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# Visions of Interconnectedness in Engaged Buddhism and Feminist Theology

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**ABSTRACT** Interconnectedness is an appealing ideal in both engaged Buddhism and feminist theology. There are differences, however. Engaged Buddhists stress selfishness as the root cause of “disconnectedness” and clear awareness through meditation as the antidote and goal. Feminists stress sexism as the root cause and the overcoming of dualistic patterns of patriarchy as the goal. Both traditions can learn from each other in addressing these causes and seeking these goals.

“Interconnectedness” has become something of a buzzword in contemporary talk on spirituality and politics. Everywhere one turns it seems, one hears a similar refrain: that all things are interconnected and mutually conditioning; that relationship is the essence of everything; and that if we dare to move beyond the pretenses of a walled-off individuality, that stylistics of self so endemic to Western culture, we will realize ourselves to be truly as inseparable from the web of life as the cells in our bodies are inseparable from us.

To account for the widespread appeal of this vision of interconnectedness or interdependence in the context of today’s commodified, commercialized, and desacralized Western world is not difficult. The social, political, and economic arrangements of modern life work to frame persons as individual agents, autonomous masters of their own fate, who are as estranged from any real grounding in communal belonging as they are cut off from any dimension of reality that is not a product of human agency. From this situation of estrangement, talk about interconnectedness tastes like a tonic elixir, revitalizing and refreshing, just what the doctor ordered.

But precisely because this vision of interconnectedness is so enticing, and seems to be such a good medicine for the ills of our time, it behooves us to consider what we really mean by interconnectedness, especially what it might mean as an ethic—that is, how the idea of interconnectedness might take shape as a mode of orientation and lived *practice* in the world.

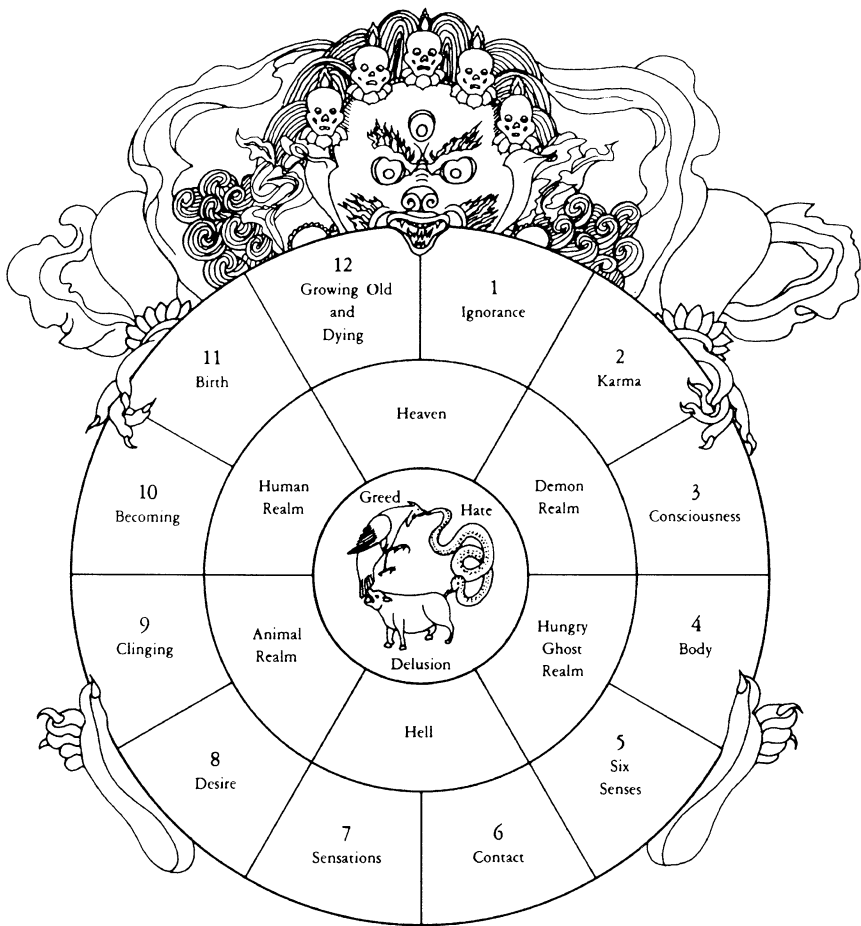
If I take the idea of interconnectedness seriously, then with whom or with what must I acknowledge my connectedness? And how must I act in awareness of that connectedness? These questions are approached here through a consideration and comparison of the ways that the principle of interconnectedness works in two specific religious movements: engaged Buddhism and feminist theology. A vision of the interdependent nature of reality is at the heart of both of these innovative, reformist movements. But what does it mean in each context? Are their visions the same? Where do they intersect? Where do they challenge each other?

In many ways, engaged Buddhism and feminist theology are natural conversation partners. Sharing a commitment to religiously motivated engagement with society for the sake of its transformation, both movements reject the dualistic tendencies of their respective traditions that sunder spiritual life from worldly life, materiality from sacrality, as if the real was located somewhere beyond this world of change. Against traditional valorizations of asceticism and world abandonment, they both favor a this-worldly spirituality that is mobilized in opposition to the sources of injustice, senseless suffering, and ecological devastation.

This shared commitment to social engagement in the context of the challenges of the late twentieth century gives rise to one application of the principle of interconnectedness that is common to both movements. Keenly aware of the interdependent nature of our pressing political, social, and environmental problems, both engaged Buddhists and feminist theologians argue that ideological approaches which divide issues up into discrete boxes are no longer adequate to deal with the peril we face. As well, this situation of global interdependence calls us to expand the parameters of what we perceive to be our self-interest and to adopt a more inclusive ethics of responsibility for all beings. Joanna Macy's thinking toward an "ecological sense of self" moves in this direction<sup>1</sup> as does ecofeminism's emphasis upon respect and reverence for "the web of life" in which all beings are interconnected and upon which all beings depend.<sup>2</sup>

In other ways however, feminist theology and engaged Buddhism offer distinctive articulations about what a paradigm of interconnectedness or interdependency might mean. The following will clarify how the idea of interconnectedness works in each movement in order to set the stage for a dialogue of comparison and mutual critique.

For socially engaged Buddhists, the Dharma not only points the way to spiritual transformation but also constitutes a mandate for and a guide to the work of social transformation. While the Buddha's teachings on suffering, compassion, and selflessness are extremely important in different ways to engaged Buddhists, the doctrine of interdependence or *pratitya-samutpada* (variously translated as interdependent origination, conditioned genesis, dependent co-arising, etc.) is perhaps most fundamental; it is, as Sallie King asserts, "probably the most powerful conceptual tool used by . . . [Buddhist] activists to understand, express and justify their perspective."<sup>3</sup>



The Wheel of Becoming—Pratitya-Samutpada

The Buddha's doctrine of *pratitya-samutpada* teaches that nothing at all, most of all that which we call the self, exists independently, in and of itself. Rather, everything arises in dependence upon everything else; "because there is this, there is that; because this is not, that is not." We live in a web of mutual causality in which everything ultimately touches and conditions everything else, with nothing at all existing autonomously and nothing at all standing aloof from change. Traditionally, this teaching is understood to bring liberation from the root of suffering in the realization that the desiring self and its desired objects are both empty of any substantial, abiding, or independent existence. But for socially engaged Buddhists, *pratitya-samutpada* means also that personal transformation is always interdependent with social transformation, inner peace with world peace.<sup>4</sup>

The empty or interdependent nature of the self and all things implies

that liberation cannot be understood as just a matter of personal salvation.<sup>5</sup> The individual and his or her world are interdependent and mutually conditioning; self and society “inter-are,” as Thich Nhat Hanh puts it. Therefore, we cannot awaken to things as they are by retreating into an island of private tranquility, for we are not islands; all that we are is inextricably interconnected with all that society is and with all of the suffering that pervades society. Thus to awaken is to realize the truth of our inter-being with a tormented world, so giving birth to compassion, the motive force of engaged spirituality. Social activism is then a natural expression of spiritual practice.

At the same time, if all things are linked to all others in “an intricate web of co-arising,”<sup>6</sup> then even the smallest of actions, like the quelling of one person’s mental confusion through Dharma practice, generates a ripple effect of change that reaches to every corner of the universe.<sup>7</sup> Therefore spiritual practice should not be abandoned for the sake of activism, for the power to transform the world rests in our hearts as well as in our hands.

The principle of interdependence can also be taken as a map for the constitution for alternative, more humane forms of social organization. For example, the late Thai monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu took interdependence as the basis for a social philosophy he called dhammic socialism; he argued that because interdependence is the fundamental law of all things, including human nature, any socioeconomic system that fosters selfishness and individualism runs counter to the way things really are and therefore creates social disharmony and suffering. To live correctly, that is according to the way things really are, is to wake up from the illusion of separateness and individualism, and thus to put aside selfishness and to act for the good of the whole.<sup>8</sup> Lest such social visions appear to be completely utopian, Joanna Macy reminds us that interdependence means that our social institutions “co-arise with us”; rather than being inevitable or immutable, the structures of society are “impermanent and contingent products of human interaction,” which today “mirror our greeds,” but which tomorrow could mirror our compassion.<sup>9</sup> Knowing that power resides not in institutions, but in the relationship between those institutions and ourselves, we can muster the courage and the will to work for change.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the most profound and challenging application of *pratitya-samutpada* is to be found in Thich Nhat Hanh’s reflections on the interconnectedness between self and enemy.<sup>11</sup> “We think that the enemy is the other,” he says, “and that is why we can never see him.” “Thinking the enemy is the other, we comfortably locate the source of violence somewhere “out there,” separate from ourselves. If, however, *pratitya-samutpada* means that other people are not fundamentally separate from our own selves, then we need to experience not only the suffering of others as our own suffering, but also and most painfully, to see the violence of others as our own violence.<sup>12</sup> *Pratitya-samutpada* teaches that the perpetrators of vio-

lence are not as they are because of any intrinsic nature, rather they are as they are because of the causes and conditions that have made up their lives. And because these causes and conditions are interlocking and interdependent with all other causes and conditions—including those that form the fabric of our own lives—then it follows that we are all participating, moment to moment, in the causes and conditions that make the enemy what he is.<sup>13</sup>

From this perspective, there is no place of innocence from which to cast judgment on those who create suffering nor is there any room for hate or righteous anger. Anger must be allowed to settle in mindfulness, so that one can look deeply into the heart of one's enemy, see through to the sources of his or her violence, and awaken to one's own coparticipation in those sources of violence. The root of violence is to be found not only in the one who commits violence, but also in our own willingness to hold anger, to hate, and to refuse to recognize our interbeing with the enemy. "We can only shoot others when they are strangers. Real efforts for reconciliation arise when we see with the eyes of compassion, and that ability comes when we see clearly the nature of interbeing and interpenetration of all beings."<sup>14</sup> Seeing with the eyes of compassion means to realize that our enemy suffers too, that his or her violence arises in response to that suffering, and that we might act the same if we stood in his or her place.<sup>15</sup> In this way, Thich Nhat Hanh's interpretation of the Buddha's teaching of interconnectedness offers a path of purification in which we seek not only to quell all hatred or anger, but also to deconstruct the fortifications of self-righteousness and blame that protect one from acknowledging our interbeing with the one we call enemy.

The theme of interconnectedness is as central to feminist reflection in religion as it is to engaged Buddhism. Feminist scholars, however, come to this theme from a different direction and articulate its implications in different ways. For engaged Buddhists, the principle of interconnectedness could be found at the very heart of the Buddhist tradition in the doctrine of *pratitya-samutpada*. By contrast, feminist theology must deal with the apparent absence of a strong principle of interconnectedness within the classical theological tradition, that is, with the imagination of a transcendent deity that is fundamentally not connected with the world. Within classical theism, the measure of this God's perfection is his immutably and therefore, his untouchability; for God to be God, "He" must be essentially unrelated to this material world and unaffected by what happens in it.<sup>16</sup> Such a disconnected God is congruent with a conception of selfhood that is likewise disconnected from matter and mutuality, as authentic selfhood is equated with autonomy and measured in terms of one's capacity to rise above the pull of emotional and bodily needs. In turn, these alienated constructions of sacrality and selfhood support hierarchal and oppressive forms of social organization and set the stage for the exploitation of nature.

Feminist theology confronts these constructions with the realization that they are all founded upon the primary sexual symbolism of the domination of the male over the female and the projection unto women of those aspects of human nature that threaten the autonomous self's desire for self-mastery and rational control—that is, the body, sexuality, emotion, dependency, and death. In response, feminist theology strives to deconstruct the West's dualistic worldview and to reimagine the world anew, this time in terms of the interconnectedness of soul and body, God and nature, reason and emotion, and autonomy and connection, weaving back together those dimensions of reality that had been alienated from one another.

Although Christian, Jewish, and neo-pagan Goddess feminists reweave the world with varied patterns, one finds a common thread between them in a shared language about interconnectedness, mutuality, and relationship between and among all things. In feminism's "theology of relation," the divine is dethroned from "his" transcendent impassibility, into the immanent web of life, and the sacred is reimaged as the very thread of interconnection that binds together all things. Whether imagined as the neo-pagan Goddess, who is immanent in nature, flesh, and relationships,<sup>17</sup> or in biblical metaphor as the feminine Spirit or Holy Sophia, who is the "great matrix" within which all things are mutually interrelated,<sup>18</sup> this divine She models alternative forms of social relationship and spirituality based upon mutuality and an awareness of interdependence of all beings within the web of life.

As the very web of interconnection, this divine She cannot be found through any ascetical flight from body, world, and relationships, but only in and through the work of embracing the joy and pain of embodied, relational existence. The way to Her moves through the defensive reifications of a self-enclosed ego into an opening to the truth of our being as constituted in and through our relationship with others. This way must pass through the inner demons of self-hatred and repression born of the fear of connection. Confronting these, one releases that power within which Lorde and Heyward call the power of the *erotic*—that is, the power of desire and the longing to connect, physically or otherwise, which draws human beings into loving, empowering relationship with one another.<sup>19</sup> For feminist theology, this power of the erotic is the power of the sacred, for it is not through monadic autonomy and self-mastery, but through openness to connection and the embrace of emotion and vulnerability that one enters into that power by which human experience is made whole.

In such ways, a vision of the interconnectedness of all things, 'posited in resistance to the dualistic metaphysics of Western religious thought, guides feminist theology in an effort to resacralize the relational and embodied nature of human experience.

Thus, in their distinctive ways, feminist theology and engaged Buddhism each embrace a worldview characterized by a principle of the intercon-





The Triple Goddess of  
Neolithic Europe

nectedness or interdependence of all things with each other. Upon examination, however, it seems that there are some things that feminist theology includes in its vision of interconnectedness that engaged Buddhism does not, and vice versa. In the following discussion, feminist theology and engaged Buddhism dialogue with each other so that each draws the attention of the other to places where their respective visions of interconnectedness might become yet more inclusive.

One obvious point of convergence between engaged Buddhism and feminist theology is their shared insight that self and society are interdependent and that, therefore, inner transformation and social transformation are likewise interdependent. Where they differ, however, is in the type of inner changes that each recommends. For feminist spirituality, the emphasis is not as much on attaining inner calm, freedom from anger, or boundless compassion as in the work of Thich Nhat Hanh, as upon an effort to overcome the internalized structures of the patriarchal, dualistic worldview that are manifest within the structures of one's own psyche, for example, in self-hatred, in the numbing of feeling, or in distorted attitudes toward one's sexuality.

Now it could be argued, with much justification, that spiritual feminists could profit from mindfulness training and attend more closely to the interconnections between inner peace and world peace. Feminist theory honors anger as a motive force for change, but as Rita Gross saw when feminism and Buddhism intersected in her own life, attachment to anger, even where such anger is well justified, is in the long run enervating and self-indulgent.<sup>20</sup> Mindfulness practice, which focuses upon the anger itself rather than upon its object, could help feminists to work creatively with the energy contained in anger.



But could it not also be argued that the inner work practiced within feminist spirituality has something to share with engaged Buddhism? Perhaps Western feminists can be of little help with the great matter of attaining nirvana. But we are not talking here about the quest for enlightenment in remote hermitages; rather we are talking about a Buddhism engaged with lay life and social activism, and consequently with all of the heartaches and headaches that arise in the context of close engagement with other human beings. Traditional Buddhist practice does not necessarily train a person to deal with interpersonal relationships, and probably it has not needed to, given that traditionally Buddhist practitioners have come from cultures where persons were already well “connected” to others by close clan and village ties and a shared worldview.<sup>21</sup> But many if not most practitioners from Western cultures come to Dharma practice as highly individualized selves, for whom relationship with others is something that must be achieved, often with much difficulty, rather than being already given. (For example, Jack Kornfield found that the long and fruitful years of training he received in Burmese monasteries did not adequately equip him to deal with the complex personal and sexual issues that arose as he reengaged with lay life.)<sup>22</sup> It may be that Western engaged Buddhists at least, whose activism brings them to deal with the complex tangles of human emotion and drives, might find some wisdom in feminist spirituality’s impetus to honestly acknowledge those dimensions of human experience that have been denigrated in the West—desires, sexuality, our need for relationship, our vulnerability, even our dark emotions—and to reclaim these in some way as integral to empowered and whole experience.

This concern for our connectedness is already showing up in the writings of engaged Buddhists in the West who are influenced by the same streams of thought that flow through feminist theology. Christina Feldman for example, a teacher of insight meditation, warns against the temptation to misinterpret Buddhism’s stress on non-attachment as an excuse to put on the armor of “spiritual invincibility.”<sup>23</sup> If, in the name of non-attachment, we give ourselves permission to withdraw from engagement with our own hearts, from our own pain and yearnings, is it not an easy next step to withdraw from the pain of others? Thus, for Feldman, religious practice is not a way of detachment, but a way of inward sensitivity. As she says, “Learning to listen inwardly, we learn to listen to our world and to each other. . . . [Such] sensitivity brings an inner connection with the total range of . . . our bodies, feelings, and mind. Respect for the power and fertility of our heart is born, and we truly appreciate the healing power of love, sensitivity, and compassion.”<sup>24</sup> Thus connecting with our deepest feelings, and honoring these, is not a self-indulgent diversion from the path, but is rather the basis for compassionate engagement with the pain of others.

Traditional Buddhist teachings tend to valorize solitude and aloneness as the *sine qua non* of the path to enlightenment; the celibate world renouncer

is enjoined to wander “lonely as a rhinoceros.” But if belief in the self as independent and self-existent is our fundamental delusion and root poison, can heroic assertions of spiritual autonomy—that we are self-sufficient and have no need for human comfort and companionship—bring liberation? A feminist Buddhism might argue that we are not just solitary beings who must come to terms with our radical aloneness; at the same time we are interdependent beings, whose minds and possibilities are shaped by the character and quality of our relationships with others. This wisdom is carried in the heart of the Dharma itself, in the neglected third of the Triple Refuge—samgha or community.<sup>25</sup> As Rita Gross argues, to say that one must take refuge in the samgha is to say that “community, as source of psychological comfort, is the indispensable matrix of spiritual existence.”<sup>26</sup> From community we gain not only opportunities to practice compassion, as traditional teachings stress, but also the opportunity to receive compassion and the psychological comfort needed for healing and empowerment through our pain. Therefore, the work of creating and nurturing networks of relationship that are characterized by mutual care and friendship is spiritual work of the utmost importance.

This is especially true, argues Anne Klein, for those practicing within the context of Western culture: “In a highly individuated society, maintaining relationships is both of greater importance and greater difficulty than in a traditional one. For this very reason, profound human connection has an important place in Western spiritual development. Human connection grounds spirituality and expresses it, and maintaining such connection is as profound a challenge to accomplish as any advanced meditative state.”<sup>27</sup> Where an atmosphere of militant individualism breeds spiritual and bodily diseases born of alienation and aloneness, feminist theology’s affirmation of relationship as spiritual work offers a much-needed remedy.

Feminist theology further suggests that such work is political as well as personal. Because the glorification of spiritual invincibility and personal autonomy is so interrelated with sexism and related forms of oppressive power, the work of political transformation cannot be separated from the work of inner transformation in opening our hearts to our vulnerability, our feelings, and our dependence upon relationship. Thus an engaged spirituality, dedicated to the mutual transformation of self and society, may sometimes require of us not only the renunciation of desire, in the sense of renouncing the poisons of attachment and aversion, but also at the same time, a reclamation of desire, in the sense of a reclamation of the erotic—of our connectedness to body, to feeling, and to our need for others.

Another basic application of the principle of interconnectedness upon which both feminist theology and engaged Buddhism agree is that all the issues that confront us—personal, social, political, environmental—are interconnected and mutually conditioning. But unlike engaged Buddhism, feminist theology takes the issue of sexism as a privileged locus in the self-

society nexus where external structures of domination and internal sources of violence intersect. This perspective can provide an important corrective to the proclivity of engaged Buddhists to deal with the issue of sexism as an addendum upon a long list of social problems.

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's proposal for a dhammic socialism offers a case in point. His diagnosis of the root cause of the social problems that Thailand faces is certainly correct at the most fundamental level. Not only Thailand's, but all humanity's troubles are rooted in our "me" and "mine" ways of thinking. From this it follows that the ultimate solution to our problems is selflessness. Each must live for the benefit of society, placing the common good above personal interests. However, in this proposal for a dhammic socialism, Buddhadasa does not foreground the problem of sexism nor does he connect gender issues with other social issues, and herein lies a problem. From a feminist perspective, Buddhadasa's prescription for Thailand's social ills elides the situation of Thai women, particularly poor Thai women. It overlooks the problem that selflessness means one thing in the context of dharma practice, but can mean quite another thing as an imposed prescription for social behavior. For many Thai women, selflessness is already too much a way of life—but theirs is not a liberating selflessness born of realization of emptiness, but is rather a self-negating selflessness that is born of sexist social attitudes which degrade women's inherent value. As Dr. Kabilsingh explains, views of women's mental and physical inferiority, passed down and perpetuated over the generations, teach that women have little worth apart from the worth they gain by serving their families and pleasing men.<sup>28</sup> Self-effacing behavior becomes a primary basis upon which Thai women establish their social worth. This devaluation of woman is not unrelated to other social problems in Thailand. For example, Dr. Kabilsingh argues that this pattern of socialization plays into the thriving sex trade.<sup>29</sup> When a family falls into debt, it is not uncommon for elder daughters to be asked to "sacrifice" for their parents and younger siblings, that is, to enter into the sex trade. And the girls, having internalized the view that their worth resides in their willingness to sacrifice for others, then become prostitutes out of a sense of duty or obligation to parents. The point here is not to accuse Buddhadasa of holding sexist attitudes himself; certainly he envisions that men and women will practice selflessness equally under dhammic socialism. But rather the point is to question whether the promotion of selflessness as the highest social virtue would help to free Thai culture from sexist social attitudes. As his diagnosis of Thailand's social problems ignores the problem of sexism, his prescription does not treat it.

In the literature on engaged Buddhism coming out of Thailand, discussion of the question of women is usually dealt with as a separate topic and is focused on the status of religiously committed women. But a gender-nuanced analysis of Thailand's social ills, informed by awareness of the

way issues interconnect, would have to treat seriously the co-arising of sexist attitudes toward women with other dimensions of Thai culture, including not only the traditional exclusion of women from the samgha, but also the rise of consumerism, the erosion of community life, and other social problems that Buddhadasa decries.

But what about sacrifice and selflessness? From the perspective of the principle of interconnectedness, when are they appropriate modes of action and why are they appropriate? As noted earlier, both feminist theology and engaged Buddhism agree that awareness of interconnectedness implies a more inclusive ethics of responsibility. But where does our responsibility not to harm the web of life upon which we ourselves depend shift into responsibility to give of ourselves selflessly, to extend ourselves for others beyond the parameters of our own self-interest, no matter how broadly understood? I think here of the Vietnamese nun Chi Mai who immolated herself for peace during the Vietnam War.<sup>30</sup> When Chi Mai set herself on fire, she made of her body a flaming witness to the profound interconnectedness of herself with the suffering people of Vietnam. Unable to bear the suffering of others, feeling their pain as her pain, she gave away her life in an attempt to reach the hearts of others, in the hope that those who supported the war would likewise awaken to their shared participation in its horror. It would be false to argue that Chi Mai was motivated in her sacrifice by the self-interested hope of accruing merit; rather she believed that suicide was a sin of impiety toward one's parents for which one would have to atone in another life.<sup>31</sup> There was no benefit for Chi Mai in the deed. Her self-immolation was pure gift, and a costly gift at that.

Feminist theology has always been suspicious of calls for selfless sacrifice, because historically, the ideological valorization of selflessness has served as a mechanism to maintain the system of female subordination. For women and others who have been socialized to efface their own needs in service of others, "to *own* one's life," to claim the self-authority to assert one's own needs as significant, "is to creatively overcome dispossession."<sup>32</sup> But if feminist theology would make good on its promise to be a force for the transformation of the world, does it not need to give a more central place to compassion, self-giving, and even sacrifice? For where in the modern world has the hegemony of violence and oppression been effectively challenged except where men and women have bravely practiced the way of compassion and selflessness? On the heart level, most of us agree with Thich Nhat Hanh when he says, "only love and sacrifice can engender love and sacrifice."<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, feminist theology tends either to avoid discussion of the need for sacrifice in activist work or to deny that it is needed at all. Starhawk, for example, argues that "Gandhi's ideas don't always fit for a lot of us, particularly for women. Gandhi said we have to accept the suffering and take it in. Women have been doing that for thousands and thousands of years, and it hasn't stopped anything much—except a lot of

women's lives."<sup>34</sup> She argues that acts of self-sacrifice serve only to "absorb" violence rather than to stop it or to transform it and that there are other ways to transform the hegemony of the structures of power-over, ways that offer self-enhancement rather than demanding self-sacrifice. Indeed, she says, "the actual unsung truth about a lot of organizing is that it feels really good, and that's why people do it."<sup>35</sup> Such optimism might appear terribly naive to those who struggle for human rights and peace in situations of political oppression where concerned activism is accompanied every day by the threat of arbitrary imprisonment, torture, and /or death.

Catherine Keller ventures that the traditional religious ideal of self-sacrifice and feminism's ideal of self-affirmation may not necessarily be opposites if one understands self-sacrifice as a self-emptying "into the ocean of relational life, from which one perpetually receives oneself back again."<sup>36</sup> In criticizing selflessness as a goal, Keller stresses that her point "is not to decry the gesture by which selves knowingly give themselves over as gift to the matrix of meaningful life that sustains them—the social ecology of love surely requires such circulation of energies."<sup>37</sup> Although Keller honors acts of sacrifice such as Chi Mai's, there is a vacuity of language here that I think betrays an absence or a lack in feminist theology that might be addressed through an encounter with engaged Buddhism. Keller's talk about sacrifice as "a giving of oneself over as gift to the matrix of meaningful life" or "participating in a circulation of energies" would hardly inspire a timid and comfortable person such as myself to put her body, freedom, or wealth on the line for the sake of others. Why should I sacrifice anything at all, beyond what is already excess? Why should I put at risk my own security and well-being?

Engaged Buddhism answers this question with one word: compassion, the lived expression of the awareness of interconnectedness, knowing that the suffering of others is not separate from one's own suffering. To a Western woman however, the call to compassion is a danger spot in the river of emotion, drawing us too close to the shoals of self-dissipation into the needs of others. As Anne Klein points out, the prescription to relinquish all self-cherishing behaviors, such as one finds in the teachings of Shantideva and others, assumes from the start a subject position that puts concern for self above concern for others. For many Western women however, socialized to patterns of self-forgetting and self-abnegation, such a call "to relinquish all sense of personal entitlement in order to serve others" can sound too much like a step backwards.<sup>38</sup>

Must compassionate concern for others be seen as undermining the attainment of an empowered, self-directed sense of personal agency? Klein argues that this perceived opposition between autonomy and relationship is a function of Western constructions of selfhood. While denigrating women's work of maintaining the network of relationships, Western culture has idealized a masculine style of autonomous, self-sufficient identity, which

“expresses itself primarily through assuming certain unassailable differences between self and others.”<sup>39</sup> A self constructed in this self-other oppositional mode is likely to project undesirable traits onto “others” such as women, people of color, Jews, etc. Through such a process of projection, women have been typed as relational, caring, dependent, and weak, in contrast to an idealized masculine self that is constructed as autonomous, self-contained, and invulnerable.

Feminist theory’s discourse about interconnection and the self-in-relation represents an attempt to find a way beyond these gendered and polarized constructions of selfhood, but an allergy to compassionate self-giving remains. Klein argues that Buddhist traditions can offer a way to see through this constructed polarity of compassion versus empowered agency. As is evident in traditional Dharma practices designed to generate a mind of altruism, the cultivation of compassion is achieved through the deliberately chosen response of an empowered agent. Connectedness and individual strength then are seen not as opposites, but as mutually enhancing. The self one must let go of on the dharmic path is not the ego as locus of self-confidence and personal effectiveness. Indeed, an attitude of psychological autonomy is crucial to the cultivation of an all-pervading compassion, for as long as one’s sense of self-worth depends upon the positive regard of others, one will not be able to practice compassion for friends and enemies alike.<sup>40</sup>

This point about equanimity as an essential element on the spiritual path leads this conversation to one last thought.

There are few human beings who could not learn something important from Thich Nhat Hanh’s teaching on the interrelatedness of self and enemy. “We think that the enemy is the other,” he says, and that is why we do not see him. To see the enemy, we need turn our gaze to the mirror, for we participate in the causes and conditions that create the enemy to be what he or she is. The willingness to maintain the enemy as the evil “other,” and to believe that one is by contrast pure, is for Thich Nhat Hanh the true root of violence. Feminist theory shares this concern with projection and denial, criticizing the propensity of the patriarchal ego to posit its own identity and goodness by projecting what it does not wish to see in itself onto the “other”—with sexism, racism, and other forms of violence and prejudice being the result. In this critique, feminists express their solidarity with, indeed their interconnectedness with, all those who have suffered oppression under the patriarchal system—all women, black men, Native American men, homosexual men, working class men, etc. Actually, the only human beings who do not make the list and who are not included in feminism’s circle of belonging are elite, white, heterosexual males. These men remain feminism’s “other”; they are the source of violence, prejudice, and oppression. This is ironic, given that the majority of feminist intellectuals are elite, white women, like myself, whose lives are profoundly and



undeniably interconnected with all those patriarchs who are the butt of our critique. I think of my own father and grandfathers, brothers and husband, teachers and colleagues; these men, many of whom are powerful, privileged, and somewhat sexist, are not separate from whom I am; we inter-are.

The willingness of feminists to set up patriarchal males as the “other” has already gotten the movement into trouble once. Naming patriarchal males as the loci of oppression, white feminists were able to elide the fact of their own complicity in the structures of oppression. Women of color finally had to point out the racism implicit in a movement of white women that claimed to make universal statements applicable to all women. Most feminists today have gotten that point, but the propensity to project the mechanisms of violence onto this ideological construct called patriarchy remains. Weaving myths of a golden age of matriarchy, feminist spirituality excuses women from cocreating with men a world of violence and pain. In acknowledging connection only with victim and not with victimizer, feminist thought today sells short its vision of interconnectedness and sidesteps issues of first world women’s complicity in the spiral of violence and environmental degradation that threatens the planet today. Thinking the enemy is the “other,” we do not see her.

#### NOTES

1. Joanna Macy, “The Ecological Self: Postmodern Ground for Right Action,” *Sacred Interconnections: Postmodern Spirituality, Political Economy, and Art*, ed. David Ray Griffin (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), pp. 35–48.

2. See, for example, Carol Christ’s essay “Rethinking Theology and Nature,” *Reweaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality*, ed. Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1989). As she argues there, “when we understand our profound connection to other beings, we begin to understand that it is a violation of the web of life to take more than we need. To poison rivers and seas and the ground on which we stand so that we can have televisions and air conditioning, to engage in wars of conquest in order to exploit other people’s labor and take the resources of their land, is to forget that we are all connected in the web of life” (p. 321).

3. Sallie King, “Conclusion: Buddhist Social Activism,” *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, ed. Christopher Queen and Sallie King (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 406.

4. For a systematic discussion of the Buddha’s teaching on *pratitya-samutpada* and its ethical implications, see Joanna Macy, *Mutual Causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

5. This is not just a Mahayana teaching, as the Thai Buddhist Sulak Sivaraksa emphasizes; as he says, given the teaching of no-self, or interdependence, it is clear that “Buddhism is primarily a method of overcoming the limits or restrictions of the individual self. Buddhism is not concerned just with private destiny, but with the lives and consciousness of all beings” (*Seeds of Peace: A Buddhist Vision for Renewing Society* [Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1992], p. 66).

6. Joanna Macy, *World as Lover, World as Self* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991), p. 63.



7. Kenneth Kraft, "Prospects of a Socially Engaged Buddhism," *Inner Peace, World Peace: Essays on Buddhism and Nonviolence* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 13; Joanna Macy, "In Indra's Net: Sarvodaya and Our Mutual Efforts for Peace," *The Path of Compassion; Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism*, ed. Fred Eppsteiner (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1988), p. 172.

8. For an introduction to Buddhadasa's thought, see *Me and Mine: Selected Essays of Bhikkhu Buddhadasa*, ed. Donald K. Swearer (Albany: State University of New York Press).

9. Macy, *World as Lover*, pp. 96, 98.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

11. Thich Nhat Hanh, "Please Call Me by My True Names," *The Path of Compassion*, ed. Eppsteiner, p. 33.

12. Kraft, "Prospects," p. 13.

13. Sallie King, "Thich Nhat Hanh and the Unified Buddhist Church," *Engaged Buddhism*, ed. Queen and King, p. 341.

14. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), p. 118.

15. For an illustration of this principle in action "under fire," as it were, see the autobiography of Chan Khong (Cao Ngoc Phuong), *Learning True Love: How I Learned and Practiced Social Change in Vietnam* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993).

16. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), p. 19.

17. Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982), p. 9.

18. Johnson, *She Who Is*, p. 134.

19. Carter Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1989); Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," *Reweaving the Visions*, ed. Plaskow and Christ, pp. 208–213.

20. Rita Gross, "Feminism from the Perspective of Buddhist Practice," *Buddhist Christian Studies* 1 (1981): 73–82.

21. Anne Carolyn Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen: Buddhists, Feminists, and the Art of the Self* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 120.

22. Jack Kornfield, *A Path With Heart* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), pp. 6–7.

23. Christina Feldman, "Nurturing Compassion," *The Path of Compassion*, ed. Eppsteiner, p. 21.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 20–21.

25. Rita Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), pp. 258–269.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 264.

27. Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, p. 196.

28. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, *Thai Women in Buddhism* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1991), p. 13.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

30. Cao Ngoc Phuong, "Days and Months," *The Path of Compassion*, ed. Eppsteiner, pp. 155–169.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 156.

32. Catherine Keller, "Scoop up the Water and the Moon is in Your Hands: On Feminist Theology and Dynamic Self-Emptying," *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*, ed. John B. Cobb and Christopher Ives (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990), p. 108.

33. Cited in King, "Thich Nhat Hanh and the Unified Buddhist Church," p. 350.

34. Starhawk, "Power, Authority, and Mystery: Ecofeminism and Earth-Based Spirituality," *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*, ed. Irene Diamond and Gloria F. Orenstein (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990), p. 79.

35. Ibid.

36. Catherine Keller, "More on Feminism, Self-Sacrifice and Time; or, Too Many Words for Emptiness," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 13 (1993): 214.

37. Ibid., pp. 214–215.

38. Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, pp. 98–99.

39. Ibid., p. 102.

40. Ibid., p. 114.