Why I Am Not a Buddhist Feminist: A Critical Examination of ‘Buddhist Feminism’

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Abstract
Feminist Buddhology is a burgeoning area of study, with many scholar-practitioners examining the interaction between Buddhism and feminist theory. Here I examine the contributions made by Buddhist Feminists and argue that, in general, Feminist Buddhology runs the serious risk of being ‘apologist’. I contrast the discrimination against women evident in Buddhist traditions with the claims of Buddhist Feminists that ‘Buddhism is feminism’ and ‘feminism is Buddhism’. In order to do so I provide a brief history of the position of women in Buddhism, an overview of Feminist Buddhology and lastly the beginnings of an alternate perspective from which we may interweave Buddhism and feminism, without an underlying apologist perspective.

Keywords
Buddhism, Duality, Feminism, Nonduality, Women in Buddhism

For many women Buddhism has provided a spiritual path that is tolerant of other religions,¹ focused on experience and lacks the Father-God imagery of monotheistic religions. Congruently we also see the emergence in academia of Feminist-Buddhology as a new field of study, which largely focuses on the purported positive and fruitful interaction between Buddhism and Feminism. For many women, who are also feminist, the Buddha’s teachings resonate with their political beliefs (such as the focus on experience

¹ For example the recent development of the category ‘JewBu’, to identify a Jewish Buddhist, or a Jewish person interested in Buddhism (Boorstein, 1998).
and lack of a male god). However, we equally find in Buddhism practices and texts which are discriminatory towards women and at worse, misogynist (as I outline). Because of this tension between egalitarian and discriminatory teachings in Buddhism I shall argue that we must be very careful about the extent to which being a ‘Buddhist’ erodes the extent to which we might be ‘Feminist’. Essentially my argument is that Feminist-Buddhologists run the risk of overemphasizing the egalitarian teachings of the Buddha at the expense of adequately addressing the misogyny and discrimination against women that can be found both textually and practically in Buddhist traditions. Furthermore, I suggest and touch on more fruitful ways in which we might bring together Buddhist philosophies, such as nonduality, with feminist beliefs and aspirations.

As a meditator my first impressions of Buddhism were egalitarian. Anyone could meditate, whether young or old, black or white, male or female. My understanding of Buddhism as egalitarian was further entrenched by the emphasis placed on personal experience within Buddhism. At 21 I left Australia to deepen my understanding of meditation and Buddhism in South East Asia. Upon attending my first retreat at a Buddhist monastery in Penang, Malaysia, my sense that being feminist and an aspiring Buddhist was a wonderful interweaving of the political and spiritual was shattered. I began to see firsthand, and later at other monasteries in Thailand and India, that while the Buddha’s teachings are somewhat egalitarian, the lived experience of Buddhist nuns does not always match the largely egalitarian philosophies of Buddhism. The nuns meditated for longer than the monks, slept in smaller quarters than the monks and shared their quarters with visitors such as myself; nuns were unable to give formal teachings to the monks regardless of their experience; the nuns ate poor quality food at tables with non-monastic’s such as myself, while the monks sat on raised platforms receiving donations of exquisite food for their meals. Furthermore, the nuns often took care of the cleaning and general running of the monastery – even at a Tibetan monastery I stayed at in Australia! Unable to understand the discord between what I had learnt prior to these experiences and the lived experience of the nuns who I met and meditated with, I delved into the history of Buddhism and its texts in order to shed some light on why, at surface value, being a Buddhist Feminist might make sense. Upon research and reflection, it became clear to me that I wasn’t a Buddhist-Feminist; indeed I wasn’t Buddhist at all. In this paper I outline this theoretical inquiry to explain ‘Why I am not a Buddhist Feminist’.

Feminist Buddhology is a burgeoning area of study, with many scholar-practitioners examining the interaction between Buddhism and feminist theory. My purpose here is to critically examine the contributions and claims made by Buddhist Feminists and to argue that, in general, Feminist Buddhology runs the serious risk of being ‘apologist’. To provide a context for my claim I will begin by examining traditional images and teachings regarding women in differing Buddhist schools in order to highlight that throughout the history of Buddhism, to the present day, there exists an attitude of ‘ascetic misogyny’. This attitude of ascetic misogyny, seen in negative portrayals of women and

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2 I do not intend to provide an exhaustive account of images of women in Buddhist traditions; rather my intention is to establish that sexist attitudes are evident within Buddhism. I have included examples from a variety of Buddhist schools.
discriminatory regulations regarding women’s ordination (or lack thereof), has not been adequately resolved by Buddhist Feminists. Moreover, the way in which nondual theory figures in Feminist engagements with Buddhism stands in stark contrast to the way in which nondual theory relates to the actual practice of Buddhism. Because of this a thorough examination of ascetic misogyny in Buddhism is neglected. Once the problem of ascetic misogyny and the lack of feminist engagement with this issue are outlined I examine the claim by Buddhist Feminists that ‘Buddhism is feminism’ and ‘feminism is Buddhism’. I focus on the way in which such a claim acts as an inadvertent silencing of female Buddhist practitioners and the gender debate in Buddhism on the whole. In conclusion I point to an alternate perspective from which we may interweave Buddhism and feminism, without an underlying apologist agenda.

The Buddha’s, Life, Teachings and Legacy

I will begin our discussion with a brief outline of the Buddha’s life, a story well known to all Buddhists. Born into a princely life, with all his material needs met, the Buddha longed for something more than his palatial surroundings. Desiring to learn more about the world he ventured beyond the palace walls into the city with his charioteer. Upon leaving his palace he met with what is known as ‘The Four Sights’. The Buddha-to-be, as he was only called the Buddha (‘awakened one’) after his enlightenment, was then known as Siddhartha Gautama. On his outing with his charioteer he encountered an old man, a sick man, a dying man and lastly a spiritual renunciate. Upon seeing that old age, sickness and death come to all regardless of status, the Buddha left his palace to pursue a life not unlike that of the spiritual renunciate he had met outside the palace walls. Leaving his wife and son behind, Siddhartha began his spiritual journey which culminated under the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya.

Bodh Gaya is a place of pilgrimage for many Buddhists, even today hundreds of thousands of Tibetan monks gather there for the Kalachakra, most Buddhist countries have representative monasteries in the town and interestingly there are increasing numbers of westerners visiting and conducting meditation retreats in the western vipassana tradition. This illustrates the global impact Buddhism has had on the lives of millions of people, providing them with a path that fosters wisdom and compassion and a life free from craving and aversion. However, even though Buddhist practices and teachings may alleviate and free us from suffering, Buddhist women, like women within all major religious traditions, have undergone a great deal of hardship in order to be able to access the teachings of the Buddha.

This hardship begins with the archetypal story of Prajapati, the Buddha’s aunt and foster mother. Prajapati longed to be a nun, yet this seemed impossible, given the Buddha’s resistance to giving monastic ordination to women.3 Of course at the time, it was unheard of for women to leave their husband and children, and gender roles and duties were firmly entrenched in the fabric of Indian society. To wholeheartedly accept

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3 This resistance is evident in a statement attributed to the Buddha, as quoted by Wilson (1985:78):
women into the sangha would have created a great deal of social disharmony. Yet Prajapati was neither a mother nor a wife and was determined. Prajapati shaved her head and followed the Buddha and his monks as he journeyed through India giving teachings to interested lay people. It was only due to Ananda, the Buddha’s cousin and personal assistant, that Prajapati and other women became ordained. Ananda’s insistence convinced the Buddha of her and the other women’s sincere desire to become monastics. With much reluctance the Buddha instituted the order of nuns, which has since died out in many countries, which can be contributed to the social context of the Buddha, and also to the additional rules nuns must obey – the *garudharma*.

The Buddha instituted the order of nuns under the condition that they follow the additional rules of the *garudharma*, which ensures a nun’s subservience to monks. These discriminatory rules negatively affected the dana (financial support) nuns received from the laity. Essentially these rules mean that ‘men deserved the richer offerings, the more elaborate building and the greater opportunity to shine in court and public confrontations’ (Falk, 1989: 160). Thus nuns found (and still find) it difficult to obtain the financial support necessary to pursue the path of liberation as taught by the Buddha. Furthermore any feminist may begin to wonder how Buddhist Feminists might

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To go forth under the rule of the Dharma as announced by me is not suitable for women. There should be no Garudharma ordination or nunhood. And why? If women go forth from the household life, then the rule of the dharma will not be maintained over a long period. It is just as if, O Ananda, there were a family with many women and few men. It is subject to easy attack, specifically, of thieves and robber bands.

It is interesting to note that the situation which the Buddha wishes to avoid (vulnerability to attack) is the same position women were left in when their husbands, sons or fathers became monks.

4 The Garudharma, found in the rules of monastic discipline is as follows:

1. In the presence of monks, O Ananda, women are expected to request ordination to go forth as nuns.
2. In the presence of monks, O Ananda, a nun must seek the teachings and instructions every half month.
3. No nun may spend a rainy season, O Ananda, in a place where monks are resident.
4. After the rainy season a nun must have both orders [monks and nuns] perform the ‘end of rainy season’ ceremony for her with reference to the seeing, hearing, or suspicion [of faults committed by her].
5. It is forbidden that a nun, O Ananda, accuse or warn a monk about transgression in morality, heretical views, conduct or livelihood.
6. A nun, O Ananda, should not scold or be angry with a monk.
7. When a nun violates important rules, O Ananda, penance must be performed every half month.
8. A nun of a hundred years of age shall perform the correct duties to a monk. She shall, with her hands folded in prayerful attitude, rise to greet him and then bow down to him. This will be done with the appropriate words of salutation.(In Wilson, 1985: 85-86).
conclude that ‘the teachings of the Buddha speak for themselves as a model of egalitarianism’ (Hamilton, 1996:104), particularly given that these rules exist to this day.

Even now Buddhist nuns are not accorded the same privileges as their male counterparts. In many Theravada countries (e.g. Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand) the order of nuns has died out and attempts to revive it are often met with great resistance. In these countries many women live as nuns, although as ‘de-facto’ nuns they are not accorded the same status. Prajapati’s (the first nun and the Buddha’s aunt and foster mother) legacy only continues unbroken in China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam (Barnes, 1994:139) and the order of nuns was not transmitted to Tibet (Havenevik: 1989:130). Contemporary attempts to re-establish the order of nuns has met with great resistance in many Buddhist communities. Recently Ajahn Brahm of Bodhinyana Monastery in Perth, Western Australia, presided over the first full ordination of a nun in the Thai Forrest Tradition. His attempt to restore the order of nuns was met with extreme disciplinarian action. He was expelled from membership of the monastic community of Wat Pa Pong in North Eastern Thailand. We do not need to look far back in Buddhist history to see that women are not accorded similar rights to practice Buddhism as their male counterparts.

Yet, the hindrances for women on the Buddhist path have not just been confined to the order of nuns, since Buddhist teachings are imbued with negative images of women, and the Buddha himself can be understood to have an ambivalent attitude towards women, with Buddhist texts revealing both positive and negative statements about women, their nature and ability to attain enlightenment. One such example of a negative portrayal of women is the retelling of the Buddha’s enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, wherein women are understood as sexual temptresses. In order to distract the Buddha from his goal of enlightenment, Mara (the tempter) sent his daughters to dance seductively in front of the Buddha. Even though they were not successful, his daughters are portrayed as the ‘ultimate in feminine seduction, they are the personification of lust, aversion and craving’ (Paul, 1985: 52). Clearly in the story of the Buddha’s enlightenment women are associated with the non-spiritual or the worldly, an obstacle to be overcome and left behind before the Buddha’s spiritual journey can begin. Furthermore, although the Buddha agrees to the ordination of the order of nuns, he also expresses his concern that with women’s ‘going forth’ as nuns the rule of the Dharma (his teachings) will not endure (See Wilson, 1985: 78). This is yet another example of the ambivalence towards women we might find in Buddhism.

Further examples of negative portrayals of women in Buddhism are evident in both Mahayana and Theravada literature. In both traditions hell is described as populated by

5 More recently one Thai nun, Dhammananda Bhikunni, has become a fully ordained Theravadan nun. She travelled to Sri Lanka to become ordained. Similarly in 2009 Buddhist monk Ajahn Brahm ordained Theravadan nuns in Perth, Australia, which led to his excommunication from his own lineage at Wat Pah Pong (Thailand).

6 A representative of Wat Pah Pong monastery, Phra Khru Opaswuthikon stated:

If action is not taken, the council fears that more women could be ordained in the West. Sooner or later, we’ll see female monks everywhere.
elderly, repulsive women, a visualization monks are encouraged to undertake to deepen their understanding the impermanence of the body and beauty. Other negative portrayals of women include the following:

“Pray, lord, what is the reason, what is the cause why women folk neither sit in a court [of justice], nor embark on business, nor reach the essence of [any] deed?” The Buddha replied “Women are uncontrolled Ananda. Womenfolk are envious, Ananda. Women folk are greedy, Ananda. Women folk are weak in wisdom, Ananda. That is the reason, that is the cause why women folk do not sit in a court of justice, do not embark on business, do not reach the essence of the deed” (Anguttara Nikaya II: 82-83).

Fools, lust for women like dogs in heat. They do not know abstinence. They are also like flies who see vomited food. Like a herd of hogs, they greedily seek manure. Women can ruin the precepts of purity. They can also ignore honor and virtue. Causing one to go to hell, they prevent rebirth in heaven. Why should the wise delight in them? (Sponberg, 1992: 19).

My purpose in this paper is not to focus on the many examples in which women are associated with the worldly and non-spiritual in Buddhist literature, nor do I wish to further list examples of negative textual portrayals of women in Buddhist texts. Yet even from these few examples we can recognize that there exists an attitude of ascetic misogyny7 in the Buddhist tradition. Many contemporary commentators on Buddhism and women wish to ‘explain away’ incidents of ascetic misogyny in Buddhism. Hamilton (1996: 94) cites the most often used ‘excuse’ for such misogyny and sexism in Buddhism by attributing such attitudes not to the Buddha, but to his surrounding culture. This explanation overlooks the strength of ascetic misogyny as a tool for ensuring the survival of a Buddhist monastic order, and that some of the quotes are said to be the word of the Buddha, himself. Since monks often left their families to take monastic vows the life of the sangha (the Buddhist community) was endangered by the possibility that monks would return to a life of sensual comfort and worldly desires. The portrayal of women as carnal temptresses warned monks off women by creating a sense that women have an intoxicating power over men, which could inflict serious damage on a monk’s spiritual practice.

Nonetheless, many Buddhist women, even the first fully ordained Thai Buddhist nun, Dhammadina Bhikkuni,8 believe that the Buddha’s teachings are egalitarian given that he affirms the possibility of the potential for both men and women to become enlightened. However, in Theravadan Buddhism, there are few, if any, female arhants (‘enlightened beings’) in the Buddhist canon.9 Such a lack of representation of enlightened female arhants seems to suggest that either women can’t become enlightened, or

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7 One of the four attitudes towards women in Buddhism, recognized by Alan Sponberg (1992:18).
8 At a public presentation in Thailand Dhammadina Bhikunni explained that “Buddhism came out very quickly to say that both men and women can be enlightened” (http://www.thaivisa.com/forum/index.php?showtopic=66109).
9 Findly writes: ‘the term arhant holds a place of exceptional significance. It marks the completion of the religious quest, the attainment of meditational repose, and the fulfillment of the standard of perfection for all sentient life’ (1999: 57).
that women’s spiritual aptitude is not as great as men’s, given that they do not earn arhant status. Even in Mahayana Buddhist teachings, such as the philosopher Asanga’s ‘Bodhisattvabhumi’ women cannot attain Buddhahood as ‘all women are by nature full of defilement and weak intelligence. And not by one who is full of defilement and of weak intelligence is completely perfected Buddhahood attained’.10 Furthermore, in Amitabha’s Pure Land (a school of Mahayana Buddhism) no one shall have to suffer the unfortunate rebirth into womanhood, in fact the name of woman will not even be heard (Gross, 1993: 65).

As I mentioned above when the order of nuns was instated the Buddha said to his cousin and personal attendant, Ananda:

If Ananda, women had not obtained the going forth from home into homelessness in the dharma and discipline proclaimed by the Truth finder, the Brahma faring, Ananda, would have endured for a thousand years. But since Ananda, women have gone forth … in the dharma and the discipline proclaimed by the Truth finder, now Ananda, the Brahma-faring will endure only five hundred years.

Implicit in this retelling of the Buddha’s words is the worldliness of women and their innate potential to taint the teachings (dharma) and discipline of Buddhism. It is primarily because of women’s presence in the sangha that the Buddha thought the dharma would die out.

**Soteriological Inclusiveness**

Buddhist feminists focus on aspects of Buddhist teachings which affirm the spiritual capabilities of women, without delving into the intricacies of wondering why – if women are as spiritually capable as men – their achievements have not been recorded nor recognized. Rather than thoroughly examine the issue of ascetic misogyny that exists in Buddhism today, Buddhist Feminists highlight the attitude of soteriological inclusiveness (Sponberg, 1992: 9) which exists alongside misogynist texts and teachings. Such an example of soteriological inclusiveness can be seen in the following passage:

“Straight” is the name that road is called, and “Free From Fear” the quarter whither thou art bound

10 As the following quote implies women were encouraged to denounce their gender, and through ‘the thought of enlightenment’ they would become men, thereby avoiding an unfortunate rebirth as a woman and consequently enabling them to walk on the path of bodhisattvahood:

If women can accomplish one thing they will be freed of the female body and become sons. What is this one thing? The profound state of mind which seeks enlightenment. Why? If women awaken to the thought of enlightenment, then they will have the great and good person’s state of mind, a man’s state of mind, a sage’s state of mind … If women awaken to the thought of enlightenment, then they will not be bound to the limitation of a woman’s state of mind. Because they will not be limited, they will forever separate from the female sex and be sons (In Paul, 1985:176).
Thy chariot is the “Silent Runner” named,
With wheels of righteous effort fitted well.
Conscience the leaning board; the drapery
Heedfulness; the driver is the dharma,
I say, and right views, they that run before.
And be it woman, or be it man for whom
Such chariot doth await, by that same car
Into Nirvana’s presence they shall come.

As Sponberg states, this passage affirms an attitude of soteriological inclusiveness (1992: 9) making it clear that theoretically women and men may both attain enlightenment. We can also see the same attitude in Zen Buddhism where some texts describe female teachers giving teaching to men (although the female ‘teachers’ are usually informal teachers and unnamed). Deborah Hopkinson (1986: 45), a Zen Buddhist and editor of Kahawai: Journal of Women and Zen, uses the following story as an example of the positive portrayals of women within Zen Buddhism:

Once a monk went to call on Mi Hu. On the way he met a woman living in a hut. The monk asked, “Do you have any followers?”
She said, “Yes.”
The monks said, “Where are they?”
She said, “The mountains, rivers and the whole earth, the plants and trees are all my followers.”
The monk said, “Are you a nun?”
She said, “What do you see me as?”
The monk said “A lay person.”
She said, “You can’t be a monk!”
The monk said, “You shouldn’t mix up Buddhism.”
She said, “I’m not mixing up Buddhism”. The monk said “Aren’t you mixing up Buddhism in this way?”
She said, “You’re a man, I’m a woman – where has there ever been any mix up?”

This story is also a Zen koan, operating on different levels and potentially understood in a myriad of ways. It can be read as a positive portrayal of a woman teaching a monk by challenging his preconceived views on Buddhism, monks, nuns and lay people. In doing so the woman in the story attempts to free him from the dependence on dualistic categories such as layperson/renunciate, monk/nun, man/woman. Thereby she initiates him into the essential world of emptiness that Hopkins considers to be the heart of Buddhist practice.

**Buddhist Feminism**

As I have mentioned, Buddhist feminists strategically focus on examples of soteriological inclusiveness in order to support their arguments that Buddhism affirms the spiritual capabilities of women. In doing so the lack of female arhants, prominent historical women Buddhist teachers and persisting discrimination against women – both textually and in practice – is ignored. While I do not disagree that positive attitudes towards women can be found in Buddhism (as highlighted by Buddhist
Feminists), these inclusive attitudes exist within sexist institutions that discriminate upon the grounds of gender (see previous discussion of nuns and ordination). These conflicting attitudes of misogyny and soteriological inclusiveness create considerable confusion when we search for a clear picture of the position of women in Buddhism and also further muddy attempts to interweave the insights of both Buddhism and feminism in a critical, well examined and useful way. Although inclusive attitudes towards women may be found in some Buddhist texts, arguably, this is not sufficient reason to conclude that Buddhist and feminist thought may be unproblematically interwoven. Sally King makes this important point:

Articles that discuss, for example, the non-dualistic philosophy of Mahayana Buddhism may leave readers with the impression that women must or should fare well under a system molded by such a philosophy. However, both the knowledge that women generally are second-class citizens within Buddhism and the invisibility or nonexistence of notable women throughout most of Buddhism’s historical and geographical span must surely make us hesitant before reaching any such happy conclusion (King, 1998: 8).

King rightly concludes that focusing solely on Buddhism’s soteriological inclusiveness presumes that sexist images and teachings can be ‘cancelled out’ by positive teachings regarding women’s spiritual capabilities.

Prominent Buddhist Feminist, Rita Gross, argues that Buddhism’s egalitarian teachings outweigh the contrasting attitude of ascetic misogyny. Her work draws upon examples of the (rare) positive images we find of women in Buddhism, Buddhism’s egalitarian philosophies and the focus on personal experience (not unlike feminism). Nonetheless, and as Sally King rightly points out, such positive attitudes exist within sexist institutions. Gross’ observations, while useful to western women seeking to incorporate useful aspects of Buddhist thought and practice into their spiritual lives, does not adequately examine how sexism functions today in Buddhism. Essentially, despite the egalitarian philosophies Gross highlights, we cannot simply explain away sexism and conclude that Buddhism’s negative portrayal of women, treatment of women as second class citizens and questioning of women’s spiritual capabilities are irrelevant factors to consider in any attempt to synthesize both Buddhism and feminism. It is clear that the teachings of Buddhism are not inherently emancipatory. The preceding discussion highlights that sexism is evident at all levels of Buddhist practice – structurally, textually and in practice. How then are we to agree with the claims of Buddhist feminists that ‘Buddhism is feminism, feminism is Buddhism’?

Such a hasty integration of Buddhism and feminism might be understood as naïve or simplistic at best. In order to reach the conclusion that Buddhism is feminism we find an overemphasis on the nondual discourses of Buddhism in which the dharma (Buddhist teachings) are considered neither male nor female. This overemphasis neglects to

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11 Sally King (1988:17) notices this tension when writing about the life of Satomi-San, ‘While both Shinto and Zen present a positive philosophical image of women, both fall short of their promise when we arrive in the institutional realm.’
adequately address that, particularly regarding the rules that govern nuns, we can see that gender dualisms negatively affect the conditions under which women practice Buddhism, throughout the world.

We can now see that even though Buddhist teachings often focus on overcoming dualisms, Buddhism also inadvertently perpetuates these dualisms in the sphere of gender. Personally this was quite a revelation to see in practice. While attending a retreat at a Malaysian Buddhist monastery in Penang and then later at a southern Thailand monastery I experienced firsthand the different rules, living conditions and respect accorded to nuns. While the nuns ate at tables with retreatants such as myself, the monks sat on raised platforms receiving delicious prepared meals from the sangha (the community of lay Buddhists). The monks had larger living quarters in the forest; the nuns either resided with retreatants such as myself or lived in dismal buildings in the central part of the monastery. The nuns also undertook cleaning and chores around the grounds, which the monks did not do. Having been so personally inspired by the nondual teachings of Buddhism, I was surprised to experience the stark reality of gender-based discrimination in Buddhism. These realities for Buddhist women throughout the world are, however, not at the forefront of Buddhist Feminists’ minds when they claim ‘Buddhism is Feminism’. Regardless of the realities Buddhist women face, Buddhist Feminists still primarily focus on the liberating power of nondual teachings, according to which gender is not a barrier to enlightenment.\(^\text{12}\) It is due to over emphasizing the nondual teachings of Buddhism that Gross misleadingly asserts that ‘Buddhism is feminism’. By ignoring the gender dualism at the heart of Buddhism’s negative treatment of women and aggrandizing the Buddha’s nondual teachings, Gross and others inadvertently and unintentionally disregard the experience of many Buddhist women which is otherwise to their claim.

It is only by identifying the consequences of the dichotomizing of male and female in Buddhism and understanding the way in which nondual discourse functions as a subtle silencing force for Buddhist women that we can truly begin to explore the possibility of the interface of Buddhism and feminism. To realize the liberating potential of nondual thought it is necessary to make transparent the relationship between dual and nondual thought in Buddhism. Once this transparency is achieved we can utilize nondual discourses in a way that doesn’t silence women’s resistance or ‘explain away’ sexism.

**Duality**

Dualistic thinking is the heart of sexism. Within dualisms two concepts or terms are considered mutually exclusive, there is no middle ground or alternatives, only one side of the dualism has a positive value and the second, being an absence of the first, is amorphous and includes all which is not the first (Jay, 1981: 106). As

\(^{12}\) Sue Hamilton agrees with Gross on this point. She writes ‘Whichever way Buddhist feminists choose to go about practising their religion, in my view the teachings of the Buddha speak for themselves as a model of egalitarianism’ (Hamilton, 1996: 104).
feminist theologians have discovered dualisms and their inherent dichotomous oppositions have not served women well. The sacred/profane dichotomy evident in many religious traditions positions women, both theologically and in practice, on the side of the profane. Within feminist theology this is far from a revelation, however within feminist Buddhology there is an absence of discussion of the impact of dualistic thinking on female Buddhist practitioners. Instead, a focus on the liberating potential of non-dual discourses belies the damage that has been wreaked through the dichotomizing of male and female, and the subordination of, for example, Buddhist nuns.

An example of women as posited on the side of the profane in Buddhism is the portrayal of women as temptresses. Nowhere is this more explicit than when Mara sends her daughters to tempt the Buddha as he sits under the Bodhi tree in meditation. As I explained earlier, such a portrayal of women relegates women to the socio-temporal horizontal (the sensible) and men to the religious vertical (i.e. transcendence). In Buddhism the socio-temporal and religious dichotomy is more appropriately termed the split between conventional and ultimate. The conventional realm is affected by factors such as time and history whereas the ultimate realm is associated with otherworldliness and spirituality. Stephen Collins puts it this way:

Buddhism uses a distinction between the categories of “ultimate” and “conventional” truth. Ultimate truth refers to those psychological and philosophical analyses contained in the canonical tradition which are held to be universally true: that is, it denotes the form and content of what are considered to be the crucial doctrines of the great intellectual tradition, to be used by the specialist, meditator and scholar. Conventional truth refers both to the general structures and to the particular local content of the various little traditions of Buddhist societies, which are used by the ordinary man (and indeed by the specialist when not dealing with matters of ultimate concern) (Collins, 1982: 19).

An attitude of ascetic misogyny has ensured women’s place on the side of the conventional. Women represent materiality and sexuality in Buddhist teachings. Like all dichotomies, it is rare that the terms in opposition hold equal value. In Buddhism the absolute, or ‘religious vertical’ is aggrandized at the expense of the relative or ‘socio-temporal horizontal’ and this has serious effects for women who practice Buddhism.

Given that this dichotomizing and its effects on Buddhist women are observable it can be asked why change has not been initiated to, at a minimum, ensure women practitioners have the same access to Buddhist teachings and respect as their male counterparts. We can look to nondual discourses in search of the answer to this question. It is my contention that nondual discourses act as a silencing force in the recognition of sexism and discrimination.

13 Neumaier-Dargay, writes, ‘The kind of critique of Christianity exercised by such scholars as Rosemary Radford Ruether or Elisabeth Scussler Fiorenza has still to come in the field of Buddhist studies.’ (1995: 166).
14 Terms used by Keller C (1993) ‘More on Feminism, self sacrifice, and time; or, too many words for emptiness,’ Buddhist Christian Studies, 211-19.
in Buddhism. Paradoxically, these are the same discourses that Buddhist feminists appeal to in the assertion that Buddhist philosophy can be liberating for western women.

The appeal to nondual discourses as an empowering discourse for women is evident in Buddhist feminist Rita Gross’s work on the revalorization of Buddhism: *Buddhism After Patriarchy*. She explains that, ‘nonduality means overcoming the subject-object duality in which an independent object is posited by the perceiving ego. Rather, there is just the continuity and flux of experience without dualistic overlay’ (1993:196). Nonduality can be understood as an ultimate truth, it is unconditioned and not bound by independent selves. From a nondual perspective everything and everyone are interconnected and separation is an illusion. Diametrically opposed to ultimate truth is conventional truth. Conventional truth can be understood as that which is true in the realm of dualistic thought, in which we believe the self to be eternal and separate from all that is around us. However Buddhist feminist, Anne Klein provides a slightly different explanation of non-dualism. She explains, ‘By nondualism I mean, most generally, a relationship that is not irrevocably hierarchical and/or not spatially differentiated between two or more apparently disparate items’ (1985: 81). Yet the term nondualism itself implies separation, as it is ‘non’—implying a difference between dualism and its opposite. Moreover, within Buddhist thought nondualism is aggrandized over and above conventional truth. In this way distinguishing between the dual and nondual displays one of the hallmarks of dichotomous thought — since a hierarchical or disproportionate value is ascribed to one side of the dualism. In this way, conventional truth appears ‘not as true’ as ultimate truth, primarily because the Buddhist practitioner seeks through the practice of meditation to be freed from the constrictions of dualistic, conventional thought in order to experience the non-dual. In fact it is often thought that conventional attachments to money, pleasure, sex and food are hindrances on the path to an experience of the ultimate.

Gender, then, is clearly a conventional truth. Yet, from an ultimate or nondual perspective there is no separation between self and other, the experience or one who has the experience, and there is also no distinction between male and female. Because the nondual is emphasized in Buddhist practice and philosophy it can be difficult to recognize discrimination in the realm of the conventional and to see how this discrimination can affect the possibility of women realizing the liberating truth that the Buddha taught. Because gender is only ‘real’ in a dualistic sense there is a lack of urgency to explore the effects sexism has on Buddhist women. A clear example of this reluctance and disinterest with the conventional is in regards to the re-establishment of the order of nuns in Theravadan Buddhist countries. Attempts by Buddhist nuns (or those who live like nuns without officially being recognized as such) to re-establish the formal lineage of nuns that died out15 have been met with much resistance. It is clear that initiating change for reasons conventional and dualistic in nature is difficult in Buddhism. In a sense, gender is considered to have little impact upon a woman’s spiritual practice, since ultimately, gender is an illusion. Yet in a conventional sense women’s, particularly nuns’, practice is affected by discrimination along the lines of gender. In order to truly embody the Buddha’s nondual teachings, Buddhism and Buddhists need to ensure that the ultimate

15 Perhaps the reason for this can be attributed to societal attitudes towards women and the tendency to ignore the politics of the conventional realm as irrelevant to the Buddha’s teachings.
translates to the conventional, and that there is a movement back and forth. The nondual notion that male and female are illusory concepts must be translated into the conventional realm to ensure that gender is not the basis of discrimination in the conventional world. American Buddhist practitioner Kate O’Neill explains:

    I come to dwell in that refuge of the dharma without respect to race, gender, sexual orientation, ability and so on. The tricky part is there is no place without politics. Human beings have a say about the planet, our lives, and how we interact with one another. This is true both on and off our zafus [meditation cushions] (In Dresser, 1996: 34).

In other words, for change to be initiated along gender lines in Buddhism, what happens during the practice of meditation needs to be understood as deeply related and connected to the world of ordinary affairs in which there are men and women, and gender based discrimination. Furthermore it would be timely for male Buddhists resisting giving equal rights to Buddhist women to consider the way in which their own clinging to gender is further entrenching the dukkha (suffering) that the Buddha taught we can be free from.

**Conclusion**

Nondual thought in the context of Feminist Buddhology is a complex area of inquiry and perhaps a double-edged sword for female Buddhists. Nonduality philosophically frees women from harmful gender stereotypes, yet leaves women unable to address discrimination based on gender. Nonduality, however, may help us to reconceptualize the question which plagues feminist theory – how to define woman. Woman is a necessary starting point for any feminist endeavor yet it has become apparent that we cannot solely define woman by her biology. Nor can we assume that there is even a group that we can call ‘woman’. Yet, the Buddhist conception of selfhood may be useful for feminists as Buddhism presents us with a subject who traverses the ultimate/non-dual and the conventional/dual. In other words, a subject which can both be defined and explained by language and yet is beyond language – thereby unable to be dichotomized or made ‘Other’. Such a conception of selfhood could be of great benefit to post-structuralist feminist inquiries. In such a model, women could be free to define themselves yet to also dwell in that which is undefinable. ‘Woman’ would be meaningful in a conventional sense, yet at the same time we could hold onto this term lightly – realizing that it will never define the totality of who we are. In this way women can participate in the sphere of representational politics using the term ‘woman’ to enable change along gender lines.

By holding the conventional sense of ‘woman’ lightly, women can traverse the sphere of representational politics yet be free to be amorphous as she may feel. Women can engage in representational politics without having to define herself in terms of

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16 However, elsewhere I have discussed the possibilities we might find through nondual philosophy for articulating our identity as women (Byrne, 2010; 2004).
oppositional politics. Although she may engage in representational politics, which are very real at a conventional level, there is also a recognition of that which is beyond representational politics, its delineations and categories. To conceive of ‘woman’ in this way, in a conventional and ultimate sense, disrupts the way in which subjectivity is viewed in a traditional western rationalist framework which demands a fixed and continuous self. Feminists such as Judith Butler agree with the Buddhist notion that ‘selves’ are maintained norms of intelligibility rather than an ontological given. To view selves and woman from a perspective which encompasses the dual and non-dual is to do as Irigaray suggests, that is jam the theoretical machinery itself, suspending the pretension to a production of a truth and of a meaning, and I would include a self, which is excessively univocal, singular and fixed.

If women were to know the possibilities of conceiving of self as both conventional and ultimate, or dual and nondual, there would be a freedom for self-knowledge and exploration of what it means to ‘be’. ‘Woman’ would no longer be an artifice or fabricated aspect of identity, prescribed to us by our society. Instead we could come, through practices such as meditation to understand ourselves as boundless and free. However we could still employ this limited sense ‘woman’ in order to serve political purposes, simultaneously realizing the possibility of de-centering gender and its inherent polarization when enquiring and wondering what it means to ‘be’. Such a conception of woman opens the way to the realization of interconnectedness, a central Buddhist teaching. The way in which I have spoken of the possibility for defining woman through the application of Buddhist ideas of subjectivity responds to a feminist quandary without invoking what some consider to be the constrictive parameters of rational thought and modes of inquiry. Yet to speak of ‘woman’ in this way also means traversing territory that is difficult to express in language that seeks to polarize, dichotomize and categorize.

Through this application of Buddhist notions of subjectivity the way is opened for conceiving of being and persons as interconnectedness rather than separation. As author Catherine Keller has recognized, conceiving of subjectivity and ‘being’ as interconnectedness has radical implications for feminist theory because separation and sexism function interdependently. Western conceptions of selfhood, through emphasizing separation over interconnectedness, inevitably result in sexism through permitting that which is ‘Other’. Uniquely, Buddhism can offer us a vision of interconnectedness along with a practice to realize that vision. From our understanding of interconnectedness we can then begin to cultivate an intersubjective economy between men and women in which we recognize both our oneness and our difference. Firstly though, attachment to prescribed gender roles must be let go of within Buddhist traditions (particularly by monks) so that true interconnectedness can become a lived experience for men and women. In this way we might fully realize the Buddha’s teaching of overcoming dukkha in the realm of sexual politics.

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17 Judith Butler writes, ‘...the “coherence” and “continuity” of “the person” are not logical or analytical features of personhood, but, rather, socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility’ (1999: 23).
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