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Can Buddhists Be Feminists?

Thinking with and Learning from Others in the Asian Humanities Classroom

Jue Liang and Isabelle Peel

Ling Xingpo visited Master Fubei Heshang to pay her respects. They sat together and drank tea, and she asked him, "If a true word can't be spoken no matter how hard you try, how will you teach?"

Fubei said, "Fubei has nothing to say."

Ling was not satisfied. She placed her hands inside the opposite sleeves of her robe and cried out: "There is grievous suffering even within a blue sky!"

Again Fubei had nothing to say.

Ling said, "To be a human being is to live in calamity."

— "Ling's Question."[1]

Jue and Isabelle: Ling's lament of "living in calamity" resonated with us. As educator and student, we felt the impact of a global pandemic, as well as the uncertainty in the emerging post-pandemic world: the physical distance, the mental stress, and the emotional and personal challenges, just to name a few. For those of us dealing

with cultures and worlds that were once accessible but now continue to feel far removed, there is an added struggle to make connections, and to make them meaningful. At the beginning of every class meeting in our Buddhism, Gender, & Sexuality seminar in spring 2021, we read a short story from the *Hidden Lamp*, a collection of short stories highlighting the experience of Buddhist women. These pithy encounters serve as an entry point to that day's discussion. The details in the narratives also add a lived dimension that complements—and sometimes complicates—the Buddhist discourse on gender and sexuality. "Ling's Question" remains one of our favorites. For us, it speaks to the dissonance one faces between the ideal of enlightenment in Buddhism that is supposed to be beyond words and gender markers, and the usually disappointing reality of gender inequality and the ensuing struggles in Buddhist communities. It also asks, how can we relate to others' experiences and realities when the medium of language fails to bring us together?

One of the most challenging aspects of teaching about Asian religions is to invite students to set aside their presuppositions and to "see things their way," that is, to embody a sympathetic understanding, rather than observing from a distance. Some of these presuppositions are easier to recognize, while others slide into the intellectual exercise unexamined. For example, students might be conscious of the geographical and temporal distance, as well as their concrete manifestations in lived experiences—we eat different foods, dress differently, and inhabit different climates—but could overlook the various ways of "being minded"[2] about the world that promises a deeper understanding and even personal transformation. In a classroom conversation about "religion," "gender," and "sexuality," all of which are second-order categories that do not necessarily translate into languages other than English, it is easy to fall into the assumption that these categories are cross-culturally applicable and universally defined.

In this essay, we aim to address the challenge of teaching Asian religions in an undergraduate classroom by promoting a nuanced, sympathetic understanding, instead of a superficial celebration of diversity and, in worse cases, a reluctance to engage with differences. Jue Liang will speak from her perspective as the instructor, while Isabelle Peel will speak based on her experience as a student in the course, and as someone majoring in psychology. We begin with our respective motivations for teaching and taking the course, followed by a particular classroom conversation on the postcolonial critique of a liberal progressive hermeneutic and its unexamined application to Buddhist texts and traditions. Finally, we summarize by reflecting on one of the three principles for an Asian Humanities laid forth by Donald R. Davis, that is, how do we learn *from*, instead of learning *about* others.[3]

Motivations

Isabelle: While scrolling through a Spring 2022 scheduling guide, I came across a course called "Buddhism, Gender, and Sexuality." I had never taken a religion class, so these topics caught my attention—and appeared to offer me a break in my typical course load. Besides fulfilling my major requirements, I did not walk into Knapp 303 with a specific goal.

The first few days of class were slightly intimidating as I was unfamiliar with many of the terms and concepts that were covered. With no background knowledge of Buddhism, I found myself overwhelmed during lectures. Despite my initial hesitations, The *Hidden Lamp* stories that we discussed at the beginning of each class were always intriguing. These short pieces transported me into a new world where I engaged with various topics on a personal, intimate, and meaningful level. Through the lens of the narrators, I acknowledged different perspectives that I otherwise would not have encountered. Stories and anecdotes are powerful and arguably more helpful when trying to understand the experiences of others.

Jue: One of my favorite anecdotes to share with the students on the first day of the class is two interactions I had with Tibetan Buddhist nuns. The first one took place at the end of a four-hour-long conversation. I have been asking a Tibetan Buddhist nun about her role in publishing several collections of writings by and about Buddhist women, and what her life as a nun was like. She also asked me questions about the gender situation in the US and mainland China. She was particularly interested in the suffragette movement and the legal debates surrounding abortion. So I thought I would wrap up the interview by asking, "Would you consider yourself a Buddhist feminist?" To my surprise, she said, "No. I am a Buddhist, not a feminist. But I'd like to help to advance women's cause in whatever way I can."

Another encounter took place during an interview with another nun who was the provost of esoteric learnings at the same institution. She was known for her strict demeanor but, at the same time, her advocacy for nuns' education. She was making me lunch in her own hut. I was asking her questions about her own experience and her teaching. I asked the same question, she stopped and asked me what feminism is. After my quick explanation—"feminism is the ideal that all genders should be treated equally"—she shrugged and said, "Sure! I guess you can call me a feminist."

These two examples immediately prompt questions from students like "do Tibetan Buddhists care about feminism," "what does Buddhism say about gender," and, ultimately, "can Buddhists be feminists?" They vividly demonstrate the inadequacy of using terms like "feminism" in our critical analysis of a religious tradition that does not necessarily espouse such an ideal or has very different

ideas about personhood and gender identities. The challenges in a cross-cultural definition of "gender" and "personhood" remain central in the reflective exercises of our presuppositions.

Isabelle: About a month into the semester, I recognized that I was reevaluating my understanding of Buddhism, gender, and sexuality. The thoughts that I had established before this class were shifting away from the comfortable boundaries of a liberal-feminist mindset. As a psychology major, I recognized these shifts in my thinking as conceptual changes. In their 2014 article, Sinatra, Kienhues, and Hofer analyze conceptual change as it relates to the public's perception of science. However, the theory also plays a crucial role in academic environments as it affects how students engage with complex topics. Conceptual change is defined as "the process of restructuring one's knowledge that is influenced by a complex array of cognitive, motivational, affective, and sociocultural factors."[4] This concept describes my experience in Dr. Liang's classroom as we explored subjects such as feminism.

Case Studies: A Postcolonial Critique of Liberal Feminism

Jue: One example of such reflective exercises happens early in the semester. The seminar is divided into three sections. The first one is effectively a crash course on the key tenets of Buddhism and the central concepts in the study of gender and sexuality.[5] The second one surveys in broad strokes the chronological development of Buddhism and the rise of its many emanations: Mainstream Buddhism, Mahāyāna Buddhism, tantric Buddhism, and Chan or Zen Buddhism. The third and last section of the course responds to the many challenges and new circumstances contemporary Buddhist communities find themselves in, including homosexuality, transgenderism, equal access to education, and the restoration of full ordination for nuns.

At the end of the first section, after going through some general theoretical and methodological concerns of the study of women in religions, I assigned two readings that specifically counter the seemingly universality of categories like womanhood, equality, and feminism. One is a chapter from Nirmala Salgado's *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice: In Search of the Female Renunciant*, entitled "Decolonizing Female Renunciation;"[6] the other is the introduction chapter from Amy Langenberg's *Birth in Buddhism: The Suffering Fetus and Female Freedom*.[7] Both readings tackle the deeply seated and prevalent liberal feminist hermeneutics present in many studies of women and gender in Buddhism. In her critique of Rita Gross's influential work, *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*,[8] Salgado examines three sets of problematic reasonings in the book: the overemphasized dichotomy between "traditional"/ "Asian" and "Western" Buddhism (and monastics and lay Buddhism), the flattening of Buddhism into its textual traditions, and the assumptions that "agency" and

"freedom" are universal and universally desirable principles. In her research, Salgado queries the identity of the female renunciants through a combination of textual and ethnographic study, and attends to the everyday, lived reality of female renunciants in Sri Lanka as narrated by themselves, instead of imposing any external interpretive frameworks.

Similarly, Langenberg also proposes a contextually sensitive and critically reflective methodology that maintains awareness of the limited applicability of liberal feminist perspectives in the study of early Buddhism. In short, their critique is not to categorically deny any possible connection between religious and feminist ideals, but "refusing to simply conscript the past into contemporary arguments between feminism and religion."[9] Finally, to offer a comprehensive discussion, I also provided in class a short excerpt from a later collection of essays by Rita Gross, published posthumously.[10] This excerpt responds to the critiques of her "feminist" reading of Buddhism. While Gross restates her advocacy for feminism as the "freedom from the prison of gender roles," she also resigns to a separation between "Asian" and "Western" Buddhist communities, arguing that "[w]hat Asians make of these suggestions is not for me but for Asian Buddhists to decide. Just as I insist that Asian Buddhists should not try to control Western Buddhists who do not want to adopt Asian Buddhist practices of male dominance."[11]

Isabelle: I was significantly impacted by this excerpt from Rita Gross's *Buddhism Beyond Gender*. Gross declares that Western feminism is the universal path forward. Prior to this class, I likely would not have thought twice about her argument as my definition of feminism was more closely aligned with hers: "Feminism refers to any movement that deliberately seeks to raise the status of women from an accepted status quo. It is presupposed that such movements result in greater gender equality and equity."[12] Using this framework, Gross explains that it may be beneficial for Asian Buddhists to adopt feminist ideas as they appear to ignore women's rights and gender equality. Instead of merely acknowledging Gross's work and moving on with my day, I felt I could not leave class without challenging her claims. My urge to dig deeper was an indication that my previous understanding of feminism was not in agreement with the content I was learning in the course. At this moment, my attitude on the topic shifted from what I had previously relied on, as I had replaced these points of view with updated ones. This is not to say that I have completely abandoned my previous definition of feminism, but I found myself asking whether it was applicable in the context of Asian Buddhism.

Can We Learn from Asian Religions?

Jue: But Ling's question remains: if the comparative study of feminism and religion is in many cases a flawed exercise, then what can we get out of studying Asian

religions, and their views on gender, sexuality, and personhood? In this concluding section, we would like to turn our attention to the call for a new vision of Asian Humanities proposed by Donald Davis. First, Davis notes the different treatment of subject matters on Asian persons, subjects, and disciplines with their "Western" counterparts—"[o]ne reads Plato not merely to learn about ancient Greece or the quaint customs of another place and time, but to learn from Plato how to think and rethink politics, art, and metaphysics today. We almost never do the same with Kautilya, though his *Arthaśāstra*, like Plato's *Republic*, contains an equally majestic vision of polity and statecraft."[13] He then proposes that we as educators and as students keep ourselves open to the possibilities of being changed or moved by the subjects of our study, be it the Buddhist contention that our notion of self is a falsely conceptual product, or the Hindu suggestion that spirituality, security, and pleasure are all worthy pursuits in life. In other words, we need to be open to being changed conceptually, and to embrace other ways of being minded in this world.

Isabelle: "Care First…Learn From…Connect Histories." This is how Donald R. Davis suggests we approach Asian Humanities. I was intrigued by Davis' piece because I had never contemplated how—and why—professors relay information to their students. However, these three principles are especially relevant in a fast-paced, high-stress environment like college. The principle of care demands us to slow down and pay attention to each other; to learn from helps us become more compassionate and capacious in our study; and the connections we make situate ourselves in the world in a more informed manner.

Davis states that "…much more has been written about what Asian studies should be and what is wrong with it than about what it might be and what its value is."[14] I immediately highlighted this sentence and recalled the articles I had read in the Buddhism, Gender, and Sexuality seminar. I asked myself if these various authors had emphasized the value of Asian studies rather than offering a critique of the subject. While it is essential to consider the content I absorbed in class, reflecting upon my engagement with Asian topics is more important. For the most part, learning is treated as a goal-oriented task. Whether the purpose is to pass an exam or write a paper, Davis's first principle, "care first," is often abandoned in the classroom. He states that caring encompasses both definitions: having a sincere interest and watching over someone and ensuring their well-being.[15] Even though I understood the meaning, it took me some time to apply it in the seminar context. To care extends beyond my personal or intellectual curiosities. Interacting with the history and culture of Asia could be no different from entering into a conversation with another person. Just as this interpersonal encounter requires respect and attention, Asian studies should be treated in the same way.

Davis' second principle is to "learn from." To learn *from* and to learn *about* are frequently used interchangeably, but there is a distinctly different concern. Academic endeavors are usually addressed in a "learning about" manner. The search for objectivity, facts, and validity prevents potentially more powerfully transformative conversations. I saw this dichotomy in Nirmala Salgado's *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice*. After interviews and discussions with Buddhist nuns, she concludes that the relationship between the nuns and the Eight Heavy Conditions (Pāli *gurudhamma*)[16] is more complex than the prescriptive one portrayed by Western scholars. The principle of "learning from" is highlighted as Salgado "speaks first of the human and second of the culture."[17] Not only does she provide a transcript of the interviews, she also made clear the importance of the nun's perspectives. Such narratives are extremely valuable as they provide the most authentic information. Communication in this form is crucial because we subconsciously use heuristics in situations where accessible information is limited. Because these mental shortcuts are formed and influenced by past experiences, we are a reflection of our biases. When it comes to an academic discipline that is unfamiliar, like Buddhism, it is far too easy to make assumptions and generalizations based on one's own culture. To learn from others forces us to step outside our comfort zones and make the deliberate choice to refuse the patterns with which we have become complacent.

Davis' final principle is "connecting histories." Despite the thousands of miles that separate North America and Asia, both continents are a piece of the larger human history. We are all more connected than the history books often reveal. To focus on connection allows for deeper discovery and recognition of cultural agency and influence.[18] Superficial comparison, on the other hand, does not create productive environments and might widen the gap between the already distant cultures. Through much of my academic study, I have had more experience with comparison rather than connection. However, this course on Buddhism, Gender, and Sexuality has allowed me to break this habit. Dr. Liang prompts the class to practice connecting histories in our discussion board posts. We are asked to make a connection between the assigned reading and any other material we have covered. Since we began practicing this skill from the start of the semester, it has become second nature. Once we are able to recognize the history of others as our own, learning from these connected histories can then take place.[19]

Jue and Isabelle: We wrapped up the semester with presentations on student research projects, each firmly rooted in a contextually sensitive approach. Some projects utilize textual resources, where students disentangle the ambivalent attitude toward female enlightenment in Indian Buddhism, investigate the creative adaptation of Buddhist identities by Empress Wu of China, or analyze the discourse on gender by contemporary Thai female Buddhist leaders. One project

challenges the visual representation of Buddhism in America as predominantly white, middle-class, and female (as seen on several *Time* covers), while another examines Buddhism as social activism in Vietnamese American communities. In a post-pandemic world still wounded by hate and ignorance, an Asian Humanities classroom centered around care, humility, and engagement could offer a footing for us to venture into a potentially less calamitous future.

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Notes

[1] Florence Caplow and Susan Moon, *The Hidden lamp: Stories from Twenty-Five Centuries of Awakened Women* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2013), 260.

[2] As suggested by Sonam Kachru, to speak of "being minded" suggests that humans are oriented in their perception of, reactions to, and relationship with the world through their thoughts. For his salient argument for the entanglement of mind and world, as exemplified in the work of the Indian Buddhist philosopher Vasubandhu, see Kachru, *Other Lives: Mind and World in Indian Buddhism* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2021), 1–2.

[3] Donald R. Davis, "Three Principles for an Asian Humanities: Care First ... Learn From ... Connect Histories," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 74, no. 1, 1 Feb. 2015, 1–25.

[4] Gale M. Sinatra, Dorothe Kienhues, and Barbara K. Hofer, "Addressing Challenges to Public Understanding of Science: Epistemic Cognition, Motivated Reasoning, and Conceptual Change," *Educational Psychologist* 2014 49 (2), 133.

[5] This is because the course is crosslisted with Religion, Women and Gender Studies, and Queer Studies at Denison University. Students who enroll in the course could come from any of these three disciplines and do not necessarily share the same background knowledge.

[6] Nirmala S. Salgado, *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice: In Search of Female Renunciant* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013), 21-31.

[7] Amy Paris Langenberg, *Birth in Buddhism: The Suffering Fetus and Female Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 10–17.

[8] Rita M. Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1993).

[9] Langenberg, *Birth in Buddhism*, 17.

[10] Rita M. Gross, *Buddhism beyond Gender: Liberation from Attachment to Identity* (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2018), 132-140. Also see Amy Paris Langenberg, "*Buddhism beyond Gender.* By Rita Gross," *Journal of Global Buddhism*, 2019, Vol.20, 133–137.

[11] Gross, *Buddhism beyond Gender*, 139.

[12] Gross, *Buddhism beyond Gender*, 136.

[13] Davis, "Three Principles for an Asian Humanities," 12.

[14] Davis, "Three Principles for an Asian Humanities," 1.

[15] Davis, "Three Principles for an Asian Humanities," 5.

[16] The Eight Heavy Conditions are a well-known set of monastic precepts applicable only to fully ordained nuns. These rules prescribe nuns paying respect to monks irrespective of seniority, nuns' reporting duties to monks, and a mandatory presence of monks in some important gatherings and ritual occasions. For an introduction to the scholarly debates on this matter, see Bhikkhu Analayo, "Bhiksunī Ordination," in *The Oxford Handbook of Buddhist Ethics*, edited by Daniel Cozort and James Mark Shields (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 116–134.

[17] Nirmala S. Salgado, *Buddhist Nuns and Gendered Practice*, 17.

[18] Davis, "Three Principles for an Asian Humanities," 19.

[19] Davis, "Three Principles for an Asian Humanities," 23.

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