

Buddhism and Feminism

Toward Their Mutual Transformation

PART I

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FOR MANY YEARS NOW, I have been seriously practicing both Buddhism and feminism. Like other Western Buddhist women, I find each of these practices vital; I also find that each practice enhances and complements the other. In a deep way Buddhism and feminism share many essential insights. Each one also contributes important insights and practices that the other very much needs to discover and utilize. In this essay I want to explore this interface of Buddhism and feminism further. I will focus especially on three topics: 1) the most basic similarities and differences between Buddhism and feminism; 2) how Buddhism supplements and goes beyond feminism; and 3) what Buddhism can learn from feminism.

Buddhism and Feminism: Similarities and Differences

I would like to define “feminism” in a simple and straightforward manner. To me being a feminist simply means that one recognizes and acts on the fact that women are completely within the human realm rather than in some special category unto themselves. As such, all human options, institutions, and pursuits are their birthright, without regard to conventional notions about female or male sex roles, masculinity, femininity, etc. If asked why I call this “feminism” rather than some sort of “humanism,” I would respond that feminism recognizes, whereas humanism does not, that all the institutions in our

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society, as well as subtle and unconscious patterns of our language and thought, conspire to confine women to an extrahuman and usually subhuman category.¹ This happens when sex roles are inculcated, thereby arbitrarily limiting both women's and men's access to the full range of human possibilities; the confinement in the subhuman is completed when, as is the case in most contemporary cultures, the activities assigned to men are evaluated as more valuable, worthwhile, dignified, and important than those assigned to women, and common opinion generally agrees that it is more worthy to be male than to be female.

Thus feminism's double agenda is to open all human possibilities to all humans and to lift the stigma that has been attached to women, women's work, and femaleness in so many cultures. In short, feminism has to do with promoting the essential human dignity of women. I do not at all have in mind some kind of separatism or the idea that men or maleness are defective and the enemy. I consider the emotional tone that goes with that brand of feminism an extremely unfortunate development that hurts the cause of feminism immeasurably.

Defining what I am talking about as "Buddhism" in this paper is

¹ This may seem like a trivial definition of feminism, but it penetrates to the core of the matter. Language, culture, habitual thought patterns, at least in the Western mainstream, have largely been created by males. Part of their psychology is a feeling that women are more "other" than "same," which has resulted in their viewing women as curious and often troubling objects rather than as cohabitants and co-creators of the human world. The classic expression of this insight is Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* (New York: Knopf, 1953). A shorter, more approachable, but equally brilliant statement of this insight are Dorothy Sayer's two essays, "Are Women Human?" and "The Not-Quite Human," anthologized as *Are Women Human?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971). For an excellent psychological explanation of why this pattern of seeing women as "other" and less valuable persists, see Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976). I have consistently used this insight to critique the field of religious studies, especially the history of religions, which is quite myopically caught up in androcentrism. See my articles, "Androcentrism and Androgyny in the Methodology of History of Religions," *Beyond Andocentrism* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977), and "Patterns in Women's Religious Lives," *Unspoken Worlds: Women's Religious Lives in Non-Western Cultures* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980). From the Buddhist point of view, I use the word "realm" deliberately to bring up the concept of the six realms—hell, hungry ghost, animal, human, jealous god, and god—discussed in Trungpa's interpretation of traditional Buddhism, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* (Berkeley: Shambhala, 1973), pp. 138-148. Women, obviously, must be included in the human realm.

much easier. I am not a professional Buddhologist and I am not talking about Buddhism speculatively or comprehensively in this paper. I will mainly confine myself to my experiences as a student of Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, which affiliates me with the Karma Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism. Because of its stress on meditation practice, this lineage calls itself the practicing lineage. It traces itself in unbroken succession of teacher and student to Tilopa, Naropa, Marpa, and Milarepa, heroic eleventh and twelfth century Indian and Tibetan figures studied by most students of comparative religions, even if casually.² I regard myself as their student, in their lineage. However, even within that lineage, I will avoid the historical perspective, discussing only women's involvement in the contemporary North American sangha.

Buddhism and feminism are not usually paired with each other. Most people with active feminist concerns know almost nothing about Buddhism and assume that Buddhism fits into the general patriarchal mold. A few well-known statements, such as the assertion about the relative misfortune of a female birth vis-à-vis a male birth; the vinaya rules placing all nuns lower in the hierarchy than any monk, without regard for seniority of ordination or spiritual attainments; and the infamous comment that the Dharma would decline twice as quickly because women had been permitted to enter the monastic sangha at all,³ quickly bolster such assumptions about the inherently patriarchal

² I remember very clearly reading about them in books on Tibetan Buddhism, read to prepare for the "general comparatives" section of Ph.D. comprehensives. Now I understand why I was so drawn to them. Good biographies of most of them are readily available. See Herbert Guenther, tr., *The Life and Teaching of Naropa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963); Lobsang Lhalungpa, tr., *The Life of Milarepa* (Boulder: Great Eastern, 1982); C. C. Chang, tr., *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*, two volumes (Boulder: Shambhala, 1977); and Nalanda Translation Committee, *The Rain of Wisdom* (Boulder: Shambhala, 1981).

³ The role of women in Asian Buddhism is discussed in several important books and articles. For the early period in Indian Buddhism, see I. B. Horner, *Women under Primitive Buddhism* (London: Routledge, 1930); Nancy Falk, "An Image of Women in Old Buddhist Literature: The Daughters of Mara," *Women and Religion* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1974), pp. 105-112, and "The Case of the Vanishing Nuns: The Fruits of Ambivalence in Ancient Indian Buddhism," *Unspoken Worlds*, pp. 207-224; and Cornelia Dimmit, "Temptress, Housewife, Nun: Women's Role in Early Buddhism," *Anima*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Spring 1975), pp. 53-58. For Mahayana Buddhism, see Diana

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cast and consequent unworkability of Buddhism for women who care about their intrinsic dignity. Furthermore, some Western Buddhist women, who once called themselves feminists, have left self-conscious identification with the feminism behind, claiming that feminism is too ideologically egocentric to be compatible with Buddha-dharma. Sometimes there seems to be little acknowledgement of anything feminist, even among those Buddhists who embody and demand within their own sangha the best insights of feminism.

Nevertheless, especially for one who is deeply involved in both practices, there are basic and important common insights shared by both Buddhism and feminism. I want especially to stress three such similarities.

First, contrary to most of the Western philosophical and theological heritage, both Buddhism and feminism begin with experience, stress experiential understanding enormously, and move from experience to theory, which becomes the expression of experience. Both share the approach that conventional views and dogmas are worthless if experience does not actually bear out theory. In other words, in a conflict between one's experience of one's world and what one has been taught by others about the world, both feminism and Buddhism agree that one cannot deny or repress experience.

Regarding Buddhism, this starting point is so basic that it hardly needs to be demonstrated. It is the reason for the continual emphasis on sitting meditation as the only basis for study and philosophy. The basic point is borne out by countless statements in Buddhist literature from the earliest scriptures to the present.

Feminist theology has its origins in the gut feeling that what we are taught about our religious tradition simply did not mesh with what women experienced.⁴ Therefore, the basic practices in feminist

Y. Paul, *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in Mahayana Tradition* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1979), and *The Buddhist Feminist Ideal: Queen Srimala and the Tathagatagarbha* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1980). For Vajrayana Buddhism, see Reginald A. Ray, "Accomplished Women in Tantric Buddhism of Medieval India and Tibet," *Unspoken Worlds*.

⁴ For an excellent review article on feminist theology to 1977, see Carol P. Christ, "The New Feminist Theology: A Review of the Literature," *Religious Studies Review*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (October 1977), pp. 203-212. The most complete anthology is C. P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds., *WomanSpirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*

theology are to rest with that discontinuity, to explore experience, and to come up with language that conforms with experience, rather than paying lip service to received tradition. This allegiance to experience is also the only viewpoint common to all feminist theologians. Otherwise they range all the way from rather wholesale attempts to maintain ties with the received Judeo-Christian tradition to vigorous and outspoken rejection of all contemporary and recent religions of the past three thousand years on grounds of hopeless patriarchy.

Allegiance to experience before theory leads to a second important similarity between Buddhism and feminism, the will and the courage to go against the grain at any cost, and to hold to insights of truth, no matter how bizarre they seem from a conventional point of view. In its core teachings about the lack of external salvation (non-theism), about the non-existence of an abiding, permanent self (non-ego) and about the pervasiveness and richness of suffering, Buddhism so goes against the expectations of many students of religion that people sometimes question whether Buddhism even is a religion. Those teachings, which certainly are contrary to the teachings of most or all other religious traditions, are not based on spite. Rather they are the articulation of experience without illusion. The centrality of these teachings in Buddhism is so clear that there is no need to prove the point.⁵

(New York: Harper and Row, 1979). Other important survey articles are C. P. Christ, "Women's Studies in Religion," *Bulletin of the Council on the Study of Religion*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (February 1979), and J. Plaskow, "The Feminist Transformation of Theology," *Beyond Androcentrism*. The most complete critique of conventional theology from the standpoint of women's experience is Rosemary R. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983).

⁵ Though they are elementary, core teachings in Buddhism, they are not easy to understand or to teach, as anyone who has ever taught a course in Eastern religions can attest. The best way for a novice to begin to grasp these teachings is to combine reading Western academic textbooks on Buddhism with books written by Buddhists. The best introductory academic book on Buddhism is Richard H. Robinson and Willard L. Johnson, *The Buddhist Religion: A Historical Introduction* (Encino: Dickenson, 1977). Several other excellent books by Buddhists give one an understanding of egolessness and non-theism, as interpreted by the major schools of meditational Buddhism. For Theravadin Buddhism, see Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove, 1974), and Joseph Goldstein, *The Experience of Insight: A Natural Unfolding* (Santa Cruz: Unity Press, 1976). For Vajrayana Buddhism, see C. Trungpa, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* and *The Myth of Freedom and the Way of Meditation* (Boulder: Shambhala, 1978). Out of the plethora of books on Zen Buddhism, Suzuki

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Feminism's similar courage to hold to unconventional and unpopular truths may not be quite so obvious. Many people shield themselves from the outrageous truth of feminism's message by believing that it represents only the emotional upsurge of a group of dingbatty women who can't conform gracefully to their "natural place." But in fact, any feminist's against-the-grain recognition of women's inherent dignity and humanity is bought at a price of tremendous courage and discomfort. It goes against a conspiratorial scheme of socialization and usually costs years of psychic pain and social ostracism before some sense of psychic and social well-being eventuates. General acceptance or approval usually does not occur. Nevertheless, the whole enterprise derives from insight which cannot be contravened, the insight into things as they are, beyond artificial sexual hierarchy. The result is to go against the grain of conventionality by refusing to conform to the habitual pattern of men's interests dominating women's lives, and by rebelling against men's habitually easier, far easier, access to intellectuality, spiritual discipline, and power, which, while they are not the sole values of human existence, are essential and irreplaceable ingredients in basic dignity.

This similar willingness to hold to basic experience rather than conventionality is connected with the third basic similarity between Buddha-dharma and feminism. Both use their courage and adherence to basic experience to explore how the mind operates. In this exercise, Buddha-dharma explores the patterns of ego and the nature of egoless being. It explores the nature of ego-ful, problematic experience and, at least in its Mahayana and Vajrayana versions, also the egoless, non-grasping, basic state of mind. Feminism, on the other hand, explores an aspect of ego—sexual identity and the way in which it determines or prohibits societal or psychic access to various experiences and privileges—in a completely thoroughgoing fashion. Thus, both explore how habitual ego patterns block basic well-being. That sentence conveys my deepest sense of the profound similarity between feminism and Buddhism.

However, in their exploration of ego, Buddhism and feminism also differ significantly. Buddhism explores basic patterns of ego or ter-

Shunryu, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (New York, Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1974) is my favorite.

territoriality, pain and clinging. It also teaches the path to transcending ego and eventually offers some hints to non-egoistic experience. Buddha-dharma is significantly and dramatically more developed in its sense of path and discipline than is feminism. Furthermore, its presentation of egolessness is completely beyond anything feminism, or most other value systems, have yet envisioned.

On the other hand, in its exploration of one of the fundamental habitual patterns of ego—the territoriality and sense of limitation and/or privilege that are part of sexual identity in conventional people—feminism has laid bare a dimension of ego that Buddhism seems not to have noticed. To me this aspect of feminist thought is among its most applicable and relevant contributions. When all the furor about rights and wrongs finally dies away, it will probably be easier to see that the deeper issue brought up by feminism is to insist that we must acknowledge and explore gender-related aspects of ego or identity. The acknowledgement and exploration of gender-based ego patterns show how they arise from societal patterns and pressures, and how critically and massively they can affect one's psychology and one's sense of the environment. In short, only with impetus from feminist thought are we finally looking at an aspect of human experience that heretofore has been dealt with only through stereotypes, restrictions, and ignoring.

This ignoring is stranger for Buddhist than for Western thought, given that the impetus of Buddhist thought throughout its history has been to explore mind. Yet Buddhist tradition seems to wonder very little why its literature contains a strain of misogyny but no corresponding strain of male-hatred. Buddhism rarely asks why its institutions make it far easier for men than women to pursue the spiritual disciplines leading to egolessness. It has not dealt with the contradiction that sometimes masters who were evaluated as advanced in their development still went along with the conventional stereotypes, fears, hostilities, and restrictions concerning women. Being able at last to see these perversions of sexual identity as a dimension of ego, to see them as another trick of grasping and territoriality standing in the way of egolessness, would be a rather auspicious result of the meeting between feminism and Buddhism.

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Feminism from the Perspective of Buddhist Practice

For me, Buddha-dharma has provided something feminism did not and, in my opinion, could not provide at this point. Buddha-dharma simply goes far deeper than feminism in laying bare the basic human situation. However, Buddha-dharma could be extremely useful to feminists and feminism.

In the perspective of Buddha-dharma, the ground for any further development is the practice of basic mindfulness meditation (*samatha-vipashyana*)⁶ and this ground in no way depends on being Buddhist; it only depends on discipline and openness. The sense of dawning egolessness that cannot help but result from mindfulness meditation practice manifests as an ever-increasing gentleness, softness, and openness which has nothing to do with being weak, powerless, or submissive. In fact, if anything, a sense of dignity, strength, and invulnerability, in the positive sense, increases with the increasing gentleness and softness. Thus far, I have especially noticed three specific ways in which this gentling process has implications for feminist theory and practice.

First, I want to discuss suffering and feminist theory, an obvious application of Buddhism's first noble truth to feminism. However, that application did not occur in a mechanistic fashion; rather, it was one of the many surprises that I have experienced in my journey. In retrospect, I suppose this sequence must have been that first I gained some understanding of the first noble truth, the truth that suffering is basic, which understanding brings with it some relaxation from the constant struggle to avoid pain. Then I became dissatisfied with feminism's more superficial discussion of suffering. Feminism's major thesis regarding pain is to assert how bad patriarchy makes us feel, both men and women, and how much it warps our appreciation of our lives. Thus far, feminism's critique is certainly true. But there is something more.

⁶ While the technique (*samatha-vipashyana*) Trungpa's students use is always taught orally and no published written instructions exist, he discusses some aspects of meditation practice in *Myth of Freedom*, pp. 43-59, and in *The Foundations of Mindfulness* (Berkeley, London: Shambhala, 1976), pp. 15-46. For zazen techniques, see Philip Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), pp. 30-41; for *satipatthana* instructions, see J. Goldstein, *The Experience of Insight*.

Feminist theology has never distinguished between avoidable pain caused by patriarchal, sexist values and institutions and the basic pain of being human, nor has it really ever considered the inevitability of suffering, no matter how perfect social arrangements might be. In short, feminism seems to attribute pain to imperfect social arrangements and to imply that when more equitable social arrangements are achieved, pain will disappear. While eradicating patriarchy and the suffering it causes remains an important priority, applicable especially for a Buddhist society, it is now clear to me that such an agenda is naive if it is one's total method for understanding and dealing with suffering.

More important, this incomplete understanding undercuts feminism's effectiveness. Because feminism has no avenue of approach to basic pain, pain completely uncaused by the evil of patriarchy, much feminist theory and practice has a kind of frantic quality. That frantic quality actually compromises feminism's effectiveness and ability to communicate. What Buddhists see very clearly is that so long as one ignores the basic truth of suffering, one also expends a lot of painful energy maintaining that ignorance. That effort to ignore rebounds negatively to the cause of actually communicating and acting effectively with other people, to say nothing of the fact that it increases one's own misery at the same time. Therefore, such an understanding of suffering is extremely useful to feminists in two ways. First, it would offer individual feminists a quality of non-naive peacefulness and understanding that is not otherwise possible. Secondly, one would actually know what the problems are and how to work on them without alienating everyone in the process. This could further the cause of feminism significantly.

These suggestions about the pervasive quality of pain lead directly to the second way in which feminism is softened by Buddha-dharma. In my experience the practice of mindfulness meditation is a more useful and helpful way of experiencing, working with, and transforming anger than any other technique I have encountered. In particular, meditation practice invites one to acknowledge rather than to ignore all facets of one's experience. Then it gradually, slowly allows one to tap into, transform, and use the energy of anger and aggression in more enlightened ways. Since anger is such a basic dimension of feminist experience, I want to explore the experience of anger and the possibilities

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of exhausting anger and then using its energy.

First, one experiences anger as one's consciousness is raised about the degraded ways in which women *have been treated*. Then eventually something else must happen. Anger can either be indulged or exhausted. Those feminists who make a career out of expressing anger obviously indulge it, and by conventional logic they could make a strong case. Don't the oppressed have a right to bitterness and self-righteousness, since they must struggle so much harder for ordinary self-determination and dignity? Especially since there are so many individuals and so many societal stereotypes claiming either that we aren't oppressed or that if we are, that's just "natural" and unproblematic? Everywhere one turns, constant advertisements, news stories, and insensitive language irritate one's consciousness. Isn't it important to keep those feelings going? Isn't the anger righteous and doesn't one have a right to such feelings? Even if one doesn't identify with feminists' anger, I suspect everyone experiences some private emotionalism about which they feel such possessiveness and self-righteousness.

In the choice between either repressing or expressing such emotionalism, much can be said about the healthier ability to experience and perhaps express the emotion. That is why all schools of feminist theology value anger as part of the process of growth.⁷ But practice works to take one beyond both repression and expression to the point where the teachings about being without passion and without aggression begin to make some sense. Then one begins to see how cumbersome and counterproductive all that emotionalism actually can be.

Anger becomes cumbersome in that it is actually quite enervating and painful to experience. The outbursts of anger, or the refined and precise knife-thrusts of analytical anti-sexist rhetoric bring temporary

⁷ Mary Daly expresses anger most bitterly of all feminist theologians. Her three books are both a documentation or demonstration of consciousness raising and the most extensive and expressive eruption of full-blown feminist rage. *The Church and the Second Sex with a New Feminists Post-Christian Introduction* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975) was a pre-feminist, goodwilled and somewhat naive book later retracted by the author, as the new title indicates. *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973) is an extremely valuable and useful book, very fresh and full of discovery. In *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978) the rage has solidified.

relief, but they do not satisfy one for long. Then the cycle starts over again, but the whole process really doesn't produce much sense of basic well-being. This is because, as the practitioner begins to discover, while there is some intelligence in the whole experience, there is also something extra and unnecessary, which actually is the source of the pain. The intelligent part is the discriminating judgment that certain conditions or situations are problematic and need to be changed. The painful part is the egoistic attachment to those insights and emotionality that results from such attachment. What I am suggesting is that without the ego dimension of the whole experience, without the sense of personal attachment to one's insights, clarity and painful attachment to clarity can be separated and the emotional identification with the clarity can be completely dissolved. The result is that one is not so touchy and reactive. There simply is no need to trot out the whole repertoire of emotional responses when one sees what is going on. Instead there is some gentleness and humor, some spaciousness in the intelligence.

That spaciousness brings up the possibility of not having a grudge against the world, which is the transition between recognizing the cumbersomeness of anger and recognizing its counterproductivity. Two points seem to be basic to the idea of not having a grudge against the world. First, if one depends on one's world for a sense of basic well-being, one will be caught up forever in the throes of resentment. Secondly, one has the responsibility to deal with the totality of one's own world without projection and aggression, no matter how uncomfortable that may be. All situations are experienced as learning environments and no resentment, an egoistic reaction, is added to the experience. Of course, watching the fixed reference point of anger dissolve brings its own sense of panic. "Where am I? What is happening to me?" one wonders as familiar emotional territory becomes less habitable. But losing the cumbersomeness of anger also makes anger's counterproductivity more obvious.

Anger-filled reactions begin to seem like a luxury because one knows they have more to do with indulging one's own sense of being injured than with stopping the problematic activities. I am suggesting that not only is wearing out anger through meditation practice more effective for the individual than repressing, expressing or ignoring anger, I am also suggesting that wearing out anger is the basis for the most produc-

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tive way of dealing with one's social environment, especially the sore points, the areas in need of reform. Being touchy and demonstrating one's personal anger only polarizes the situation and hardens the opposition; it rarely achieves any practical results in terms of changing situations or other people's minds. One can easily watch this process of double entrenchment in most confrontations. In contrast, people are so surprised by gentleness that often the results are surprisingly positive. However, the basic point is not that if one is gentle rather than aggressive and angry, suddenly everyone will automatically be won over. Many people are so entrenched that they are oblivious. But interactions based on anger will definitely not be very productive in any case. Gentleness may be more productive; in any case one's own well-being is enhanced more by gentleness than by aggressiveness.

This discussion of anger was a specific application of the third way in which basic mindfulness meditation practice affects feminist theory and practice. In general, regarding all beliefs, the effect of practice is that one becomes less ideological, less tied to rigidly-held fixed beliefs. It is somewhat of a shock, from the typical Western perspective, to discover how problematic ideology is, how aggressive it can be, and how much of a closed, comfortable identity ideology can provide. The aggression of ideology is easily demonstrated by recalling an experience in which one was on the receiving end of someone else's ideology. While one may protest that one is never *that* dogmatic, still usually a hard edge comes through. That hard edge is connected with the way in which ideology is a protective shell preserving one from immediate contact with situations. I think it is obvious how feminism can and has functioned as such an ideology for some of its adherents.

However, it is important to notice an important twist to this relaxation of ideology. As ideology becomes less viable, the result is not some supine acceptance of the status quo as right, proper, and inevitable. That would be equally ideological, a point that I think is missed by both feminists who fear losing the protection of their ideology and by non-feminists who shy away from feminism because they experience it as too ideological. Feminists, I suspect, fear that without a strong ideological commitment to feminism they would be left acquiescing to sexism. On the other hand, critics who notice feminism's hard ideology and point out the non-Dharmic (not conducive to Dharma or truth) quality of such a mind-set tend to focus only on the anger of feminism,

not noticing the intelligence mixed up with the anger. Though such critics may reject the ideological quality, they still have a responsibility to face the issues brought up by feminism. If one simply dismisses the whole issue then one is giving allegiance to the status quo including its obvious inequities. Rather, some middle way between ideology and mindless acquiescence to anything whatever is in order. This non-dualistic, non-fixated allegiance to "neither this nor that" seems to be the hardest aspect of Indian spirituality to teach to Westerners in classrooms and it also seems to be the hardest actually to grasp. But it seems the only way to maneuver between the ideology of the radical and the ideology of the conventional.

In addition to these general observations about the potential effect of practice on feminism, I feel that feminist theology specifically, especially its practicing dimension, the "WomanSpirit" or Wiccan movement could benefit from some input from the perspective of mindfulness meditation practice.⁸ While I find this WomanSpirit movement attractive in many ways, I also find that WomanSpirit movement's greatest problem is a kind of "trippy" quality that results from practicing spiritual disciplines that do not have proper steadiness and grounding potential. This "trippiness" shows up in three ways that are particularly troubling.

The most serious problem concerns the tone of the whole movement and the effect of many of the exercises and contemplations recommended in its manuals. Despite some theoretical insight into all-pervading impermanence, the movement tries to foster a sense of ego enhancement for its adherents. Many of the exercises have the quality

⁸ The name "WomanSpirit" comes from a non-academic periodical, *WomanSpirit*, published quarterly at solstices and equinoxes, a rather indiscriminate journal that published poems, short essays, reports and drawings of varying quality, all revolving around the topic of "feminist spirituality." The Movement is most accessible through several books. The most important book in the WomanSpirit movement is Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance: Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), a beautiful and entrancing work. Another major, very influential book is Z. Budapest, *The Feminist Book of Lights and Shadows* (Venice, California: Luna, 1976). Feminist academic theologians who have been influenced most by this movement are Naomi Goldenberg and Carol P. Christ. Goldenberg devotes a chapter of *Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), pp. 85-114, to this theme. Chapters of the final section of Christ and Plaskow's *WomanSpirit Rising* also advocate this movement.

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of producing an artificially manufactured temporary “high,” with a lot of emphasis on bliss and positive feelings. From the Dharmic point of view, the problem is that while such efforts may provide short-term “success,” they do not resolve our fundamental discontent, and these efforts eventually prove to be quite exhausting and depressing. Mindfulness practice, on the other hand, because it manufactures nothing, leads to basic invulnerable, unproduced insight and strength. The two practices are diametrically opposed in their approaches. They are also eventually diametrically opposite in their effects, though the temporary results of ego-building exercises can be quite dramatic.⁹

Probably connected with this tendency to keep trying to build things up is another tendency that I have already touched on in my discussion of pain. Despite much use of classical death and rebirth symbolism and rituals celebrating the year’s round as a cycle of the god’s birth and death in the life of the goddess, the goddess of the WomanSpirit movement, or perhaps more accurately her followers, do not really seem to understand the uncompromising reality and finality of suffering. There is always a kind of upbeat quality of asserting that life/joy/pleasure win out over death/sadness/suffering, despite their codependent quality. That is an extra, manufactured statement that goes well with ego-enhancing contemplations, but is unnecessary from the point of view of mindfulness meditation practice.

Finally I find one of the WomanSpirit movement’s most prideful points—its lack of central teachers or practices—quite inadequate. Without the sense of competence that goes with the teacher-student relationship in an established lineage of spiritual discipline and teachings, the tendency to shop around, taking what is comfortable for one’s ego and foregoing more austere or “uncomfortable” but necessary disciplines, is greatly increased. “Making it up as one goes along” and relying on one’s own judgment as ultimate authority strike me as shortchanging oneself. Unless one is an absolute genius, there is no way one can go as far on one’s own or with one’s small local group

⁹ A reader familiar with Buddhist teachings will notice that I am discussing the Wiccan/WomanSpirit movement in terms of the three marks that, according to Buddhism, characterize all sentient existence. They are impermanence, suffering, and egolessness. My claim is that though the witches have some insight into impermanence, they do not go on to see suffering and egolessness.

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as one could by working with a great teacher who has been trained by a great teacher for generations, for a millenium, all of them trained in the same techniques in which one is training oneself. The WomanSpirit movement simply cannot provide that sense, which is so helpful, of a tested and settled practice that is liberating.

Thus my own involvement with Buddhist practice has led me to several insights about feminism that surely I would not have otherwise made, insights which strengthen and deepen my feminism. Clearly, however, though my comments might be interesting as theoretical reflections on feminist thought and basic style, I could not be making them without my own meditation practice and I am sceptical of how thoroughly they can be understood apart from such practice itself. However, despite all this applicability of Buddha-dharma to feminism, it is unlikely that many people currently involved in feminist theology or the WomanSpirit movement will become Buddhists, nor is there any reason for them to do so. Basic mindfulness meditation practice does not necessitate giving up or adding on specific rituals and beliefs. Mindfulness meditation practice can be independent of its Buddhist moorings and some groups are actively working to develop formats to teach it in a secular manner and context. Most Buddhists feel that the practice of meditation itself is of value to anyone, without regard to their affiliation or lack of affiliation with any particular religious institution or teachings. I am no exception. If the next development in feminist theology, especially the Wiccan/WomanSpirit movement, were for its practitioners to become seriously committed to basic mindfulness meditation practice, the results would be extraordinary. I would encourage feminists who are at all interested in spirituality and/or meditation to find a sympathetic teacher and to become serious about the practice of mindfulness meditation.

[To be continued]