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Borrowing a Prophetic Voice, Actualizing the Prophetic Dimension: Rita Gross and Engaged Buddhism

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Borrowing a Prophetic Voice, Actualizing the Prophetic Dimension: Rita Gross and Engaged Buddhism

Charles R. Strain¹

Abstract

“I am taking permission, as a Buddhist,” Rita Gross boldly affirmed, “to use the prophetic voice.” More than any other engaged Buddhist scholar she made this voice an explicit part of her work. This article explores the prophetic voice/dimension within Buddhism by pushing further along the path that Gross has blazed. This involves, first, a return to the classical Hebrew prophets where, arguably, the religious dimension of the prophetic voice is most clearly presented. The *second* section deconstructs the misogynistic narratives that pervade the prophetic literature and their theology of *retributive* justice and, then, offers an argument about what is salvageable in the prophet’s raw speech. The *third* section examines how Gross applies a prophetic method to the deconstruction of the androcentric

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views and the patriarchal structures of all schools of Buddhism. The final, *fourth*, section comes to terms with the religious chords sounding in the prophets' declamations. It does so by examining three aspects of the prophetic mode of being religious: allegiance to the God of Exodus, the practice of grief, and the practice of hope. In each case it suggests what challenges these modes of being religious present to engaged Buddhists.

Prologue

*See today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms
to pluck up and to pull down. . .
to build and to plant. (Jer 1:10)²*

*The work of building will take ten thousand lives
But dear one, look—
that work has been achieved ten thousand lives ago. (Nhat Hanh Opening 80-81)*

Introduction

"I am taking permission, as a Buddhist," Rita Gross boldly affirmed, "to use the prophetic voice" (*Buddhism* 134).³ More than any other engaged Buddhist scholar she made this voice an explicit part of her work. It is a thread

² All translations from the Hebrew Scriptures are from the New Revised Standard Version. I am grateful to my colleague, Frida Kerner Furman, for her comments on an earlier draft of this article.

³ While many scholars have lauded Rita Gross' contributions to the history of religions, religious feminism, Buddhist studies and the Buddhist-Christian dialogue, to my

that runs throughout her autobiographical writings and her efforts as a feminist to reconstruct Buddhism. To assume a prophetic voice as a Buddhist, Gross insists, is to engage in interreligious dialogue as a process of mutual transformation. Following John Cobb, Gross acknowledges this process as the deepest goal of dialogue and she confronts his challenge to her to acknowledge the roots of this voice in her own involvement with the prophetic traditions of the West. She agrees with Cobb in seeing Western feminism “as a mode of the prophetic voice,” a continuance of a prophetic lineage purified of its cultural biases (*Soaring* 13-14).⁴

The emergence of both feminism and Western forms of Buddhism is more than a random occurrence. Gross calls it an “auspicious coincidence,” two streams of cause and effect intersecting in a positive way (*Buddhism* 218-219). Mutual transformation in the case of Buddhism requires critique and reconstruction. Using the prophetic voice becomes a means for uncovering the pervasive ambiguity of the Buddhist tradition in its portrayal of women, its estimation of their religious potential, and in its gender-based hierarchical institutional arrangements. No transformation, we might say, without purgation. But the prophetic tradition also

knowledge none have explored or expanded the meaning of this borrowing. Likewise, though engaged Buddhists have been influenced by the prophetic tradition, notably by Liberation Theology, I am not aware of any who have explored the possible contributions of the classical Hebrew prophets to a reconstruction of Buddhist teachings and practice.

⁴ “[True] dialogue,” John Cobb argues, “if it succeeds, passes quickly beyond dialogue. It realizes what is sometimes spoken of as the ‘risk’ of dialogue. That risk is that in the process of listening one will be forced to change in a more than superficial way. . . . *Beyond* dialogue, I suggest, lies the aim of mutual transformation.” Transformation can occur, Cobb continues, only when one does extended work in internalizing the truth taught by one’s dialogue partner. Only from this new standpoint can dialogue be resumed (Cobb 47-49).

offers a socially and religiously powerful concept—the concept of justice—that reconfigures the Buddhist dharma (*Soaring* 13).⁵

At its most basic, Gross' appropriation of the prophetic voice entails:

- a willingness to engage in social criticism and self-criticism,
- protest against the abuse of power,
- a vision of an alternative social order,
- a commitment to social activism.⁶ (*Buddhism* 132-134)

Classical Buddhism, like virtually all premodern religious traditions, lacked an understanding of structural violence. Despite the teaching of impermanence, it viewed social institutions as given and offered no vision of a post-patriarchal world (Gross *Buddhism* 134, 169-170, 215; *Garland* 237). Liberation “was not the result of justice and righteousness but of mindful awareness, detachment and tranquility.” Western Buddhists practicing today—and, to an increasing extent, all Buddhists—are the heirs of multiple religious and secular strands including those stemming from the Hebrew prophets. It is no longer possible for Buddhists to hold themselves aloof from the “prophetic call for judgment, criticism and responsibility” (*Buddhism* 214, 218). Gross does not shy away from this challenge. Moreover, she integrates it with her scholarship and her Buddhist practice.

⁵ The impact of Buddhism on Gross's feminist commitments and practices is beyond the scope of this paper. See Gross, “Buddhism and Feminism, pt. 1” 44-58; “Buddhism and Feminism, pt. 2,” 62-74.

⁶ Gross argues that the traditional literature of Buddhism seems to lack: (1) an ethical analysis of social systems; (2) a designation of unethical systems as oppressive; and (3) a recognition of action to change those systems as a *form of spiritual discipline* (Gross and Reuther, 164-170).

Ultimately, I wrote *Buddhism after Patriarchy* because it was the most useful and helpful thing that I could imagine ever doing in my life. It is . . . what I can do to fulfill my bodhisattva vows, what I can do to alleviate the suffering inherent in imprisonment in patriarchy and gender roles. I have often thought of it as an offering born of my own suffering to try to chip away at samsara, at pain-laced conventional life. . . . It is what prophetic message I have to offer. (*Soaring* 37)

While Rita Gross speaks of borrowing a prophetic voice in numerous places in both *Buddhism after Patriarchy* and *Soaring and Settling*, I have found only one place where she refers to “the need for Buddhism to develop its prophetic dimension” (*Buddhism* 183).⁷ This formulation suggests that a prophetic stance and mode of being-in-the-world is intrinsic to, but perhaps concealed, within Buddhist teachings and practices. The prophetic voice is not entirely a graft of a different way of being religious.⁸ Gross points to the bodhisattva ethic of compassion as the seed of prophetic social action. Given the prevalence of oppressive forces within po-

⁷ She also in one other place refers to the “prophetic method” as involving a deconstruction and reconstruction of Buddhism (*Soaring* 25). I single out the concept of a prophetic dimension also because it hints at the religious character of the Hebrew prophets’ voice. Otherwise Gross’ four borrowings could be read as merely a secularized version of the prophetic tradition.

⁸ In *Buddhism Beyond Gender*, published posthumously, Gross counters the charge that the Buddhist feminism that she espouses is a Western (read alien) import and that its imposition is a form of neo-colonialism. Instead of defending her borrowing of a prophetic voice, she uncovers that voice from within multiple strands of Buddhism, from what she calls “indigenous Buddhist feminism.” For example, that indigenous imagination, counter to the predominant narrative line, emphasizes the partnership of Yasodhara, the Buddha’s wife, with the Buddha-to-be over the course of many lifetimes and her attainment of a spiritual state “not second to the Buddha” (34-35, Chapter 5, 122-27).

litical and economic structures, gender roles and culturally imposed psychological formations, she argues, “it is hard to imagine being serious about liberation or the bodhisattva path without being involved in social action at some level” (*Buddhism* 183). Elsewhere she sees compassion and justice as mutually transformative and calls for infusing compassion with righteousness. Here it seems that a compassion with a critical edge arises from viewing the realm of collective dukkha with a clear eye (*Buddhism* 134-135; *Soaring* 13).

This article explores the prophetic voice/dimension within Buddhism by pushing further along the path that Gross has blazed. This involves, first, a return to the classical Hebrew prophets where, arguably, the religious dimension of the prophetic voice is most clearly presented. The *second* section deconstructs the misogynistic narratives that pervade the prophetic literature and their theology of retributive justice and, then, offers an argument about what is salvageable in the prophet’s raw speech. The *third* section examines how Gross applies a prophetic method to the deconstruction of the androcentric worldviews and the patriarchal structures of all schools of Buddhism. The final, *fourth*, section comes to terms with the religious chords sounding in the prophets’ declamations. It does so by examining three aspects of prophetic religion: allegiance to the God of Exodus, the practice of grief, and the practice of hope. In each case it suggests what challenges these modes of being religious present to engaged Buddhists.⁹

⁹ We have been operating on the assumption that Rita Gross fits easily, both as a scholar and a Buddhist practitioner, into the international movement that Thich Nhat Hanh described as “engaged Buddhism.” Sallie King defines engaged Buddhism as “a contemporary form of Buddhism that engages actively yet nonviolently with the social, economic, political . . . and ecological problems of society” (*Socially Engaged Buddhism* 1). Christopher Queen sees it as “the application of the Dharma . . . to the resolution of social problems .

The Prophetic Voice

Throughout this analysis we must remain aware that the prophets *are* their voice. They claim to make God audible. However, assuming a prophetic voice is not as straightforward as it may seem.¹⁰ It is much more complicated than simply engaging in social criticism. The Hebrew prophets, including men, women, and prophetic guilds, proclaim or perform the divine message in words, songs, and symbolic actions.¹¹ They do not employ the discourse of moral deliberation moving from core principles, justified rationally, to applications, a process which is open to public debate

. . . in the context of a global conversation on human rights, distributive justice and social progress. . . . [I]t may be seen as a new paradigm of Buddhist liberation” (1-2).

To clarify further what form engagement takes in Gross’ case let me suggest that there are three types of engagement. First, *social service* represents organized compassion directed towards healing social suffering (e.g., Thich Nhat Hanh’s Youth for Social Service). Second, *social development* offers a wholistic alternative to Western forms of economic development, e.g., Sri Lanka’s Sarvodaya movement. Third, *social transformation* pursues fundamental social change through collective, nonviolent action. This third form focuses on multiple forms of systemic, structural violence, institutionalized forms of the three poisons. Structural violence becomes normalized through ideologies that require deconstruction if society is to be reconstructed. Gross’ passionate scholarship falls squarely within this third type of engagement

¹⁰ Mid twentieth century scholarship on the prophets searched for the historical kernel in the heavily redacted prophetic books. More recently, scholars have interpreted the meaning of these texts as literary wholes. The Jeremiah and Isaiah that appear in the text as well as their God are literary inventions even when dealing with real historical events like the Exile. This suspension of the quest for the historical Jeremiah does not undermine the power of the prophetic voice; it shifts it to the meaning disclosed in the text. The redacted text, of course, has its own *Sitz im Leben* that shapes its meaning (Stulman and Kim 9-10; Holt 299-310; Sweeney).

¹¹ The women who are explicitly called prophets in the Hebrew scriptures include Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, No’adiah, and the unnamed wife of Isaiah (Gafney 24-25, 28, 38-39, 120-22). Symbolic actions such as Jeremiah’s wearing the yoke (27:1-2; 28:10-11) and Isaiah’s walking naked through the streets of Jerusalem for three years (20) serve to underscore the verbal message.

(Gustafson). Their voices ring with passion. They invoke the language of the courts to level indictments, judgment, and punishment. They seek to move their audience to a dramatic change. Lamentations, pleas for repentance, arguments with God, oracles that anticipate disaster falling on the northern kingdom of Israel and, later, the southern kingdom of Judah and the surrounding countries are a few of the ways in which the Hebrew prophets voice their messages. Their method is not didactic. They do not offer sage advice; rather they present shocking images that depict a cosmos in disarray. Each of these forms of speech is intended to destabilize their audience (O'Brien "Metaphorization" 244; Green 258-276).

Isaiah minces no words. "Seek justice, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." YHWH has an allergic reaction to those who perform religious services with blood on their hands. "I have had enough. . . ." (Isa 1: 11-15; cf. Amos 5: 21-24). Seeking justice is a pathway to God not simply an ethical imperative (Isa 1: 10-17). The prophets' defense of the widow, the orphan, and the stranger morphs into a virulent condemnation of the abuses of the power elite (Yee 491-506). Micah reveals just how strident the prophetic voice can be when he compares the power elite of Judah to cannibals "who tear the skin off my people and the flesh off their bones, who . . . break their bones in pieces and chop them up like meat in a kettle" (Mic 3:2-3). The prophets do not ground their condemnations in some utopian ideal of justice; rather, as Rabbi Abraham Heschel puts it, they confront "the monstrosity of injustice" (204).

Is it possible to conceive of the prophets' raw speech that scholars describe as "disruptive, fragmentary, jarring" as skillful means for breaking through the obliviousness of the power elite to the corrosive effects of injustice and the collective numbness enforced through the ideology of a divinely secured state? (O'Brien "Metaphorization" 244; Brueggemann *Prophetic* 41-45, 47). "Peace, peace," the smooth talking, false prophets

proclaim, “when there is no peace” (Jer 6: 14). Cathleen Kaveny places prophetic discourse within a helpful frame when she describes it as “moral chemotherapy,” appropriate for a social body riddled with the cancer of injustice (4, 126, 287, 312).

Deconstructing the Prophetic Voice

If, as we will soon see, the Hebrew prophets practice ideology-critique as a spiritual practice, their words and images, too, must be subjected to an ideology-critique. Among the shocking images are those depicting God and God’s relationship with Israel and Judah. Throughout the prophetic corpus sinful Israel and Judah are each portrayed as an unfaithful wife, a whore. God’s retribution for Judah’s failure to uphold its covenantal obligations is imagined as an act of sexual violence (Jer 13: 21-22, 25-27). Hosea’s depiction of God fits the pattern of an abusive husband (Hosea 1-2; O’Brien *Challenging* 33-34). Defeated nations are depicted as a woman stripped of her clothes (e.g., Neh: 3:4-6). So pervasive is the degrading imagery of women that some scholars refer to the classical prophetic books as “pornoprophetic texts.” For these scholars outrage alone is the proper response (O’Brien *Challenging* 34-35, 40-41; Maier 470-474). Another group of scholars tries to peel away the husk comprised of these misogynistic metaphors to get at what they see as the real kernel. For Gail Yee such images are deplorable because they obscure what today we would call “issues of class and colonialism that are at the heart of these texts” (O’Brien *Challenging* 46; Yee). Gross herself sees the prophets’ misogyny as reflecting a “cultural bias,” not their core vision. Modern feminism, she believes, has stripped away that husk (*Soaring* 13-14).

Such diametrically opposed approaches to the Hebrew prophets create an impasse. Put bluntly, how can we acknowledge the prophetic texts as creating a radical breakout of the ideological prison of an unjust

system when their metaphors are so deeply entrenched in the violence of a patriarchal culture?

Several strategies apply to the prophetic texts themselves the scathing criticism that they applied to the prevailing ideologies of their society. First, recognizing that the classical prophets are in debate with one another demands a critical reading. Second, Juliana Claassens excavates alternative images of God as Mourner, Mother and Midwife that disrupt the predominant image of God whose sovereignty is communicated through the image and actions of a Divine Warrior whose robes are soaked with the blood of Judah's enemies (Claassens *Mourner*). Third, one can read imaginatively from the point of view of those who have been pushed to the margins of the text, erased or condemned to silence—the children punished for their fathers' sins, or the wives abused like Gomer (Claassens "God and Violence" 345-346).¹² What possible vision, for example, lies buried in the single verse that alludes to No'adiah, the female prophet who resisted the prophet Nehemiah's drive to ethnically cleanse the Jewish people by forcing men to divorce their foreign wives? (Neh 6:14; Gafney 111-114). Finally, one can appeal to anyone in the multifaceted prophetic tradition stretching from Miriam to Rita Gross who wrestles with these deeply ambiguous texts. So, peace activist Daniel Berrigan reinvigorates the prophetic tradition when he challenges the Exodus narrative, the very paradigm of liberation in Western religions and politics. "What difference, all said . . . between the death of the Hebrew male infants and the death of the Egyptian first born. Are we to abominate the former and celebrate the latter? The mind boggles." The prophetic texts require readers who will read against their grain (Berrigan 49, 82).

¹² There are many stories of women, particularly old women, scattered throughout Buddhism's multiple traditions who, while cast to the margins, still manage to confound monks who preen themselves with their assumed wisdom. They raise the issue of who, really, are the bearers of the Buddhist lineage (Caplow and Moon).

Applying a Prophetic Method

Throughout *Buddhism after Patriarchy* Gross carries forward what she calls a “prophetic method” (*Buddhism* 25). Her reading against the grain begins with a reluctant Buddha. The story of the Buddha’s negative response to repeated requests to include women as renunciants by his aunt, Prajāpatī, and his disciple, Ānanda, is well known. What is important, Gross suggests, is that the Buddha changed his mind. Enlightenment did not confer freedom from cultural bias. The Buddha, too, had to overcome imprisoning preconceptions about gender. The more important threads in the early literature, for Gross, are examples of the Buddha directly teaching nuns, indicating his conviction that they could achieve enlightenment. While the Buddha’s terms of acceptance of women into the monastic sangha dictated “institutional subordination,” they do not imply “spiritual subordination.” “[Women and men] lived the same lifestyle, did the same practices and even looked alike, both having shaved heads and identical robes” (*Buddhism* 32-34, 36-37).

Gross argues that across the length and breadth of the Buddhist tradition, views of women and, most especially, statements about their capacity to attain enlightenment, are inherently ambiguous (*Buddhism* 115-116). Ambiguity requires critical attention and an argument for the dharmic centrality of one stream over the other. Gross does not hesitate to make this critical judgment. Despite the presence, even the prevalence, of texts that denigrate women, “a feminist interpreter of Buddhism can make a strong case that the core of the tradition is without gender bias . . . and that sexist practices are in contradiction with the essential core teachings of the tradition” (*Buddhism* 209-210). In such a case, judgment is not simply a weighing of conflicting evidence. It is a moral act, a commitment to move the tradition beyond androcentrism as inimical to the flourishing of women and men. Second, Gross unearths the neglected voice of women in the early Pali canon, especially as represented in the *Therīgāthā*, a collection

of poems by Buddhist nuns. Many, if not most, of these poems express an enlightenment experience, stories of women who “split open the mass of mental darkness” (*Buddhism* 48-54; *Therīgāthā*). This focus on women’s proven capacity to become enlightened in this life must be read as a counter-narrative to patriarchal Buddhism’s denigration of birth in a female body. Finally, like Claassens who retrieves countervailing images of God, Gross establishes the importance of female bodhisattvas in Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions (*Soaring* Chaps 15 and 16).

The descendants of the Hebrew prophets have found an emancipatory kernel in the prophetic texts despite their misogynistic narratives. Beyond her diagnosis of Buddhism’s profoundly ambiguous record in its views about women and its persisting history of domination through patriarchal institutions, Gross is similarly intent on retrieving an emancipatory kernel within Buddhism. The Mahāyāna teachings of emptiness and dependent coarising express that emancipatory potential. Because all phenomena are empty and are products of causes and conditions, there are no such things as fixed gender-based traits. Reified understandings of male and female traits are themselves products of particular historical conditions and can be altered by reshaping their causes and conditions (*Buddhism* 173-184).

Equally important for Gross is the Mahāyāna teaching of *tathāgatagarbha*. While usually translated as Buddha Nature, Gross prefers its more literal translation as *Buddha-womb* or *Buddha-embryo*. The potential of all living beings to actualize their *tathāgatagarbha* makes institutional restrictions on the practice of one gender and the tradition’s androcentric denigration of women’s capacity for enlightenment a violation of Buddhism’s liberatory intent.

[T]aken together the concepts of emptiness and Buddha Nature provide a very firm basis to argue that gender equality is a normative, rather than an optional position,

for Buddhists. If gender equality is normative, then actively working to undercut gender hierarchy and privilege is a *required ethical norm for all Buddhists*, not merely a marginal position for a few feminists.¹³ (emphasis added) (*Buddhism* 188-189)

Beyond the retrieval of core teachings, Gross also deconstructs the widespread teaching that birth as a woman is due to negative karma. Karma is not fate; it is the product of causes and conditions. To assume that women alone generate those causes and conditions is to blame the victim. One who acts compassionately “would not be willing to support, passively or actively, fundamentally cruel and oppressive institutions or situations such as gender privilege, militarism or economic exploitation” (*Buddhism* 142-145). Gross recognizes that the concept of “oppression” is borrowed from prophetic traditions, in her case, one result of the mutual transformation of Buddhism and feminism. It signifies the fixated patterns of those who exercise power *over* others out of self-interest and self-delusion. Karma, reinterpreted, attunes us to the ways in which actions solidify and become a systemic burden but one that can be undone (*Buddhism* 145-146).

¹³ While they may appeal to different teachings for support, Buddhist feminists are in agreement about two principles: the spiritual equality of women and men and the constructed character of gender roles. The language of Buddha Nature is common across engaged Mahayanists and Vajrayanists whether we are speaking of Thich Nhat Hanh’s Order of Interbeing, the Dalai Lama’s teaching of our innate capacity to love, or Cheng Yen’s charitable work in Taiwan (King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism* 20-22; *Being Benevolence* 21-22, 24-26).

The Prophetic Challenge to Engaged Buddhism

To fully grasp the prophetic challenge in its classic expressions to engaged Buddhism requires a shift from examining the prophetic voice to the prophetic dimension. The three studies that follow, while hardly comprehensive, do help us to see the prophetic persona as more than a social critic but, rather, as embodying a mode of being religious that is accessible across boundaries of religion and culture.

The God of Exodus and a Buddhist retrieval of transcendence

Walter Brueggemann, perhaps the dean of scholars of the prophetic literature, salvages the prophets' messages by seeing them as an attack on what he calls Judah's "royal consciousness." That consciousness cemented a sacred alignment of God/King/Temple/Sacred City/and the Land. God had been yoked to the will to power of the political and religious establishment. YHWH was, as it were, "on call" (Brueggemann *Prophetic* 23, 28-30).

Wherever it is found, Brueggemann argues, the royal consciousness forecloses any future inconsistent with its assumption of permanence. It anesthetizes the moral imagination. No transcendent deity means no transcending the hierarchical boundaries cemented in place by this ideology. The role of the prophets, put simply, is to call into question the royal consciousness and thereby open up a space for the religious imagination. Prophets break the yoke that would harness God (Brueggemann *Prophetic* 39-40; O'Brien *Challenging* 25). "[A] truly free God is essential to marginal peoples if they are to have a legitimate standing ground against the oppressive orders of the day" (Brueggemann *Prophetic* 23). For Brueggemann, a transcendent deity constitutes "a court of appeal against the highest courts and orders of society" (*Prophetic* 23).

The prophets are unanimous in their appeals to the God of Exodus, a transcendent god who, nevertheless, stands with the marginalized and oppressed, who is moved by their plight. From Moses and Miriam (Exod: 15) to Amos (2:10, 3:1) and Micah (6:3-4), from Jeremiah (6:14-15; 32: 20-23, 36-41) to all three Isaiahs (10:24-26; 11: 15-16; 48:20-21; 52:4; 63:7-14), the prophets frame the crisis of the present and their hope for deliverance in terms of this originating myth (Green 272). To be sure, this passionately involved God is frequently described as a War Lord exacting retributive justice on Israel, Judah, and their imperial conquerors. But here, as with Gross' retrieval of an emancipatory kernel, we resolve the ambiguity by choosing to carry forward one strand of the tradition—YHWH as a liberating God.

The temptation for a Buddhist is to dismiss the prophets' commitment to a transcendent god as expressing an extreme version of a dualistic ideology. Rita Gross follows a more challenging path. "Constructing theology as a Buddhist non-theist," she argues, "encourages one to ask different questions of immanence and transcendence" (*Soaring* 161). Rather than seeing both of these concepts as traits of the divine, Gross sees their roots in modes of religious experience.¹⁴ What she calls the "spiritual impulse" of transcendence is fundamentally tied to the experience of "longing and vision, and to the remaking of worlds." Transcendence in Gross'

¹⁴ *Soaring and Settling* represents Gross' most constructive effort. She makes it clear that the exploration of her own "generative experiences" and "recurring formative events" is typical of feminist theologies. Moving from autobiography to religious reflection, Gross argues, is a way of avoiding a "false universalism." Moreover, her approach reflects the feminist principle that "the personal is the political." Gross' approach to transcendence and immanence is a case in point. "I have been ever less convinced that immanence and transcendence are primarily . . . about deities and increasingly more interested in the *religious experiences* behind theological concepts of immanence and transcendence" (*Soaring* 3-4 162). I can also add that this interpretive shift opens up the possibility of Buddhists learning from and, perhaps, appropriating the religious dynamic at the roots of a theology whose god is both utterly transcendent and unreservedly engaged.

case involved a break with an authoritarian and repressive religious upbringing and with what she calls the “prison of gender.” “Thus, transcendence,” she concludes, “was literally my salvation” (162-63). The experience of immanence on the other hand has to do with peace and tranquility, to being at home in one’s body and in this rich and wondrous world that we share. Both modes are necessary and Gross seeks a middle path to avoid falling into a self-righteous renunciation of the world or a deadening spiritual complacency (164-65).

One further point: I find compelling Brueggemann’s argument that the transcendent God of prophetic faith constituted a “court of appeal” for people who had experienced oppression at the hands of religiously sanctioned power. Is there a court of appeal not founded on a hierarchical model in Buddhist teachings and practice?

That the Buddha resisted efforts of his disciples to turn him into an infallible authority and urged them to trust only their own investigation is well known. But the power of modern ideologies with what David Loy calls their “weapons of mass deception” threatens to engulf our daily lives (92-102). We must train our minds as our own “court of appeal.” The first three of Thich Nhat Hanh’s Fourteen Mindfulness trainings aim to do just that. They coach us to treat all worldviews only as guiding means, to disentangle our minds from fixed views, and to avoid all coercive forms of indoctrination (*Interbeing* 23-29).

The practice of grief: Reinterpreting a classic Buddhist story

Reflecting on John Cobb’s challenge to acknowledge her internalization of a prophetic voice as a result of her academic training in Western religious traditions, Gross searched for its roots in her past. She saw her academic training as coming too late to be that root. Her rearing within a strict Christian sect left her with no positive model of a prophetic Christianity.

“I now believe that my first articulation of the prophetic voice was to stand against that training, timidly and tentatively at first as a teenager.” Her subsequent excommunication left her with trauma and longing, with the pain of exclusion and the continuing desire to uncover some “positive personal experience of Christianity” (*Soaring* 13-15). It also confronted her with the monstrosity of injustice. “I would like to make it as clear as I can,” she said, “just how damaging and wounding exclusive truth claims about matters of symbols and doctrines can be. That message is part of my use of the prophetic voice” (*Soaring* 16).

Trauma and longing are intimately related to the prophetic persona. The spiritual work of the prophet transforms them into grief and hope. Louis Stulman captures both aspects as central to the intentionality of the prophetic texts.

Written prophecy’s multiplicity of voices bears witness to the end of Israel’s symbolic, cultural and political structures, principally as a result of two national disasters: the fall of Samaria in late eighth century B. C. E. and the sixth century destruction of Jerusalem. . . . Written prophecy invites its readers to imagine the unthinkable. . . . Prophets dare to imagine . . . the end of culture and the return to primeval chaos. . . . The horrors of war no doubt serve as the subtext to . . . prophetic expressions of cosmic crumbling. . . . Written prophecy shifts the wreckage of war from ground zero to the symbolic world of language, affording readers the opportunity to name their ordeal, mourn it, and survive it. Equally remarkable . . . prophecy seeks to generate hope in people whose worlds have collapsed, and whose cherished forms of faith and culture have been broken seemingly beyond repair. (322-323)

Walter Brueggemann argues that the stereotype of the angry prophet screaming in righteous indignation is overblown. Giving voice to anger is one rhetorical strategy among many employed by the prophets. Far more central is what Brueggemann calls “the practice of grief,” signifying a performance, a spiritual discipline to which one is called (*Reality* 57-58). As many others have done, Brueggemann is following the lead of Rabbi Abraham Heschel who, in his classic treatment of the prophets, argued that the prophets participated in the “divine pathos” and were thereby able to reveal a God who suffers and mourns for His people, a God who breaks the mold of an imperial overlord (Heschel 24, 26).

Grief cuts through denial, the delusion of the Jerusalem elite that the state would remain secure forever. While those elites still slept soundly, Jeremiah is instructed by YHWH to call out the “keeners,” a women’s guild whose social role was to perform a family’s—or, here, a nation’s—grief (Jer 9: 17-18; Brueggemann *Reality* 59-60; Gafney 121-122). If the practice of grief is not embraced, Brueggemann insists, sorrow finds an outlet in anger, in blaming others, even in collective violence. So, the Jerusalem elite responded to Jeremiah’s wake-up call not by joining in lamentation but by clamoring for his execution (Jer 26:10-11, 38:4-6). Clinging to the past, suppressed grief forecloses future possibilities (Brueggemann *Reality* 82-83).

In a Buddhist context, grief is generally seen as a form of clinging and an obstacle to enlightenment. In a classic story a mother, Kisa Gotami, has lost her only child. Crazy with grief, she carries her dead child from person to person seeking medicine. Finally, someone sends her to the Buddha who promises that he will heal her son if she will bring him a pinch of mustard seed from a household that has not known death. Kisa Gotami goes forth but her quest, predictably, fails. However, she sees into the impermanence of existence, gives up her child’s corpse and returns to the

Buddha. Recognizing her level of insight, he accepts her request to become a nun, whereupon she quickly reaches enlightenment (*Therīgāthā* 111, 113, 115, 266-267 n.1).

While traditional commentaries emphasize the Buddha's skillful means in leading Kisa Gotami to awareness, Rita Gross emphasizes the Buddha's recognition that Kisa Gotami has the capacity as a woman to become enlightened and that she has made rapid progress along the path to enlightenment (*Buddhism* 53). In an important article, however, Reiko Ohnuma explores the ambiguity of the tradition toward mother-love/mother-grief. When considered in the abstract, mother-love is held aloft as the ideal to be actualized on behalf of all living beings. Yet mother love expressed in grief over a lost child is most often presented as "a potent manifestation of desire, attachment and clinging—all negative emotions in Buddhism that keep one bound within the realm of samsara." Kisa Gotami must not only lay her child to rest; the trajectory of the story leads to her renouncing her role as a mother (Ohnuma 97-98, 100, 103-104). Traditional interpretations see Kisa Gotami's grief not as a practice but as a form of delusion which in extreme cases manifests itself as insanity. If mother-love, as a symbol, represents the ideal, mother-grief in actuality is the opposite of detached wisdom (Ohnuma 102; Gross *Buddhism* 233-234).

Prophetic social criticism, however, will want to uncover what has been left unsaid in the story. What happened in the village? We know only that Kisa Gotami failed in her quest for the mustard seed and a deep transformation occurred. But how long was her quest? An afternoon? A week? A year? Were doors slammed in her face? Were her encounters perfunctory: "Do you have mustard seeds?" "Yes." "Has someone in your household died?" "Yes." "I am sorry to have bothered you." Or, as perhaps the Buddha foresaw, was she welcomed by the women of the village into their homes and over a cups of tea stories were shared and grief was performed

and resolved? Was there, in short, a *practice* of grief? A prophet will want to hear the voices of the women of the village.

We must imagine Kisa Gotami at some point in her visits experiencing *bodhicitta*, the point where “one sees one’s life as inextricably interlinked with all other lives. One cares about them. In this caring,” Gross continues, “emotions are cultivated and trained, not repressed or endured. It is assumed that properly developed and cultivated emotions are as fundamental to a sane, healthy person as a trained and cultivated intellect. . . .” (*Buddhism* 181). This approach to emotions is also how Gross dealt with her own losses. “Through leaning into grief I learned that finitude is impermanence and that . . . dancing with impermanence launches one into the immediacy of nowness. . . .” (*Soaring* 141). It is this cultivation, this *leaning into grief*, that is cloaked in silence in the traditional story of Kisa Gotami.

In the *Therīgāthā* there are numerous stories of women whose grief over a lost child is healed by the Buddha. One of these women, Patacara, goes on to become an important teacher. In one poem Patacara pulls the arrow of grief from 500 women, all of whom have lost a child and went on to become nuns (*Therīgāthā* 73, 75, 260-261 n. 18). This example is crucial. It is utterly ambiguous. All of the women are viewed as liberated from the fetter of motherhood. On the other hand, here the healer is one who has known grief, has leaned into it, learned from it, and is thereby able to heal others.

What Gross argues about leaning into grief applies just as well to the anger that, at times, seems to engulf the Hebrew prophets. First, she sees politics as a realm of practice, one that “provides consistent fuel for working through the three poisons of aversion, attachment and ignoring.” “[L]ike any unenlightened energy,” she insists “each of the three poisons includes the potential for its transmuted form. Aversion contains muted

clarity, attachment contains unrealized compassion; and ignoring contains complete all-inclusive spaciousness” (Garland 238). From this perspective the prophetic voice at its most strident has not fully undergone this transformation. Righteous anger calls out the monstrosity of injustice but obscures its deep roots. However, only “leaning in” not a simple repudiation of aversive discourse will suffice.

One more point: Haitians would want to know whether or not Kisa Gotami’s child died what they call a “stupid death,” a death that was easily preventable if only the most basic of health measures (clean water) and treatments (vaccinations) were made available—a death, in short, imposed by structural violence (Farmer 143-144). We must grieve those stupid deaths. True compassion for grieving mothers might then take on a prophetic edge. As Brueggemann puts it, “real criticism begins in the capacity to grieve because that is the most visceral announcement that things are not right” (*Prophetic* 11).

The practice of hope and imagining a post-patriarchal Buddhism

The loss of an entire way of life is unthinkable but it is grievable. The practice of grief, argues Brueggemann, is the condition for imagining an alternative future. At the very point of the destruction of Jerusalem and the devastation of the surrounding countryside, Jeremiah, who has practiced grief with unmatched intensity, is instructed by YHWH to purchase a plot of land from a relative (Jer 32). This action symbolically counters despair as the final word in a world in which all bearings have been erased. “The task of the prophetic imagination,” argues Brueggemann, “is to bring to public expression those very hopes and yearnings that have been denied so long and suppressed so deeply that we no longer know they are there” (*Prophetic* 65). The wisdom of the status quo declares “there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl: 9). The world of the powers-that-be is closed, that of

the exiles in Babylon is shattered. In either case the key question is not whether an alternative world is feasible but is it imaginable (Brueggemann *Prophetic* 39-41). Brueggemann sees “radical hope” as a prison break from the world of *Ecclesiastes*. Such hope is “committed to the bare idea that something good will emerge” even when one is in the midst of the despair.¹⁵

It goes without saying that hope for the prophets is grounded in the Exodus story. Michael Walzer pushes further by arguing that the Exodus story in the West has catalyzed, again and again, a radical break with the present.

The strength of the [Exodus] narrative is given by the end though it is also crucial that the end be present at the beginning, as an aspiration, a hope, a promise. What is promised is radically different from what is. . . . Exodus is a journey forward—not only in time and space. It is a march toward a goal, a moral progress, a transformation. . . . Canaan is a promised land because Egypt is a house of bondage. Beginning and end stand in a necessary relation. . . . Egypt is not just left behind; it is rejected, it is judged and condemned. The crucial terms of that judgment are *oppression* and *corruption*. God’s promise generates a sense of possibility. . . . The world is not all Egypt. (Walzer 11-12 21)

Buddhists are often suspicious of common affirmations of hope. Such hope appears to be a turning away from the present moment, ori-

¹⁵ Brueggemann develops an analogy between the prophets of the exile articulating a new hope and Jonathan Lear’s treatment of the Crow Nation which accepted confinement in a reservation as the only alternative to annihilation. With confinement came the erasure of a way of life built around nomadic hunting, horse raiding, and bravery in battle. To go beyond mere survival required a “radical hope” (*Reality*, 120-28; Lear).

enting the self towards a not-yet future. Our life becomes a series of hurdles that must be surmounted, each of which gives rise to the next. Thich Nhat Hanh shows us how the process works: “Usually we say, ‘Wait until I finish school . . . then I will be really alive.’ But then when we obtain it, we say, ‘I have to wait until I have a job in order to be fully alive.’ After the job, we need a car, and after the car, a house. . . . We always postpone being alive to the future” (*Living Buddha* 17). Thich Nhat Hanh offers St. Francis as an alternative model:

When St. Francis asked the almond tree to tell him about God, in just a few seconds the tree was covered with beautiful flowers. St. Francis was standing on the side of the ultimate dimension. It was winter. There were no leaves, flowers, or fruits, but he saw the flowers. . . . When we touch one thing with deep awareness, we touch everything. Touching the present moment, we realize that the present is made of the past and is creating the future. (*Living Buddha* 152-153)

I would argue that St. Francis—for those few seconds—embodied what Brueggemann calls radical hope, a hope that is holding oneself open to what is unknown but about to be born. Such hope embraces, as Dr. King frequently put it, “the fierce urgency of now.” This form of hope is not wishful thinking but is fully engaged in a now that dynamically includes past and future. Rebecca Solnit offers a redefinition of hope that can be read as a riff on Dr. King’s trenchant phrase:

[H]ope is not like a lottery ticket you can . . . clutch feeling lucky. . . . [H]ope is an ax you can break down doors with in an emergency; because hope should shove you out the door, because it will take everything you have to steer the future away from endless war, from the annihilation of the earth’s treasures and the grinding down of the poor. (Solnit 5)

The epigram from Thich Nhat Hanh that opens this essay embodies a paradox. On the one hand we are to act committed to a very long haul. We act with ax in hand, moment after moment. On the other hand, Thich Nhat Hanh suggests that the hoped-for future is already present. Solnit chimes in by tying an Exodus journey to the “politics of prefiguration . . . the idea that if you embody what you aspire to you have already succeeded. That is to say, if your activism is already democratic, peaceful, creative, then in one small corner of the world these things have triumphed” (86-87). Does this understanding of radical hope—a far cry from some of the revenge fantasies that frequently conclude prophetic texts—address the criticisms of hope from the Buddhist standpoint of Thich Nhat Hanh and others? Buddhism, too, begins with a break—the future Buddha’s home leaving. The focus in the traditional story, however, is existential rather than social. What might it mean, to paraphrase Walzer, not only to leave patriarchal Buddhism behind, but to reject, judge and condemn it? Can Buddhists as Buddhists do that?

Rita Gross certainly aims to do so. She explicitly uses the term “oppression” to characterize patriarchal Buddhism. To name oppression as oppression and not something else is to take a leap forward (*Buddhism* 134-135, 145-146, 183; *Soaring* 13). Dukkha is not only existential in character but social and systemic. As the product of causes and conditions it can and must be undone (*Buddhism* 145-146). The very title of her book, *Buddhism after Patriarchy*, represents a claim on all Buddhists to imagine an alternative future and, then, to undertake a moral journey. As we have seen, Gross views the traumatic experience of an abusive religious community as what led her to adopt a prophetic stance. I have interpreted this stance as “the practice of grief.” The longing that accompanies trauma is transformed by the Hebrew prophets into the “practice of hope.” The world is not all Egypt. And Buddhism is more and other than its patriarchal past.

The third element of the prophetic voice, as Gross sees it, is offering a “vision for a social order more nearly expressing justice and equality” (*Buddhism* 134). Focusing on patriarchal Buddhist institutions, Gross argues that women want more than to move from the sidelines onto the playing field. They want to change the rules of the game. “[This process] eventually includes reconceptualizing why people play the game, how to construct game plans, and what is the point . . . of the game” (*Buddhism* 225-226). This last point is crucial. “[O]ne standing authentically within the Buddhist tradition can accurately see Buddhism as a path to freedom *within* the world process or as a freedom *from* the world process. To see Buddhism as providing freedom *within* the world is much more compatible with post-patriarchal vision than the more familiar interpretation of Buddhism as freedom from the world” (Gross *Buddhism* 146).

Western Buddhists, primarily lay women and men, seek an intensive spiritual practice that is something other than accumulating merit by supporting the monastic orders. “Community building is our practice,” argues Thich Nhat Hanh (*Calming* 85) and Gross takes this task to heart by re-imagining the sangha. She dissects the ways in which the sangha reflects a highly alienated and individualistic culture. It ignores the emotional well-being of its members and fails to provide the “psychological matrix” for pursuing awakening. Gross would rebuild the sangha around “the feminist values of community, nurturance, communication, relationship and friendship” (*Buddhism* 261-261, 265).¹⁶ According to Walzer, the

¹⁶ What is clear here is Gross’ intent to transform the consciousness and intersubjectivity of Buddhist women and men. To do so she must provide new stories like the retrieved tales of indigenous Buddhist feminists and a new discourse based on an emancipatory kernel buried in mainline traditions that would lead to transformed practices. What I see missing is not the unmasking of the oppressive impact of Buddhist patriarchy but a political argument for the strategic transformation of Buddhist institutions. Likewise, it is not clear how transformed sanghas, empowering both individuals and groups, would confront, engage, and transform the social institutions which continuously replicate patriarchal power. In short, how would sanghas carry out a prophetic mission?

Israelites wandering through the desert had to unlearn their slavish mentality and forge themselves as a people (45-54, 64-69). The sangha, for Gross, needs to be restructured so that it can assist us in liberating ourselves from the prison of gender roles.

Beyond her feminist analysis of core Buddhist concepts and revalorization of the sangha, Gross turns to the most difficult task—the interrogation of “the beloved heart of Buddhist life—its emphasis on meditative and spiritual disciplines.” Here she is only following her injunction to take nothing on faith, to test everything. She appeals to the Buddha’s own criterion of hewing to the Middle Path. Are Buddhist exemplars who isolate themselves for long periods of time merely winners in a “macho endurance contest?” “What can Mila Repa’s isolation in his cave, turning green from his diet of nettles, have to do with enlightenment?” (*Buddhism* 280-182). Why do we praise such discipline? The balance that Gross seeks between serious meditative practice and the tasks, shared by men and women, of earning a living, raising children, and maintaining a household requires a rethinking of the path of liberation. Post-patriarchal Buddhism offers a discipline that awakens awareness of “just this,” “whether ‘just this’ is one’s everyday occupation or one’s seat in the meditation hall.” Here Buddhist practice coheres with the feminist call to find “freedom within the world, within domestic concerns, within emotions, within sexuality, within parenthood, within career” (*Buddhism* 277-278).

Conclusion

At one point in the trek of the Israelites through the wilderness, Moses and the elders of the Israelites had gathered outside the main camp in the presence of YHWH when a young man arrived bearing the news that two men had begun to prophesy. Joshua, Moses’ assistant, urged him to squelch this unauthorized manifestation of the spirit of God. But Moses

refused, saying “would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit upon them” (Num 11: 24-29). In fact, the spirit of the Hebrew prophets has become contagious. Rita Gross, in significant ways was caught by that boundary transgressing spirit. She demonstrated how a careful scholar and committed Buddhist becomes inspired in a way that leads her to engage in critique as a spiritual discipline. Her steady work, and her unflinching honesty, often in the face of criticism, deserve to be carried forward into new terrains.

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