhist "reform," the best action for a would-be reformer would be either to add some new medicines to the pharmacy or to discover that medicines already there are effective for more than was previously appreciated. A much less skillful kind of reform would be to label some of the medicines that have proven efficacious in the past as now being antiquated and irrelevant and to insist on throwing them away. It seems clear to me that Rita Gross is clearly a reformer of the former type, for her agenda is to encourage other modern (mostly affluent, mostly urban, mostly professional) women to pursue a spiritual path inspired by a carefully selected set of classical Buddhist teachings, supplemented perhaps by certain key principles of the European Enlightenment. If her agenda had been to devise a Buddhist movement that would be a flagship in reforming Buddhism throughout the world by throwing some doctrines and practices away altogether or dismissing them as toxic waste, then one might have suspected that an element of *abhimāna* (pride, conceit) had crept into her mentality-continuum, perhaps during a lapse in her practice of mindfulness. Professor Gross made it clear, however, during the course of the conference that the purpose of her book was *not* to suggest the necessity of such a worldwide reform, but merely to point out ways in which modern North American women might appropriate aspects of the Buddhist tradition for their own individual and collective situations, and that they could do so without compromising the essential teachings of Buddhism.

Finally, to return to the question of whether the conference on *Buddhism After Patriarchy*—or the book that inspired the conference—changed my views on Buddhism or on any of the conclusions that I touched upon in the main body of my paper, I must say that it did not. What the book and the conference both did do for me personally was to make me far more aware of what a struggle some North American women have had in coming to terms with traditional Buddhist institutions. Their struggle seems yet another particular instance of a universal principle, which is that the whole point of Buddhist discipline is to invite a radical re-examination of one's own social, familial and educational conditioning and to discover one's own way of managing in the world without being excessively worldly; and this exercise in re-examination is rarely effective without some discomforts. There is no doubt that by working together (with or without the cooperation of Buddhist men), women will succeed in working out a way of being Buddhist that suits their particular spiritual needs at this time in history. In working this way out, I should think that the most important strategy will be to see to it that women continue to have good access to education in the sciences and humanities, and to libraries and other informational resources; of far less importance to the welfare of modern Western women, I should think, is being given access to full monastic ordination in a Theravāda setting or being given status as a tulku (*sprul-sku*), for these institutions may very well have been superseded by universal education and suffrage and other consequences of the European Enlightenment.

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