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Source: *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, Vol. 34 (2014), pp. 69-81

Published by: University of Hawai'i Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24801354>

Accessed: 17-09-2018 09:23 UTC

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The Suffering of Sexism: Buddhist Perspectives and Experiences

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Having been assigned the topic of suffering and sexism for this conference and celebration of Paul Knitter's career and work, I feel qualified to address that topic. I have suffered a lot because of the work I have done on sexism, including a very diminished career. After nearly fifty years of demonstrating the presence of sexism in religious studies and in Buddhism, and taking a lot of flak and criticism for bringing to light many things that many people simply don't want to know, I would be delighted if such discussions were no longer needed. That, however, is not the case. So bringing together these two s-words—suffering and sexism—is very potent. **The only effect of sexism is suffering. Forming identities and organizing society on the basis of male dominance have no redeeming benefits that offset the suffering.**

However, it is critical that we understand what is the real issue as we begin these reflections on suffering and sexism. I have long contended that, rather than trying to reform gender roles or discern what an ideal set of gender roles might be, **the fundamental problem is the very existence of gender roles—any set of gender roles whatsoever.** Does the shape of our genitals really predetermine our hearts, minds, longings, and abilities? Does it have anything to do with one's ability to think theologically or to excel at spiritual disciplines? **Gender roles severely and arbitrarily constrain people. That is the real suffering of sexism, and that, rather than male dominance, is the true problem. Male dominance is only one of the more unfortunate results of the constraint of arbitrary and binding gender roles. Thus, the suffering of sexism needs to give way to freedom from the prison of gender roles.**

ENGAGED BUDDHISM (AND CHRISTIANITY) AND THE SUFFERING OF SEXISM

Unfortunately, the engaged Buddhist movement has been very slow to recognize that the suffering of sexism is something engaged Buddhists should care about, or even that it exists. Doubly unfortunately, many engaged Christians are no more likely to take up issues of gender justice very forcefully. It is not uncommon for books on

engaged Buddhism or Christianity to omit the topic altogether. If it is discussed at all, a single issue, such as *bhikkhuni* ordination in the Buddhist case, is often the only gender issue discussed, rather than the full topic of Buddhist androcentrism and patriarchy.

It is very frustrating and disappointing when those who wax eloquent on economic and political justice are completely silent on sexism and gender justice. How can they possibly imagine there could be economic or political justice when women still lack political and economic equality because they lack both equal access to all culturally valued pursuits and to reproductive freedom? Yet many engaged Buddhists and Christians seem to see no contradiction at all between advocating for economic and political "justice" at that same time as they advocate against women's religious equality and reproductive freedom. Even if they don't advocate against things that are essential for women, they are often silent on those issues.

It's very easy to criticize the IMF, the World Bank, or US foreign policy, things that we Buddhists don't and can't control, things that even Christians can't control. But we do control our own religious institutions, whether Buddhist or Christian. So why don't engaged Buddhists and Christians even discuss Buddhist and Christian sexism and patriarchy? We could change those institutions in a heartbeat, if we chose to do so. Why don't we? I challenge engaged Buddhists and Christians to become much more aware of the suffering of sexism and much more serious about ending it in Buddhist and in Christian institutions.

RECEIVED GENERALITIES REGARDING BUDDHISM AND GENDER

If one looks at the world's various Buddhisms, especially in Asia, superficially less so in the Western world, it would be impossible to avoid the conclusion that Buddhism is seriously infected with the sexism of male dominance. All the leaders and most of the teachers are men. Male monastics are well supported, while female monastics barely survive. Lack of economic support from lay donors, who were told they would receive more merit for supporting more-prestigious male monastics than less-prestigious female monastics, probably led to the disappearance of female monasticism in much of the Buddhist world. Today, many oppose the introduction or reintroduction of full ordination for female monastics. Education for female monastics lags far behind that for male monastics in many parts of the Buddhist world. In the West, things appear to be more equitable. Women are quite visible in Buddhist meditation halls. In fact, more women than men participate in many sanghas, and women are able to take on all leadership roles. In the West, about half the dharma teachers are women. Nevertheless, as a quick look at ads for retreats in any leading Buddhist magazine will demonstrate, most of the teachers who lead large retreats that attract national audiences are men, while women do much of the more elementary, everyday teaching in local sanghas.

Traditional Buddhists have a handy explanation for this situation. They readily admit that women are disadvantaged in general and in Buddhist institutions. That is because to be born a woman is an unfortunate birth, the result of negative karma from

previous lives. Thus, it really isn't unfair that women are so disadvantaged and nothing can be done about it except for women to be good girls. Being a good girl usually means accepting and fostering male dominance as necessary, just, and adequate. Such good girls can then be reborn as men in future lives, in which they will enjoy all the privileges and perks that go with having a penis.

I often retell a story. When I attended one of the first international conferences on Buddhist-Christian dialogue in Hawai'i in 1980, I gave a plenary address on Buddhism and feminism, probably the first such address ever. The male Japanese Buddhist delegates wouldn't talk to me, but they did talk to my Western male colleagues, who reported to me that they were dumbfounded by this crazy Western woman doing a feminist critique of Buddhism. They could understand Christian feminism, they said, because of all the male priests and the male deity, but, according to them, Buddhists had solved those problems long ago. "Deserving women are reborn as men," they proudly declared. Such a solution is logical, but it certainly is not ethical.

Buddhist teachers also have an answer for women who protest when they notice their low status and limited possibilities. "Enlightened mind is neither male more female, but beyond gender," we are told. Unfortunately, many women hear this advice, which in a certain way is accurate enough, as a reprimand to them or a denial of their observational skills. They then acquiesce to male dominance rather than continuing to try to correct the situation. Therefore, for years, I have been asking teachers to stop excusing and condoning male dominance in Buddhist institutions with the accurate claim that enlightened mind is gender-free. Enlightened mind is not at issue. Male-dominated institutions are. Men, the ones who really need this teaching, are never given advice to act on the recognition that enlightened mind is beyond gender, which would require them to stop cherishing their gender privileges and clinging to the gender role that gives them those privileges. Instead, they are given leave to continue ignoring the fact that if potentially enlightened minds are embodied in deprived bodies, it is much less likely that they will realize their potential. They are, in fact, given leave to continue to oppress women with Buddhist institutions that greatly favor men over women.

In my work on Buddhism and gender, I have consistently demonstrated that two major positions have prevailed throughout Buddhist history. The more normative view, not often put into practice, is that enlightened mind, as the birthright not only of all human beings but of all sentient beings, is beyond gender and not limited by gender. The other, much more visible but much less normative view is that gender matters a great deal and it is far more fortunate to be a man than to be a woman. Thus, as I have claimed many times, in Buddhism we have an intolerable contradiction between the view, which is gender-neutral and gender-free, and basic practice, which is male dominant through and through. But in Buddhism, the practices we do are supposed to enable us to realize the view, not be counterproductive to realizing the view. Obviously, we Buddhists have a major problem with inappropriate gender practices, but most Buddhist leaders, including most engaged Buddhists, are doing very little to overcome male dominance.

BUDDHIST MALE DOMINANCE: THE THREE SUBSERVIENCES
AND THE FIVE WOES

To their credit, at least Buddhists have usually not claimed that sexism is actually beneficial to women, as other religions have sometimes done. They have been quite upfront about how difficult and unpleasant it is to be a woman living in male-dominant conditions.

Many Buddhist texts contain several common lists detailing what allegedly makes women inferior to men. These lists turn on conventional, *samsaric* social arrangements, not on any dharmic principles. In common with Asian cultures in general, Buddhists have agreed with the norm that a woman must always be subject to some man—her father, her husband, or her son, depending on her age and marital status. This stereotype is the basis of the much discussed “eight special rules,” which, when observed, subjugate even the most senior nun to the most junior monk. Another list, the five stations thought to be unavailable to women in patriarchal societies, explains why there cannot be a female Buddha. To become a Buddha, a person must previously have experienced the most powerful roles in cyclic existence (*samsara*).¹

However, the most relevant list of what makes being a woman less desirable than being a man is the so-called “five woes,” three of which are biological and two of which are social. These five woes are menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, being required to leave one’s natal family at marriage, and being required to work hard all the time taking care of one’s husband and family. These are all either male assessments of female biology or male demands for services from women.

From almost any point of view, in mammalian species there is no question that females bear a much heavier biological burden than males, which strikes me as a cogent argument against intelligent design. Thus, there is a certain cogency in locating the possible unsatisfactoriness of women’s lives with their role in biological reproduction. Nevertheless, regarding the three biological “woes,” women might have different assessments *if*, and only *if*, women have the reproductive freedom to decide whether, when, and how often to endure pregnancy and childbirth. Evidence from every situation in which birth control and, if it becomes necessary, abortion are readily available indicates that women prefer to limit their fertility. Thus, the burden of even these biological “woes” is quite amenable to amelioration, unless religions and cultures get in the way, as they often do. In addition to being of benefit to women, limiting human fertility is also of great benefit to our seriously overpopulated Earth home. Though birth control technology sometimes fails even when readily available, it significantly cuts the rate of unplanned and unwanted pregnancies.

However, even in situations in which reproductive choice and freedom seem secure, they can be snatched away, as recent developments in the United States make clear. Many people have difficulty even obtaining birth control, to say nothing of abortions, and many are eager to limit access to both even more. It has always been impossible for me to understand why compassionate people would want to limit women’s reproductive freedom or force us to bear and raise children we don’t want to have. It seems to me, whether or not they will admit it, that the agenda of those who seek to limit

reproductive choice and freedom is to confine women to traditional domestic roles, thus making the biological woes truly woe-producing while destroying women's ability to fulfill many of our dreams. Though Buddhists often oppose abortion, I know of no instances of Buddhists opposing birth control.² As I have demonstrated in previous publications, Buddhism is not especially pro-natalist in its views and does not regard biological reproduction as either a religious requirement or as necessary to human fulfillment.³

However, another modern intervention into reproductive processes, when combined with patriarchal social values, undoes many of the advances made possible by technologies of reproductive choice. I am talking about sonograms that detect the sex of a fetus combined with abortion for sex selection. In Asia, this lethal combination makes for widespread abortion of female fetuses and a resulting severe sexual imbalance, which is socially destabilizing. **Apart from the elimination of many female births, such practices also can force women to undergo numerous pregnancies until they finally conceive a male fetus, which cannot be good for either their biological or psychological health. The root cause of these practices is extreme misogyny and patriarchy combined with extreme disregard for the worth and well-being of women. It is incomprehensible how people imagine they will ever have grandsons if women bear only sons. More than anything else, the practice of abortion for sex selection demonstrates the absolute evil of patriarchy and male dominance and their total lack of any redeeming characteristics. Do Buddhists or nominal Buddhists engage in such practices? Certainly in countries in which the practice is widespread, such as China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Korea, Vietnam, and Nepal, they do.⁴ But then, traditional Buddhism is institutionally severely male-dominated and sexist. Thus, it is not too surprising that the Buddhist principle that makes Buddhists queasy about abortion—the first precept of not harming living beings whenever possible—would be ignored when having a daughter instead of a son is at stake.**

The two social woes of female birth commonly cited by Buddhists are more arbitrary, clearly dependent on humanly created social practices rather than on biology. In matrilineal societies men live with their wives' families, not vice versa, and today multigenerational patrilineal households are much less common everywhere. The epitome of male advantage, however, lies in the fifth woe—that **women's lifework is designated as taking care of men and children, thus freeing men for education, cultural creativity, and, in Buddhism, practicing spiritual disciplines and teaching dharma.** Even today, including in Buddhist societies, women's education, including their education in dharma, is curtailed on the grounds that women don't need and can't use education. After all, their lives will be consumed by household domestic work caring for men and children. **How utterly convenient for men to be freed of repetitive and boring domestic work and to have a whole class of human beings whose lives are dedicated to doing such tasks to take care of them!** This Buddhist assessment of what women's lives are for is not substantially different from assumptions common in any male-dominated society, including our own.

Unless you have been a girl in a patriarchal society with no feminist movement and little notion of women's rights or equality, it must be hard to imagine how awful

it feels to look forward to such a constrained life. But women of my age did experience such conditions, and, as I often say, those of us old enough to know why the feminist movement started in the first place need to write and talk about those experiences. Younger women, the “I’m not a feminist” generation, really need to stop being so smug and cavalier about their better fortune, which would not have happened without what women of my generation went through.

In my own life, as a child I heard it whispered that it would be okay if I got an education just in case, God forbid, I should ever be without a man for some reason. That I loved learning was beside the point. Children are not at all oblivious to the sexist messages endemic to their culture, even if there is a façade of seeming equality, up to a certain point at which girls who have taken those messages to heart stop achieving. I remember as a young child, probably in preschool, certainly by the early elementary grades, wondering what it meant about me that both God and Jesus were male. In our small house, there was a small picture of an angel guarding children crossing a dangerous ravine on a rickety bridge, and she certainly looked like a woman to me. I happily concluded that there was a place at the table for me after all. Angels seemed to be rather important. That small comfort was taken away from me some years later in confirmation class. We were told that men are superior to women, which we know because both God and Jesus are male. I put up my hand and announced, “But the angels are women.” I was told in no uncertain terms that I was wrong. The angels were also men, but artists portrayed them incorrectly, the pastor proclaimed.

Worse, however, was the specter of being a girl who loved nothing more than learning and was very good at it. Many times I vehemently asked to myself, “Why did I have to be a girl? Girls don’t get to do anything interesting or important.” At one point I mused that it was terribly unfair and cruel for girls to be born with high IQs and a love of learning, given that we were never going to be allowed to put them into practice. Somehow, one day well before the beginning of the second wave of feminism, an insight snapped me out of this self-loathing. “It’s the system! There’s nothing wrong with being a girl! It’s the system!” I don’t know where that came from, but it obviously saved my life.

Multiply that suffering, which was very intense, by the millions, even billions of girls who look at their male-dominated worlds and see no hope for dignity, self-determination, or following their dreams of how to use their precious human birth to make the world a better place.³ Men, on average, may have more physical strength than women, but they certainly don’t have more brainpower. So why do men have all the positions of leadership and influence in religions, both Buddhism and Christianity? Surely religious wisdom is more dependent on thoughtfulness and spiritual potential than on brute physical strength.

Some critics of contemporary Buddhist feminism claim that dissatisfaction with conventional Buddhist gender norms was unknown in traditional times and is only a perversion due to modern Western feminists. Indeed, Asian women seeking full monastic ordination, for example, sometimes preface their requests with the phrase, “We’re not feminists. We just want to practice Buddhism more fully.” The label “feminist” is indeed modern, but not Buddhist criticisms of Buddhist conventions

regarding gender. From the beginnings of Buddhism, texts are full of critiques of Buddhist male dominance. One could write a long article, perhaps even a book, detailing these traditional contestations of Buddhist male dominance. But they are either unknown to most Buddhists, or they simply have not noticed that had the label “feminist” been available in earlier centuries, these texts would have been labeled “feminist.” “Feminism” is by no means a new perspective in Buddhism.

ENLIGHTENED MIND BEYOND GENDER

As already noted, when confronted with Buddhist institutional sexism and male dominance, many teachers respond by stating that enlightened mind is beyond gender, as if that truth, by itself, made institutional sexism irrelevant. Clearly, Buddhism does teach, quite forcefully, that gender is ultimately nonexistent or irrelevant. Nevertheless, institutional sexism continues to limit and affect women (and men in different and lesser ways).

What does it mean to say that enlightened mind is beyond gender? Would we still be able to rely on our familiar gender roles, stereotypes, and proclivities? Buddhists are very familiar with teachings on egolessness, which are central to the project of realization. These teachings are considered to be among the most difficult of all Buddhist teachings, not only to understand but also to bring into one's everyday life. At the more abstract level, these teachings proclaim that there is no permanent, unchanging personal soul or self, that nothing has essence, including human beings. At a more practical level, these teachings mean that all the familiar identities we rely upon are shift and unreliable. They constantly change and fall apart. Thus, clinging to them, which we are prone to do, intensifies suffering.

Buddhists understand, or at least try to understand, and experience the ephemeral, fleeting nature of all identities. Nevertheless, they have rarely drawn the obvious conclusion that these teachings also apply to gender identities. They deeply resist practical teachings on what it would mean to rely less on gender identity, such as making Buddhist institutions gender-neutral and gender-free. Sometimes, given widespread resistance to Buddhist feminist insights and suggestions, I quip that, though Buddhists believe deeply in egolessness, they act and speak as if egolessness is, nevertheless, gendered—a rather nonsensical proposition. Instead, I argue that clinging to gender is one of the last barriers to enlightenment, and that clinging to gender identity and conventional gender norms does, indeed, subvert enlightenment.⁶ We really cannot cling to our notions of what it means to be male or female, or to the privileges and liabilities that go with gender identity, and still expect to make much progress spiritually.

The Buddha himself said as much. In a passage I have never seen quoted in any discussions of Buddhism and gender, the Buddha says quite clearly that both men and women must give up clinging to their conventional gender identities. Though the passages in question could narrowly be interpreted as referring only to giving up sexual intercourse, I believe that they bear a wider interpretation as well. Exactly the same wording is used for both women and men. To avoid repetition, I will quote only

the relevant passages as directed to men. Remember that women are given exactly the same advice, word for word.

A man, bhikkhus, attends internally to his masculine faculty, his masculine comportment, his masculine appearance, his masculine aspect, his masculine desire, his masculine voice, his masculine ornamentation. He becomes excited by these and takes delight in them. . . . It is in this way that a man does not transcend his masculinity.

A man, bhikkhus, does not attend internally to his masculine faculty . . . his masculine ornamentation. He does not become excited by these nor take delight in them. . . . It is in this way that a man transcends his masculinity.⁷

Another translator translates the title of this chapter “Bondage,” which I think quite clearly indicates what is at stake in clinging to gender norms and privileges.⁸ **Those who do not transcend their gender roles are in bondage to them.**

In the project of seeking freedom from the prison of gender roles, a great deal more attention has been paid to what it means and involves for women than what it would involve for men. Women, who now are able to serve in combat roles in the military, have taken on one of last places once thought to be a monopoly for men. Women are still underrepresented and underpaid in many cases, but we have pried our way into virtually every occupation known to men. **What have men done that is the equivalent? It is difficult to avoid the impression that women have gone much further in breaking out of the prison of gender roles than have men. It is also difficult to avoid the impression that men are really afraid of being associated with tasks and behaviors strongly associated with women—much more than women are afraid to take on male tasks and behaviors.**

Nevertheless, much of the discourse on gender is still about what women would have to do to gain true equality and full representation in the broad range of important human activities. **One rarely hears discussions of how men are remiss in not stepping out of their conventional gender roles or of what they could do to improve human flourishing.** So, in keeping with the Buddha’s advice that both men and women, not just women, need to transcend their conventional gender norms and stereotypes, in the remainder of this paper, **I will turn the tables by discussing some of the ways that men cling to masculinity and seem uninterested in freeing themselves from the prison of gender roles. I will focus on only a few ways in which men cling to masculinity, beginning with a way that is perhaps not so serious and moving on to ways that have much more serious implications.**

To begin on a somewhat light note, I love to point out that men, at least in Western societies, are **deathly afraid of skirts—that, is for them, not for women. This is despite the facts that men wear skirts in many cultures and that important religious authorities, even in Western cultures, often wear skirts.** As a simple demonstration of the fact that women have freed themselves more from the prison of gender roles than have men, I point out that women now freely wear either pants or skirts, depending on which is more appropriate for the climate and the activity in question, though I am old enough to remember my mother longing to be able to wear pants to church.

Men resist quite forcibly any suggestion that they might wear skirts. In my sangha, we have five *lopöns*, or senior teachers, one of whom is a man. Our teacher wants us to have robes to designate our office, and she has been told by other Tibetan teachers that we need to be in robes so that they ascertain at a glance that we have special duties. The problem? Tibetan robes for both men and women involve wearing a skirt, and the men have resisted fiercely. I regularly mention to them their bondage to the male gender role in the form of their fear of skirts. One of them has repeatedly said to me, "You'll never get us to give up our trousers!" The last time he made that declaration, I replied, "If you can't give up your pants, how will you ever give up your ego?" He conceded that I had a point. Aside from the fact that skirts are more practical and comfortable in hot weather and for the cross-legged sitting we do for hours on end, what really concerns me is the fear and loathing that the suggestion these men might do something "feminine" brings up in these men. I have also seen men become quite angry and defensive when their inflexibility regarding trousers and skirts is pointed out to them.

Moving on to a point that is much graver—it seems that men want to father children, or at least to impregnate women, but often they don't want to take care of those children, either physically or financially, but especially physically. Remember that one of women's "five woes" is being expected to take care of men and children. Almost universally, men are excused from serious childcare of young children at the time when they are messiest and most demanding but completely incapable of adult interaction. In more traditional situations of extended and joint families, women could cooperate in childcare, but in an isolated nuclear family, it's usually up to women to cope somehow, either by giving up or curtailing their careers or cobbling together childcare arrangements. The notion that men would take equal turns at childcare, especially of very young children, and also curtail their careers to do so is almost unheard of. Even in situations in which men can get paternal leave, they rarely take it, and those who do are sometimes pitied and ridiculed—or evaluated as not sufficiently serious about their careers. The situation seems to be similar to that regarding skirts. Men are afraid to take on something traditionally associated with women. Meanwhile, women are dying in combat—a quintessentially male role. Where is male flexibility to match female flexibility when it comes to not being chained to traditional gender roles?

Or perhaps men's unwillingness to take on things quintessentially associated with women—skirts and babies—forcefully demonstrates the depths of sexism and misogyny we still endure. Being a woman is so despised that men just can't bring themselves to do things that are so much associated with women. After all, both Buddhist and Christian texts are full of misogynist statements that most people would not utter out loud today. But do they still infect our minds and hearts?

One of the most irritating aspects of sexism, especially for women, is its androcentrism. This aspect of sexism also seriously skews our knowledge of the world in which we live. Androcentrism was identified early in the second wave of feminism as one of the key problems with scholarship on religion and society. It is defined as the tendency to regard men as the normal and normative human beings so that the

male norm and the human norm become the same thing. As Simone de Beauvoir wrote so long ago, "the fact of being a man is no peculiarity. A man is in the right in being a man: it is the woman who is in the wrong."⁹ Men are also regarded as the interesting and important human beings, so that a discipline such as religious studies could get by without studying women's religious lives at all, even though women are excluded from many of men's religious activities. This cavalier dismissal of women's religious lives as trivial, unimportant, uninteresting, or even nonexistent—not worth studying—was completely infuriating to those of us who founded the discipline of women's studies in religion.

One could give countless examples of androcentrism, but I shall give only two. The difficulties women experience in coping with childcare issues is actually a vivid example of androcentrism—what works for men who have someone to take care of domestic responsibilities for them is made the standard for all. In the culture at large, there is absolutely no priority at all for widespread childcare arrangements that would equalize what parenthood means for both women and men.

The second example comes from a student in a women and religion class many years ago. I was asking students for examples of androcentrism they had experienced. A student narrated going to the emergency room with severe abdominal cramps. After X-rays and exams, the doctor said to her, "It's so hard to diagnose women with abdominal issues. They have all that extra stuff in there." For purposes of consciousness raising through role reversal, imagine saying to a man, "It's so hard to diagnose men with lower body issues. They have all that extra stuff flapping around down there." If you men resent that comment, that is what it feels like to be the objectified other sex. Imagine how much we have disliked being "the second sex" for all these millennia. Or as Dorothy Sayers put it in the title of one of her short books, it gets tiresome being the "human-not-quite-human." We're still fighting to get rid of generic masculine language and solely male images of deity, those most obvious and disempowering examples of androcentric thinking!

Finally, in untrained individuals, aggression, evaluated by Buddhism as one of the "three poisons" that drive unsatisfactory cyclic existence, is certainly something to which all human beings, both women and men, are subject. Aggression is evaluated very negatively in Buddhist psychology. It has no redeeming side effects or justification—ever. It causes untold harm both to those who initiate aggressive encounters and those who are the recipients.

Nevertheless, it is hard to deny a link between males and violence, at least in Western cultures. I'm at a loss to know whether the link involves a male love affair with violence or a cultural love affair with male violence. Especially at certain life stages, the conventional male gender role glorifies and condones violence and aggression. In many conventional social groups, the most belligerent males are the most admired rather than the least admired. If men are rewarded for belligerence and aggression more than they are for gentleness and cooperation, it is not surprising that many men opt for aggression over more socially helpful behavior. This tendency has sometimes been labeled "testosterone poisoning," a term that could be offensive to men but names a real social problem—the level of male violence prevalent in our culture

and the way in which that violence is condoned or dismissed, rather than criticized. Surprisingly, one can find many pages of entries on “testosterone poisoning” if one does an Internet search for the term. The real problem, however, is that our culture values and condones aggression, which encourages men’s tendencies toward violence. It is difficult to imagine how a society could be more pro-violence when we consider its sports, video games, movies, and other entertainment. Not enough men and not enough religious leaders speak forcefully against this aspect of the conventional male gender role.

I am not claiming that men are inherently violent or more violent than women. Such a claim would not accord with Buddhist thought, which does not find the notion of essences credible. What I am saying is that without sufficient spiritual training, and living at the level of conventional culture and conventional gender norms, men easily become aggressive and violent in ways that are counterproductive and unhelpful. And I am also saying that there is far too much condoning and encouragement of that aggression, and not nearly enough criticism of the endemic violence that pervades our culture at so many levels—nor enough criticism and retraining directly targeting aggressive men. This is one aspect of the conventional male gender role that men really need to renounce.

All this adds up to the conclusion that men have not seriously taken on the project of freeing themselves from the prison of gender roles. Instead, it is difficult to avoid the impression that men think they are just normal human beings beyond gender, that gender is something that applies to women but not to them. When the topic of gender is brought up, they often subtly communicate the stance: “Gender? That’s not about me. I’m a normal human being!” That leaves women doing all the work of clarifying what gender is and how it applies, which leaves us, as usual, with a double shift. We do all the “nongendered” thinking and scholarship that men also do, but we then also do the thinking about gender. But the work we do on gender then disqualifies us from being considered among the top tier of scholars because men don’t take seriously the work we’ve done on gender and dismiss it. One of my colleagues was denied tenure because, as the men who evaluated her for tenure put it, “all she ever studies and teaches about is women” (and Hinduism). But being a male, whatever that means in any given cultural context, is not the normal and normative way of being in the world; it is a male way of being in the world. When are men going to get that?

CONCLUSION

Some of the most succinct and cogent advice ever given on how to develop enlightened mind is from Dogen, the great twelfth-century Japanese teacher, who said, “To study the way of enlightenment is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self.”¹⁰ According to him, and to most Buddhist teachers, forgetting the self and realizing egoless enlightenment does not just happen. Instead, one must first study the self to be able to eventually forget that self. The sequence is studying the self and then forgetting it, not the reverse.

Yet, regarding gender, Buddhist teachers often reverse the sequence of studying the self in order to be able to forget it eventually. When asked about Buddhist male dominance they simply trot out the slogan that enlightened mind is beyond gender, neither male nor female, as if that slogan, by itself, undid all the suffering caused by Buddhist male dominance. But what about first studying the extent to which the self, which needs to be forgotten if enlightenment is to be attained, is a *gendered* self? It is incomprehensible that so much sophisticated Buddhist thought has been devoted to studying the self so that it could eventually be forgotten but that Buddhists have forgotten to study how much the *samsaric* self is caught up in fulfilling and perpetuating the prison of gender roles. Even more critical is the question of whether it is even possible to truly forget the self if one ignores its gendered aspects.

The enlightened mind beyond gender, neither male nor female, truly does not dwell in the prison of gender roles. However, just as one must first study the self in order to be able eventually to forget that self, so one can discern the enlightened mind beyond gender only by first studying how much the prison of gender roles, which fosters and nurtures the gendered self, subverts enlightenment itself. "To study the way of enlightenment is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self." To study the enlightened mind beyond gender, neither male nor female, is to study the gendered self caught in the prison of gender roles. To study the prison of gender roles is to forget the prison of gender roles. But the sequence must be to study that gendered self in order to be able to forget or transcend it. Denying or ignoring the prison of gender roles is very different from studying it, but that is what happens when the answer to objections about Buddhist male dominance is to jump immediately to the truism that enlightened mind is beyond gender. People cannot get there without studying the mind imprisoned in gender roles any more than one can forget the self without first studying it.

NOTES

1. One list of the five stations includes having been the Hindu gods Brahma and Indra, having been a great king, having been an emperor, and having been an irreversible bodhisattva. This list is from the *Lotus Sutra*. Gene Reeves, trans., *The Lotus Sutra* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2008), pp. 252–253.

2. Many Buddhists do not approve of abortion, but it is possible to construct a cogent Buddhist pro-choice position. See Rita M. Gross, "A Buddhist Perspective on Abortion," in *American Buddhism as a Way of Life*, ed. Gary Storchhoff and John Whalen-Bridge (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), pp. 83–100.

3. Rita M. Gross, "Toward a Buddhist Ecological Vision," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65, no. 2 (1997): 333–353; Rita M. Gross, "Buddhist Resources for Issues Concerning Population and Consumption in Relation with the Environment," in *Population Consumption, and the Environment: Religious and Secular Responses*, ed. Harold Coward (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 155–172; Rita M. Gross, "Buddhism and Ecofeminism: An Unexplored Question," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 24, no. 2 (2011): 17–32; Rita M. Gross and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Religious Feminism and the Future of the Planet: A Buddhist-Christian-Feminist Conversation* (New York: Continuum, 2001).

4. This information is from an unpublished paper by Allison Goodwin presented at the

thirteenth Sakyadhita Conference on Women and Buddhism, held at Vaishali India, in January 2013.

5. Buddhists regard birth/rebirth in a human body as extremely fortunate and rare. It is rare when one considers all the other life forms found on our planet and in other world systems, which were a common feature of traditional Indian cosmologies. It is fortunate because the human body is considered the basis for enlightenment, and the human realm is the psychological state most conducive to enlightenment. A human body and mind, in and of themselves, provide everything necessary for enlightenment. No intervention from an outside agent is required or even possible.

6. Rita M. Gross, "How Clinging to Gender Subverts Enlightenment," *Enquiring Mind* 27, no. 1 (2010): 18–19, 32.

7. *Anguttara Nikaya*, VII.51, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012), pp. 1139–1141.

8. Thanisaaro Bhikkhu, trans., *A Handful of Leaves, Volume Three: An Anthology from the Anguttara Nikaya* (n.p.: Metta Forest Monastery, 2003), pp. 223–224.

9. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Bantam Books, 1961), p. xv (originally published in French in 1949).

10. Kazuaki Tanahashi and Peter Levitt, *The Essential Dogen: Writings of the Great Zen Master* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2013), p. 53.