

07 Rita Gross, Buddhist Feminist and Freethinker

Rita Gross, who lived from 1943 to 2015, was an American scholar and practitioner of Buddhism who was well known as the author of a book entitled 'Buddhism After Patriarchy'. She practiced within the Mahayana / Vajrayana tradition and was seen as one of the foremost voices of feminism within Buddhism. But as we shall hear, she refused to be bound by expectations of her as a Vajrayana and feminist Buddhist. She was an independent, free thinker.

Born a Lutheran, in search of her own spiritual path she converted to Judaism in her twenties. But then in her thirties, like Pema Chodron and other well-known American Buddhists, she became a disciple of the controversial Tibetan teacher Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche. After he had died, she became a senior teacher under the female lama Mindrolling Khandro Rinpoche.

As a feminist practitioner she was active in Sakyadhita, a world-wide organisation dedicated to promoting equal opportunities for women in all Buddhist traditions and which has been active in seeking the full Buddhist ordination of nuns, still denied in many Buddhist traditions.

As a scholar, before retiring she was Professor of Comparative Studies in Religion at the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire in north America and played a leading role in Buddhist-Christian dialogues.

I have not read *Buddhism After Patriarchy* though I have read many essays by her, some collected within one volume entitled "Soaring and Settling: Buddhist Perspectives on Contemporary Social and Religious Issues", and others that have appeared in different academic journals and books, and some in the *American Tricycle Magazine*.

In this talk I am going to focus on three particular instances where her writing made a deep impression on me.

The first concerns her very personal experience of grief that led to an insight into impermanence and the four noble truths.

The second concerns her observations on the relative merits of an immanent as opposed to a transcendent approach to enlightenment, and her criticisms of the view of her feminist friends of the superiority of the immanent approach.

And the third concerns her understanding of the conditioned nature of Buddhist history and teachings, and the related fundamentalist and literalist tendencies in Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhist schools.

So, first, Rita Gross on her personal experience of grief and insight.

In an article, she describes how in September 1973, she was walking across the parking lot towards her office at a north American university, on what she describes as an 'almost unbearably beautiful' autumn day.

She was thinking about how to teach the Four Noble Truths, which she didn't think she understood very well, in her upcoming Buddhism class.

But she was also feeling quite miserable. She had spent the previous year living with the grief and trauma of discovering that the young philosopher with whom she was in love had a terminal brain tumour. She had spent the previous weekend visiting her friend for what she knew would be the last time.

She describes how she was experiencing at one and the same time both intense misery at her own situation and intense appreciation for the autumnal beauty in which she was immersed.

She comments that conventionally seen, one of these experiences was "desirable" and the other was "undesirable," though both were caused by impermanence and change.

It was the co-emergence of these two contrasting experiences that suddenly impressed itself upon her. In her words:

“Something suddenly snapped in my mind and I said to myself in wonder, "The Four Noble Truths are true!" This experience was not superficial or short-lived, for it motivated me to seek out Buddhist meditation disciplines and sent my life onto a course that previously I had never deemed possible or appealing.”

What had she noticed that had eluded her before?

It wasn't so much the First Noble Truth, that suffering is present in life, for she had been deeply suffering already for some time.

Rather, it was the Second Noble Truth, that suffering derives from desire.

She realized that her own desperate longing and wishing for things to be different than they were, was what made what seemed to be 'inside her

mind' so painful, in contrast to the beauty of the autumn day that seemed to be 'outside her mind'.

Impermanence and change are an unavoidable aspect of life. What matters is how one responds in one's own mind, to those changes.

Rita Gross had caught a glimpse of what's called the 'wishless gateway' to enlightenment, letting go of wishing things to be otherwise than circumstances could allow. And it fundamentally changed her life, pushing her to embark upon a deep practice of meditation and Buddhism.

(Impermanence, Nowness, and Non-Judgment: A Personal Approach to Understanding Finitude in Buddhist Perspective. In "Buddhist Theology")

Now on to immanence and transcendence.

In Christianity a transcendent view sees God as a divine other, separate and different. An immanent view sees God as all around us, inside of us, and in everything.

The usual feminist view would be that women see God as immanent, and men see God as transcendent.

Something of this division carries over into Buddhism where enlightenment as transcendence is a form of truth and reality that is separate from us, and beyond us, inexpressible in words and concepts.

Enlightenment as immanence is to find peacefulness in the everyday experience of life, to find enlightenment within. This view is often associated with 'Buddha-nature', that we are already Buddhas or at least contain the potential within to be a Buddha.

Responding to feminists within Buddhism who favoured the immanent view of enlightenment, Rita Gross refused to be bound by the feminist view.

She associates the transcendental model for the spiritual life with longing and vision of a goal. She associates the immanent model with equanimity and peacefulness.

She writes:

'Equanimity without vision easily degenerates into complacency or laziness, but longing without peacefulness equally results in rigidity, resentment, and a crusading mentality. In fact, the trick of the

spiritual life may well be finding and maintaining the balance between immanence and transcendence. "

For her, the two concepts of transcendence and immanence must work together as we journey towards enlightenment.

We need first that sense of dissatisfaction with life, a longing to transcend the limiting conditions of life, a vision of the goal. But we must retain and nourish a sense of peacefulness and equanimity if we are to make progress on the path.

Now on to Rita Gross's understanding and teaching of the conditioned nature of Buddhist history and teachings.

In an extended article published in Tricycle magazine in 2010 – "Buddhist History for Buddhist Practitioners" – she argued that many Buddhists do not understand how their own Buddhist tradition fits into the larger picture of Buddhism. They do not know much about the many regional and historical variations, except perhaps that other traditions are inferior.

Each tradition has its own story about how, when, and where the Buddha gave the teachings on which its view and practices are based.

As she points out, these stories make claims that are difficult to reconcile with one another. Making sense of these stories can be difficult unless one has tools with which to understand the relevance of legend and myth. And one of the most important tools is to bring western historical consciousness and the Buddhist doctrine of conditionality to bear.

She explains how she had worked for many years to bring these tools into different centres in the USA including those from Zen, vipassana and Tibetan traditions.

She comments that while many students deeply appreciated this opportunity, others found the approach unnerving.

She gives an example from her own practice tradition or lineage of Mindrolling Khandro Rinpoche where she had been teaching a course in Buddhist history.

Several of the other senior teachers were concerned that the perceived conflict between the historical approach and traditional lineage stories, was too difficult for many students to resolve.

They wanted her to stop the teaching.

Mahayana teachings describe how the Buddha had taught the Mahayana during his lifetime on Earth, but that the teachings had been kept secret until such time as people were ready to receive them.

But Rita Gross said that the historical Buddha had not given specific Mahayana teachings during his lifetime on earth.

Rather, those scriptures had developed out of causes and conditions that arose some four hundred years or more after the lifetime of the Buddha.

The teachers feared that the revelation that some beloved narratives did not hold up to historical scrutiny would lead to a loss of faith in the Dharma.

Fortunately, Rita Gross was strongly backed by Khandro Rinpoche, the leader of her sangha.

The core of the problem was that legends were taught as if they were factual accounts of history.

She identified several issues arising out of this core problem.

First, she was concerned about the growing tendency toward fundamentalism in North American sanghas.

She defined fundamentalism as the urge to see the words of favourite narratives as literal truth, that is to assume that those narratives are empirically accurate descriptions of physical occurrences.

Second, she felt dismay at the sectarianism of many North American Buddhists, who eagerly praised their own lineage yet made disparaging remarks about others.

Some Buddhists, like orthodox Theravadins, dismiss other forms of Buddhism, such as the Mahayana and Vajrayana, because, they claim, these other forms developed later and thus are not really the Buddha's teaching.

Other Buddhists claim that the teachings followed by some, including Theravadins, are not the Buddha's full and final teachings but were merely provisional teachings intended for those with lower potential.

Theravadin teachings are thus Hinayana, the inferior vehicle, as opposed to the Mahayana, the large or superior vehicle.

Thirdly, she argued that accepting change as inevitable and usual brings the realization that diversity is also inevitable and usual.

Not only do things change, but in the vast geographically distant and socially varied regions such as those covered by Buddhism, they change in different ways and at different rates. The internal diversity of Buddhism is therefore to be expected, and, I might add, even to be celebrated.

To summarise, legends and sacred narratives provide orientation and meaning to those who follow a specific path, *whether or not the events they narrate literally happened.*

Sacred narratives do not need to be historically accurate to convey profound meaning and truth.

If we manage not to confuse legend and history, each can help to create an accurate understanding, both of the whole of Buddhism and of one's own tradition. Rather than fostering doubt, such an approach can provide a foundation for accurately informed confidence in the Buddha dharma.

There is much here in the arguments put forward by Rita Gross that can be found in the approach of Sangharakshita and Triratna. I was made familiar with views similar to those expressed by Rita Gross in her Tricycle article of 2010, very early in my involvement in Triratna in the mid 1990s.

But Rita Gross was, as far as I am aware, one of the first persons from a Mahayana / Vajrayana tradition to articulate these views publicly and loudly across western Buddhism. That's why what she said in 2010 is significant.

Within Triratna we pay respect and give study time to different Buddhist traditions, particularly to the historical schools found in India, south-east Asia, Tibet, China and Japan.

This was central to the Triratna approach from its foundation in the 1960s, and included teachings from the Pali Canon and Early Buddhism, to later Mahayana developments including the Perfection of Wisdom schools, the Yogacara, different Tibetan traditions, Chinese Chan and Japanese Zen, and Pure Land schools.

In this approach Sangharakshita distinguishes between what he calls literalism, and reductionism.

According to Sangharakshita, the literalist takes all the mythological details of one Eastern Buddhist culture or another as historically true.

This might mean believing, for instance, that the world is literally arranged around the cosmic mountain, Sumeru, or that chanting the

mantra of Avalokiteśvara will literally save one from shipwreck and other disasters.

As Sangharakshita argues, this not only often clashes with the observable facts of everyday experience, but also can perpetuate an unthinking and superstitious state of mind, seeking security in simplistic certainties.

He points out that sometimes this leads people who have rejected the credulity of their Christian background for Buddhism, to adopt what for them demands an even greater credulity in the superstitions of an alien culture.

The opposite of literalism is what Sangharakshita calls reductionism.

He believed that reductionism is widespread, particularly among scholars of Buddhism, as well as among rationalistic Western Buddhists.

Whilst it is alright to distinguish between the historically factual and mythic elements in the Buddha's biography, the problem arises when people go a step further, and start saying that only the historical facts are valuable and relevant.

They then dismiss the myths and legends, and the poetic parts of the account of the Buddha's history as mere fiction, and therefore to be discarded as completely worthless.

Sangharakshita saw this as a grave error, since it limits Buddhism's appeal simply to the intellect.

He argued:

“Buddhists who fall into this error fail to realise that it is not the intellect that moves us: below the surface of man's rational, conceptual mind are the ‘vast unplumbed depths’ of the nonrational, unconscious mind that is by far the larger part of his total psyche ... it isn't enough to appeal just to the conscious, rational intelligence that floats upon the surface. We have to appeal to something more, and this means that we have to speak an entirely different language than the language of concepts, of abstract thought; we have to speak the language of images, of concrete form. If we want to reach this nonrational part of the human psyche, we have to use the language of poetry, of myth, of legend.”

Both Sangharakshita and Rita Gross are now dead. They were both free thinkers, prepared to step outside of orthodoxy and fundamentalism, in their analysis of the history of Buddhism.

Link to recording:

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/ub1jcbvbk4bfkug3s2azl/07-English-Only-Rita-Gross.MP3?rlkey=sdlxi3ml1z9rsyf455r8k7akj&dl=0>

