

Who am I? A response to the koan “woman”

Jean Byrne

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Buddhist theory can provide a new perspective from which we can understand the problem of how to define ‘woman’. Relating Mahayana Buddhist ideas of emptiness and not-self to a definition of woman allows for the conceptualising of an idea of ‘woman’ which is simultaneously absolute and relative, without being oppositional. Mahayana Buddhist theory shifts the emphasis on gender from being a static category to gender as fluid and boundless. Such a conception allows for social action based on an idea of ‘woman’ without binding all women to an homogenising and fixed category - ‘woman’ - creating a space in which women can simply ‘be’. The question of how to define woman can then become a koan, allowing us to see our true nature, rather than invoking an intellectual crisis.

The concept ‘woman’ is a necessary starting point for all feminist theory, yet as Luce Irigaray states, *One woman + one woman + one woman never will have added up to some generic: woman*. It is my contention that Buddhist,¹ particularly Mahayana Buddhist, ideas of self can contribute to a definition of ‘woman’ which avoids homogenisation by having a sense of subjectivity and self which is somewhat amorphous. The three major Buddhist traditions (Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana) teach that self, and as a result gender, are empty of any inherent existence or identity. From this perspective, thinking of gender or self as static, non-relational and fixed, is to search for that which does not exist.

Two key aspects of Mahayana Buddhist theory that assist in resolving what Linda Alcoff (330) names as the ‘identity crisis’ in feminist theory are ‘not-self’ (*anatta*) and the relationship between conventional and ultimate, also understood as conditioned and

unconditioned existence. Not-self, along with impermanence and unsatisfactoriness, is one of the three marks of existence in all Buddhist schools.² Not-self does not necessarily mean that there is no self, as some negative interpreters might propose. Instead, a theory of not-self can be understood as a framework for understanding existence. When the Buddha was asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer about the self, he wouldn't attest to its existence or non-existence, since the teaching of not-self primarily serve a soteriological role. That is, the apprehension of not-self is seen as the means through which the Buddhist practitioner can awaken to the truth of suffering and the path which leads to its cessation. Consequently, most Buddhist schools would identify not-self not as a metaphysical reality or an ontological given, but rather as an instrument which facilitates liberation from suffering by overcoming attachment to ideas of 'me' and 'mine'.

Anatta or not-self is often interpreted by western audiences in a nihilistic manner to mean nothingness. This interpretation is most likely due to the fact that the Buddhist conception of the self stands diametrically opposed to western notions of selfhood, which imply a lasting self, spirit or soul. The Buddha's teaching of not-self also directly contradicted the views of his Indian contemporaries who spent their life in search of the realization of atman³. The teaching of anatta is one of the primary factors that separates Buddhism from all other major world religions and philosophical view points (Collins, 104). In a Buddhist framework holding onto an idea of self results in craving, attachment and aversion, all three of which are centered around a sense of 'I'. This 'I' is thought to have no permanent reality – since there is no sense of self beyond the mental and physical phenomena that are occurring. When this is seen clearly, teachings of not-self serve the purpose of liberation from suffering which resulted from attachment to self.

To what do we refer when we speak of the self? Buddhism provides a five-fold explanation of personality. These five factors are known as skandhas⁴ or groups of grasping, named as such because, when we attempt to define the 'I', we grasp for one of these factors or groups. David Kalupahana (69) retells the Buddha's discovery of the skandhas as follows:

The Buddha therefore concentrated on the analysis of the so-called psychic personality in order to discover such a self. Every time he did so, he stumbled on one or the other of the different aspects of experience, such as feeling (vedana), perception (sanna), disposition (shankara) or consciousness (vinnana). If anything other than these psychic elements constituted the human personality, it was the body (rupa). Yet none of these factors could be considered permanent and eternal; all liable to change, transformation, and destruction – in brief they are impermanent (anicca).

None of these factors are considered permanent: they are constantly changing and in a state of flux. They are related states which the Buddhist practitioner can reflect upon to understand the seemingly stable and enduring sense of self as simply a cluster of changing physical and mental phenomena, thereby undermining grasping and attachment (to self) which are thought to be the key causes of suffering (Harvey, 50). While these five skandhas serve the function of denying the reality of a metaphysical self, they can also be thought to be the factors that constitute the empirical self, as in a conventional sense there is an idea of self, otherwise there wouldn't be a soteriological reason to employ a doctrine of not-self. Therefore, Buddhists will refer to self yet maintain that all existence is marked by not-self.

Similarly, many feminists refer to 'woman' with an implied fixity of term and referent that post-structuralist feminists such as Irigaray and Alcoff deny exists. In the case of Buddhism, it is necessary to speak of selves to communicate teachings which may lead to liberation from suffering and it is equally important for feminists to be able to speak of woman as a category to initiate political change (alleviating a different type of suffering), even though both selves and woman are concepts which may be empty of any inherent existence. Mahayana Buddhists side-step the problem of talking about that which does not (in an ultimate sense) exist through distinguishing between the non-dual teaching of not-self and dualistic, everyday consciousness, thus invoking an ultimate/conventional divide⁵. It is this twofold understanding of self as both dual and non-dual which may assist feminists who need to refer to 'women' without homogenising all women or essentialising 'woman'.

In Mahayana thought conventional truth is that which is true in the world of dualism and independent selves. This is the conditioned sphere, affected by time, space and politics. Discussion of the “self” in this context is a strategy or tool which has soteriological potential to liberate the individual from the illusory entrapments of ‘me’ and ‘mine’ and the subsequent suffering such attachment entails. Conversely, ultimate truth is not bound by dualisms or independent selves and is unconditioned in its expansiveness. The ultimate/conventional divide renders the discussion of selfhood in Buddhism unique as the Buddhist subject traverses both spheres – the ultimate and conventional. It is this approach to selfhood that I suggest may have possibilities in application to post-structural feminist questions about identity and questions of how to define ‘woman’.

The Buddhist subject’s ability to traverse both the ultimate and conventional speaks to the identity crisis referred to by post-structural feminists. A Buddhist idea of selfhood may assist feminists concerned with the homogenising implications of utilising the concept ‘woman’ to formulate a definition of woman which allows for participation in representational politics (conventional) while simultaneously asserting that ‘woman’ is un-namable (ultimate) within rationalist politics and theory. Such a conceptualisation may allow the concept woman to be used in a system of phallogocentric representation without leaving the term ‘woman’ open for anything to be projected on to it due to a failure to participate in representational politics. As Elizabeth Berg comments (in Campbell, 158):

If women are to be represented – this representation must necessarily take place within the context of a phallogocentric system ... in which the woman is reduced to mirroring the man. On the other hand, the presence of woman as a blank space – as a refusal of representation – only serves to provide a backdrop or support for masculine projections.

If successful, this theory of selfhood would result in freedom from the problems encountered when attempting to define ‘woman’. Therefore women could participate in representational politics, using ‘woman’ without engaging in a self-definition in terms of those politics.

To some extent this possibility entails a ‘borrowing’ of what might be considered explanatory tools from Buddhist theory. Yet so as not to proceed naively, it is crucial to first identify possible objections to this task because it is a borrowing from a religious tradition well-known for its misogynistic treatment of women. The Buddha himself abandoned his wife and young son (supposedly after a night in his personal harem) in order to pursue a spiritual life, and for this he is honored. Even after his experience of enlightenment, he did not have enlightened views on gender and it took great persuasion for the order of nuns to be established, but only once the women (led by his foster mother and aunt) had agreed to precepts which ensured their subservience to monks.⁶ Buddhist texts are riddled with negative images of women as temptresses, lustful, evil beings, sent to tempt the Buddha as he sat in meditation. Even western Buddhist communities are not free from gender inequality: most senior teachers are men, in male lineages, and the most horrible abuses of power are often, at least initially, overlooked.

Obviously we can not presume that the teachings of Buddhism are inherently emancipatory, as sexism is evident at all levels of the Buddhist tradition - structurally, textually and in practice. Given the position of women within Buddhist traditions I would question the writings of Buddhist feminists who, acting as apologists for their tradition, assert that Buddhism is feminism – feminism is Buddhism.⁷ Such a position prioritises a faith commitment at the expense of an ideological position and negates the recognition of sexism and ways it could be tackled to give women (particularly nuns) better standing in the Buddhist community. This issue is crucial to the spiritual practice of many women - for nuns it is this standing which may directly effect their livelihood.⁸ By utilising Buddhist ideas of selfhood for a feminist end I do not intend to suggest that Buddhism is feminist in any essential way. Yet this sexism does not render the Buddhist idea of selfhood as any less relevant – we can still apply Buddhist ideas to the task of defining ‘woman’ in new and challenging ways.

Objections to the use of the Buddhist ultimate/conventional divide, as a tool which allows ‘woman’ to be part of representational politics without being bound to the definitions and

terms of those politics, are not only based on the negative position of women in Buddhism. The use of an ultimate/conventional divide is also objectionable on the grounds of the dualistic nature of this sort of divide (as I am adopting a dichotomous approach in order to solve the problem of an already existing dichotomy, based on gender). Within dualisms, two concepts or terms are considered mutually exclusive. There is no middle ground, only one side of the dualism has a positive value and the second, being an absence of the first, is amorphous and includes all which is not the first (Jay, 39). As feminist theologians have discovered, dualisms and their inherent dichotomous oppositions have not served women well, particularly within religious traditions where the sacred/profane dichotomy often positions women (both theologically and in practice) on the side of the profane.

It is also true that in Buddhism women have been identified with the relative or profane (for example the temptress daughters of Mara who attempted to distract the Buddha from his goal of enlightenment) whereas men, particularly monks, are associated with the spiritual. Yet, at the same time Buddhist women are told that everyone has Buddha-nature and both men and women can become enlightened. These seemingly contradictory views on gender can co-exist - because in a conventional sense there is a male/female dualism, but in an ultimate sense there is not. Our true nature is therefore understood as not tied to notions of male and female, but as interdependent, unconditioned and non-gendered.

This non-dualistic perspective has been described by Anne Klein (51) as ontological non-dualism. In contrast to dualism, it does not refer to or create separation between subject and object. Instead, it is referring to the relationship between a subject and 'their' emptiness. Despite possible objections that may be raised, non-dualism conceived of in this way, applied outside of a Buddhist framework, can assist feminists to speak of 'woman' as a category within representational politics, without acquiescing to an idea that the category 'woman' is fixed. This allows for women to legislate, protest and initiate change using the category of 'woman' while also avoiding essentialising and homogenising all women, because the category 'woman' is being used in a conventional

and relative sense - that is, relative to 'man'. This facilitates entering the sphere of representational politics without adopting its premises. It raises the possibility of seeing gender as empty of any inherent, static existence, while noting that ideas of gender arise when there is a conception of an 'Other' which is not 'I'. It is from this arising of 'Otherness' that discrimination and oppression almost inevitably occur. Most importantly, from a non-dual perspective, 'woman' can be understood as that which is bound *and* that which is boundless.

Conceptualising 'woman' in this way disrupts the way subjectivity is traditionally viewed in a western rationalist framework. Additionally, rather than elaborating a new theory of gender, Buddhist ideas of selfhood can assist feminists to see woman as a category and also disrupt the idea of continuous and fixed subjects. Irigaray (78) suggests that resolving the identity crisis of feminist theory is:

Not an issue of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the subject or the object, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal.

Buddhist ideas of selfhood do not provide a new definition of what it means to be a woman. Instead Buddhist thought can provide an insight to that which lies beyond our conventional understanding of selves and gender. There exists an alternative conception of selfhood in which selves are dis-continuous, lacking fixity and boundless, only understandable through a direct experience of 'not-self'. This is an example of how the theoretical machinery by which we understand personhood may become, in Irigaray's (78) words, 'jammed'. Therefore women (and men) would have the freedom to define or be themselves outside of the subject/object framework Irigaray (78) speaks of. Through this disruption 'being' can take primacy without necessitating singularity or continuity of selves. As Judith Butler comments (23), continuity of selves can then be understood as a maintained norm of intelligibility rather than an ontological given.

Proposing that the continuity of self, and therefore gender, is not an ontological given may result in an identity crisis which implies the question 'Who am I?' In response to this

question one of the first replies may be ‘a woman’ since gender is an integral part of our self-understanding. As Marilyn Gottschall (280), who explores the ethical implications of gender deconstruction, comments:

Gender is a social construct, and as such it is a part of our epistemological foundations; that is, it participates in the way we think about thinking. Gender constructs are imbricated in our processes of self knowledge and self-identification and our interactions with others.

If we were to identify gender as a category which does not, in an absolute sense, exist and selfhood as a dis-continuous category we can arguably create a freedom for self-knowledge and exploration of what it means to ‘be’, without conditioned notions of what a woman is or should be. So while out of necessity gender can be recognised as a category to serve political purposes, it is possible to de-center gender and its inherent polarisation when thinking, feeling, wondering and contemplating what it means to ‘be’. As said by Irigaray (in Whitford, 58):

Woman certainly does not know (herself to be) all, even knows (herself to be) nothing. But her relationship with (self) knowledge creates an opening to an all of what could be known of what she could know herself to be ...: God.

However, even though self and gender as constituted in representational politics may be categories which we could ‘hold lightly’ in order to wonder and explore what it means to be outside of these categories, to a large extent self-knowledge begins within these parameters. It is inescapable that women develop a conventional or conditioned sense of what it means to be a person and woman. This conditioned self-knowledge, bound by social constructs and ideas of ‘womanhood’ can serve as the departure point for an exploration of the possibility of just ‘being’. Before conventional ideas of gender and self can be negated, transcended or furthered, these notions must be recognised. As previously suggested, Buddhist theory can assist in providing a framework of how to traverse that which is both bound and bound-*less*, recognising dichotomous notions of gender, yet moving beyond these notions, touching that which some refer to as the ‘ground of being’ or the ‘great completeness’.

As Irigaray suggests, through a process of self-knowledge women can open themselves to an all of what they can be. When we ask the question, 'what is woman?' in a conventional sense there are answers, including name, profession, family, thoughts, feelings, experiences and sexuality. But this inquiry begs a deeper question - Who am I? The same question has been asked in other forms, 'What is This?' 'Who is hearing?' 'What is woman?' Questions such as these can penetrate to the core of our existence if we allow for responses which lay beyond what some consider to be the constrictive parameters of rational thought. However this lays forth a challenge to traverse territory perhaps indescribable in a language which seeks to polarise, dichotomise and categorise. Yet if we can truly ask and be open to a response which lies outside that which can be named, notions of what it means to be a woman and a person may crumble. In Zen Buddhism these questions are referred to as koans. Letting go of the search for a conceptual response and approaching the question 'what is woman' as a koan, allows an answer to erupt from our depths. The answer may well be a certain knowing based on inquiry into our very being.

This inquiry into being, or the 'koan' of 'woman', can be an engagement in self-exploration that does not demand rational answers, or impose categories existent in representational politics. Gender and selves can be understood as necessary and true in a conventional sense, but in a deeper sense, beyond rational categories, there is a response to the koan of woman – which can only be clumsily articulated in language. To this extent we may have a two-fold notion of gender, one conditioned by dichotomies of male and female (conventional), and another which is not bound by conventional binaries. The latter creates space for further enquiry into our being and may allow for an exploration of 'being' as interconnectedness rather than separation. To conceive of 'being' as interconnectedness has radical implications for feminist theory as it can be seen that sexism and separation have functioned interdependently.⁹ Western conceptions of selfhood, through aggrandising separation over interconnectedness, inevitably result in sexism through permitting there to be that which is 'Other'. Experiencing or understanding 'being' as interconnectedness frees women from the position of the 'Other'.

In conclusion, to address to identity crisis described by Linda Alcoff we might begin with a recognition of the importance of ‘woman’ as a category which is discriminated against within the sphere of representational politics, without giving credence to the ontology of separation, or the objective epistemology representational politics imply. Furthermore, this ‘identity crisis’ or the question of ‘woman’ could become a koan of sorts, allowing for a space or praxis of openness and expansiveness in which interconnectedness can be realised. In response to this koan, knowledge of a non-rational (not irrational) sort may be apprehended, signifying a radical epistemological shift from a rational paradigm and avoiding the pitfalls of defining ‘woman’ within a rationalist framework. However this space and praxis exists within, and not necessarily separate to, the sphere of representational politics. Rather than being immobilised, the crisis in feminist theory can serve as an opportunity to respond to the needs of women by defining ‘woman’ yet also holding this definition lightly. By not holding onto this definition women can respond to the ‘koan of woman’ engaging in self-exploration of what it means to be, without the necessity of explaining this self-understanding in the limiting language available to her.

Jean Byrne is a PhD candidate in the School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics at the University of Queensland. She is researching the interface of the eight limbs of yoga and Luce Irigaray’s writing on the breath.

jean@yogospace.com.au

P.O. Box 6152 St Lucia Qld 4067

Notes

¹ As Paul Harrison comments, to talk about Buddhism is often to be drawn into “abstractions, generalisations and oversimplifications which could never do justice to the rich diversity of all past and present forms of the Buddhist tradition” (Harrison, 67). Yet, it is important not to allow the problem of definition to lead us to a paralysis where we cannot speak of Buddhism in a somewhat general sense as there are core beliefs in Buddhist teachings, such as the four noble truths, the three marks of existence and the Three Jewels.

² All conditioned things are thought to share these features.

³Atman (within Brahminism) can be understood as the universal self, identical to Brahman.

⁴ The Five skandhas, otherwise termed the five groups or aggregates of grasping are what constitutes personality or consciousness in Buddhist theory. They are,

1. The aggregate of matter – the body.
2. The aggregate of feeling or sensation – of which there are three; pleasant, unpleasant and neutral.
3. The aggregate of perception – that which recognises an object.
4. The aggregate of mental formations – all willed activities of mind.
5. The aggregate of consciousness – arises in relation to objects.

⁵ "Ultimate truth refers to those psychological and philosophical analyses contained in the canonical tradition which are held to be universally true: that is, it denotes the form and content of what are considered to be the crucial doctrines of the great intellectual tradition, to be used by the specialist, meditator and scholar. Conventional truth - of which, of course, there is a great deal in the canonical texts also - refers both to the general structures and to the particular local content of the various little traditions of Buddhist societies, which are used by the ordinary person (and indeed by the specialist when not dealing with matters of ultimate concern)." (Collins,19). This distinction between two types of truths is most apparent in the Madyamaka sect of Mahayana Buddhism, founded by the philosopher Nagarjuna.

⁶These precepts are:

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

(Wilson, 85-86)

⁷ Gross outlines three main similarities between Buddhism and feminism which results in her conclusion that "Buddhism is feminism" (Gross, 130) These are: the emphasis both place on experience; the courage both have to hold to insights of truth, even if these truths are unconventional, and that both attempt to explain how the mind works. Although to some extent the similarities listed by Gross may be well founded, this hardly allows us to conclude that Buddhism is feminism. Buddhism is focused on alleviating the suffering of *all* beings, allowing them to be liberated. Feminism, at the most fundamental level, focuses on the alleviation of suffering and liberation of *women*.

⁸ As Nancy Falk states in her discussion of the disappearance of the Buddhist order of nuns in Theravada Buddhist countries, it was implied that "men deserved the richer offerings, the more elaborate buildings and the greater opportunity to shine in court and public confrontations." (Falk, 156)

⁹ For further information see Keller, C. *From a Broken Web: separation, sexism and self*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1988.

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