

HOW CLINGING TO GENDER IDENTITY SUBVERTS ENLIGHTENMENT

by Rita M. Gross

All forms of Buddhism adhere to teachings of egolessness, asserting that there is no permanent abiding self beneath the flux of experience, despite our deep-seated emotional reaction that there must be such a thing because it feels so real. Buddhist teachings also claim that much of our suffering is caused by our grasping to that non-existent, but very deceptive self. Enlightenment, peace, unbinding—whatever words one uses to convey the whole point of Buddhist view and practice—require that one lay down the burden of constantly trying to constitute a self, an enduring and reliable identity, out of the kaleidoscope of our experience. Thus, it seems that the Buddha intended us to take this business of egolessness with utmost seriousness.



One should wonder, then, why Buddhists have been so shy about questioning the centrality we attribute to gender in our everyday lives and so oblivious to the overbearing importance gender plays in Buddhist institutional life. No other element of experience has such a stranglehold on our immediate reactions to people we meet, thus conditioning how we view them and making it impossible for us to simply encounter them freshly, free of preconceptions and prejudice. Such everyday reactivity might not be completely devastating, had it not been elevated into the supreme organizing principle of traditional Buddhist institutional life. Not only do Buddhist institutions such as educational centers, meditation centers, and monastic orders traditionally practice sexual segregation; they also practice gender hierarchy, with the result that men's practice and education has always been much better supported economically and emotionally than have women's practice and education. No wonder the view that female rebirth is unfortunate compared to male rebirth grew ever stronger, and in many parts of the Buddhist world, eventual rebirth as a male was presented as the only viable solution to the misfortunes of female rebirth.

The fact that many North American Buddhists are unaware of these traditional attitudes and practices does nothing to cancel these facts about traditional Buddhism or make them irrelevant. Even if that were the case, Western Buddhists have a moral obligation to be aware of the devastation this attribution of relevance or reality to gender has wrought in Buddhist life historically and the ways in which it still limits Buddhists in many parts of the world. Furthermore, looking beneath the surface of this superficial equality reveals that sexual stereotypes and fixed notions about gender are alive and well here also.

Buddhists, at least reasonably well educated Buddhists, all affirm egolessness and claim to believe that it accurately describes how things are, even if they don't really understand egolessness and can't explain it. Yet most of them also expect men and women to be different and to have different life plans and expectations. They seem untroubled by the fact that, even in North America, most of the best known and most popular teachers are men. They are uninterested in and even hostile to Buddhist feminist reforms such as

lineage chants that include female ancestors, gender-inclusive and gender-neutral liturgies, or specific attention to female role models. In other words, their allegiance to teachings on egolessness has had no impact on their reliance on conventional, everyday gender norms and stereotypes.

For years, I have used a slogan to summarize this situation. *Though there is no permanent abiding self/ego, nevertheless gender is real.* Put even more succinctly, egolessness is gendered - a statement that makes no sense, but a statement that captures the absurdity of clinging to rigid and fixed gender norms while also affirming egolessness. It seems to me that only one element of this motto can actually be adhered to because its two elements are mutually exclusive. Which is more important to us? Egolessness and enlightenment or the security of conventional notions about gender?

The tragedy is that Buddhists have spent a great deal of time and energy deconstructing ego with many sophisticated teachings. One would think that in working so hard to deconstruct ego, Buddhists would have noticed how central a component of ego gender is. Instead, they have spent a comparable amount of time and energy making and enforcing rules about gender, especially for monastics, and have also acquiesced without comment to the gender norms of the surrounding cultures. But they have usually not put these two enterprises together. They have not questioned why rules and norms about gender should be so important if nothing about the phenomenal self truly exists. Instead, the most commonly invoked statement about gender is the slogan that enlightened mind is neither male nor female, as if that truism by itself undid all the pain and injustice caused by gender norms and stereotypes. Comfortable, even smug in their assurance that gender is ultimately unreal, many Buddhists are then *very* comfortable insisting that everyone conform to conventional gender norms and criticizing those who defy them.

To ensure that enlightenment is not subverted by clinging to gender, we need to bring these two sets of discourse together to analyze their relevance to each other. In the first instance, what is needed is not citation of the absolute - that enlightened mind is beyond gender - but much more discussion at the relative level, many more critical analyses of the relevance and utility of conventional gender norms and practices. For though enlightened mind is beyond male and female, unenlightened minds are decidedly not beyond concern with male and female. I have found in my many years of talking and writing about Buddhism and gender that Buddhists really dislike talking and thinking about gender at this level, perhaps because, apart from its uplifted slogan that enlightened mind is beyond gender, Buddhism's actual record on the practicalities of gender is quite depressing. Nevertheless, many Buddhists will do almost anything to avoid discussion on the practicalities of gender, even shaming and ridiculing those who want to have the discussion.

The basic problem with conventional approaches to gender is that the immediate, often unavoidable, perception that someone is either a man or a woman instantaneously brings with it a whole host of assumptions, expectations, and restrictions. There is obviously no problem with the immediate perception. Gender designations as conventional, agreed-upon labels are harmless and somewhat useful. The problem lies with all the baggage that

is imposed on the perception by longstanding training in conventional gender stereotypes. For example, thinking about my own experience, I know that I have a female body and in my full-figured case, that is quite obvious to others as well. But that really doesn't give people much reliable information about me and no information that conforms me to the stereotypical female gender role. It does not mean that I must bear children, or even that I can. It does not mean that I necessarily have a gentle, non-aggressive demeanor, as opposed to a violent or nasty temperament. It does not even guarantee my primary sexual orientation, which has been guessed wrong almost as often as it has been guessed right by observers, both women and men. My female sex is not a reliable guide to my interests and concerns. I care little for many of the things that are supposed to interest women, but I also am interested in some things that are generally thought to be of more interest to women than to men. In short, though my sex may be the first fact about me that registers, it tells people relatively little about me. Nevertheless, though my female body doesn't translate into anything essential about me, a great deal has been projected onto it by society, by religions, and by individuals who think that the shape of my body reveals something intrinsically existing, something on which it is valid to pin all sorts of meanings and limitations.

Thus, conventional gender norms and stereotypes are essentially useless for determining what any individual is really about. But analysis of gender at the relative level must also discuss the tremendous pain caused by conventional gender norms, a topic that should be of concern to Buddhists who claim that dharma practitioners should attempt to alleviate suffering. In a traditional culture, even a Buddhist culture, I could have been forced into the female gender role in spite of my own capabilities and inner direction. It is devastating to think of how many children, both boys and girls, have been forced into lifestyles to which they were unsuited by conventional gender expectations.

Some parts of my analysis of how clinging to gender subverts enlightenment actually have long been recognized by Buddhists. The easily misunderstood traditional teaching that female rebirth is less fortunate than male rebirth is precisely about the pain of being female in a male-dominated system, a point that is clearly recognized in traditional lists of the woes of female rebirth. In addition to what are assessed as biological liabilities, those lists always include the pain of gender hierarchy and male dominance. This liability has been especially devastating for female monastics who have long faced reduced economic support, inferior training, and, in some parts of the Buddhist world, extinction of their ordination lineages because traditional Buddhist monastic rules are extreme in the way they favor monks over nuns. In some parts of the Buddhist world in contemporary times, nuns have largely overcome their inferior status, but in other parts of the Buddhist world, monks (and also some laypeople) are trying very hard to keep women from gaining full ordination as monastics. It is hard to understand how otherwise intelligent and compassionate men/monks cannot figure out the legalisms required to initiate or reinstate nuns' ordination lineages, given that if their own ordination lineages were at stake, they would solve the problem in a heartbeat! To justify their unwillingness to ordain women, they argue that deep practice and spiritual attainment are not dependent on status. Therefore, women could attain realization despite their inferior position in the Buddhist world. That argument is correct, of course, though men never apply that logic

to themselves but only to women. There are profound Buddhist teachings on how useful obstacles can be in the long run, if they don't destroy one first. But nothing in Buddhist thought suggests that one should deliberately place obstacles in peoples' paths and there is no doubt that throughout history the nuns' lower status and lack of full ordination has been a great obstacle to their attainments and their very survival. Their low status resulting in lack of support for nuns clearly can subvert women's enlightenment. One must also wonder about the spiritual well-being of those who continue to insist that nothing can be done about traditional gender hierarchy. It does seem that ego-grasping is quite alive and well in such a mindset.

So much for ego-grasping and gender as they pertain to the more mundane aspects of Buddhist institutions, lifestyles, and everyday life. What about some of the more profound Buddhist analytical and meditational techniques? The various deconstructive exercises of Buddhism were all designed to challenge students to try to find the insubstantial ego that they took for granted, and not finding that self, discover peace and freedom. In the famous Mahamudra investigations as well, one explores whether mind can be found in any specific attribute, such as shape or color. In the Pali suttas, when the Buddha is asked about any specific element being isolated and analyzed, he often replies, "Recognize that this is not yours, not you. Don't identify with it."

I suggest that, while I have never heard a teacher apply these techniques to deconstructing gender, they could easily be applied to that task, significantly strengthening the deconstruction of ego in the process. Such analyses have the added virtue that gender would be deconstructed on genuinely Buddhist grounds, not just through methods familiar to Western secular feminism. Buddhist analyses break down things that are assumed to be truly existing entities by showing that we can't find them, no matter where we look. To demonstrate, let us work with the skandhas, specifically the first skandha of form. According to Buddhist analysis, we think we have or are a truly existing self, but upon examination, that turns out not to be the case because the purported self actually consists of five insubstantial components/skandhas. Looking at the first skandha of form, we see that it, likewise, is not an entity but a composite built of many components. It breaks down into the four great elements, which helps us recognize that having a form does not translate into being a self. Commonly, such analyses also point out that things we often think define the form, such as color or shape, really cannot be found and do not confer truly existing selfhood on the form.

It is curious that traditional analyses using "color" or "shape" to break down our assumption of real selfhood never use the terms "male" or "female" in the same way. This omission allows people to easily believe in egolessness while clinging to conventional gender norms and stereotypes, which are rigid, arbitrary, inaccurate, and cruel. Would it not be just as useful to disclaim selfhood based on having a male or female form, as it is to disclaim selfhood conferred by color or shape? Would it not be useful to contemplate gender as a composite made out of biology, cultural expectations, and habitual patterns, rather than anything that exists truly and substantially, just as it is useful to deconstruct every other thing that seems to be an entity into its component parts?

I suspect that many Buddhists, while willing to do analyses to recognize that form does not confer selfhood might balk at applying the same rigorous analysis to their male or female forms because gender seems so real to them. But doing so intensifies the deconstructive power of the analysis, making egolessness much less a theoretical belief and much more an “in your face” reality. Without that additional step, people can easily do the traditional exercises and genuinely believe in egolessness, but still be quite attached to gender. The effectiveness of such deconstructive analysis can be demonstrated by the reaction of a sweet young man after a day of my teaching on Buddhism and gender. He said, “Without my mustache and genitals, I’d have no idea who I was.” I wanted to shout “Bingo - you’ve got it!” Consistently going to that place of not knowing who one is would go far to attain the peace of egolessness and freedom from the prison of gender roles.

But if we all believe that enlightened mind, the natural state of mind, is beyond gender, why is it important to so rigorously deconstruct gender? When teachers scold students who bring up gender issues by reciting the slogan that enlightenment is beyond gender, or when Buddhists frustrated with feminist critiques of conventional Buddhist gender practices also rely upon this slogan, they are missing an important point. People cannot go to that state of mind beyond gender on the spot anymore than they can just drop self-grasping the first time they hear teachings about egolessness. That transformation takes a great deal of time and effort, and just as training is necessary for people to actually approach egolessness, so training is required to transcend the prison of gender roles. Neither just happens. Additionally, a large percentage of self-grasping is not just ego-grasping. It is grasping at an ego that is deeply conditioned by its residence in a male body or a female body, and for many people the maleness or femaleness of that body takes precedence over its humanity. It is important to grab people where they really live, which for many is not in their form skandha anyway. They live intimately with and identify very closely with their gender assignments. Until those attachments are cut, there will be ego-clinging, no matter how much people may believe in egolessness. Giving absolute answers to questions about the relative is very unskillful in the short run, even if such answers are true in the long run.

But to live in the relative world we *need* our gender reference points, some may protest. A well-ordered society requires appropriate, sex-specific behavior for men and women, they may claim. Even if that argument were true, it cannot be translated into an argument that male dominant gender relationships are good and just. Beyond that, the main problem with current gender arrangements is the rigidity and fixation with which people cling to them - a rigidity and fixation that is incompatible with relaxing into the state of mind beyond gender. To negotiate the relative, gendered world in an ethical and ordered way, we really only need one thing. We need a humane, kind sex ethic, not numerous gender norms and stereotypes telling us how men should be and what women cannot do. The foundations of that sex ethic are already well in place in Buddhism.

If one does not make an ego out of gender, one would still know whether one is a man or a woman, gay, straight, bisexual, transgender - whatever else we may think of. But those

identities need to fit very loosely and be very lightly worn. All sense of privilege or deprivation that has developed around one's gender identity, all rigidity regarding proper roles and behaviors for the various genders, must be cut through. We really do need to stop making an ego out of gender. And that may well be more difficult than learning about skandhas and other traditional Buddhist deconstructive analyses. Gender may well be the last component of our conditioned, composite, impermanent, ever-changing ego to lose its grip on us. That is how clinging to gender subverts enlightenment. Given the dire consequences of clinging to gender, it really is a tragedy that for so long Buddhists have been blind to how this attachment subverts enlightenment and so unwilling to take seriously the analysis that clinging to gender really is an obstacle to resting in the peacefulness and spaciousness of enlightened mind.

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