



Sokthan Yeng and the Resuscitation of Anger in Buddhist Feminism

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In attachment, the petals still fall and in anger the weeds still grow.

—Dōgen, *Genjōkōan*

SOKTHAN YENG'S IMPORTANT AND ILLUMINATING BOOK, *Buddhist Feminism: Transforming Anger against Patriarchy*,¹ can be read as an exercise in *upāya*, the skillful redeployment of the Dharma so that it resonates with the needs and capacities of a particular audience. Yeng's strategy is to engage the tradition and its healing practices so that it encourages transformation and speaks with liberatory force to women throughout the many manifestations of the global Dharma.

In the 1240 fascicle *Raihai Tokuzui* (*Receiving the Marrow by Bowing*),² Zen Master Dōgen (1200-1253) counsels that consummate awakening involves the practice of bowing to those who would teach you. Our ego attachments, however, exclude from our consideration those we may consider beneath us and therefore unworthy of being our teachers, including laypeople, nonhuman animals, and, most pertinent to our present essay, women. These ego attachments, however, make us unteachable. If we are unteachable, even though we may consider ourselves Buddhists, we are demons in the house of Dharma. Despite the vow to liberate all sentient beings, male Dharma practitioners have traditionally been dismissive of female practitioners. Dōgen derides this as “merely nonsense spoken by a soaking-drunk śrāvaka,”³ those practitioners whose practice is attachment to cultural dogmas (what they have “heard”). “Before becoming free from delusion, men and women are equally not free from delusion. At the time of becoming free from delusion and realizing the truth, there is no difference between men and women.”⁴

This is what Dōgen and Yeng, each in their own way, call non-discrimination. Dōgen writes, “Why are men special?... Do not discriminate between men and women. This is the most wonderful principle of the buddha way.”⁵ This principle is also at the heart of Yeng’s turn to non-discrimination, which “challenges the dualistic thinking that proclaims Buddhism can only be feminist if it either recognizes or dissolves differences between women and men.”⁶ Non-discrimination does not dissolve gender and sexual differences into a murky and indiscriminate oneness. Nor does it hierarchically oppose men and women into the first and second sexes, respectively, as Simone de Beauvoir famously argued.⁷ Instead, it is important to “connect the Buddhist spirit of non-discrimination with non-domination.”⁸ This is the liberating insight into *ahimsā*. It is not only that we avoid unnecessary harm but that we concomitantly work to dismantle dominating patterns in ourselves, others, and our institutions.

These practices of compassionate and engaged non-discrimination and *ahimsā*, however, did little to transform stubborn patriarchal attachments in many Buddhist traditions. “In theory,” Yeng observes, “Buddhism does not discriminate against women, people of color, or women of color. In practice, Buddhist leaders and institutions continue to marginalize these groups.”⁹ In this respect, Yeng’s strategy is twofold: first, to rethink the place of women in Buddhist traditions. There are at least 300 million Buddhist women in the world. It is not clear that their liberation is always at the heart of current modes of practice. Second, Yeng aspires to contribute positively to the toolbox of feminist discourses and activism. The former is an ongoing tension and struggle within Buddhist traditions. That being said, the founding of the Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women,¹⁰ as well as the dramatic rise of Buddhist women in teaching, scholarship, and leadership roles are dramatic breakthroughs. Like Yeng’s own book, these developments “benefit from greater engagement with feminist philosophies.”¹¹ At the same time, Yeng argues that the Buddhist tradition offers tremendous resources for women’s liberation. Both discourses are emancipatory and mutually beneficial.

One of the most striking examples of Yeng’s cultivation of the Middle Way¹² is her resuscitation of anger beyond the traditional European duality of composure and aggression, compliance and disruption. Associating women with hysteria, irrationality, and ungovernable feelings have been a part of their domination. As she cites bell hooks, “if the in-group wants to maintain the status quo, it would serve them well to squelch anything that would point to injustices within the system that helps them to attain privileges.”¹³

Yeng engages in a subtle reading of one of the most fundamental teachings of the Dharma. As taught in the second noble truth, the root of our painful

disharmony and lack of balance (*duḥkha* in the first noble truth) is craving or bottomless thirst (*taṇhā*). The latter is itself the symptom of the three poisons, namely our oscillation between attachment and greed (*raga*) and the flip side of not getting what we obsessively want, namely, anger and hate (*dveṣa*). Inflexible attachments are bound to result in the rage of disappointment and, consequently, our war with a world that never seems to be enough. This pernicious fluctuation is a symptom of our delusion (*moha*).

Buddhist practice turns these inverted mental toxins right side up. The fixating and obsessive demands of desire are liberated into non-attachment (*alobha*). However, this only names the emancipation negatively—that is, in terms of its *from what*. To put it more positively—that is, in terms of its *for what*—our egotistical and stingy attachments are transformed or awakened into the generosity of *dāna*. In this respect, to put it lightly, the Buddhist world, like much of the rest of the human world, has been exceedingly stingy regarding women. In light of the three poisons, this is the Buddhist version of “toxic” masculinity. This stinginess and ego infatuation include the presumption among men that women’s liberation is up to the discretion of men. Women do not need men to affirm that they, too, are buddhas. Their Buddhahood has never been contingent on the approval of the male gaze, although the male gaze has historically refused to concede this.

Anger, the inevitable consequence of our attachments, is transformed or awakened into non-anger and non-hatred, or, to put it affirmatively, into loving-kindness (*maitrī*). The generosity of loving-kindness is the possibility of what Martin Luther King, Jr. called the “beloved community” and what the Buddhist traditions call the *sangha*. Underlying this transformation is turning the corner on delusion (*amoha*). To speak of it positively, this is the liberation of wisdom or *prajñā*. Although we already live in the Buddha lands, the implicit politics of the Dharma is to liberate all sentient beings from their stingy and self-serving delusion—including its systemic manifestations in patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism, the prison industrial complex, and the subjugation of the earth’s ecologies—so that we can realize the sangha of all sentient beings.

This schematic model, however, seems to imply that anger is deceptive and, consequently, one of the ways that we are complicit with our own suffering (*duḥkha*). The dogmatic interpretation of this insight condemns us to dualisms that replicate the dominating dichotomies that traditionally subjugate and marginalize women and others, such as rational wisdom versus irrational anger, the suppression of anger for the rational pursuit of ethics, or the kindness of compassion and the selfish destructiveness of anger. Anger, like all entities in the Middle Way, is not a discrete and self-standing entity. It is empty and

non-dualistic.¹⁴ “If we, like Buddhists, do not see a clear split between anger and compassion (a wholesome tendency), we can see that the two are not only interconnected but also that there is a possibility to transform anger into something more wholesome and positive.”¹⁵ Compassion can express itself in some forms of anger (e.g., Buddhist anger against the degradation of the sangha and the Buddha lands, the anger in which I assert my Buddhahood within institutions that deny it and restrict access to it). Moreover, some forms of anger carry within themselves the seeds of compassion. Anger against injustice, for example, can imply the seeds of generosity and loving-kindness.

Reflecting on Yeng’s intervention, two images come to mind. Both seem almost identical on the surface. I imagine a person wielding a huge sledgehammer, smashing great boulders into little pieces with furious determination. Asked about their motivation, they explain that they hate rocks and that the very sight of them awakens in them uncontrollable hatred and rage. They are hellbent on destroying boulders. Another person is wielding a similar sledgehammer with the same determination. When asked about their motivation, they respond that they are breaking up the boulder into pieces small enough to build the foundation of a new feminist sangha. “I am so angry that women have had so few places to take refuge and I do not want to waste any time building one.” This could be the emergence of Yeng’s feminist sangha, which, “in contrast to conventional sanghas, places women, rather than monks, in positions of social and moral leadership.”¹⁶

Despite their superficial resemblance, these are two distinct modes of anger. They resemble each other as fruits (both are energetically hammering rocks) but their motivation differs radically. The first is a symptom of the flipside of my greed and attachment when I do not get what I demand. The second, even as anger, shares roots with wisdom, generosity, and loving-kindness, either as seeds or perhaps even as a direct expression of a compassionate heart. However, anger as a symptom does not necessarily mean that it is expressing anger at its root, or that, even as a symptom, it automatically belongs to a nebulously generic effect. Anger is empty. There is no one thing that anger in all cases is. As Yeng presciently quotes bell hooks, “the rage of the oppressed is never the same as the rage of the privileged.”¹⁷ Anger at the patriarchy, white supremacy, or the capitalist exploitation of the earth and its inhabitants does not automatically point toward ego satisfaction. It can indicate the generous cast of mind that realizes that justice is not a zero-sum game and that flourishing is not a private matter but rather tied to the flourishing of all sentient beings. The latter should perhaps understand itself as having a preferential option for the poor because the exercise of compassion begins with the victims of raging domination.

Therefore, such anger is not necessarily the expression of the intoxicated ego. It can also indicate resistance to one's conditions of subjugation. It does so not because of the imperious demand of ego individuation, but rather because one realizes one's dignity and Buddhahood. "Anger creates a subject-to-subject encounter. The one who has been denied subject status now claims it and has a way to meet with a privileged member of society that has been accorded subjectivity."¹⁸ It refuses the "sleight of hand that shifts the attention away from white supremacist capitalist patriarchy that creates oppression and exploitation."¹⁹ Such anger is not reactionary but the awakening of the seeds of Buddhahood. Hence, rather than squelching the emancipatory seed of self-righteous anger, one can cultivate it by combining "the full expression of anger with mindfulness training."²⁰

This is Yeng's Middle Way, and we are better for it because this "we" is no longer the ruse and pseudo-inclusivity of privilege and domination. May all sentient beings flourish.

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NOTES

1. Sokthan Yeng, *Buddhist Feminism: Transforming Anger against Patriarchy* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).
2. Eihei Dōgen, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, ed. Kazuaki Tanahashi (Boston and London: Shambhala, 2010).
3. Dōgen, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, 80. I note that the *śrāvakas* are those who adhere to the teachings of the earliest Buddhists (they adhere to what was originally said) and in this manner can mean Theravada practitioners, the tradition with which Yeng associates. (It can also include Jain practitioners.) I certainly would not find such an association true or helpful. I think, however, we can read Dōgen's charge to mean the literalists or dogmatists whose egos drunkenly hide behind the letter of the tradition and do not find their way to wisdom (including non-discrimination) and compassion.
4. Dōgen, 80.
5. Dōgen, 77.
6. Dōgen, 79.
7. This was the impetus behind her watershed book, *Le Deuxième Sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949).
8. Yeng, *Buddhist Feminism*, 74.
9. Yeng, 9.
10. See <https://sakyadhita.org>.
11. Yeng, *Buddhist Feminism*, 10.
12. The Middle Way (*Madhyamāpratipada*) is the pith of Mahāyāna Buddhist practice. It first denotes the historical Buddha's practical avoidance of a self-destructive overreliance on asceticism without yielding to its opposite extreme (sensual abandon, greed, and unbridled absorption in the world). This developed into an ontological register, consummately in the *Mādhyamaka* (Middle Way or centrist) practice exemplified by Nāgārjuna, in which a being is as such neither because it contains its own discrete being (*svabhāva*) nor because it has no being whatsoever (is nothing). This is the Middle Way of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) in which something is neither because it is what it always is (sometimes called "eternalism") nor is not at all (sometimes called "annihilationism"). It is the Middle Way of dependent co-origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) or interbeing.
13. Yeng, 86.
14. Emptiness is the non-duality or interbeing of entities as discussed in note 12.
15. Yeng, 49.
16. Yeng, 146.
17. Yeng, 85.
18. Yeng, 86.
19. Yeng, 86.
20. Yeng, 113.

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