

# Interrupting the conversation on kenosis and sunyata: Buddhist and Christian women in search of the relational self

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**INTERRUPTING THE CONVERSATION ON *KENOSIS AND ŚŪNYATĀ*:  
BUDDHIST AND CHRISTIAN WOMEN IN SEARCH OF THE RELATIONAL  
SELF**

a dissertation

by

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submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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## **Abstract**

### **Interrupting the conversation on *kenosis* and *sūnyatā*: *Buddhist and Christian Women in search of the Relational Self***

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The purpose of this dissertation is to contribute to Christian theological anthropology by bringing in the “interruption” of another religious tradition, Buddhism, in order to see how key Buddhist doctrines such as emptiness and practices of meditation may inform aspects of the Christian feminist discussions of *kenosis* in the spiritual life, and the search for a relational self. It also seeks to enhance Buddhist-Christian dialogue by bringing the “interruption” of feminist voices from both the Buddhist and Christian traditions into conversation with each other in order to see what they might offer, not only towards the search for “right relationship,” but also towards bringing about the re-integration of doctrine and spiritual practices for more effective action in the world today.

In the first part of the dissertation, I lay out the background of these two concepts of *kenosis* and emptiness within their respective religious traditions including the Buddhist-Christian dialogues around these two concepts. I then look at how Christian feminists (Sarah Coakley and Mary Grey) as well as Buddhist feminists (Anne Klein and Rita Gross) critique the traditional interpretations of these concepts and how they reconstruct such concepts in their articulation of a relational self and in their argument for the importance of practice and its relationship with doctrine.

In the second part of this dissertation, I focus on the comparison between these Buddhist and Christian feminists and how they can mutually learn from each other. I argue that Buddhist feminist discussions on emptiness and meditation enhances and deepens the Christian feminist articulations of *kenosis* and how an empowered self can be found through a kenotic spirituality. I also demonstrate how such a dialogue can bring us back to the rich resources within the Christian tradition, such as the image of Mary and Marian devotions. Furthermore, I show how this feminist comparison contributes back to Buddhist-Christian dialogue by including the voices of women and their concern for suffering and the importance of *praxis* in our interreligious encounters today.

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## Introduction

### **I. The importance of “interruption”**

The title of this dissertation, “Interruption the conversation” may seem disconcerting for the reader at first glance. The notion of “interruption” is usually understood as something rude or inappropriate, or something that breaks a pattern or train of thought with negative connotations. And yet “interruptions” can also be seen as having a positive value. For example, they are necessary in order to move one out of patterns and habits that hamper growth and allow for new ones to emerge. Furthermore, they enable us to see things from a new perspective or notice aspects previously unnoticed. Henri Nouwen, writing on the spiritual life, says that interruptions are “invitations to give up old-fashioned and outmoded styles of living” that opens us to “new unexplored areas of experience.”<sup>1</sup> They are important because they are part of the way that is constantly calling one to conversion, to a new way of seeing the world, to new realities and new possibilities. One could also argue that interruptions are just as necessary within the life of the Church today for her “old-fashioned and outmoded styles of living” are being deemed as constantly irrelevant or distanced from the contemporary world we live in. This, for example, is what Lieven Boeve observes as he looks at the situation of the Churches in Europe and concludes that “an ever-increasing gulf exists between contemporary culture and the Christian faith.”<sup>2</sup> Given this gulf, he wonders “[t]o

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<sup>1</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Image Books/Doubleday, 1975) 53.

<sup>2</sup> Lieven Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition: An Essay on Christian Faith in a Post Modern Context* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 2003) 6.

what extent can the Christian faith still offer meaning to contemporary men and women and the communities to which they belong?”<sup>3</sup>

For Boeve, the solution lies in recontextualizing the tradition itself and having a dialogue with the postmodern context. For this to happen, however, the interruption of “the other”<sup>4</sup> is necessary so that we do not just continue on as we did but that we allow ourselves to truly have an encounter, a real dialogue with the other. This allows Christianity to say something meaningful to that context while allowing that context to say something relevant back to Christianity. Moreover, Boeve argues that the necessity for interruption and recontextualization is not only due to our current context; rather, interruption itself is a theological imperative.

As a matter of fact, interruption is also capable of pointing the way in which God reveals Godself in history and the way in which Christians bear witness to this reality in narratives and practices. God’s interruption constitutes the theological foundation for a continuous and radical hermeneutic of the context and the tradition. Just as (and because) every concrete encounter with the other/Other is a potential location for God to reveal Godself today, it is only in concrete narratives and practices that the interrupting God can be testified to in today’s context.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, to be a Christian, to follow Christ and to believe in God is to allow oneself to be interrupted by the other, and through dialogue, find God in and through the other. This theological foundation for interruption is developed in Boeve’s book, *Interrupting Tradition* where he depicts an “interrupting God” and Christ as “God’s

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<sup>3</sup> Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition*, 7.

<sup>4</sup> For Boeve, it is the interruption of the “religious other” that is necessary in today’s postmodern world. However, I take the notion of the “other” as those who have been “othered” and therefore marginalized and whose voices need to be brought back to the table of theological discussions. Hence, in this dissertation, I not only focus on the voice of the “religious other” but also the voice of women who have been considered “other” and whose experiences have historically been excluded from Christian theology. This will be discussed in the next section as I discuss the “double-interruption” of the voice of the religious other and of women. Furthermore, this issue of “self” and “other” has been the focus of many philosophical discussions. See footnote 42.

<sup>5</sup> Lieven Boeve, *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval* (New York: Continuum, 2007) 205.

interrupter.” There, he argues that Christian discipleship involves following his work of interruption in order to allow for an open narrative in Christianity.<sup>6</sup> Hence, “...just as (and because) the Christian narrative is interrupted by God, Christians are called to interrupt themselves and others when their own narratives and those of others close themselves off.”<sup>7</sup> Such openness to the interruption of the other is found at the very heart of the Christian faith, and is what is necessary for Christianity in this postmodern context.

There are many different “contexts” within our current situation that warrant such interruption and dialogue with Christianity today. As Boeve notes, for Johann Metz, who inspired his own work on interruption, “it is particularly the confrontation with suffering that forms the impetus behind his search for a ‘dangerous’ theology of interruption.”<sup>8</sup> One could argue that confrontation with suffering, especially the massive suffering that one finds in the world today (especially of the poor) has served as a huge source of interruption within Christian theology.

Given the events of World War II, the Vietnam war, and the poverty of the two-thirds world, many theologians began to look instead to this experience of suffering and oppression – not just of individuals but of peoples and nations -- as the common human experience that must become the new starting point for theology. New questions then about what it means to be human in light of suffering and oppression arose: what is this human person that s/he is capable of so much good and yet apparently so much evil as well? How are we to understand suffering in the world and our responsibility and duty

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<sup>6</sup> Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition*, 115-146.

<sup>7</sup> Boeve, *God Interrupts History*, 205.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

toward it? These questions led to the development of many liberation and political theologies (such as that of Metz) from both the “first” and the “third” worlds. Hence, the voice of the poor and those who were suffering became the interrupting event that led many theologians to re-think their notion of God, Christ, humanity and salvation.

The centrality of the experience of suffering, oppression, and marginalization was “interrupted” yet again by the voices of women.<sup>9</sup> These women argued that much of theology and anthropology has been done by men, has focused on men and male experiences. These theologies have not served to properly incorporate the experiences and voices of women so that the analysis of suffering and oppression has occluded the suffering and oppression of women. Such feminist critiques brought light to the fact that what was masked under what were seen as “universal” or “transcendental” experiences were really particular, white, male (usually European) experiences and did not take into account the particular experiences of women. Thus a critique opened up concerning how much of Christian theology has been in the hands of men and has led to the interpretation of doctrines that have been harmful to women. For example, looking at the history of the Christian tradition and the ‘fathers’ of the Church, many feminist theologians find that the understanding of Christian anthropology and cosmology rooted in the Greek philosophical tradition have led to notions of hierarchy and dualism: God-world, soul-body, men-women, where women are identified with world and body, and thus secondary in the hierarchy and inferior to men. These ideas influenced the interpretations of

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<sup>9</sup> For example, Mary Ann Hinsdale argues that the voices of women can be understood as an “interruption of the Spirit.” See “Women’s Struggle for Voice as Interruption of the Spirit” in *Light Burdens, Heavy Blessings: Challenges of Church and Culture in the Post Vatican II Era*, eds. Mary Heather MacKinnon, Moni McIntyre and Mary Ellen Sheehan (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 2000) 97-113.

Augustine, Aquinas, Luther who saw women as inferior, as less than men, and not even in the image of God. Hence, as they talked of human beings – they were really talking about male beings and not women.

The interruption of women's voices has led to the recontextualization of Christian theology as feminist theology. One of its main strategies for theological interpretation has been critique of classical Christian doctrines such as creation-salvation and sin-grace in order to uncover their androcentric bias and how they are harmful to women. It also includes the recovery of the voices of women within Christian history as well as the reconstruction and reinterpretation of doctrines that take into account women's experience.

In addition to the context of suffering and the “interruption” of the voice of the poor and of women, another important context that Christianity is very concerned with is the plurality of religions. This is Boeve's primary focus in his two books on interruption. Thus, he asks “[i]n what way can the Christian narrative continue to hold its own in the midst of religious plurality?”<sup>10</sup> For him, the answer lies in dialogue with the religious other in a way that allows for Christianity to keep an open narrative. In this way, the religious other “interrupts” Christian theology and Christianity also “interrupts” the religious other and the current context. In particular, he says,

[t]he confrontation with religious otherness alerts the Christian narrative specifically to the very particularity of its own truth claim and interrupts any pretence toward absoluteness....It is critically challenged to formulate its truth claims on two fronts: first, with respect to this irreducible narrativity and particularity, and second, as regards the truth claims of others.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Boeve, *Interrupting Tradition*, 164.

<sup>11</sup> Boeve, *God Interrupts History*, 43-4.

Rediscovering the particularity of the Christian narrative can be interruptive in a way that “not only critically engages with other narratives that have closed themselves off or harden themselves in a fundamentalist way, it also warns us of the erosion of the particularity and alterity in many current discourses that seemingly take a sympathetic view toward religion and other fundamental life options but often imply a post-Christian functionalization of religiosity, and relativization of its particularity.”<sup>12</sup> Here then, we see Boeve’s concern for openness and engagement with other traditions so that Christianity is able to learn from the “other” without being reduced to mere similarities with the “other”. The importance of the “interruption” of the other is that it can lead us to discover our own selves more deeply and learn to articulate our particularity in the midst of religious plurality. It is from this stance of the rediscovered particularity (through dialogue) that Christianity is able to “interrupt” other traditions by eliminating the tendencies to reduce all religions to their least common denominator and judge them as all the same. Far from the fear of losing a distinctive Christian identity (the usual fear that arises when Christians deal with religious plurality), Boeve sees interruption and dialogue as necessary means for discovering Christianity’s particularity. “Interruption” thus enables Christianity to hold its own amidst religious plurality in a way that neither isolates nor relates it as one among many.

A concern for an engagement with religious plurality that is open, yet not reductionistic, and the belief that mutual interruption is necessary for Christian theology in light of religious plurality is also a chief concern for Francis Clooney. In our

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<sup>12</sup> Boeve, *God Interrupts History*, 44.

increasingly plural world, Clooney argues, Christian theology needs to become interreligious, comparative, dialogical and confessional.<sup>13</sup> First, like Boeve, Clooney takes religious plurality seriously and sees the need for Christian theology to open itself up and broaden theological discourse into an interreligious conversation. Second, he is concerned with a real engagement with the other (as against more reductionistic approaches). For theology to be comparative, similarities as well as differences must be taken into account. In this way, “intelligent and attentive scholars become able to theologize within their own traditions in a way that neither blocks thinking across religious boundaries nor interprets reductively the similarities that become obvious.”<sup>14</sup> Third, as a dialogical enterprise, theologians need to learn to “stop judging other religions from afar” and learn to “write in a way that speaks and responds to people in other traditions as well.”<sup>15</sup> This then facilitates a real encounter with the religious other in their alterity, which involves finding a way to dialogue with them and formulate one’s truth claims in light of the truth claims of the other (as Boeve mentioned above). However, attention to the particularity of the other does not have to lead to the loss of Christian identity. Rather, as Clooney’s fourth characteristic makes clear, theology is confessional. This means that “theologians should be able to affirm the content of their faith as true, render it intelligible to those who believe it already, and venture to put persuasive arguments before outsiders in order to demonstrate the truth of the faith...”<sup>16</sup> In other words, Christian theology should still be able to maintain its particularity and confront

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<sup>13</sup> See Francis Clooney, SJ, *Hindu God Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Boundaries between Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 7-12.

<sup>14</sup> Clooney, *Hindu God Christian God*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Clooney, *Hindu God Christian God*, 10.

<sup>16</sup> Clooney, *Hindu God Christian God*, 10-11.

others through this particularity. However, such a stance is not a block for true learning from the other, since the discovery of one's particularity is something that happens within the very dynamic of this dialogue/encounter with the other.

However, just like Christian theology in general, interreligious dialogue and comparative theology might also benefit from the “interruption” of women’s voices and vice versa. For example, in the new book *The New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation*, Michelle Voss Roberts contends that “an alliance between feminist and comparative perspectives on theology awakens both to the types of power operative within them.”<sup>17</sup> There she suggested that comparative theology could benefit from feminist theology by now using sources that included women’s voices and practices as against the use (though not deliberately) of sources that excluded women. On the other hand, feminist theology could benefit from comparative theology by learning to “emulate comparativists’ careful attention to the particularities within traditions and the long, difficult work of attaining competency in multiple religious traditions. Such practices inculcate a certain sensitivity to cultural essentializations that was absent in some earlier feminist work and can help feminists to welcome genuine religious differences even while searching for sites of convergence.”<sup>18</sup>

Taking seriously the task of “interruption” as a theological enterprise, I will attempt a “double-interruption”; that is, of taking into account both the voices of women as well as the voice of the religious other in current discussions in Christian theology and

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<sup>17</sup> Michelle Voss Roberts, “Gendering Comparative Theology” in *The New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation*, ed. Francis X. Clooney, SJ (New York: T&T Clark, 2010) 127.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.



in interreligious dialogue and comparative theology. My objective is not to stop such discussions but rather to redirect them by bringing in the “interruption” of the voices of women and the religious other. In so doing, I hope to highlight how such discussions have been too narrow or blind and may have even become harmful to the “other.”

Highlighting these interruptions is intended to show how inclusion of the voice of “the other” can enrich the conversation and lead to new and more fruitful ways of thinking that address the issue of suffering and religious plurality in the world today.

“Interruption” does not halt the conversation but redirects it by recognizing the “other” previously unnoticed. In light of the new voices now at the table, voices that can offer a critical eye, a new approach or a broader perspective may be achieved – one that opens us to new unexplored areas of experience, as Nouwen mentioned. As Boeve says,

...the category of interruption holds continuity and discontinuity together in an albeit tense relationship. Interruption is after all not to be identified with rupture, because what is interrupted does not cease to exist. On the other hand, it also implies that what is interrupted does not simply continue as though nothing had happened. Interruption signifies an intrusion that does not destroy the narrative but problematizes the advance thereof. It disturbs the anticipated sequence of sentences following one after the other, and disarms the security devices that protect against disruption. Interruption refers to that ‘moment,’ that ‘instance,’ which cannot occur without the narrative, and yet cannot be captured by the narrative. It involves the intrusion of an otherness that only momentarily but nonetheless intensely halts the narrative sequence. They do not annihilate the narrative; rather they draw attention to its narrative character and force an opening toward the other within the narrative.<sup>19</sup>

## **II. The Project: A double-interruption of the voices of women and the religious other**

In this dissertation, I will enter and “interrupt” two specific conversations. The first would be the Christian feminist discussions that focus on the search for a relational self, and within these discussions to focus on attempts to re-interpret key Christian

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<sup>19</sup> Boeve, *God Interrupts History*, 42.

doctrines and spiritual practice which empower the transformation of the self, society, and the church. One of the feminist critiques have focused on Western descriptions of selfhood which emphasize individuality and independence to the detriment of others (usually women), and relationality (which women value). For example, Catherine Keller writes that “separation and sexism have functioned together as the most fundamental self-shaping assumptions of our culture. That any subject, human or non-human, is what it is only in clear division from everything else; and that men, by nature and by right, exercise the primary prerogatives of civilization: these two presuppositions collaborate like two eyes to sustain a single worldview.”<sup>20</sup> Hence, the project of some feminists is to articulate a vision of selves as interconnected in a way that does not lead to the bondage of women, with her identity tied only to her relationships, but to a vision which stresses connections that are truly affirming of herself and her relationships.

In this search for “right relationship,” many feminists have critiqued Christian doctrines which have proved to be detrimental to women. Beginning with Valerie Saivings’ critique of R. Niebuhr’s basic understanding of sin as pride and her rebuttal that for women, sin is selflessness, interpretations of Christian doctrines which focus on humility, vulnerability, dependence or self-sacrifice continue to be debated by feminist theologians who question whether such doctrines and their interpretations are still helpful or ultimately just damaging to women.<sup>21</sup> One doctrine that has been particularly

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<sup>20</sup> Catherine Keller, *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986) 2.

<sup>21</sup> Valerie Saiving, “The Human Condition: A Feminine View” in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, eds. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979) 37-38.

troubling for some feminists is that of *kenosis* or self-emptying.<sup>22</sup> As Sarah Coakley notes, this issue “cuts close to the heart of what separates Christian and post-Christian feminism.” To illustrate, she points to Daphne Hampson for whom *kenosis* is “a Christic ‘bone’” upon which she chokes. For Hampson, the theme of self-emptying and self-abnegation is far from helpful as a paradigm for women.<sup>23</sup> In a more recent article, Jane Linahan cautions against interpretations of *kenosis* that may lead to distorted forms of relationship. She notes how the image of Christ as *slave*, a model of Christ’s submissiveness has “continued to function, as a fundamental paradigm for Christian faith and life....It has fostered the notion that to be a good Christian, to be a good *person*, one must deny and efface the self.”<sup>24</sup> Such interpretations, for Linahan, lead either to “passive submissiveness to oppression or misguided self-sacrifice and ‘charity.’”<sup>25</sup> Hence, she argues that “[s]ince the image of *kenosis* and its related ideals are so central and loom so large in the Christian ethos and imagination, it is absolutely essential to engage in a critical re-appropriation of them which can, if possible, transcend their potential for harm and mine their even deeper potential for good.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> When I speak of *kenosis* as a doctrine or the “doctrine of *kenosis*,” I do not mean this in any technical sense but more generally, as O’Collins describes it in *A Concise Dictionary of Theology* as “[t]he self-abasement that the second person of the Trinity underwent in the incarnation.” As he mentions, many theologians have adopted *kenosis* as a central theme in their Christologies. I will focus on some of these theological interpretations in Chapter One, and how certain feminist theologians critique and re-interpret its meaning, particularly for theological anthropology in Chapter Two.

<sup>23</sup> Sarah Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion: On the Repression of ‘Vulnerability’ in Christian Feminist Writing” in *Swallowing a Fishbone? Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity*, ed. Daphne Hampson (London: SPCK, 1996) 82.

<sup>24</sup> Jane Linahan, “Kenosis: Metaphor of Relationship” in *Theology and Conversation: Towards a Relational Theology*, eds. J. Haers and P. de Mey (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003) 303-304.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

The critical appropriation of the doctrine of *kenosis* has already been the project of some feminist theologians. The quest for a critical retrieval of the doctrine is based on establishing a new vision of self as self-in-relation to others and the world. For these feminists, what is central is a search for the right understanding of relationship and within that relationship, the dynamics of “dependence” and “sacrifice” might still be held as central to Christian life. Rosemary Ruether, for example, focuses on understanding the *kenosis* of Christ and its implications for human relationships. She begins her book *Sexism and God-talk* with a “midrash” on the *kenosis* of the Father.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, in speaking about Jesus Christ and his maleness, she speaks of Jesus Christ as one who “manifests the *kenosis of patriarchy*, the announcement of the new humanity through a lifestyle that discards hierarchical caste privilege and speaks on behalf of the lowly.”<sup>28</sup> In a similar vein, Sandra Schneiders speaks of the maleness of Jesus as a “free self-emptying by which he participates in the oppressor class of humanity, thereby definitively undermining not only patriarchy but all the forms of oppression derived from it.”<sup>29</sup>

Concerning God and the Trinity, feminists have also re-interpreted *kenosis* as the primary way of understanding God and God’s nature. Elizabeth Johnson critiques Moltmann and other theologians’ discussions of *kenosis* by arguing that they continue to

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<sup>27</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993) 1-11.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 137. Rita Nakashima Brock critiques such an understanding of Jesus’ *kenosis of patriarchy* seeing it as a “unilateral, heroic model” which does not take the influence of community into account. Hence, using the story of the unclean woman, she argues for a re-interpretation of such a *kenosis of patriarchy* as involving Jesus’ community who challenges him and from whom he learns. Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1988) 84.

<sup>29</sup> Sandra Schneiders, *Women and the Word: The Gender of God in the New Testament and the Spirituality of Women* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986) 68.

use almost exclusive male imagery and pronouns. For her, there are more appropriate ways of describing such a kenotic, self-limiting God through the use of maternal metaphors and the feminist retrieval of the power of friendship.<sup>30</sup> Linahan herself uses Moltmann to re-think the meaning of *kenosis* in light of the Trinity. She argues that “*kenosis* is a key to the form of the dialogue between Jesus and the Father, helping to underscore the mutuality and reciprocity of their relationship...”<sup>31</sup> *Kenosis* then, she argues, is the metaphor for relationship: of the Father, Son, and Spirit, and of God with the world.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, a number of feminist theologians have focused on how we are to understand *kenosis* within women’s search for self and “right relationships.” Two British theologians, Sarah Coakley and Mary Grey focus on contemplation as key in the re-interpretation of *kenosis* and the articulation of a relational anthropology. I hope to contribute to this specific re-interpretation of *kenosis* and the more general attempt at a relational anthropology by bringing these Christian feminist theologians in conversation with Buddhist feminists who have some of the same concerns in searching for the “relational self” and who critique, but also reinterpret, key Buddhist doctrines such as emptiness and (*śūnyatā*) and dependent origination (*pratītya samutpāda*), connecting their understanding and interpretation of these doctrines to meditation practice. In this way, I hope to bring in the interruption of the voice of the “religious other” in order to enrich the Christian feminist discussions of *kenosis* and theological anthropology.

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<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York, Crossroad, 1992) 234-235.

<sup>31</sup> Linahan, 307.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

The second conversation I wish to “interrupt” is that of the Buddhist-Christian dialogues. Within these dialogues, there seem to be two main currents of conversation: one is the focus of the dialogue on key doctrines and the other on spiritual practices – particularly comparisons in contemplation and meditation.<sup>33</sup> However, feminist voices as well as attempts to bring about dialogue on doctrine and spiritual practice have been primarily lacking in these interreligious dialogues. For example, Jay McDaniel has observed that “the emergence of feminist theology within Christianity and that of a Christian dialogue with Buddhism have proceeded for the most part independently.”<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, Christian feminist theologian Catherine Keller has critiqued the Buddhist-Christian dialogue spearheaded by the Kyoto School which has focused on the Christian doctrine of *kenosis* and the Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrine of *śūnyatā* (emptiness). In a response to Masao Abe,<sup>35</sup> Keller points out that this dialogue “neglects the most obvious common denominator of these two world religions: their patriarchalism!”<sup>36</sup> However, this does not suggest that she finds the dialogue futile. Rather, she sees promise in the interchange and in the “interruption” by a feminist perspective: how Buddhist emptiness

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<sup>33</sup> See for example the annotated bibliography that came out in 1993 which lists the works done within Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Harry Wells, chairperson, *Resources for Buddhist-Christian Encounter: An Annotated Bibliography* (Wofford Heights, CA: Multifaith Resources, 1993) 17-24.

<sup>34</sup> Jay McDaniel, “Self-Affirmation and Ego Transcendence: The Encounter of Christianity with Feminism and Buddhism” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 7 (1987): 230.

<sup>35</sup> Masao Abe is a Japanese philosopher who was highly involved in Buddhist-Christian dialogues with Christian theologians and philosophers. He is part of the Kyoto School that focused on the dialogue around *kenosis* and *śūnyatā*. This will be discussed further in the next chapter.

<sup>36</sup> Catherine Keller, “Scoop up the Water and the Moon is in your Hands: On Feminist Theology and Dynamic Self-Emptying” in *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*, eds. John Cobb and Christopher Ives (NY: Orbis Books, 1990) 102.

can support a feminist revision of *kenosis* and also how the dialogue itself can help articulate “authentic and novel forms of spirituality grounded in global responsibility.”<sup>37</sup>

In the end, I hope to contribute to Christian theological anthropology by bringing in the “interruption” of another religious tradition, Buddhism in order to see how key Buddhist doctrines and practices may inform aspects of Christian feminism and theology. I also hope to enhance Buddhist-Christian dialogue by bringing the “interruption” of feminist voices from both the Buddhist and Christian traditions into conversation with each other in order to see what they might offer, not only towards the search for “right relationship,” but also towards bringing about the re-integration of doctrine and spiritual practices for more effective action in the world today.<sup>38</sup>

*Methodology.* The retrieval of the notion of *kenosis* and the construction of a relational anthropology will be done by employing both a feminist as well as comparative methodology.<sup>39</sup> Given the focus on *kenosis* and *śūnyatā* within Buddhist-Christian dialogue, the feminist methodology will begin with the “interruption” of the feminist voices that establish the lack of consideration for the experience of women in these dialogues and show the problematic ways in which discussion of these doctrines continue to propagate interpretations that lead to notions of ‘self-sacrifice’ and “self-negation” that are harmful to women.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 104-105. Also in a later essay, Keller speaks of how *kenosis* might be used as a “basis for an uninhibited spirituality of embodiment...” Keller, “More on Feminism, Self-Sacrifice, and Time; Or Too Many Words for Emptiness” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 13(1993): 215-216.

<sup>38</sup> In his dissertation, Thomas Cattoi has also spoken of the disjunction between spirituality and theology. See Thomas Cattoi, “Redeeming the Particular: Maximus the Confessor’s critique of Origenism and the Tibetan Debates on Practices” (Ph.D. diss., Boston College, 2006) 4-13.

<sup>39</sup> The comparative methodology will involve looking at the similarities and differences in the use of *kenosis* and *śūnyatā* within their respective traditions, then in conversation with each other. This method will be further explicated in Chapter Four.

However, as mentioned, this project does not seek to abort the Buddhist-Christian dialogue that has already occurred. Rather, it will use this dialogue and the comparative method in order to undertake a feminist reconstruction of *kenosis* and theological anthropology. With a feminist and comparative lens, the critique and re-interpretation of *kenosis* will be compared to the critique and re-interpretation of *śūnyatā* in the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition especially in light of Buddhist feminist retrieval of this doctrine and its link with compassion as well as with meditation practice. After establishing the Christian feminist discussion, a Buddhist feminist discussion on *śūnyatā* will follow. Then comparison will proceed by looking at the similarities behind the reconstruction of both traditions followed by a discussion on what their differences are and the challenges they continue to constitute. In light of this comparison, I will begin to analyze how the Buddhist feminist reconstruction of *śūnyatā* can contribute to the Christian feminist reconstruction of *kenosis* and a relational anthropology. In this way, I hope to follow Boeve's description of "interruption" as holding both continuity and discontinuity, in this case, continuing the dialogue with Buddhism but with the goal of redirecting and broadening (and in this sense discontinuing previous discussions) the dialogue to address the specific concerns of feminists in search for the relational self.

A good example of the kind of comparison that I envision in this project is the work by Paula Cooley on emptiness and the otherness of God. In this article, she begins with the feminist problem of identity and otherness and looks to the doctrine of emptiness



and the otherness of God in order to articulate a selfhood that remains related to others.<sup>40</sup>

However, I will not primarily be basing my comparison on ancient or sacred texts of either tradition or their philosophical underpinnings. Rather, though considering the historical and philosophical interpretations, my comparison will focus more on how feminist theologians from both traditions are using these texts and re-interpreting or retrieving meanings from key doctrines in these texts in their search for a relational self that resonates with their experience as women. In a sense then, my comparative “texts” will be the works of these feminist theologians. I will compare how *kenosis* and *sūnyatā* function in women’s search for the relational self, and the place of doctrine within the spiritual life.

#### *Scope and Limitations.*

Feminist theology and comparative theology are two fields that are relatively new but are experiencing great interest among many theologians.<sup>41</sup> However, as previously mentioned, the dialogue itself between feminist theology and comparative theology has occurred less frequently. More often than not, feminist critiques and reconstructions have focused only within particular religious traditions. Yet, as many comparative theologians

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<sup>40</sup> Paula Cooley, “Emptiness, Otherness, and Identity: A Feminist Perspective” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 6 (Fall 1990): 7-23.

<sup>41</sup> I am aware of the pluralism within “feminist theology.” The very history of feminism and feminist theology shows how there is no one feminist “theology” and to speak as such can be highly suspicious since this usually implies the dominance of Anglo-European feminist voices to the detriment of the rich theologies coming out of places such as Asia, Africa, etc. Yet, I agree with Anne Clifford who argues that, “although each feminist theology is unique, feminist theologies share in common the commitment to bring faith in God revealed in Jesus Christ from the perspective of women’s experience to understanding” and that “[a]ll Christian feminist theologies share a distinguishing principle: patriarchy and androcentrism in their many forms conflict with faith in a God whom Christian revelation proclaims to be love itself.” See Anne Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001) 30. It is from this perspective that I am using a feminist methodology and use the expression “feminist theology” in my dissertation.

such as Francis Clooney, John Keenan, John Cobb, and others have demonstrated, there is much to be gained from the dialogue with other religious traditions. Concepts within one's own tradition may sometimes be clarified, deepened, thought of in a different way, and challenged by the encounter with another tradition. From this encounter, feminist theologians can only stand to benefit. They may find many resonances with how feminists from other traditions have uncovered and problematized the patriarchal roots of their traditions. Even more, in their dissonances, in their different approaches and symbols, feminists may actually find resources from these traditions that can further critique areas of one's tradition that have not been thought of, or retrieve strands of their own tradition that have been forgotten. Moreover, these concepts and symbols may become resources for a reconstruction that may not have been possible simply with the resources of one's own tradition. Hence, the main purpose of this dissertation is to provide a feminist reconstruction of theological anthropology through an encounter with Buddhist feminists, and to redirect Buddhist-Christian dialogue by means of the "interruption" of the feminist critique. The "double-interruption" that I will employ allows me to contribute both to feminist thinking and to dialogue among religions, particularly in terms of how Buddhist doctrines and practices might illumine aspects of Christian theology.

Given the broad fields of theological anthropology and Buddhist-Christian dialogue, one of the limits of this project will be the focus on *kenosis* and *śūnyatā*, particularly in how these two doctrines are helpful in the articulation of a new anthropology. Hence, in terms of the discussion of *kenosis*, my focus will not be on

interpretations of the *kenosis* of God/Trinity or Jesus Christ but more on *kenosis* and the individual/self. Furthermore, though there have been some philosophical works on *kenosis* and the problem of self and “other” such as those of Kierkegaard, Levinas, and Ricoeur, these are beyond the scope of this project.<sup>42</sup> The project will focus primarily on feminist retrievals of *kenosis*, particularly the works of two British theologians, Sarah Coakley and Mary Grey. Neither will an extensive exegesis of Philippians 2:6-11 be undertaken, although an overview of the various interpretations of the hymn will be undertaken as a background for the general feminist arguments against certain interpretations of *kenosis* as well as for the theological interpretations of Sarah Coakley and Mary Grey.

In terms of the discussions of *śūnyatā*, unlike the dialogue with Masao Abe and the Kyoto school which has primarily focused on Zen Buddhism, I will involve Indo-Tibetan theory and practice. The two major Buddhist feminists, Rita Gross and Anne Klein, both come from the Indo-Tibetan tradition (the Nyingma and Kargyu Dzogchen traditions) so their discussion of *śūnyatā* will come primarily from this tradition. I also

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<sup>42</sup> Levinas and Ricoeur have primarily been interested in the relationship of the self and other in light of suffering. Levinas saw the problem of ‘totality’; that is, of the totalizing systems that sought to understand and reduce everything in light of the self. In controlling the other, one does violence to that other. His solution then is the notion of “infinity,” of how the other is stranger whose depths cannot be known, of someone who overflows my thought of them and hence cannot be reduced or controlled by me. See his work, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1994). Ricoeur builds on Levinas and adds the need for self-esteem, which he argues, is necessary for self-effacement. Self-esteem grounds one’s solicitude for the other. Hence, the demand of the Other is met by the solicitude of the self for the other, grounded upon one’s own self-esteem. In his system, we find the importance of recognition; that is, of recognizing oneself as an other and the other as one’s self which leads to solicitude and from solicitude to justice. See his work, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1992).

relied primarily on their re-interpretations of the doctrine of emptiness instead of going to primary sources such as the *Prajñāparamitā* sutras.

In some ways, one could say that the dialogue is “one-sided” since I am a Christian and my goal is a reconstruction of the Christian doctrine of *kenosis* and theological anthropology. Hence, though I offer some points for deeper reflection on Buddhist feminist understanding of *śūnyatā* (from my own Christian (particularly Catholic) perspective, my focus will be on how Buddhist feminists are re-interpreting key doctrines and practices and from that, seeing how one can gain a new perspective within the Christian feminist attempts at reconstructing *kenosis* and its grounding in spiritual practices. Finally, the critiques and reconstruction of *kenosis* as well as *śūnyatā* will primarily be based on the experiences and dialogues of feminist theologians in North America and Europe. However, my hope is that this conversation among North American/European women can also help illumine the way for an Asian articulation of relationality and become a springboard for conversations between Buddhist and Christian women in Asia.

### *Chapter Outline*

*Chapter One:* In this chapter, I will give an overview of the two concepts of *kenosis* and *śūnyatā*, including the historical development of the traditional interpretations of these concepts within their respective traditions. Then I will present some background on the Buddhist-Christian dialogues that have taken place concerning these two concepts, particularly the Kyoto School dialogues. I will end with the various

critiques of this dialogue in order to set up the comparison that will follow in the next chapters and demonstrate the relevance of my project.

*Chapter Two:* In this chapter, I will focus on the Christian feminist critique and retrieval of the doctrine of *kenosis* in the articulation of a relational self. In particular, I will discuss the work of two British feminist theologians, Sarah Coakley and Mary Grey, whose reconstructions of *kenosis* are grounded in the practice of contemplation. Both argue that in contemplation, one understands “right” *kenosis* and women are able to experience the relational self that is required for the transformation of the self, society and the church.

*Chapter Three:* In this chapter, I will focus on the analogous work of two Buddhist feminists, Anne Klein and Rita Gross, in their critique and retrieval of the doctrine of *śūnyatā* in their articulation of an interconnected self. I will focus on how they use *śūnyatā* and its corollary *pratītya samutpāda* (dependent arising or the interdependence of all things). I will also examine how they discuss the relationship between wisdom and compassion, and how understanding the relationship of the two can guard against notions of self-sacrifice and selflessness that are detrimental to women. In the end, I will endeavor to bring out the relationship between the doctrine of emptiness and its implications for the feminist search for the relational self, the relationship between the doctrine of emptiness and the practice of meditation, and finally the relationship between the doctrine of emptiness and the practice of compassion.

*Chapter Four:* This chapter will be comparative in its approach. Having discussed in the previous chapters how the doctrines of *kenosis* and *śūnyatā* function in

their respective feminist reconstructions, I will begin with a brief description of the comparative method that I will be using. This will be followed by a discussion of how the Christian feminist interpretations of *kenosis* for the ethical and spiritual life can be deepened and challenged by the Buddhist feminist discussions on emptiness and dependent origination. It will include a reflection on the story and significance of Mary as influenced by the Buddhist feminist discussions on the Great Bliss Queen. In the last section, I will discuss a Christian response to the discussions of Anne Klein and Rita Gross to show possible ways of a Christian contribution to the Buddhist feminist discussions on emptiness and the search for a relational self.

*Conclusion:* In this chapter, I will summarize the work that has been done in the previous chapters that highlights how the interruption of the voice of the religious other contributes to Christian feminist theology. I will also discuss how the interruption of these feminist voices has something to contribute back to Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Here, implications of the feminist reconstruction of *kenosis* and *śūnyatā* for Buddhist-Christian dialogue will be discussed as well as suggestions for the continued dialogue and how my work responds to the critique leveled at previous dialogues.

## **Chapter One: Background on *Kenosis*, Emptiness and the Buddhist-Christian Dialogues on these two doctrines**

### **I. Introduction**

In this chapter, I will focus on the development and interpretation of the concepts of *kenosis* and *śūnyatā* within the greater context of their respective traditions. For *kenosis*, this will entail an overview of the biblical and theological interpretations of the Philippians hymn in terms of theological statements regarding God and Christ as well as understanding Christian discipleship. Particular attention will be paid to the development of the interpretation of *kenosis* as it originated as part of a liturgical pre-Pauline hymn in the life of the early Church that moved into metaphysical and dogmatic discussions on the nature of Christ and God. Finally, I will trace the implication of these discussions for the understanding of human nature and its relationship with God as well as for the ethical and spiritual life of Christians.

In terms of *śūnyatā*, I will trace the development of this doctrine back to early Buddhism with the discussion of the Four Noble Truths and the earlier understanding of other doctrines such as “no-self” (*anātman*) and dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*). I will then move toward the richness and complexity of its meanings among the various Mahāyāna schools ranging from understanding it as an epistemological tool against attachment to false views to articulations of Buddha nature and visions of dependent arising as the mode of being of persons. I will also focus on the Bodhisattva path of wisdom and compassion, and how these doctrines express the Buddhist understanding of human nature and the human condition. In the last section, I will include an example of

how these doctrines are expressed within Buddhist practices and how meditation practices are used to help one realize the teachings for one's spiritual enlightenment.

Finally, I will present the background on the Buddhist-Christian dialogues that have taken place concerning these two concepts. I will end with the responses and critiques to this dialogue, particularly the call to expand the horizon of the interpretation of both doctrines and to take into consideration the feminist critique of this dialogue.

## **II. Background on the doctrine of *kenosis***

### *Biblical Basis: Philippians 2:5-11*

The doctrine of kenosis has been a central teaching with regard to understanding the doctrine of God, Christology, and the Christian life. The *locus classicus* for this doctrine can be found in Phil. 2:5-11 which states:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God (NRSV).

This text has been widely understood to be a pre-Pauline hymn, probably used in a liturgical setting (Eucharist or baptism) by the early Church. One of the main debates which relates to Christology and the doctrine of God centered on the question of *who* “emptied himself.” There were primarily two trends in these debates: those who focused on the human Jesus and his life on earth as the model for human behavior and those who



saw Christ as a kind of the archetypal *Urmensch* or “original Man”, and the author of the hymn as influenced by pre-Christian Gnostic circles.<sup>43</sup>

For example, Ernst Lohmeyer posited that the text was speaking only primarily of the human Jesus, and interpreted “did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited” (or grasped) as an allusion to the experience of temptation, a “resisting of the evil one, which is relocated to the beginning of days.”<sup>44</sup> He then explicates that it is this path of humiliation and obedience within Jesus’ earthly ministry that led to his exaltation. This view is supported by Hans Werner Bartsch who re-iterated that this text was only about the historical Jesus and there was no assumption of pre-existence at all. Rather, it is in his earthly life, in constantly choosing solidarity with the slaves, that he gradually becomes son of God. Other arguments, such as that of Oscar Cullman, juxtapose the image of Adam with Jesus as the suffering servant. Just as Adam “grasped equality with God” in reaching for the Tree of knowledge and hence bringing sin and disobedience, Jesus is the one who refused to grasp such equality, choosing instead a life of humility and obedience to God that brings him to death on a cross. However, while Adam’s “grasping” brought death, Jesus’ refusal to grasp leads to his exaltation and glory. For this group of scholars, the emphasis is on correlating the emptying with Jesus’ earthly life that culminated with the death on the cross.

The interpretation above has been highly questioned by other exegetes who focus on the verse stating that he was “in the form of God.” For these scholars, the verse “form

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<sup>43</sup> Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion,” 85-6.

<sup>44</sup> Rinse Reeling Brouwer, “Kenosis in Philippians 2:5-11 and in the History of Christian Doctrine” in *Letting Go: Rethinking Kenosis*, ed. Onno Zijlstra (Bern: Peter Lang, 2002) 73.

of God” and the “emptying” refers to some kind of Gnostic redeemer myth, and Christ “in the form of God” as some kind of divine or (quasi) divine entity who descended upon the earth to impart *gnosis* upon a select few. For example, Ernst Käsemann argues that the author of the Philippians hymn’s understanding of the ‘form of God’ probably incorporates and modifies some kind of a “Gnostic redeemer myth, which views the redeeming Christ as a cosmocrator and inaugurator of a new eon.”<sup>45</sup> For him, the emptying then does truly entail a change of the divine “mode of being” in the divine’s “descent” or “emptying” into humanity. In either case, there is an agreement among most modern New Testament scholars that this text does not refer to any kind of metaphysical discussion about the nature of Christ, nor to the Incarnation, but emphasized more Christ’s earthly life and the focus on his obedience to God that led to the cross. As Käsemann puts it, “Philippians 2 tells us what Christ *did*, not what he *was*.”<sup>46</sup>

However, theological debates regarding this hymn and *kenosis* have not reflected this same emphasis only on Jesus’ earthly life but focused more on what he was. In particular the understanding of God and the formulation of the two natures of Christ shifted the focus of the discussions into the nature of God and Christ. Discussions focusing only on the human Jesus and his life became inadequate to truly understand who Christ is. For example, if one accepts the interpretation that it was the human Jesus who emptied himself, what does that mean for a Christology that not only holds that Jesus Christ is both human and divine, but holds central the action of the divine becoming

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<sup>45</sup> David Hadley Jensen, “The Emptying Christ: A Christological Approach to Interfaith Dialogue” *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 11 (2001): 11.

<sup>46</sup> Ernst Käsemann, *Exegetische Versuch und Besinnung: erste Band* (Gottingen, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1960) 70, quoted in Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion,” 85.

human? On the one hand, such an interpretation would appeal to those who wish to demythologize Jesus and turn him into a model of exemplary human behavior who is meant to be emulated, a kind of superman or deified man. On the other hand, if it was instead the “preexistent Son”, then there are still further questions about “what” was emptied and how this affects the understanding of Chalcedonian understanding of Christ, as well as the doctrine of God and the Trinity. In this case, the debates center around the understanding of the verb “*kenoo*” (to empty, render void, or be of no effect) and what Christ was emptied of. The appearance of this verb in this passage is very interesting since the verb “*kenoo*” does not appear often in the New Testament, and in particular, only appears in this hymn as “self-emptying.” As mentioned, if one understood this “self-emptying” of the human Jesus, then it relegates this action into his humility and obedience, and his ministry of self-giving love on earth. This is not adequate for a Christology that links *kenosis* with the Incarnation, as the “form of God” who emptied Godself and was “born in human likeness.” On the other hand, if one holds to the preexistence of the Son, there is still the further question of “what” the Son was emptied of, the answer to which affects our understanding of the doctrine of God and the Trinity. This has been the subject of debate from the early Church onwards to which we now turn.

*Kenosis and the Divine: Theological Debates on the nature of Christ and of God*<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> A summary of the various possibilities in the interpretation of *kenosis* will be discussed later in Chapter Two where Sarah Coakley systematizes such interpretations in her critique of other feminists and in her re-interpretation of the doctrine.

Many Christological discussions regarding this passage assume the pre-existent Son as the subject of the hymn, and that it alludes to the Incarnation, especially in the context of other New Testament texts such as John, Hebrews, etc. However, the question of “what” the Son was emptied of became a predominant challenge given certain formulations of the understanding of Christ and of God.

For example, for the early Church who held that God was immutable, omniscient and omnipresent, it was inconceivable to think of Christ being emptied of divine attributes. As Friedrich Loofs argues, “no theologian of any standing in the early Church ever adopted such a theory of *kenosis* of the Logos as would involve an actual supersession of His divine form of existence by the human...”<sup>48</sup> Many emphasized that God could not change but explained the emptying as “taking on the flesh” instead of “becoming flesh”. Assumption of the flesh, they insisted, involved no change in the Godhead but merely an extension, a transference of divine energy into the human, without any loss or change in God. In these discussions, the main concern was to protect God’s immutability, for any change or loss in God was seen to undermine God’s divinity. Hence, there was greater focus on what human nature gained in the process of emptying than any loss in God. For example, Cyril is quick to point to God’s continued superiority despite God’s “assumption” of the flesh. He states:

What sort of emptying is this? To assume the flesh, even in the form of a slave, a likeness to ourselves while not being like us in his own nature but superior to the whole creation.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Friedrich Loofs, art. ‘Kenosis’ in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1914) VII, 680b-87b, quoted in Coakley, “Does Kenosis Rest on a Mistake?” in *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God*, ed. C. Stephen Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 250.

<sup>49</sup> Cyril, “On the Unity of Christ” cited and translated in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* VIII, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, ed. Mark J. Edwards (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1999) 243, quoted in Coakley, “Does Kenosis Rest on a Mistake?,” 251.

Others such as Gregory of Nyssa interpreted *kenosis* not as a loss but as the realization or demonstration of God's ultimate power, of being able to do the impossible. He writes that "His descent to humility of man is a kind of superabundant exercise of power."<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, he also focused on what the human gained in this assumption of flesh: a transfusion of divinity into humanity without any loss of or gain on the divine. He explains it saying:

...but human nature in Christ, undergoes change towards the better, being altered from corruption to incorruption, from the perishable to the imperishable, from the short-lived to the eternal, from the bodily and the formed to what is without either body or form.<sup>51</sup>

During the time of the Reformation, other debates regarding *kenosis* came about as Lutherans centered on the notion of the *communicatio idiomatum*: that is, the exchange of qualities between Christ's human and divine natures. This was an important theme for Luther whose Christology focused on Christ's humanity, in his vulnerability, particularly his anxiety and weakness in the face of death. How then to explain such vulnerability and weakness in Christ, his cry of anguish and despair, in light of his divinity? This point continued to be debated among 17<sup>th</sup> century Lutherans, particularly the Tübingen and the Giessen schools. The Tübingen School insisted on the hiddenness of the divine characteristics (of omnipotence, omniscience, etc.) from humanity so that one couldn't tell from Jesus' words and action that he was using them.<sup>52</sup> The Giessen school, on the other hand, argued for a *kenosis*, a partial renunciation of Christ's human nature; that is, a

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<sup>50</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio catechetica* (385 or later), Chapter 24 first half, in *A select library of Nicene and post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. V, trans. William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1994) 494, quoted in Brouwer, 88.

<sup>51</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, in "'Heavenly Man' and 'Eternal Christ': Apollinarius and Gregory of Nyssa on the Personal Identity of the Savior, trans. by Brian E. Daley, SJ, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 10 (2002): 469-88, at 480-1, quoted in Coakley, "Does Kenosis Rest on a Mistake?," 259.

<sup>52</sup> Brouwer, 93.

“kenosis operative on his *human* side [...] ‘empty’ of the possession of such divine attributes as omnipresence and omnipotence during the incarnation” while the divine nature retained its powers.<sup>53</sup> Brouwer describes this as a “kenosis of use” so that Christ retained the divine attributes but gave up their use as Christ became human.<sup>54</sup>

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the development of New Testament scholarship and the quest for the historical Jesus, questions regarding Jesus’ self-consciousness, his psychological development, etc., became a crucial issue. In contrast to the position of the early Church that there could be no change in God (and that this entailed a weakening or diminishment of God), it is at this time that we find a reversal of that position, that the *kenosis* of Christ truly meant some degree of modification, change, or an “emptying” of the divine attributes in the person of Christ. This became the position of scholars such as Gottfried Thomasius as well as British kenoticists who focused their work on ascertaining what attributes of divinity were actually renounced while still trying to both honor the Chalcedonian doctrine and answer questions regarding Jesus’ humanity. They developed a notion of the idea of a self-limitation of the *divine* realm, and of God being a “‘self-limited God’ and wants to be that way.”<sup>55</sup> For example Thomasius explicates his notion of divine self-limitation saying that what God gives up are relative divine attributes, not essential to being divine. In particular, he points to divine glory which includes omnipotence, omniscience, as those characteristics that the divine can give up, and still not become any less divine. He writes:

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<sup>53</sup> Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion,” 94.

<sup>54</sup> Brouwer, 93.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 101.

Omnipotence is no 'more' of the absolute power, omniscience is no enhancement of the immanent divine knowledge, omnipresence is no enhancement of the divine life (#11 and 12). Thus if the Son as man has given up these attributes, he lacks nothing which is essential for God to be God.<sup>56</sup>

Charles Gore, a British kenoticist, on the other hand, talks about this act of self-limitation, as an act of empathy, the “power of sympathy as a power of self-abandonment, or self-effacement, or self-sacrifice.”<sup>57</sup> In this case, God’s self-limitation does not involve any change in God, since such empathy is God’s nature. It is rather the realization or actualization of God’s nature, for “God can limit Himself by the conditions of manhood, because the Godhead contains in itself eternally the prototype of human self-sacrifice and self-limitation, for God is love.”<sup>58</sup> This claim moves even farther from the early Church’s position of seeing the “emptying” as a loss and diminishment of God to now understanding “emptying” as the very nature of God. For example, such an interpretation was echoed by other theologians such as John Macquarrie who argued that Jesus Christ did not only reveal the “depth of a true humanity” but also the “final reality as likewise self-emptying, self-giving and self-limiting.”<sup>59</sup> That God is self-emptying love and is the prototype for humanity will have implications for the use of *kenosis* beyond arguing God’s nature to discussions about human nature. This will be discussed in the next section.

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<sup>56</sup> Gottfried Thomasius, “Christ’s Person and Work” in *God and Incarnation in mid-Nineteenth Century German Theology*, trans. and ed. Claude Welch (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965) 73, quoted in Ronald J. Feenstra “Reconsidering Kenotic Christology” in *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays*, eds. R. Feenstra and C. Plantinga, Jr. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989) 131.

<sup>57</sup> Charles Gore, *The Incarnation of the Son of God* (London: J Murray, 1891) 94, 59, 111-112 (Lecture IV: The Christ of Dogma and the Christ of Scripture), quoted in Brouwer, 101.

<sup>58</sup> Brouwer, 102.

<sup>59</sup> Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion,” 99.

Finally, these discussions of *kenosis* as the very nature of God also extended to new articulations of the Trinity asserting that *kenosis* is not only the activity of the Son but of all three persons of the Trinity. Furthermore, theologians such as Hans Urs von Balthasar assert that such activity is not only turned toward humanity, but is the very activity or disposition within the Trinity itself. For him, "...the idea of kenotic self-surrender is too pervasive and important a characteristic to divine love to circumscribe its significance alone; it is eternally true of the perichoretic and reciprocal interrelations of the person of the Trinity..."<sup>60</sup> Other theologians who broaden kenotic activity to the whole Trinity include Jürgen Moltmann, who in his work *The Crucified God*, writes how it is not only God the Son who suffers and dies on the cross but also God the Father suffers with the son. There he questions the notion of a God who is unmoved, unchanged by the suffering of the Son. Again, notice the shift away from the early Church's notion of God being "weakened" by being changed. Here, what is argued is that a God who is not moved or changed by the suffering of the Son (and of the world) is not truly God.

Finally, Thomas Altizer moves such interpretations further and talks about the radical *kenosis*, the total self-giving of God, the "death of God" and the absence of God that is experienced in the modern world. It is such interpretations of *kenosis* that will be of particular interest to the Kyoto school which will be discussed later. In the end, Coakley summarizes the complexity of the developments in the interpretation of *kenosis* and Philippians 2:5-11 saying:

the christological uses of the language of kenosis in the history of Christian tradition shifted from its original hymnic celebration of Christ's exaltation through humility [...]

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<sup>60</sup> Sarah Coakley, "Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations" in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. John Polkinghorne (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2001) 199.



via its narrative application to the pre-existent Word who miraculously ‘took flesh’, and then on into the increasingly complex debates about the metaphysics of the relations of the ‘natures’, which became more problematic, not less, with the imposition of ‘modern’ notions of the subject on the classical category of *hypostasis*. It is a convoluted story...<sup>61</sup>

*Kenosis and the Human: Following the “self-emptying” of Christ*

Debates regarding the doctrine of God and of Jesus Christ inevitably have implications in the understanding of humanity. As Karl Rahner once famously stated, “theology is anthropology” and the debates around *kenosis* with regard to the nature of Christ inevitably lead to questions regarding human nature and the human’s relationship with God. For example, the juxtaposition of Christ’s *kenosis* with the actions of Adam implies the understanding of the human condition as one of sin. As discussed above, sin was understood as pride, choosing to be like God, “grasping the form of God”, in his act of disobeying God’s command. Through this act, sin and death entered the world. This contrasts with Christ’s whole life of *kenosis*, of “not grasping the form of God” in his life of humility, and his obedience unto death. Such is the model of a new Adam, of true humanity without the stain of original sin.

However, the discussion of sin and the human condition is only half of the story because the story of salvation also involves grace. Sin is not something that we can escape out of our own action or will. Rather, it is only through the grace of God, the act of God entering into human chaos, that salvation is possible. For example, in Augustine’s discussion of human nature and the human condition, he understood human nature as primarily disordered because of sin. For him, original sin was due to our first parents having ‘free will’ (that is, the freedom of choice) and they chose themselves

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<sup>61</sup> Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” 198.

instead of choosing God. This choice has disordered the will, so that it can no longer choose God or the good (which is what real freedom is about). This disorder has been passed down to all human beings; original sin is our inherited sin. So the human condition is one of universal corruption in need of redemption. Though we are free to make choices, our wills are in bondage, our desires are disordered. Such bondage and disorder means that though we have free choice, the choices that we make are ultimately not the good, and our own efforts cannot lead to the liberation of our will and the proper ordering of our desire.

Given this understanding of sin, grace then, for Augustine, is the liberation of the will, of a proper ordering of the will toward the good which is God. Given his anti-Pelagian stance, Augustine understands grace as absolutely gratuitous; that human beings cannot do anything to earn it – since without grace we cannot choose the good. He holds that grace is operative (that is what God does without us), while holding on to free will, he still contends that grace is also cooperative (that God cooperates with us).

Grace then is understood in the context of sin. Because of sin (which has led to our disordered desire and the imprisonment of our will) grace is necessary (as that which reorders or reorients our desire back toward God). The human condition is one of corruption (due to sin) and the human person is one whose will is disordered, unable to choose the good that s/he wants. Grace “corrects” and reorients us back to God, and this is our salvation. This grace took form in the person of Jesus Christ, who entered the world through the act of *kenosis*. His whole life was a continuing of that *kenosis* which culminated on the cross, the salvation of humanity.

Furthermore, this unique union of the human-divine in Christ which has been the central question in discussions regarding *kenosis*, also begs the question of the relationship of the human to God. For example, God being “emptied” into humanity leads to discussions about how such emptying empowers and ultimately transforms and divinizes the human, the question of salvation. Moreover, in the “assumption of the flesh”, there is the further question of whether anything is retained in the human or whether the human is completely dissolved into the divine. It is unavoidable then to speak about *kenosis* without a discussion of the understanding of sin and grace, of salvation and how the act of God’s self-emptying and entering the world is an act of grace that leads to salvation. However, such discussions also lead to questions about humanity and humanity’s role in this act of salvation. For if due to sin only God can save humanity, if it is grace that brings about salvation, then where is the role of human agency, as well as human freedom and free will? These are the questions that have divided Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians throughout history. This is why, according to Sarah Coakley, “this theme of *kenosis* has profound importance for how we perceive the *humanum* – how we think of the nature of human freedom and of the willed and (graced) response to God.”<sup>62</sup>

Finally, these discussions about human agency and salvation lead to the issue of discipleship, of how Christians are to live in the world. The Philippians’ hymn is seen to teach Christ’s *kenosis* as the model for Christian behavior. Furthermore, kenoticists like Charles Gore, also argue that such is the behavior to be imitated because it mimics the

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<sup>62</sup> Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” 192.

very nature of God as love. These later theological interpretations shifted from the more metaphysical preoccupations about the nature of the “self-emptying of God” to the ethical preoccupation of the exhortation to “have the mind of Christ” understood as following the way of self-emptying and self-giving, and mirroring God’s *agape*, God’s unconditional and self-sacrificial love. The example of such love is not only Christ’s *kenosis* through the Incarnation, but also his *kenosis* in his life of humility and obedience unto death (his passion/cross). This latter development, the emphasis on obedience, humility, and self-sacrifice, of *kenosis* being equated with *agape* becomes problematic from a feminist perspective which will be discussed in the next chapter.

#### *Kenosis in Christian Spirituality*

Finally, discussions on *kenosis* are not limited only to the nature of Christ, nor to the understanding of a moral example or the ethical individual path to follow, but include the spiritual life of the Church. They also include an exhortation to enter the sacramental life of the community. As mentioned above, the hymn was part of either a Eucharistic or baptismal celebration, so it was used as part of the ritual of the early Christian community. As Sarah Coakley reminds us, the “hymn of Philippians 2 was, from the start, an invitation to enter into Christ’s extended life in the church, not just to speculate on his nature.”<sup>63</sup> It is not a surprise then, that the doctrine of *kenosis* has also played a very big role in many spiritual writings, understanding the way of *kenosis* as to enter into a life of contemplation or meditation, an entry into the very life/heart of God.

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<sup>63</sup> Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion,” 107.

Within the spiritual life, *kenosis* involves an understanding of “self-emptying” in the process of prayer, of a letting go or surrender of one’s will or one’s desire to the will of God. It involves self-denial, a renunciation or loss of the self that is a condition for the mystical life. In prayer, one “empties” oneself to be infused and filled up by God. In some ways this is reminiscent of the discussions of the Incarnation, of how the divine “descends” and transfers divine energy so that the human is purified and transformed in the process. In this case though, instead of the focus on the divine emptying, *kenosis* is seen as the human activity/ receptivity that allows for the person to be filled by God. Just like the discussions above, once again, there are questions regarding human agency and asking what is retained in the human. Is the human dissolved into the divine in the experience of union with God? The centrality of *kenosis* in the spiritual life, for example, can be found in the classic Carmelite tradition of both John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila.

However, just as the emphasis on humility, obedience and self-sacrifice in the ethical Christian life is critiqued by feminists, so too is the notion of *kenosis* in the spiritual life and its perceived rhetoric of “letting go” and “surrender” that seems to promote a passivity, a dissolution (even destruction) of self and escape from the world that is problematic for many feminists. These objections will be discussed in the next chapter.

### **III. Background on the doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*)**

#### *Early Buddhism*

Emptiness is understood as one of the key Mahāyāna doctrines. This doctrine is a further development of the early Buddhist teaching of impermanence (*anityā*) and the doctrine of “no-self” (*anātman*) found in the teachings regarding the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths, which are part of the fundamental doctrines of Buddhism, give a description or analysis of the human condition and of the human person. The 1<sup>st</sup> Noble Truth states that:

The Noble Truth of Suffering (*dukkha*) is this: Birth is suffering; ageing is suffering; sickness is suffering; death is suffering; sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering; dissociation with the pleasant is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in brief, the five aggregates of attachments are suffering.<sup>64</sup>

Here one finds a description of the whole of the human condition as one of suffering – that is that sickness, death, ageing, etc. are suffering. These experiences within human experience is suffering, but even more that, in a sense, the human person is “suffering” – as the last part of the first noble truth says – “the five aggregates (*skandhas*) are suffering.” These five aggregates are said to be the basic constituents of the human personality which is mistaken for the “self” which leads to attachment and ultimately to suffering.

In a further explication of the doctrine, it states that:

And what, friends, are the five aggregates affected by clinging that, in short, are suffering? They are: the material form aggregate affected by clinging, the feeling aggregate affected by clinging, the perception aggregate affected by clinging, the [mental] formations aggregate affected by clinging, and the consciousness aggregate affected by clinging. These are the five aggregates affected by clinging that, in short, are suffering.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Walpole Rahula, trans., “The First Sermon of the Buddha” in *Radiant Mind: Essential Buddhist Teachings and Texts*, ed. Jean Smith (New York: Riverhead Books) 66.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 68-9.

The five aggregates mentioned are primarily related to the Buddhist doctrine of no-Self - that is, that there is no permanent, substantial Self. Rather the human personality is comprised of the 5 aggregates listed above – that is form, bare sensory awareness or consciousness, feeling tones, recognitions or perceptions and thought formations. These five aggregates are understood as the composite nature of personality or as constantly changing processes of mind-body that is usually experienced as one instantaneous event that brings about this sense of a permanent, unchanging, substantial Self, the sense of an “I”. As Peter Harvey says, “The Buddha focused much critical attention on views concerning ‘self’ ....Such views can take many forms, but the Buddha felt that all of them locate a substantial self somewhere in the five *khandhas*...”<sup>66</sup>

Attachment or clinging (as the quote mentions) to such a “substantial self” is rooted in the very nature of these five aggregates. They, in a sense “cause” it. For contact with the world through the senses leads to feeling tones particularly of pleasantness or unpleasantness or neutrality which then bring about desire/attachment/clinging to that which is pleasant while trying to avoid the unpleasant. This brings about chains of thought and reaction that rule our actions. We are led by such chains of thought and reaction, ultimately controlled by our thoughts, emotions and actions and become unconsciously reactive to the world around us. We are caught in this endless cycle of reaction, constantly craving, thirsting, led by emotions – leading to anxiety, unsatisfaction, struggle – which is *dukkha*. This is the cycle of samsara.

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<sup>66</sup> Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History, and Practices* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 54.

One example typically used to demonstrate this doctrine and how the aggregates work together is the image of the chariot which is primarily just made up of different parts. The word “chariot” is used to “denote a collection of items in functional relationship, but not a special part of a chariot...”<sup>67</sup> There is no “chariot” in itself, but rather different parts coming together in order to make that chariot. In the same way, the “self” that is experienced as a unitary “self” is really the five aggregates which are of a composite nature.

Furthermore, these five aggregates and the doctrine of “no-self” are also closely related to another key Buddhist doctrine, dependent origination (*pratītya samutpāda*) which states that “...all things, mental and physical, arise and exist due to the presence of certain conditions, and cease once their conditions are removed: nothing (except *Nibbāna*) is independent.”<sup>68</sup> Such doctrine strengthens the doctrine of no-self, reaffirming the teaching that there is no independent, unchanging “self”, but rather, it is conditions coming together, dependent upon each other for their arising or their existence. Hence as Peter Harvey states,

The doctrine [of conditioned arising] thus complements the teaching that no permanent, independent self can be found. The main concrete application of the abstract principle is in the form of a series of conditioned and conditioning links (*nidānas*) culminating in the arising of *dukkha*.<sup>69</sup>

In particular, Abhidharma literature has used the description of the links of dependent origination<sup>70</sup> to analyze the origin of suffering. Basically, in trying to

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<sup>67</sup> Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, 52.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> The standard 12 links are thus: “(1) spiritual ignorance → (2) constructing activities → (3) (discriminative) consciousness → (4) mind-and-body → (5) the six sense-bases → (6) sensory stimulation → (7) feeling → (8) craving → (9) grasping → (10) existence → (11) birth → 12 ageing, death, sorrow,



understand the mechanics of rebirth into *samsara* (which is *dukkha*), the Abhidharmists argued that the origin of rebirth was volitional action (unskillful ones marked by greed, hatred or delusion), being fueled by one's grasping, clinging or attachment, itself rooted in one's ignorance. These three – action, clinging and ignorance – are the fundamental causes of suffering, the second Noble Truth. It is all of these conditions coming together that lead to suffering. In this analysis, Harvey contends that this analysis bolsters the doctrine of no-self for it does not invoke a permanent self. "No substantial self can be found which underlies the *nidānas*, owning and operating them: they simply occur according to conditions."<sup>71</sup>

What we find then in these early Abhidharma analyses of the nature of the person is that the notion of 'no-self' and dependent arising demonstrates our ignorance or mis-knowing (*avidyā*) of our fundamental nature. The doctrine of 'no-self' points to how there is no permanent, substantial, autonomous Self. Rather, that sense of Self is the product of the five aggregates that construct this illusory Self which leads to attachment. In reality, the 'Self' is really conditioned (as we saw in the analysis of the links of dependent origination); it relies on other conditions for its arising. Hence, it is wrong to think of the Self as autonomous, permanent, or substantial. What we find from this analysis is that the five aggregates are essentially defiled – they lead to our ignorance, clinging and attachment and hence to suffering and *samsara*.

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lamentation, pain, grief and despair, "Thus is the origin of this whole mass of *dukkha*." Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, 55.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 56.

In the end, the doctrine of “no-self” is the antidote to the attachment one feels to a sense of “I-ness” or “self” and a corrective to one’s ignorance about the true nature of the self, which can then lead to liberation. This teaching reminds us that the sense of self that we usually experience as permanent, unchanging, stable, individual/autonomous does not exist! This is not the “self” at all, it is only as we experience it in our ignorant, unattentive, unexamined ways. Rather, “self” is to be found in the moment by moment construction of thought processes, dynamic, continually changing processes. We are a changing process, not a fixed being that becomes the source of attachment. As Harvey states,

The not-self teaching is ...primarily a practical teaching aimed at the overcoming of attachment. It urges that all phenomena that we identify with as ‘self’, should be carefully observed and examined to see that they cannot be taken as such. In doing this, a person finally comes to see *everything*, all *dhammas*, as not-self, thereby destroying all attachment and attaining *Nibbāna*.<sup>72</sup>

Nirvana then was understood as the cessation and escape from this suffering. Coming from the root “*nirv*” which means to “blow out or extinguish”, nirvana was understood as the ‘blowing out or extinguishing’ of the flames/fires of desire or attachment. Cutting out such desires then frees one from samsara, and one attains nirvana. If the root of suffering is ignorance about one’s fundamental nature, then by understanding our true nature as conditioned and understanding the causality of conditioning, one can break such a conditioning and the cycle of samsara can be ended. In early Buddhism then, we find the human situation one of suffering, caught in samsara, and nirvana was seen as an escape from samsara, the two mutually exclusive.

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<sup>72</sup> Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, 52.

Furthermore, the nature of the person is impermanent and conditioned, the five aggregates defiled.

*Mahāyāna developments in the doctrine of emptiness*

With the development of the Mahāyāna tradition beginning around the 1<sup>st</sup> CE, the understanding of the nature of the person and of *samsara* and *nirvana* changed. One of the key developments in Mahāyāna is the doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) developed from meditative practices which brought about insight into the “empty nature” of things. The development of wisdom (*prajñā*) opens one up to see the “empty nature” of things – their lack of inherent existence. The doctrine of emptiness extended the notion of impermanence and “no-self” to “emptiness” or lack of inherent existence. In other words, the Mahāyāna view emphasized “not only that no permanent, substantial Self can be found to exist, but that the changing mental and physical processes – *dharmas* – that make up the world and persons are devoid of any inherent nature or separate existence.”<sup>73</sup> Here, we see the move of Mahayanists away from the Abhidharmists who believed that these dharmas still existed as substantial and not empty. The concern of these Mahayanists was the continued attachment that belief in the substantial nature of the *dharmas* may bring. For example, Paul Williams contends that in the Perfection of Wisdom (*Prajñāpāramitā*) sutras, considered to be the earliest Mahāyāna sutras, attachment to *dharmas* was considered attachment nonetheless, and that the goal of *arhatship* was unattainable “without understanding the absence of Self in *dharmas*.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 124.

<sup>74</sup> Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (New York: Routledge, 1998) 47.

The greatest systematizer of the teachings on emptiness was probably Nagarjuna, of the Madhyamaka school. Streng characterizes Nagarjuna's basic work, the *Mulamadhyamakakarikas* as showing the influence of both the Abhidharmic concern with analysis and clarification as well as the *Prajñāpāramitā* concern with the practice of spiritual realization.<sup>75</sup> In particular, Nagarjuna mirrors the concern about attachment to *dharma*s and the insistence on their empty nature. As Ornatowski contends, "Nagarjuna was attempting to overturn the substantialist views of the Abhidharmists, who tried to give a substantive positive reality to the *dharma*s and other concepts that Nagarjuna argued were not there."<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, in his *Stanzas on the Middle Path*, Nagarjuna developed emptiness as a logical tool to be used to break down the monks' attachment to false views.<sup>77</sup> He was not trying to give a description of the Ultimate or unconditioned, or the nature of existence, but instead was using emptiness as a tool to against attachment to anything, even to the doctrine of emptiness itself which is a "poison."<sup>78</sup>

Furthermore, Nagarjuna also moves away from the Abhidharmists by re-interpreting the understanding of dependent origination and identifying it with emptiness. As Ornatowski says, "[t]he main achievement of Nagarjuna was not simply his insistence upon the importance of 'emptiness' but also his identification of emptiness with

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<sup>75</sup> Frederick J. Streng, *Emptiness: A Study in Religious Meaning* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967) 30.

<sup>76</sup> Gregory Ornatowski, "Transformations of 'Emptiness': On the Idea of *śūnyatā* and the Thought of Abe and the Kyoto School of Philosophy in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 34/1 (Winter 1997): 100.

<sup>77</sup> James Fredericks, *Buddhists and Christians: Through Comparative Theology to Solidarity* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004) 89.

<sup>78</sup> The poison of emptiness, as Nagarjuna warns, is that one holds to emptiness as another view that becomes the object of one's attachment (and hence a cause of suffering) instead of using it as the antidote to negate all manner of attachment or clinging to views. As Harvey says, "at the ultimate level, even talk of 'emptiness' is to be finally given up: as things which are said to be empty do not ultimately exist, one cannot even say that 'they' are 'empty' (*Mk.* Ch. 22, v. 11): the 'emptiness of all *dharma*s is empty of that emptiness' (*Panca.* 196). Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, 102.

dependent co-origination (*pratītya-samutpāda*) which he considered the basic teaching of the Buddha.”<sup>79</sup> For the Mahayanists, the understanding of *dharma*s being empty meant that, in their very nature, they lack inherent existence and are therefore mutually dependent on others for their arising. This is how things really are. For Nagarjuna, “emptiness became the best verbal expression for ‘originating dependently.’ It avoided the illusion of self existence most completely and omitted the necessity for a law of causation which related entities that were presupposed in a ‘svabhava’ [own/inherent-existence] perspective.”<sup>80</sup> In this case, the notion of emptiness should not be seen as equivalent to nothingness or nihilism, but to relative existence; meaning they [the *dharma*s] are dependent on other causes and conditions for their arising.<sup>81</sup> What they are opposed to is the imputation of inherent existence. This is the false view that leads to attachment and greater suffering. According to Streng,

...the religious significance of ‘emptiness’ is comparable to that of anatma [no-self], for both are expressions of dependent co-origination. They delineate the existential situation in which man attains release.<sup>82</sup>

In contrast to the Mādhyamaka teaching on emptiness and its use as a logical tool against attachment to views, the Yogācāra school developed, deeply rooted in the practice of meditative trance (*dhyānas*), which focused on consciousness and how the ordinary experience of the world is made of conceptual constructions. As Harvey states,

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<sup>79</sup> Ornatowski, 94.

<sup>80</sup> Streng, 64.

<sup>81</sup> For the Abhidharmists, these *dharma*s are considered the building blocks which we use to construct our reality. As Paul Williams explains, “[t]hey are the results of causes, exist for a very short time indeed and yet, unlike the objects of our everyday world, which have merely conventional or conceptual existence, all *dharma*s in some fundamental sense really exist.” Williams, 15. This “real existence” of the *dharma*s as explained above, is challenged by the Mahayanists who argue that even these *dharma*s are empty of inherent existence.

<sup>82</sup> Streng, 163.

The Mādhyamikas had an analytical, dialectic approach to reality, emphasizing *prajñā* (wisdom); the Yogācārins emphasized *samādhi* (meditative concentration) and the withdrawal of the mind from sensory phenomena. Just as the early Buddhists sought to transcend limiting attachment by seeing phenomena as immanent, unsatisfactory and not-self, the Mādhyamikas sought this by seeing them as ‘empty’, and the Yogācārins sought it by seeing perceived phenomena as mental constructions.<sup>83</sup>

Yogācārins emphasized the role of consciousness or mind (hence its other name as the Cittamātra or mind/thought-only school) as that which interprets experience and thus constructs the world. A central concept among Yogācārins is that of the three “natures” or “aspects” (*trisvabhava*) to explain one’s experience of reality, and to move from the ordinary experience of reality to the ultimate truth. The first aspect, the *parikalpitasvabhava* (mentally constructed or imagined), is one’s ordinary, unenlightened, dualistic experience of the world. “It is how the world appears to us, the realm of subject-object duality. These things do not actually exist at all (*Trimśikā* v. 20), things are not really like that.”<sup>84</sup> The second aspect is the *paratantrasvabhava* (the other-dependent) which sees both subject and object as a flow of perceptions, seeing them as impermanent and arising dependently of each other. However, this is not the highest level for it is this flow of perception which forms the basis of the mistaken construction into subject and object in the first aspect. The third aspect, the *pariniṣpannasvabhava* (absolutely accomplished or perfected) is one that is totally devoid of subject-object duality and where the empty nature of the first two aspects/natures is realized. This aspect is “knowledge of the very empty ‘nature’ of all phenomena: emptiness. This ‘nature’ is also known as thusness, the inconceivable as-it-is-ness of reality.”<sup>85</sup> This is the view of the Buddhas who are able to glimpse the ‘empty nature’ of all things, and in so

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<sup>83</sup> Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, 105.

<sup>84</sup> Williams, 83.

<sup>85</sup> Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, 111.

doing, see things in their thusness/suchness (*tathatā*); that is, to see things as they are, prior to conceptual construction and reification. This thusness, the way things truly are is the ultimate truth. It is ineffable and unchangeable. It is through meditation that one learns to glimpse into this ultimate truth.

In such discussions, the Yogācārins shifted the emphasis from expressing emptiness as a mere negation or as lack of inherent existence to emptiness as the affirmation of the intrinsic and positive nature and purity of things, and the affirmation of the mind as a nondual flow of perceptions. As Harvey argues,

While the Mādhyamikas see ‘emptiness’ as simply indicating the absence of inherent existence in phenomena, the Yogācārins see it as itself positively existing – in the form of the non-dual nature of ‘construction of the unreal’. Reality, understood according to the true Middle Way, is empty of duality but not empty of existence.<sup>86</sup>

Of course, there were debates about the nature of this mind, for how can a pure mind lead to impure illusory constructions. Ultimately, they came to agree that the mind is inherently pure and its defilements are merely adventitious, and not part of its very nature. Mind is seen as impure only from the view of conventional or phenomenal truth but from the stance of ultimate reality – glimpsed in meditation – the mind is pure. As Harvey says,

Its purity is intrinsic to it: ‘As is pure gold, water free from dirt, the sky without a cloud, so it is pure when detached from imagination’ (*Lanka* 1.31). Emptiness is seen as undefiled due to its very nature, the brightly shining state of the transcendental *citta*, but this purity is hidden by arriving defilements (*Mv.* Ch. 1, v. 23, cf, p. 56).<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, 111.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

Another school of thought which emphasized a more positive discussion on emptiness is the *tathāgatagarbha*.<sup>88</sup> Its main contribution is the discussion of the *tathāgatagarbha* (TTG) and its relation with Buddha nature. *Garbha* means womb, embryo or container while *tathāgata* usually alludes to the Buddha, the perfect one. Hence, TTG usually refers to the “embryonic perfect one” alluding to the seed/potential within all sentient beings to become Buddhas, no matter how deluded or defiled one is. One of the key texts for this doctrine is that of Queen Śrīmālā which explains that this TTG is really the dharmakāya which is obscured in unenlightened persons. The dharmakāya is:

beginningless, uncreate, unborn, undying, free from death; permanent, steadfast, calm, eternal; intrinsically pure, free from all the defilement-store; and accompanied by Buddha natures more numerous than the sands of the Ganges, which are nondiscrete, knowing as liberated, and inconceivable. This Dharmakāya of the Tathāgata when not free from the store of defilement is referred to as the Tathāgatagarbha.<sup>89</sup>

Furthermore, beyond the earlier understanding of no-self and even of emptiness as negation, TTG discussions continue to affirm the intrinsic and positive nature and purity of things as we saw among Yogācārins. As Harvey states,

[i]t is an emptiness which is itself full of possibilities; it is resplendent with the qualities of Buddhahood, beginningless, unchanging and permanent (*Rv.* Vv. 51, 84). It is beyond duality, having the nature of thought and the intrinsic purity of a jewel, space or water (*Rv.* vv. 28, 30, 49). It is brightly shining with lucid clarity (*Rv.* v. 170) and is ‘by nature brightly shining and pure’ (*Lanka*.77).<sup>90</sup>

Hence, in a reversal of earlier views of the “self” (and *skandhas*) as defiled, this further development shows that the person is inherently pure, and has the capacity for goodness

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<sup>88</sup> Though the Chinese tradition lists Tathāgatagarbha with the Mādhyamaka and Yogācāra philosophical schools of thought, Indian and Tibetan traditions do not consider it as a separate philosophical school. Instead, it developed sometime between the two schools, and “its ideas were in some ways intermediary between theirs and they both drew on these ideas.” Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, 113.

<sup>89</sup> Alex Wayman and Hideko Wayman, trans. *The Lion’s Roar of Queen Śrīmālā: A Buddhist Scripture on the Tathāgatagarbha Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974) 98, quoted in Williams, 101.

<sup>90</sup> Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, 114-5.



and love and all the qualities of enlightenment (the qualities of a Buddha such as discernment, creative responsiveness, skillful means, etc.) except that it is concealed. Such a development in doctrine still upholds the prior notion of ‘no-self’ understood as a wrong understanding of self as “samsaric egoism.” However, the true nature of self lies beyond the notion of impermanence, and is glimpsed from the view of emptiness. This true self is the ultimate truth: that the fundamental nature of persons is one of purity and goodness – the nature of the Buddhas as stated above.

Correlated to the Yogācāra stance that the mind is pure yet has adventitious defilements, the TTG developed the stance that Buddha nature is pure and undefiled, only it is hidden by habits of clinging and attachment. Some of the metaphors to illustrate the relationship of the pure TTG and its defilements are a Buddha-image wrapped in rags, or a gold ore that has to be refined in order to bring out the intrinsic purity of the gold.<sup>91</sup> In the metaphor of the Buddha-image wrapped in rags, one finds a strong model of Buddha nature where one can argue that only from conventional reality, that is, from the state of ignorance and unenlightenment is our nature seen as tainted. Hence if our very nature is already that of the Buddhas, then there is nothing that we need to do except to discover/uncover this truth or in this case, take off the rags and uncover the Buddha hidden within. In the second metaphor, one finds a weaker model of Buddha nature, as the capacity for awakening that needs cultivation – just as the gold ore has to be purified and refined.

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<sup>91</sup> Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, 115.

The discussions on these key Buddhist doctrines of “no-self”, “emptiness” and “dependent origination” has implications on the understanding on the mode of existence of persons. The doctrine of ‘no-self’ – that there is no permanent, substantial self - already implies the doctrine of dependent arising, that the self is dependent on other causes and conditions. Moreover, the Mahāyāna emphasis on emptiness as dependent origination emphasizes further how the very nature of persons (indeed of all phenomena) is interdependence. Since all is empty, and everything depends on everything else for its existence, then fundamentally everything is interconnected and interdependent. As Ingram says,

Applied to human beings, for example, non-self means that we are not embodiments of an unchanging self-entity that remains self-identical through time. All Buddhist teachings are firm in their rejection of permanent selfhood. What we “are” is a system of interdependent relationships – physical, psychological, historical, sociological, cultural, spiritual – that, in interdependence with everything else undergoing change and becoming in the universe, continuously create “who” we are from moment to moment in our lifetimes. We are not permanent selves that *have* these interdependent relationship; we *are* these interdependent relationships we undergo. Since these relationships are not permanent, neither we nor anything else in the universe is permanent.<sup>92</sup>

Furthermore, the doctrine of emptiness also implies that ultimately, “self” and “other” are beyond duality. Conventionally, there is the appearance and experience of duality since “self” and “other” are interdependently co-constructed in relation to each other. Through realizing emptiness, there is a recognition of the other as oneself, as sharing this fundamental ‘empty nature’ but also constitutive of the other since we are all mutually interdependent. With the further development of the doctrine of Buddha nature – then the recognition of other as oneself – extends beyond the recognition of sharing an

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<sup>92</sup> Paul O. Ingram, *The Process of Buddhist-Christian Dialogue* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009) 48.

‘empty nature’ but ultimately realizing that “self” and “other” are one nature, thusness beyond duality, having the nature of the Buddhas. As Burton Watson says,

...because of its underlying unity, all things in it interpenetrate with one another and share one another’s identity...all beings partake of the Buddha nature and have the potential to attain Buddhahood.<sup>93</sup>

This is primarily what is found in many meditation practices, that part of the wisdom of emptiness is cutting through our delusion of seeing ourselves as separate and different from others in order to see the fundamental nature that is shared by all, the nature of the Buddhas. Just as our suffering can be shown as not being different from another person and we can see them as ourselves, we can also see this Buddha nature in others and sense our deep connection with them, and commune with them. A wonderful image of such a mode of interdependence was developed in the Hua-Yen tradition in China. In the Flower Garland sutra is the image of Indra’s net and Tower of Vairocana, the latter seen as the vision of Bodhisattvas and Buddhas who see ultimate reality – the emptiness and hence interpenetration of all beings. In the image of Indra’s net, each knot that forms the net has a jewel and in each jewel is reflected all the other jewels that make up the net. Each jewel then is constituted by all the other jewels – an image of “emptiness” (lack of inherent existence) and dependent origination. And the Tower of Vairocana gives us the vision of how all reality is contained within every single entity, a vision of ultimate reality which is the perfect interpenetration of all things.

From this vision of emptiness comes compassion – that is the wish to help others and free them from their suffering. Aside from seeing that everyone shares the same fundamental conditioning and nature, our interdependence means that one cannot wish

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<sup>93</sup> Burton Watson, trans., *The Vimalakirti Sutra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) 11.

for one's liberation without wishing the same for others. One cannot be liberated unless all are liberated. This becomes the beginning of the *bodhicitta* (the awakened or awakening mind) which is the entrance to the Bodhisattva path. This is the path of one who chooses to attain enlightenment, not just for themselves, but for the sake of all sentient beings who are ultimately undivided from oneself. This focus on compassion and the liberation of all beings is one of the key characteristics of the Mahāyāna. According to Williams,

What characterizes the Mahayana is not the teaching of absence of Self in *dharma*s but, according to the great Tibetan scholar Tsong kha pa (1357-1419), the extensive deeds and compassion of the Bodhisattva who is treading the path to perfect Buddhahood for the benefit of all.<sup>94</sup>

In a famous passage in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (The Way of the Bodhisattva), this aspiration is expressed as such:

For all those ailing in the world,  
Until their every sickness has been healed,  
May I myself become for them  
The doctor, nurse, the medicine itself.<sup>95</sup>

Just as the buddhas of the past  
Embraced the awakened attitude of mind,  
And in the precepts of the bodhisattvas  
Step by step abode and trained,

Just so, and for the benefit of beings,  
I will also have this attitude of mind,  
And in those precepts, step by step,  
I will abide and train myself.<sup>96</sup>

In these verses, this aspiration to heal every sickness coupled with embracing the awakened attitude of mind shows the Bodhisattva path as both the path of wisdom (awakened attitude of mind) and compassion (healing every sickness, benefiting sentient

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<sup>94</sup> Paul Williams, 47-8.

<sup>95</sup> Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva: A Translation of the Bodhicaryāvatāra*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (Boston: Shambhala, 2003) 3:7.

<sup>96</sup> Shantideva, 3:23-24.

beings). They are usually expressed as the two wings that enable one to fly or as the two eyes that enable one to see deeply or clearly. On the one hand, wisdom (realizing emptiness), as Harvey says, ensures that compassionate action is “appropriate, effective, and not covertly self-seeking.”<sup>97</sup> This is so because in realizing emptiness, one sees that “I” is not ultimately different from “another” since both are “empty” and one’s action will not stem out of pride or condescension, but instead comes from seeking liberation for them, in the same way that one seeks liberation for oneself. Furthermore, wisdom cannot be seen as fully realized unless it bears fruit in compassionate action. For if one realizes the emptiness of both self and other, then one can only act to save not just oneself, but all sentient beings. Hence, the universality of the vow of a Bodhisattva never to stop until all beings are set free or as quoted above, until every sickness has been healed. On the other hand, compassion helps us to realize the wisdom of emptiness by undercutting our self-centeredness, lessening the attachment to self in light of our consideration of the other. Furthermore, great compassion does not allow us to “immerse ourselves in any sort of quietistic trance, or accept any sort of illogical escapism from relativity, but imperatively compels us to act selflessly, as if already enlightened, even when we do not yet feel enlightened.”<sup>98</sup> Here, we see how wisdom and compassion help in the cultivation of each other on the path.

The interdependence of wisdom and compassion can be found in the very popular and much loved story of Vimalakīrti, a bodhisattva who appears as a sick man in order to

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<sup>97</sup> Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, 121.

<sup>98</sup> Robert Thurman, trans., *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti: a Mahāyāna Scripture* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976) 4.

teach others the view of emptiness which will lead them to liberation. In his discussions, he challenges wrong understandings of emptiness, and insists on its nonduality with compassion. He makes it clear that “the sole function of wisdom, gnosis or any state of liberation is its function as a necessary complement to the indispensable great compassion that has no object (*anupalambha*) and is not a sentimentally conceived emotion (*ananūnayad.r.st.imahākarunā*).<sup>99</sup> For example, in Vimalakīrti’s discourse on his sickness, he speaks about using his own sickness to empower empathy for all living beings and hence work for their welfare.<sup>100</sup> Moreover, he speaks about how wisdom and compassion have to work together, for without the integration of the two, one does not find liberation but only bondage. He says,

Wisdom not integrated with liberative technique is bondage, but wisdom integrated with liberative technique is liberation. Liberative technique not integrated with wisdom is bondage, but liberative technique integrated with wisdom is liberation.<sup>101</sup>

Here as the translator notes, “liberative technique” is the expression of compassion.<sup>102</sup> On the one hand, wisdom without compassion is still bondage because one cannot truly have realized wisdom, if one chooses only to work for one’s own liberation and not that of others. This would show one has not truly realized both the sameness and the interdependence of all sentient beings. In other words, one still continues to have a subtle attachment to oneself. At the same time, compassion without wisdom is also bondage, because it leads to what he calls “sentimental compassion.” This kind of compassion is problematic because it is still attached to the emotions and passions that lead to suffering.

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<sup>99</sup> Thurman, 7.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>102</sup> As Thurman notes, “...the way to the full nonduality of wisdom and compassion, the latter being expressed as skill in liberative technique,” 6.

As Vimalakīrti said, one is still “living in the grip of dogmatic convictions, passions, attachments, resentments and their subconscious instincts.”<sup>103</sup> One is not acting from detachment, or from the view of the equality of all beings, but continues to act out of wrong notions of “I” and “other”, out of feelings of “desire” or “anger”, not free from such passions and attachments. In his view, such “sentimental compassion” only exhausts the bodhisattva. They are unable to free others because they themselves are not yet free. Thus it is only with wisdom that compassion can be liberating because then it is a compassion that is truly without attachment, truly universally encompassing, and without any desire of merit on the part of the bodhisattva. This is why wisdom and compassion are seen as two wings due to the synergy in the practice of both. Each further empowers the other as the path of the bodhisattva unfolds. The practice of compassion helps to undercut one’s attachment to oneself and one’s self-centeredness thereby supporting the development of wisdom. On the other hand, wisdom ensures that one’s practice of compassion over time becomes wider until it encompasses all sentient beings, and is no longer motivated by one’s emotions especially attachment or hatred.

*Doctrine of emptiness and meditation practice*

In order to realize such wisdom of emptiness, one must ultimately engage in the practice of meditation. As previously mentioned, the very development of this doctrine came as the result of intense meditative practices. In the same way, the realization of emptiness, the direct perception of the absence of self and the empty nature of all phenomena, is only possible through mental cultivation, that is mind-training and

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<sup>103</sup> Thurman, 47.

meditation. The *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, is one popular example of such meditation and mind-training that is focused on the cultivation of both wisdom and compassion. It was written by Śāntideva (c. 695-743), another influential Madhyamika writer, on the topic of the bodhisattva path. The whole of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* is “geared toward wisdom, the direct realization of emptiness, absolute bodhicitta, without which the true practice of compassion is impossible.”<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, it is famous for its chapter on wisdom showing how such is central to the spiritual life, and not just a topic for philosophical discussions. “Śāntideva demonstrates that, far from being a matter of rarified metaphysics or academic discussion, removed from the concerns of practical existence, Mādhyamika is fundamentally a vision and a way of life. It is the ultimate heart and soul of the Buddha’s teaching.”<sup>105</sup>

In the chapter on wisdom, Śāntideva contends that only the realization of emptiness can bring enlightenment and hence the task of one who seeks it must be the meditation on this topic. He writes:

Afflictive passion and the veils of ignorance --  
The cure for these is emptiness.  
Therefore, how could they not meditate upon it  
Who wish swiftly to attain omniscience?<sup>106</sup>

What follows in that chapter is a very profound and complex meditation on emptiness, teaching the reader to ponder what one usually experiences and to see the “empty” nature of all of that. In particular, he is keen to examine the usual notion of the “self” as a unitary “body”, of analyzing the five aggregates (the *skandhas*) mentioned

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<sup>104</sup> Shantideva, 21.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 9:54.



above, to show that none of them is the “I”, nor do they have inherent existence. For example, he writes:

The flesh and skin are not the “I,”  
And neither are the body’s warmth and breath.  
The cavities within the frame are not the “I,”  
And “I” is not accounted for within the six perceptions.<sup>107</sup>

Instead, what appears as “I” or having inherent existence, only arises through the coming together of certain causes and conditions. Here, we see him following the Mādhyamaka train of equating emptiness with dependent arising. For example, he writes:

As long as the conditions are assembled,  
A body will appear and seem to be a man.  
As long as all parts are likewise present,  
It’s there that we will see a body.<sup>108</sup>

What arises through the meeting of conditions  
And ceases to exist when these are lacking,  
Is artificial like the mirror image;  
How can true existence be ascribed to it.<sup>109</sup>

May beings like myself discern and grasp  
That all things have the character of space<sup>110</sup>

He states that suffering, all sorrow and pain can be attributed to this wrong view, the ignorance regarding emptiness. In order to counteract such tendencies, he goes into these deep examinations of phenomena and encourages his readers, as quoted above, to see things as “artificial”, as having the character of space, or even seeing them as illusions or mirages. Such can help lessen one’s attachment to seeing phenomena as solid, permanent and unitary. Such exercises are done in meditation and are ultimately what lead to the direct realization of emptiness.

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<sup>107</sup> Shantideva, 9:59.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 9:84.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 10:144.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 10:153.

However, as previously mentioned, the realization of emptiness is impossible without the practice of compassion and vice versa. In this text, one also sees how the two work together, and how Śāntideva balances the training on emptiness with the practice of compassion. In his discussions, one sees how compassion comes through the realization of the “emptiness” of “self” and “other” and hence their interdependence, and how one’s own liberation can only come through the liberation of others. For example, he writes:

And catching sight of others, think  
That it will be through them  
That you will come to buddhahood.  
So look on them with open, loving hearts.<sup>111</sup>

Furthermore, his meditation on chapter eight, verses 90-98 is a classic example of a meditation that leads to compassion undergirded by an understanding of emptiness articulated as seeing the nonduality between “I” and “other”, and seeing their equality. This practice becomes the basis of then being able to exchange oneself for the other, ultimately allowing one to take on the suffering of the other as one’s own suffering, and powering the great compassion. As Khenchen Kunzang Palden writes, in his commentary on these verses, “first meditate strenuously on equality of self and other; for without it, a perfectly pure altruistic attitude cannot arise.”<sup>112</sup> For Śāntideva, the way to achieve this is to meditate on how all beings are the same, in wanting happiness and wanting to be free from suffering. He writes,

Strive at first to meditate  
Upon the sameness of yourself and others.  
In joy and sorrow all are equal.  
Thus be a guardian of all, as of yourself.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Shantideva, 5:80.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>113</sup> Shantideva, 8: 90.

The hand and other limbs are many and distinct,  
But all are one – one body to be kept and guarded.  
Likewise, different beings in their joys and sorrows,  
Are, like me, all one in wanting happiness.<sup>114</sup>

Meditating in this way, Khenchen Palden contends, one begins to realize the nondualism of self and other, to see “I” and “other” as totally unreal and illusory. One begins to realize the “spacelike quality of egolessness” and “it is no longer possible to make a separation between ‘I’ and ‘other’, and there arises an attitude of wanting to protect others as oneself, to protect all that belongs to them with the same care as if it were one’s own.”<sup>115</sup> It is precisely this attitude and realization that empowers the bodhisattva’s activity in the world, wishing to liberate all beings from suffering, realizing not only their equality but also their interdependence. As mentioned, such meditation becomes the basis for the practice of exchanging oneself for the other, a practice in compassion, but also a constant reminder of how “I” and “other” are not ultimately different. This allows for compassion to be pure and universal, not tainted by the passions and attachments rooted in the wrong view of “self” and “other.” Such insights into wisdom and compassion, as demonstrated by Śāntideva, can only happen within meditation. Hence, it is a vital component in order to truly have a direct realization of emptiness. Its main goal, as mentioned, is not any kind of discursive or academic understanding of the doctrine, but ultimately its realization so that one can experience liberation in the fullest sense, a liberation that reaches out to all others as one’s greater self.

#### **IV. Buddhist Christian dialogues on *kenosis* and *śūnyatā***

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 8: 91.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 181.

Comparison and dialogue between Christians and Buddhists have proven to be fruitful for both religions.<sup>116</sup> In these comparisons, there has been a focus on *śūnyatā* as one of the key Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrines even as Christian theologians reflected upon the nature of God, on Christology, and on theological anthropology and selfhood. Furthermore, there have also been exchanges between some of these Christian theologians and their Buddhist counterparts. These exchanges which occurred between the 1980s and the 1990s focused on the Buddhist doctrine of *śūnyatā* and the Christian doctrine of *kenosis*. In Lai and von Brück's assessment, academic exchange has primarily concentrated on this dialogue between the Kyoto school and most prominently American process philosophy.<sup>117</sup> Masao Abe of the Kyoto School together with John Cobb started a group of Buddhist and Christian scholars conversing on various issues over a five-year period. Such conversations over the years have resulted in books such as *The Emptying God, Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Trinity* and *Divine Emptiness and Historical Fullness*.<sup>118</sup>

Such prolific dialogue between these Buddhist and Christian scholars may have come about because they share many parallels. Process philosophy, started by Alfred Whitehead, moves away from the Aristotelian notion of being and substance toward a

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<sup>116</sup> For a detailed account of the history of Buddhist-Christian dialogue in the United States, see Whalen Lai and Michael von Brück, *Christianity and Buddhism: A Multi-cultural History of their Dialogue*, Phyllis Jestice, trans. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001) 193-235.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>118</sup> John Cobb and Christopher Ives, eds. *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), Roger Corless and Paul Knitter, eds. *Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Trinity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), and Christopher Ives, ed. *Divine Emptiness and Historical Fullness: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation with Masao Abe* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1995).

more dynamic process of becoming, both of God as well as beings. As such, “it takes positions that are similar to certain assertions of Buddhism, without being historically dependent on Buddhism.”<sup>119</sup> In particular, it comes close to the Buddhist understanding of impermanence, no-self, as well as “emptiness” and dependent origination. As Lai and von Brück note, this was not immediately apparent in the early days of Buddhist-Christian dialogue where emptiness was understood in the sense of radical negation rather than as complete interdependence. However, as interest in the Hua-Yen school, with its more positive image of emptiness as mutual dependence, and its vision of the interdependence of all things, increased, there came a corresponding increase in interest from process philosophers and theologians. One of the first fruits of this encounter is the work of John Cobb, a process theologian who started the conversation with Masao Abe.<sup>120</sup>

*John Cobb and Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism*

In his book, *Beyond Dialogue*, John Cobb reflects upon aspects of the Christian tradition by way of understanding Buddhist doctrines, particularly the doctrine of emptiness. As is evident from his title, he believes that the encounter between the two, and his method of “passing over” to Buddhism and “coming back” to Christianity, moves “beyond dialogue” to a new and enriched understanding of both traditions that can lead to their mutual transformation and fructification. In particular, as Paul Ingram points out, Cobb believes that dialogue with Buddhism can help Christians understand “how

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<sup>119</sup> Lai and von Brück, 231.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 233.

inadequately theology has reflected on the nonsubstantial character of God and human selfhood. To make this point, he incorporates the Mahayana Buddhist doctrines of “emptying” (Sanskrit *śūṅyātā*) and “non-self” (Sanskrit *anātman*) into his doctrine of God.”<sup>121</sup>

For example, in reflecting upon the Christian understanding of selfhood and whether that can be understood in light of the Buddhist notion of “no-self”, Cobb reflects upon “no-self” as the reminder of how we are not permanent, unchanging selves. This counters views that keep us locked in the illusion that change is not possible, and ultimately close us to new possibilities. Within the Christian framework, this could be understood as closing ourselves to the possibility of deeper openness to the call of God because we are too firmly entrenched in our “past” and the “self” understood in that past. He writes:

The strong personal self which characterizes us is also the sinner who refuses to respond, moment by moment, to the call of Christ. The dominance of our past purposes restricts our openness to the new possibilities that are given in Christ .... The Christian goal, therefore, is not the dissolution of the personal self but its continual transcending of the past through conformation to the ever new purposes of God.<sup>122</sup>

Furthermore, Cobb also re-thinks the Great Commandment of loving the other as oneself in light of his understanding of emptiness as dependent origination. He writes about the difficulty to love others in the same way that we love ourselves; that in the Christian imagination, there is the strong sense of one’s individual self over that of

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<sup>121</sup> Ingram, 35. The language of “emptying” is probably more reflective the Christian tradition of *kenosis* or self-emptying. Instead, Indian Buddhist philosophy talks about emptiness as the “adjectival quality of ‘*dharma*s’” rather than the verbal function of “emptying” something. Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, 99. In Indian Buddhist philosophy, nothing needs to be emptied since everything is already empty. See footnote 81. A further discussion of this point will be made in the Kyoto school section.

<sup>122</sup> John Cobb, *Beyond Dialogue: Toward a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982) 107-8.

others, and a sense that a choice for the other is a choice for the “refusal to favor oneself.”

He contends then that, in the Christian tradition,

the call to love others as we love ourselves is experienced either as remote and hardly relevant ideal, a burdensome and guilt-producing law, or as a supernatural gift. Relations to other persons are so different from relations to oneself that an equality of love is virtually inconceivable.<sup>123</sup>

However, taking into consideration the Buddhist notion of dependent origination (and this could be where we see the influence of the Hua-yen tradition of the interdependence of all things), there need not be a dualism between self and other, for the other is experienced as oneself. He rejects the substantialist understanding of selfhood, and contends that with the understanding of emptiness as dependent origination, “the barrier between persons, the mutual externality, disappears. Each participates in the other as in itself. The Christian commandment to love the neighbor as the self is transformed in the enlightened ones into a description of the actual relationship to others.”<sup>124</sup> However, he clarifies that such a movement, is not meant to lead to a dissolution nor annihilation of a personal structure of existence (which may be a particular Christian and Western concern or a misunderstanding of Buddhist notion of “no-self”), but rather is a movement toward transcendence. It is a move away from the past self that is locked in one’s individuality and one’s concern and crosses over to the concerns of the other, transcending such a past in a way that allows for the “development of relations to others that are increasingly able to inherit from them...”<sup>125</sup>

In accordance with his own process theology and the doctrine of emptiness and dependent origination, he also posits a new understanding of God that goes beyond the

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<sup>123</sup> Cobb, *Beyond Dialogue*, 108.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>125</sup> Cobb, *Beyond Dialogue*, 110.

Greek philosophical understanding of God as an unchanging substantial essence, and corresponds better, he argues, to the biblical notion of God. He writes,

God must be conceived as wholly lacking substantiality. God cannot be an agent or distinct from the divine activity or a patient distinguished from the divine receptivity. God must be the complete, unqualified, everlasting actualization of *pratitya-samutpada*, dependent origination. It is precisely by being perfectly empty that God, like a Buddha, is perfectly full. That is, God must be totally open to all that is and constituted by its reception. ... might resonate better to the revelation in Jesus than does the identification of God as being or Supreme Being.<sup>126</sup>

In the end, Paul Ingram expresses his understanding of Cobb's project and its contribution to Christian theology stating that:

...dialogue with Buddhism, meditated through Whiteheadian process philosophy, brings theological reflection into closer alignment with biblical tradition, given the fact that traditional Christian teaching of God as an unchanging substantial essence, as well as the doctrine of an immortal soul, are in harmony neither with biblical tradition nor the 'structure' of Christian experience.<sup>127</sup>

This description of God, as wholly lacking substantiality, and his statement that only by "being perfectly empty is God perfectly full, or even perfectly God," comes close to the conversations with Masao Abe who re-thinks Christ's *kenosis* in light of his understanding of emptiness, concluding that God can only be truly the Son of God in his full emptying of his divine nature in the Incarnation. It is to this discussion that we now turn our attention.

#### *The Kyoto School and Masao Abe's "Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata"*

Masao Abe comes from the Kyoto school of Japanese Buddhism that has a history of studying Western Continental philosophy, particularly Kantian idealism.<sup>128</sup> The Kyoto School is characterized by formation/education in European/Western thought. This

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<sup>126</sup> Cobb, *Beyond Dialogue*, 113.

<sup>127</sup> Ingram, 36.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 49.



school, according to Steve Odin, started a new period of kenoticism, particularly, “Japanese kenoticism” with the Japanese effort to reformulate the Christian notion of kenosis in light of the metaphysics of *sunyata*.<sup>129</sup> These dialogues were begun by Nishida Kitaro (1879-1945), the founder of the Kyoto School, when he first introduced the *kenosis/sūnyatā* motif in his search for a transcultural or comparative philosophy of religion. In his analysis, he stated that “A God who is simply self-sufficient is not the true God.”<sup>130</sup> He argued that the nature of God is that God is self-emptying or “kenotic,” and hence the perfection of God rests, not on God’s self-sufficiency, but on the *kenosis* of God.

His disciple, Nishitani Keiji (1900-1990), followed in his footsteps and also focused on the problem of a transcultural philosophy of religion. In his book *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani followed upon the logic of Nishida and continued to develop the notion of *kenosis*. He linked it to another Christian concept, *agape*, arriving at a re-interpretation of Christ. For him, *kenosis* is grounded in *agape* or disinterested love. The self-emptying of Christ out of *agape* reveals the very perfection of God. This is the characteristic of the divine, and the self-emptying of Christ can only be understood within the original *kenosis* of God. The perfection of God is God’s self-emptying nature. This is typified in Christ’s *ekkenosis* (the activity of self-emptying) and our self-emptying

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<sup>129</sup> Steve Odin, “A Critique of the ‘Kenosis/Sūnyatā’ Motif in Nishida and the Kyoto School” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 9 (1989): 72.

<sup>130</sup> Kitaro Nishida. *The Complete Works of Nishida Kitaro XI*, (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1965) 399, quoted in E.D. Cabanne, “Beyond Kenosis: New Foundations for Buddhist-Christian Dialogue” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 13 (1993): 104.

today is the practice of that divine perfection.<sup>131</sup> This interpretation of the Christian theological notion of *kenosis* is done from the standpoint of some key Mahayana Buddhist categories as emptiness, non-ego, and compassion.<sup>132</sup>

Most prominently, Masao Abe continued this dialogue around *kenosis* and *śūnyatā*, and as mentioned above, started a group of Buddhist and Christian scholars conversing on various issues. He studied at Union Theological Seminary under Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr. Furthermore, as James Fredericks also notes, “Abe Masao, more than any other member of the Kyoto school, has made interreligious dialogue his specialization.”<sup>133</sup>

Abe’s article entitled *Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata* sparked much conversation with many Christian as well as Jewish theologians which resulted in the three books mentioned above. First, he contextualizes not only the need for mutual understanding but also mutual transformation of both Buddhism and Christianity in light of anti-religious tendencies, particularly scientism and nihilism, in the modern world. He states that “[t]he most crucial task of any religion in our time is to respond to these anti-religious forces by elucidating the authentic meaning of religious faith.”<sup>134</sup> Specifically,

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<sup>131</sup> Steve Odin, “*Kenosis* as a Foundation for Buddhist-Christian Dialogue. The Kenotic Buddhology of Nishida and Nishitani of the Kyoto School in relation to the Kenotic Christology of Thomas J.J. Altizer” *Eastern Buddhist* 20 (2001): 38.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 34. Though the interpretation of *kenosis* or “self-emptying” is done through the Buddhist category of emptiness, “self-emptying” itself makes no sense in Indian Buddhist philosophy per se (since there is no substantial self that needs to be emptied, which is precisely what needs to be realized). The Kyoto school is adopting the Christian use of “self-emptying” and importing it back into their articulation of Buddhist principles. We will see this move more explicitly in the discussion of Masao Abe and his dynamic *śūnyatā* where he argues that *śūnyatā* should not be understood in its noun form but in its verbal form.

<sup>133</sup> James Fredericks, “The Kyoto School: Modern Buddhist Philosophy and the Search for a Transcultural Theology” *Horizons* 15/2 (1988): 308.

<sup>134</sup> Masao Abe, “Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata” in *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*, eds. John Cobb and Christopher Ives (New York: Orbis Books, 1990) 3.

of Buddhist-Christian dialogue he writes that, only when “it is pursued with an appreciation of the wider context of the contemporary confrontation of religion and irreligion will it be able to open up a deeper religious dimension in which Buddhist and Christian truth can be fully realized in a new paradigm beyond the religion-negating principles of scientism, Marxism, traditional Freudian psychoanalytic thought, and nihilism in the Nietzschean sense.”<sup>135</sup> This reflection then on *kenosis/sūnyatā*, on a kind of “kenotic Buddhology” of “Buddhist Christology” is his proposal for how Buddhism and Christianity can overcome scientism and nihilism as well as open up that deeper religious dimension in both traditions.

Before one can understand his interpretation of Christ’s *kenosis*, one must look at how Abe uses the doctrine of emptiness upon which *kenosis* is re-interpreted, and how his understanding of *kenosis* or “self-emptying” influences his articulation of emptiness. He gives Buddhist philosophy a new Christian terminology, using *sūnyatā* verbally in a way that was not traditionally used or understood in Indian Buddhist philosophy. For example, Abe begins his interpretation of *sūnyatā* and his comparison with *kenosis*, by stating that “[t]he ultimate reality for Buddhism is neither Being nor God, but Sunyata. Sunyata, literally means, ‘emptiness’ or ‘voidness’ and can imply ‘absolute nothingness.’”<sup>136</sup> Here, Abe grounds his understanding of *sūnyatā* on Mādhyamikan interpretation of Nagarjuna and the traditional Buddhist understanding of emptiness. Yet, at the same time, he articulates Nagarjuna’s discussion of emptiness using the Christian notion of “emptying” when he cautions that even emptiness itself must be emptied and

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<sup>135</sup> Abe, 4.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 27.

not clung to. This “self-emptying” of emptiness, this “pure activity of absolute self-emptying” is true Sunyata.”<sup>137</sup> This articulation of “emptying emptiness” as caution lest it become another form of attachment is closer to the Christian articulation of *kenosis* as self-emptying and Christ’s *kenosis* where he emptied himself and did not cling to the form of man. For Indian Buddhist philosophy, emptiness, like everything else, does not need to be “emptied” of anything since it is already empty of inherent existence. In his discussion of emptiness then, one sees how Abe is trying to accommodate the Christian understanding of *kenosis* as well.

Furthermore, using the Heart sutra which states that “form is emptiness, and emptiness is form”, he also argues against a kind of nihilistic understanding of *śūnyatā* and proposes a dynamic understanding instead. He reminds the readers of the more positive meanings of emptiness while at the same time, again articulating it in light of Christian “self-emptying.” For example, in speaking of the positive meanings of *śūnyatā*, he mentions that it can also be equated with suchness (*tathatā*), or with boundless openness, with naturalness. *Śūnyatā* can be understood as the interdependence and interpenetration of all things (*pratītyasamutpāda*) and contains the characteristics of wisdom and compassion. All these possible meanings are reasons he uses to argue for understanding *śūnyatā*, not “in its noun form but in its verbal form, for it is a dynamic and creative function of emptying everything and making alive everything.”<sup>138</sup> This interpretation of a dynamic *śūnyatā* as both one that is totally self-emptying, that it empties even itself, and yet as one full of positive meaning correlates to his interpretation

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<sup>137</sup> Abe, 27.

<sup>138</sup> Abe, 33.

of the *kenosis* of Christ and of God, as a complete self-emptying, as an absolute nothingness which is at the same time a fullness, an absolute being. Ingram comments that in the process, Abe,

...transformed Nagarjuna's epistemological use of Emptying into a metaphysical absolute ultimate reality which is the ground of all religious experience, but which is manifested most clearly in Buddhist, particularly Zen, teachings and practices.<sup>139</sup>

Masao Abe begins his interpretation of Christ's *kenosis* by looking at Philippians 2:5-8 and, similar to many of the Christian theologians discussed above, takes it to refer to the Incarnation, the act of God becoming human. Based on this passage, he argues for a complete and total abnegation of Christ as the Son of God, understood as a transformation not only in appearance but in substance. He writes that, "in Paul's understanding the Son of God abandoned his divine substance and took on human substance to the extreme point of becoming a servant crucified on the cross. Accordingly, Christ's *kenosis* signifies a transformation not only in appearance but in substance, and implies a radical and total self-negation of the Son of God," and he concludes that the activity of the Son of God, his *ekkenosis* reveals that he is "true person and true God at one and the same time in his dynamic work and activity of self-emptying."<sup>140</sup> From this, he reformulates the doctrine of Christ's *kenosis* (the Incarnation) as:

The Son of God is not the Son of God (for he is essentially and fundamentally self-emptying): precisely because he is *not* the Son of God he *is* truly Son of God (for he originally and always works as Christ, the Messiah, in his salvational function of self-emptying).<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Ingram, 50. Again, note here that "emptying" is not Nagarjuna's terminology but is already Masao Abe and the Kyoto School's re-articulation of emptiness in light of their understanding of Christian *kenosis*.

<sup>140</sup> Abe, 10.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 11.

In other words, Abe argues that the very nature of Christ, as Son of God is self-emptying; that is, emptying himself of his divine nature to the point of becoming the humblest of human beings, a servant. Moreover, it requires a radical *kenosis* of fully giving up divine transcendence, a total renunciation of divinity. It is this total self-emptying, not clinging in any way to any form of God that makes him truly the Son of God. Such a radical *kenosis* where Christ is true person and true God at the same time challenges the Christian understanding of the preexistence of the *logos* which Abe believes requires a new interpretation. In particular, he wants to argue that any discussion regarding preexistence cannot be separated from discussion about humanity. Hence, he says that “[t]he “preexisting” Son of God must be realized right here, right now, at the depth of our present existence, as the self-emptying Son of God.”<sup>142</sup> In other words, he wants to focus and prioritize discussions about Christ to his self-emptying nature rather than to discussion of his pre-existence. This, he argues, is necessary given the context in the modern world where such a view (of preexistence) would be deemed incompatible with “critical rationality and autonomous reason” and where it would be “challenged by contemporary existentialistic atheism and active nihilism, which proclaim the death of God.”<sup>143</sup>

Instead, the discussion regarding Christ, as stated above, must focus on how we can realize and find in the depth of our own experience, this self-emptying of Christ. Ultimately, this radical *kenosis*, the act of Incarnation, must be related to discussions about our salvation. This is why his formulation above talks of Christ as the Messiah and

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<sup>142</sup> Abe, 10.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 13.

of self-emptying as salvational. For Abe, any discussion regarding Christ is meaningless if it does not address our own human existence, and our own existential problems of self, and ultimately address the issue of our salvation. In particular, he says that “[t]he notion of Christ’s *kenosis* or his self-emptying can be properly understood only through the realization of our own sinfulness and our own existential self-denying.”<sup>144</sup> And in the same way that Christ’s *kenosis* was total and complete, so too must our own self-denial and the death of our ego self be complete. Hence, he concludes that the statement regarding Christ’s *kenosis* can also be reformulated for the kind of radical *kenosis* that we are called to enact. Only in this complete “emptying” of the “old person” or the “ego-self” can the new person (the one who lives in Christ) be realized. The formulation states:

Self is not self (for the old self must be crucified with Christ); precisely because it is not, self is truly self (for the new self resurrects with Christ).<sup>145</sup>

In the end, Christ’s *kenosis*, begun in the Incarnation finds fulfillment and fullness in the death of the Son, the full self-emptying into God that leads to our salvation. The complete abnegation of Christ as the Son of God ultimately shows Christ’s self-sacrificial love for disobedient humankind. Furthermore, he argues that such self-sacrificial love is revelatory of the very nature of the God the Father. He writes, “[t]he unfathomable depth of God’s love is clearly realized when we come to know and believe that Christ as the Son of God emptied himself and became obedient to the point of death on the cross.”<sup>146</sup>

Moreover, James Fredericks says,

...the self-negation through self-emptying is complete only in the cross, where the self-emptying God becomes fully human by dying into God. Thus not only is Christ’s *kenosis*

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<sup>144</sup> Abe, 11.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 10.

the self-negation of God, it is also God's radical self-realization as the saving love that has triumphed over death. Therefore, the emptiness of the true God does not reveal the universe as meaningless and godless. Only in being empty is God revealed as love.<sup>147</sup>

Here one sees that the *kenosis* of Christ cannot be understood apart from the *kenosis* of God, or as Abe says, the problem of the *kenosis* of Christ leads to the question of the *kenosis* of God. In particular, Abe argues that the *kenosis* of the Son of God is rooted in the *kenosis* of God, the Father. He writes that "[w]ithout the self-emptying of God, 'the Father,' the self-emptying of the Son of God is inconceivable."<sup>148</sup> He contends that the *kenosis* of the Son has its basis on the will and love of God while the *kenosis* of the Father is implied in the very nature of God, which is love.<sup>149</sup> With his predecessors, he holds that the essential nature of God is *kenosis* and he roots Christ's own *kenosis* in the *kenosis* of the Father. Just as the *kenosis* of the Son cannot be partial but must be radical and total, so too is the *kenosis* of God the Father.

While the self-emptying of Christ can be seen in the act of Incarnation, the total and complete *kenosis* of the Father can be seen in God's identification with creation where God is "each and everything thing [...]. Only through this total kenosis and God's self-sacrificial identification with everything in the world is God truly God."<sup>150</sup> The total self-emptying of God leads to God being emptied into all, in the very act of creation. This leads to his second formulation that:

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<sup>147</sup> Fredericks, 93.

<sup>148</sup> Abe, 14.

<sup>149</sup> Here we find echoes of Nishitani's works where *kenosis* is grounded in *agape*.

<sup>150</sup> Abe, 16. Abe himself acknowledges that there may be two objections to this statement. First, that God being "each and everything" smacks of pantheism and second, that Christ's incarnation no longer seems unique since everything is an incarnation of God. For his answer to these objections, see pp. 17-9.



God is not God (for God is love and completely self-emptying); precisely because God is not a self-affirmative God, God is truly a God of love (for through complete self-abnegation God is totally identical with everything including sinful humans).<sup>151</sup>

Here, just as Abe's interpretation of the *kenosis* of Christ (in the Incarnation) led to his conclusion that the very nature of Christ is self-emptying, so too, does the *kenosis* of God (in creation) lead to the conclusion that the very nature of God is self-emptying. This self-emptying God however, Abe relates to Absolute Nothingness which he states is, at the same time, Absolute Being. He writes that "God's total kenosis is not God's self-sacrifice for something else or God's self-negation for nihilistic nothingness, but God's self sacrifice for absolutely 'nothing' other than God's own fulfillment."<sup>152</sup> In both of these statements about Christ and God, he applies the paradoxical logic of Nagarjuna, mentioned above, that "emptiness that is not completely empty is a false view of emptiness. In the same paradoxical way, the God that clings to an eternal transcendence, removed from creation, is not the true God."<sup>153</sup>

At the same time, holding on to the Heart sutra's formulation that "form is emptiness and emptiness is form", he also asserts that *kenosis* is also a *plerosis*, the fullness of the expression of God's divinity, and not a limitation of God's divinity. Here he follows the Christian theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century mentioned above who saw the *kenosis* of God, not as a self-limitation but as the very expression of the essence of God, of understanding divinity as self-emptying love. God finds God's being, God's fulfillment in God's "nothingness", in God's love that fully empties itself into creation.

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<sup>151</sup> Abe, 16.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Fredericks, 92.

In this sense, this *radical kenosis* is no longer just an “attribute” of God but is the very “being”/nature of God, for fullness is emptiness. Hence as Odin summarizes,

Abe’s articulation of *śūnyatā* in positive terms as dynamic function of self-emptying out of egoless compassion itself facilitates an equally positive understanding of *kenosis* ...as the fullest expression of that divine glory through a real ‘self-emptying’ out of agapic compassion....It is in this coincidence between Emptiness and Fullness wherein the Christian *kenosis* and Buddhist *śūnyatā* traditions have at last encountered each other in their ultimate depths.<sup>154</sup>

Given this, Abe states that:

...the notion of the kenotic God opens up for Christianity a common ground with Buddhism by overcoming Christianity’s monotheistic character, the absolute oneness of God, and by sharing with Buddhism the realization of absolute nothingness as the essential basis for the ultimate.<sup>155</sup>

He concludes his article by stating that “when we clearly realize the notion of the kenotic God in Christianity and the notion of the dynamic *Sunyata* in Buddhism – then without eliminating the distinctiveness of each religion but rather by deepening their respective unique characters – we find significant common basis at a deeper dimension. In this way, I believe, Christianity and Buddhism can enter into a much more profound and creative dialogue and overcome antireligious ideologies prevailing in our contemporary society.”<sup>156</sup>

#### *Responses to Abe’s “Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata”*

Responses to Abe’s interpretation of the Philippians hymn in correlation to the Buddhist emptiness has indeed resulted in the kind of “profound and creative dialogue” that he was hoping for. His work was engaged by a variety of Jewish and Christian theologians in a back and forth that has resulted in many conferences and books. Many of the challenges from the Christian theologians question whether his re-interpretation of

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<sup>154</sup> Odin, “A Critique of the ‘Kenosis/Śūnyatā’ Motif,” 76.

<sup>155</sup> Abe, 17.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 61.

*kenosis* is truly adequate for a Christian understanding of Christology or the Trinity. For example, some have criticized his work as too narrowly interpreting *kenosis* only in light of his own Buddhist understanding of emptiness without taking into consideration the Christian understanding and context of *kenosis*. Such a method then limits his “Buddhist Christology” and leads to inadequate or wrong understandings of the doctrine of God. For example, Schubert Ogden responds to his work saying,

...it is obvious that the conclusion he draws is controlled less by a historical-critical exegesis of this passage than by his own Buddhist beliefs concerning the nature of ultimate reality.<sup>157</sup>

In so doing, according to Ogden, his description of God places God as “simply one individual among others faced with the same fundamental option between inauthentic self-affirmation and ignorance of emptiness, on the one hand, and authentic realization of emptiness and self-denial on the other.”<sup>158</sup> This, for Ogden, may be acceptable to Abe who believes that anything divine is just like any other natural or human thing but is not acceptable for Christians who see God as the ultimate ground of all reality and cannot be conceived as just one particular individual among others. Such a kenotic God as Abe proposes, for Ogden, “could not really be God at all but only an idol in whom faith could believe only by ceasing to be itself.”<sup>159</sup>

Similarly, Hans Küng also criticizes Abe’s description of God, calling it unbiblical. In his case, he points to Abe’s conclusion that the *kenosis* of Christ is the “emptying of *God Himself*, completely and radically, which accords in a non-dualist

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<sup>157</sup> Schubert Ogden, “Faith in God and Realization of Emptiness” in *The Emptying God*, 128-9.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

sense with the renunciation of ourselves in the unity of non-duality.”<sup>160</sup> This, for Küng, is not supported by the New Testament texts which insist on the distinction between God the Son and God the Father. In this way, it is only the Son who undergoes such renunciation, and it is only the Son who undergoes death on the cross, but not God himself.<sup>161</sup> In the end, Küng argues that such an error is most critically seen in the resurrection, for if God is dead, then who is supposed to have resurrected the dead God back to life. He concludes then saying:

This is the significant fallow in Masao Abe’s interpretation: he indeed makes reference to the resurrection, but practically speaking neglects it – has to neglect it. Why? In order to be able to abide by his interpretation: the renunciation of God Himself in Buddhist *shunyata*.<sup>162</sup>

Other scholars have also commented on Abe’s uncontextual/unbiblical use of *kenosis* which could have opened up the heavily philosophical discussions on *kenosis* and *śūnyatā*. For example, Steve Odin, citing theologians such as Hans Urs von Balthasar, Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Merton, also argues that Abe’s interpretation does not place *kenosis* in its proper context within Christianity, particularly its essential connection with the Eucharist (where Christ’s self-emptying continues) and with the eschatological dimension of Christianity (the culmination of Christ’s *kenosis* which ends in *plerosis*). Hence, in the end, he argues that “the Christian experience of *kenosis* or self-emptying cannot be simply reduced to the realization of *muga* or selflessness in Zen Buddhism.”<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Hans Küng, “God’s Self-Renunciation and Buddhist Emptiness: A Christian Response to Masao Abe” in *Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Trinity: Essays and Explorations* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990) 32.

<sup>161</sup> Interestingly, Küng also points out that Christian theologians who make this point about the “death of God” such as Moltmann are just as unbiblical as Abe. Küng, 34.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Odin, “A Critique of the ‘Kenosis/Śūnyatā’ Motif,” 84.

Another scholar, E.D. Cabanne argues that, if one were to look at the biblical interpretations of *kenosis*, one would see that the discussions were focused on a broader issue of “mind”, of having the “mind of Christ” which is the concern of the Christian spiritual life. Given this greater context, Cabanne argues that the *kenosis/sūnyatā* dialogues could be shifted to this broader issue of mind, moving the Buddhist discussion from *sūnyatā* towards *bodhicitta*, the beginning of the spiritual path to Enlightenment. Such consideration of this broader context then can lead to a shift from the more philosophical discourse that the Kyoto school has started into a more spiritual discourse, which is the proper context for understanding these two doctrines. As Cabanne contends,

The previous discussion of ‘kenosis’[by the Kyoto School] should be considered, therefore, as a preliminary effort to pave the way, laying an aesthetically conducive groundwork (albeit admittedly prosaic) for dialogue. The door to a spiritually concerned dialogue is not opened by the keys or combinations of erudition. Such an “intelligent” approach is not the wisest. There must come into play a quality of consciousness, mind, heart, spirit, soul, that is confessedly weary of talking ‘about’ spirituality but that rather yearns with all its heart to settle down and begin to feel out, contemplate and interpenetrate into the reality of it.<sup>164</sup>

This suggestion of considering the broader context of the doctrines and moving toward a more spiritual comparison is also supported by looking at the broader context of the doctrine of emptiness. Though the Kyoto school asserts that they are influenced by Nagarjuna and the Mādhyamaka school, their notion of “absolute nothingness” does not correspond to Nagarjuna’s notion of emptiness. As Ornatowski points out, for Nagarjuna, emptiness “was *not* a new Absolute Reality itself but a *means* or *method* ‘used to shift the mode of apprehending ‘existence’ and ‘ultimate reality’ so as to allow the Absolute reality to be apprehended.’”<sup>165</sup> Instead, the Kyoto school’s understanding of

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<sup>164</sup> Cabanne, 113.

<sup>165</sup> Ornatowski, 95.

emptiness, particularly as they discuss it as fullness or potentiality (as they asserted from the Heart Sutra that emptiness is not nihilism) is closer to the Yogācāra or Zen schools than the Mādhyamikans.

Given this critique of Abe's use of emptiness, Ornatowski echoes the suggestion above, stating that participants in the dialogue must become more aware of the historical and cultural contexts and specific meanings of emptiness, and in so doing, be able to broaden the dialogue so as to take into account other possible meanings of emptiness.<sup>166</sup> He gives as an example the shift back to the Mādhyamikan "negative" notion of emptiness as a tool for enlightenment. Nagarjuna's concern was more soteriological than philosophical. Reminded by this specific meaning, the dialogue around *kenosis* and emptiness could then shift from an overly heavy 'theologizing' and 'philosophizing' towards the similar apophatic meditative tradition that exists in both Buddhism and part of the Christian tradition of spirituality."<sup>167</sup>

One work that has addressed these concerns, particularly in terms of broadening the discussion to include spirituality is Donald Mitchell's *Spirituality and Emptiness*. Here, he tries to address David Tracy's challenge to Masao Abe to "give new attention to spirituality and its relation to theology."<sup>168</sup> In an attempt to answer Tracy's challenge, Donald Mitchell wrote a book which he saw as broadening the "Christian response to the Kyoto school by speaking from the field of spirituality."<sup>169</sup> However, while he speaks of

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<sup>166</sup> Ornatowski, 114.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>168</sup> David Tracy, "Kenosis, Sunyata and Trinity: A Dialogue with Masao Abe" in *The Emptying God*, 142-143.

<sup>169</sup> Donald W. Mitchell, *Spirituality and Emptiness: the Dynamics of Spiritual Life in Buddhism and Christianity* (NY/NJ: Paulist Press, 1991) 3. Furthermore, there has been a whole strand of Buddhist-

the spirituality of Teresa of Avila and of Chiara Lubich, he himself does not directly address the problem of *kenosis* for women and whether kenotic spirituality, which he develops through comparison with the Buddhist notion of emptiness, addresses the particular issues concerning women and feminist spirituality. This is another crucial critique of these dialogues.

Catherine Keller, as mentioned in the introduction, pointed out the patriarchalism in both Christianity and Buddhism. She reminded Abe and his other interlocutors that the concept of *kenosis* and the Philippians hymn has long been the source of much of the problem for feminists in the Christian tradition who have argued that such rhetoric of self-sacrifice, service, and obedience have often been used to keep women in a subordinate place. Hence, she legitimately questioned whether such a dialogue based on a concept that has been seen as problematic by feminists would then offer the worst of both worlds to women. She asks, “How can the two patriarchies, with their common problem of the inflationary male ego and their common solution of selflessness, fail to redouble the oppressive irrelevance of the ‘world religions’ for the liberation of women?”<sup>170</sup> However, she does not suggest that the dialogue is futile. Rather, she sees promise in how Buddhist discussions can support Christian feminist discussions on *kenosis* and how the dialogue itself can be broadened to include spirituality and a sense of global responsibility.

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Christian dialogue that has focused on contemplation and meditation. For example, see *Speaking of Silence: Christians and Buddhists on the Contemplative Way*, ed. Susan Walker (New York: Paulist Press, 1987) and *The Gethsemani Encounter: A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life by Buddhist and Christian Monastics*, eds. Donald Mitchell and James Wiseman, OSB (New York: Continuum, 1998). However, these are generally another set of dialogues separate from conversations on doctrine.

<sup>170</sup> Keller, “Scoop up the Water and the Moon is in your Hands,” 106.

Given this feminist critique, as well as the critique above to be more aware of the specific background and broader contexts of *kenosis* that refocuses the dialogue on spirituality, I will endeavor, in the next chapters, to bring the “interruption” of both Christian and Buddhist feminist voices and perspectives into this dialogue. I will attempt to answer the challenge of how both traditions offer something to the liberation of women, particularly in light of women’s search for self and right relationships. In particular, they will look at how Buddhist philosophy in Buddhist feminist thought can inform aspects of Christian feminism and theology, particularly on the issues of *kenosis* and theological anthropology. Furthermore, the “interruption” of both Buddhist and Christian feminist understandings, in informing each other, can contribute new interpretations and understanding of the doctrines that help nuance and deepen Buddhist-Christian dialogue and learning. Furthermore, a focus on spirituality and its links to the teachings will also be discussed, in order to answer the challenge above of discussing such doctrines within their proper context of spiritual practice/life. Such a discussion can then offer a response to David Tracy’s challenge of relating theology and spirituality.



## **Chapter Two: Christian Feminists on *Kenosis*: The Example of Sarah Coakley and Mary Grey**

### **I. Introduction**

Chapter One focused on the traditional interpretations of *kenosis* and *śūnyatā*, and the Buddhist-Christian dialogue that revolved around them. Furthermore, it was also noted how women's voices and experiences were not taken into account in such discussions and interpretations. As mentioned, Catherine Keller critiqued how the dialogue did not address the issues of women and the patriarchalism in both traditions. This chapter will focus on the feminist critique of *kenosis* but more importantly on its reconstruction or retrieval in light of women's search for a relational self.

As Aristotle Papanikolaou has observed, “[t]he Christian notion of *kenosis* or ‘self-emptying’ has an ambiguous history.”<sup>171</sup> In the previous, we saw the complexity and richness of the development of the interpretation of *kenosis* that focused on God and Christ's nature, ultimately becoming understood as the unconditional love of God and the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, out of love for humanity. However, as *kenosis* became understood as an ethical imperative, as “self-sacrificial love” following the example of Jesus who died on the cross for others, feminists began to question whether this was a positive virtue for women whose sin, as mentioned above, is that of “selflessness”. For example, Daphne Hampson has questioned whether *kenosis* is in line with feminism and feminist values. She writes that “[i]t may well be a model which men need to appropriate

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<sup>171</sup> Aristotle Papanikolaou, “Person, *Kenosis* and Abuse: Hans Urs von Balthasar and Feminist Theologies in Conversation” *Modern Theology* 19/1 (January 2003): 41.

and which may helpfully be built into the male understanding of God. But ... for women, the theme of self-emptying and self-abnegation is far from helpful as a paradigm.”<sup>172</sup>

Furthermore, this development of equating *kenosis* with *agape*, seeing God’s “self-emptying” (*kenosis*) as paradigmatic of “God’s love” (*agape*) and the command to follow that same example (Charles Gore’s argument in the previous chapter) is problematic for feminist ethics. For example, Brita Gill-Austern, in an article entitled “Love Understood as Self-Sacrifice and Self-Denial: What does it do to women?” begins with this statement: “The equation of love with self-sacrifice, self-denial, and self-abnegation in Christian theology is dangerous to women’s psychological, spiritual, and physical health, and it is contrary to the real aim of Christian love.”<sup>173</sup> In her article, she proceeds to show the negative effects of self-sacrifice and self-denial on women. She outlines seven negative effects including the loss of the voice and identity of the woman because she has focused so much on others. In the end, this situation can even “contribute to exploitation and domination of relationships by the more powerful party”.<sup>174</sup> Even Barbara Andolsen argues that this notion of self-sacrifice is problematic. She begins by talking of how self-sacrifice is often understood in the context of *agape* or of “other-regard”<sup>175</sup> and proceeds to show how *agape* is problematic when taken together with the female experience. She too points to Valerie Saiving’s contention about the female sin being selflessness and that “women have a tendency to give themselves over

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<sup>172</sup> Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990) 155, quoted in Coakley, *Swallowing a Fishbone*, 82.

<sup>173</sup> Brita Gill-Austern, “Love Understood as Self-Sacrifice and Self-Denial: What does it do to Women?” in *Through the Eyes of Women: Insights for Pastoral Care*, ed. Jeanne Stevenson Moessner (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996) 304.

<sup>174</sup> Gill-Austern, 310-315.

<sup>175</sup> Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, “Agape in Feminist Ethics,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 9 (1981): 69.

to others to such an extent that they lose themselves”.<sup>176</sup> Moreover, Andolsen quotes Mary Daly who problematizes this virtue even more, saying:

There has been a theoretical one-sided emphasis upon charity, meekness, obedience, humility, self-abnegation, sacrifice, service. Part of the problem with this moral ideology is that it became accepted not by men, but by women, who hardly have been helped by an ethic which reinforces the abject female situation.<sup>177</sup>

It is for the same reason that many feminists also argue against the notion of *kenosis* in Christian spiritual practice. The language of “submission” and “surrender”, of the dissolution of one’s self, or being “nothing” and the sometimes violent imagery of God “battering one’s heart” or the “destruction of the self” can only seem to heighten the problem of women’s sense of a loss of self as well as promote passivity especially in the face of suffering and the abuse of women, seeing this as part of the path of *kenosis*. Furthermore, the (mis)understanding of Christian spiritual practice as an interior practice and as moving away from the world brings about the objections that such practices do not adequately give women the resources to fight the sources of oppression and abuse *in this* world. Rather, it allows them only to “escape” into an interior life where they may continue to just experience their own sense of “nothingness” or to offer up such sufferings in prayer, equating them to the redemptive suffering of Christ and hence passively accepting such suffering.

Despite these objections, I noted in the Introduction that many feminist theologians have undertaken the critical appropriation of the doctrine of *kenosis*. In this chapter, I hope to contribute to that work by articulating a new interpretation of *kenosis*

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<sup>176</sup> Andolsen, 74.

<sup>177</sup> Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973) 100, quoted in Andolsen, 75.

for theological anthropology that answers the question of how we are to understand *kenosis* in ways that are empowering for women and their relationships. The quest for a critical retrieval of the doctrine is based on establishing a new vision of self as self-in-relation to others and the world. What is central is a search for the right understanding of relationship and within that relationship, the dynamics of “dependence” and “sacrifice” might still be held as central to Christian life. Furthermore, this will be done through a re-interpretation of the understanding of God and God’s *kenosis* and how such empowers the ethical and spiritual dimension of Christian *kenosis*.

To do this, I will focus on the work of two British feminist theologians, Sarah Coakley and Mary Grey, who not only focus on a reinterpretation of *kenosis* but do this within the context of contemplation. David Ford writes that “[p]erhaps the most obvious feature of British women’s theology is its commitment to spirituality.”<sup>178</sup> This is definitely true of Coakley and Grey who both argue that in contemplation, one can understand and experience “right” *kenosis*. Furthermore, spiritual practice is the place where one can begin to transform the self and realize new ways of “right” relationality and be empowered to act within society.<sup>179</sup> This is important since both theologians are not just interested in a reinterpretation of doctrine and showing its deep ties with spirituality, but ultimately in social change and the transformation and empowerment of women in society. These two women have been characterized as theologians who are

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<sup>178</sup> David Ford, “British Theology: Movements and churches” *Christian Century* (Apr. 19-26, 2000): 469.

<sup>179</sup> I have chosen these two theologians because they balance and complement each other’s work. Sarah Coakley focuses more on individual prayer and uses the resources of medieval and mystical theology. On the other hand, Mary Grey focuses on individual prayer but also writes of communal/ecclesial prayer and the Church. Furthermore, Grey focuses on contemporary theologies including the work of Latino/a as well as Asian theologians.

“actively engaged in feminism as a means of social change.”<sup>180</sup> In their projects, we see the formation of a “wholistic” theology that shows the relationship between doctrine/theology, moral theology/ethics and spirituality that grounds women’s search for self and right relationships.

## **II. Sarah Coakley**

### *Introduction*

Sarah Coakley is a British theologian who came to Harvard Divinity School in 1993 and taught there for many years. Since 2005, she has gone back to England to become the Norris Hulse Chair of Divinity at Cambridge University.<sup>181</sup> Apart from being a scholar, she is also a priest in the Anglican tradition who used to celebrate a weekly ecumenical Eucharist at Harvard as well as serve as chaplain in a Boston jail for one semester. Being a priest-scholar, as Mark Oppenheimer describes her, her “theological investigations have a pastoral component, one that introduces her to more actual Christians than many theologians get to meet.”<sup>182</sup>

In her work, what one finds is the intersection of feminism/gender studies and systematic theology, or rather systematic theology from a feminist perspective, and the importance of prayer/contemplation within systematic theology.<sup>183</sup> Oppenheimer has noted that there are two general themes in Coakley’s major writings, “[t]he first is that

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<sup>180</sup> Kathryn Greene-McCreight, *Feminist Reconstructions of Christian Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 131.

<sup>181</sup> For a fuller description of her life, see Mark Oppenheimer, “Sarah Coakley Reconstructs Feminism: Prayerful Vulnerability” *Christian Century* (June 28, 2003): 25-31.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>183</sup> She also talks about the importance of prayer, not only within her work in systematic, but its importance for ministry. For this discussion, see “The Vicar at Prayer: An English Reflection on Ministry” *Christian Century* (July 1, 2008): 28-31.

feminist theory is a powerful tool not always well used. The second is that prayer needs to be a central category of theology.”<sup>184</sup> Confirming this observation, Coakley writes about the future of systematic theology and how it needs to take into account gender studies, as well as insights from political and liberation theology. She writes:

My claim will be that *only* systematic theology (of a particular sort) can adequately and effectively respond to the rightful critiques that gender studies and political and liberation theology have laid at its door. And *only* gender studies, inversely, and its accompanying political insights, can thus properly re-animate systematic theology for the future.<sup>185</sup>

Furthermore, she also argues that only a systematic theology that is rooted in prayer can provide an answer to the critiques of systematic theology today. This kind of systematic theology, which she sees as her own project, she calls a contemplative *théologie totale*.<sup>186</sup> She describes it thus:

That “particular sort” of systematic theology I propose, then, (and here is the major *novum* I lay before you), must involve the purgative contemplative practice of silence as its undergirding point of reference – an ascetic activity which is peculiarly equipped to search and transform, over the long haul, the arena of sexual (and indeed all other) desires. It thus involves an understanding of theology in progressive transformation (*in via*, as we might say), and one founded not in any secular rationality or theory of selfhood, but in a spiritual practice of attention that mysteriously challenges and *expands* the range of rationality, and simultaneously darkens and breaks one’s hold on previous certainties.<sup>187</sup>

This contemplative *théologie totale*, for her, is the answer to the current challenges to systematic theology that come from the philosophical, moral/political, and feminist critiques. The philosophical critique focuses on how systematic theology turns God into an object of knowledge and therefore an idol, forgetting about the absolute

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<sup>184</sup><sup>184</sup> Oppenheimer, 26.

<sup>185</sup> Sarah Coakley, “Is there a Future for Gender and Theology? On Gender, Contemplation, and the Systematic Task” *Criterion* 47/1 (Spring/Summer 2009): 2.

<sup>186</sup> Oppenheimer explains that this is an “homage to the French *annaliste* school of historians who used varied disciplines – economics, sociology, philology, history – to answer historical questions. ‘For every question, I investigate,’ Coakley said, ‘I use a novel method, like artistic criticism, or [sociological] fieldwork.’ Each book, for example, has a ‘pastoral investigation.’” Oppenheimer, 30.

<sup>187</sup> Sarah Coakley, “Is there a Future for Gender and Theology,” 4.

mystery of God. She argues that, with contemplation as the ground for one's theology, this can be overcome for "it is the actual practice of contemplation that is the condition of a new knowing-in-unknowing."<sup>188</sup> Furthermore, "contemplation is the unique and wholly *sui generis*, task of seeking to know, and speak of God unknowingly; as Christian contemplation, it is also necessarily bodily practice of dispossession, humility and effacement...."<sup>189</sup> Hence, it is only within this posture of dispossession and humility, of being reminded of the mystery and unknowability of God, that any kind of utterance about God can be made without God being turned into an object that can simply be fully known or captured in language.

The moral/political critique focuses on the "totalizing" tendency of systematic theology that does not hear the voices or perspectives of those who are marginalized. Again, for Coakley, grounding theology within contemplation can serve as a solution, for contemplation allows one to heed the voice of the other, to go outside of oneself towards the other. As she writes, "the ascetic practices of contemplation are themselves indispensable means of a *true* attentiveness to the despised or marginalized other ... its practiced self-emptying inculcates an attentiveness that is beyond merely good political intentions. Its practice is more discomfiting, more destabilizing to settled presumptions, than a simple intentional *design* on empathy."<sup>190</sup>

Finally, there is the critique, particularly from French feminists who write how systematic theology is ordered according to the "male mode of thinking which seeks to

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<sup>188</sup> Coakley, "Is there a Future for Gender and Theology," 6.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

clarify, control, and master. It is thereby repressive of creative materials culturally associated with femininity and the female body which are characteristically pushed into the unconscious.”<sup>191</sup> Again, she argues that such issues can be addressed by a *théologie totale* that is grounded upon contemplation; contemplation as the action that delves into the unconscious, welcomes the arts and the imagination in a way that “dryly intellectual theology often misses.”<sup>192</sup> Furthermore, she writes that such feminist critiques are right to show how “gender and bodily difference cannot be irrelevant to systematics.”<sup>193</sup> However, unlike those feminists who have chosen to be dismissive of systematic theology, she argues that there can be a response other than rejection. This, I believe, has been the main topic of many of her writings within systematic and feminist theology.

An example of such a response, an example of her contemplative *théologie totale* can already be found in her earlier works where she explored the doctrine of *kenosis*, choosing to re-interpret it in light of prayer, understanding contemplation itself as a kind of *kenosis* and how such can bring a new understanding of the Trinity, Christology, and anthropology. Hence, in the next few sections, I will focus on how she reinterprets *kenosis* within prayer/contemplation, and how this kind of *kenosis* is what is needed for women’s stronger sense of self and relationality, as against interpretations of *kenosis* that may lead to passivity in the face of suffering or further abuse for women. Ultimately, “[s]he sees the Christian spiritual tradition as an offering to the vexed antinomy in feminist theory between autonomy and relationality. The way to have strengths of both is

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<sup>191</sup> Coakley, “Is there a Future for Gender and Theology,” 5.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.



the self-outpouring that invites in the presence of an Other.”<sup>194</sup> This will be the focus of the discussion on Coakley’s interpretation of *kenosis* and re-interpreting it in light of prayer.

*Coakley’s reinterpretation of the Doctrine of Kenosis*<sup>195</sup>

Sarah Coakley agrees that kenosis has been a “contentious theme in feminist theology in recent decades: to call to ‘self-effacement’ or ‘self-sacrifice’ - whether in God or in the human – has the inevitable ring of ‘feminine’ abasement, which feminist theology from its outset has been concerned to expose and criticize.”<sup>196</sup> However, unlike those theologians who have chosen to reject or avoid discussions of *kenosis*, Coakley argues that to do so would be dangerous for Christian feminists, for it would be the rejection or avoidance of central teachings within Christianity as well. For example, interpretations of *kenosis* would ultimately bring about discussions on dependence and vulnerability, which some feminists find worrying. However, to avoid such discussions would mean abandoning discussions regarding creaturehood, a fundamental understanding of our unique relationship with God and what it means to be human.<sup>197</sup> She writes,

The undeniable danger of using the appeal to ‘kenotic’ self-sacrifice as a means of subordinating, or even abusing, Christian women should not be confused with the attempt

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<sup>194</sup> Jason Byassee, “Closer than Kissing: Sarah Coakley’s Early Work” *Anglican Theological Review* 90/1 (Winter 2008): 154.

<sup>195</sup> Sarah Coakley’s discussions on *kenosis* are comprehensive. She delves into the historical development of the theological interpretations of *kenosis*, particularly within Christology. However, the main focus of this section will be how she tackles certain feminist interpretations of *kenosis* in light of discipleship or understanding theological anthropology; that is, of *kenosis* as self-sacrifice as a virtue for Christians and how she tries to “retrieve” such understandings that are more empowering for women and do not lead to a “loss of self.”

<sup>196</sup> Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations,” 193.

<sup>197</sup> See her discussion about creaturehood and how it entails a certain dependence of God in “Creaturehood before God: Male and Female” *Theology* 93 (Sept/Oct 1990): 343-354.

to reconsider the status of kenosis as a legitimate spiritual goal for both men and women...The danger lies in refusing to face what the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' lays before us for consideration: it does not therefore follow that *all* attempts to rethink the value of moral kenosis, or of 'sacrificial' love, founder on the shoals of gender essentialism ... the repression of questions of kenotic 'vulnerability' is a worrying trend if what it disallows is an admission of creaturely dependence in women as well as men<sup>198</sup>

Furthermore, she argues that such hesitation to speak of dependence or vulnerability, the "failure to confront issues of fragility, suffering, or 'self-emptying' except in terms of victimology is ...ultimately the failure to embrace a feminist reconceptualizing of the power of the cross and resurrection."<sup>199</sup> Hence, like Linahan who saw the importance of *kenosis* for Christian discipleship, Coakley sees the need to reconceptualize our understanding of *kenosis*, in terms of re-interpreting our understanding not only of "dependence" or "vulnerability" but also of "power", particularly "divine power" as opposed to worldly (male) power.

First, Coakley critiques the usual feminist criticisms surrounding *kenosis*. Primarily, in response to Hampson's rejection of the doctrine, Coakley argues that Hampson has fallen into the gender stereotypes that only men have power and women suffer from lack of it. This is why, for Hampson, *kenosis* can only be helpful for men as a compensatory balance for their dominating tendencies. She writes,

[F]or her [Hampson], 'males' (all males, including 'workmen' and 'slaves'?) need to compensate for their tendency to 'dominate' by means of an act of self-emptying; whereas 'women' (all women, including university professors?) do not...Has she not assumed, that is, that 'vulnerability' or 'self-effacement' are prescriptively 'female' (though regrettably so), and thus only 'helpful' as a secondary or compensatory addition to 'male' power and dominance...But why should we continue with these outworn gender presumptions in the first place?<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Coakley, "Kenosis: Theological Meanings and Gender Connotations," 208.

<sup>199</sup> Coakley, "Kenosis and Subversion," 106-107.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 98.

From this quote, we can see how Coakley argues that Hampson seems to just reify gender assumptions about men's power and women's powerlessness. Coakley insists that what must be done instead is to acknowledge that everyone lives between some sort of power and vulnerability/dependence, as her example about male slaves and female university professors demonstrate. At the same time, the dynamic of power and vulnerability within the divine-human encounter also needs to be reinterpreted in ways that address the feminist critiques on these issues. On the one hand, discussions about dependence cannot be avoided, for everyone is called to live out some kind of dependence, which is at the "heart of true human creatureliness."<sup>201</sup> At the same time, discussions about power cannot be avoided either for power is usually assumed to be the purview of men. Rather, Coakley says that we all wield power in some areas. The challenge is how to understand "power", not in worldly (male/dominant) fashion, but a different kind of gentle, non-dominating power, that is divine power. As she says, "If 'abusive' human power is thus always potentially within our grasp, how can we best approach the healing resources of non-abusive divine power? How can we hope to invite and channel it, if not by a patient opening of the self to its transformation?"<sup>202</sup> This then, is her project with regard to *kenosis*: to reform the understanding of divine power as non-abusive and non-dominating, as that which sustains and empowers. It is, furthermore, on the human side, a refusal of the kind of worldly (male/bullying) forms of power which destroy or annihilate. As she says, "[i]f there not, we might ask, a more creative theological way through our dilemma

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<sup>201</sup> Coakley, "Creaturehood before God: Male and Female," 352.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., "Kenosis and Subversion," 107.

via a reformulation of the very notion of divine ‘power’ and its relation to the human?”<sup>203</sup>

At the same time, she also seeks to reform the understanding of vulnerability or dependence as the posture that opens one up to such divine power and therefore leads to the transformation and empowerment of the human in God. It is not a submission that leads to destruction or annihilation, nor an emptying that leads to emptiness, but rather a fullness and empowerment from the divine. As she argues,

[w]e need to get beyond these alternatives, and to re-embrace alternative readings of *kenosis* that take the *communicatio* tradition seriously, along with its understanding of the radical difference of status of the ‘divine’ and the ‘human’. Such a view need not think of human ‘freedom’ as involving divine ‘self-restraint’ at all, I suggest, but rather as being enabled precisely by the sustaining and continuing matrix of divine creative power.<sup>204</sup>

In order to do this, she goes back to the history of *kenosis*, from its New Testament roots in Philippians 2 and goes to the interpretations from New Testament connotations to the patristic era up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century British kenoticists.<sup>205</sup> From this survey, which was discussed in Chapter One, she observes that there are a whole range of possible interpretations of the relationship of divine power to the human. She summarizes them as:

(1) temporarily *relinquishing* divine powers which are Christ’s by right (as cosmic redeemer); (2) *pretending* to relinquish divine powers whilst actually retaining them (as gnostic redeemer); (3) choosing *never to have* certain (false and worldly forms of power – forms sometimes wrongly construed as ‘divine’; (4) *revealing* ‘divine power’ to be intrinsically ‘humble’ rather than ‘grasping’<sup>206</sup>; (5) the divine Logos’ *taking on* of human flesh in the Incarnation, but without loss, impairment, or restriction of divine powers<sup>207</sup>; (6) a temporary retracting (or withdrawing into ‘potency’) of *certain* characteristics of divinity during the incarnate life.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion,” 99.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., “Does Kenosis Rest on a Mistake,” 264.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., “Kenosis and Subversion,” 82-111. This history was also discussed in Chapter One.

<sup>206</sup> These first four possibilities offered by New Testament scholars interpreting the author’s understanding of *kenosis* within the Letter to the Philippians can be found in Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion,” 89.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., “Kenosis and Subversion,” 91. This, for example, was the main concern among the Patristic fathers such as Cyril or Gregory of Nyssa.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., “Kenosis and Subversion,” 96. This final possibility was offered by Thomasius and British kenoticists of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century.

From this survey, she argues that the interpretation of *kenosis* that feminists critique can be traced only to such modern interpretations of the British kenoticists, as mentioned in Chapter One, who offered an interpretation of “emptying” as a kind of “empathy” articulated as a “superior” coming down to the level of someone inferior, an “empathetic identification with the circumstances of an ‘inferior’: the child, the uneducated, or the ‘savage.’”<sup>209</sup> As she writes, “Hampson’s critique scores only against relatively modern forms of *kenosis*, and in particular those where the ‘emptying’ is regarded as a compensating for an existing set of gender presumptions that might be called ‘masculinist.’”<sup>210</sup> Furthermore, she argues that in these debates about *kenosis* and its implications on gender, no model considers the possibility “of a ‘strength made perfect in (human) weakness’ (2 Cor. 12.9), of the normative concurrence in Christ of non-bullying divine ‘power’ with ‘self-effaced’ humanity.”<sup>211</sup>

Hence, from other strands of the tradition, Coakley reinterprets *kenosis* as a special kind of “power-in-vulnerability” a special kind of dependence upon God, and divine power which is not a worldly kind of power that empowers and transforms the human. To do this, she brings the third possibility above offered by New Testament scholars with the interpretation by the Giessen School in which Christological *kenosis* is applied to the human nature of Christ. Instead of choosing interpretations of *kenosis* that focused on the actual or “pretended” relinquishment of divine power, Coakley is most convinced by the interpretation where Christ “chooses *never to have* certain (false and

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<sup>209</sup> Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion,” 107.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 105.

worldly) forms of power – forms sometimes wrongly construed as ‘divine.’<sup>212</sup>

Furthermore, she argues that a variant of this interpretation can be found later in the Giessen school, which again argued for a “*kenosis* operative on his [Christ’s] *human* nature, whilst his divine nature retained its powers.”<sup>213</sup> These two interpretations together raise the possibility of a vision of Christological *kenosis* uniting human ‘vulnerability’ with authentic divine power (as opposed to worldly or patriarchal visions of power), and uniting them such that “the human was wholly translucent to the divine...”<sup>214</sup> As Papanikolaou summarizes such *kenosis*, it is “not a powerlessness in opposition to powerfulness, but a non-grasping at worldly forms of power in order to make oneself available to the true empowerment that comes from the presence of divine power. It is not a sign of weakness, but a strength made perfect in weakness (2 Cor. 12:9).”<sup>215</sup> In this interpretation of *kenosis*, we see the focus on Christ’s action of “non-grasping” to certain kinds of power, in order to be open to empowerment from the divine.

In another article, Coakley focused more on the patristic interpretations of *kenosis*, and there demonstrated more fully how divine power transforms and empowers the human using Gregory of Nyssa’s alternative interpretation of Philippians 2:5-11. As she states:

...what Gregory proposes is a *real*, but gradual transformation of divinity into the human, until, as he memorably puts it, the humanity is ‘absorbed’ by the omnipotent divinity like a drop of vinegar mingled in the boundless sea...the divine characteristics are progressively absorbed by the human, but not without every dimension of authentic

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<sup>212</sup> Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion,” 89. For a detailed analysis of the four interpretations of Philippians 2, see pp. 84-90.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>215</sup> Papanikolaou, 45.

humanity being held up to transformative interaction, until, in the resurrection, the process is found complete.<sup>216</sup>

Furthermore, she writes,

Not – says Gregory – that the characteristics of divinity and humanity are *compatible*; but nor are they meant to be: one (the divine) is infusing the other (the human) until it is fully restored to its proper perfection in the resurrection.<sup>217</sup>

From this example of Gregory of Nyssa’s alternative interpretation of Philippians 2, one gets a glimpse of the possibility of a divine power that does not dominate nor destroy the human. Rather, in this description, “every dimension of authentic humanity” is held up and transformed. It is not just absorbed (in the same way that vinegar cannot just be “absorbed” nor “mixed” into water) into the divine, but rather the divine transforms and empowers the human, without annihilating it.

This alternative interpretation of Christological *kenosis* where one sees how the human is not annihilated, nor ‘absorbed’ into the other, where divine power is not seen as a dominating force but rather one that sustains and empowers the human, and where vulnerability is seen as empowering and transformative, is important and can serve as foundation for a new understanding of *kenosis* for theological anthropology. This is the kind of interpretation of *kenosis* that can empower women’s search for a strong yet relational self; of an understanding of *kenosis* that does not lead to abuse but to a transformation and expansion of the self. Furthermore, it offers a model of relationship where one is not subsumed or consumed by the other, but is empowered precisely by such a relationship.

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<sup>216</sup> Coakley, “Does Kenosis Rest on a Mistake?,” 258.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 259.

For Coakley, this special “power-in-vulnerability” does not just happen in any kind of context or any kind of relationship. Rather, this special vulnerability, this “paradox of power and vulnerability” is “uniquely focused in this act of silent waiting on the divine in prayer.”<sup>218</sup> As she argues, it is in silent prayer, an “activity characterized by a rather special form of ‘vulnerability’ or ‘self-effacement’, that ‘right’ *kenosis* can be found. Furthermore, she demonstrates how “wordless prayer can enable one, paradoxically, to hold vulnerability and personal empowerment *together*, precisely by creating the ‘space’ in which non-coercive divine power manifests itself.”<sup>219</sup> It is in such prayer that one’s self is empowered and transformed, helping to “find themselves in losing themselves” and to find the prophetic voice to speak in society and discern the relationships that are most empowering.

#### *The doctrine of kenosis and contemplation*

Sarah Coakley understands the danger of starting with prayer, and its connotations of “vulnerability” and “dependence” which may lead to abuse. For example, she writes that “an ‘absolute dependence’ is at the heart of true human creatureliness and the contemplative quest. But such *right* dependence is an elusive goal: the entanglements with themes of power, hierarchy, sexuality and death are probably inevitable but also best brought to consciousness: they are an appropriate reminder that our prayer is enfleshed.”<sup>220</sup> However, just like her discussion on *kenosis*, the answer, for her, does not

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<sup>218</sup> Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion,” 107.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>220</sup> Coakley, “Creaturehood before God: Male and Female,” 353. She also contends that there is still the “danger of trivializing their undertakings as mere feminine submissiveness.” See “Deepening Practices: Perspectives from Ascetical and Mystical Theology” in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, eds. Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002) 81.



lie in avoiding the topic, but in trying to understand the “right” kind of dependence, the “right” understanding of prayer. Prayer, where one enacts the special kind of power-in-vulnerability, can be the place of the transformation and expansion of the self, and one’s relationship and commitment to others.

What is prayer? Coakley clarifies what she means by prayer and is adamant that prayer or contemplation is not an “elitist” pursuit that only spiritual masters can achieve. Rather, she describes the contemplative as one who “regularly spends even a very short time in a quiet waiting upon God”<sup>221</sup> or one who engages in any such “regular and repeated ‘waiting on the divine.’”<sup>222</sup> This, for example, can take the form of Quaker attentiveness or charismatic expression. Furthermore, it is in prayer, where the “right” kind of *kenosis* can be practiced. As she says,

[T]he ‘spiritual’ extension of Christic kenosis, then (...the avoidance of all ‘snatching’ from the outset)...involves an ascetical commitment of some subtlety, a regular and willed *practice* of ceding and responding to the divine...in prayer (especially the defenceless prayer of silent waiting on God) it is ‘internalized’ over time in a peculiarly demanding and transformative fashion.<sup>223</sup>

Just as Coakley favored the interpretation of *kenosis* as the giving up, or choosing never to have certain kinds of worldly power, she also understands contemplation as a kind of *kenosis* where one “gives up power” by relinquishing control or ceasing to make the agenda within this space of prayer. This is why she describes it as “quiet waiting” or a “ceding and responding” to the divine, making space for God to be God. However, this posture cannot simply be understood as one of passivity, for, as Coakley writes, it is a

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<sup>221</sup> Sarah Coakley, “God as Trinity: An Approach through Prayer,” in *We Believe in God: A Report by the Doctrine Commission of the General Synod of the Church of England* (Wilton, Conn: Morehouse-Barlow, 1987) 107-108.

<sup>222</sup> Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion,” 108.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 107.

“peculiarly active form of passivity”<sup>224</sup>, a “willed *practice*” as she describes above. This demonstrates how prayer cannot simply be seen as a passive moment but one that the believer actively engages in which requires much discipline and effort, for as Coakley contends, it is an activity that is demanding, painful, and must be repeated and ‘internalized’ over time. In other words, it is not just a kind of pastime activity, but a practice that involves great “personal commitment and great personal risk.”<sup>225</sup> It is in this demanding and painful space that a deeper and more profound knowledge and ultimately love of oneself and other, can happen.

As Coakley describes:

The very act of contemplation – repeated, lived, embodied, suffered – is an act that, by grace, and over time, precisely inculcates mental patterns of un-mastery, welcomes the dark realm of the unconscious, opens up a radical attention to the other, and instigates an acute awareness of the messy entanglements of sexual desires and desire for God. The vertiginous free-fall of contemplation, then, is not only the means by which a disciplined form of unknowing makes way for a new and deeper knowledge-beyond-knowledge; it is also the necessary accompanying practice of a theology committed to ascetic transformation.<sup>226</sup>

Coakley used this description of contemplation to argue for its necessity in systematic theology today. However, in this description, there are three results of contemplation that can aid in understanding how such practices can contribute to women’s search for an empowered and relational self. First, such practice results in a kind of knowing through “unknowing” as she describes “mental patterns of unmastery” or becoming open to a “knowledge-beyond- knowledge”. Such is helpful for women in order to help them question their usual assumptions of self and God (including gender

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<sup>224</sup> Coakley, “Deepening Practices,” 83.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., “Kenosis and Subversion,” 108. She further writes about its dangers in psychological terms as “the dangers of too-sudden uprush of material from the unconscious, too immediate a contact of the thus-disarmed self with God.”

<sup>226</sup> Coakley, “Is there a Future for Gender and Theology?,” 5.

assumptions), and bring them towards a more balanced sense of self and of God. The same holds true for the second result of contemplation, the opening to the dark realm of the unconscious including the messy issues of sexual desire vs. desire for God, as well as the desire for a wholistic sense of self that goes beyond the binaries of “active/passive” and “body/soul.” Third, contemplation, instead of keeping the person isolated, opens one up to the world, becoming more conscious of the other. Hence, it is through the practice of contemplation that women can experience a transformation of the self which also leads to a transformation in their relationship with others. The next sections will clarify how these three aspects in contemplation lead to this transformed relational self.

Prayer and the love of self. Silence and the posture of openness and vulnerability – the practices within prayer – are the practices necessary for self-knowledge and transformation. It is only within silence, in sitting with oneself, that one can truly hear one’s own voice and begin to know oneself. Furthermore, only within the practice of contemplation can one begin to develop those patterns of unmastery or un-knowing, mentioned above, which are necessary for self-knowledge and the knowledge of God. As a “bodily practice of dispossession, humility and effacement...”<sup>227</sup>, contemplation develops the necessary disposition so that one can look closely at one’s knowledge of self, other, and God and begin to question them. It is a practice then of “non-grasping” to what we think we know, to allow for patterns of unmastery and unknowing that can lead to transformation.

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<sup>227</sup> Coakley, “Is there a Future for Gender and Theology?,” 6.

However, this practice of prayer can also be very painful and rigorous. Just as the path to self-knowledge and acceptance can indeed be an arduous path, so too is the path toward conversion, moving away from the old self and transforming into a new self. This is why for Coakley, the silence and vulnerability within contemplation are not seen negatively, but are understood as the qualities needed in order to truly know and transform oneself. She writes,

...if traditions of Christian ‘contemplation’ are to be trusted, this rather special form of ‘vulnerability’ is not an invitation to be battered, nor is its silence a silencing (If anything, it builds one in the courage to give prophetic voice)...Thus the vulnerability that is its human condition is not about asking for unnecessary suffering (though increased self-knowledge can indeed be painful); nor is it self-abnegation. On the contrary, this special ‘self-emptying’ is not a negation of the self, but the place of the self’s transformation and expansion into God.<sup>228</sup>

In prayer, this silent waiting for the divine, one experiences vulnerability, for as Coakley describes, “we come to prayer empty handed, aware of weakness, inarticulacy and even of a certain hollow ‘fear and trembling.’”<sup>229</sup> Furthermore, in this silent time, we encounter ourselves in what could be a very dangerous moment, the moment of truly hearing our own voice including encountering ourselves in our weakness, in those dark moments we would rather not face. For example, Coakley describes having to endure our “inner ‘noise,’ and inner obsessions, fantasies and feelings” within prayer.<sup>230</sup> This is part of the result of the practice of silence, not a silencing, but actually beginning to hear and acknowledge our own voice which may be painful and uncomfortable when we are not used to truly confronting ourselves and our thoughts and feelings, but rather masking them in the “din” of a myriad of voices in the midst of a “busy life.” Moreover, in this

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<sup>228</sup> Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion,” 108.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., “God as Trinity,” 108.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., “Jailbreak: Meditation as a Subversive Activity,” *The Christian Century* (June 29, 2004): 18.

space, we might also experience the “dark night of the soul,” the experience of a God who “appears sometimes for long periods, to desert us; or worse still ... to press upon us with apparent negative pressure, causing disturbance, deep uneasiness, the highlighting of sin and even the fear of insanity. Such are the death throes of the domineering ego.”<sup>231</sup>

Yet, as Coakley contends, such pain, suffering and one’s disposition of vulnerability are part of the journey towards the transformation and expansion of the self. It is in this seemingly powerless and painful moment that true empowerment occurs, where the false self gives way to the true self, and where one enacts and participates in the very cross of suffering that leads to resurrection and glorification. As Coakley writes,

While risky, this practice is profoundly transformative, ‘empowering’ in a mysterious “Christic” sense; for it is a feature of the *special* “self-effacement” of this gentle space-making – this yielding to divine power which is no worldly power – that it marks one’s willed engagement in the pattern of the cross and resurrection, one’s deeper rooting and grafting into the “body of Christ”.<sup>232</sup>

How then does the silence and vulnerability that leads to pain and suffering, the “yielding to divine power” lead to the transformation and expansion of the self, and the sense of the true empowered self? First, by “nongrasping,” the space created through the quiet waiting for God is filled by God, and the experience of prayer which may seem very isolating and desolate, over time becomes experienced almost as an expansion of oneself as one realizes that through prayer, one participates in the very life of God. As Coakley explains,

Usually it dawns bit by bit on the person praying that this activity, which at first seems all one’s doing, is actually the activity of another. It is the experience of being ‘prayed in,’ the discovery that ‘we do not know how to pray as we ought (Romans 8:26), but are

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<sup>231</sup> Coakley, “God as Trinity,” 109-110.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., “Kenosis and Subversion,” 108.

graciously caught up in a divine conversation, passing back and forth in and through the one who prays, 'the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit' (Romans 8:16).<sup>233</sup>

In this case then, the fear of our inarticulacy, our weakness, begins to lessen with this experience of being "prayed in" and of realizing that we do not need to control what is going on. There is an empowering feeling of letting go and resting in God and in the experience of being caught up in this divine dialogue. This experience can lead to greater courage to face ourselves and to give ourselves into this process of prayer.

Second, the experience of God that we encounter in prayer is not only the experience of the absence of God or the "dark night" as mentioned above. Rather, Coakley says that "[b]y choosing to 'make space' in this way, one 'practises' the 'presence of God' – the subtle but enabling presence of a God who neither shouts nor forces, let alone 'obliterates'".<sup>234</sup> For apart from encountering ourselves at our most vulnerable moment, it is also in this space that we encounter a gentle and tender God. This God does not will our death or destruction nor will we be abused in that vulnerable space. Rather God wills our flourishing and empowers us to be more fully human, fully alive. This encounter with a God whose message on the cross is what Coakley labels, "power-in-vulnerability" becomes a powerful critique of the experience of human abusive power. It gives women an experience of power that does not force itself upon a person, but rather is invited in and empowers the person. It is an experience of vulnerability that leads to empowerment and not destruction. As Coakley argues, such "power-in-vulnerability, a willed effacement to a gentle omnipotence, far from

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<sup>233</sup> Coakley, "God as Trinity," 108.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., "Kenosis and Subversion," 108.

complementing masculinism, acts as its undoing.”<sup>235</sup> Hence, this encounter is not about being battered or undergoing unnecessary suffering. Rather, it is in the face of this gentle divine power, which is neither coercive nor abusive, that we are able to face our own inner turmoil and weakness. We are empowered toward an acceptance and love of ourselves, having seen ourselves through the eyes of a God who knows us better than we know ourselves. As Coakley puts it “For God is no rapist, but the very source of my being: God is *closer* than kissing (I am happy to put it thus, metaphorically); indeed God, being God, is closer to me even than I am to myself....”<sup>236</sup> Hence, this encounter with God begins a true encounter and discovery of the self and with that comes the destruction of our idols, of the wrong notions of self that we had. This is why for Coakley,

*Kenosis*, waiting for our wordless entry into the triune conversation that is prayer, is actually a putting off of our false and sinful self to await our true self, as we are in the presence of God.<sup>237</sup>

In this encounter with God, one can begin to see glimpses of our true, most authentic selves as seen from the eyes of God. We are forced to truly look at ourselves for the first time, to confront parts of ourselves we would rather hide, and to begin to confront our brokenness. One part of it is looking at our own self-conception and our relationships and see to what degree we have been “abusive” to ourselves – too harsh, too critical – and to what degree we’ve allowed others to be abusive to us. This confrontation becomes part of shedding our false and sinful self, a confrontation that cannot happen

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<sup>235</sup> Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion,” 110. Mary Grey, on the other hand, uses Dorothy Soelle as an example of someone who found that “[w]ith the language of prayer, she discovered hope of penetrating beyond domination and control.” See Mary Grey, “My Yearning is For Justice: Moving Beyond Praxis in Feminist Theology” in *Interpreting the Postmodern: Responses to “Radical Orthodoxy,”* eds. Rosemary Radford Ruether and Marion Grau (New York: T&T Clark, 2006) 190.

<sup>236</sup> Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion,” 107, quoted in Byassee, 144.

<sup>237</sup> Byassee, 144.

without making space to listen to our own voice, and to make space for God. However, such an image does not have to lead us to despair, for in the presence of God, we experience our own truest self, and the glory of that true self.

Furthermore, it is an experience of a God who “wants us whole, conscious and unconscious, soul and body.”<sup>238</sup> As Coakley writes, “[i]t is truly an effect of this prayer that we are gradually forced to accept and integrate those dark and repressed strands of the unconscious that we would rather not acknowledge, and along with these, all aspects of our sexuality, both bodily and emotional.”<sup>239</sup> It is in prayer, the vulnerable moment of waiting for the gentle divine power that such transformation and expansion of the self occurs, and where a true love of self (including accepting our brokenness, the dark aspects of ourselves) happens as we see ourselves through the eyes of God and experience God’s unconditional love.

Questioning gender assumptions within the movement of prayer. Lest we think that this image of praying is still too passive (and hence too “feminine”) and the image of God transforming us as still too active (and hence “masculine”), Coakley argues that gender assumptions are also subverted within the very experience of prayer. Part of the transformation and expansion of the self is the transformation and integration of our sexuality. This is part of the wholeness that she seeks, of finding balance within herself, as mentioned above. As Coakley notes, “it is a not uncommon experience among those who give themselves seriously to the practice of prayer that sooner or later they have to

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<sup>238</sup> Coakley, “God as Trinity,” 110.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.



face their own need of an integrated sexuality, and of an inward personal balance between activity and receptivity, initiative and response....”<sup>240</sup>

As mentioned, the very practice of prayer as a “willed” (that is active) passivity (waiting for God) is already a critique of the usual assumption of prayer as “passive”. More than this, Coakley also gives examples of mystics who in their practice show the breakdown of gender assumptions of “feminine” passivity and male “activity” within prayer. About the Carmelites, she writes that “the notable adoption of the ‘feminine’ posture of the soul by John and the emergence of a strong voice of authority in Teresa illustrate the characteristic gender fluidity of mystical theology’s possibilities.”<sup>241</sup> Furthermore, as Jason Byassee has also noted, Coakley also gives the example of Gregory of Nyssa’s *Life of Moses* to show how, as one gets closer and closer to the divine life, the fluidity of gender roles is revealed. There, Coakley observes that while most of the ascent features echoes of male sexuality, at the end, “‘masculinist *eros* tips over into what we might call a womb-like receptivity’...Now Gregory’s use of imagery becomes almost entirely feminine....Our prototypical human has gone from being male to female.”<sup>242</sup> These examples strengthen Coakley’s claim that within contemplation, one finds the fluidity of gender roles, developing both activity and passivity, initiative and response, within the person. It is through the development of both that one is enabled not only to have a more integrated and balanced sense of self, but also to be able to have the initiative and activity needed to respond to others and to the needs of the world.

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<sup>240</sup> Coakley, “God as Trinity,” 120.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid., “Deepening Practices,” 90.

<sup>242</sup> Byassee, 148-9.

However, questions regarding gender assumptions are not limited to issues of the self, but also the self's experience of God within prayer. The deeper one gets into one's practice, the deeper one gets to the apophatic sense of God - the God who cannot be fully expressed in language and imagery. At this level, one gets a sense of the inadequacy of our language and imagery of God, and the inaccuracy of only certain (usually male) imagery for God. The desire for wholeness and balance within oneself also corresponds with a more balanced perception of God, ultimately seen as Mystery. Once again, Coakley turns to Gregory of Nyssa, insisting on the ultimate unknowability of God, and hence God's transcendence of all categories of gender. And yet, there is the realization that at the anthropomorphic level, there is a need to balance "masculine" and "feminine" traits in God. As Coakley writes:

It has again and again been the insight of those given to prayer that description of the triune God which is not fatally inadequate must somehow encompass, as a matter of balance, what we are conditioned to call feminine characteristics – patience, compassion, endurance, forgiveness, warmth, sustenance and so on – no less than the strength, power, activity, initiative, wrath, and suchlike that our society has tended to regard as peculiarly masculine.<sup>243</sup>

Hence, through an experience of sustained prayer, we experience the expansion of our own sense of self and sexuality, including the gender assumptions that we may have had. At the same time, it also expands our very experience of prayer, moving from various images and experiences of God, even to the experience of the "unknowability" of God who transcends all gender categories. We see the need to break the gendered "idols" we have made and the need to have a balance of "masculine" and "feminine" characteristics in the God whom we ultimately experience as Mystery. It is in this

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<sup>243</sup> Coakley, "God as Trinity," 120.

experience that we begin to have a sense of Coakley's description of contemplation as a disciplined "unknowing" that leads to a deeper knowledge-beyond-knowledge; an experience of God greater than previously thought, becoming more apophatic while also recognizing the need to be able to capture that experience in language and imagery that is more wholistic. In the end, this experience of prayer leads not only to a more balanced sense of self, but also to a more balanced, or as she says "more satisfying", doctrine of the triune God, where God is seen as both "creative power" as well as "enduring in patient weakness." Furthermore, she writes,

Both man and woman are 'in the image of God', and God is the fullness of the Trinity. The 'masculine' and 'feminine' qualities (as we call them) which we all share in varying admixture are both of them for us clues and glimpses of the wholeness of divine life and love.<sup>244</sup>

Prayer and the turn to the "other". Though prayer is a very personal experience, it does not have to lead to a sense of individualism or isolation, as is often the objection of those who think that prayer disconnects one from the world. Rather, as our prayer life, as our interior life deepens, we experience a new way of relating with ourselves and others as well. This can lead to a deeper commitment to others, a deeper love, not just for the self, but for others and for all of God's creation. It can become an experience of the self, as a self-in-relation to others through an experience of being "in Christ" and being part of the body of Christ.<sup>245</sup> Coakley describes it as such:

...to pray 'in Christ' is to intuit the mysterious interpenetration of individuals one with another, and thus to question our usual assumptions about the boundaries of the self. It is

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<sup>244</sup> Coakley, "God as Trinity," 121.

<sup>245</sup> Some may argue, as Rosemary Ruether once asked, whether a male savior can save women, and in this case, how helpful Christocentric prayer might be. However, Coakley argues that prayer is always Trinitarian and always begins with the Spirit who then leads us to Christ then to the "Father." See her article, "God as Trinity." Furthermore, as mentioned above, she argued how sustained prayer questions gender assumptions even of God.

to discover that central aspect of Pauline Christology, the notion of the mutual interdependence of the members of the 'body of Christ' (1 Cor. 12); it is to perceive the Trinitarian love coursing out to encompass the whole of humanity.<sup>246</sup>

In prayer, seeing ourselves "in Christ" and part of the "body of Christ", we begin to realize how we are not and cannot be separated from the rest of God's creation.

Instead, we see more clearly our connection with everything else. We are all connected as God's creatures, all part of the body of Christ. Just as we realize that we are not alone in prayer, for God is there, we also realize that being in the presence of God means being in the presence of all of God's creatures, united to them, through Christ. Just as prayer slowly begins to teach us to love ourselves, so too the experience of the love of God transforms our love and pours out into a love for the other, realizing that we are like the other, and that we are all God's creation. Furthermore, just as we learned to see ourselves through God's eyes, we begin to see others through the same lens which helps us to deepen our love for them, strengthening our relationship with them. Many Christian mystics speak this way. For example, Thomas Merton himself wrote a moving passage about his sense of communion with all humanity; that he (as a monk) is not different from everybody else. He writes:

Thank God, thank God that I *am* like other men, that I am only a man among others...It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race, though it is a race dedicated to many absurdities and one which makes many terrible mistakes; yet, with all that, God Himself gloried in becoming a member of the human!....I have the immense joy of being *man*, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are....There is no way of telling people that they are walking around shining like the sun.<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> Coakley, "God as Trinity," 110-111.

<sup>247</sup> Thomas Merton, *Confessions of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Double Day, Image Books, 1968) 157-158, quoted in Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1986) 42-43.

This passage gives us an insight into the movement in prayer which allows for the transformation of the self which leads to solidarity with others. First of all, the passage shows his gratitude for being human. One of the realizations in prayer is how good it is to be a human being despite, as Merton writes “our sorrows and stupidities.” These do not overwhelm us; rather, we are able to see ourselves both in our weakness and in our glory, able to accept all of ourselves which leads to a true love of self. We learn to accept our frailties, “our absurdities and mistakes” and still be able to say how “great” we are because God chose to become one of us. Hence, part of what it means to be “in Christ” or to have the “mind of Christ” is to see as Christ does and rejoice in the goodness of humanity and of oneself. This is what we have shown above, how prayer transforms the self.

However, the second movement is to rejoice that this goodness is the true nature of all humanity, and how we begin to connect to others. Our joy in seeing our own goodness becomes the lens through which we can see the goodness and dignity of others, allowing us to see them “shining like the sun.” Just as we come to awareness and acceptance of our own brokenness and suffering, we can link to the brokenness and suffering of others. As Nouwen once wrote, “in the solitude of the heart, we can truly listen to the pains of the world because there we can recognize them not as strange and unfamiliar pains, but as pains that are indeed our own. There we can see that what is most universal is most personal and that indeed nothing human is strange to us.”<sup>248</sup> More than this, we are not overwhelmed by the brokenness and the pains of this world, but are

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<sup>248</sup> Nouwen, 58.

moved by them into action, given the contrast to how we now truly see humanity. Like Merton's insight, Coakley writes that "...it has often been the perception of the mystics to see creation anticipatorily in the light of its true glory, even while it is yet in 'bondage to decay' and 'groaning in travail'".<sup>249</sup> Given this shift in our perception of the other, to see one's "true glory", to see them "shining like the sun", our sense of our commitment and love for the other changes. We change our attitude and actions to reflect how we see the other's "glory" while also acknowledging the current pains and struggles. This can become the foundation for working for justice, working to make sure that we and others are able to live out just and dignified lives, reflective of the "true glory" that we all share, as God's creatures.

However, sometimes, the problem as we work towards justice for others is that we do not know how to truly listen to the voice of the other. Our well-intentioned actions on their behalf lead us to objectify them, to become a voice for them without truly paying attention to them and their needs. Hence, beyond just realizing our shared "glorious" nature, having prayer as the foundation for our work for others, prayer can also lead to a deeper response to the other, and a deeper respect for them. Prayer cultivates the necessary attitude to really learn to receive the other, not just in their similarities but in their differences and in their otherness. As Coakley contends,

the ascetic practices of contemplation are themselves indispensable means of a *true* attentiveness to the despised or marginalized other ...its practiced self-emptying inculcates an attentiveness that is beyond merely good political intentions. Its practice is more discomforting, more destabilizing to settled presumptions, than a simple intentional *design* on empathy.<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Coakley, "God as Trinity," 111.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., "Is there a Future for Gender and Theology?," 6-7.

Here, she argues that prayer makes us truly attentive to the other, not “colonizing” their voice and turning them into our own agenda. Rather, prayer gives us the qualities needed in order to truly listen to and break our assumptions of the other. In this way, we can truly see, recognize and love the other. Coakley maintains that prayer is a “practiced self-emptying”, which means a kind of “non-grasping”, of not trying to control the agenda, or thinking that one already knows the results. One comes to God “empty-handed.” However, the same attitude of “practiced self-emptying” is also the attitude necessary to truly be able to listen to the other, by creating a space where the other can be themselves, not controlling them, not setting the agenda for them. As Coakley explains,

Kenosis...involves a discussion of the deep difficulties of recognizing “otherness” without swallowing the other into a preconceived category or an item of personal need. The moral integrity of the ‘other’ is only maintained by a *deliberate* act of space-making, or perhaps – as Irigaray will have it – of mutual ‘ecstasy’ which waits on the other’s difference without demand for egotistical control.<sup>251</sup>

This space-making, the main quality cultivated in prayer, is what allows one to let go of one’s control, and on the one hand, to “let God be God”, and on the other, to let the other be other. It is a practice that allows us to begin to hear our own voice and learn to accept and love ourselves. In such a practice, we also begin to create a space so that another’s voice can be heard and respected, unmanipulated by the needs of the one who prays, because s/he is finding resources within prayer life and within themselves to purify their relationships. In this case, what we find is that those who pray not only begin the transformation of themselves, but also a transformation in how they see and treat others. It is in a way a “purification”, not just of one’s views but also of one’s actions, in light of what happens within prayer. For this reason, Coakley argues that prayer is never just a

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<sup>251</sup> Coakley, “Kenosis: Theological meanings,” 209.

personal nor private event, but a return to the hustle and bustle of daily life. But our actions within that life are now “taken up and transfigured”<sup>252</sup>, made and re-made within the process of prayer.

If this is truly the movement in prayer, then as Coakley claims, sustained prayer leads rather “to the building up of community than to its dissolution, to intensification rather than atrophy of concern for the life of the world.”<sup>253</sup> In discovering the “true self”, we see ourselves as self-in-relation, but not in a way that risks assimilation or the loss of self. Understanding ourselves and our connections, grounded in Christ and being “like Christ” – in prayer then is where we begin to develop this prophetic voice with which we can speak of the brokenness of ourselves and our relationships, of our communities and of our world and work towards healing and wholeness just as Christ has done.

Coakley gives the example of meditation in prison as an example of a kind of silent prayer in solidarity that shows the power of prayer. She writes that “[s]hared silence in peace and solidarity is possibly the most subversive act of resistance to the jail’s culture of terrorization and violence.”<sup>254</sup> She also wonders “[w]hat if the physical poise, calm and self-control that had been gained in such ‘miraculous’ solidarity in jail could be maintained outside?”<sup>255</sup> In the end, she concludes that “[t]he practice of silent solidarity might have deep political as well as personal effects: the unleashing of “dark”

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<sup>252</sup> Coakley, “Deepening Practices,” 91.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., “God as Trinity,” 111.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid., “Jailbreak,” 18.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid., 19.



subversive divine power as the antidote to racist despair, marginalization and repression.”<sup>256</sup>

### *Conclusion*

In sum, Coakley writes that,

...no human, contemplative or otherwise, is beyond the reach of either self-deception or manipulation by others... These problems and dangers can only be confronted; however, by the making of fine, but important, distinctions: between this ‘right’ vulnerability and mere invitation to abuse, between this contemplative ‘self-effacement’ and self-destruction or self-repression, between the productive suffering of self-disclosure and the decentering torture of pain for pain’s sake.<sup>257</sup>

Making such distinctions and discussing ways of holding on to “vulnerability” and “dependence” that can still be empowering for women has been the goal of many of her writings. In this section, the goal has been to lay out her understanding of *kenosis* and of prayer as *kenosis* precisely as a process of “self-disclosure”, of the painful process of coming to know and ultimately love ourselves, of creating a space so that our voice and the voice of the other can be heard. In her discussion of *kenosis*, Coakley reinterprets its meaning and focuses on the notion of “vulnerability” and “dependence” as a kind non-grasping, of not trying to control the agenda in prayer, or assuming that one already knows. It is, furthermore, a “space-making”, silence creating a space, not for silencing but so that one’s voice, the voice of God, and the voice of others can truly be heard and acknowledged.

From this space where we discover and re-define God, ourselves, and others anew. We are brought back to the world, seen with new eyes in the light of “glory” that has been revealed within prayer. It is in seeing such “glory” that we can be moved to act

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<sup>256</sup> Coakley, “Jailbreak,” 20.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., “Kenosis and Subversion,” 109.

in this world of “bondage” and “groaning”, to be taken up and participate in making all things new. This is the vision that can empower and sustain the action of transforming not just ourselves but the world around us. Hence, this description of prayer and what happens in prayer, is exactly the opposite of the notions of *kenosis* and dependence and vulnerability that lead to abuse. This experience of prayer shows the subtle distinction of a kind of “effacement” that leads to empowerment, and of power that is not abusive.

In the end, this experience of prayer, as mentioned, far from leading to individualism and isolation, actually opens us to the other, even the religious other. Coakley observes that though her description of prayer is very Christian and focuses on the specificity and the distinguishing features of Christ and the Trinity, it doesn’t close her to other traditions, but leads to an openness and possible appreciation for similar strains of contemplation in other traditions. She writes,

For the obscurity, the darkness, the sheer defencelessness of wordless prayer usually lead rather to a greater openness to other traditions than to an assured sense of superiority; and the experience of God thus dimly perceived brings about a curious intuitional recognition of the activity of ‘contemplation’ in others, whether or not the concept of God to which they adhere is congruous with the Christian one.<sup>258</sup>

### **III. Mary Grey**

#### *Introduction*

Mary Grey is a Roman Catholic theologian who has taught at various universities in Europe including Nijmegen University and the University of Wales. She is also a co-founder of Wells for India, a water irrigation project in poor communities, particularly in Rajasthan. In much of her own writing and experience, there is a good amount of similarity with Coakley in terms of the focus on the importance of spirituality, of social

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<sup>258</sup> Coakley, “God as Trinity,” 119-120.

change (and feminism as the means for social change), and the reinterpretation and valuing of Christian doctrines for feminist theology. As Joy McDougall has written, Grey's focus is a "profoundly spiritual quest"<sup>259</sup> that places faith in Christianity's core symbols, particularly in the ministry of Jesus, in the mystery of the cross and resurrection, and the longing for redemption.<sup>260</sup> However, unlike Coakley, Grey's approach uses more contemporary, particularly feminist writers such as Etty Hillesum or Dorothy Soelle and usually begins with an assessment of the current situation/issues in the world which challenges theology today. Furthermore, her work also puts more emphasis on the transformation of the Church and the community rather than the individual, though she also advocates the feminist project of finding the autonomous yet independent self. Grey though, relies upon finding "epiphanies of connection" and she sees the church, or the community and its spiritual practices as integral to such a project. Some of the other influences in her writing include process theology and engagement with other traditions such as Buddhism.

Her main project can probably be best summarized in the epilogue of her latest work, *Sacred Longings: The Ecological Spirit and Global Culture*. There she writes:

"'What do we really want?' has been the focus all along. How to break the fetters of addiction to consumerism and the domination of the free market system has been the question. In 'recovering heart' we know the answers. I have suggested that the desiring heart finds true fulfillment in enabling the happiness of others: in hospitality and openness to the other we recover the joyous possibilities of our interconnected selves."<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> Joy Ann McDougall, "Women's Work: Feminist Theology for a new generation" *Christian Century* (July 26, 2005) 23.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>261</sup> Mary Grey, *Sacred Longings: The Ecological Spirit and Global Culture* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004) 211.

From this quote, we see that her concern has been our culture's disordered desires (that we no longer know what we want, or we are wanting the wrong things) and the phenomenon of globalization and our "addiction to consumerism and domination." She sees the current state of the world as one of suffering – the suffering of people (particularly women and marginalized groups) and the suffering of the earth. This suffering is due to our addiction and our wrong desires fueled by such unstoppable consumerism. Furthermore, such consumerism is connected to a strong sense of individualism that leads to a culture of separation and fragmentation within society, and hence the breakdown of relationships and communities.<sup>262</sup> As she writes, "[t]o be an individual - according to current wisdom – it is vital to compete and to succeed. To succeed one has to be a consumer."<sup>263</sup> As individuals and consumers, we have split ourselves from others and the world, and even from our own deepest self, our deepest desire. This is why Grey characterizes the current climate as a "searching for soul"<sup>264</sup> or "losing heart"<sup>265</sup>; that is, that we have lost sight of our true desire, and have separated from our own self (our heart/soul) which has driven our continued separation from others and the world. Hence, in order to stop such consumerism and the fragmentation that has resulted from it, one must strike at this problem of individualism and recover our sense of connectedness with others as well as oneself.

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<sup>262</sup> She describes our current context as one of fragmentation in *Beyond the Dark Night: A Way Forward for the Church* (London: Cassell, 1991) 9-11. There she notes that she used to describe it as a "culture of separation" in a previous book, *The Wisdom of Fools? Seeking Revelation for Today* (London: SPCK, 1993) but that "the process of separating has taken several steps further so that splitting, fragmenting are now more accurate descriptions." See her footnote 7 in *Beyond the Dark Night*, 17).

<sup>263</sup> Mary Grey, *Prophecy and Mysticism: the Heart of the Postmodern Church* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1997) 1.

<sup>264</sup> This is the title of the section in *Beyond the Dark Night* where she speaks of cultural fragmentation.

<sup>265</sup> This is the title of a section in *Sacred Longings* where she speaks of globalization and our consumerist addiction.

For this reason, many of her writings have focused on recovering our connectedness to others, seeing this as our true desire. This is our task and the task of theology today, to gather the fragments and discover wholeness through rediscovering our connection, the “right relation” with all else. In light of this primary insight, Grey reinterprets the key doctrines within the Christian faith, that of redemption and revelation. For example, she argues for connectedness as the new metaphor for Christian revelation, understanding God as the source of connection and seeing our interconnectedness with all of creation.<sup>266</sup> Moreover, she re-interprets redemption as a longing for wholeness, for “right relation” and the living out of our interconnection with all of creation. She redefines redemption as the “dynamic energy of mutuality or the making of right relation”<sup>267</sup> and further argues that,

interdependence and relating are the very threads of the complicated tapestry of the world – its warp and woof ....And this is why *relating is at the heart of what is redemptive* [italics mine], and what may bring about the transformation of the world, its structures and its patterns of interrelation at every level.<sup>268</sup>

Moreover, she relates this definition of redemption with women’s search for self and for right relationships. She argues that “this [redemption] is a concept which includes the journey to self-realization and pushes further to making this real in society, through the communal struggle and the political struggle. It is self-realization, but from within the experience of the ‘relational self’ ....”<sup>269</sup> Here, we see her work, joining the project of so many other feminists, of finding the balance between self and other, between a strong

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<sup>266</sup> Grey, *Wisdom of Fools*, 57-66.

<sup>267</sup> Grey, *Redeeming the Dream: Feminism, Redemption, and Christian Tradition* (London: SPCK, 1989) 153.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid., 155.

interior life as well as finding one's public voice, and the re-interpretation of Christian doctrines in light of such feminist insights.

The challenge then is how one begins to shift from the individualistic and consumerist mentality in order to begin to discover this sense of connectedness and hence recover our own heart/soul. For Grey as for Coakley, the answer is to begin an interior journey to find one's true desire again, and this is done through the path of contemplation, treading the path of *kenosis*. For this reason, Grey writes that she seeks to develop a feminist theology of contemplation "as the means to the recovery of community, and in order to find a way of staying with the struggle and re-source it in a way that frees new energy for gathering and re-shaping the cultural fragments."<sup>270</sup>

Furthermore, she contends,

In the contemporary Western situation of postmodern cultural fragmentation ...the image of the self-emptying, kenotic God re-emerges as a direct challenge to the idolatry of money. The very silence of God is deafening. It is as if the very filling-up of the world by global capitalism, so that there is no place to stand outside, has as its reverse the emptying-out process of the Divine.<sup>271</sup>

The next section will explore what she means by *kenosis* and kenotic spirituality, and how such provides the solution to the current problem of consumerism and cultural fragmentation, as well as women's search for self and right relationships.

#### *Grey's re-interpretation of the doctrine of kenosis*

Similar to Sarah Coakley, Mary Grey also acknowledges the problem that the doctrine of *kenosis* presents to women; that it promotes notions of dependence that may lead to "demeaning situations of economic poverty or emotional dependence which can

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<sup>270</sup> Grey, *Prophecy and Mysticism*, 6.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid., *Sacred Longings*, 74.

cripple the development of the autonomous self”<sup>272</sup> or that “self-emptying” can lead to an understanding of “self-sacrifice” or “suffering” or “subordination” as the “rightful lot of women.”<sup>273</sup> Given such caution, Grey acknowledges that to be able to re-interpret *kenosis* in a positive sense is a real challenge for theology, one that she has taken up in many of her writings. Her main point has been to re-interpret *kenosis* particularly as God’s vulnerability and divine *kenosis* as the activity which allows God to share the suffering of humanity and the earth. Witnessing to such a kenotic God, understood as a vulnerable God, brings about our own sense of vulnerability and hence openness to the suffering of others. This in turn leads to a greater sense of solidarity and justice building, ultimately re-building our right relationship with others. As Joy McDougall summarizes,

Christianity’s witness to a self-emptying, vulnerable God confronts the ethics of self-interest and unchecked consumption that prevails in global capitalism. Such a God reeducates our disordered desires and calls our heartless society back to the spiritual practices of compassion, solidarity and justice-building with the marginalized and humiliated in our midst.<sup>274</sup>

In order to make this re-interpretation of *kenosis*, Grey emphasizes the understanding of God as relational. As she asserts, “God’s very self is relational; God is the power to make right relation; God even created the world out of yearning for relation.”<sup>275</sup> From this statement, it is obvious that she sees the very act of creation as stemming from the very “essence” of God as relational. Moreover, this “yearning for relation” continues in the Incarnation as God’s way of continuing to relate to God’s creation. Grey contends that the “[k]enosis of God leads divine activity into the

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<sup>272</sup> Grey, *Prophecy and Mysticism*, 16,

<sup>273</sup> Ibid., *Sacred Longings*, 75

<sup>274</sup> McDougall, 23.

<sup>275</sup> Grey, *Prophecy and Mysticism*, 23.

ambiguity and tragedy of the human condition.”<sup>276</sup> It is this “yearning for relation” that becomes the condition for God’s vulnerability, or more accurately, according to Grey, “...relational power is vulnerable” and God is the “pulsating heart” of relating.<sup>277</sup> For in God’s “yearning for relation”, God enters, as mentioned above, the “ambiguity and tragedy of the human condition” becoming vulnerable, not only to the suffering in this world, but also to our response to such suffering. This is how God is vulnerable; this is what she means by God’s *kenosis*, that God waits for our response while staying in the midst of our suffering.

Moreover, she claims that paradoxically, God is both “vulnerable to our response and yet, at the same time, empowering us out of this very vulnerability.”<sup>278</sup> How does God empower us out of this vulnerability? Grey reminds us how God and God’s vulnerability and suffering are not identical with that of humanity. First, she states that “God’s vulnerability is voluntary, enabling God to share world suffering.”<sup>279</sup> This ensures an understanding of suffering that does not sentimentalize it nor elevates it automatically to a “redemptive level.” It is also meant as a reminder that most of the suffering in the world is not voluntary (and hence not redemptive) but rather is the kind of “vulnerability” that is the result of our consumerist/individualistic mentality that must be fought today. Furthermore, she also asserts that “[t]he God of the covenant is steadfast and faithful, God’s power lies in staying power, in imagination, in compassionate love, even if this is – let us face it – unable at any given moment to

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<sup>276</sup> Grey, *Sacred Longings*, 79.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., *Prophecy and Mysticism*, 35.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., *Sacred Longings*, 76.



remove the suffering.”<sup>280</sup> Notice here how she is re-defining the notion of God’s power. It is no longer simply understood as the “power” to end suffering; rather, she places the power in the ability to be with the other in their suffering (com-passion), to remain “steadfast and faithful” in the midst of the suffering, and to even be so powerful as to be patient enough to wait for our response. Notice how this is exactly what she meant by God’s vulnerability. God’s vulnerability is God’s power since “relational power is vulnerable.” As McDougall puts it,

Divine kenosis, she insists, does not mean that divine power is sacrificed but rather it is relocated in a ‘relational love’ that brings about forgiveness and awakens an ethics of care and compassion for others. God’s power remains steadfast in its embrace of the suffering and the vulnerable.<sup>281</sup>

It is exactly this model of vulnerability, of “power” in the midst of suffering that empowers and gives an alternative model to the consumerist /individualistic mentality in society. As Grey argues, to “discover the God of right relation means both discovering, as Etty Hillesum showed us, the vulnerable, not the omnipotent God, and being empowered by the paradoxical strength of her vulnerability.”<sup>282</sup> In the face of the vulnerable God, one is forced to confront a new understanding of God and power – not as domination (which the notion of an “omnipotent God” might suggest), but the power of a steadfast and faithful love that awaits our response. To be empowered by a vulnerable God means “re-imaging vulnerability, not as weakness, but as the power of being present to, of suffering-with, of encouraging, of facing the truth, of respecting the fragility of

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<sup>280</sup> Grey, *Sacred Longings*, 79.

<sup>281</sup> McDougall, 24.

<sup>282</sup> Grey, *Prophecy and Mysticism*, 26.

shared humanness.”<sup>283</sup> This serves to give an alternative model for relationships to be based on respect and mutuality, and compassion for those who are suffering. This is also a notion of God, power, and vulnerability that serves as an alternative to patriarchal interpretations that have led to the subordination and abuse of women in society.

It is in the discovery of this kenotic, vulnerable God that we discover our own true desire, our own true *kenotic* humanity. Grey contends that the challenge of the self-emptying of human beings is the “need for the radical reconstruction of what is meant by human personhood”<sup>284</sup> no longer defined and driven by consumerist/individualistic mentality but now modeled upon the vulnerable God whose very self is relational. As Grey says, “[d]ivine power enables us to ‘cross over’ (lit. *transcendere*) out of self-absorption into new relationships. This meaning of divine transcendence is reflected in the discovery of meaningful connections and the movement into deep, sustaining relationships of justice.”<sup>285</sup> It is precisely the kenotic God who redefined “power” in terms of a different kind of vulnerability as described above, that moves us towards our own *kenosis*, towards becoming vulnerable to the suffering of another, out of our own self-concerns, and learning not just to be “with the other” in their suffering but to fight in order to get them out of such suffering. Again, notice how she makes a difference here between the imposed suffering of others (that which should not be) and the voluntary suffering (once one learns to become vulnerable, open to the suffering of others) one takes on in order to fight against such suffering. Grey argues for the importance of the

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<sup>283</sup> Grey, *Prophecy and Mysticism*, 40.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid., *Sacred Longings*, 77.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid., 79-80.

“witness of voluntary, chosen suffering for the process of redemption,”<sup>286</sup> for this is the mark of someone who is becoming more and more like the vulnerable God whose heart is moved by suffering. Notice though how it is the voluntary suffering which is redemptive, and not suffering per se.

In the end, Grey still issues a couple of cautions in terms of understanding such *kenotic* humanity. First, apart from saying above how such self-giving, self-emptying must be voluntary, a result of becoming vulnerable to the other, she says that it must also become the model for all humanity, not just women. “It is not for one gender to sustain the entire burden of caring for society”<sup>287</sup> but rather “‘compassion, empathy and solidarity’ become the marks of perfection for *all* (italics mine) persons.”<sup>288</sup> Furthermore, as McDougall reminds us,

...the call to self-emptying praxis must never become an end in itself. A person’s voluntary encounter with human suffering should always be viewed as a cry of protest and a testimony of hope against the overwhelming evil that one experiences.<sup>289</sup>

In the end, we see how her understanding of God’s *kenosis* impacts her understanding of our own and serves as a corrective to interpretations of *kenosis* that have been harmful to women. Her main contention is that God’s self is relational, and just as God’s “yearning for relation” was the impetus for Creation and the Incarnation, so too is this “yearning for relation” at the heart of redemption, for “relating is at the heart of what is redemptive.”<sup>290</sup> Ultimately it is what is the heart of being human (the core of our

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<sup>286</sup> Grey, *Sacred Longings*, 79.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>288</sup> McDougall, 24.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

<sup>290</sup> Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 31.

desire, as Grey would say) because it is what it means to be “like God” (*imago Dei*) and ultimately what it means to be holy, She writes,

[i]f the relational process is at the heart of reality, at the heart of the great divine creative-redemptive dynamism, participating in this must be what is meant by ‘holiness.’ So entering into deeper, more meaningful and at the same time juster structures of relating is the kind of redemptive spirituality needed for the transformation of the world.<sup>291</sup>

*Kenotic spirituality and the individual*

For Grey, “...redemption as right relation includes prayer as a dimension.”<sup>292</sup> As mentioned, she believes that it is only with a kenotic spirituality that we can go back to the importance of connections, have our desires re-ordered toward others and re-ordered back to God. This is particularly important given our current situation where she observes that “there is a hunger for the prayer of silence and meditation.”<sup>293</sup> One of her main projects has been the turn to the mystical theology of the early church and fusing it together with more modern spiritual writers in order to address our contemporary concerns. She believes the “retrieval of the mystical way as vital for withered contemporary religious experience.”<sup>294</sup> Furthermore, she sees mysticism as an “alternative to what is offered by the consumerist banquet of the global market”<sup>295</sup> as well as important to the feminist search for self, right relationship and fullness of life.<sup>296</sup>

Like Coakley, Grey insists that the mystical experience is not the privilege of the elite but a possibility for everyone.<sup>297</sup> Furthermore, this way that leads to self-discovery

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<sup>291</sup> Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 36.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid., *Prophecy and Mysticism*, 9.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid., *Sacred Longings*, 151.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid., *Prophecy and Mysticism*, 11.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid., *Redeeming the Dream*, 74.

and the discovery of God and the other is also a slow and painful process.<sup>298</sup> She best summarizes the beginning of a kenotic spirituality in the words of T.S Eliot: *“I said to my soul be still, and wait without hope, for hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love for love would be love of the wrong thing...”*<sup>299</sup> From this short verse, we can discern the key components of a kenotic spirituality for Grey. It begins with a posture of “stillness” and “waiting without hope...” This “stillness” means a calming of ourselves and moving away from the frenetic pace of daily life. Moreover, it means the beginning of the practice of silence so that we can begin to truly pay attention to ourselves and hear our own voice amidst the cacophony of voices in daily life. “Waiting without hope” means that we must learn to let go and not control what happens in prayer; that is, we must not try to control the outcome lest we get it wrong by loving or hoping for the wrong thing. So this “kenotic” posture asks us to be open and vulnerable, to submit ourselves to the whole process, ultimately submitting ourselves to God as will be discussed later. Second, this notion of “waiting” is not to be understood primarily as just a passive moment. This time of stillness and waiting is neither empty nor passive for it is only within such a posture that we can come to a kind of focused attention, a “spirituality of attention”. Here, Grey is influenced by Simone Weil who Grey describes as having been inspired by “‘focused waiting’ or attentiveness which is not opposed to action but rather was a bridge between the being and doing.”<sup>300</sup> Such attentiveness allows us to discover ourselves more deeply, especially realizing one’s brokenness and fragmentation.

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<sup>298</sup> Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 71.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid., *Sacred Longings*, 76.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid., *Redeeming the Dream*, 68.

Moreover, it also becomes the space where we can begin to heal this brokenness, working towards wholeness and the integration of mind, body and soul. This prepares us for appropriate response and action in the world, and becomes that necessary space between “being” and “doing” as mentioned above. How is this possible? First, in this focused waiting, she contends that we encounter the presence of the Watcher, where we are able to observe and understand and ultimately go to a deeper level of consciousness and hence learn to grow from our own experience.<sup>301</sup> For with deepening awareness, we are able to pay attention to our many connections, particularly our broken connections and our fragmentation. She writes that:

At the personal level we wait, we pay attention to all the many connections, the disordered patterns of relation, hearkening, listening, discerning, pulling back from the rhythms we’ve moved to thoughtlessly – in other words, practicing a “spirituality of attention.”<sup>302</sup>

Notice here how the notion of “attention” is about learning to truly listen, observe, discern, to not just “thoughtlessly” go through the motions, but to really be able to examine the dynamics that are going on within ourselves and in our relationships. It is a posture of “unknowing” in order to truly see what is going on. In so doing, we begin to realize that the patterns of relationships that we’ve had – with ourselves and with others – are not just “natural” but disordered patterns harmful to ourselves and others. From this, the challenge is recognizing how such patterns stem from our wrong sense of individualism, of a sense of a “possessive self” which needs to control and master others, brought about by a culture of domination of which we are a part. As Grey contends,

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<sup>301</sup> Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 67-8.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid., *Prophecy and Mysticism*, 51.

The starting point has to be the recognition of the way our basic patterns of knowing, perceiving and feelings are already damaged by the kyriarchal patterns of the ethics of domination ... and the way all these come together in absolutising the “individualistic I”. This enclosed “I” which seeks “mastery” without counting the cost cannot comprehend the language of relation.<sup>303</sup>

To put ourselves back together means realizing how we have been caught up in such harmful relationships, how we (especially as women) have been seen as “possessions”, how others have abused us in their quest for “mastery” over us. At the same time, as Mary Grey reminds us, we must acknowledge with Ruether that “women are not the great innocents of history” and that we have been an integral part of these oppressive structures ourselves.<sup>304</sup> So part of our encounter with ourselves also requires the confession of the ways that abuse of power is present in our relationships, to explore the darker dimension of our own selves, particularly our “possessive selves” and the relationships we do not want to face.

Hence, to put ourselves back together, to begin to recover our wholeness and gather the fragments entails the “stripping away of the false notions of self, the distorting absolutizations of the self.”<sup>305</sup> This has traditionally been understood as the *via purgativa* on the mystical path. This primarily entails recognizing the “poverty” of our notions of self, of seeing that we do not know our true selves as we ought and realizing that the notion of an “individualistic” self leads only to brokenness and fragmentation. “If it is the false egoistic self which is lost, rising to a new and widened concept of self means both widening perception of who we are, and deepening a sense of responsibility

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<sup>303</sup> Grey, *Prophecy and Mysticism*, 36.

<sup>304</sup> Mary Grey, “Claiming Power-in-Relation: Exploring the Ethics of Connection” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 7/1 (Spring 1991): 9-10. This is also an important reminder so that women do not reify or sentimentalize their image as just “victim” or “abused.”

<sup>305</sup> Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 70.

within a wider relational understanding.”<sup>306</sup> Particularly for women, Grey adds another important element in this process. Beyond just the confrontation with our “darker strands” and a rejection of our “false selves,” she writes that “women can often require the integrating of positive images and experiences, together with the rejecting of the destructive ones.”<sup>307</sup> This is important lest women just continue to beat themselves over the head remaining in the belief of their inherent weakness and “badness” or do not have positive healing images upon which they can begin to accept and love themselves, before even branching out to others. For the challenge of the *via purgativa* is preserving the two poles of relating, interdependence and autonomy. The stripping away of the false, individualistic notions of self is an effort to reach a more “centered”, more balanced, a more wholistic sense of self within the broader understanding of our relationship with others. In the end, Grey points to Carol Ochs who describes the *via purgativa* for women as,

...the stripping away of all that stands in the way of our relationship with reality – such unworthy goals of wealth, fame and status, fears of failure, ridicule or isolation, and such habits as irresponsibility, laziness or forgetfulness....this is the movement of “letting go” (*abgeschiedenheit*) in order to facilitate in us the “birthing of God.”<sup>308</sup>

Notice how once again, Grey implies how this can only happen through a kind of *kenosis*, of “letting go” so that we can realize our broken connections and fragmented selves, and visualize alternative models of connection and desires. This only happens by

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<sup>306</sup> Grey, *Prophecy and Mysticism*, 36-37.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid., *Redeeming the Dream*, 71. For example, in this same book, she writes of Christian women seeking biblical images to encourage positive images. Furthermore, in another article, she writes about vibrant images of the Divine arising from global feminist theologies. These include images of God as Mother, the Goddess, or notions of the Trinity as relational power or experienced as fullness of life. See “A Passion for Life and Justice: Gender and the Experience of God” in *God: Experience and Mystery*, eds. Werner Jeanrond and Christoph Theobald (London: SCM Press, 2001) 17-26.

<sup>308</sup> Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*, 71.



way of “letting go” and surrender. But this is not a surrender once again to the harmful culture of domination, nor is it a kind of passive surrender or giving up on ourselves. Rather, Grey contends that “breakthrough will come through the way of surrender – not to the forces of non-being, destructive of the fragile self...but surrender to God’s initiative.”<sup>309</sup> In this kenotic spirituality of delving deep and moving inward, as we discover ourselves more intimately, we ultimately discover God, for the “experience of transcending the self as part of the process of self-realization often comes linked with the experience of the divine.”<sup>310</sup> It is, as previously mentioned, a discovery of the God of right relation, of the vulnerable God who then empowers us and gives us an alternative desire (the desire for relation instead of individualism or autonomy), and an alternative model of relation (of learning to be vulnerable to the other versus dominating the other). It is in such an encounter with this vulnerable God, that we begin to be empowered by such an experience, giving us a new vision that can inspire us into a new sense of self and a new way of relating with others. As Grey says,

The God we meet in the process toward wholeness is the God who energizes our whole being: the God we meet as our heart’s deepest desire, in our moments of clearest self-knowledge. *The God met in the depths is relationality’s deepest core.* This is the God who is urging us on to deepen our connectedness, weave new connections, unravel and re-weave the patterns of relating.<sup>311</sup>

Furthermore, in this experience with the vulnerable God, we are given the experience of the kind of loving relationship with God that allows us to become vulnerable. It is an experience where we find God desiring our wholeness, respecting our autonomy and seeing our intrinsic value. It is such an experience of love that we are then

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<sup>309</sup> Grey, *Prophecy and Mysticism*, 57.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid., *Redeeming the Dream*, 67.

<sup>311</sup> Grey, “The Core of our Desire: Re-imaging the Trinity” *Theology* 93 (Sept/Oct 1990): 371.

challenged to emulate in our human experiences. How is this possible? First, in this encounter with God, according to mystical experience of religious tradition, there is the sense of “not seeing but being seen, held and dreamed...of being held by God, of never being able to fall out of God.”<sup>312</sup> This is an important experience of being vulnerable, of letting go and “resting” in God, being held by God, and trusting that God will never let go. Furthermore, unlike the experience of women being seen with “objectifying eyes” or “possessive eyes”, the experience of being seen by God, is an experience not of the “arrogant” eye that “wants to objectify, possess and control” but the “loving eye” that sees our inherent beauty, value, depth and dignity and longs for our wholeness and the integration of mind, body and soul.<sup>313</sup> Furthermore, the experience of being held by a vulnerable God is also the experience of being thrown into a wider reality, a wider set of relations than we had before. It becomes a way of breaking out of the narrow conception of self while still maintaining our sense of self. This is truly the balance that is being sought within kenotic spirituality. It is the balance (of autonomy and interdependence) that we begin to experience in the face of the vulnerable God. As Grey claims,

The notion of being held in a wider whole, in other words, that there is a greater reality than oneself, will be the deepening experience which holds the two poles together. This is the redemptive sphere of the vulnerable and creative God.<sup>314</sup>

This whole encounter then with God within contemplation breaks open our previous notions of self, other, and God. It is the kind of spirituality that requires our “surrender”, to learn to let go so that we can feel ourselves held by God, our desires and vision of personhood re-modeled by the vulnerable God. In this encounter where we feel ourselves

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<sup>312</sup> Grey, *Sacred Longings*, 166.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid., 165,

<sup>314</sup> Ibid., *Redeeming the Dream*, 81.

held in a “greater reality” than ourselves, we realize the poverty of our notions of self, of other and of God. As Grey claims, “the kenotic, self-emptying God-in-process questions all constructions and dogmas about God as contextual, time-bound and partial.”<sup>315</sup>

Notice already how this very experience with God brings us to the deepest core of our being while at the same time thrusting us widely into relationship with the other, since the God we meet is the God of relationality. So on the one hand, the experience of contemplation brings us more deeply with ourselves but also more broadly with another, learning to become vulnerable to the other as we experience the vulnerability of God. As Grey argues, the “discovery and affirmation of the self – honest self-love – are a prerequisite for the process of redemption and transformation.”<sup>316</sup> However, this is not enough; for the experience with the relational/vulnerable God thrusts us into the “tragedy and ambiguity” of the human situation and opens us to the suffering and vulnerability of the other. This is why, for Grey, contemplation, “far from being an escape from the responsibilities of the world...can be reimagined as a deeper engagement with it, specifically as engaging with the fragmentation of culture which threatens to engulf us.”<sup>317</sup>

Having experienced the “loving eye” of God which affirms our very being, we begin to learn to see others with the same “loving eye” as God. In the same way that we have discerned the harm of the “arrogant eye” that has possessed and objectified us; that we have learned that we are not possessions for others to use and abuse, we also begin to

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<sup>315</sup> Grey, *Sacred Longings*, 76.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid., *Redeeming the Dream*, 82.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid., *Prophecy and Mysticism*, 22.

look at others with this loving eye that sees their dignity, depth and inherent worth. For Grey, such “sacramental perception” is how we must perceive, not just other people, but all of creation. Such perception, based on our experience of the vulnerable God, can re-order our desires and our relationship with others. This begins by seeing ourselves with new eyes, to “re-image myself not as an individual defined over against another, but in-relation-to, connected-with.”<sup>318</sup> Re-imagined in this way (influenced by the image of the vulnerable, not “omnipotent” God), our hearts begin to open and learn to become vulnerable to the other, especially in their suffering. Part of such vulnerability is learning to truly listen to the other, just as we learned in “stillness and waiting” to listen and discern and discover our own voice. As Grey argues, “[l]istening is an activity which requires the whole person. It requires the vulnerability to the other which is presupposed in the idea of the connected self.”<sup>319</sup> Just as it is only by “surrendering” and “letting go” of what we know that we come to know a deeper level of ourselves, so too it is only in “letting go” of what we think we know about others that we can truly know them. This is the kind of “vulnerable” attitude that must accompany our relationship with others. Only with this kind of disposition of “listening” and vulnerability can we truly know the other, and not become “possessive” of them, or dominating, thinking that we already know how they are or what they need. Rather, this “vulnerability” gives them the space to be themselves, and us the space to truly hear them. As Grey says, “being vulnerable to each other allows ‘other ways of knowing’ their full space.”<sup>320</sup> In being vulnerable in such a

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<sup>318</sup> Grey, *The Wisdom of Fools*, 75.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid.

way, we allow our hearts to break open and be truly vulnerable, particularly to their suffering, and this becomes the impetus in our fight against injustice or oppression of others and of the earth.

An example Grey gives of someone who, by going on an “interior” journey through contemplation, achieves the kind of solidarity and “vulnerability” towards others is Thomas Merton. She writes that Thomas Merton’s own journey echoes largely the concern of many feminist theologians – search for self, search for God (and the search for a kind of dependence that respects our freedom) and the search for fullness of life.<sup>321</sup> Moreover, Grey finds that Merton’s views on the self in solitude (as distinct from separation) find a resonance with feminist insights for “his sense of discovering connection with the human race while in solitude is exactly what is meant by the ‘connected’ aloneness of the feminist mystic....”<sup>322</sup> She points to his Louisville epiphany as a moment of delving deep within himself and in that solitude finding such great connection with others. However, Grey also recognizes the limitations with Merton’s example, and the continuing challenge of a right understanding of “dependence” within the contemplative life as well as the challenge of working toward change in the world as against “escaping the world.” In order to bridge this gap, Mary Grey turns to the example of Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish woman who lived and worked in Amsterdam during the German occupation and ultimately died at Auschwitz. For Grey, her journey outlined in her diary shows the potency of a kenotic spirituality. In particular, Hillesum’s idea of

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<sup>321</sup> Grey, *Prophecy and Mysticism*, 11.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

“soulscapes link interior growth with outward circumstances, in a way that bridges some of the duality” mentioned above.<sup>323</sup>

In her diary, Hillesum mentions how her external circumstances and surroundings were seen as a reflection of her own inner landscape. This external landscape is a mirror into her own “soul-(land)scape.” For Grey, this soulscapes is about “connecting the fragmented elements of the physical, material, psychological and emotional elements of all our lives, with an intensity and a desire for wholeness....”<sup>324</sup> It is about bringing the disparate elements of one’s life into one’s interior life, each flowing into the other, instead of being divided. To do this, however, requires seeing the external world from the sacramental perception discussed above, acquired through focused awareness. This is the way Hillesum writes about the things and events in her daily life, finding joy and wonder in the simple things. As Grey says, this is what soulscaping about, “relating to these elements of ordinariness with tenderness, reverence and a sense of gratefulness, integrating them all into a process of self-becoming.”<sup>325</sup> Furthermore, this interior life, sculpted from the exterior world, also brought her closer to God, particularly the vulnerable God as she became more exposed to the vulnerability around her, the vulnerability of the camps. Moreover, the encounter with the vulnerable God, made her take greater responsibility for the vulnerability around her. Notice here how the development of the “sacramental perception”, of seeing everything with “tenderness, reverence and gratefulness” did not mean putting on rose-colored glasses and becoming

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<sup>323</sup> Grey, *Prophecy and Mysticism*, 17.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid., 17-8.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid., 18.

blind to the suffering around her. Instead, such perception, rooted in her interior life, actually gave her the courage to see the reality of suffering around her, to see things as they were, and to be moved to action in the world, due to her encounter with the vulnerable God. Hence, Grey wonders, “[c]an this sense of taking responsibility for God, recognizing the vulnerability of God, lift us from the difficulty of how to nurture a real dependence on God while crushed with debilitating deprivations?”<sup>326</sup> Her response is that Hillesum “...blazes a trail by affirming the need to strip away crippling notions of dependency and obedience through affirming life in its fullness, despite the horrors of the present.”<sup>327</sup> In the end, Grey says that,

For Hillesum God’s vulnerability – seen as inability, powerlessness to alter the disastrous situation – was a direct challenge for human response and participation in the task of restoring heart...Finding room for God in peoples’ hearts, bringing divine presence into humanity’s life was for Hillesum an awakening into joy and delight and into reconciliation as an alternative to hatred.<sup>328</sup>

In the end, it is the combination of the kenotic spirituality of Hillesum with the mysticism of Merton that Grey sees as the antidote to the consumerism today, and to women’s search for the balance between self and other-centeredness. However, as Grey cautions, “[i]n the experience of transcending the self – the feeling of being part of a wider whole – comes authentic self-realization, yet a corresponding vulnerability to victimization.”<sup>329</sup> This is why she emphasizes how God’s vulnerability is voluntary and how it respects our autonomy. This is the model we are encouraged to follow, lest we become even more vulnerable to victimization; that our opening ourselves to others may lead us to lose ourselves instead of truly finding ourselves in the process. For in the end,

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<sup>326</sup> Grey, *Prophecy and Mysticism*, 19.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid., *Redeeming the Dream*, 67.

the challenge is also about finding the balance between autonomy and interdependence. As Grey says, the task ahead will be to maintain this sense of ‘connected aloneness’, to be self-affirming as a choice-making, judging and acting individual, and yet to maintain that vital interconnectedness with the rest of creation.”<sup>330</sup>

*Kenotic spirituality and the community*

Though Grey is very much concerned with the feminist project of finding oneself and right relations, and fighting against oppression and suffering, a good part of her writing also focuses on the transformation of communities, particularly on the Christian Church and its renewal. She believes that it is through empowered communities that the transformation of individuals and the consumerist society can take place. It is such communities, more than just individuals, that offer counter-cultural models to fight against the fragmentation and suffering in the world today. As she contends, having individual role models such as Mother Teresa or Archbishop Romero are good but they can also have a disempowering effect: “the hero/heroine mould idealises the individual concerned, who becomes a cult figure....Not only do their achievements seem unattainable by ordinary mortals, but they distract from the community taking responsibility for its own witness.”<sup>331</sup>

However, she begins by admitting that the Church itself has been perceived as unable to address the issues of the world, that it is disconnected from such concerns, and its rituals, doctrines and practices seen as irrelevant and detached from the crisis today. This, she contends, is part of the “Dark Night” of the Church. As she says,

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<sup>330</sup> Grey, *Redeeming the Grey*, 181.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid., *Prophecy and Mysticism*, 48.



I want to move the metaphor of the Dark Night out of the cell of Julian of Norwich, out of Merton's hermitage and John of the Cross' prison, into the violent ghettoes of the inner city, the humiliated disrepair of our overcrowded prisons, the hopelessness of the ravaged women in the refuges. This is the sense in which the lostness, pain and confusion of Dark Night metaphor fits a situation where the Church has lost its way and seems incapable of making an adequate response.<sup>332</sup>

Furthermore, the Church has also become a place where more suffering, more darkness is experienced by women leading to their own "dark night" as part of a community that refuses to recognize them, and help them find their way back to themselves. Grey describes the "dark night" of women in the Church as such:

...most people assume women are angry and depressed because they are not allowed to be ordained priests. But the Dark night comprehends a *much deeper* level of alienation and despair. It is a darkness born of a lack of nourishment by the liturgy, prayer-life and doctrine of the Christian church. It is the pain of the distorted symbols and lifeless rituals which exclude the humanity of women; it is the making of the Christ-mystery into something un-related to human living and the controlling of this by a class of clerical elite, many of whom live in a style remote from ordinary people....<sup>333</sup>

Part of her project then has been to re-think ecclesiology, to help the Church recover its heart, just as she encouraged individuals, particularly women to recover theirs. She wants moreover to recover a prophetic Church by way of mysticism, as an antidote and inspiration for individuals, to become the space, the community where they can recover their own heart. For, as she says, "[i]n communities inspired by the energizing presence of God, we find inspiration to speak the prophetic word to society."<sup>334</sup>

What does such a prophetic community look like? In *Beyond the Dark Night*, she describes such a community as primarily the opposite, counter-cultural community to the current stream of consumerism in society today. In particular, such prophetic communities must not give way to consumerism and live in a way that makes it possible

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<sup>332</sup> Grey, *Prophecy and Mysticism*, 47-8.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid., *Redeeming the Dream*, 75-6.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid., *Sacred Longings*, 202.

to survive and live dignified lives. They are communities that condemn the culture of violence, and above all, they are “safe spaces of trusting where women can speak the truth of their abuse, suffering and rejection, without fear.”<sup>335</sup> For the Church specifically to become such a prophetic community, she says, it needs new models of authority, power and leadership, moving beyond patriarchal models that are associated with domination, competition and control. However, in order to become such counter-cultural models, the Church has to become a community that “sees, hears and imagines differently.”<sup>336</sup> Moreover, it needs to be able to operate out of a powerful memory, a “subversive memory which stands in judgment over the dominant culture, and the power to imagine and dream alternative visions of self and world.”<sup>337</sup> These, for her, are at the prophetic heart of *ecclesia*.

For the renewal of the Church, as it was for the individual, what is needed for the recovery of heart, is a kenotic spirituality, grounded in mysticism. As she says, “What I referred to earlier on the level of the individual, I now urge at the level of the institution.”<sup>338</sup> Here, she is urging institutions, particularly the Church to take up such *kenosis* and enter into the “spirituality of attention,” that brings us to the vulnerable God, teaching us to become vulnerable to the other, to truly listen to the other. From such vulnerability comes our compassion, and the ministry to “bear up God in the world”.<sup>339</sup> Such spirituality of attention also means looking at how patterns in the institution,

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<sup>335</sup> Grey, *Beyond the Dark Night*, 138-140.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid., *Prophecy and Mysticism*, 68.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid., 70-1.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid., 5.

particularly in our rituals, may lead more to broken connections than healing and wholeness. As such, part of the kenotic process would be

...learning new patterns and unlearning patterns of functioning that have stifled the Body's life. It means leaving behind sacramental practices that have become routine and which block off the earth....<sup>340</sup>

Furthermore, Grey states that the challenge of the Church is to “relinquish the idea that *she dispenses and controls* the Holy *Ruah* of God; equally she needs to lose the fear that the Spirit is experienced outside of official structures.”<sup>341</sup>

In the end, she argues that if the Church can enter into this kenotic process, it can begin to recover its prophetic heart and become the space where individuals can come to recover their own hearts. In particular, she sees a renewed understanding of liturgy as a powerful tool that can unleash the kind of subversive memory that can lead to a recovery of our own hearts. For this reason, she wants the liturgy to be understood differently as a

...place of ethical commitment, and eucharistic as a community act of solidarity with the suffering earth/suffering people. A place to recover heart. A place where the great act of remembering, of anamnesis, becomes remembering what we were once, what we have been, what we can now never be, given so much destruction of earth's creatures....A place where we commit ourselves concretely to life-styles geared to the flourishing and survival of threatened peoples.<sup>342</sup>

In *Prophecy and Mysticism*, Grey lists seven steps that are necessary in order to move to such an empowering notion of liturgy as the place to recover heart. It includes a re-imagination or a recovery of the “earthly” symbols of water, bread, wine, etc., and re-connecting with their “full ecological, material, economic, and political dimensions.”<sup>343</sup>

It also means recovering our “subversive” community memory that reminds us of the

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<sup>340</sup> Grey, *Sacred Longings*, 207-8.

<sup>341</sup> Ibid., *Beyond the Dream*, 138.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid., *Sacred Longings*, 171.

<sup>343</sup> Ibid., *Prophecy and Mysticism*, 74.

sacredness of all things. This includes a renewed understanding of sacrifice, not just as “self-giving” (which has led to interpretations that condone unjust suffering) but also as “making sacred”. Furthermore, this praxis of sacrifice needs to extend beyond our usual boundaries and limitations. It means solidarity and action beyond the usual limits, the willingness to move “out of safety, familiar attachments and convictions to come on board ... a global movement embodying an ethic which is life-giving in the widest sense.”<sup>344</sup> Through such rituals then, the memory of the vulnerable God may be remembered, and such communities can bring us life again, and help us to recover our own hearts.

In the end,

The kenotic presence of God is understood not simply negatively, as the refusal of God to be merely a commodity within the system of global capitalism, but as an invitation to a process of self-emptying as a challenge to the way that this economic system has tried to occupy all available space. This language of voluntary self-emptying leads to recognizing vulnerability, God’s vulnerability and compassionate suffering shared with numerous vulnerable communities around the world. It is this divine generosity and self-effacing kenosis that was the very possibility of the incarnation of Jesus. But through the Holy Spirit of Christ, born of the kenosis of God and the self-giving of Jesus, a new vital force of divine presence has been enabled... We long for a dynamic presence of the sacred in our midst. Specifically, it is in communities activated by the renewing Spirit that we find strengths to counter dehumanizing economic forces.<sup>345</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Mary Grey states that, “Trinitarian love is kenotic in the Godhead’s generous self-emptying of omnipotence and glory. This blazes a trail for the Churches in the face of globalization: how can we actually live and embody the kenotic way in both public space and interior life?”<sup>346</sup> Here, we find Grey’s two-pronged concern – of one’s personal,

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<sup>344</sup> Grey, *Prophecy and Mysticism*, 75-7. For a list of the seven steps, see pages 74-76.

<sup>345</sup> Grey, *Sacred Longings*, 201-2.

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

interior life and one's life within society, emphasizing that these two are not separate, independent spheres but interdependent spheres that affect both the individual as well as the community. It is in her conviction of such a relationship that she seeks to develop a kenotic spirituality that speaks to both these spaces, finding a way to integrate the two spaces again where one's interior life empowers one's action in society, and where one's community and what happens in society are brought into one's personal and interior life. This is one way to begin to gather the fragments of one's self, by finding wholeness through integrating such personal and public spheres. This is why, for Grey, the example of Etty Hillesum, as one whose soulscape brought both spheres together in a way that empowered her own struggle in the life of the camps, is an important model of such integration, and why contemplation and the path of *kenosis* is crucial in order to achieve this.

On this path where we learn to "surrender" control and discover our "poverty" in our notions of self, other and God, we are met by the vulnerable God who shows us the way of right relations, reminding us of the greater reality that we are embedded in, a reality that we are also responsible for and accountable to. Furthermore, such an encounter with God reminds us of the sacredness of all things. Such a vision move us to fight against those that continue to demean and devalue all that is "sacred" by turning them into mere objects or possessions in a consumerist society. For women, this includes recognizing the ways that we have been seen and treated as possessions, and moving out of such harmful and abusive relationships.

Moreover, such kenotic spirituality must open us in a way that goes beyond the limitations of our own religious communities and must spill over to the recognition of the dignity and wisdom of other religious traditions and communities. This, she says, is a particular challenge for the Church. As mentioned above, part of the kenotic process for the Church is to begin to relinquish the idea of being in control of God's Spirit or even knowing where that Spirit is to be found. Furthermore, she states that "Christian revelation is called to respond in humility to the changed inter-faith scene....Christianity is called to a vast movement of *metanoia*, or repentance, for its failure to recognize and listen to the revealed word of other faiths and to listen with humility to other wisdoms."<sup>347</sup> In the end, she writes,

I dare to hope that even if the Dark Night is where we are, even if fragmentation is what we experience, yet like the phoenix rising from the ashes, our communities, both prophetic and mystical in their counter-cultural response, are already fashioning a new integrity for contemporary society.<sup>348</sup>

#### IV. Conclusion

Joy McDougall writes that feminist theologians such as Sarah Coakley and Mary Grey are those whose ultimate aim is not to deconstruct the Christian faith, but to strengthen its foundations and witness.<sup>349</sup> In this case, we see both of them taking up the prickly topic of *kenosis*, understanding the dangers of connotations of dependence, sacrifice and loss of self that have led to the subordination and suffering of women, yet arguing that we cannot just let go of this language of *kenosis* but must rather reinterpret

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<sup>347</sup> Grey, *The Wisdom of Fools*, 13. Part of her own response to this challenge has been to consider Buddhist feminist discussions regarding self and their view of the interdependence of all things. Such considerations will be discussed in Chapter Four where the comparison between these Christian feminist theologians and Buddhist feminist theologians will be made.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid., *Prophecy and Mysticism*, 80.

<sup>349</sup> McDougall, 20.

it, in light of the feminist critique. In doing so, we may find that the right understanding of kenosis could actually be helpful in women's search for self as well as the fight against the suffering in the world today.

Both of them insist on retaining the language of *kenosis* as "vulnerability" or "dependence" but only by turning the ordinary understanding of "power" on its head. Instead of continuing the propagation of the understanding of power as domination or control, they re-interpret power instead in *kenosis*; that is, that *willed* vulnerability, a *willed* surrender or letting go, particularly as *dependence* on God. It is with such a posture of "dependence" that one is empowered by God. Notice how both are careful to clarify that this kind of "vulnerability" is voluntary, a continued practice, and not something imposed upon by others. Moreover, the notion of divine *kenosis* is also based upon the premise above. Coakley writes about a gentle God, and divine *kenosis* as "choosing never to have certain forms of power". In other words, giving up certain kinds of "power" is seen as a kind of "power" in itself. Mary Grey on the other hand, writes of divine *kenosis* as God's "power" being made manifest in choosing to be "vulnerable" to our suffering and to our response. In both cases, we find the correlation between the notion of "power" and the language of "vulnerability" and dependence. For this reason, Sarah Coakley writes of *kenosis* as "power-in-vulnerability" and why Grey insists that relational power is vulnerable. Furthermore, both argue that it is only with such a posture that a transformation of our disordered desires, a recovery of heart and of right relations, can truly happen.

This kind of right *kenosis* can be found in the practice of prayer or contemplation. It is in this space that we can experience a kind of “dependence” that can be empowering, and discover ways of relating with ourselves and others that can begin to solve some of the issues regarding autonomy and relationality. Though Coakley and Grey have different approaches to the discussion of contemplation (Coakley grounds it more on the Church Fathers, the Carmelites and other medieval mystics while Grey ties mystical theology with more contemporary (mostly) feminist writers), they are in agreement that contemplation is no elitist thing but a possibility (in some ways given the current situation in the world), even a necessity today. Furthermore, what is cultivated is the practice of the “spirituality of attention” and “waiting” - a posture that begins to develop a way of “unknowing” or “unmastery” that then opens us up to truly listen, see and discover the self, God and others in ways that break the limitations of our previous knowledge. It is in such a space of deeper knowing that we encounter the gentle, vulnerable God who knows us better than we know ourselves, and throws out all the old “distorted” illusions of our thoughts of self and other. Furthermore, it is God who “yearns” for our wholeness and for relation. It is an experience of “being seen” with the loving (and not possessive eyes) of God through which we realize our worth, our dignity, and a deeper sense of self previously unknown to us.

Both writers contend (as do most other spiritual writers) that this process of prayer is slow and painful, requiring a lifetime of commitment and risk. This process of coming to know our true selves begins with the “giving of oneself” to God, the “willed passivity” and “absolute dependence” only on God. This process allows us to re-member



ourselves, to piece back together our disparate selves, replacing old and broken images and relationships and finding new, liberating images.

Furthermore, this encounter with God in the deepest core of our being, also throws us into a wider, broader reality than we once thought. It breaks open our limitations of self and brings about the experience of crossing over the boundaries of self into relationship with others, without the annihilation of self. This is part of our discovery: that we are not just “autonomous” selves but we are also “connected selves” as Grey says. And in the same way that the spirituality of attention allowed us to listen and hear our own voices, it is the same practice that can allow the space for us to truly listen, hear and respect the voices of the other, to begin to see them, not with the “arrogant” eye but with loving eyes that respect their differences and also see their vulnerability. Such loving eyes remind us of the “glory” and the “sacredness” of all things. Such perception makes us truly grasp the realities of the world (seeing it in all its “glory” but also in its suffering and bondage), and far from escaping from it, asks us to respond and spurs us into action in the world.

Grey’s insistence of the integration of “public space” and our interior landscape also ensures that our own spiritual journey never becomes just an “escape from the world” but becomes a deeper engagement with the world. With the example of Hillesum, Grey offers a way of being able to take in the vulnerability and suffering of the world into one’s practice, maybe even being the impetus for such practice while at the same time not letting go of their own journey of self-realization and discovery. Rather the two can go hand and hand which again emphasizes the point of the fluidity of self-

other, of private and public spaces and the interdependence of the two. As we learn to protect the vulnerability of others, we also learn to protect our own vulnerability, and vice-versa. The practice of contemplation, though opening us to our vulnerability and the vulnerability of the other, paradoxically also offers the space to empower us and gives us a stronger sense of self, and a stronger prophetic voice in order to act in society. This reminder might serve to help counter the objections to Sarah Coakley's discussions of kenosis and the question of whether the turn to contemplation truly helps to prevent or fight against abuse.<sup>350</sup>

Moreover, this interdependence of self-other can also be seen in Grey's insistence on the renewal not just of individuals, but primarily of the community, especially the Church. It is a recognition that individuals are also formed by communities and by society. In the same way that the fragmentation of self came out of a consumeristic society, so too can alternative models of community serve as a resource for individuals to recover their own true desires, their own true self, and can serve as a reminder of the call towards right relation and right perception through their rituals and practices. This insistence of the renewal of the community reminds us that our discovery and formation of our selves can never be formed in a vacuum, but already happens within a matrix of relationships. Hence, in order for true change to happen, it has to happen on both the individual and the institutional/societal levels.

A particular challenge for the Church, according to Grey, is in her recognition of and respect for the difference of the religious other, a boundary that contributes to the

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<sup>350</sup> For this objection, see Papanikolaou.

fragmentation of society. However, in the space of contemplation, where we truly begin to pay attention and listen to the other in their particularity, we begin to develop the sense of “unknowing” and humility that can lead us to greater openness to other religious traditions, and the wisdom that they offer. This is something that both Coakley and Grey argue from their experience of contemplation. Interestingly, the specificity of the Christian path of contemplation leads not to separation but rather to the appreciation of and openness to such analogous experiences in other traditions which may continue to offer a path towards better inter-faith encounters. This point will be further explored in the conclusion.

In the end, Coakley states that “the final and safe test of contemplation can only be known by its fruits – and the fruits that feminist spirituality seeks apart from love, joy, peace – are personal empowerment, prophetic resistance, courage in the face of oppression, and the destruction of false idolatry.”<sup>351</sup> However, such fruits begin in prayer, in making a space for God who then creates for us a safe and gentle space to explore our brokenness and begin the process towards healing and wholeness for ourselves and others.

But such a process takes time. Coming to know God and ourselves while allowing for our transformation and seeing our connections is a lifelong journey. Yet, over a “lifetime of faithful observation of both public acts of worship and charity on the one hand, and private devotions on the other, one might hope ultimately to come to

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<sup>351</sup> Coakley, “Kenosis and Subversion,” 110.

‘know’ God in God’s intimate life,” and truly know oneself and others through a sharing in the life of God.<sup>352</sup>

In the end, the Christian path that is fruitful for women is truly illumined by the kenotic path. It is in the “giving over of oneself” to God that we are truly transformed and empowered and we realize how we are intimately connected to all else as God’s creatures. Such empowerment, such “right” relationship with God, self and other, becomes the foundation of our struggle for peace and justice, the support for our struggle for social change. It is the vision and transformation that happens in prayer that grounds our work for change in the world.

These two theologians give us an example of lives given over to such a task. Both theologians who argue for the primacy of prayer/contemplation, and both are committed to the task of justice and social change. Through their lives, we see the coming together of the love of self, others and God, and of the commitment of their whole selves – head, heart and hands – to others and to God. Such lives remind us of the ground of social change, of a deep spiritual life so that the “well is never empty” and we are able to truly be there for ourselves and others, empowering our cry for justice in an unjust world, a cry for wholeness in this broken world, but also being able to rest in the arms of God and in the arms of others when our work and our cries do not seem to be enough.

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<sup>352</sup> Coakley, “Deepening Practices,” 92.

### **Chapter Three: Buddhist feminists on emptiness (*śūnyatā*): The example of Anne Klein and Rita Gross**

#### **I. Introduction**

Similar to the project of the Christian feminist writers in Chapter Two, there are also Western Buddhist feminists who are seeking to bring Buddhism and feminism into conversation with each other, allowing each to turn a critical eye on the other. Some apply the feminist critique onto Buddhism, showing the problems with the interpretations of their doctrines and practices that do not take women's experience into account. For example, Eva Neumaier-Dargyay looks at the Buddhist doctrines of compassion (*karuṇā*) and no-self (*anātman*) and, similar to feminists in the Christian tradition, ask whether such doctrines are helpful to women who already suffer a loss of self.<sup>353</sup> She also critiques the negative Buddhist images of woman as the locus of suffering and the womb as the place of filth as well as the positive images of the feminine, such as Tara, questioning whether such an image of what is culturally defined as "feminine" is placed on a pedestal for other women to emulate.<sup>354</sup>

Others draw attention to the dangers of certain interpretations of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), especially those that border on nihilism or relativism; that is, the notion that since everything is "empty," then either it means nothing or it can mean whatever we

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<sup>353</sup> According to Daniel Arnold, other feminists such as bell hooks have also critiqued "egolessness" saying that "you can't give up the ego and the self if you haven't established a sense of yourself as subject." Daniel Arnold, Mapping the Middle Way: Thoughts on a Buddhist Contribution to a Feminist Discussion" *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* Vol. 14/1 (2006): 66. In that article, he writes about the problem between modernist and postmodern feminist debates about "self" and "woman," a debate that, as we shall see later, Anne Klein tries to address through her work

<sup>354</sup> Eva Neumaier-Dargyay writes that "the Buddhist concept of No-self is more critical, if investigated from a feminist perspective, since the general experience of women is that they do not have a sense of self." See "Buddhist Thought from a Feminist Perspective" in *Gender, Genre, and Religion: Feminist Reflections*, eds. Morny Joy and Eva K. Neumaier-Dargyay (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1995) 167.

want it to, or that our actions have no ethical consequences and therefore nothing has to be changed. Anne Klein reminds us of Tsong-kha-pa's warning that "emptiness should not be taught to those who will construe it to mean that the self does not exist, or that one's actions and relationships do not matter because there is no karmic cause and effect, no ethical consequences."<sup>355</sup> Gross echoes such concerns in discussing the "poison of *śūnyatā*" and warns that though "things are not absolute but only relative does not make them irrelevant or non-existent." She argues that this kind of wrong understanding of *śūnyatā* has led to the continued gender inequality in Buddhist institutions. Though Buddhist women may be aware of sexism within Buddhist institutions, they choose not to deal with it or allow things to remain the same because they think that emptiness means that "injustice and inappropriate social institutions don't really exist" and therefore nothing needs to be changed or addressed.<sup>356</sup>

On the other hand, there are others who feel that Buddhism has much to offer to feminism. For example, Daniel Arnold writes that much of the literature in feminist theory "attempt[s] to develop new conceptions of subjectivity. Questions of feminist ethics turn on our conceptions of the *self*." He proposes that the middle way of Buddhism can offer an alternative that at once deconstructs and allows for subjectivity, providing an alternative that bridges essentialist and postmodern feminist discussions on the self.<sup>357</sup> Eva Neumaier-Dargay, though critical of some Buddhist doctrines, also argues that "[t]he core concept of Buddhist thought, i.e. that the nature of the cosmos can

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<sup>355</sup> Anne Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen: Buddhists, Feminists, and the Art of the Self* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995) 127.

<sup>356</sup> Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 179.

<sup>357</sup> Arnold, "Mapping the Middle Way," 64.

be described only as a vacuity, emptiness, and that it transcends the realm of language and conceptual thinking...harbours great potential for stimulating a feminist search for spirituality.”<sup>358</sup> The key doctrines of no-self and emptiness as well as meditation practices on these doctrines seem to take a central role in these discussions of the Buddhist contribution to feminist concerns.

Anne Klein and Rita Gross are two key figures that have focused their work on this intersection of Buddhism and feminism, both in doing a feminist “retrieval” of Buddhism as well as looking at what Buddhism can offer to current feminist discussions about the self. Kay Koppendrayar describes these two authors as Western feminist Buddhists who “address questions related to the nature of being woman. They ponder the implications of engendered being, as well as what place not just the embodied self but the *female* embodied self has in activity that is spiritually and socially transformative. Each author turns to the resources Buddhism offers to help push our understandings of gender, body, and being.”<sup>359</sup> From this description, one can discern that the project of these authors is not only the reinterpretation of doctrines but also the articulation of a way of being for women that is spiritually nourishing as well as empowering within society. These are the kinds of discussions that mirror the project of the Christian feminists studied in Chapter Two, a project that seeks to define the self, to “find” the *female* self through spiritual practices and connecting such practices to the transformation of one’s self as well as one’s action in the world.

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<sup>358</sup> Eva Neumaier-Dargyay, 167.

<sup>359</sup> Kay Koppedrayar, “Review Essay: Feminist Applications of Buddhist thought” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 23/1 (2007): 122. The other two authors that she reviews in her article are Judith Simmer-Brown and Winnie Tonn.

Gross and Klein turn the spotlight of gender analysis on Buddhist doctrines particularly on the nature of the self and interpret them in light of the experience of women. Reciprocally, they also use these Buddhist doctrines of no-self, emptiness, and Buddha nature to shed light upon the feminist issue on the self-other divide. This chapter then will focus on these two writers to see how their retrieval and use of emptiness can illumine the search for the elusive relational self, and how the realization of such is mediated through meditation practices.

## II. Anne Klein

### *Introduction*

Anne Klein is a Western Buddhist feminist whose knowledge of Buddhism comes not only from her “academic study but also her work with traditionally trained Tibetan Nyingmapa and Gelukpa Buddhists and from decades of practice.”<sup>360</sup> Her primary interest is on issues of selfhood, an issue which she believes is important to both feminism and Buddhism. She writes,

Selfhood is, in different ways, at the core of both Buddhist and feminist concerns. In Buddhism one’s mistaken sense of self is considered to be the root of all other problems. In North America, an important feminist concern is to forge a strong identity that does not gain power primarily from its ability to exclude people who don’t share that identity. An oppositional stance toward ‘the other’ is deeply associated with patriarchy....In this regard, I think the aspect of Buddhist philosophy which radically questions common assumptions regarding identity is very relevant to feminism. The Buddhist material offers a critique of hyperindividualism as well as a very positive view of interdependently understood identity.<sup>361</sup>

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<sup>360</sup> Kay Koppedraier, 130. In her footnote 37, she writes that “Klein completed her M.A. in the Buddhist Studies program founded by Richard Robinson (University of Wisconsin), her Ph.D. under Jeffrey Hopkins (University of Virginia), and ha studied and practiced with teachers of Geluk and Nyingma lineages in India, Nepal, and the United States.

<sup>361</sup> Anne Klein, “Roundtable Discussion: The Questions that won’t go away: A dialogue about women in Buddhism and Christianity” eds. Rita Nakashima Brock, Paula Cooley, and Anne Klein, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 6/2 (2004): 98. See also, Anne Klein, “Finding a Self: Buddhist and Feminist Perspectives” in *Shaping New Vision: Gender and Values in American Culture*, eds. Clarissa Atkinson, Constance Buchanan and Margaret Miles (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1987) 193.



Here, the intersection of Buddhist and feminist concerns regarding the self are made clear. In both cases, the problem lies with articulations of the self and identity which are too autonomous and individuated and results in dualism or opposition to the other. In Buddhism, the key delusion is the sense of a separate, independent, autonomous self. This is the mistaken sense of self mentioned above. Such individualism can be seen as a kind of dualism, of separating “self” and “other” which is a cause of suffering and which obscures our true nature. This is the Buddhist analysis of self contained in the doctrine of no-self and emptiness.

Feminists, such as Catherine Keller, as previously mentioned, find this independent, separative selfhood as problematic for women who see relationships and friendships as a key aspect in defining one’s self. They are looking to find a strong yet relational self. In these discussions, Klein seeks to contribute to two interrelated areas of debate. The first issue as mentioned above is about finding a strong identity that is not oppositional in nature. In other words, like other feminists, she is trying to find an alternative to masculine styles of selfhood that have led to the oppression of women. She writes, “[t]o gain a sense of self that is genuinely one’s own, and not a projection or product of patriarchy, is an important focus of concern for many women today.”<sup>362</sup> She echoes the concern of other feminists that were discussed in Chapter Two. These feminists have identified how women and women’s experiences are different from men. They are now looking to articulate a sense of self that is more congruent with their experience as women. First, there is a need to reject the images and roles of women that

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<sup>362</sup> Anne Klein, “Finding a Self,” 191.

have been projected upon them due to patriarchy. This has been very detrimental to women and has led to the loss of their voice in their own self-definition. Second, according to such feminists, male styles of selfhood focus on individualism and autonomy. Such styles have led to the “othering” of women which has resulted in their secondary role or status leading to their suffering. Furthermore, it is also not congruent with women’s experience who prize relationality in their sense of identity. However addressing the issue of women and “loss of self” or lack of self-esteem particularly in relationships, Klein is also searching for a theory of the self that would enable the conceptualization of a strong, centralized self which does not conceive itself as separate from other. Hence, for Klein, rejecting the “oppositionality that characterizes patriarchal styles of selfhood”<sup>363</sup>, women are seeking a “style of identity that is powerful, yet favors the relational over the individual.”<sup>364</sup> Her project is about articulating “another way of thinking of a strong self whose power does not depend on its ability to oppose, project or conceive itself as radically separate.”<sup>365</sup>

She also hopes to contribute to the divide between modern feminists and postmodern feminists and their descriptions of selfhood.<sup>366</sup> Modern feminists argue for a particular way of being woman, an “essence” of being a woman that all women share,

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<sup>363</sup> Klein, “Finding a Self,” 192.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid., 196. Aside from this article, she also writes about issues of dualism and finding a strong yet powerful self in “Nondualism and the Great Bliss Queen: A Study in Tibetan Buddhist Ontology and Symbolism” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 1/1 (Spring 1985): 73-98.

<sup>366</sup> She discusses these two positions in her book *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen* and the article “Presence with a Difference: Buddhists and Feminists on Subjectivity” *Hypatia* 9/4 (Fall 1994): 112-130. As mentioned above, Daniel Arnold also tackles this specific debate among feminists and suggests Buddhism as the solution. However, differentiating his work/approach from Klein’s, he writes, “Klein, then, is particularly concerned with the implications of the *practice* of Buddhism. Here [in his article], I have chosen to focus instead on the strictly philosophical and rhetorical contributions of Buddhism. I would like to think such an emphasis could complement Klein’s work.” Arnold, 70.

while postmodern feminists argue that the meaning of “woman” is something that is constantly in the process, something that she is constantly becoming or creating. Klein wants to offer another alternative to these two debates, to describe a self that is neither overly essentialized nor contingently constructed. In this way, she is hoping to forge a way between modern and postmodern feminists and the debates about the “essential” vs. the “contingently constructed” self. She believes that “issues of personal power, connection, independence, and relationship lie at the heart of the feminist essentialist-postmodern debate.”<sup>367</sup>

As mentioned in the first quote, she believes that Buddhism has a lot to offer to such debates. In particular, she sees the Buddhist analysis of self and the doctrines of no-self and emptiness as the main teachings from Buddhist philosophy that are most helpful in the feminist search for a relational self. She writes that “Buddhist analyses of self as active and empty offers one approach to the articulation of selfhood that addresses tension between social interrelatedness and psychological individuality.”<sup>368</sup> Furthermore, she argues that Buddhist meditation practice is the main way to experience and realize this relational self. It is through mindfulness practice, and the practices that cultivate both wisdom and compassion that one may experience this strong self who is properly related to others and does not lose herself in these relationships. She speaks of how mindfulness meditation can give a sense of groundedness and centering while seeing the constructedness and flux of self and identity. Furthermore, “mindfulness and

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<sup>367</sup> Klein, “Presence with a Difference,” 113.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid., “Finding a Self,” 213.

concentration are not merely sources of new ideas about the self, but comprise a new sensibility and subjectivity.”<sup>369</sup>

*The Doctrine of Emptiness and the search for a relational self*

Before applying Buddhist analysis and philosophy to the issue of strong yet relational self, Klein makes it clear that such analyses have never taken gender into account.<sup>370</sup> In fact, she writes of how Tibetan Buddhist women’s notion of “self” is very different from Western notions of self.<sup>371</sup> For example, she notes how the Western understanding of “self” has focused on the individual and finding what is unique about oneself so that one can differentiate oneself from others. Furthermore, the predominant image of such a self is the Enlightenment “man of reason.” The focus on individuation, autonomy and reason has been problematic for Western women who are seen as the opposite of this “man of reason” and therefore are delegated to secondary status. For example then, “[t]o the extent that Western culture suspiciously regards relationality as a threat to ‘genuine’ autonomy, birth, mothering, and nurturing are likely to be denigrated.”<sup>372</sup> On the other hand, the Tibetan sense of self and identity has a strong emphasis on the community and social connectedness. “No matter how isolated, even high in a solitary cave, one remains part of a community of values, and of people and spirits also.”<sup>373</sup> For Tibetan women and men, social cohesion was a given. The choice for Tibetan women was between marriage and entering the religious life. “There was no

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<sup>369</sup> Klein, “East, West, Women, and Self” in *Buddhist Women across Cultures: Realizations*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (New York: SUNY Press, 1999) 209.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid., “Finding a Self,” 195.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid., *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, 26-57.

<sup>372</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>373</sup> Ibid., 40.

‘public sphere’ to speak of that might tempt her away from home....”<sup>374</sup> All these serve as a caution before proceeding into how Buddhist analyses of self and the doctrine of no-self and emptiness can still be applied to and are relevant to the Western feminist search for a relational self. As Klein cautions, “[f]inding oneself” in the contemporary Western sense means identifying one’s unique talents, limitations, and place in the world so as to make choices consistent with this identity. Buddhist practices, by contrast, are celebrated for their ability to access universal faculties such as clarity, focus, or an experience of the unconditioned.”<sup>375</sup>

First, she distinguishes between the doctrine of no-self (or selflessness) and emptiness in Buddhism versus issues of “selflessness” in Western feminist discussions.<sup>376</sup> As previously mentioned, some feminists like Neumaier-Dargyay conflate the doctrine of “no-self” with issues of selflessness or loss of self or self-sacrifice that have been problematic for women. However, Klein clarifies that the doctrine of no-self is not to be equated with Western notions of “ego”, particularly the weak ego that is usually associated with women. Rather, the doctrine of “no-self” is not about loss of self or self-sacrifice, but rather is about an understanding of the existential status of persons, the illusion of permanency and solidity that obscures the clarity about our true nature.

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<sup>374</sup> Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, 56.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid.

<sup>376</sup> Anne Klein equates “selflessness” and “emptiness” in her discussions. For example, she writes that “[e]mptiness is synonymous here with selflessness” at least in terms of understanding that the notion of permanent, unchanging, self-sufficient self is an illusion. See “Nondualism and the Great Bliss Queen,” 83. She also says “Buddhists variously call emptiness or selflessness, meaning the absence of existing independent of causes and conditions. All persons and things are qualified by this unconditioned absence.” See “Presence with a Difference,” 122.

Selflessness in Buddhism is insight into the lack of an inherently existing, autonomous self. As Klein writes,

The self observed by ordinary awareness and then denied in theories of selflessness is not a psychological self characterized by certain personality traits, dominant emotions and so forth. It refers rather to a *style* of selfhood, to the ontological or existential status of such a self. Specifically, it refers to the assumption of a greatly exaggerated existential status. In the language of Buddhist philosophy, this reified sense of self is known as true or inherent existence....[t]his concept of 'true existence' easily becomes the basis for an overbearing sense of hierarchy and thus provides fuel for oppression.<sup>377</sup>

From this definition, it is clear that the doctrine of “no-self” cannot simply be equated with Western discussions about ego or persons. Furthermore, Klein says, “[i]t is very important not to confuse this meaning of “self” with the integrated sense of self-worth that neither modern psychoanalysis nor Buddhist traditions would urge one to discard.”<sup>378</sup> The kind of “selflessness” that Neumaier-Dargyay and other feminists worry about would actually be considered another form of clinging, another kind of the “greatly exaggerated existential status” or a “reified sense of self” that leads to suffering. As Klein argues, “[i]n the Buddhist view, it is not only the powerful, confident person who has an ontologically overwrought sense of self. A person with a fragile, psychological self or low self-esteem is just as likely to have this, although the ontology of that self may be less accessible to awareness.”<sup>379</sup> This is so because in both cases, a person is clinging onto a particular identity, an identity that they experience as solid, permanent, unchanging – regardless of whether it is a “strong” or “weak” identity. Such clinging and such illusion about the self leads to suffering. Hence, a “powerful ego” as well as a

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<sup>377</sup> Klein, “Finding a Self,” 200-1.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid., “Nondualism and the Great Bliss Queen,” 83. In her footnote 17, she writes that “much work needs to be done by those trained in psychology and Buddhist techniques of transformation/Buddhist philosophy to clarify the subtle distinctions here. ‘Selflessness’ in the Buddhist sense is not a call for unhealthy pseudo-altruism, nor a devaluation of personal ‘psychological’ strength.”

<sup>379</sup> Ibid., “Finding a Self,” 206.

dependent personality or “weak ego” are considered illusions of self that lead to suffering.

Applying such analysis of self, women can begin to ask themselves about their “reified sense of self”? What have been their definitions and experiences of selfhood? To what degree have these been reified, or greatly exaggerated? Here, women can begin to question how the projection of others, social constructions, roles they have been given are just another form of such ‘reified forms of self’ projected onto them. How has such a reified and exaggerated sense of self led to their suffering or led to the suffering of others? This reminder of a “reified and exaggerated sense of self” as “no-self” – can lead to introspection, to a closer investigation into the true nature of self. And if both a “powerful” and “weak” sense of self or ego are not the true self, then what is the true self that Buddhist philosophy speaks of?

According to Klein,

The conclusion that the self does not exist at all is not drawn but rather that the self is utterly unreifiable, non-inherently existent. Understanding this emphasizes the contingent, dependent, interconnected, and non-autonomous nature of the self’s existence. An active, effective self exists but not in any sense independently....the self affirmed in Buddhism is dependently constituted. It is created through association, rather than separation, and in relation, rather than from nothing.<sup>380</sup>

In this quote, notions of selfhood that are tied to independence and permanence are rejected. This is the view of self that is an illusion and leads to suffering. Instead, as Klein says, the “true self” is an “active, effective self” but it is one that does not exist independently of others. It is in this Buddhist analysis of self as contingent and non-autonomous and the implications of emptiness and dependent arising, that one can see

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<sup>380</sup> Klein, “Finding a Self,” 204-5.

why Klein finds such Buddhist doctrines helpful for feminists. In this analysis, we are given a new description of selfhood that focuses on relationship without undermining a “sense of self.” It is a description that precisely challenges the patriarchal descriptions of selfhood that focus on independence and autonomy. In this Buddhist description, independence and autonomy are illusions that lead to suffering. Instead, the “true self” is “contingent, dependent, interconnected, and non-autonomous.” It comes into being “through relationships” and not through separation.” Yet, this self is “active and effective” and not merely passive. Hence, one cannot be anything but a self-in-relation though one can never lose either side of this tension. Proper relationality can only be realized through a vigorous introspection, an analysis of self that leads to the proper understanding of self and other. This happens in meditation, and will be discussed in the next section.

Understanding the empty nature of reality, the lack of inherent existence (emptiness) and one’s dependent and contingent existence (dependent arising) emphasizes how the very nature of persons is interdependence. Since all is empty, everything depends on everything else for its existence. The true self is an interdependent and relational self. If this is so, then fundamentally everything is interconnected and one realizes that there is no duality between self and other. Rather, there is recognition of the other as oneself, as sharing this fundamental “empty nature”. Furthermore, there is also the recognition of the other as constitutive of oneself since everyone is mutually interdependent. One of the expressions of this, as previously mentioned, is the vision of Indra’s net and how each jewel reflected all the other jewels



that make up the net. Each jewel is then constituted by all the other jewels – an image of emptiness (lack of inherent existence) and dependent origination. This is one vision that expresses the understanding of emptiness as dependent origination. Emptiness is not nothingness but the dependent arising of all things, each constituted by the other. Emptiness then is what helps one realize that others are just like one's own self and that everyone is dependent and related to others, without losing one's "self". In understanding selflessness and emptiness, one's eyes are opened to the interconnection and interdependence of all things.

It is from the realization of emptiness that compassion for others develops. As Klein argues, "[t] experience of emptiness ... is associated with the development of a compassionate sense of relatedness in which self and other are seen not as oppositional but as relative designations, like the far and near banks of a river. The identity of each is utterly contingent on the other....Emptiness theory therefore is crucial to the full development of relational understanding and compassionate involvement"<sup>381</sup> Furthermore, it "undermine[s] psychological or ontological self-sufficiency and confirm[s] the existence of a self that is ontologically relational and whose primary emotional characteristic is compassion for others."<sup>382</sup>

Furthermore, wisdom and compassion, expressed metaphorically as two wings of a bird, are the path of the bodhisattva, as discussed in Chapter 2. In the cultivation of wisdom, one encounters a self that is "dependent, contingent" and yet the discovery and cultivation of such also leads to an experience of a self that is strong, powerful and

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<sup>381</sup> Klein, "Finding a Self," 205.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid., 209.

grounded. Fully realizing the implications of the wisdom of emptiness, one sees others as just as “empty”, “dependent and contingent” like oneself. Compassion arises as one recognizes the other as oneself. It is in such a realization of wisdom and compassion, a vision of the “empty yet dependent” nature of all reality that women can glimpse a view of relationality that balances self and other. In realizing emptiness and compassion, one sees the other as oneself, but one only discovers the other by discovering oneself first. In the end, Klein writes, “[e]mptiness is an awareness one continually cultivates so as to integrate it into more and more aspects of one’s life, including one’s relationship to others.”<sup>383</sup>

*The Doctrine of Emptiness and meditation practice*

According to Anne Klein, meditative rituals particularly Tibetan ones, often “explore the way things *are*...and the way they ought to be *understood*....They are best understood emically as practices that transform subjectivity and understandings of self in a palpable way that can be maintained outside the ritual circle.”<sup>384</sup> In Buddhist philosophy, the description of the way things are and the way they ought to be understood is explained through the key doctrines that have been discussed, the doctrine of “no-self” (the way the self is usually experienced) and the doctrine of emptiness/dependent co-arising (the way it ought to be understood). It is precisely through meditation practices that one is led to the realization of emptiness that leads to a new understanding and experience of self, to the strong, powerful yet relational self that women seek. In the end, the realization of emptiness does not revolve around thinking or talking about what it is.

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<sup>383</sup> Klein, “Finding a Self,” 208.

<sup>384</sup> Ibid., “East, West, Women, and Self,” 212.

Instead, “[d]eveloping an experience does not involve further knowledge ‘about’ it but rather increased concentration and focus on it.”<sup>385</sup>

To understand emptiness, one must begin with an observation of the ordinary experience of self.<sup>386</sup> In the development of a steady observation of self, one can begin to develop the qualities necessary for a “strong self,” qualities such as focused attention, stability, and calm. At the same time, it equips the practitioner with the skills needed to analyze and question wrong notions of self, particularly the independent autonomous self. This opens one to the possibility of seeing the self as dependent and relational. This practice begins with cultivating the skills of mindfulness and concentration, necessary for a steady observation of the self, and for experiencing emptiness. As Klein writes, “...certain ontological truths are available only to particular subjective states. For example, direct insight of what Buddhism calls the empty nature of the self – a special quality of oneself – is only experienced by a mind conjoined with specifically defined styles of stability, clarity, intensity, and ultimately insight.”<sup>387</sup>

In her book, *The Great Bliss Queen*, Klein describes the practice of mindfulness as a way to “develop new subjective states and discover unnoticed aspects of oneself.”<sup>388</sup>

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<sup>385</sup> Klein, “Presence with a Difference,” 122. In fact, thought can lead to intellectual obscurations that can block progress rather than support it.

<sup>386</sup> Ibid., *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, 124.

<sup>387</sup> Ibid., “Finding a Self,” 195. Klein writes that “[k]nowing emptiness requires a considerable measure of clarity, stability and intensity.” Klein, “Presence with a difference,” 122. In Buddhist meditation practices, insight (*vipāśyanā*) is always facilitated and grounded upon the ability for calm abiding (*śamathā*). As Klein writes in her footnote 14, clarity, stability and intensity are “characteristics classically associated with calm abiding, the minimal level of concentration required for actual insight into the unconditioned emptiness. Klein, “Presence with a Difference,” 128.

<sup>388</sup> Ibid., *Meeting The Great Bliss Queen*, 62. When she speaks about mindfulness, she defines it as “a continued focus on what is now present before one’s mental or physical senses.” Klein, *Meeting the great Bliss Queen*, 62. Furthermore, she does differentiate between Theravada’s “effortful mindfulness” versus the Mahāyāna Great Completeness Tradition’s “effortless/relaxation based on innate awareness. Despite

Furthermore, she writes that “the most salient characteristic of such mindfulness is its capacity to maintain clear and stable observation of a chosen object, whether a visualized image or some aspect of one’s body or mind.”<sup>389</sup> This kind of clear and stable observation is important in women’s search for a strong self. Such observation entails a kind of “nonjudgmental awareness”, focusing on the present, focusing on her thoughts without any judgment, just being fully present in the moment. As she says, “[m]erely a gentle observer, mindfulness is a way of being there. It does so by fostering a capacity to relate to oneself without trying to oppose, judge, or change what is observed.”<sup>390</sup> Hence, this kind of “nonjudgmental awareness” of being a “gentle observer” allows her to begin to accept herself just as she is, to create a safe space for her to face herself and to accept all of herself, without judgment and condemnation. This, according to Klein, is important especially in a “culture where self-hatred is an issue.”<sup>391</sup>

Furthermore, mindfulness also allows her to begin to discover herself in ways that are not defined by others. She is able to discern her true self from an externally imposed patriarchal self that is based on internalized gendered roles and expectations. This is so, because the same “nonjudgmental awareness” that allows her to accept herself as she is, also does not impose any kind of ideal on her. Klein says, “It permits self-knowledge without the crippling weight of an ideal against which she inevitably falls short.”<sup>392</sup> Hence, mindfulness practice can teach her a way of seeing herself in a healing way,

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their differences, she says that “all the mindfulness practices [...] are similar, however, in their ability to combine an experience of centering with a keen awareness of change.” Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, 75. For her full treatment of both kinds of mindfulness, see pp.63-76.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid., *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, 62-63.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid., “Presence with a Difference,” 121.

<sup>391</sup> Ibid., *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, 80.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid., 197.

accepting who she already is while also giving her the clarity to begin to define who she wants to be, for herself. As Klein says, “a person who is mindful is present, accepting, focused and clear. This is a state in which all the self’s various voices can be heard.”<sup>393</sup> As she learns to be present to herself, without judgment, without the oppressive presence of ideals, she can begin to hear her own voices, and begin to find her own self. This can be the beginning of constructive personal power.

Mindfulness practice also brings about the experience of being “stable yet changing” while at the same time, getting a glimpse of how things really are and developing a way of questioning the constructedness of reality, including gender roles/identities. Klein writes,

...mindfulness is physically centering, it provides a visceral sense of personal continuity in the midst of clearly observed flux....The experience of mind and body as only a seething flow of sensations is a dismembering of the self. But there is also a remembering, a bringing together, in a sense that mind and self are reconstituted for one’s experience. Re-membering steadies and integrates. Paradoxically, the more one’s mindful concentration develops, and the more grounded one is in present experience and in the steadfast flow of consciousness itself, the clearer one is about the fragile and constructed nature of mind and body.<sup>394</sup>

This experience of being “stable yet changing” of being “dismembered and remembered” are important processes in women’s search for a relational self. It is also crucial in the modern-postmodern debates. First, this experience of seeing herself as constantly changing, of being in flux, of being dismembered is important because it allows her to see the possibility of change, of not being stuck in a certain identity or in certain roles that may have been imposed on her by herself or others. It helps her to

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<sup>393</sup> Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, 81.

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-67.

question the usually unquestioned categories about herself and her identity, and helps reveal the constructedness of gender and identity.

At the same time, she is also centered, able to re-member and reintegrate herself, define who she is for herself, in a way that is neither oppositional nor based on societal impositions. Having such centeredness and stability are important because as Valerie Saiving once argued, “distractibility and diffuseness, the lack of an organizing center or focus, are among the chief female ‘sins’”.<sup>395</sup> Hence, with mindfulness practice, women are able to find a steady ground, to have a stronger sense of “self” that sees “the fragile and constructed nature of mind and body.” Even as she is able to center herself, she is also able to “de-center” and de-stabilize all constructs of self and other – seeing how everything is in flux and how reified perceptions of “self” and “other” are. Hence, mindfulness meditation reduces dependence on others’ attention as she learns to pay attention to herself.<sup>396</sup> It also “demonstrates the self’s constructedness and identity”<sup>397</sup> – which can help to break reified notions of self and other that she holds or that others impose on her.

Furthermore, this experience in meditation of being centered, of having stability and observing flux, is the kind of experience that can bridge the essentialist and postmodern discussions regarding the self. This experience is an articulation that holds both a sense of “essentialism” in the experience of being grounded, of having a sense of personal continuity and a reintegration of mind and body. It is not “essentialist” in the

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<sup>395</sup> Valerie Saiving in *Womanspirit Rising*, eds. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (New York: Harper & Row, 1979) 37, quoted in Klein, “Finding a Self,” 199.

<sup>396</sup> Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, 81.

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

sense of having definite, immutable definitions of being “female” or “male” but it does hold to some kind of core and continuity in the person while at the same time observing and realizing the possibility of change, of “dismemberment” which is closer to postmodern sensibilities. It is then in the practice of meditation, that this sense of a dismembered yet remembered self, of an experience of personal continuity in the midst of observed flux, that a new experience, a new articulation of self and subjectivity is made possible that brings both essentialist and postmodern experience of self into a kind of coherent experience.

One dimension of mindfulness that Klein points to is silence. This may be controversial for some feminists as Sarah Coakley has pointed out in the previous chapter. However, Klein argues that mindfulness practice and nonjudgmental observation are only possible within silence, for “mindfulness is a silent observer of voices, saying nothing, but potent and effective in other ways....The silence of mindfulness comes from a capacity of mind, not a failure of speech. This capacity, moreover, can be intentionally, deliberately, cultivated. The point is not that the mindful subject *is* silent – incapable of expressing herself – but that she deliberately *has* silence as a possibility.”<sup>398</sup> Through this description, Klein tries to clarify the kind of powerful silence that women can deliberately choose to cultivate against the silencing of the voices of women or the kind of Orientalist view of the hushed voices of Asian women. This silence, the “observer of voices”, is precisely what is necessary in order to begin to hear and honor one’s own voices as well as that of others. In other words, it is what allows for

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<sup>398</sup> Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, 82-3.

“deep listening” which is necessary if one is to truly be able to know oneself and others and respond accordingly. Silence offers that space where one can hold those voices, without judgment or condemnation, “an observer of voices”. Only from such a space can effective knowledge and response be given, free of the usual attachments and emotions that such voices are associated with. This is why Klein says that such silence is the “background of all speech” which offers a “space for the subject apart from its dominating knowledge....”<sup>399</sup> Furthermore, she writes “[f]or Buddhists, silence and the categories of mind most closely associated with it – mindfulness, calm, and concentration – allow the subject a sense of proceeding beyond the play of voices (without necessarily hushing them) into a different dimension of subjectivity.”<sup>400</sup>

In the end, silence and mindfulness meditation are the foundation for the development of the wisdom of emptiness that cuts through delusion about one’s self and other, cutting through dualistic tendencies that are the basis of patriarchy and the suffering of women. First, as one maintains a continued observation, one begins to realize one’s “selflessness.” As she says, “[m]indful observation ... reveals that we usually assume the existence of an “I” that is either wholly independent of its parts or inalienably fused with them. Either of those positions is a misconception of the actual status of the self. It is a misconception that makes the self seem more reified and less open to new possibilities than it actually is.”<sup>401</sup> This as discussed is what is meant by the

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<sup>399</sup> Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, 144-5.

<sup>400</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid., 126. One example she gives of how this comes about through mindfulness meditation is how with practice, one’s arm which usually feels solid and constant (mistaken sense of self) is instead felt like an “ongoing flux of mini sensations with no overarching ‘arm’ except as a name given to these myriad sensations.” She says that this same observation can be made with the mind as well. Therefore, “[m]ind



doctrine of “no-self”, seeing the lack of an inherent, independent, unchanging self, experiencing the sensations and thoughts changing from moment and moment. However, selflessness does not mean a negation of self, as if the self did not exist at all. Rather, it is a negation of the way one previously thought or assumed that self to be, that the self does not exist in the way it is ordinarily experienced. As Klein says, “the absence of the self one has been trying to find, and not absence in general, is called emptiness or selflessness.”<sup>402</sup> In terms of women’s search for a powerful/strong self, this experience of a mistaken sense of self can teach women to question identities that they have constructed or that society has imposed on them. It shows her the limitations of such a reified sense of self and the possibilities beyond such a self, also giving her the tools to explore these possibilities. In particular, Klein gives the example of feelings and how mindfulness practice can help one to acknowledge one’s feelings without identifying with them and clinging to them as one’s identity. Through mindfulness practice, one gets to experience and explore one’s mind better, recognizing one aspect of its “emptiness” as its spaciousness; that is much more open and infinite than one previously thought. Given this then, “no single quality or emotion, nor any combination of these, can completely fill or occupy it. None can own or define it completely. Thus, intense feeling can be present without consuming one’s identity.”<sup>403</sup> To discover a dimension of oneself that can never be filled and therefore can never be limited or identified with just that one thought or emotion may be important to women who have suffered abuse or a lot of pain in life that

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and body are revealed as nothing but a great disappearing act. The more one’s mindful concentration develops, the clearer one is about one’s fragile and constructed nature.” Klein, “Presence with a Difference,” 117.

<sup>402</sup> Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, 127.

<sup>403</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

it is now consuming them; this has become their identity. Klein gives her own example of feeling grief and how chanting “ah” together with others allowed her relationship with grief to be transformed. She was able to find a way to “hold the grief as well as a connection with a part of my self not colored by it.”<sup>404</sup> Through this example, she shows how mindfulness, together with silence, calm and concentration, allows us to experience emptiness as a kind of spaciousness so that we can honor our thoughts or feelings without locking us into those thoughts or feelings, hardening one’s identity based on them. Rather, realizing emptiness, and the various illusory selves one has held on to that have limited her, such practices teach her to discover a new sense of self and learn to love and accept herself for who she is. As Klein says, “For me, and I think for many women, one of the important aspects of mindfulness is self-acceptance. This means that you are willing to see yourself and be with yourself as you are. Settling the mind is physically grounding as well as mentally stabilizing. It can be a real source of strength and personal ease.”<sup>405</sup> Practices of mindfulness lead to self-acceptance and strength that in turn become the foundation for the acceptance of others, and compassionate action on their behalf.

Having realized that the ordinary experience of self as permanent, autonomous, reified or solid are mistaken assumptions about the self, the self that is discovered through such mindful observation is the dependently arisen self, one constituted by other causes and conditions. This discovery about the nature of one’s self leads to the

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<sup>404</sup> Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, 201.

<sup>405</sup> Klein, “Meeting the Great Bliss Queen: an interview with Anne Klein” *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* (Spring 1995): 84.

realization that everyone else shares in this same “empty”, dependently arising nature. This insight leads to the development of compassion. She discovers that this self is not an isolated self. Rather the sense of separation is seen as the key delusion that has led to her suffering. The true self is an interconnected and interdependent self. As Alice Keefe explains “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.”<sup>406</sup> It is such a realization, the development of wisdom that sees the interdependent self, which leads to the development of compassion, the wish to free all beings from suffering. Klein says, “...the mind which understands or experiences emptiness ...is inclined to be ethical, active, and compassionate.”<sup>407</sup>

First, one who is mindful is less “prone to harming” others. “To control one’s mind is much emphasized ...not only for the benefits it brings to oneself, but also for the way it protects others from being harmed by one’s own carelessness or worse.”<sup>408</sup> Furthermore, one who has cultivated mindfulness is able to be more respectful of others, to listen and hear others in the same way that she has learned to listen and hear her own self, and “when all the voices of self are fully owned, they are less likely to be projected onto others. In this way self-acceptance translates into acceptance of the other.”<sup>409</sup> Just as through mindfulness practice a woman can break free from the “idolatry of ideals”, she can then also learn not to subject others to such kind of idolatry, to be mindful of the labels and identity that she imposes upon others just as she has become mindful of how

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<sup>406</sup> Alice Keefe, “Visions of Interconnectedness in Engaged Buddhism and Feminist Theology” in *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 17 (1997): 63.

<sup>407</sup> Klein, “Finding a Self,” 211.

<sup>408</sup> Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, 64.

<sup>409</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

these were imposed upon her. This allows her to break many of the oppositional tendencies she may have that are harmful to her and the other, to label self and other as “abuser” vs. “abused”, for example, labels that lead to separation and in Buddhism, lack of compassion and equanimity that can cloud the development of wisdom.

Apart from mindfulness practice, there are other practices that can lead to a greater sense of connection to others and practices that cultivate compassion and holding self-other in equal concern. For example, there are many meditation practices that begin with a visualization that focus on bringing to mind various connections to people, past and present, imagining oneself surrounded by family, loved ones, teachers, or spiritual friends (*kalyanamitra*). So from the beginning, “one practices as a self embodied and assisted by others. Buddhist traditions thus generally see no dichotomy between a sense of relatedness on the one hand and a sense of personal effectiveness on the other.”<sup>410</sup> These visualizations foster a great sense of connection to others while focusing on oneself at the same time. Combined with other practices, it becomes one of the methods that help develop wisdom and compassion.

In a meditation example that Klein gives in Chapter 4 of *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, the development of equanimity is the preparation/foundation for developing compassion. Equanimity, Tsong-kha pa says, is the “separation from desire and hatred and an equal-mindedness toward living beings.”<sup>411</sup> In these meditations, she realizes how similar she is to others – both in their suffering and their wish to be free of suffering. Hence, as she learns to develop love and compassion for herself, she begins to develop a

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<sup>410</sup> Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, 108.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid., 93.

love and compassion for the other, who is now seen as herself. As Lati Rinboche says, “We are dear to ourselves because we want happiness and don’t want suffering, and this is the same for others.”<sup>412</sup> This becomes the foundation for universal compassion. Hence, the importance of developing equanimity, of seeing “self” and “other” as not different, seeing “friends”, “strangers” and “enemies” as all deserving of love and compassion.

Notice how the cultivation of equanimity contributes to the realization of wisdom and compassion. By meditating upon “friends”, “strangers” and “enemies”, we begin to break the boundaries of our usual perception of others, to separate such perception from “desire and hatred” as Tsong Kha pa said. The disappearance of such division contributes to realizing the empty nature of all persons, that the identity of “friend”, “stranger” and “enemy” are all labels that have been placed on them in order to protect our own mistaken sense of self. To destroy the barrier of self and other, of labels, is the beginning of the development of wisdom. It is such wisdom that leads to universal compassion. Only by recognizing one’s empty nature, and thereby realizing the empty nature of all others, and seeing their interdependence upon each other can one see how self and other are equally deserving of compassion, and how one’s own happiness is interconnected with the happiness of everyone else. Once she truly and powerfully realizes the wisdom of our interconnection, then compassion can flow through. It is also from such wisdom of emptiness, seeing everyone as sharing in the same “empty” nature, that one ensures that compassion is universal, everyone deserving of that. As Klein writes, “acknowledging our own wish for happiness means naming a quality found in all

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<sup>412</sup> Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, 98.

other persons as well. This recognition, a discovery embedded within a developmental process of reflection, requires a sympathetic understanding of her own situation, as well as recognition that it is inappropriate to seek for herself alone the happiness that everyone wants.”<sup>413</sup>

Some techniques that cultivate equanimity would be to think of all beings as having been in every possible relationship to oneself due to innumerable rebirths. Hence, if everyone has been “friend”, “stranger” or “enemy”, there is no reason to treat them differently since they have been or will be all these things. One can also look at the connections in this life which have made one’s life possible. For example, “one can consider the great numbers of persons, known and unknown, on whose efforts life depends each time one travels in a plane, or the benefits received from medicines discovered long ago.”<sup>414</sup> Such practices of equanimity and visualization techniques on one’s spiritual friends, break the boundaries of self and other, helping to realize the wisdom of emptiness and compassion which can lead to a strong experience of one’s interconnection. At the same time, it can also lead to an experience of a strong self, in terms of having independence of mind. For in these meditations where one’s action or reaction toward others is no longer predicated upon their labels or their feelings of desire or hatred, one can develop a mind that is not swayed by perception or social convention. “Because equanimity frees the mind from being merely reactive, it protects one from

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<sup>413</sup> Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, 98.

<sup>414</sup> Ibid., 95.

being emotionally overpowered by any given situation. In these ways, the cultivation of equanimity, like mindfulness, encourages a certain independence of mind.”<sup>415</sup>

An important feminist concern that can serve to further make these practices fruitful for women is the emphasis that such meditations on emptiness and compassion should include oneself among those who deserve compassion. If discovering the empty nature of self and other leads to a universal compassion for everyone whose nature is similar to oneself, then one should also be deserving of the same compassion as others. However, as Klein notes, the practice of compassion in Tibet was usually entered into by those who already had powerful positions in the world. They did not consider whether such practices would increase self-esteem or heal childhood trauma.<sup>416</sup> Hence, in actual practice today, care of self should be emphasized in ways that it may not have traditionally been. It must highlight how compassion for others needs to start with compassion for oneself, fully analyzing oneself, seeing the mistaken sense of self before one realizes the true nature of self and other. This starts with practices such as mindfulness, visualization, etc. that leads to a discovery and love of self that develops into universal compassion for everyone else. This is an important point for women who lose themselves in their care for others, thinking that others deserve more compassion. As Klein states, “including oneself in the circle of care, an idea that has received much attention from feminist psychologists and ethicists in the past decade or so, is an important step in creating a compassion that is self-empowering.”<sup>417</sup>

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<sup>415</sup> Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, 93.

<sup>416</sup> Ibid., 121-2.

<sup>417</sup> Ibid., 96.

In these meditation practices, one is able to hold the middle way between self-care and compassion for others. In these practices, the nonduality of the self and other (emptiness) is realized precisely by paying attention to oneself. Only when one truly and powerfully recognizes emptiness can great compassion (*mahākaruṇā*) flow through in an endless fount, since this love does not come from one person but is precisely the love that is realized in one's interdependence with others. It is for this reason that bodhisattvas can be reborn again and again and never be exhausted in the work of liberating all beings from suffering (bodhisattva vow). It is from this understanding that many engaged Buddhists have worked toward justice in the world. As Alice Keefe says, understanding the web of mutuality means that “personal transformation is always interdependent with social transformation, inner peace with world peace.”<sup>418</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Paula Cooley describes Anne Klein's project best when she says that “Anne takes on the difficult project of trying to understand how identity emerges out of interrelatedness and individuality out of community in the context of experience....What I found most fascinating about an ontology of self that combines psychology with epistemology was the whole notion that the realization of emptiness or cultivating awareness undercuts reification – our way of looking at selves and others as substances in opposition to one another.”<sup>419</sup> This is exactly what we have described in this section. Anne Klein uses the Buddhist analysis of self – using the doctrines of no-self and emptiness - in order to find a self that does not form its identity through separation or

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<sup>418</sup> Keefe, 63.

<sup>419</sup> Paula Cooley, “Questions that won't go away,” 99.



autonomy, the kind of self that has led to patriarchy and the abuse of women. In particular, by looking at specific meditation practices, she is able to articulate how such an identity that is both individual yet interrelated comes about as one realizes selflessness/emptiness through meditation. Such practices and experiences that begin to mold one's personal power become the foundation for developing compassion for others, seeing how we all share the same nature. Through her exposition, she has provided a way of experiencing such a strong yet relational self, and an alternative to the essentialist-postmodern debates on self. She showed the deep connection between doctrine, ritual practice and ethical practice. It is through ritual practice that the doctrines are realized while understanding that such doctrines empower ritual practice. Furthermore, such practices, in transforming the practitioner, ultimately affect the way that person is in the world. Hence, ritual practices have an effect on one's ethical practice. She writes that "[t]o take these categories of subjectivity seriously is to shift the terrain of contemporary Western ways of understanding religion, which might bring the unlanguage subject out of the dim and shrouded realm of the mystical (a realm all the more mysterious because it is absent in predominant cultural understandings of "ordinary life") and into daily life where it more properly belongs."<sup>420</sup> As a very particular example, she writes of the importance of realizing the sameness of all people in order to combat violence in the world today. She writes "...people must unite against injustice across lines of nation, race, and culture. I believe it is important to spread the understanding – in whatever cultural, religious or philosophical terms are most effective – that there is a dimension

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<sup>420</sup> Klein, "East, West, Women, and Self", 210.

through which persons can connect precisely because this dimension is free from the particularities that otherwise define us.”<sup>421</sup> In this case of Buddhism, it offers the doctrine of no-self and emptiness and its accompanying practices to realize one’s Buddha nature as the same nature as others, seeing the world as one’s own body and hence acting accordingly, caring for oneself and for others and the world as oneself.

Though she does not spend as much time writing of what feminism can contribute to Buddhism, she does make a few points about how Buddhist practices can be critiqued and enhanced by a feminist lens. This answers some of the concerns of feminists (Buddhist and non Buddhist) who contend that, though Buddhist practices may offer many possibilities for women, the reality of the traditional male-centered institutions and the power differentials expressed in the practices may still leave women in subject positions.<sup>422</sup> First, she writes that “[b]uddhist texts often refer to the ‘skillful means’ (*upāya*) by which compassion is manifested according to the needs of a specific situation, but these texts do not encourage or demonstrate a nuanced curiosity about the intimate details of a person’s life.... The sense of the ‘personal’ is, from a Western perspective, missing in Indian and Tibetan discussions of compassion. This is where feminism, as well as psychology more generally, makes an important contribution to Buddhist practice in the West.”<sup>423</sup> In some ways, her work that highlights the specific experience and problem of women and selfhood is already an example of a way that feminism contributes to Buddhist practice by bringing in the “personal” experience of

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<sup>421</sup> Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, 203.

<sup>422</sup> Kay Koppedrayar points to June Campbell as one of these Buddhist women who have reservations about the contribution of Buddhism to women in light of the reality of traditional institutions and practices. See Koppedrayar, 133. For her discussion on Campbell, see pp. 128-130.

<sup>423</sup> Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, 119-120.

women. In discussions of compassion, aware of the specific concern about women's notions of "self-sacrifice" or losing themselves in relationships, Buddhist teachers can become more critical of the ways of teaching or handing down practices on compassion that may continue this particular suffering for women. They can skillfully adapt teachings and practices to focus on cultivating self-love and concern within the circle of compassion in ways that they may not have traditionally done, but may be more fruitful for women. At the same time, teachers can find ways to honor and encourage people's individuality and personal stories, as part of who they are without clinging to them, constitutive of any transformation of self that may occur.

Second, the role of interpersonal relationships in cultivating compassion in Buddhism is found to be more theoretical or philosophical. Compassion is often framed as the result of a solitary contemplative practice, and not from actual interpersonal interaction with others. This lack of the development of compassion through mutual interpersonal exchanges is seen as a significant lacuna from a Western feminist perspective for "personal interaction 'implies the possibility of learning from others in ways that transform the self.' That is, the self is no longer an integer, but a dynamic engager of others, 'defined not by reflection but by interaction, the responsiveness of human engagement.'"<sup>424</sup> Though the vision of an interconnected self can be experienced through Buddhist meditation practice, the practice itself can still be seen as a solitary one, and not one that necessarily engages other people, nor the world. Hence, there is a need to emphasize the necessity of interpersonal engagement within ritual practice to truly

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<sup>424</sup> Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, 118.

realize one's interdependence with others. One suggestion from Klein is that it may be "helpful to initiate workshops or retreats where traditional practice is combined with interpersonal practice, for example, in developing the ability to speak without entirely obscuring or forgetting the unlanguage dimension of oneself and others, in being sensitive to other persons within this experience, and in allowing other persons to see one struggle toward these goals."<sup>425</sup>

In the end, the focus on Anne Klein's work has been to offer a new way of thinking about self and subjectivity from a Buddhist perspective that can contribute to the feminist search for a strong yet relational self. To a certain degree, she does offer a feminist critique of Buddhist practices, and how such practices can be changed or adapted to be more aware of women's issues. However, this is not her main goal. Neither is she as interested in looking at how a feminist lens can be used to reinterpret or critique Buddhist doctrines or the Buddhist institution for that matter. This falls more within the domain of our next author, Rita Gross, who looks not only to Buddhism to see how it is helpful to feminism but also undertakes what she calls the "revalorization of Buddhism", looking at how feminism challenges or urges changes not only in the understanding of Buddhist doctrines, but changes in the practices and in the institution itself. In so doing, she believes in the mutual transformation that can occur when Buddhism and feminism come into dialogue with each other.

### **III. Rita Gross**

#### *Introduction*

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<sup>425</sup> Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, 197-8.

Rita Gross calls herself a “Buddhist feminist theologian”, an identification that illustrates the intersection of Buddhism and feminism in her life. On the one hand, it shows the influence of Christian theologians such as John Cobb, who spoke of the mutual transformation that can take place in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, and many other Christian, primarily feminist theologians, such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, with whom she has been in conversation and helped shaped the feminist lens with which she analyzes Buddhism. At the same time, it also indicates her “conversion” to Buddhism and how she sees Buddhism as a dialogue partner with feminism. Based on her personal experience, she writes,

For many years now, I have been seriously practicing both Buddhism and feminism. Like other Western Buddhist Women, I find each of these practices vital; I also find that each practice enhances and complements the other. In a deep way Buddhism and feminism share many essential insights. Each one also contributes important insights and practices that the other very much needs to discover and utilize.<sup>426</sup>

Furthermore, identifying herself as a “theologian”, she differentiates herself from other scholars of religion, writing that “I do not confine my discussions of Buddhism to reports about Buddhist history and doctrine, but insist on doing reflective world construction, mainly in a feminist vein, with the explicit aim of contributing to the development of Buddhism.”<sup>427</sup> Here, we see how her project is similar to the project of many Christian feminist theologians; a reconstruction or retrieval of one’s religious tradition in light of the experience of women. As Kay Koppedrayer describes it, Gross’s career is one that combines “scholarship, critical engagement, advocacy and feminist

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<sup>426</sup> Rita Gross, “Buddhism and Feminism: Toward Their Mutual Transformation Part I” *Eastern Buddhist* 19/1 (Spring 1986): 44.

<sup>427</sup> Rita Gross, “Why Me: Methodological-Autobiographical Reflections of a Wisconsin Farm Girl who became a Buddhist Theologian when she grew up” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 13/2 (Fall 1993): 104. Another source of her autobiography can be found in *A Garland of Feminist Reflections: Forty Years of Religious Exploration* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009) 23-44.

concerns. Gross' project is a 'feminist revalorization of Buddhism,' using feminist values to probe Buddhist thought and practice from within."<sup>428</sup> This is the main task in her book, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*. There, she argues that to revalorize Buddhism particularly in light of the feminist critique means to "repair the tradition, often bringing it much more into line with its own fundamental values and vision than was its patriarchal form."<sup>429</sup>

Furthermore, she also takes up the important feminist task of searching for a strong identity that does not rely on individualism or independence. Similar to Anne Klein and others, she discusses the problems with current patriarchal styles of selfhood, and finds Buddhist doctrines and meditation practices helpful in articulating and experiencing such a powerful interdependent self. For example, in her article "Some Reflections About Community and Survival," Gross takes up the problem with the prevalent North American culture of individualism. As she observes, "[i]t has become more common for North American social commentators to suggest that we have gone too far with individualism as a way of life."<sup>430</sup> She observes how American culture has focused so much on work and the nuclear family trying to do everything without the help of the community. She wonders

[w]ould not these parents and children be more relaxed, happier, and better off in a different kind of 'family,' one more embedded in community and friendships? And wouldn't marriages be more likely to endure in such less stress-filled conditions? Priorities need to be switched. If we had functioning, village like communities, family life would be less stressful and less time-consuming.<sup>431</sup>

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<sup>428</sup> Koppedrayar, 122.

<sup>429</sup> Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 3.

<sup>430</sup> Ibid., "Some Reflections about Community and Survival" *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 23 (2003): 11.

<sup>431</sup> Ibid., 15.

Furthermore, she argues that such a way of life, such “[i]ssues of work, family and community will not be resolved without attention to gender and the gender norms that became dominant in the 19<sup>th</sup> century....”<sup>432</sup> In particular, she points to how women and women’s roles were limited to the house and to emotionally supporting their husbands. Men were expected to work, and women were expected to stay at home and provide the loving atmosphere for their families. With the feminist movement, the mistake was in aiming for the same roles as men so that now “no one had the time for the essential tasks of nurturing and taking care of relationships and friendships, as everyone, women and men alike pursue traditionally male goals.”<sup>433</sup> In the end, such “exaggerated gender complementarity fostered to facilitate the separation of domestic and work lives and the elevation of the nuclear family as the dominant human social unit always produced unbalanced, psychologically unhealthy adults....There is nothing to recommend the conventional gendered division between work and love.”<sup>434</sup>

She suggests, without going into extensive detail, that the “Buddhist concept of interdependence might be very useful in providing tools with which to think about why this hyper-individualism cannot survive.”<sup>435</sup> This has been one of the main preoccupations in her writings. The search for community, finding social networks or relationships that are “stronger, more satisfying, and more emotionally sustaining,” is, for

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<sup>432</sup> Ibid., “Some Reflections about Community and Survival,” 16. In this sense, she is not that different from the concerns and analysis of other feminists such as Catherine Keller (mentioned in the previous chapter) regarding the relationship between “separation and sexism” or in Gross’ terms – the problem of gender complementarity and the prison of gender roles.

<sup>433</sup> Gross, “Some Reflections about Community and Survival,” 17.

<sup>434</sup> Ibid., 18. She has also written about the “prison of gender roles” in another article, “What Went Wrong? Feminism and Freedom from the Prison of Gender Roles” *Crosscurrents* 53/1 (Spring 2003): 8-20.

<sup>435</sup> Ibid, “Some Reflections about Community and Survival,” 11.

Gross, one of the key intersections in Buddhism and feminism.<sup>436</sup> Her very definition of feminism, as that which “involves the radical practice of co-humanity of women and men,” already belies this search for a right kind of relationship between women and men, a search for an anthropology, a model that stresses the humanity of both. This, she claims, is where “the key concepts in Buddhism and the key claims of feminism mutually entail each other.”<sup>437</sup> This reveals her preoccupation with notions of subjectivity similar to other Christian and Buddhist feminists that have been discussed. Similar to Klein, she sees the Buddhist analysis of self, and the doctrines of selflessness and emptiness, as helpful in these discussions. In particular, “her feminist contribution to Buddhist discussions of ego and egolessness is predicated upon the view of a healthy self that ‘arises with awareness and gives rise to calmness, equanimity, and energy.’”<sup>438</sup>

She also believes that a “healthy” self that realizes emptiness can only be developed through meditation. Hence, for her, “Buddhist meditation is a powerful ally and source of strength and growth for a feminist.”<sup>439</sup> Furthermore, the “[t]wo aspects of Buddhadharma are especially influential, applicable, and not elsewhere available. These are (1) the actual discipline of meditation practice and (2) the open, basic state of mind known in Buddhist terminology as egolessness, that is the fruition of practice.”<sup>440</sup> In this section, I will look at how Gross critiques and evaluates the key Buddhist doctrines of selflessness, emptiness and Buddha nature, and how she reinterprets them in light of

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<sup>436</sup> Gross, “Some Reflections about Community and Survival,” 12.

<sup>437</sup> Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 129. She argues in the book that this model of humanity must be androgyny.

<sup>438</sup> Koppedray, 125.

<sup>439</sup> Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 171.

<sup>440</sup> Gross, “Feminism from the perspective of Buddhist Practice” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 1 (1981): 74.



women's search for a strong, healthy view of self. Then I will analyze the role of meditation practice in the realization of these doctrines. Finally, I will look at her feminist reconstruction of Buddhism, looking at her articulation of the implications of the feminist critique, not only on Buddhist doctrines, but on practices and the Buddhist institution itself, a discussion that was not as fully developed in Klein's work.

*A Feminist Analysis of Key Buddhist Concepts*

In order to demonstrate that Buddhism has something to offer to the discussion on individualism and the search for relationships and communities free from gender roles and gender complementarity, she first needs to address whether Buddhism in general is misogynist/patriarchal or not, and therefore whether it can be a resource for women or not. This is the main task in the first two sections of her book, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*. In the first section, she looks at the images of women, of "female" and the "feminine" within Buddhism throughout its history and concludes that such images of women can be both as heroines and tokens at the same time. She writes that "Buddhism has a usable past, but, as a model for the future, it is neither sufficient nor adequate."<sup>441</sup> After critiquing the history of Buddhism and how women have been portrayed within that history, she locates her project as part of the future of Buddhism that can more adequately address the current issues of women and of feminism. This is what she tries to accomplish in the remaining sections of her book. In the second section, which is of primary interest here, Gross discusses what she identifies as the key Buddhist concepts - "egolessness" (*anātman*), "emptiness" (*śūnyatā*), and Buddhature (*tathāgatagarbha*)

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<sup>441</sup> Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 120.

analyzing not only their traditional interpretations but also bringing them into conversation with feminist discussions. As she says, “[t]he primary theses of this part of this book are that no major Buddhist teaching provides any basis for gender privilege or gender hierarchy and that these doctrines, in fact, mandate gender equality at the same time as they undercut the relevance of gender. Furthermore, it is also my thesis that these major teachings are much more compatible with feminist rather than with patriarchal manifestations of Buddhism.”<sup>442</sup> This section will follow her discussions on these key Buddhist concepts.

She uses the schema of the “three turnings of the wheel of dharma” to discuss the key Buddhist doctrines relevant to gender. First, she looks at foundational Buddhism and the teachings of the Four Noble Truths and particularly “egolessness”, one of the three marks of existence. Then she focuses on Mahāyāna Buddhism and discussions on emptiness (what it is not) as well as its relationship to compassion. Finally with Vajrayana, she looks at a more developed view of emptiness (emptiness is not nothing), in particular the development of the doctrine of Buddha nature. She writes that “each of the three turnings provides a major concept that invites an extremely provocative discussion of gender, even though in classic Buddhist sources, the implications of these teachings for gender issues have been noticed only with the second turning. And with each turning, we will discover a progressively richer and fuller basis for reconstructing androgynous Buddhism.”<sup>443</sup> I would add that with each turning, she also demonstrates how the teachings can contribute to women’s search for an authentic self that is not

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<sup>442</sup> Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 153.

<sup>443</sup> Ibid., 155.

projected onto them by men or by a patriarchal society, and for relationships that are empowering of that authentic self.

### **Doctrine of no-self / egolessness (*anātman*)**

Similar to Klein's point that discussions of "self" are a point of intersection between Buddhism and feminism, Gross sees such intersection particularly in the analysis and discussions on "ego" or self, and the destructive patterns that have been harmful to women. She writes, "Buddhism and feminism are more like each other than either is like Western patriarchal thought, in that both explore how dysfunctional habitual patterns of mind cause great suffering."<sup>444</sup> In particular, "Buddhist discussion of ego as the creation of the duality of self and other is almost identical with the feminist discussion of what men do to women in patriarchy."<sup>445</sup>

Similar to Klein, she also debunks any understanding of "egolessness" as equivalent to a loss of self/identity and thus harmful to women. She clarifies in a discussion with Buddhist and Christian women scholars that,

[t]his question about no-self not being a good ideal for women is one of those problematic translations because of what "ego" means, namely any problematic or neurotic being in the world. Being self-effacing is just as much having an ego as being self-asserting. When we talk about self and no-self and true self we are talking about getting rid of neurotic ways of being in the world. So no-self is a perfect way of teaching women to get rid of the problematic ego styles we have.<sup>446</sup>

Furthermore, she writes in her book,

it is often claimed by feminists that Buddhist concepts of ego and egolessness would be more relevant for men than for women because many women 'need more ego, a stronger self-concept, not less ego.' From the Buddhist point of view, someone who is intensely co-dependent and someone who is intensely macho or self-aggrandizing suffer equally from ego. Ego...is any style of habitual patterns and responses that clouds over the clarity

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<sup>444</sup> Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 161.

<sup>445</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>446</sup> Rita Gross, "The Questions that won't go away" 104.

and openness of basic human nature. Self-effacement is just a style of ego different from self-aggrandizement, but both equally cause suffering to self and others.<sup>447</sup>

In both these arguments, she makes a similar claim to Klein about the proper understanding and application of the doctrine of no-self. The doctrine of no-self is not the same as “forgetting oneself” or “losing oneself” or becoming “self-sacrificial”, the way it has meant in many feminist, particularly Christian feminist discussions and debate. Rather, it points to the habits of the mind to project a particular reified image of self, a projection one uses that clouds one’s true existence. It is a way of grasping, a fixation, and a way of separating “self” and “other” in ways that are harmful. As Gross states, both having “too much” or “too little” ego are both ways of clinging, of fixation to a certain “self” that is harmful. Hence, the doctrine of no-self can be used to criticize both styles of selfhood as deluded, unhealthy ways of being that lead to suffering.

In particular, she applies the doctrine of no-self to the discussion on gender, arguing that gender essentialism is another form of a “reified self”, or another form of ego-clinging that causes suffering to oneself and others. She writes that “[t]he strong tendency to reify things, including ideas about what gender mean, and then to cling to these ideas, is often called ‘habitual patterns’...One of the strongest and most persistent habitual patterns is to attribute invariant and fixed meaning to gender.”<sup>448</sup> In other words, the mind has been conditioned to continually make a separation/opposition between “male” and “female”, attaching particular characteristics or identities to both, as if such characteristics are fixed, unchanging, “normal” or “innate” to each. Such habitual conditioning regarding gender has led over time to the acceptance of gender and gender

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<sup>447</sup> Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 161-2.

<sup>448</sup> Gross, *A Garland of Feminist Reflections*, 296.

categories. It has resulted in the demarcation of roles, and specific qualities of each (usually women “complementing” men’s qualities) that have resulted in the unquestioned secondary status of women as “normal.” This habitual pattern on gender is just another form of ego that needs to be analyzed and debunked through the doctrine of no-self. For her, “[t]he feminist contribution to discussions of ego and egolessness ... is to demonstrate, incontrovertibly and powerfully, the extent to which gender-fixation is part of ego, and therefore, damaging and destructive.”<sup>449</sup>

To begin to realize this truth means to analyze, focus, and develop oneself. How do we dismantle such wrong notions of “self”? “Not by ignoring it and pretending it does not exist, but by studying it very carefully.”<sup>450</sup> One needs to analyze oneself and see the identities that have been formed and clung to, all the wrongs ways of being, including gender essentializing notions of “woman” or “female”, or ways of self-effacement or self-aggrandizement that have led to suffering. Realizing one’s wrong and deluded ways of being does not lead to “nothingness” or to “no sense of self at all” as some feminists worry. Rather, such analysis of a wrong and unhealthy sense of self is the beginning of the development of a stronger sense of self, free from the trap of delusions and projections upon one’s identity. One becomes more free to engage with the world. As Gross says, “[a]n egoless person is quite the opposite of a zombie. Rather, she is cheerful, calm, humorous, compassionate, empowered, and energized because she has

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<sup>449</sup> Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 163.

<sup>450</sup> Gross, *A Garland of Feminist Reflections*, 261.

dropped the burden of ego. She has found a sane, healthy, and mature way of being free *within* the world; she has discovered how to ‘find [her] ease in impermanence’”.<sup>451</sup>

Furthermore, she is adamant that another important lesson women can learn from these first turning teachings is how, at this initial stage, the focus and concern is on oneself. Practices of compassion towards others and the development to become a compassionate person for others come later, as a result of one’s own training on oneself and developing compassion for oneself. She writes, “At this stage of development, it is important to pull back for a while, to pull into one’s self and to develop the foundations of sane and wholeness habits and modes of interacting.”<sup>452</sup> Moreover, “self-development, leading to individual liberation, must be the first step. In Buddhist perspective, such attention to self-development is the most compassionate thing one could possibly do; otherwise one will be trying to help others aggressively, on the basis of one’s own confusion and negativity...For women, socialized not to take themselves seriously, to take care of everyone else before attending to their own needs, such a map of spiritual path is welcome and relevant.”<sup>453</sup>

### **Doctrine of Emptiness (what *śūnyatā* is not)**

Moving on to the second turning (Mahāyāna) teachings, Gross focuses on the doctrines of emptiness and the relationship between the wisdom of emptiness and compassion. As she points out, “[ś]unyata is the logical outcome of thoroughly understanding egolessness and interdependent co-arising ...[Things are] empty or lack

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<sup>451</sup> Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 160.

<sup>452</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>453</sup> Ibid., 168.

‘own-being’ inherent existence. They do not exist in and of themselves, but only relative to their matrix, dependent on causes and conditions.”<sup>454</sup> She also writes that “Mahayanists are careful to point out that emptiness should not be reified. *Everything* lacks own-being, including emptiness, which is a tool used to cup conceptual fixation, not an alternative concept out of which to build a worldview...undercuts all assertions.”<sup>455</sup> These descriptions of emptiness echo the traditional understanding of emptiness and its development from the doctrines of no-self and dependent arising in foundational Buddhism. Similar to her application of the doctrine of no-self, she uses emptiness, the “logical outcome” of egolessness, as a tool to extend her critique to undercut the “conceptual fixation” on gender. After debunking the fixedness of the categories of “man” and “woman” and the roles that have been identified/attached to each, she uses emptiness to show the “emptiness” of the categories of “male” and “female” and how there are no innate characteristics to either one. They are merely social constructs. She writes that “[m]ale’ and ‘female,’ like all other labels and designations, are empty and lack substantial reality. Therefore, they cannot be used in a rigid and fixed way to delimit people.”<sup>456</sup> In particular, she writes against streams within Buddhism that focus on negative images of women who are seen as spiritually inferior and not as capable as men of enlightenment. Instead, she argues how the doctrine of emptiness shows “gender fluidity”, the emptiness of the categories of “male” and “female” and the characteristics and roles usually attached to them. To bolster such an application of emptiness, she uses

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<sup>454</sup> Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 174.

<sup>455</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>456</sup> Ibid.

the example of the goddess from the *Vimalakīrti sūtra*, a beloved Mahāyāna text.<sup>457</sup>

Upon being asked by Śāriputra why she does not turn herself into a man, the goddess replies “*I have been here for twelve years and have looked for the innate characteristics of the female sex and haven’t been able to find them.*” Afterwards, she changes him into a female and after making her point of how gender does not matter, eventually changes him back. Gross interprets this story to show how “maleness and femaleness do not exist as fixed, inherently existing forms, but only as convenient designations and mere tokens”<sup>458</sup> and that “conventional social arrangements, including those common to Buddhist institutions contradict the essential Mahayana teaching of emptiness.”<sup>459</sup> In this way, she extends the critique of “no-self” to show the emptiness of the categories of “male” and “female”. Hence, there is nothing one can cling on to, for these categories are all empty and therefore fluid, open to possibilities not previously experienced or imagined. If that is so, then gender roles are more fluid than one thinks and putting women in certain roles or discriminating against women in Buddhist institutions goes against this logic of emptiness.

Apart from being a tool, she also discusses emptiness as the logical outcome of interdependent co-arising, and as understanding how things lacking “own being” does not mean that they do not exist at all, but they exist in a matrix, dependent on causes and conditions. It is this understanding of emptiness and dependent arising that leads to the development of the wisdom that gives rise to compassion, realizing how interconnected

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<sup>457</sup> She writes about her interpretation of this sūtra in *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 70-72 and 177, and in *A Garland of Feminist Reflections*, 253-55.

<sup>458</sup> Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 176.

<sup>459</sup> Ibid., 177.



and interdependent we are on each other for our existence. She writes, "...in Buddhist perspective, human nature, beneath the constructions of ego, is basically good. Though it has been much less explicitly noted, experiencing that basic good nature also means experiencing one's sane, enlightened self as fundamentally relational rather than essentially autonomous...One sees one's life as fundamentally and inextricably interlinked with all other lives."<sup>460</sup> Similar to Klein's point above, after we focus on ourselves, seeing the "wrong notions of self", the fixed and rigid ways we've held on to identities, we can then begin to have some clarity about the true nature of self, not only its impermanence, but now also its emptiness, seeing our similarity with others and our dependence upon them for our existence. Here again, we see how the corollary to emptiness is seeing our interdependence with all else. It is also about the realization of our basic goodness (the underlying nature of clarity, openness and positive capacity). This is Buddha nature which will be discussed in the next section.

It is precisely such realization of the wisdom of emptiness that brings one to compassion. The kind of compassion that is cultivated together with wisdom is an important contribution for women. It is a compassion that is "not dutiful nor based on fear and need. It is utterly uncompelled and unstrategized and, therefore, completely genuine."<sup>461</sup> In other words, it is not the kind of compassion that has exhausted women, forced to be there for others, even when she does not have the energy and strength for herself. Furthermore, as was emphasized, such compassion is not the beginning of the

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<sup>460</sup> Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 181. This notion of human nature as basically good draws on the doctrine of Buddha nature which will be taken up in the next section.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid., 180.

path. It is the result of starting with one's own self and one's realization about that self, thereby developing a healthy sense of self before one even begins to develop compassion for others. It is also the result of the realization of emptiness, where one can see and treat oneself and others similarly, ensuring that compassion is universal, and not attached to emotions. As Gross argues,

[a]s we have seen, for Buddhism, the development of compassion is not the first message or agenda for spiritual development. The first step is non-harming, which includes learning to overcome self-destructive ego patterns, such as loving too much or caring unwisely in unhealthy ways. Caring, by itself, is not enough. One needs to learn to care with the detached and all-encompassing compassion of a bodhisattva; in order to be able to do that, one first needs to learn non-harming and to develop some understanding of egolessness and emptiness.<sup>462</sup>

### **Doctrine of Buddha Nature (*Tathāgatagarbha: śūnyatā is not nothing*)**

The third turning of the wheel is still considered to be part of the Mahāyāna development but instead of focusing on the “negative”/deconstructive aspect of emptiness, focuses on the positive/reconstructive side of it. In other words, it shows the flip side of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) which is “fullness” or “suchness” (*tathatā*) which leads to a more wholistic, nondualistic view. For Gross’ purposes, it leads beyond just a critique of the “emptiness” of the categories of male and female to the possibility of a reconstruction of an identity that is neither male nor female, but beyond gender, that is full of the potential for enlightenment and for being a whole, healthy self. She writes, “[t]he second turning interpretation of *shunyata* undercuts gender bias by showing the non-existence of essential feminine or masculine characteristics. The third turning teachings about *tathāgatagarbha*, in explaining what is there beyond emptiness, give

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<sup>462</sup> Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 182.

even greater strength to feminist criticism of Buddhist gender practices and to feminist interpretations of Buddhism.”<sup>463</sup>

While the second turning focused on undercutting all characteristics that one clung to, question all categories of self and other, of all dualisms, such as “male” and “female”, the third turning does not just leave one with nothing to hold onto beyond the deconstruction of all these categories. Rather, what one finds beyond such dualisms, beyond such categories is one’s Buddha Nature; that is, that everyone – beyond obscurations and superficial differences – has the qualities of a Buddha, qualities of enlightenment and innate goodness as well as a capacity for deepest peace, all inclusive love, compassion, and penetrating wisdom.<sup>464</sup> Gross uses this doctrine to strengthen her argument against the perceived inferiority of women, and to show the equality of women with men, particularly in their potential for enlightenment. Bringing together the second and third turning teachings builds a stronger argument against gender privilege and a stronger argument for egalitarian gender arrangements.<sup>465</sup> She writes,

On the one hand, because all phenomena are empty and lack inherent existence, intrinsic maleness and femaleness cannot be found. Therefore women and men should not be defined by gender traits nor limited by gender roles and stereotypes. On the other hand, the intrinsic nature of all people, without regard for gender, is their potential for Buddhahood. Therefore, it is not appropriate to place institutional obstacles, such as formal subordination, lower expectations, or discouragement from the life of study and practice, in the path of either gender.<sup>466</sup>

Furthermore, bringing these two turnings together also strengthens one’s way of being in the world, without being caught up in that world with the projections and

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<sup>463</sup> Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 186

<sup>464</sup> John Makransky. 2008. *Seven Key Doctrines of Indian Mahayana Buddhism*. Religious Quest I Course Handout. Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA.

<sup>465</sup> I would also argue that it is from this perspective too that she pushes for an anthropology that is androgynous.

<sup>466</sup> Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 188-189.

expectations of gender and roles, free to “perform” oneself and enact wise compassion for others. Discovering that everything is empty and also imbued with Buddha Nature, one recognizes the primordial purity and goodness of all that is, without becoming attached to them. It becomes a way of being able to hold one’s “deconstruction” and “reconstruction” of reality, or a way of being back in the world without being *of* the world, since one is now coming from the view of emptiness and thusness, resulting in a nondualistic view of the world. “The primary meaning of thusness is, as we have seen above, to see things in a nondualistic manner, to see the ever-flowing stream of events without reification, without imposing a subject-object dichotomy on them....Such seeing also means accurately seeing what is, rather than the usual projections and preconceptions that color phenomena.”<sup>467</sup> Seeing accurately what is, seeing what are “adventitious defilements” vs. the “purity” beneath, those that were previously judged to be inferior, impure or obstacles to enlightenment can now be enjoyed, and brought to the path. This is significant for women, for they, together with aspects that have been associated with them – body, sexuality, emotions – can now be seen as pure, and can lead to their celebration of being women, and the enjoyment of their body, their sexuality and their emotions, in ways that do not lead to more attachment, reification, and therefore suffering.<sup>468</sup> Gross writes,

...emptiness, thoroughly understood, is not nothing; it is the basis for appreciating phenomena without reifying them. Phenomena are no longer seen as seductive elements that engender unwholesome reactions of clinging and fixation, but as primordially pure, vivid, non-dual Suchness. As such they need not be avoided, but can be appreciated, celebrated, and liberated. All elements of ordinary phenomenal existence can now be

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<sup>467</sup> Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 191.

<sup>468</sup> Gross talks about the transformation of body, sexuality and emotion in *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 193-196.

seen in this sacred manner, which means everything can be included in spiritual discipline.<sup>469</sup>

From her discussion on emptiness which ended with her conclusion that “the dharma is *neither* male nor female”, she contends that, with Vajrayāna, there is the further development that leads on the other hand to the conclusion that “the dharma is also *both* male and female.” In this case, one does not disregard differences as if they do not matter or that they are just the cause of suffering; rather, the aim is for the development of both qualities by all beings, breaking down all separation and dualism. As Gross says, “The two, masculine and feminine, however, are not an oppositional duality; they are a non-dual pair, a dyadic unit...One does not identify with one against the other as is done in dualist thinking. Rather, one regards the two as interdependent, complementary aspects of the Whole, aspects which cannot be collapsed into monistic unity any more than they can brought into real opposition. Further, one identifies with and develops *both* elements of the pair.”<sup>470</sup>

#### *Importance of meditation*

Such a nondualistic view and the realization of these doctrines are only possible through practice. Gross claims that “[t]here is a very intimate link between a formal practice and manifesting that mind of clarity, insight, and compassion in the world. Those of us who have meditated a long time tend to feel that without the formal discipline it is going to be much harder to have detachment.”<sup>471</sup> In other words, one cannot fully realize the doctrines of egolessness, emptiness and Buddha-nature without an accompanying

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<sup>469</sup> Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 192.

<sup>470</sup> Ibid., 198.

<sup>471</sup> Ibid., “The Questions that Won’t Go Away,” 117.

practice. This is why, for Gross as it was with Klein, the most relevant contribution and application of Buddhism are not its doctrinal or theoretical insights but its meditation practice itself.<sup>472</sup>

First, Gross notes how it is through meditation practices that women can develop a healthier sense of self, finding techniques helpful for their self-cultivation and development. She writes,

In the simple and basic practices of mindfulness and awareness, one is taught how to experience thoughts without repressing them, judging them or acting them out. One is taught to observe and notice, to increase awareness, to become much more familiar with one's thought patterns and habitual tendencies without immediately trying to fix them or change them.<sup>473</sup>

This is similar to Klein's discussion of the development of a non-judgmental awareness that is necessary for women to break out of habitual patterns of thought that lead them to construct their identities based on patriarchal ideals and to become more gentle in their assessment of themselves, beginning to learn to accept, discover and love themselves in the process. Gross says that such a practice undercuts women's sense of self-hatred under patriarchy. It can also undercut her sense of frustration, feeling that she has been denied her full potential because she is female.<sup>474</sup> Furthermore, it also helps her develop a certain "independence of mind" as Klein writes above, becoming less reactive and more receptive (but not passive), thereby having more clarity of mind to truly understand her dynamic of self and her dynamic with others. Gross describes the results of mindfulness practice as such,

A feeling of spaciousness and an ability to accommodate one's experience with all its ups and downs, is beginning to replace the claustrophobia, paranoia, grasping, and rage that

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<sup>472</sup> Gross, "Feminism from the Perspective of Buddhist Practice," 79.

<sup>473</sup> Ibid., *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 170.

<sup>474</sup> Ibid.

one's experience used to generate. One spreads one's *kleśas* or basic neuroses around a little less, one is less prone to habitual reactions laden with painful emotionalism, and one is kinder and less harsh both to oneself and to the world.<sup>475</sup>

Furthermore, she also writes,

There is a sense of dawning that arises from developing egolessness as an inevitable result of *śamatha-vipaśyanā* or mindfulness meditation practice. It has a basic effect that I would characterize as ever-increasing gentleness, softness and openness that has nothing to do with being weak, powerless or submissive. In fact, if anything, a sense of dignity, strength, and invulnerability in the positive sense increases with increasing gentleness and softness.<sup>476</sup>

This first step of self-cultivation and development through mindfulness practice becomes the stepping stone for the development of compassion for others. As one gains this sense of “dignity, strength and invulnerability” through “gentleness and softness”, one begins to be able to turn such “gentleness and softness” onto others in an ever expanding way. As one continues to realize egolessness and emptiness, one begins to uncover not only one's own Buddha nature, the innate capacity for goodness, peace, etc. as described above, but one also realizes that this is the fundamental nature of all beings. Hence, as she wrote above, one becomes kinder and less harsh, not only to oneself but to others, seeing that everyone shares in this same fundamental nature. Through practice, one's heart becomes wider and wider as the clarity of one's mind about our true nature becomes clearer and clearer. This is where one develops the perfection of wisdom that leads to compassion. As Gross says, “it sees *śūnyatā* (emptiness) and two-fold egolessness (egolessness of both self and other); in such complete clear seeing,

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<sup>475</sup> Gross, “The Three-Yāna Journey in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 7 (1987): 91.

<sup>476</sup> Ibid., “Feminism from the perspective of Buddhist practice,” 74.

compassion arises freely, spontaneously, and appropriately. Thus the fruition of the Mahāyāna is the simultaneity of emptiness and compassion....”<sup>477</sup>

However, in light of feminist concerns regarding the virtue of compassion, or being for the “other” in ways harmful to oneself as mentioned previously, Gross is insistent that the practice must begin with practices of self-cultivation and development, in line with developing the clarity of wisdom (of emptiness). As seen in the quote above, compassion arises OUT of such wisdom, a wisdom that is focused on self-awareness and self-compassion. This is a key point to emphasize because it is the development of such wisdom that allows one’s compassion to be “skillful” instead of harmful to one’s self or to another. As Gross notes, “Some self-liberation *inevitably leads to*, but *also must precede* attempts to help others and change the situation. Without prior clarity, which presupposes taming one’s self somewhat, concern for others, no matter how sincere, is often misguided, and worse, quite aggressive.”<sup>478</sup> This serves as an important reminder for women who want to put others first, that some self-reflection, self-development is necessary to purify one’s actions for others, examining carefully one’s intentions so that concern is not “seen” as aggression, nor a kind of dependence nor clinging onto another person instead of a genuine concern for the other. It also ensures that such actions do not cause harm to ourselves, diffusing our energies for others, disabling us from giving ourselves the same concern that we are giving to others. In the end, such complementarity, better yet, nonduality between wisdom and compassion is one of the

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<sup>477</sup> Gross, “The Three-Yāna Journey in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism,” 94.

<sup>478</sup> Ibid., 92.



important aspects in Vajrayāna Buddhism that Gross sees is important for feminism. As she says,

...learning to recognize space, to do nothing, to develop wisdom (*prajna*) is the harder part of spiritual training. Once unobstructed space – vision unclouded by conventionality and discursiveness - is developed, then appropriate skillful and compassionate activity arises spontaneously and blissfully, whereas before such vision is developed, activity is usually futile and misdirected. Thus, wisdom provides the ground for compassionate and skillful activity, which completes the dyadic unity. Without compassion, wisdom is too cold and hard, even destructive. But together, like the right and left sides of the body, they can co-operate to do what needs to be done.<sup>479</sup>

More generally, the concept of nonduality is a key contribution of Vajrayāna teachings and practices. Apart from realizing the fundamental nonduality of wisdom and compassion, one also begins to realize that since everything is imbued with Buddha nature, then everything can be taken into the path, even those that used to be considered an obstacle to the path. Such a development of a “sacred outlook” is emphasized in Vajrayana. As Gross says,

In terms of meditation-in-action, developing a sacred outlook involves transmutation of basic energies from their confused or neurotic manifestation to their enlightened potential. This teaching of transmutation is probably **the most powerful, provocative, and basic of the Vajrayāna teachings** [emphasis mine]; it summarizes or condenses the whole Buddhist non-dualistic approach to working with the human existential situation. Whereas earlier in the journey, some energies might have been rejected as unworkable, now the fundamental potential of that energy is tapped because one recognizes that the energy itself not only is without problem, but is the very and only basis for enlightened activity.<sup>480</sup>

As mentioned, this “sacred outlook” or the nondualistic approach, is important for women who have been traditionally associated with the body, emotions, etc. as obstacles to enlightenment, as the “dual” inferior halves to men. Furthermore, it is also important because it allows a woman to appreciate and use what she already has, her emotions, “negative” energies which are transformed as part of her path. This allows her to “honor

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<sup>479</sup> Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 203.

<sup>480</sup> Gross, “The Three-Yāna Journey in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism,” 97.

her emotions”, to not just dismiss them, or diminish their importance but to really learn to listen to their wisdom. As Gross says, “emotion itself always contains tremendous wisdom, even if that wisdom is clouded and obscured by its deluded counterpart. Therefore, emotions are to be dealt with, not by denying them, overlooking their validity, or banishing them, but by harkening to their wisdom.”<sup>481</sup> This is an important reminder for women who are caricatured as “emotional” and not “rational” creatures and hence whose voice or opinions are questioned or ignored. Furthermore, a view that shows the nonduality of emotion and wisdom is also important in giving an alternative view in the current tendency to bifurcate “reason” (as a male trait) and “emotion” (as a female trait) that has led to the view of the inferiority of women.

She gives the example of working with anger as a “negative” energy that can be transformed into clarity (wisdom), and how this can be helpful for feminists. She writes from her own experience having seen how closely “anger and clarity are related, how they are the same energy, and how clarity grows out of anger.”<sup>482</sup> She describes that over the course of her practice she could “no longer dredge up the same feelings of release and emotional satisfaction by aggressive expressions of my frustration and rage....I was only causing mutual entrenchment.”<sup>483</sup> Rather, what remained was her clarity, her “critical intelligence” that allowed her to see injustice and perversions of peace but without the murkiness that the emotion of anger brings. Clarity without anger does not bring about “apathy” but can bring about real compassion, a “concern for the entire matrix not based

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<sup>481</sup> Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 195.

<sup>482</sup> Ibid., “The Three-Yāna Journey in Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism,” 98.

<sup>483</sup> Ibid., “The Clarity in Anger” in *A Garland of Feminist Reflections*, 240.

on the distinction between self and other.”<sup>484</sup> This can already lead to a breaking out of our individual, alienated self (possibly alienated further due to one’s anger) and bring us into right relationship with others. Instead of bringing further separation or dualism with the object of our anger or feeling that we are “righteous” and the other is not, we can focus on the issues without blame, or hatred, and find more effective solutions without the emotional attachment to anger that can usually be exhausting. Such a transformation of emotions (and not a rejection of them) can be very helpful to many feminists. As Gross says, Buddhist meditation training and the Buddhist emphasis on gentleness will modulate the prophetic voice, which can be strident in expressing its truths and insights.<sup>485</sup> Furthermore, such “gentling effects of deep spiritual discipline” can prevent one’s anger and attachment from growing into an ideological fixation – an “expression deeply tinged with aggression.”<sup>486</sup> Here, we see her arguing for a way that Buddhists can be concerned with the world, without attachment and anger – and hence take up the feminist agenda, but also transforming it, “purifying it” so only clarity and wisdom come through, making one’s words and actions more effective in the world.

### *Conclusion*

Looking at Gross’s revalorization of the Buddhist teachings on no-self, emptiness and Buddha-nature, one sees how this can contribute to the feminist search for a strong interdependent self. She uses these Buddhist teachings of egolessness and emptiness as a critical lens to show the social constructedness of gender roles, thereby questioning the

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<sup>484</sup> Gross, “The Clarity in Anger,” 241.

<sup>485</sup> Ibid., *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 135.

<sup>486</sup> Ibid., “The Clarity in Anger,” 241.

categories of “women/female” and “men/male”, and the superiority of one to the other, and the social roles that have been imputed onto them. Instead, she argues that all are called to develop both the ‘masculine’ and feminine principle, and that all – women and men – have the same spiritual capacity for transformation, for all have Buddha nature. This is her ground for a new anthropology that can lead to equality/co-humanity between women and men. Furthermore, she uses the doctrine of emptiness to counter the problematic patriarchal styles of selfhood. No one is an individual or an autonomous, separate, substantial being. Rather, everyone exists within matrices of interconnections; within relationships – an important aspect for many feminists – particularly those who see separation / individualization as part of the problem of sexism. Such a realization leads to the right kind of interdependence and connection with others that does not risk losing oneself in such relationships.

Her main vision of co-humanity is encompassed in her discussions of androgyny which does not mean the disappearance or nondistinction between “male and female” but the affirmation of the particularities of being “male” and “female.” As she writes in *Buddhism After Patriarchy*,

...the meaning of “androgyny,” as the term is being used in this book, is “both male and female.” As scholarly method, model of humanity, and mode of consciousness, it contrasts with ‘androcentrism or male-centered consciousness. But it also contrasts significantly with sex-neutral models and ideals, in which something is said to be “neither male nor female.” Androgyny affirms both male and female, whatever those labels may involve, while the sex-neutral model denies them both. Both styles of language and thought are useful and appropriate in different contexts. But the sex-neutral model is not sufficient to overcome and undo androcentrism....<sup>487</sup>

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<sup>487</sup> Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 222.

This description of androgyny counters the androcentric view that subsumes the category of “women” into the category of “men.”<sup>488</sup> Instead, it precisely looks at the women’s particularity and their needs on the one hand, while recognizing “sameness” with men in terms of equality in potential for enlightenment, and the need to find the balance between “masculine” and “feminine” characteristics in everyone. Such a vision of androgyny, the co-equality of women and men while recognizing the specific needs of women, has implications for change within Buddhist institutions and practices accordingly. Such changes are worked out in the last section of her book, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*. As Koppedrayar summarizes it, “‘Post-patriarchal’ Buddhism, in Gross’s view, can prompt change, from the redefinition of the *sangha* (community), to the introduction of gender equity that echoes Western affirmative-action programs, to a revalorization of everyday life, which finds the potential for insight in ‘ordinary’ activities.”<sup>489</sup>

There are a couple of aspects among these changes that are particularly important for this discussion. One, she pushes strongly the need for more female dharma teachers. She argues that if one were to take seriously the Buddhist belief that everyone is capable of enlightenment, then there should be an equal number of male and female teachers. However, historically, women, being seen as inferior or obstacles to the path (which she has judged as not being an accurate interpretation of the Buddhist teaching) were not given these opportunities. As she says, “At least as strong as the habitual tendency to

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<sup>488</sup> Whether this has been achieved in her work has been questioned by Kay Koppedrayar who writes that “gender neutral and gender blind states can amount to erasure...advocating the irrelevance of gender can have an insidious effect ...configure women and women’s subjectivity through ‘absence’ or ‘lack’ ...where is the recognition let alone affirmation of conditioned being?” Koppedrayar, 126.

<sup>489</sup> Koppedrayar, 123.

fixate on gender identity is the habitual pattern of evaluating men as superior to and more important than women, which is the basis for setting up social and religious institutions that favor men over women.”<sup>490</sup> Realizing it now requires that women be given the opportunity to cultivate their own capacities and become teachers in their own right. As she says, “[t]he acid test for whether Buddhism has overcome its male-dominant heritage is the frequency with which women become dharma teachers.”<sup>491</sup> This is important so that women not only have feminine images within the practice to work with, but actually also have women teachers, particularly those who can skillfully adapt the practices to the needs of women, as she has tried to demonstrate.

At the same time, given her emphasis and the feminist interest in relationality, and how such can be an aid (and not an obstacle) to finding one’s true self, she writes of a “revalorization” of the *sangha*, the forgotten aspect of the three Jewels. She writes how the “sangha as the matrix of companionship and psychological comfort, contradicts some prevalent impressions of Buddhism” because the path is often understood as an individual one, that one is supposed to travel alone on this path, since each one must come to enlightenment on their own.<sup>492</sup> Yet the sangha is one of the 3 refuges in Buddhism and has its place in the spiritual formation of each practitioner. Here, she says, feminism can transform Buddhism by its emphasis on relationships and their empowering nature, and showing how companionship through the sangha can provide the base in which personal transformation can be realized. Through such a lens, one no longer sees the Sangha as a

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<sup>490</sup> Gross, *Garland of Feminist Reflections*, 296-7.

<sup>491</sup> Ibid., 282. For her full argument, see pp. 281-290.

<sup>492</sup> Gross, “‘I go for Refuge to the Sangha’: A Response to Rosemary Ruether’s Paper” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 11 (1991): 231.

poor third, but as it really should be, as the focus of “personal nurture and supportive community.”<sup>493</sup> She suggests that this be done by “fill[ing] the profound and provocative category ‘*sangha*’ with the feminist values of community, nurturance, communication, relationship, and friendship. To emphasize these values is to recognize how critical they are, *and always have been*, as matrix and container for emulation of the Buddha and for meditative and philosophical pursuits of the *dharma*.”<sup>494</sup>

Finally, as discussed, Gross contends that the most important contribution of Buddhism to feminism is its meditation practice that helps women to realize a strong “healthy” self, seeing themselves within matrices of relationships, allowing them to develop a kind of *wise* compassion, and transforming their emotions to be brought into their spiritual practice. It reminds them that practice must begin with oneself, with self-cultivation and development before one can help others. It also allows women to be more involved in the world, but in ways that are empowering for them and others, not allowing them to be consumed by anger or frustration at the process. As mentioned, she wrote of the gentling effect of such practices to make our words and actions more effective. In effect, she is also making the argument of how spiritual practice is tied together with

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<sup>493</sup> Gross, “‘I go for Refuge to the Sangha,’” 239.

<sup>494</sup> Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 265. She wants to fill this category “*sangha*” with such feminist values because one, she has experienced the importance of such communities within her own spiritual practice, writing, “To receive such gifts within a community of both women and men, to engage in meditation-rituals, feasts, and fire-offerings invoking these *vidam*-s with both male and female companions is another good fortune. To me, such a situation is much more fortunate, sane, and balanced than a situation in which one feels one has to withdraw into a separatist community to find such integrity and wholeness.” See *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 205. Furthermore, she contends like Klein, that the Buddhist notion of compassion does not emphasize relationality. Hence, this can be a feminist contribution to Buddhist practices. She writes, “The term ‘compassion’ is absolutely central in the traditional understanding of Mahayana ethics. However, the emphasis on ‘relationality’ may not be so central to the traditional Buddhist understanding of compassion ... thought of compassion more as an attribute that I might possess than as the fruition of my utter interrelatedness with the world. *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 182.

social action and how each can purify and strengthen the other. This, again is another key contribution of Buddhism to feminism. She writes,

Buddhism has two things to contribute to those involved in feminism. One is the immediate need for the skillful means of developing and maintaining equanimity and peacefulness in the face of opposition, oppression and conflict ....The second great gift of Buddhism to political process is its ability to develop staying power in those who practice in spiritual disciplines...I have argued that part of one's practice as a Buddhist might be to practice the inseparability of spiritual disciplines and politics....With true inseparability, we learn much about deep Buddhist insights through involvement with causes, and our immersion in Buddhist practices teaches us how to remain involved in politics – skillfully.<sup>495</sup>

#### **IV. The Great Bliss Queen: A Buddhist Feminist Retrieval<sup>496</sup>**

##### *Her Story*

For both Klein and Gross, the story, image and most importantly, the ritual of the Great Bliss Queen, Yeshe Tsogyel, is a key example that shows how Buddhist doctrines are enacted/realized/empowered practices that are most helpful for women in cultivating a strong, healthy interconnected self. Furthermore, her image and her story also provide an alternative to the predominant male examples of those who have achieved enlightenment, providing women with a story and an image that they may identify with, something to aspire to, and eventually realize that they are already her. As Klein says, “Yeshey Tsogyal in a deep sense represents one's own capacity for mindfulness,

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<sup>495</sup> Gross, *Garland of Feminist Reflections*, 244.

<sup>496</sup> In this section, I would like to clarify that I am looking particularly at Klein and Gross' articulation and retrieval of the story and ritual of the Great Bliss Queen as a possible resource for women. This does not mean that the traditional understanding was not affected by androcentric or patriarchal biases. In other words, the Great Bliss Queen's story and ritual can and should be critiqued from a feminist perspective, articulating the ways that her story may have been used to beat down women who object to patriarchal practices and organizational structures or how to understand the visualization of the female body by male monks, etc. However, what is important to see is how these Buddhist feminists are not discarding the story and ritual but are actually using it as a resource for their own search for a strong yet relational self, “redeeming” the image of “woman” and the “feminine” in Buddhist practices that may not have done so. Such a reconstruction will become the base for a similar reconstruction of Marian traditions in the comparative section of the next chapter.



compassion and wisdom....Meeting the Great Bliss Queen is not about meeting someone else, it's about meeting yourself in a deep way.”<sup>497</sup>

Yeshe Tsogyal is one of the most prominent and influential female teachers and religious exemplars from Tibet. Her story, a combination of history and hagiography, is both a typical and atypical story of a woman but also the story of an enlightened one. Historically, she is identified to have lived in the eighth century, and is a disciple and consort to Padmasambhava, an important figure in the transmission of Buddhism from India to Tibet. However, hagiographically/mythically, her biography starts like those of great Buddhas and bodhisattvas, with her decision to appear in the world and teach, followed by stories of her birth filled with auspicious signs and miracles. Her journey through life mirrors some of the hardships women faced at that time. She encountered many obstacles trying to reach her goal of enlightenment. In her refusal to get married, she was beaten by the men who wanted her. They “took a lash of iron thorns, and stripping me naked they began to whip me.”<sup>498</sup> To end the fighting (and seeing how her qualities made her a fitting partner to the Emperor), she was eventually given to the Emperor Tri-song-day-tsen, who was a supporter of the spread of Buddhism into Tibet. He would later give her as a consort to Padmasambhava as an offering to his guru, who also then becomes her guru. She then proceeds to deepen her own training, finding her own spiritual consorts, practicing arduous austerity and discipline in solitude for three years in a cave, finally achieving realization and working for the benefit of sentient

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<sup>497</sup> Klein, “On Meeting the Great Bliss Queen: an interview with Anne Klein,” 82.

<sup>498</sup> Keith Dowman, trans. *Sky Dancer: The Secret Life and Songs of the Lady Yeshe Tsogyel* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984) 16, quoted in Anne Klein, “The Great Bliss Queen” in *Buddhism in Practice*, ed. Donald Lopez (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995) 140.

beings. This is the story of the perseverance and strength of a woman, her struggles through her own spiritual development, her “struggles” with men, and ultimately her choice to benefit all beings. This is an important story for women, for as Klein points out, “the qualities of courage, nobility, and perseverance detailed in Yeshe Tsogyal’s biography gave open recognition to women’s capacity for enlightenment and contributed to the prevailing view that women are as suited as men for the most exalted teachings of Buddhism, as well as for Buddhahood itself. Accomplished women might become gurus themselves, as did Yeshey Tsogyal.”<sup>499</sup> This is part of the story that women can learn from her. She gives women a model, an example that women truly are capable of spiritual enlightenment.

Another important aspect of her story is the role of others (her guru, her spiritual consorts, disciples) in her realization. This is an important point for feminists who seek to value relationality but not at the expense of one’s self. Yeshe Tsogyal is a model of one whose spiritual path is marked by her relationships that are transformed by her practice or that transform her in practice. As Klein notes, “In many ways, her story is like that of a hero – alone, overcoming obstacles – even though the principles her story puts forward undermine that model of highly individuated, oppositional accomplishment.”<sup>500</sup> In her story, everyone she comes into contact with - her guru, her consorts, and others who either cause her suffering or come to her for teaching - are all constitutive of her own path, part of her realization. Gross focuses on this point in her analysis of the story of Tsogyal. She writes that “I know of no similar story of a woman

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<sup>499</sup> Klein, “Nondualism and the Great Bliss Queen,” 81.

<sup>500</sup> Klein, “The Great Bliss Queen,” 139.

whose relational life and spiritual journey are so intertwined and support each other so thoroughly.”<sup>501</sup> Gross points out the interesting dynamic between the men and women in Tsogyal’s life and Tsogyal’s spiritual path. First, though some of her most important encounters were with men, not all of them were positive. On the one hand, she found male consorts who would help in her practice and ultimately had her guru Padmasambhava. On the other hand, she also experienced much cruelty and abuse by other men such as her suitors as well as bandits who robbed and raped her. In these cases, Gross notes how she turned such experiences with men either into insight that brought her deeper into her own practice, or used this opportunity to convert these men who ultimately become her disciples. Gross also points out Tsogyal’s relationship with women who became her disciples or others with whom she exchanged advance teachings, each helping the other deepen in their practice. These relationships are important for Gross, because they give an example of the kind of relationship that does not just exhaust women or take away their “sense of self”. Rather these are the kinds of relationship that help women to more fully discover themselves in their interaction with others; that others are constitutive of one’s own growth. For Gross, the lesson from Tsogyal’s life is that it is relationships within the context of spiritual practice which are the most fruitful relationships, and that through spiritual practices, difficult relationships or situations with others can be transformed. Gross writes,

What Tsogyel’s relational biography shows is that relationships carried on in the context of a spiritual discipline can dissolve clinging, grasping, and fixation and need not involve the anxiety, neurotic passion, and jealousy of conventional relationships. So often in conventional relationships, expectations, needs, and neurotic passions cause the

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<sup>501</sup> Gross, “Yeshe Tsogyel: Enlightened Consort, Great Teacher, Female Role Model” in *A Garland of Feminist Reflections*, 272.

relationship to increase rather than to ease suffering. The only way out of this situation is to dissolve the unrealistic expectations surrounding the relationship. These ego-fixations and ego-orientations dissolve through spiritual discipline.”<sup>502</sup>

Having discussed above how practices of mindfulness, and of gentle observation allow one to truly listen and discover one’s own voice, and to be able to acknowledge one’s emotions without reactively acting upon them, one can now see how relationships can be transformed in ways that are not just about one’s own selfish, or as Gross puts it “neurotic”, expectations and needs that cause suffering to one or both parties. Through practice, one can see the dynamic of what is truly going on, and skillfully work towards transforming such relationships into fruitful ones. This is the example that Tsogyal’s life gives us. She brought all her experiences with others – positive and negative – into her practice and allowed them to bring her deeper into the practice. She also allowed her practice to help her transform others and invite them into their own practice. As Gross writes, she is an inspiring and comforting model for women, able to “be a companion to her consorts while not losing her vision of her own reason to live – enlightenment and service.”<sup>503</sup>

### *Her Ritual*

As we turn to her ritual, it is a reminder that she is not just a model to be emulated but rather, that we are already like her, containing all the qualities needed for enlightenment. As Klein mentioned above, she is not just who we want to be, but already who we are. She shows us how we meet ourselves in this deep way. The ritual is a way of embodying and practicing it in ways that can be sustained outside the ritual, reminding

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<sup>502</sup> Gross, “Yeshe Tsogyel: Enlightened Consort, Great Teacher, Female Role Model,” 274-5.

<sup>503</sup> Ibid., 275.

us of who we already are. On the one hand, some may object that the biography of Tsogyal may be too lofty an ideal for women, another “idolatry of ideals” as Klein mentioned above that may be harmful for women. Furthermore, portions of her biography may easily be misread, making her seem like she was passive in the face of abuse or self-sacrificial in ways that were harmful to her. Both Klein and Gross agree that such stories must be interpreted in light of her whole life, particularly her hagiography. For example, where she seems impassive at the abuse of some, Klein writes that she “did not passively endure degradation or worse; the context of this passage emphasizes that she was beyond danger of discomfort because of her actively cultivated realization.”<sup>504</sup> Or Gross clarifies that in stories where Tsogyal offers her body to others, such self-sacrifice “should not be seen as everyday practice or the inevitable lot of a woman. She is nearing Buddhahood by the time it is appropriate for her to take on such self-sacrifice on behalf of others.”<sup>505</sup> In other words, much care and feminist critique must be given as the story of Tsogyal is used as an inspiration and basis for women’s practice. Furthermore, in terms of actually taking on the practice itself, the ritual of the Great Bliss Queen is a fairly advanced practice, as both Klein and Gross mention. It is not for those who are beginning. Rather, practices of mindfulness and other practices that help with women’s self-development and cultivation are necessary. As Klein says,

Yeshey Tsogyel is from the beginning of her ritual regarded as identical with oneself, an expression of the primordial purity and spontaneous excellence of one’s own mind, even if the actual experience and nature of that identity is at first obscure. This is why meeting the Great Bliss Queen is in a very specific sense meeting the most primal part of oneself.

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<sup>504</sup> Klein, “The Great Bliss Queen,” 141.

<sup>505</sup> Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 97. Remember too her argument that the path begins with one’s own self-development and cultivation, not with compassion nor self-sacrifice.

If one does not yet know that aspect of oneself, other practices are required to prepare for this meeting.<sup>506</sup>

The example of her ritual is important, according to Klein and Gross, because it offers an alternative that undercuts the usual dualistic models that predominantly feature male figures and imagery. For Klein, the ritual of the Great Bliss Queen demonstrates the presence of a female divinity and positive meditations on the female body as divine metaphor. Such are important elements in undoing dualistic tendencies that have resulted in patriarchy.<sup>507</sup> Gross, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of the balance of the masculine and the feminine and the search to go beyond towards nondualism, as the most fruitful aspect of the ritual for her. She writes,

Being introduced to practice of the *sadhana* of Vajrayoginī – felt empowerment through having access to this *sadhana* involving a female myth-model...I suggested that though this spiritual practice had not been designed to solve the problems inherent in Western patriarchal religious symbolism, it had done so for me because of the “healing power of non-patriarchal, non-sexist anthropomorphic symbolism.”<sup>508</sup>

Further on, she says,

This *upaya*, this skillful method of initiating me into a meditation-liturgy connected with a female *yidam*, restored the balance of masculine and feminine principles in a way that nothing else could have. It not only restored the feminine in the dyadic unity; it also restored the masculine.<sup>509</sup>

The ritual itself is a good example of many of the key points made by both Klein and Gross. It shows how a practice is supported by the key Buddhist doctrines of emptiness and Buddha nature but the goal is to have an experience, a realization of such doctrines through the practice. Furthermore, at its center is a female deity and female

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<sup>506</sup> Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, 172.

<sup>507</sup> Klein, “Nondualism and the Great Bliss Queen,” 74.

<sup>508</sup> Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 140. A more explicit discussion of her practice of Vajrayoginī can be found in “I will never forget to visualize that Vajrayoginī is my body and mind” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 3/1 (Spring 1987): 77-89.

<sup>509</sup> Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy* 205.

body that remind women not only of their spiritual capacity but also of the value of women's bodies. Ultimately, it is the kind of practice that can lead a woman to a strong yet interconnected self, merging her personal story with that of the Great Bliss Queen, who ultimately is herself.

The ritual itself is made up of three parts. It begins by taking refuge in the Great Bliss Queen, followed by a visualization of one's surroundings and one's self as the Great Bliss Queen. This second segment makes up the bulk of the ritual and will be the focus here. Lastly, there is the dedication of merit for the benefit of all sentient beings. Visualization of the Great Bliss Queen begins with the recitation/chanting of "ah". This seemingly simple practice of taking a breath and slowly releasing while chanting "ah" can be the place where one can already begin to have a glimmer of an experience of a strong centered self within a matrix of relationships. On the one hand, the chanting of "ah" is meant to "produce a centering effect on the body, as well as a calming and clarifying effect on the mind."<sup>510</sup> Effects such as these on both body and mind can be helpful in developing a stronger sense of self for women. More importantly, "ah" is meant to be a reminder of the doctrine of emptiness and Buddha nature (or primordial purity) that undergirds the practice and empowers the practitioner. It is the belief in one's empty nature, one's "pure nature" free of defilements, that one shares in the nature of the Buddhas that one can visualize oneself as the Great Bliss Queen, and discover that this is already oneself, and also the nature of others. This is the sacred outlook that Gross talks about. It is such a view of the world, and of oneself and others, that can lead to wise

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<sup>510</sup> Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, 173.

compassionate action in the world. As Klein writes, "...the practitioner is not rejecting the world but understanding it and thus seeing more clearly. And the overriding purpose for seeking this understanding is to be able to act effectively in the world for the benefit of others."<sup>511</sup> All this is invoked, remembered as one slowly chants "ah" and enters into the ritual.

Just as sound both emerges from silence and is an expression of it, just as thoughts emerge from primordial clarity and are a manifestation of it, so in the course of the ritual, visualizations appear from empty space. These visualized images are understood as manifestations of the emptiness or primordial purity of the birthless matrix that is the mind's essence.<sup>512</sup>

As the practitioner becomes more settled, the mind more calm and capable of greater clarity, one begins to visualize the mandala and the Great Bliss Queen, probing even deeper into realizing the emptiness and purity of all things through such visualizations. First, one visualizes the mandala which is particular interest for women for it uses very specific female imagery, the womb and female organs, to represent both wisdom and compassion. One visualizes oneself in a kind of "mandala-mansion", symbolized by a circle, one's residence where one finds the potent purity of all things. This "mandala-mansion" is usually associated with the womb. As Klein explains, "[t]he expanse of reality is a womb, not only in the sense that it makes all change and worldly activity possible, but because in realizing this reality, one is born as an enlightened being."<sup>513</sup> As one enters more deeply into the mandala, one visualizes what resembles the "star of David", each triangle signifying the female organ as the opening to enlightenment. It is a reminder of how wisdom and compassion always go together, and

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<sup>511</sup> Klein, "Nondualism and the Great Bliss Queen," 90.

<sup>512</sup> Ibid., *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, 174.

<sup>513</sup> Ibid., "Nondualism and the Great Bliss Queen," 90.



how “emptiness and conventional objects do not cancel each other out but abide in each other.”<sup>514</sup> Ultimately, Klein says, “Her womb and other female organs are emblematic of enlightened wisdom and the state of Buddhahood itself, and are among the most important symbols associated with the Great Bliss Queen. We see here the valorization, not just of female imagery in general, but of female body imagery....”<sup>515</sup> This can be an important visualization for women whose bodies and very nature are usually seen as inferior to men. Furthermore, such visualization which brings together the nature of the mind through symbols of the female body, may also be helpful in undoing some of the split between mind and body that has supported the inferior view of women.

Moreover, Klein writes, “...each aspect of the Great Bliss Queen embodies primordial purity or emptiness. Ritual identification with her is meant to manifest clarity with respect to the primordial purity and spontaneous effulgence of the practitioner’s own mind and its innate awareness.”<sup>516</sup> For example, she writes about the knife seen as cutting through subject-object dualism to see emptiness, or the drum with two skulls that symbolize the nondualism of samsara and nirvana, another implication of the doctrine of emptiness, her two hands as signifying wisdom and compassion. She is also seen as cheerful, smiling or laughing and of course, as her title suggests, she is blissful. This bliss comes from recognizing the true nature of all beings as emptiness or primordial purity. As Klein explains

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<sup>514</sup> Klein, “Nondualism and the Great Bliss Queen,” 92. Klein also notes that “meditation teachers emphasize that compassionate and appropriate engagement is a quality of mind that always inheres in a wisdom consciousness, just a warmth inhere in fire.”

<sup>515</sup> Ibid., *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, 160.

<sup>516</sup> Ibid., 182.

...her bliss expresses her freedom from the limitations of dualistic thinking. The opposition between self and other dissolves into her compassion. The opposition between conditioned and unconditioned dissolves in her wisdom; and the opposition between ordinary and enlightened dissolves in the recognition that her enlightened mind is one's own. Her bliss is an expression of being released from the limitations of these dualisms; her passion is to share this with others.<sup>517</sup>

Hence, bliss comes with the realization of emptiness, of breaking free from dualistic tendencies. Particularly for women, it comes as such dualistic tendencies that have placed her as secondary or inferior are broken for her, and she realizes that she herself shares in this nature. She is the Great Bliss Queen. This is the last step of the visualization, to imagine the actual Great Bliss Queen coming and dissolving into oneself. ; her wisdom and her compassion flowing into one's own; they are one's own.

During the visualization, one is usually chanting with others, chanting the liturgy, chanting the description of the appearance of the Great Bliss Queen which one is visualizing. For Klein, such chanting is another element where one can experience the notion of being interrelated with others without losing one's own self, an experience of emptiness and dependent arising. As she describes it,

[c]hanting with others, one is embedded in a social matrix of practitioners and a resonant matrix of sound. The voices of others melt into the experience of self as one kinesthetically experiences the vibration of one's own voice, which one cannot separate from the surrounding sound of others. One is both an individual and part of a unity, and yet not entirely either. The experience of chanting is thus well in tune with a sense of oneself as dependently constructed yet singular, and with selves as interrelational yet independent.<sup>518</sup>

Such chanting, such practice in a group, shows the importance of relationality and community that both Klein and Gross have argued for. Furthermore, it becomes another embodied practice through which the practitioner can access an experience of emptiness, an alternative way of experiencing herself and others, even as she goes deeper into the

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<sup>517</sup> Klein, "On Meeting the Great Bliss Queen: an interview with Anne Klein," 82.

<sup>518</sup> Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, 175-6.

ritual of the Great Bliss Queen. This could be another place where she experiences the coming together of wisdom and compassion, in the mingling of sounds and voices whose sounds are well placed within a matrix of chanting and visualization. This could be another access point to break such dualistic tendencies that can result in bliss and in wise and compassionate action towards oneself and others.

At the very end of the ritual, she dedicates the merit of the practice for the benefit of all sentient beings. Then she comes out of practice and tries to go about her daily activities imbued with the vision of the purity of all things, and hopefully, reminded that hers is the nature of the Great Bliss Queen.

In the end, the ritual of the Great Bliss Queen, with its chanting, visualization, practices of mindfulness are all meant to bring the practitioner to a realization of wisdom and compassion; to see from the “sacred outlook”, the nondual perspective that sees the primordial purity of all things. As Klein suggests, its liturgy “is an excellent resource for exploring how the more explicitly philosophical expressions of Buddhism, which in their most rigorous form were accessible to a relative minority of Tibetan Buddhists, were assimilated to widely known styles of practice.”<sup>519</sup> In other words, it is a good example of how doctrine/philosophy is interdependent with practice; how each is understood, realized or deepened through the other. In particular, for women, it is a way for women to experience a strong yet interdependent self; to begin to cultivate a strong and “healthy” sense of self that realizes her connection with others which leads to her compassionate action. For one, as Klein claims, “[t]he practices of chanting, calm, and concentration all

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<sup>519</sup> Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, 151.

assume that the subject has depth as well as breadth, motion as well as ideas, and that these qualities provide personal coherence and power.”<sup>520</sup> A ritual that cultivates such qualities is helpful for women who feel diffuseness or a sense of loss. It provides them with stability, clear thinking, and a groundedness that is necessary to begin to discover one’s own voice, to find the underlying identity that is more essential than the ordinary sense of their identity and its components like gender.

More specifically, visualizing a female deity and a female body has even deeper implications for women. To see a woman and a woman’s body as symbolizing enlightenment and bliss is a reminder of how women have the same capacity for enlightenment as men, and that they too are inherently pure, breaking dualistic bonds that have left them inferior. She is the Great Bliss Queen and she has the same capacities. Such visualization can serve as a helpful reminder to women of their great capacities; that they must begin with themselves, and empower them to break out of the image of passivity and helplessness that may have defined them. As Klein says, “[f]rom a feminist perspective, the fact that a female form and specific body imagery is used to transcend polarities is significant. Not only is the degrading subject-object dichotomy questioned, but the ‘passivity’ with which women are frequently associated is reframed.”<sup>521</sup>

Klein writes, “In her ritual context she [Tsogyel] is not a mask; she is not a role model. She is an expression of one’s own capacity and potential. To meet her in this way means, for Western women, to possess and come to terms with their own story. It is also to recognize that, however fine or tragic our stories are, they cannot define us completely.

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<sup>520</sup> Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, 194.

<sup>521</sup> Ibid., “Nondualism and the Great Bliss Queen,” 93.

There are other dimensions of embodied subjective experience.”<sup>522</sup> To engage in the ritual is to begin to meet the most fundamental and powerful part of ourselves; for women to see their own capacity and potential. Furthermore, within the ritual, they find the power to transform their own selves by identifying, ultimately merging and dissolving with the image of the Great Bliss Queen. At the same time, the ritual also cultivates compassion for others, seeing the primordial purity of all things and therefore remembering the context of the ritual as benefiting all sentient beings. Once one has the clarity of mind, having seen the emptiness and primordial purity of all things, then “one’s real purpose – which is not autonomy but manifold beneficial activity – can be acted out. One’s relationship to others becomes more than ever one of responsibility and profound care, while at the same time one’s own personal power increases as never before.”<sup>523</sup> In other words, the practice is never meant for individual or selfish purposes only; it is not meant to isolate one from the world or others but is a foundation for compassionate action in the world, by starting with one’s own self, one’s own mind.

However, Klein does warn that such a ritual, such identification with the Great Bliss Queen, must be adapted by Western women with some caution. Already cognizant of women’s tendencies to “lose themselves”, practices of identification such as these may lead to even further loss of women’s own identity, of their own story. Hence, Klein argues that Western practitioners must be careful not to lose their story, and in the ritual

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<sup>522</sup> Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, 193.

<sup>523</sup> Ibid., “Nondualism and the Great Bliss Queen,” 97.

of the Great Bliss Queen, to identify “with her inessential essence in order to discover it in oneself and part of one’s own identity.”<sup>524</sup> In the end, Klein writes,

Among the most stimulating challenges for Western Buddhists is to find a way to integrate personal narrative and historical specificity into the nonconceptual universals considered the goals of much of Buddhist practice. In the midst of negotiating this delicate intersection of uniqueness and connectedness, it is crucial that an engagement with ‘traditions’ such as those of Tibetan Buddhism does not tip the balance by obstructing personal creativity and inspiration. Conversely, particularity is crucial, but it is important not to get lost in one’s particulars, or to overidentify with them. There is a middle way where meet the two narratives engaged throughout this book: how feminists and Buddhists can expand each others’ narrative horizons, and what Western women practicing in Buddhist traditions might gain and where they might exercise caution.<sup>525</sup>

## V. Conclusion

In the end, both Klein and Gross argue that a dialogue between Buddhism and feminism is important particularly around the issue of selfhood that has plagued many Western feminists. Buddhist discussions of analysis of self, using the doctrines of no-self and emptiness are helpful for women in search of a powerful yet relational self. Though the category of gender has never been used in Buddhist analysis and notions of “no-self” may be misunderstood as the problematic “selflessness” of women, Klein and Gross argue that the doctrines are helpful in critiquing wrong notions of “self” or identity that have been harmful to women, particularly identities tied to patriarchal impositions that have left women in an inferior position. Such doctrines can be used to demonstrate how gender roles and identities are merely social constructs and projections. Moreover, emptiness as thusness or Buddha nature, gives a more positive image for women; that they are not mere obstacles to enlightenment but have the same spiritual capacities as men and hence cannot be treated in any kind of inferior or secondary way. This is the

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<sup>524</sup> Klein, *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, 188.

<sup>525</sup> Ibid., 193.

kind of nondual outlook, a “sacred outlook” that Vajrayana Buddhism tries to develop. This kind of outlook can help women find a more positive way of relating with themselves as well as with their bodies or emotions which have been associated with them and seen as inferior to the mind and reason that are usually associated as “male traits.” Such an outlook shows the interrelation of mind and body, of emotion with reason (or wisdom), and of finding the balance between the “masculine” and “feminine” principles, and bringing all of this into the spiritual path.

These doctrines and the vision of emptiness and interdependence are realized through meditation practices. It is through such practices that women can cultivate the qualities of mind necessary to develop and experience a strong and healthy sense of self that is also deeply connected to others, undoing the harmful dualism upon which patriarchy is based. In the discussions above, practices of silence and mindfulness that cultivate calm, concentration, and focus are helpful in developing and experiencing a more stable, centered, grounded and stronger sense of self. In such mindfulness and the beginning of insight into emptiness, a kind of gentle awareness is cultivated that leads to a healthy self-acceptance, able to listen to the multiplicity of one’s voices, see the spaciousness and fluidity of one’s identity, without fear, judgment and condemnation. It is such practices then that can be the foundation for the development of a strong sense of self for women, able to critique the patriarchal voices they’ve heard and begin to hear their own voice.

As insight into emptiness is developed through such practices, compassion for others also develops. Hence, just as a strong sense of self develops, a stronger sense of

one's connection to others develops as well. Just as one was able to hear and honor one's own voice, one is now better able to hear and honor the voices of others, letting their compassion be more effective, less clingy and clouded with one's own needs and expectations. Furthermore, having cultivated the "sacred outlook" through practice, one sees how the nature of oneself and of the other are similar. This allows women and men to care for others in the same way that they care for themselves. In other words, the initial introspection on oneself does not lead to being closed to others, but leads to healthier relationships with others based on one's spiritual practice. This is one of the key points in the teaching on the interdependence of wisdom (of emptiness) and compassion; that one's own liberation is tied with that of others, or in this case, one's own self-development is tied to that of others, and others are constitutive of one's own liberation, but it must start with oneself. This teaching is an important reminder for women who want to develop a strong yet relational self, in order to balance both love for self and love for the other so that she does not lose herself in her compassion for others. For both Klein and Gross argue that compassion can only be enacted by having the wisdom of emptiness which allows the person to be grounded in their self, in their very center, clearly seeing the situation which allows for "dispassionate" (not ruled by disturbing emotions such as desire or attachment) and wise compassion for others (seeing their nature as the same as one's own). Furthermore, given the predilection of women to focus too much on others, both Klein and Gross remind women that self-care is just as important as compassion for others. Klein reminds women that they must include themselves in the circle of care while Gross reminds them that some level of self-



development and self-liberation is necessary for effective compassion for others that is free of aggression or may be harmful to oneself or to another.

Both give the example of the Great Bliss Queen as a model of wisdom and compassion, but also whose ritual can bring about such an experience of the strong sense of self that is relational and compassionate. Her story can be used skillfully to point to how relationships are constitutive of developing one's own sense of self and deepening one's own practice, and how one's practice can transform and purify one's relationships. Furthermore, her ritual gives women an example not only of a female deity but also a very positive valuation of the female body, again emphasizing the equal potential of women, ultimately able to visualize herself as the Great Bliss Queen. The cheerful, calm, blissful, wise and compassionate Queen is oneself. This is not a model that is another impossible ideal, but depicts capacities one already has. All that she needs is already within herself. Such a model and ritual can go a long way in undoing many of the negative views of women that have been projected upon them, and empowering their own transformation towards being strong yet relational selves. It is through such a practice that the transformation of the self happens.

This insistence on the centrality of spiritual practice in the realization of doctrine and for effective compassion and transformed self and relationships illustrates how doctrine, spiritual practice (worship), and moral action are all interdependent. On the one hand, the doctrines of wisdom and compassion are what empower and inform the practices, but it is through the them that one actually realizes or has an experience of such wisdom and compassion. This shows the relationship of doctrine with spiritual practice.

Furthermore, this spiritual practice that promotes the transformation of the self and liberation of all beings also becomes the foundation for moral/social action. As one is transformed or one more fully realizes one's empty nature, one sees one's interrelation with all else and the purity of all things. Such a transformation also allows for "clear seeing" which may help one to undo harmful patterns in relationships. Such a vision, cultivated through spiritual practice, can be the fuel that lights one's action for others in the world, so that the transformation of oneself can truly lead to the transformation of the whole world. This, for Gross, is one of the challenges to Buddhism today, making the "language of meditation socially relevant." She says, "[t]hat is a fusion of spirituality and feminism for me."<sup>526</sup>

In the end, it is such meditation practices that Gross and Klein argue are the biggest contribution of Buddhism to feminism and the feminist search for the strong yet relational self. However, such meditation practices still cannot just be taken wholesale, in order to be helpful to women. As Leah Weiss-Ekstrom once argued, just as feminists have proposed that doctrines and scriptures must be analyzed for their impact on the experience and lived reality of women, so too must spiritual practices be addressed, asking how they support or undermine women's practical and spiritual needs.<sup>527</sup> Moreover, they must once again be skillfully adapted to address those needs. This is what we find in Gross and Klein's work. Their discussions on mindfulness and other meditation practices show how they can address the particular need of women searching

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<sup>526</sup> Gross, "The Questions that won't go away," 116.

<sup>527</sup> Leah Weiss Ekstrom in a response to my presentation on "Christian Feminist Spirituality for Justice" at the New England American Academy of Religion in New Jersey, March 2009.

for a strong yet relational self. At the same time, they also give caution and suggestions on how to continually make changes cognizant of the issues of women. For example, Klein mentioned the importance of personal stories, of emphasizing self-care and the importance of interpersonal interactions within one's practice. Gross, on the other hand, mentioned the need to emphasize how self-development must come before compassion, to have more female dharma teachers and ultimately to revalue the third refuge, the sangha filled with the feminist value of community, nurturance, communication, relationship and friendship. In this way, spiritual practice itself can truly be not just a personal or individuated experience, but one of an interrelated self transformed within and through a community of practice.

**Chapter Four: Comparing Christian and Buddhist Feminists critiques  
and reconstructions of *kenosis* and emptiness:  
mutual learning through comparison and dialogue**

**I. Introduction**

According to Anne Carr, there are three main tasks/agendas in Christian feminist theology: (1) a critique of the past, (2) the recovery of the lost voices of women, and (3) revisioning Christian categories to include the experience of women.<sup>528</sup> Having surveyed the feminist reconstructions of *kenosis* and emptiness within their respective traditions, in this chapter, I will explore how the three tasks above can be enriched through comparison, seeing how Buddhist feminist reconstructions of emptiness can be helpful in Christian women's critique and revisioning of *kenosis* and their search for a relational self. In this way, Christian feminist theology is enriched through dialogue and comparison and becomes an example of the kind of theology that Frank Clooney, as we saw in the introduction, argues for: a theology that is "interreligious, comparative, dialogical and confessional."

Comparative theology is theology, an act of "faith seeking understanding," through dialogue and learning from other religious traditions. As Clooney says,

Comparative theology – comparative and theological beginning to end – marks acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions. This learning is sought for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition.<sup>529</sup>

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<sup>528</sup> Anne Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) 7-8.

<sup>529</sup> Francis X. Clooney, SJ *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) 10.

Hence, the comparative method that will be operative in this Christian feminist reconstruction of *kenosis* begins with an attitude, a stance that there is something to be learned from the other, of taking seriously the religious other – the way they understand the world, the human condition and human persons, and their relationship with ultimate reality. If one begins with such a stance, then the comparative method can only begin with a serious look into the truth that this other brings while also recognizing that one's understanding of the other is always to some extent also conditioned by one's own tradition.

For Clooney, one's entrance into the truth of the other begins with reading their texts which, in a sense, serves as a window into their world. He writes,

In my view, the foremost prospect for a fruitful comparative theology is the reading of texts....If we wish to learn and be changed by what we learn, we are unlikely to find another practice as reliably rich and fruitful as such reading....comparative practice occurs when *acts* of reading have been undertaken, as we read back and forth across religious borders, examining multiple texts, individually but then too in light of one another.<sup>530</sup>

This kind of reading is not about finding information that confirms already one's preconceived ideas and conclusions but must be done in an attitude of openness and vulnerability so that the truth of the other can truly lay a claim on you. This attitude is how a comparativist can begin to partially overcome their otherness to the text and the other tradition; for a major challenge in a comparative reading is how an “outsider” can begin to have an “insider's” understanding of the other religion. Engaged reading – with such openness and vulnerability – must allow for the reader to be transformed and led into the world of other. Reading then is a kind of practice, particularly the “self-

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<sup>530</sup> Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders*, 58.

effacement before the text,” of shaping the self to allow the truth of the other to transform and shape the reader.<sup>531</sup>

This humble practice changes readers, as they are inevitably drawn into the worlds brought to life in their reading. Readers who are willing to take this risk become competent to read religiously and, upon receiving the riches of the great texts, they also become able to speak, act, and write with spiritual insight and power.<sup>532</sup>

Hence, such a transformed self can have heightened awareness or sensitivity when they go back to their own religious tradition. Revisiting one’s own tradition again, the reader can come to it with “new eyes” – new angles, new questions, and new ways of looking at it. The reader is led back to reflect on one’s own truth in light of truth found in the other – and maybe to look for it in places which have been neglected and forgotten (an important task in feminist theology itself). Hence, one’s reflections can lead to the retrieval of forgotten aspects within one’s own tradition or make a new analysis, re-assessed due to the comparison. Such comparison then can help the reader to re-write Christian theology out of this new comparative context, offer new ways to understand conundrums within one’s tradition and challenge or problematize other aspects of it.

For, as Clooney says,

...the comparative process reaches fruition in the transformation of theologians’ consciousness and theological practice. Intelligent and attentive scholars become able to theologize within their own traditions in a way that neither blocks thinking across religious boundaries nor interprets reductively the similarities that become obvious.<sup>533</sup>

Clooney believes it is best to be selective and not try to cover the entirety of traditions. He focuses more on theologizing by way of particular examples and asserts

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<sup>531</sup> It is interesting to note here that such a description of the comparative method sounds appropriately kenotic and relates to the issue of self and other which is central to this dissertation. This point will be further elaborated in the next chapter.

<sup>532</sup> Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders*, 58.

<sup>533</sup> Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, 9.

that “[t]heology becomes interreligious when we actually take examples seriously.”<sup>534</sup> In this chapter, I will look at the examples of Western Buddhist feminists and their retrieval of the doctrine of emptiness as a resource for Christian feminist theologians’ revisioning of *kenosis*. I will focus on how the reading of Buddhist feminist “texts” can challenge and enrich Christian feminist discussions regarding *kenosis* and the search for a relational anthropology. In particular, my engagement with the Buddhist doctrines of the human condition and human person (“no-self”, “emptiness”, “dependent arising” and “Buddha nature”), will inform and challenge the Christian understanding of the human person (sin, image of God), help Christians find new ways of re-envisioning the human (as Body of Christ and as a community of believers), and help Christian feminists re-think *kenosis* (of what one gives up and what one gains) in the process of “self-emptying.” I will also look at how the understanding of *kenosis* in the ethical and spiritual life of Christians can be enriched by the Buddhist feminist discussions regarding wisdom and compassion as well as the importance of meditation in order to realize emptiness. Specifically, the discussion about the story and ritual of the Great Bliss Queen brings me back to the story and traditions around Mary as a continuing resource for feminist theology, and particularly in the retrieval of *kenosis*. Ultimately, my aim is to contribute to Christian theological anthropology by bringing in the “interruption” of another religious tradition, Buddhism, in order to see how key Buddhist doctrines and practices may inform aspects of Christian feminism and theology, primarily in their task to “correlate the central and liberating themes of biblical and Christian tradition with the experience of women in the

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<sup>534</sup> Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, 14-5.

contemporary situation,” in this case, the specific theme of *kenosis* and relational anthropology.<sup>535</sup>

Having seen what Christian feminists can learn from Buddhist feminist discussions on emptiness and spiritual practice, the second section will focus on a reflection on these Buddhist feminist discussions in light of some of the differences between the two traditions, continuing and deepening the dialogue between these two traditions. Hopefully in the process, I did not water down either tradition but show particularly how Christian theologizing can be deepened and challenged by Buddhist analysis and vice versa.

In the end, one of the great challenges of such a comparison is analogous to the concern about the relationship of the self and other – how can I relate with the other and leave their otherness intact but how do I also do theology in a way that does not lead to a ‘loss of self’ but a discovery of a transformed self through dialogue with the other? There is a need then for a respect for the particularities of each tradition even as one opens one’s tradition to the truth of the other, making one vulnerable and open to change and transformation. This, as we saw, was Boeve’s concern in Chapter 1. Despite this challenge, I hope to demonstrate that comparative work can develop solidarity among women, in their common suffering and their search for an empowered self, and how religions can continue to be resources of hope and transformation for their own believers as well as for each other and the world. As Karma Lekshe Tsomo wrote,

Buddhist and Christian women have much to share and much to learn from one another, especially in terms of meditation and social action....By networking in their local communities, women spiritual practitioners can provide each other with encouragement

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<sup>535</sup> Anne Carr, 8-9.



and support for the spiritual values they share and learn to appreciate their differences. By developing solidarity on an international level, women can effect great benefit in the world through a sharing and mutual infusion of spiritual values directed at personal and social change. By bridging religious differences, women set an example for the people in the world to emulate in overcoming strife and discovering commonalities in the human heritage on the deepest spiritual level.<sup>536</sup>

## **II. What Christian feminists can learn from Buddhism: The reconstruction of *kenosis* and the vision of a new humanity through dialogue with Buddhist feminists**

According to Gregory Ornatowski, the doctrine of emptiness has taken a variety of meanings throughout Buddhist history and its translation into English has included expressions such as “emptiness,” “nothingness,” “nonsubstantiality,” “relativity,” and “voidness.” Furthermore, it has been described as referring to a “(1) religious attitude, (2) focus of meditation, (3) manner of ethical action, (4) statement about reality, such as corresponding to the Buddhist notion of the interrelated nature of all existing things.”<sup>537</sup> In the previous chapters, I attempted to show this depth and breadth of the meaning and function of emptiness (Chapter 1), and how American Buddhist feminists have taken the depth and richness of this doctrine to articulate a new vision of self and human community that takes into consideration their particular experience as women, and the suffering of women in society (Chapter 3). For example, emptiness was wielded as a tool to break down the dualistic constructs of male and female binaries that saw women as inferior or weak, and to challenge the “givenness” of gendered social roles where women end up becoming subordinate to men. Furthermore, emptiness as thusness reinforced a more positive image for women reminding them of their equal status with men, possessing the same capacity for spiritual enlightenment and having the nature of the

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<sup>536</sup> Karma Lekshe Tsomo, “Comparing Buddhist and Christian Women’s Experiences” in *Buddhist Women Across Cultures: Realizations*, 258.

<sup>537</sup> Ornatowski, 93-94.

Buddha. In the end, understanding emptiness as dependent origination, these feminists offered a vision of humanity as an interdependent matrix of relations, where the self is constituted by its relationship with others without being subsumed in these relationships. This vision helps support the search for a strong and empowered self as well as mutual love and giving in relationships, the kind of reciprocal relationships desired by the Buddhist feminists discussed in the previous chapter.

The Christian feminists' discussion regarding *kenosis* centered on the correction and re-interpretation of the doctrine in light of the experience of women (Chapter Two). The challenge facing the Christian feminists was to show the continued relevance of such a doctrine in the face of the critique that it continues the dependence or abuse of women by its insistence on an uncritical command of self-sacrificial love. Sarah Coakley and Mary Grey re-focused the discussion in terms of understanding *kenosis* as finding personal empowerment, as seeing strength and power in vulnerability and questioning the assumptions regarding male and female in terms of dominance-submission or active-passive in the spiritual life as well as in society. In all this, there is the continued insistence of not losing the language of dependence or vulnerability seen as central to Christian discipleship and the power of the cross and resurrection (Coakley) as well as the desire to find empowering relationships, new ways of being community to fight the fragmentation in society today (Grey). The next section then will outline how Buddhist feminists' articulations of self and community in light of the doctrine of emptiness can help illumine, deepen or challenge the Christian feminist articulations of *kenosis* and the relational self.

### ***Kenosis and the Human (vision of self within the human community)***

The Christian feminist discussions regarding *kenosis* highlighted the problem of the interpretation of sin as pride and attributing this sin more to men than to women. On the other hand, if women's sin is that of selflessness, then the call for *kenosis* understood as self-sacrificial only exacerbates women's loss of self, particularly in their relationships. Hence, the Christian feminist reconstruction of *kenosis* entailed a re-orientation of the notions of dependence and vulnerability and re-contextualized these as postures in the spiritual life that can bring empowerment and a stronger sense of self. They also re-interpreted the notion of divine *kenosis* to mean the "giving up of worldly (patriarchal power)" and Jesus' whole life as a critique to such dominating and abusive power. In light of the Buddhist feminist discussions of "no-self" and "emptiness," how can these reconstructions of the understanding of sin and *kenosis* be deepened or strengthened?

On the doctrine of "no-self" and the doctrine of sin. First, the doctrine of no-self and the analysis of the human tendency to reify the self or to establish an independent, autonomous substantial self resonates with Christian interpretations of sin and the Fall; that is, our independent, autonomous, self-sufficient stance in the face of God, a refusal to accept "creaturehood." However, this insight into sin as pride can be deepened by the doctrine of no-self in its insistence that this reification leads to individuation and separation, a sense of independence, autonomy and dualistic tendencies that leads to suffering, including the suffering of women as Gross argued in the previous chapter. Individuation and separation have led to the dualistic tendencies that in turn have resulted

in perceptions of women as inferior, emotional, and passive while men are seen to be superior, rational and active. These erroneous perceptions resulted in the subordination of women in society as well as in the Church and many other religious institutions. For this reason, Catherine Keller writes that “separation and sexism have functioned together as the most fundamental self-shaping assumptions of our culture. That any subject, human or non-human, is what it is only in clear division from everything else; and that men, by nature and by right, exercise the primary prerogatives of civilization: these two presuppositions collaborate like two eyes to sustain a single worldview.”<sup>538</sup> This insight shows how subordination or dominance over others is part of the sinful situation of the world today, part of the “ought not be” that must be fought if Christians are to come closer to the vision of the fullness of humanity.

Moreover, as these feminist Buddhists have also pointed out, the doctrine of ‘no-self’ goes beyond the notion of a strong, powerful, autonomous self, but points to all false notions of self; of all harmful modes of being which includes selflessness. Hence, the doctrine of ‘no-self’ applies as well to the objection of many Christian feminists of the insufficiency of understanding sin as pride while women’s sin is selflessness. As Rita Gross has argued, someone who is too independent or too ‘proud’ and another who is too dependent or too ‘meek’ both suffer from ego or the delusion of Self. Hence the doctrine of ‘no-self’ applies to any kind of pattern, any mode of being that clouds the true nature of the Self which is not a permanent, autonomous Self. In light of this, one could extend the notion of sin to cover any pattern or mode of being that obscures the true nature of

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<sup>538</sup> Catherine Keller, *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self*, 2.

persons and inhibits the proper relationship with others and with God – which can either come from the stance of too much autonomy or too much dependence. Given this understanding, *kenosis* can then be re-interpreted as giving up both wrong modes of being, of giving up the false and sinful self (of either pride or selflessness) understood as any sense of self that does not equate with the dignity of the human person, any mode or state that leads to indignity or the diminishment of one's self or the other, and realizing that both modes (of pride or selflessness) lead to suffering of both one's self as well as the other. *Kenosis*, in this sense then, is a more nuanced understanding of the “loss of self” as a giving up of wrong (sinful) notions of self so that this can give way to a fuller, more empowered self, who is in right relationship with the self, God and the other.

The Doctrine of emptiness and Kenosis as “letting go” of limited gendered perceptions of self and God. In light of this insight, one of the aspects that must be given up is the dualistic tendency that leave women in a subordinate position, as mentioned above. Helpful in this endeavor is the Buddhist feminists' use of the doctrine of emptiness as an epistemological tool to break out of such tendencies to show the social constructedness of hierarchies and of social patterns that seem “natural.” The doctrine of emptiness can further deepen and support such analysis of social construction by showing the “empty nature” of all things, of how they lack inherent existence and are not as we think they are. We do not see them in their ‘thusness’ but only in our delusional, self-grasping, sinful view. Such a doctrine then can help to question the reified notions of “male” and “female,” “masculine” and “feminine,” and the way that such categories limit our perception of another to just one aspect of who they are, reifying them by seeing

them only through the lens of that one aspect which cannot capture their full reality.<sup>539</sup>

Such an interpretation of emptiness applied to gender critiques could enrich, for example, Coakley's claims about the need for "mental patterns of unmastery" so that we can get to a deeper knowledge of God and the other while having the humility to realize that the depth and richness of God and the other cannot be fully captured. In this case, one does not end up reifying or limiting one's perception of others to labels such as "male" and "female", and one can begin the "unmastery" of gender categories that obscure the realization of the full reality of the other.

Though many feminists have already spoken of how dualistic male-female, masculine-feminine, God-world thinking has been harmful to women, other oppositional trends are disclosed through the use of emptiness that can soften some of the dualistic tendencies that have led to oppressive thinking and action. For example, to think of "oppressed" and "oppressor," of "poor" and "rich," "victim," and "victimizer" is not to say that there is no truth to such an analysis that many insist is necessary to fight for justice, but in this process, one can miss a deeper dimension of humanity, and how all of us are somehow involved in both poles. For example, are women just "oppressed" and never "oppressor," just "victim" and not also somehow a "victimizer?" The doctrine of emptiness can serve to soften such hard, dualistic, reductionistic, polemical boundaries and move one to think beyond such categories to see the fullness of persons. Tempered in this way, there would be less temptation to romanticize the "poor" and demonize the

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<sup>539</sup> Such an analysis need not be limited to gender, but also look to race, class, even religion – any "other" that one faces and look at the factors that hinder the full appreciation of the humanity of the other, limiting them instead to just one aspect of who they are.

“rich” or to sentimentalize women as victims and strip them of their agency. This, as we have seen, was of particular concern for both Sarah Coakley and Mary Grey who kept insisting that women are not just dependent and hold no power over others, or that they were just victims and always “innocent.” In this case, the doctrine of emptiness can help temper those tendencies to sentimentalize women, projecting an illusion of women and women’s experience (whether as “too good” or “too bad”).

Regarding questions of power, such nondualistic and nonreductionist tendencies could also be helpful in understanding Coakley’s and Grey’s re-interpretation of divine *kenosis* and notions of power. Instead of just accepting the usual association of power with domination and male power, and dependence with weakness and femaleness, both of them argue for an understanding of a “power” that is “vulnerable” and gentle yet still empowering, and for an understanding of the posture of vulnerability and dependence that is empowering. Only in giving up such simplistic, reductionist interpretations of power and vulnerability can one begin to appreciate the interpretations of Coakley and Grey who are intimating the very heart of the Christian life: the paradox of the cross and resurrection, of as Coakley said, a “strength made perfect in weakness”; articulating ways of “redeeming” such values of the Christian life for both women and men. This cannot be done without giving up these dualistic and reductionist understandings of the dynamics of power and vulnerability.

Furthermore, one could deepen other analyses of other characteristics associated with male and female such as the question of agency/activity and passivity/receptivity and whether these characteristics are the exclusive domain of one or the other. One

example that could be subjected to this analysis would be the perception that the giving of oneself to another (again another way of equating *kenosis* with *agape*) comes more naturally to women, and hence they are to be exemplars of such self-giving. This, for example, has been the main argument of John Paul II in his various writings about women, particularly in *Mulieris Dignitatem* where he writes about the special nature of woman. In light of the analysis above, one could ask whether there is such a “special nature” of woman. Of course, John Paul II is careful to clarify that self-giving is the call of everyone, and yet his writings reflect that women are more “naturally” able to answer and live out this call in their lives. However, does such a view then reify and trap women into such self-giving actions that lead more to their suffering and loss of self? Does such a view diminish the view of women by not taking into consideration other aspects of her person that are not tied to her biological make-up or to how she is perceived to complement the male? Furthermore, does the notion of this “special nature” of women obscure the universality of this call, that all of humanity is called to live this out, and if all are called, then to an extent, everyone has this capacity within them? Does this pedestal of her special nature lock her into a prison of a romanticized image of woman that women cannot live up to?

The point here is not to nullify the differences of people, but also not to limit them and define them based on only one aspect of who they are. It is about the practice of appreciating otherness, by not limiting others to one’s preconceived notions nor by boxing them into just one particular characteristic. Boxing women as “passive receivers”, as “nurturers” and men as “active” or “problem solvers” can be damaging to



both parties. Such “mastery” of the other through preconceived categories is what prevents one from a deeper knowledge of that other, not recognizing that there is more there to continually know. Emptiness then can enrich the understanding of *kenosis* as a letting go of such preconceived limited notions of the other, for emptiness undercuts the tendency to reify others under one simple characteristic or label which allows one to surrender to the mystery of each person that transcends all such reifications.

Mary Grey argues that this is the same way with the understanding of God in Christian dogmas. She uses the Buddhist story about using a raft to get to the other shore then letting it go. This story is an example of using emptiness as a tool but letting it go, lest it become an object of attachment. In the same way, she says that in understanding *kenosis* as this kind of process of emptying and letting go, then the “kenotic, self-emptying God-in-process questions all constructions and dogmas about God as contextual, time-bound and partial.....recognizing that that is what dogmas actually are, inadequate human constructions, brings us back to the mystics who could only see what God is not, through the ancient *via negativa*.”<sup>540</sup> This is similar to Coakley’s point of the need for “unmastery” in our language and understanding of God who is Mystery. In the same way that such “unmastery” is necessary in the deepening relationship with God, so too is such “unmastery” necessary in order to truly attend to the other in their difference. The doctrine of emptiness can be helpful to point out the dualistic and reifying tendencies that prevent such “unmastery” and the mechanisms in the human person that insist on “mastery” and “control” of the other that leads to suffering. Hence, emptiness as the

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<sup>540</sup> Grey, *Sacred Longings*, 76-7.

“negation of views” can be a reminder of the importance of *apophasis* within Christian theology, not only in our articulations about God but also in our articulations of gendered humanity.

Doctrine of Buddha nature and *Kenosis* as *plerosis*: The fullness of being human (in the image of God) and being in community (as the Body of Christ). As shown in the discussions of emptiness, this view was not only used to negate other views (as the Madhyamika school did) but eventually developed emptiness into positive statements about reality such as nonduality (as against the dualistic tendencies that cause suffering) and Buddha nature. These developments can also enhance the understanding of *kenosis* as giving up the false sense of a sinful limited self to *kenosis* as seeing the fullness of humanity as the image of God, breaking such dualistic tendencies by realizing “sameness” with others, neither as superior nor inferior to the other, all creatures of God. As we saw in the development of a Buddhist understanding of human nature, the doctrine of Buddha nature pointed to how persons are not just defiled and full of suffering but at their very core (covered by these defilements) is the nature of the Buddhas with deep capacity for loving kindness and compassion as well as discernment, creative responsiveness, courage, patience, stability, energy, etc. This is deeply resonant with the Christian notion of creation and how persons are made in the image of God. A reminder of this depth-dimension of the person as image of God can then balance seeing persons in their difference while holding to some fundamental commonality/nature that we all share. The doctrine of Buddha nature then harkens us back to our own understanding of being made in the image of God, and of finding God in all persons; of seeing persons

through/with the loving (not possessive nor dominating) eyes of God – in a sense seeing our “categorical selves” from the view of the “Absolute.”

It is with such a vision, for example, that the many negative images of woman can be given up, as part of the “false sense of self” that must be rejected in order for a new sense of self to emerge. Instead, such negative images can be replaced by the positive image of one as made in the image of God, deserving dignity and equality with others. This then can become a criterion for judging one’s own relationship with others, and whether one’s dignity or another’s is being respected in our way of interacting with each other.<sup>541</sup> Furthermore, other aspects that were seen as negative and equated with women, such as the body or emotions can now be retrieved and re-valued as part of that which is precious to the human being. This was demonstrated in the discussions regarding Vajrayana Buddhism and the teachings on nondualism and valuing the body and the emotions as containing wisdom. As Rita Gross explained, such nondualism leads to the view of seeing everything in a sacred manner, and can therefore be brought into one’s practice, and become the foundation for a new way of seeing oneself and another and the world. Perceiving reality in this sacred manner is what is known in Buddhism as pure perception. John Makransky writes that

...to perceive purely is to recognize both the primordial purity of phenomena and the Buddha nature within all sentient beings. In meditation practice, as we learn to relinquish our ego-centered and dualistic frames of reference into the wisdom of natural awareness, we sense the essential purity and perfection of phenomena within the infinite, open, and unchanging nature of mind...<sup>542</sup>

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<sup>541</sup> This will be discussed further in the section on *Kenosis and the Ethical life*

<sup>542</sup> John Makransky, *Awakening through Love: Unveiling your deepest goodness* (Boston: Wisdom Publication, 2007) 133.

Nondualism in Vajrayana Buddhism points us back to the Catholic understanding of sacramental vision, of seeing the depth-dimension, the sacredness of all things which becomes the basis for our appreciation of all reality.<sup>543</sup> In this case, the *kenosis* of women calls for the giving up of such “false” negative notions of themselves, their bodies and emotions that they have been equated with, to recovering an appreciation for themselves, their bodies and emotions within such a sacramental vision. It also becomes the basis for ethical action, for oneself and others, grounding oneself and another within a deeper reality, the reality of God. These points will be elaborated further in the next two discussions of kenosis and the ethical and spiritual life.

This view of human nature (whether as having Buddha nature or being made in the image of God) opens into a better understanding of proper human relationships, an articulation of a new vision of humanity, and of empowering relationships and communities. The Buddhist doctrine of dependent arising (corollary to ‘emptiness’) brings out a way of understanding the relationship of all beings – of holding the tension between the self and the other, of our shared nature yet our diversity. The doctrines of “emptiness” and “no-self” show how truly interdependent and interconnected we are. Furthermore, the image of Indra’s net, the vision of the bodhisattvas and the interpenetration of all things, is helpful in articulating a nondualistic anthropology which many feminists search for against dualistic, individualistic views of relationships as the relating of separate entities that pre-exist all relationships. Such an anthropology can

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<sup>543</sup> The sacramental principle reminds Catholics of how all creation is imbued with God’s love and how God is revealed through God’s creation. Hence, all creation has a depth dimension and has inherent dignity.

offer a view of how to be a self in relation to other that is not oppositional; that does not entail the ‘loss of self’ while keeping the otherness of the other intact.

Mary Grey herself who, in arguing that there is a need to find new ways of imagining ourselves, not as individuals “defined over against another, but in-relation-to, connected-with”, finds a resource in such Buddhist imagery of Indra’s Net as an example of an expression of relationships of connection, of how others are constitutive of oneself and vice-versa. This is the alternative image of self and others, a mutual relationship that is needed in today’s fragmented society. Furthermore, she comments on how Joanna Macy, another Buddhist feminist, argues that other images such as the boundless heart of the bodhisattva are reflective of the doctrine of no-self and how such can “liberate us from the rat-race of chasing our own delusions, of being propelled by our own greed. The boundless heart image can transform our individualist egos, and refocus us round a larger centre. It can inspire both a new ethics and a new way of knowing.”<sup>544</sup>

In this case, the Christian is brought back and challenged to find images that express a similar sense of mutual empowerment within the Christian tradition, such as being made in the image of God. Another is the example of the Trinity, as a community of distinct persons but one God (and what that says about a human community of persons where differences are respected). An image offered by Sarah Coakley was that of the human community as the Body of Christ. She described it in a way analogous to the Buddhist notion of interdependence as the “mysterious interpenetration of individuals one with another” and the discovery of the “mutual members of the ‘body of Christ’” (quoted

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<sup>544</sup> Grey, *The Wisdom of Fools*, 77.

in chapter two). These images/descriptions bring us closer to the vision of humanity that Coakley and Grey argue for, and break us from the “sinful” reality of individualism that has led to much suffering since the construct of individualism, of a separate self, as articulated in Buddhist “no-self”, is out of touch with reality. The *kenosis* that is called for then, is a “giving up” of any false sense of self (selfishness or selflessness) in order to give oneself into God and the Body of Christ in ways that are empowering for both self and other, of finding oneself through empowering relationships with other, and expressing such power, vulnerability and suffering through solidarity with that other who is experienced as constitutive of oneself.<sup>545</sup>

This image of the interdependence of all things, of being part of a matrix of relationships may be a fruitful ground for liberation theologians such as Roberto Goizueta who argues that ‘community is the birthplace of the self’ and offers an organic anthropology. It is a reminder that we human beings require the sustenance and nurture of a community for our existence and sustenance, and that our self-identities are formed in our interactions with others, either in family, school or other relationships.<sup>546</sup> Given this realization, we are forced to look even harder into community and society in order to see the mechanics of sin and salvation there. In this case, the Buddhist analysis of this drive towards the reification of the Self – of the seemingly felt need to grasp and cling to pleasure and avoid the unpleasant – the almost desperate drive to collect and possess

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<sup>545</sup> Ethical implications of this will be fleshed out in the next section

<sup>546</sup> Roberto Goizueta has spoken of the importance of the community as “source of self-identity” in “*Nosotros: Toward a U.S. Hispanic Anthropology*” in *Listening* 27 (Winter 1992): 55. Notice how this emphasis on sustenance and nurturing can also serve as positive valuing of such “work” that is usually seen as “women’s work” and therefore not as important. In this case, it is not only seen as positive (indeed necessary for all life) but is also argued as the task of the whole community, of women and men, working together to preserve life.

things and others – may serve to complement the strong Christian analysis of structural sin and social sin. The Buddhist analysis calls attention once again to the personal dimension of sin and a new description of the drive for accumulation, possession, and domination which could enrich social analysis. This we already saw in Mary Grey’s use of the doctrine of no-self against the “rat race” in society that fuels greed. It also calls us back to the balance of personal and social sin and the question of the formation of selves and the construction of society that then molds/shapes individuals and such ‘character’ that can become oppressive, leading to their suffering and the suffering of others. Theological anthropology then needs to take into account not only individual women and men, but also our roles within the community of persons, including the presence of sin in our interactions and in the construction, reification and absolutization of our identities. Hence, though the call for relationships and community is important, finding “right” relationships, that is to say, empowering relationships where one does not lose oneself is still a challenge. In the next section, we will look at how one can find the balance of self and other within the call in the Christian life of service to others.

### ***Kenosis and the Ethical Life***

From understanding *kenosis* as giving up false ways and modes of being in order to gain a new positive understanding of our self and a new vision of humanity, the challenge then becomes how we are to live out such a vision of mutuality and interdependence in relationships. As discussed, in the Christian tradition, this call is usually understood as the call to *agape*, to self-sacrificial love for the other, a *kenosis* (a

self-emptying) of oneself for the other, following the example of Jesus. As Michael Himes has pointed out,

If we imagine the world and the neighbor sacramentally, then we must reverence the world and the neighbor. If we imagine our lives eucharistically, then we must live as self-gift. To re-envision the universe sacramentally requires us to act differently within it and toward it, and to live agapically requires that we discern what the true good of the other is which we seek to bring out<sup>547</sup>

Mary Grey also reinforces such insight arguing that once one has a new image or a new vision of humanity, no longer as separated individuals but as connected selves, then a new understanding of care/agape emerges. In this case, *kenosis* means letting go of what we previously thought of others as well as letting go of the urge to “dominate, to be ‘master’ over all one surveys, to superimpose order.” Furthermore, it brings forth a new “ethic of care, understood more as ‘patient-attention to’ than identified with the stereotypical mother-role...”<sup>548</sup>

However, as shown, an uncritical acceptance of this can lead to relationships for women where they lose themselves in the others, and to the extreme end up in relationships of abuse, due to a distorted understanding of “self-sacrificial love.” For this reason, Coakley redefined divine *kenosis* as a giving up of certain “worldly” dominating power so that women are given the example of power and relationship that does not dominate or possess but one that can truly empower and sustain. This serves as a critique in their own relationships. Yet, there is still the critique that such a call is too other-centered and can still lead to a loss of self for women. A feminist critique of the quote above would probably refer to the lack of mutuality in that quote, and the need to balance

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<sup>547</sup> Michael Himes, *Doing the Truth in Love: Conversations about God, Relationships, and Service* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995) 143.

<sup>548</sup> Grey, *The Wisdom of Fools*, 78-9.



such other-centeredness with a concern for oneself. Buddhist discussions, particularly on the interdependence of wisdom and compassion, can shed light and further direction to these Christian feminist discussions of the living out of right *kenosis*, and could potentially be one of the greatest and most fruitful contributions of the Buddhist feminist discourse to Christian feminist discussions.

As mentioned, wisdom and compassion are likened to two wings of a bird: without wisdom, compassion “exhausts” the bodhisattva, or it can continue to be self-serving. This is “idiot compassion” where our actions are still being driven by “ego” and serving our own needs. We have still not fully realized the emptiness (and therefore sameness) of all things from which equanimity emanates. In contrast is “wise” compassion which ensures that our actions are not self-serving and are not limited only to particular persons but animated by the willingness to liberate all sentient beings. This discussion of the interdependence of wisdom and compassion can challenge Christian feminist discussions on the living out of *kenosis*; that the love of the others must also include oneself (if love is to be truly universal and one truly realizes that one is not different from others). Furthermore, that love is challenged to include love of one’s enemies, recognizing them as not different from oneself. Finally, it will challenge Christian feminist theologians to find an analogous category for “wisdom” that can direct one’s act of *kenosis* or *agape* so that it does not only address the needs of the other but also of oneself, and that the action is both effective and appropriate, neither self-seeking nor exhaustive. The next section will elaborate on how the Buddhist doctrine of wisdom

and compassion can lead to new directions in Christian feminist ways of living out a *kenotic* life of discipleship.

Wise compassion and the commandment to “love the neighbor *as yourself*.”

First, through the wisdom of emptiness, one realizes that everyone is the same in their suffering and their wish for happiness and everyone shares the same Buddha nature. Part of this exercise is the practice of equanimity, of seeing oneself as similar to others and thereby just as deserving of love and compassion as others. Traditional emphasis as we saw was in developing compassion for others, but Buddhist feminists have reversed the emphasis towards developing compassion for oneself. Women must include ourselves in this circle of care, and see ourselves as having the same Buddha nature as others. Our compassion for others must also be translated into compassion for ourselves (or else, it is not an exercise in equanimity for one is differentiating themselves from others – in this case as less deserving of compassion). In the same way, Christian women could be encouraged to include themselves in reflections upon being made in the image of God, and just as deserving of love, compassion and dignity as others. Hence, the quote above by Himes could be critically understood as reverence, not just for the world and the neighbor but also for oneself, to see oneself as a gift, even to oneself, and to discern the true good not only of the other, but also of oneself. In this case then, to “live agapically” must include loving oneself and interpretations of such require the critical appropriation of the Greatest Commandment: to love the neighbor *as yourself*. Here, Christian feminists could emphasize the need to love oneself before one can truly learn to love another, just as Buddhist feminists emphasized the importance of including oneself in the

circle of care and compassion, and how a certain amount of self-care is necessary *before* one can respond in the appropriately compassionate way.

Another approach to the beginning of wisdom and compassion for all focuses not on the sameness of all in terms of Buddha nature, but the sameness in the human condition of suffering and wanting to be free from suffering. Furthermore, as the Buddhist feminists highlight, compassion for others is always built on compassion for oneself by reflecting upon one's own situation of suffering and pain. This is a key point in the Buddhist tradition. As Christina Feldman states, "you come to know that your willingness to be present with pain is the midwife to compassion. Turning toward sorrow in your own life opens your eyes to the immense suffering in the world."<sup>549</sup> In other words, by looking at one's own sorrow, one sees how this personal story is also a universal story. Starting from one's own suffering, one realizes that all human beings share in the common bond of suffering and not wanting to suffer. The more we accept and understand our suffering, we become more compassionate to others who we realize are suffering as we do. As mentioned above, *turning toward sorrow in your own life opens your eyes to the immense suffering of the world*. Such realization then leads to compassion for that world. This is how paying attention to our own suffering leads to compassion, not just for ourselves but for others. This is seen, for example, when Feldman speaks about how in moments of rage, fear or resentment, one can try to be present to oneself in that moment. In so doing, one can then find the steadfastness and courage to be present for another person entangled in the same pain. This is also the

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<sup>549</sup> Christina Feldman, *Compassion: Listening to the Cries of the World* (Berkeley: Rodmell Press, 2005) 23-24.

Dalai Lama's point when he says that "unless we have some experience of suffering, our compassion for others will not amount to very much....therefore the wish to free ourselves from suffering precedes any sense of compassion for others."<sup>550</sup>

For Christian women, this approach goes beyond the recognition of loving oneself as well as neighbor since we are all made in God's image and deserve equal dignity and love. Rather, this approach begins with the common experience of suffering. However, instead of starting with the suffering of others (which the teaching on love and *agape* often emphasize), it begins by focusing on one's own suffering first. Such a stance then, of a universal compassion grounded in the wisdom of our shared suffering, can remind Christian women that the call to *agape* must begin with an analysis of their own situation of pain, an acknowledgement of their own suffering in order for true com-*passion* to come about. This can thicken the Christian understanding of *kenosis*, no longer as a self-limitation, a "self-emptying" for the other, but almost a "self-emptying" into our own suffering and there link with the suffering of others that leads to the self-emptying for the other who is seen as our own suffering self. Such *kenosis* then is the entrance into the suffering of the other as a continuing expression of the full realization of ourself who has discovered interdependence with the other and can see our own suffering in another. Compassion and *kenosis* for the other is fueled by compassion for ourself and the realization that our longing to free the other from suffering stems from our own longing to free our own self from suffering, and that such pain and suffering must be fought on *both* levels. Such a stance then brings one back to the great commandment and a greater

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<sup>550</sup> Dalai Lama, "Awakening the Mind, Lightening the Heart" in *A Lifetime of Wisdom: Essential Writings by and about the Dalai Lama*, ed. Clint Willis (New York: Marlowe, 2002) 64.

insight about what it means to “love the neighbor *as oneself*”, to a love of the suffering self that leads to the love of the suffering neighbor now experienced as oneself. The experience of having compassion and love for one’s own pain and suffering is the bridge to true compassion and love for another.

*Wise compassion: The Christian commandment to “love the enemy”*

One particular challenge of the Buddhist notion of emptiness as sameness and the cultivation of equanimity is not just learning to love the neighbor or other as oneself, but learning how to love the “enemy” as oneself. This may be a particular sticking point for women, particularly those who may have been in abusive relationships and cannot think of the abuser as similar to them, even more to learn to “love” that abuser. As Alice Keefe explains,

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. *Pratitya-samutpada* teaches us that the perpetrators of violence 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.<sup>551</sup>

This particular point heightens the challenge of the Christian commandment to “love the enemy,” in this case, challenging one to see the enemy as oneself, and to see that enemy as still also a creature of God. How does one talk of a “love of the enemy” and experience their violence as one’s own? For women in particular, how do they love the other who has abused them or dominated them? The teaching of recognizing the enemy as oneself harkens back to the realization of Buddha nature and extending it to show that even perceived “enemies” have seeds of enlightenment and want peace and

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<sup>551</sup> Keefe, 64-5.

happiness but have ignorance or make mistakes. Again, this is part of teaching the universality of compassion by realizing that all have Buddha nature, though out of ignorance, we may act in ways that harm ourselves or others. For, “[w]ise compassion reverences the inner worth of every single person. But it also sees into the layers of their suffering, including the suffering they create for themselves and others through ego-centered thought and action.”<sup>552</sup> In this way, learning to recognize the enemy as oneself tests the universality of our compassion and our realization of wisdom while at the same time guarding against dualistic tendencies that pits “us” vs. “enemy” which can easily lead to many negative emotions such as anger and hatred that lead to our suffering as well as the suffering of others. As Śāntideva has said:

Some do evil things because of ignorance,  
Some respond with anger, being ignorant.  
Which of them is faultless in his acts?  
To whom shall error be attributed?<sup>553</sup>

Notice here how he asks whether either one of them is faultless. In either case, the “enemy” as well as the one who reacts with anger to that enemy are equally ignorant, acting in ways that are harmful to self and other which leads to more suffering for both. In this way, the one who reacts in anger is truly no different from the “enemy.” Both, in their ignorance, have pitted “self” vs. “other” and ultimately inflicted suffering onto each other. Such a teaching can then further deepen our reflections, not only on the Christian command to love the neighbor as oneself but also to love the enemy. As Paul Knitter discovered in his own experience with Buddhism, he writes how Buddhists have “prodded me to look more deeply and honestly into the nature and demands of Jesus’

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<sup>552</sup> Makransky, *Awakening through Love*, 179.

<sup>553</sup> Shantideva, 6: 57.

‘greatest commandment.’ For them, compassion excludes not only hatred. It also rules out anger, and the almost unavoidable result when anger gets out of its corral: violence. And once you’re violent, you’ve cut off your interconnectedness and profoundly jeopardized your ability to love.”<sup>554</sup> Furthermore, he says that “Buddha has faced me with the same question I should have earlier heard from Jesus: how can we love our enemies and at the same time wage war against them?”<sup>555</sup>

What does this mean for women and their fight against violence and abuse? First, it is a quick reminder once again of how no one is “innocent.” We may have harmed and done violence to others as well (though not necessary to the extent that harm or abuse has been done to oneself). Furthermore, it is a challenge not to react out of hatred and anger and thus be more caught up in the whole cycle of hatred and anger. Rather, it is a real challenge of the commandment of love; that is, not to hate or be angry at the one who has caused so much harm and violence recognizing that this abuser is still a child of God, though sinful and misguided. Could such a stance help the one who is engulfed in so much anger and hatred that threatens to destroy her? Could she begin to develop “compassion” and love for such a person, thereby releasing her from her own anger and violence and begin to heal? In this way, she moves away from contributing to the cycle of hatred and suffering in the world, while at the same time, releasing herself from emotions that can annihilate her own self.

However, this love of the enemy does not mean a passive acceptance of their violence and abuse, for as Makransky says, “[w]ise compassion confirms the intrinsic

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<sup>554</sup> Paul F. Knitter, *Without Buddha I could not be a Christian* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009) 204.

<sup>555</sup> Ibid., 205.

dignity of persons even when it confronts the harmful ways that they think and act.”<sup>556</sup>

Furthermore, as Knitter says, “loving our ‘enemies’ to the point of refusing to do violence to them does not exclude identifying them, opposing them, and doing so resolutely.”<sup>557</sup>

However, this is done out of the understanding of the complex issues of suffering and violence and how all of us are part of such a cycle (hence the necessity of developing insight). It is the willingness to enter into their chaos and the chaos of violence that has resulted in the suffering of that abuser but also of oneself as the abused. It is a willingness to enter into the complexities of life and to develop a deeper understanding and vision of oneself and the other. Isn’t this in one sense what the Incarnation means, what the *kenosis* into humanity is about, entering the chaos of the world (and maybe in Buddhist terms, also understanding the causes and conditions of that chaos)? This willingness to enter such chaos and to understand the circumstances of suffering of the abuser is not meant to excuse or “explain away” the violence. Rather, it is engaged in order to come to a better response to such violence and suffering that ends them, instead of perpetrating them even further. This response remains a call for justice for the abused and a confrontation with the abusers for what they have done, and the harmful ways they think and act. However, it is not done out of anger or hatred, but out of love and compassion. It is done with the full comprehension of the cycle of violence and suffering we are all part of and which must be confronted while also recognizing the dignity and worth of every person, including the perpetrator. Does this not come closer to Jesus’ own

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<sup>556</sup> Makransky, *Awakening through Love*, 179.

<sup>557</sup> Knitter, 205.



confrontation of his enemies, of the way God sees and confronts God's' people? Could this not be a more liberating path, than holding on to anger, hatred and blame?

*Wise compassion and Christian's "prudent" kenosis*

The love of "friend", "stranger" and "enemy" as oneself in the Buddhist tradition is grounded in the mutual dependence of all things. Furthermore, wisdom reminds us of the sameness of all things complements and guides compassion so that it is truly universal. Wisdom can also be used to remind women that they too share in Buddha nature and that compassion for others must start as compassion for oneself. Furthermore, wisdom ensures that compassion is truly universal and is able to assess the situation with clarity and insight in order to act in the most effective and appropriate manner. In the Christian tradition, the love of neighbor and enemy as oneself is grounded in the belief of being created in God's image and being part of the Body of Christ. As mentioned, this must emphasize woman as God's image and part of Christ's body, equally deserving of love and compassion for others. However, there remains the challenge of finding an appropriate analogous companion to compassion in the Christian tradition to help navigate one's ethical decisions regarding compassion and love for others and oneself, in the way that wisdom does for Buddhism, so that one's love is effective and appropriate for oneself as well as for the other. As David Chappell points out,

Christian insistence on love, forgiveness, and reconciliation has not always been productive of inner or outer peace. Buddhism responds to this problem by insisting that a more primary step is the work of developing internal *calmness* and *clarity*. Love has to be balanced and guided by understanding the fluctuations of human emotions and the limitations of human conceptuality.<sup>558</sup>

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<sup>558</sup> David Chappell, "Religious Community Related to the Stages of Personal Growth: A Response to Rosemary Ruether's Paper" *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 11 (1991): 242

One possible response to this question comes from James Keenan, a moral theologian, who proposes a new list of virtues that can thicken the understanding of *agape* and the call of relationships, and how various calls are navigated by prudence. He proposes a list of cardinal virtues which include justice, fidelity, self-care and prudence. The understanding of the cardinal virtues are important since they “perfect the fundamental anthropological dimensions of being human that are needed for integrated virtuous behavior.”<sup>559</sup> Here then we see the hinge between the mutual and relational anthropology described above and how this is to be lived out and realized in one’s life. Keenan’s proposal of these new cardinal virtues shows the challenge of truly realizing our relationality, not just to others but to oneself, and his list reflects the need to balance and respect these relationalities, with prudence being one’s main arbiter. He explains the four cardinal virtues, saying:

In this context, I propose my own list of the cardinal virtues. It includes justice, fidelity, self-care, and prudence. As persons, we are relational in three ways: generally, specifically, and uniquely. And each of these relational ways of being demands a cardinal virtue. As a relational being in general, we are called to justice. As a relational being specifically, we are called to fidelity. As a relational being uniquely, we are called to self-care. These three virtues are cardinal. Unlike Thomas’s structure, none is ethically prior to the other; they have equally urgent claims and they should be pursued as ends in themselves. Thus we are not called to be faithful and self-caring in order to be just, nor are we called to be self-caring and just in order to be faithful. None is auxiliary to the others. Each is a distinctive virtue, none being a subset or subcategory of the others. They are cardinal. The fourth cardinal virtue is prudence, which determines what constitutes the just, faithful, and self-caring way of life for an individual.

Influenced by the Buddhist feminist discussions on compassion being guided by wisdom, Keenan’s proposal regarding prudence as that which determines what constitutes the “just, faithful, and self-caring way of life for an individual,” becomes a guide for how women are to live out the call to *kenosis* and *agape* in ways that respond to

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<sup>559</sup> James F. Keenan, S.J. “Proposing Cardinal Virtues” *Theological Studies* 56 (1995): 714.

the command to “love the neighbor as oneself,” seeing with clarity, both our needs and the needs of others and finding the most effective way to respond to both. It is a call that requires much discernment from us so that we can be true not only to our own suffering and pain but also to that of the other. This list of Keenan’s cardinal virtues also shows the sometimes competing claims of such relationships and how it is the virtue of prudence that navigates through claims so that the call to love the other can truly be balanced with the love of self. This call to love does not lead to a loss of self but an empowerment of both self and other, in our personal life and relationships and as well as in society and in the world. Furthermore, such discerned action becomes the way that one actualizes their formation as a relational self, navigating through the demands of their various relationships, including a relationship with their own selves. In this case, compassion for others and the call for justice can be balanced with a love and compassion for oneself as well.

Such prudence is guided by a vision of oneself and other, of forming one’s character as grounded in the image of God and being part of the body of Christ. Such a vision, such character formation, is cultivated within the spiritual life of the individual assisted by the communal life of the Church. It is for this reason that moral theologians such as James Keenan argue for the strong relationship between moral theology and spirituality, and for the moral formation of the believer through the life of the Church.<sup>560</sup>

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<sup>560</sup> See James F. Keenan, S.J. “Spirituality and Morality: What’s the Difference” in *Method and Catholic Moral Theology: the ongoing reconstruction*, ed. Todd Salzman (Omaha: Creighton University Press, 1999) 87-102. There he argues for the contribution of ascetical theology and how it “amplifies our understanding of the moral life.” See also James Keating’s “The Good Life: An Invitation to Holiness” *Church* (Summer 1995): 15-20. There Keating argues for the need for the formation of one’s character through worship vs. merely getting a “yes” or “no” answer to our moral dilemma.

It may be for this reason that both Sarah Coakley and Mary Grey, in their reinterpretation of *kenosis* emphasized the spiritual life so much, understanding such links with the moral life. Now, we turn to how Buddhist feminist discussions on the realization of emptiness in spiritual practice can be helpful in Christian feminist discussions of *kenosis* and the spiritual life, and how such spiritual practices cultivate the Christian vision which is the ground for just and ethical action in the world today.

### ***Kenosis and the Spiritual Life***

On the self and the spiritual life. As we have seen, both Coakley and Grey focused their reinterpretation of *kenosis* in the spiritual life as an empowering experience for women, a place to “give up” the wrong and damaging notions of “self” and women as “weak”, “dependent” or passive, and to begin discovering new models of being, of mutual relationships that are more empowering, particularly for women. Both argue that such visions of a strong sense of self and empowering relationships can only be found through spiritual practices, particularly practices of silence and contemplation found in the Christian tradition. As we saw, these Christian feminists argue that in spiritual practice, far from “losing ourselves,” *kenosis* opens us up to a greater empowerment. It becomes the place where fragments of our broken selves can be gathered and made whole again, and where the “false and sinful” selves that leave them in bondage to dependent relationships or relationships that diminish them or others can be given up.

The Buddhist feminist discussions regarding the process of meditation can be very enlightening to the Christian feminist argument that spiritual practice is the place where one can begin to feel empowered. As Klein argued, such ritual practices allow for

the transformation of subjectivity and the understanding of the self. They have shown how practices of focused attention help to strengthen women and give them a state of stability, an independence of mind that can help them to be more critical of themselves and their relationships and eventually help them reach a level of self-knowledge and ultimately self-acceptance with much gentleness and without judgment or condemnation. Such descriptions challenge Christian feminist theologians to articulate more deeply and in a more detailed manner how Christian spiritual practices can lead to self-love and self-knowledge. For example, such discussions could be helpful to further Mary Grey's own articulation of a feminist spirituality and how the discovery of self and God happens in the space of stillness and silence where focused attention is cultivated.

Moreover, the specificity of Buddhist meditation practices of mindfulness, visualization, etc. also challenges Christian feminist theologians to point to more specific practices within the Christian tradition that can be helpful and how such practices can be adapted to the particular contexts and objections of women regarding spiritual practices. For example, Mary Grey in writing about focused attention does not write about the specific practices that can cultivate such stillness and silence (though alluding to the fact that this can be found in the Christian tradition). More broadly, both Coakley and Grey mentioned the Christian mystical tradition, and the examples of John of the Cross or Teresa of Avila, but there was no detailed discussion of the practices themselves and how they could be adapted and entered into by women today.<sup>561</sup> This may be part of the particular strength of Buddhism in general, providing "how-to" guides in order to enter

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<sup>561</sup> The attempt at the recovery of Mary in a latter section is fueled by this need to articulate specific practices that can be helpful for Christian, particularly Catholic women.

into meditation and cultivating such stillness and silence and focused attention. Though part of the Christian tradition, I believe that we have yet to really develop and make available such practices of silence and stillness in light of the specific contexts of women. As Paul Knitter himself has observed, “the mystical provisions in the Christian pantry of spirituality have not been readily available to the ‘ordinary faithful’ on this side of the pulpit...Over the past thirty years or so, this mystical or contemplative aridity has been recognized and addressed.”<sup>562</sup> On the other hand, a particular strength of Buddhism is the effective transmission of meditation practices that are made available to those who are interested. The challenge then would be to identify Christian approaches to deepening “wisdom” within spiritual practice (that is, of developing the vision of self, God and other, which grounds prudence and one’s moral action mentioned in the previous section) and learn how to effectively transmit them to others.

Furthermore, as Knitter himself notes, one of the particular contributions of Buddhism to his own Christian spiritual life is the importance of silence. He writes that “exploration of Buddhist practice has enabled me to understand and make use of the Sacrament of Silence in my Christian practice. I can honestly say that without these Buddhist practices, without this sacrament of Silence, I don’t think I’d be able to pray as a Christian.”<sup>563</sup> Similarly, I believe that Klein and Gross’ detailed articulation of the process of meditation can further the argument of how silence is the necessary ground for speech and action and is the necessary posture for self-knowledge and self-acceptance. In the end, as Klein argues, it is the place where a more stable, empowered self can be

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<sup>562</sup> Knitter, 137-8.

<sup>563</sup> Ibid., 154.

experienced in a way that can be maintained outside the practice. Such articulations about the role of silence within Buddhist meditation strengthens Coakley's own arguments of the role of silence within Christian contemplation; how silence does not have to lead to a silencing or that it is not merely a passive moment, but becomes the ground out of which appropriate and effective words and action can spring forth.

One of the interesting aspects in Buddhist meditation, especially in the Nyingma and Kargu Dzogchen traditions of Gross and Klein, is the notion of emptiness as space, as the vast expanse that far exceeds the limited view of existence and reality that we think we know. This notion then of "space", not as merely "empty" but as full and teeming with possibilities, can further deepen Coakley's discussion of *kenosis* as the act of space-making in the discovery and empowerment of oneself. It becomes then the space of giving up all the limited views of women (as fragile, weak, passive, etc.) to the exploration of other possibilities for women (images of strength, power) and relationships. Again Klein and Gross' articulation of what happens in this space within Buddhist meditation could aid Christian feminist articulations of what happens in this space within Christian meditation. For example, Klein says that it is in this space where one looks at the way things *are* versus how they ought to be (beginning to see reality with clarity vs. the obscurations brought about by ignorance). Hence, articulating this movement within Christian self-understanding, we could understand that space as one where we turn the critical lens on the sinful ways both in oneself and in society, and envision a new way of how things ought to be, of seeing ourselves through the eyes of God instead of our usual sinful ways. It is the place to discover the "more" in ourselves,

more than the limited experiences and expectations that have been imposed upon us, more than the burden of the “ideal” woman that has limited our imagination about ourselves. In the formation of character that is necessary for moral action in the world (as mentioned above), one asks the questions: “who am I?” “who ought I become?” and “how do I get there?” It is in this space that these questions can be explored and answered. It is a *kenosis* of giving up preconceived notions of self and other so that one can explore alternative views of oneself and another. It opens up the understanding of *kenosis* as *plerosis*, a reminder of the possibility of a greater reality for women and for relationships that may not usually be experienced given the presence of sin in our relationships and in society. As we saw, it is then in this space that the longing for balance in thinking of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ characteristics, of exploring new ways of being and relationships can all be explored. It opens one to the possibility of being formed, of one’s own character being changed in ways that affect one’s ethical action in the world, or as Klein said, in ways that are sustained outside of the practice, and into one’s daily life. This is why, as mentioned above, moral theologians argue for this connection between spirituality and the moral life.

One interesting difference in the spiritual practices is the vision that sustains the practice. While in the Buddhist tradition, there is the image for example of Indra’s net, and the mutual interdependence of all things, and a sense that there is no center that holds all of it together, in the Christian tradition, one of the key emphases in spiritual practice is finding one’s center in God, the ground of all existence who sustains us and all relationships. In this exploration of finding self and other, the main goal lies in finding



God at the center of self and other, as the one who sustains and empowers us.<sup>564</sup> This was one of Coakley's key emphases in her re-interpretation of *kenosis* as "surrender" or "vulnerability" to a gentle God. It is from the loving gaze of this God, who knows us better than we know ourselves, that the process of healing, of longing for wholeness, of finding relationships that empower and do not diminish our sense of worth and dignity, begins.

This experience is an in breaking of grace, of God's activity coming to empower and sustain human activity. As Coakley described, it is the experience of being "prayed in"; that it is no longer the person doing the prayer, but one is caught in the divine dialogue, the divine life of the Trinity. It is this experience of a God whose *kenosis* is interpreted as the "giving up" of worldly powers that serves as the critique to dynamics/relationships of domination and abuse, to give up such a dynamic within one's own life and relationship with others. Furthermore, it is the model of a relationship that empowers one, just as one learns to become 'vulnerable' and "dependent," to truly open oneself up to the power of relationship that is grounded on mutuality. It is an experience of God that blurs the lines of activity and passivity, of finding God as the one who sustains and powers our activity, including prayer. Finding that "dependence" and "vulnerability" are not just "merely passive" acts; such acts can be the gateway to greater empowerment, a greater knowledge of God, self and other that can be the ground for truly ethical and responsible action in the world. In the end, in this re-appropriation of the importance of *kenosis* in the spiritual life, women can gain the spiritual maturity we

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<sup>564</sup> This key difference will be discussed later in how the Christian response to Buddhist feminists.

need so that we feel empowered in prayer, a result of which is empowered action in the world. It is an experience that breaks the usual notion of prayer as passive and detached from the world, but rather renews us, allowing us to find the balance between activity and passivity, between self and other. As Joann Wolski Conn describes it:

In brief, a feminist theology of spiritual development notices that the classical spiritual tradition defines maturity as intimate relationship with the Holy Mystery and with all persons and the cosmos, an intimacy made possible by increasing independence from attachments that block deeper relationship. The desire to affirm women's experience as much as men's leads feminist theologians to notice how both autonomy (traditional denied or restricted for women) and attachment (culturally reinforced in women) are essential for Christian maturity.<sup>565</sup>

From this dynamic of spiritual practice, one begins to see how women can gain some balance in the usual dualistic tendencies of “male-female”, “passive-active”, “self-other”, “self-God” and be able to live in the paradox of a “strength made perfect in weakness”, in a relationship with the other and with God that is not in competition with our own relationship with ourselves but actually enhances our own self-identity. Coakley's re-interpretation of Christ's incarnation is particularly helpful here. In that account, Gregory of Nyssa saw the transformation, the flourishing of the human in the *kenosis* of the divine so that the human reaches its perfection (not its dissolution). The language of “destruction” or “dissolution” is tempered by the “transformation” and the “flourishing” of the human that happens in the encounter between the human and the divine. It further reflects the process of the paschal mystery of the death that leads to resurrection.

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<sup>565</sup> Joann Wolski Conn, “Toward Spiritual Maturity” in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993) 254.

Furthermore, the Buddhist feminist discussions of how meditation can bring about the experience of a strong, powerful yet relational self can also bring one back to the depth of the Christian mystical tradition where some have argued that a powerful relational anthropology was developed that also focused on a strong sense of self. For example, Caroline Walker Bynum has argued that Bernard of Clairvaux, among other monks, “stress[ed] the discovery of self- and of self-love – as the first step in a long process of returning to love and likeness of God, a love and likeness in which the individual is not dissolved into God but rather becomes God’s partner and friend.”<sup>566</sup> Moreover, analogous to the Buddhist feminist’s discussion on the positive valuation of emotions in Vajrayana Buddhism, in the Christian medieval tradition, passions were presented positively, “not as sources of sinful inclinations, but as the force that when properly trained would assist the devout Christian in the way of the Lord. This shift was only accomplished when a positive anthropology (*imago Dei*), a positive goal (union with Christ) and a positive way (*imitation Dei*) provided the framework that the energy of humanity had to be understood as at least potentially positive.”<sup>567</sup> Here we see spiritual practice as the place of the transformation of such desires and passions, and a realization that such desires and passions in themselves can serve as the gateway to our practice, in the same way that negative emotions can be brought into Buddhist practices.

Buddhist feminist articulations of the positive valuation of emotions can aid Christian feminist theologians to specify how such positive valuation of emotions can be

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<sup>566</sup> Caroline Bynum Walker, “Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?” in *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), quoted in Keenan, “Spirituality and Morality: What’s the Difference,” 91.

<sup>567</sup> Keenan, “Spirituality and Morality: What’s the Difference,” 95.

helpful for Christian women and articulate this within a Christian framework. For example, Gross described how “transforming” anger led to clarity, to a “critical intelligence” that helped her to perceive situations of injustice and to let go of the “negative” energy of anger and the murkiness such emotions bring. Such discussions about anger are helpful for Christian feminist theologians and our anger towards the situation of women, particularly in the Church. First, it can allow us to “work creatively with the energy contained in anger”<sup>568</sup> without being consumed by such anger in our work toward social change. Second, discussions about how “negative” emotions such as anger contain clarity and wisdom are helpful reminders to Christian feminist theologians of the wisdom contained in one’s desires and passions, to not move away from such desire and passions per se and to realize that God is found at the core of one’s desires and passions. We are asked instead to move away from “disordered” desires and ask, as Mary Grey did, “What do women truly want?” “What does the heart truly desire?” That is why desires and passions are the gateway to spiritual practice, why they can be transformed. This was the path of Augustine who saw his restlessness as the constant call to purify and transform his passions and desires so they could be re-directed once more to God. In the specific case of Christian women, the negative connotations of passions and emotions and its association with women can be placed in a more positive light within spiritual practices and can be used as the fuel for one’s practice.

On relational anthropology and the spiritual life. Spiritual practice not only leads to a renewed sense of self but to a new sense of relationships. Coakley contends that we

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<sup>568</sup> Keefe, 67.

do not just meet the gentle God who empowers us in prayer, but we also begin to meet Christ and envision the body of Christ. In so doing, we re-shape our understanding of our relationship with others as well. This is why, as many Christian mystics have argued, an interior personal spiritual practice leads to concern for the world and a greater sense of one's connection with others in the world. In the Buddhist tradition, we saw that this was expressed in the doctrine of dependent origination understood as the corollary to emptiness. This was the vision one realized once one saw that there was no independent, autonomous self. There were specific meditations that were done to begin to realize such a vision of interdependence to lessen our attachment to ourselves, and develop compassion for others which can result in action in the world. The question then for Christians would be to identify what practices, what visualizations, what images –in other words what resources - may be helpful for Christians/Catholics to recover their own sense of community, and bring such images to mind in their own individual and communal practices. It further asks how we can revitalize such practices and images, give them more power and effectiveness to combat the image of the broken, individualistic world we live in. Such highlights Mary Grey's contention of the present moment of the "dark night of the church" and the need to revitalize our images and practices.

For example, Śāntideva's reflection on the body as hands and limbs that are many and different yet still all one, can harken back to a Christian reflection on the Body of Christ, where there are different members but all part of one body, and if one part is suffering then all are suffering (1 Cor. 12). As John Sheveland compares: "[r]esembling Paul's use of body imagery, Śāntideva communicates a profound non-difference between

persons – in their state of suffering and desire for happiness – that should give rise to compassion, a moral solidarity that acts on their behalf to remove suffering and its causes.”<sup>569</sup> Such images then “bear the potential to increase readers’ domain of affectivity, to recondition their imagination toward a solidaristic affiliation and love of neighbor. All the more so when sounded together.”<sup>570</sup> In this case, comparisons of images of the body can lead Christian reflection back to how such visions within the spiritual life grounds moral activity in the world by reminding us of our interrelation with all else. Moreover, it also brings us back to the notion of the Church itself as the Body of Christ, to the presence of Christ in the world today, and help one another live up to our image as *imago Dei* particularly in this suffering world. It reminds us why the congregation gathers together on Sundays and other holy days to celebrate *as a community*, and remember not only what Christ has done for us, but what we are called to do in the world, not just as individuals but as a community. The challenge is how to incorporate such images into our individual and communal practices in ways that can help us realize our interconnection with each other and the world. A further question to explore would be “who” are part of this body? Just as in Buddhist meditation practices, the goal is for the universality of compassion, in Christian practices, we could ask “who” is part of this body, part of the Church? How are we challenged as a community to extend membership of that church in ways that are more universal? Where are our boundaries of “friends”, “strangers” and “enemies” that have limited the universality of our love of neighbor including the “religious other” who is seen as “stranger” or even “enemy”?

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<sup>569</sup> John Sheveland, “Solidarity through Polyphony” in *The New Comparative Theology*, 185.

<sup>570</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

Furthermore, the image of Indra's net and the interpenetration of all things as well as devotional practices done in communion with the buddhas and bodhisattvas, can bring us back to a reflection on the communion of saints, of our interrelatedness to the saints of the "past" as we call on them in our liturgies. We look to the dynamic of how we are empowered by them and their example and how this in turn leads us to empower and inspire and support others. Such a vision can revive to the notion of how a community of believers can provide support to an individual. Moreover, this vision of the communion of saints, far from just reminding us of our similarity and our shared goal of holiness, also shows us how there are different paths to that goal, as seen by the variety of saints that we have. It shows how the vision of mutual interdependence and communion does not have to mean assimilation but can encourage and respect difference and diversity, for "the Christian communion of saints demonstrates the enormous variety of ways that the holy is incarnated; it demonstrates, as Flanagan beautifully puts it, 'the deep truth that persons find their good in many different ways.'"<sup>571</sup> One could say the same about a reflection of being the Body of Christ – all members with different talents and gifts, recognizing and rejoicing in such differences and different paths to holiness. These reflections on the body of Christ and the communion of saints, can begin to give women an alternative model of relationships that are not about diminishment and assimilation, but about support and empowerment as well as finding one's own distinctive way.<sup>572</sup>

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<sup>571</sup> Keenan, "Proposing Cardinal Virtues," 713.

<sup>572</sup> One example of the work that has been done on this topic is Elizabeth Johnson's *Friends of God and Prophets: a Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 1998).

However, as one meditates on this image of the Body of Christ and the communion of saints, many Christian feminists have pointed out that there are not as many models of women as saints, nor women in positions of leaderships (particularly where other Pauline texts such as Ephesians 5 or 1 Cor. 11 speak of seeing the male as the leader just as Christ is the “head of the Church”) so that they have to be supplemented by other images to be more supportive of positive images of women, and not subsume women again in the category of “men/humanity” where they disappear. As Mary Aquin O’Neill has argued:

In a church that places as much emphasis on the body as Catholicism does, in a church that defends what is called the “sacramental principle,” the absence of the ‘woman’ has grave consequences. If the body itself has the value of a sacramental sign, if the human body is a text to be read, there is much to be anticipated as theologians let in the female and look for the inbreaking.<sup>573</sup>

In the end, as I look at the Buddhist feminist discussions on meditation and specific practices of mindfulness, visualization, etc., I am challenged to think of specific practices or specific images for visualizations that can particularly aid in the project of Coakley and Grey to articulate a new understanding of *kenosis* as a spiritual practice, and how this leads to a renewed sense of self and relationships. From the Vajrayāna practices that focused on nondualism and the importance of male and female imagery as well as masculine and feminine principles and the Ritual of the Great Bliss Queen (in particular the focus on her story and her agency as well as the visualization of the female body), I am inspired to think of analogous examples within the Christian tradition, of a model or models that could inspire such balance while respecting the particularities of being a woman. In this case, I am led back to the person of Mary in spiritual practice and the

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<sup>573</sup> Mary Aquin O’Neill, “The Mystery of being Human together” in *Freeing Theology*, 157.



*kenosis* of Mary as an example of the *kenosis* called for in the Christian life, as a model for women and men in the life of discipleship, as the female face of God (as Elizabeth Johnson suggests) and also of Mary (together with Jesus) as the model of humanity (as Mary Aquin O'Neill suggests).

Reflecting on Mary's story.<sup>574</sup> Just as the image of the Great Bliss Queen relies not only upon its rituals but also on her story, Christian spiritual practices could also focus on the story of Mary as the example of the kind of *kenosis* that is called for.

Donald Mitchell, expanding on the Buddhist-Christian conversation on emptiness and *kenosis* in the spiritual life, puts forward Mary as an example of the new understanding of *kenosis* inspired by dialogue with Buddhism. He writes,

Mary is *not* a model for a kind of *distorted kenosis* where one allows oneself to be dominated by others. To be empty of self, in the authentic sense, means to be empowered by God in freedom and openness in one's choice to give compassionate *to* others, and also to be humble enough to accept the compassionate care *from* others when necessary. So Mary is a model of a kenotic love that seeks to aid and liberate *all* who are in need.<sup>575</sup>

Notice here how his description of Mary's *kenosis* matches much of the discussion above: a *kenosis* that leads to empowerment of oneself by God and to compassionate action in the world. In offering such a model of *kenosis*, Mitchell turned to the writings of Chiara Lubich who founded the Focolare movement,<sup>576</sup> who identified events in Mary's life that could apply to the life of laypersons. She lists the annunciation, the visitation of Elizabeth, the birth of Jesus, until Jesus' public ministry and his crucifixion

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<sup>574</sup> I understand the complicated history of Marian devotions and doctrines for women. As O'Neill says, "the Marian tradition, no less than other traditions, has been affected by the androcentric bias of theology." O'Neill, "The Mystery of being Human together," 152. Hence, this section will be devoted to a reconstruction of a new understanding of Mary and her *kenosis* in light of the feminist critiques and categories that I have been working with in the past chapter, and influenced by Gross and Klein's retrieval of the story and ritual of the Great Bliss Queen in ways that are empowering for women.

<sup>575</sup> Mitchell, 197.

<sup>576</sup> For Mitchell's discussion on Lubich, the Focolare movement, and Mary, see pp. 193-205.

where she is given to John. All these various events, Mitchell argues, correspond to the “growth of the kenosis of love that contributes to the unity for which Paul was pleading in his letter to the Philippians.”<sup>577</sup> Furthermore, taking a cue from Gross’ reflections on the Great Bliss Queen, one could also look at these events in her life and see how her relationships or how her interaction with others enriched her own as well as others’ spiritual life. In this list of events, one could turn to the wedding feast of Cana as one particular event where we see her agency, where she moves from “contemplation to action.” Mary takes initiative in the face of a human need (the lack of wine at the wedding) and brings attention to such a need to her son. This is not to be interpreted as a “woman” asking a “man” to fix things, rather for Mitchell, this corresponds to one’s spiritual growth where “one’s more hidden contemplative life with God at a certain point must emerge into a public active life with God for the sake, not only of oneself but of all humankind.”<sup>578</sup> This then, can serve as an example of the argument that a rich spiritual life does not have to lead to an escape from the world, but an even more acute attention to the needs of the world, and the demand to act given such needs. Furthermore, Buddhist emphasis on the importance of wisdom, of having insight and clarity so that one’s action is effective and appropriate, can also show how Mary’s action began with contemplation and therefore how action in the world must start with a keen observation or analysis before one acts (of seeing how things are vs. how things ought to be, as mentioned above) and how this can be brought into one’s spiritual life.

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<sup>577</sup> Mitchell, 195.

<sup>578</sup> Ibid., 200.

At the same time, this event highlights how action in the world cannot be done by an individual, but precisely must be done with others so that the burden is not carried only by oneself. Moreover, by inviting others to a response - to also see the need and to respond appropriately – allows the other an opportunity to deepen their own practice and response to the world, giving them an opportunity to practice compassion for others. Furthermore, it heightens one's sense of interdependence and a sense of community – both with the suffering other, as well as the others who also respond to such suffering.

Another event that could be reflected upon is the scene at the foot of the cross where Jesus gives his mother to John and vice-versa. Mitchell interprets this as part of the process of emptying where she loses her son in order to become the mother of humanity. “She must be empty of everything to be love for this person who stands beside her. But, it is precisely through this painful loss that Mary becomes the mother of all humankind, represented by John.”<sup>579</sup> This interpretation may seem one-sided and further once again the notion that it is primarily women who must give themselves to others.<sup>580</sup> However, taking Gross' insight about the Great Bliss Queen and the role of others in the spiritual path, this event could highlight that it was not just John who was “given over” to Mary, for her to take care of him, but Mary was “given over to John” and the community so that he/they could also take care of her, not in a relationship of dependency, but in order to gather strength from each other in the face of the death of Jesus and become

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<sup>579</sup> Mitchell, 201.

<sup>580</sup> My critique of Mitchell is that though he tries to address the feminist critique by saying that Mary's *kenosis* is not a distorted *kenosis*, he does not really develop how this is not so. Furthermore, he does not say enough about the more “active” aspects of Mary's *kenosis* and his discussion still focuses more on Mary's *kenosis* for *others* which does not adequately address the feminist critique that such model. Hence, my own attempt in this section to broaden his reflections with my own, gained from the dialogue between the Buddhist and Christian feminist discussions of the previous chapters.

more committed disciples. Neither one could deal with Jesus' death and continue his ministry alone. It must be done, again in community. Such a gesture then could point back to the need for mutually empowering relationships and relate back to Mitchell's own contention that Mary's *kenosis* also includes being able to take compassionate care from others, and finding strength through relationships. Hence, it is then with both Mary and John's activity, that the work of Christ and the growth of the early Christian community continues. It requires the activity and receptivity of both Mary and John to begin this new relationship and continue their discipleship to Christ. Such activity and receptivity from both of them can lead to a more balanced and integrated sense of community, of the union of humanity that requires self-giving and emptying from *all* followers and to find empowerment and strength in the community and through others in their continuing commitment to self, others, and God. This is why for Mitchell,

Mary's life presents the Christian with a model for a positive way of spiritual kenosis that can empty out the negative kenosis of our ordinary way of being....Mary gives us a Christian model for the existential realization of a lived kenosis whereby one can discover this original and true way of being and contribute to a new and more united world.<sup>581</sup>

Moreover, such a relationship between John and Mary being "given over" to each other, can also lead to what O'Neill describes as the anthropology that Genesis reveals to us in which:

...the unity of humanity is the unity of a communion of persons and the model of the person is not the autonomous and isolated individual but the covenanted one who is free because bound to others and to God. It demands an anthropology of mutuality in which the male/female difference becomes paradigmatic of human limitation and possibility and in which being like God can be achieved only by the gift of self to others and the reception of the gift of self from others. In such an anthropology, difference is not to be

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<sup>581</sup> Mitchell, 205.

liquidated but delighted in, and personal development is the fruit of relationships as much as the reward for efforts of will.<sup>582</sup>

In this description of the “communion of persons”, we see the anthropology that we are meant to live out: one of mutuality, respect for differences, and personal development. In addition to this, her statement that the “male/female difference becomes paradigmatic of human limitation and possibility” is an argument against the sufficiency of other models of anthropology such as androgyny that try to take all “masculine” and “feminine” traits into oneself. The very fact of our being embodied as male or female presents limitations while relationships and the experience of community allow us to transcend such limitations and open other possibilities to us. Hence, such traits can only be experienced within community, in the mutual and dynamic give and take of relationships for “no human life...can embrace both sides of the human experience at the same time. One cannot be both male and female, nurturer and nurtured, actor and audience, the one to undergo suffering and the one to feel the suffering of the other all at the same time.”<sup>583</sup>

In light of this, O’Neill herself argues for the model of humanity to be BOTH the figures of Mary as well as Jesus, for “[o]nly a hermeneutic of the two figures, male and female, and of the traditions that have interpreted them, can allow for the discovery of the common and reciprocal story of salvation.”<sup>584</sup> Such a view then pushes the implications of truly understanding the self within a community, how the community is part of one’s self-identity or “community is the birthplace of self”, how all aspects of humanity cannot

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<sup>582</sup> O’Neill, 151.

<sup>583</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>584</sup> Ibid.

be fully contained within oneself, and how the self cannot just be isolated but must be nurtured and sustained by a community. The fullness of humanity is found in community.<sup>585</sup>

At the same time, O'Neill also argues that focus on BOTH figures of Mary and Jesus can also serve as a corrective to Christology for:

Without Mary, theologians are forced to develop an androgynous Christology or a docetic one. By androgynous, I mean a Christology in which Jesus is imagined as complete in himself, embracing the possibilities of female as well as male being. By docetic, I mean that his body is not considered to be a real human body and that it in no way affects his being.<sup>586</sup>

This focus on Mary then is necessary to move out of androgynous understandings both of Christology as well as anthropology. Furthermore, it can lead to deepened reflection of the “female” side of anthropology that is often missing in many discussions of what it means to be human or to be a follower of Christ, who is male. One particular objection to Christology is the question of whether a “male savior can save women”. As argued by other Christian feminist theologians, one can look at Jesus as the one who overturned such patriarchal relationships, and brought together a community of equals where women played a greater role. Yet, this may not fully answer questions of embodiment, how these issues come to the fore when the maleness of Jesus is highlighted, and how such maleness is used to exclude women from certain functions within the Church.

Looking back at the ritual of the Great Bliss Queen and the focus not just on her story but also on the female body within the ritual, it would be interesting to delve into

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<sup>585</sup> In the next section, I will look at how this model challenges Rita Gross' contention of an androgynous model of persons.

<sup>586</sup> O'Neill, 155.

the figure of Mary and how we are to understand the female body with regard to salvation, especially since women's bodies have been seen as inferior, as a source of temptation, etc. Rather, if we are to take seriously the story of Genesis where male and female were created, how do we begin to see women's bodies as saved and as vehicles of revelation and salvation, the way that men's bodies (as symbolized by the man Jesus) are usually understood. This is another argument then for the insistence of taking both the figures of Jesus AND Mary in discussions regarding anthropology, particularly in speaking about the body and the issues regarding divine embodiment.

First, remembering the importance of the body, in particular the female body as a symbol in the ritual of the Great Bliss Queen, I am led back to thinking about the body and its centrality in Christian anthropology, particularly in the belief in the resurrection of the body and soul. Our hope in such a resurrection is based primarily on Christ's resurrection from the dead. However, in the Catholic Marian tradition too, we speak of the assumption of Mary including her body. These Catholic Marian teachings such as the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption are understood to be symbolic statements that refer to all believers, and to the church so that "the doctrine of the assumption is not an occurrence exclusive to Mary 'since, as a matter of fact, it happens to all the saints.'"<sup>587</sup> In this case, female believers are then once again subsumed into the "common humanity" which is usually (implicitly or not) seen as male or just an

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<sup>587</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, "The Symbolic Character of Theological Statements about Mary" *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 23/2(Spring 1985): 333. There, Johnson notes how it is interesting that interpretations of Mary either "take away her being a woman" by equating her with all humanity, or by highlighting her being a woman but equating her "womanness" with "feminine traits" of "passivity," "compassion, etc.," qualities that are not always empowering for many women (or at least not balanced or not fully reflective of the experiences of women and their agency).

androgynous body. Is there a way then that the focus on the assumption can also highlight the fact of the assumption of a *female* body; that corresponding to the resurrection of the *male* body of Christ is the assumption of the *female* body of Mary? Would such a correlation once again highlight the universality of salvation, of the hope of the resurrection of both women and men, female and male bodies, and giving value to women's bodies as well? Would this strengthen O'Neill's contention of a humanity revealed in Genesis of being created both male and female as well as saved and resurrected as male and female?

These reflections on the positive images of the female body can lead to deeper reflections on the female body, not just as symbol of humanity but possibly as the symbol of divinity itself (just as we saw how the female body of the Great Bliss Queen was used to symbolize and reflect qualities of emptiness and compassion). In the Great Bliss Queen for example, the womb and other female organs were seen as emblematic of wisdom and the state of Buddhahood itself. In the same way, one fruitful avenue within Catholic theology might be to look at the correlation between the understanding of the compassion of God and the "womb" or "uterus" For example, John Paul II, in the encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*, compares the compassion of God to the love of a mother for her child in the womb. In fact, in the footnote regarding mercy in the Old Testament, John Paul II notes how the Hebrew word for "compassion" was *rahamim* which, "in its very root, denotes the love of a mother."<sup>588</sup> Here then we find the image of the God, usually portrayed as "abba" Father showing the motherly love, or "womb-love." As such, Danny

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<sup>588</sup> John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, footnote 52.



Huang, a Filipino Jesuit concludes, “if compassion is the heart of *abba*, this father-God Jesus experiences and proclaims, then this father is not patriarchal, because this father is very much like a mother.”<sup>589</sup> Hence, such positive reflections on women’s bodies can become an opening into reflections on the divine nature that break away from the usual patriarchal images of God as male. Furthermore, one can also begin to turn to the Christian medieval tradition where mystics such as Bernard of Clairvaux imagine Jesus as Mother, having breasts which sustain and nurture his followers. Could the retrieval of such images be helpful to balance the usually male imagery of God and give a more positive image for women who can then begin to see themselves as *imago Dei*, not just in their characteristics but also through their bodies? However, not wanting to lock women into their “biology” (as wombs or just mothers), I wonder if the image of the Father with a womb (a pregnant man perhaps?) or Jesus with breasts can present enough of a “shock” value, again the “absurdity” or “impossibility” of just one person, one gender assuming all the characteristics of humanity, as argued by O’Neill above. It can also shake us from our limited notions about “male” and “female”, our limited expressions of our understanding and experience of God, and remind us of the symbolic nature of all images. This can be likened to the Buddhist reflections against attachment to views and how emptiness itself must be let go of. Images such as a “pregnant man” or an “infertile mother” are used against attachments to view or a literal acceptance of such images in reality. In this case, one can positively value the female and the female body without necessarily reifying “woman” and associating and reducing her only to her body while at

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<sup>589</sup> Danny Huang, S.J. “‘God is our Father; even more God is our mother’: The year of God the Father and ‘respect for women’s rights’” (speech, Cagayan de Oro City, Philippines, August 6, 1999).

the same time saying something about God without reifying God and forgetting that God is ultimately Mystery. Here, the doctrine of emptiness, of using the raft and letting it go, might once again be a useful reminder so that women are not reduced only to their bodies, without saying that gendered bodies do not matter.<sup>590</sup>

Beyond this, we once again focus on the specific example of Mary and what reflections about her can show us, not just about humanity but also about the divine. Elizabeth Johnson contends that “the Marian tradition has a great deal to offer to a more inclusive theology of God; that once this offer is received, the Marian tradition itself will be fundamentally redirected and refreshed, and that consequently one obstacle to the Church becoming a community of equal disciples will be diminished.”<sup>591</sup>

Just like the image of “womb-love” or compassion was seen to balance the male image of God, so too Johnson argues that the qualities of Mary, particularly in the development of a compassion-oriented Mariology, should be “transferred back to the source [God], so that the reality of the divine is thought ontologically to be compassionate, intimate, and caring, and is imaged to be such in female as well as male representations.”<sup>592</sup> Furthermore, she also looks for inspiration in depictions or cults of Mary in other countries like Latin America and shows how devotion to Mary “signals Mary’s identification with the oppressed in the name of God. Consequently her cult expressly validates the dignity of each downtrodden person and galvanizes energy for

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<sup>590</sup> In this case, the need to image God as both male and female (though never reducible to either) could be aided by Tibetan Buddhist deity yoga where the male-female figure in union functions as a central symbol of Buddhahood. In an analogous way, one could claim that the Christian image of God would be completely lopsided without the female form.

<sup>591</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, “Mary and the Female Face of God” *Theological Studies* 50 (1989): 502.

<sup>592</sup> *Ibid.*, 514.

resistance against dominating powers.”<sup>593</sup> Here then is an image of Mary, not usually as the “passive” or silent woman, but as one who is active in fighting for liberation from oppression. One could say, she is the one who “hears the cry of the poor.” Hence, for Virgilio Elizondo, the devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe, “involved resistance by conquered people not only to the European invaders but to the male God in whose name they dominated.”<sup>594</sup>

In these articulations then of the “female face of God” as inspired by Mary, Johnson cautions that they may still be interpreted as stereotypically feminine which define women in preconceived categories that complement the male. However, she also contends that such characteristics of “mothering, compassion, and presence, so particular to the historical experience of women are being reclaimed, reimagined, and revalued...”<sup>595</sup> In other words, though these characteristics may be particular to the historical experience of women, they are not limited only to women, but again are part of the fullness of humanity. Furthermore, such explorations of aspects of Mary and the “female” or “feminine” represents “a missing or underdeveloped piece in our repertoire of references to God and, as shaped by women’s experience, should be allowed to connote and evoke the whole of the divine mystery in tandem with a plethora of other images.”<sup>596</sup>

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<sup>593</sup> Johnson, “Mary and the Female Face of God,” 514.

<sup>594</sup> Ibid.

<sup>595</sup> Ibid., 525.

<sup>596</sup> Ibid., 526.

Many of these images of Mary are found not only in the teachings about Mary but in Marian devotions, in spiritual practices and rituals about Mary.<sup>597</sup> What we find then is that spiritual practices can bring about the exploration of the fullness of what it means to be “woman” and what it means to be human. In the “giving up” of the limited sense of self, of giving up “knowledge” of what one knows of “male” and “female”, of “humanity” and “divinity”, the specific focus on the reflections of being female, of being woman, can open the doors of the imagination to a vision fuller than these limited notions, of a vision that encompasses both male and female in a fuller theological anthropology and a more wholistic sense of Christology as well as the doctrine of God. They are visions that hopefully reflect and respect the reality and experience of women while at the same time not reifying or limiting them. It is such visions that can affirm women and their sense of self, and empower them to find communities that give them life, and to give life back to such communities and to society. Furthermore, such visions could also breathe life back into practices which as Grey says have excluded the humanity of women, and revalorize or retrieve practices that speak more to women’s experiences and empower them as women and as children of God to fight against suffering in this world. One of the main challenges then, as highlighted by the conversation with Buddhist feminists and the importance of meditation, is naming such Marian practices and devotions (that are reflective of this new understanding of Mary and of anthropology), adapting them and making them accessible in ways that can become empowering of self and relationships, that bring us closer to realizing the vision of the

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<sup>597</sup> Maybe more accurately, the teachings about Mary reflect popular piety and devotion to her in people’s spiritual lives.

human community that O'Neill described. As seen in the discussion above, the teachings and the reinterpretation of them in light of the Christian feminist critique is being done, but the question of how this is then translated into individual and communal practice still remains.

### **III. A Christian response to the Buddhist feminist discussions on emptiness and the search for a relational self**

In the previous section, the focus has been on the main comparative theological task of learning from Buddhism in order to gather fresh insights into the Christian feminist issues regarding *kenosis* and the role of the spiritual life in the understanding and living out of "right" relationships. This section focuses on the differences between the Christian feminist and the Buddhist feminist discussion and the challenges and questions that the Christian discussions may pose to the Buddhist feminist discussions on emptiness and the spiritual path. Such may be difficult but is still part of the comparative process.

As Clooney says,

Strong arguments in favor of one's own tradition often go along with critiques of others' theological positions, and theologies are often confessional and apologetic at the same time, testifying and criticizing, explaining and arguing, persuading and disproving. But even criticism need not be a problem if it is offered respectfully and professionally.<sup>598</sup>

The Christian feminist discussions regarding self and right relationships are never divorced from the Christian emphasis on community and ecclesiology, as well as the insistence that spiritual practice is about finding right relationship with God. For this reason, there was Coakley's insistence on understanding the self as being part of the Body of Christ as well as Grey's focus not only on individual *kenosis* but on the *kenosis* of the church, seeing the community's impact on the individual person. One aspect of the

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<sup>598</sup> Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, 11.

previous section demonstrated how the Buddhist understanding of emptiness as dependent origination could enrich this Christian vision of community. This section will focus on how the Christian understanding of community, communal worship and responsibility to the earthly community challenges the Buddhist feminist discussions on the suffering and liberation of women. It will also trace possible new implications of understanding emptiness as the interdependence of all things, and how suffering (including the suffering of women) comes about due to causes and conditions, not only by individual choices but collective delusion. Such discussions may add a further dimension that can empower the Buddhist feminists' search not only for a strong relational self, but also how to find it within the Buddhist community, the *sangha*. Other topics will include how to live out compassion for others in ways that lead to the liberation of women from their specific suffering that allows them to truly be free and enlightened and work for the liberation of everyone else. The discussion in this section is informed not only by my own Catholic lens and the discussions in the previous chapters, but also by some Western Buddhists who have articulated what Christianity has offered for their own understanding of Buddhism. I trace the possible implications of their thoughts for Buddhist feminist discussions regarding self, emptiness and the power of the *sangha* and spiritual practice.

*Social dimension of the doctrine of "no-self"/causes of suffering*

In Rita Gross and Anne Klein's discussion of the suffering of women, they took the traditional understanding of "no-self" and emptiness and used it as a feminist tool to critique the dynamics of gender and gender roles in society and how this has led to the

suffering of women. They discussed the tendency to reify what gender means as “male” or “female” that has locked women and men into certain roles based on social construction which is an illusion. However, Christian feminist analysis (also influenced by liberation theology) moves beyond an individual to a social analysis of sin and suffering. Mary Grey touched on this when she talked about how individual disordered desires lead to the fragmentation and separation in society today. What liberation theology has added, and what is emphasized about social sin or the communal nature of sin, is that such fragmentation and separation in society then affect individuals in their formation and in their capacity to choose the good. This has been one of the main streams in the Christian understanding of sin in its social dimension; that the state of sin and one’s own capacity for freedom is diminished by the choices of others that in turn influences our own choices. Hence the temptation to sin is greater in light of the “sin of the world.”

Considering this Christian social analysis of sin, Buddhist analysis of suffering and its origin in individuals could then be extended to a more social analysis of suffering and its impact on the individual’s suffering. One could look at the vision of interdependence in Indra’s net and look at the “negative” side of such interdependence. Instead of a vision of bodhisattvas and their enlightenment, we see instead unenlightened beings reflecting their unenlightenment upon others building a tower of delusion and suffering. This would be the doctrine of *samsara*, of being caught in the web of suffering. In this case, it takes on another dimension by looking at how one is not just caught in a web with others, but how each one keeps the other caught in this web.

Individual personal delusion contributes to the universal delusion that influences another's capacity to decide and fuels the other's own delusion and disordered desires. In particular, for Buddhist feminist analysis, one could add that a woman's false, negative image of herself and her role in society could also be seen as part of the false reflection of that image upon her by others and by society. This is part of the difficulty of moving out of such reification of "self" and "other", of "male" and "female"; because a false image of "woman" and "man" is constantly reflected by society, keeping everyone trapped in the gender net of delusion and suffering. In other words, whereas Christianity can learn from Buddhism new ways of understanding the mechanism of desire, acquisition, and temptation that leads us to personal sin that affects society, Buddhism can look at how the choices of others seen as social conditioning or collective delusion affects one's delusion and suffering. In particular, one can look at the specific ways that women suffer under such gendered collective delusions, not just as individuals but in many social issues that affect women in the world today (sex trafficking, domestic abuse, labor/slavery, etc.). This could complexify and enrich the understanding, not just of individual suffering but the collective social suffering that is also part of our suffering as individuals and how individual delusion and suffering result in these social ills.<sup>599</sup> Furthermore, this could also strengthen the analysis that without some sort of liberation from such social suffering, individual enlightenment or liberation may be harder to achieve. The causes and conditions for enlightenment may not be as optimal, or may not be there at all, given

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<sup>599</sup> Such analysis on how individual delusion results in social ills have been done by some Buddhist writers such as David Loy in *The Great Awakening: a Buddhist Social Theory* (Boston: Wisdom Publication, 2003), as well as other engaged Buddhists such as Sulak Sivaraksa (a Thai socially engaged Buddhist writer) as well as Thich Nhat Hanh.



such suffering and such conditions for women and men. Hence, to work for the liberation of all beings includes not just working toward their personal enlightenment but freeing them from the social conditions that hamper or prevent the possibility of conditions of such enlightenment from happening.

*Communal dimension of enlightenment/awakening/liberation*

If it is accepted that part of the “negative side” of interdependence is mutual blindness or a shared delusion, then the task of enlightenment can never just be a personal task but also the task of the community. In this case, it goes beyond the usual understanding of the bodhisattva as one who sees individual liberation as inseparable from the individual liberation of all beings. Rather, this moves toward asking about the role of the community, of the *sangha* or of spiritual friends (*kalyanamitra*) in one’s individual liberation so that instead of reflecting deluded images, such friends and communities become part of one’s individual path to enlightenment. This case was made by Mary Grey, on the Catholic side, when she argued against the ideal individual hero model which disempowers communities from taking responsibility for their own action in the world. She also discussed the role of worship and the worshipping community as the place where the individual “recovers” heart, and helps one remember who they truly are.

John Makransky has discussed how Christian ecclesiology was helpful in his own understanding of the communal understanding of the path to awakening. He noted how the Buddhist path is usually framed as an isolated or solitary path especially as it came to the West. However, his understanding of the Christian teachings regarding the body of

Christ and the communal nature of creation and salvation, led him back to the Buddhist tradition where he noticed how “buddhahood, embodies itself not just as individual attainment (*rang don, dharmakaya*) but as a power to coalesce *communities* of awakening (*zhen don, rupakaya*) and to incorporate bodhisattvas into *bodies of buddhahood* ...”<sup>600</sup>

Understanding then this intrinsically communal nature of the path to awakening could aid in Rita Gross’ suggestion of the revalorization of the *sangha*, seen as the poor third among the three Jewels of refuge. The *sangha* then could be redefined as the communal place where one “recovers heart” or in this case where one is reminded of who they are in their basic goodness and Buddha nature. It no longer needs to be seen as a gathering of people on individual paths, but rather a gathering of people empowering each other on their collective path to enlightenment. It is within the community that understands the communal path of enlightenment that individuals can awaken each other out of their communal and individual delusions. As Gross argues, the *sangha* is the third refuge because “no one becomes enlightened, or even develops basic sanity, without the matrix of adequate communal and relational existence.”<sup>601</sup> The responsibility then that is the consequence of such a communal path could become the foundation for the transformation of the *sangha* to one imbued by feminist values such as friendship and nurturance, as Gross suggested. Moreover, it could also emphasize other ritual aspects that are communal in nature and further build this new *sangha*. Thinking beyond individual spiritual practices, shared practices that can strengthen bonds among women

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<sup>600</sup> John Makransky, “Thoughts on Why, How and What Buddhists Can Learn from Christian Theologians” (for *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 2011).

<sup>601</sup> Gross, “I Go for Refuge to the Sangha,” 233.

and empower them will also be helpful in their own individual processes. In this way, apart from meditation practices, there could also be the revalorization of other ritual practices such as feasts or offerings and how such rituals can foster community and a greater shared practice with one's spiritual companions (*kalyanamitra*). Such revalorization then can revitalize the community and its practices in ways that truly embody the interdependent nature of all things, particularly the interdependent nature of awakening. It underscores as well the importance of friendships and relationships, which as Gross and Klein have noted have sometimes been missed or underemphasized, especially as Buddhism entered into the culture of individualism in the West.

It can also support Gross' emphasis regarding the path of the Great Bliss Queen as one where interpersonal relationships and spiritual practice are intertwined. There she spoke of the transformation of one's relationships due to spiritual practice but also how one's practice can be enriched by one's relationships. In this case, one sees the communal nature of the path and that one cannot get there alone, but only by travelling the path with others. In so doing, the notion of "refuge in the *sangha*" could be further deepened as trust and faith in the community that enables one to begin to trust and have faith in one's own self, especially if one is starting the practices and perceiving oneself as "weak" or "spiritually inferior." By giving oneself over to the community, taking refuge while one does not yet feel strong enough, they experience encouragement from the community that empowers their own practice and allows them to slowly build their own trust and faith in themselves.

One particular point of difference between the Christian and Buddhist feminist discussions regarding anthropology is the model of humanity. Whereas Rita Gross argued for an androgynous model of humanity, Mary Aquin O'Neill has challenged the adequacy of such a model towards a model of humanity that involves community (instead of just one person balancing all "masculine" and "feminine" traits within them). As discussed, Rita Gross did not see androgyny as the disappearance or nondistinction between "male and female" but the affirmation of the particularities of being "male" and "female" and to find that balance of "masculine" and "feminine" characteristics in each person. However, as O'Neill argues, the balance of such characteristics can only be fully found in community or in relationships for no human life can encompass the fullness of human experience. This for her is the anthropology in Genesis and why she offers the image of Jesus AND Mary together as the model for humanity, without respectively assigning "masculine" or "feminine" characteristics to them. Could such an argument then enrich Gross' articulation of androgynous humanity and the goal of realizing "masculine" and "feminine" characteristics within oneself to the need to find the wholeness of human experience in relationships and in community? Would such an understanding come closer to the implications of dependent origination and seeing how others are constitutive of oneself and how no one can be an autonomous or individuated being? Could this anthropology strengthen Gross' reading of the story of the Great Bliss Queen and the importance of having spiritual consorts and spiritual friends (*kalyanamitra*) on the path? Her path shows how others are constitutive of oneself but does not result in the dissolution of self but in the empowerment of self, and finding the

balance within oneself through an experience with the other. Such then emphasizes relationality and interdependence and the realization that there cannot be a “self” without others or without community. Balance can only be found and experienced with and through others.

*Social dimension of compassion: call for social action/justice in the world*

Empowered in such communities, Christian feminist discussions on solidarity and social justice might be useful for Buddhist feminist discussions regarding the meaning of compassion, not just in terms of meaningful and empowering interpersonal relationships, but in the social dimension of compassion, of freeing women and men from the social suffering that they encounter in the world today. Karma Lekshe Tsomo believes that Christian women can learn much from Buddhism in terms of meditation while Buddhist women can learn more in terms of service to society. Rita Gross herself has talked about finding a “prophetic voice” within Buddhism. In particular she writes,

Feminism, especially the Christian and post-Christian feminist thought with which I am most familiar can, with great cogency, be seen as in direct continuity with Biblical prophecy, in its true meaning of social criticism, protest against misuse of power, vision for a social order more nearly expressing justice and equity, and, most importantly, willingness actively to seek that more just and equitable order through whatever means are appropriate and necessary.<sup>602</sup>

In this way, the Christian stance on justice, particularly liberation and feminist theology’s insistence on praxis can also serve to call Buddhist traditions into more social analysis and activity.

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<sup>602</sup> Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, 134.

As John Cobb has argued, “to say that Buddhism is not an ethical religion or that lacks a social ethic can be extremely misleading.”<sup>603</sup> However, one of the usual criticisms of Buddhism (including Kyoto school dialogues) by Christian theologians is how historicity may not be emphasized as much, or that the relative truth in Buddhism may be underdeveloped due to the greater emphasis on the ultimate truth of emptiness. This results in the fact that, as Cobb says, a critical evaluation of social and political programs, or a judgment of social structures and their historical roles are not usually encouraged.<sup>604</sup> Some of this work is now being done, for example by Engaged Buddhists as well as feminists such as Rita Gross who, as we saw, argued for changes in Buddhist institutions and in society. But could such analysis and engagement in the world also be enriched through dialogue with Christian liberationist and feminist engagement with the world that focuses on particular social and historical realities that lead to suffering? For example, John Makransky has described how the Christian concern with the God of Justice prompts him to “seek increased clarity on the meaning of unconditional compassion associated with the bodhisattva path of awakening” as well as “explore how communal dimensions of awakening in Buddhist praxis ‘knit’ Buddhist individuals and communities into inter-connected, integrated responses of service and action that respond to concrete needs and problems of societies and the natural world.”<sup>605</sup>

This emphasis on seeking clarity regarding the meaning of unconditioned compassion has been the work of many Christian liberation and feminist theologians

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<sup>603</sup> John Cobb, *Beyond Dialogue*, 132.

<sup>604</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>605</sup> John Makransky, “Thoughts on Why, How and What Buddhists Can Learn from Christian Theologians”.

asking what “love”, “mercy” and “salvation” mean in the world full of suffering, in particular the suffering of the poor and suffering of women. Such reflections could also challenge Buddhist feminist reflection on their own articulation of what “unconditioned compassion” means in the face of the physical and social suffering of women. As seen in Chapter 2, their reflections have focused on the realization of wisdom and seeing how everyone shares the same nature and spiritual capacity. Hence women should not be seen as different and inferior from men. However, maybe emphasis could be given, not just to the personal differences among men and women but also to the social differences that have led to the suffering of women, and how such specific socio-historical contexts that have led to the suffering of women must be addressed, even challenged and changed, in order for such “sameness” to be truly realized. In this case, the realization of the ultimate view of emptiness and the “sameness” of all things does not lead to just an acceptance of the way things are or an escape from the realities of the world. Rather, it is from such a view that one confronts and addresses the differences and how these have led to the specific suffering of people. As John Makransky has expressed, “...buddhist compassion, as an unconditioned expression of wisdom, *upholds* something in persons by simultaneously *confronting* something in them. To uphold persons in their deepest potential of freedom and goodness *is* to confront us in all the ways that we hide from that potential – the individual and social inhibitions and structures that prevent us from responding fully to others with reverence and care.”<sup>606</sup> Furthermore, though the realization of “sameness” may be one’s ultimate view, this does not negate the need to

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<sup>606</sup> Makransky, “Thoughts on Why, How and What Buddhists can learn from Christian Theologians” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 2011.

address the person in their specificity, so that one's compassionate action toward a "victim" or a "victimizer" (though recognizing their Buddha nature) will take different forms, and require diverse ways of confronting their specific suffering and delusions. In this case then, one is able to hold on to the ultimate view of the emptiness of all things and the importance of the relative view by analyzing the specific individual and social delusional ways that led to suffering, confronting them so that the truth of the ultimate view can be realized.

Looking at this understanding of unconditional compassion as encompassing socio-historical realities leads back to the understanding of *upāya* (skillful means) as an expression of compassion (discussed in Chapter 1). The doctrine of skillful means was about adapting the teaching of the Dharma to the specific needs of the students to facilitate their awakening. One of the stories that depict this doctrine is that of Kisa Gotami who experiences the death of her child and cannot deal with the child's death. The Buddha tells her to gather seeds from households who have not experienced such a death. In doing so, she realizes the universality of the experience of death and loss and eventually comes to see that she is the same as others in their suffering and wanting to be free from suffering. This leads to her own awakening and she ends up following the Buddha. This is part of the expression of unconditional compassion. However, as Klein argued, the doctrine of *upaya*, though focused on specific situations, does not delve into the details of a person's life. This is why she thinks feminism can contribute greatly to Buddhist practice. But what the dialogue with Christian feminists could bring is not just the personal aspect but also one's socio-historical context as part of the "specific needs"



of the student.<sup>607</sup> Could the doctrine of *upaya* be expanded to look, not only on the specific personal circumstance but maybe also the ethical/social structures that prevents such spiritual awakening, in order to truly address the particular needs of the student and facilitate spiritual awakening? In this way, unconditional compassion and spiritual liberation can be seen to also require specific action in the world that frees people from the physical suffering in this world which one recognizes as tied to spiritual liberation.<sup>608</sup>

In this case, one could look at Kisa Gotami and wonder how or why her child died and maybe how it could be prevented from happening again? At the same time, one could still speak of the universality of the experience for women who experience the untimely death of their children (due to many social ills such as poverty, lack of health care, etc.). The sharing of such a painful episode could become a stepping stone for women like Kisa Gotami to band together, recognize the universality of their suffering and make sure that it does not happen to them or to others again. This is not to say that unconditional compassion becomes limited to social change, but that social change is an aspect, another expression of unconditional compassion. Spiritual awakening then can only occur when both causes and conditions of one's personal and individual as well as one's social reality are all present.

In the same way, the story of the Great Bliss Queen as seen in Chapter Three focused on her positive and negative interactions with others (particularly men) which

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<sup>607</sup> This insight has been facilitated by the work of Leah Weiss Ekstrom on Buddhist pedagogy and the need to focus on the particular context and experience of women.

<sup>608</sup> See for example, John Makransky's article "No Real Protection without Authentic Love and Compassion" *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 12 (2005): 25-36. There he used the story in the Cakkavatti-Sihananda sutta to show the relationship between the fundamental causes of suffering and social suffering such as poverty.

brought about spiritual progress for her and for those others. Could reflections on this story be enriched by going beyond “spiritualizing” her story to an examination of what happened to her at the hands of these men, and what socio-cultural limitations she had to break through? In this case, issues of abuse and violence toward women could also be raised, confronted, and “universalized” to show the specific suffering of women that continues to happen today. Spiritual “progress” cannot just happen without dealing with the social issues that hamper its progress. Would such reflections then be more “realistic” and break the story of the Great Bliss Queen as an “ideal” for women to follow (glorifying her suffering in the process)? It could now be a story that mirrors the suffering of women today, a story of suffering that must be fought in order that true liberation and enlightenment may come about. This kind of reflection on her story could also help to respect women’s stories and reflect on their own suffering in light of the Great Bliss Queen. In this way, one doesn’t just lose themselves in their identification with the Great Bliss Queen but actually use her story as the gateway to explore our own specific experience of suffering as women. Such reflections could then help ease Anne Klein’s worry that in the ritual, women could lose their own personal stories thereby losing their own self in identifying with the Great Bliss Queen.

*On Kenosis as surrender to God and Buddhist refuge*

The Christian feminist discussions around kenosis, anthropology and action in the world inevitably revert to our relationship with God and how such empowers transformation in oneself and in the world. For this reason, the spiritual understanding of *kenosis* was emphasized in Coakley and Grey’s discussions. In the same way, liberation

theology sees itself as grounded in spirituality. Establishing a relationship with God through prayer or an active spiritual life empowers one's actions in the world. In the Buddhist discussions on emptiness and its realization through meditation and Buddhist practices, the focus has been on the transformation of the self; how a strong sense of self that is mutually dependent on others is realized through practice. Furthermore, this transformation and empowerment of the self is usually seen as tapping into the previously unrealized potential of one's own nature (Buddha nature). This for example is what one sees in the discussions about the Great Bliss Queen and how one is ultimately tapping into a power that is one's own, that one is truly discovering oneself in the ritual of the Great Bliss Queen. This is one key point of difference between Christian and Buddhist practice that many Buddhists notice, that Christian spiritual practice focuses on the "other-power" of God whereas Buddhist practices focus more on "self-power" and the realization of one's own potential. For example, in a comparison of certain Buddhist and Christian practices, Robert Aitken concludes that,

Most importantly, the presence of God sets the tone for Christian prayer, from the formulas of children and the assurances of Brother Lawrence to the plain but profound utterances of the Desert Fathers and the 'blasphemy' of Meister Eckhart [...] God must guide us to the elimination of his concept, that all things might be seen in their equality. For Yuan-Wu, however, the commentator on *The Blue Cliff Record*, it is with individual human realization that the many beings are seen in their glorious light, and the Buddhas, sages, and masters, not to mention God or "God," have no role whatever, and are, in fact, excluded...<sup>609</sup>

Focus on God and "other power" is problematic from a Buddhist perspective since it may continue to reinforce dualistic thinking when there is a self and a God understood as outside oneself. This kind of dualistic thinking could lead to suffering.

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<sup>609</sup> Robert Aitken, "Formal Practice: Buddhist or Christian" in *Christians Talk about Buddhist Meditation, Buddhists Talk about Christian Prayer*, Rita Gross and Terry Muck, eds. (New York: Continuum, 2003) 83.

However, this question of God and “other-power,” the question of the source of one’s empowerment and transformation leads to the question of what empowers Buddhist practices. Is it simply “self-power” and the realization that one has the nature of the buddhas and therefore has the qualities necessary to attain enlightenment? This begs the question of the role of Buddhist refuge, of being part of the “community” of buddhas and bodhisattvas and the role they play in one’s own transformation, and in Buddhist women’s search for transformation and empowerment that is not a purely individual act.<sup>610</sup>

For example, I argued that refuge in the *sangha* as one’s community of spiritual friends could strengthen the practice of women who start with feelings of inadequacy and spiritual inferiority. Extending such reflections, refuge in the community of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, resting on the “strength of others who have gone before us” (similar to the reflections of the communion of saints in the Christian tradition), refuge in the buddhas and bodhisattvas who have accomplished what we currently feel unable to attain, the practitioner is enabled, inspired and empowered by the buddhas and bodhisattvas to begin and persevere in the path. This for example can be seen in the *Way of the Bodhisattva* when in the beginning of the path, the practitioner “confesses” but also take refuge in the buddhas and bodhisattvas appealing to them. It states:

Nowhere help or refuge will be found.  
And sunk beneath the weight of sorry,  
Naked, helpless, unprotected –

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<sup>610</sup> The focus on “self-power” and the realization of one’s own potential can be seen in the Buddhist feminist discussions regarding spiritual practice including the ritual of the Great Bliss Queen. Of course, this is not a blanket statement for all of Buddhism. For example, Amida Buddhism focuses on “other-power” as seen particularly in the *Nembutsu* or the calling on the name of Amida for one’s liberation.

What, when this befalls me, shall I do?<sup>611</sup>

Thus from this day forth I go for refuge  
To buddhas, guardians of wandering beings,  
Who labor for the good of all that lives,  
Those mighty ones who scatter every fear.<sup>612</sup>

Gripped by dread, beside myself with terror,  
To Samantabhadra I will give myself;  
And to Mañjushrī, the melodious and gentle,  
I will give myself entirely.<sup>613</sup>

These lines are usually understood as part of the motivation to enter the Bodhisattva path, fearing one's death and the loss of the opportunity for enlightenment, one seeks refuge. However, as mentioned, before immediately "spiritualizing" such texts, would it bring forth another dimension to think of the ways that women are "naked, helpless and unprotected" and what refuge could mean in that sense? Furthermore, it highlights the entrance to the path where one comes in "weak" and needing to "give oneself over" to the community in order to draw strength from them. In such re-thinking of the notion of refuge, the point is to shift the emphasis from one's own power to the kind of "communal well" of love, compassion, etc. that is "created" by the web of interdependence. It is not just tapping into and realizing one's own power as one realizes that one has the nature of the Buddha. It is also tapping into the "common consciousness" of the buddhahood of all things, tapping the dharmakaya, and drawing on the love and compassion that does not belong to anyone in particular but to everyone in this interdependent web of relations. Within such refuge, "letting go" or "giving oneself entirely" into the web of relations, we can rest and relax. We do not have to take the full

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<sup>611</sup> Shantideva, 2:46.

<sup>612</sup> Ibid., 2:47.

<sup>613</sup> Ibid., 2:49.

burden of loving others or liberating others which can be exhausting especially if it feels like we are only doing this, using our own power, drawing on our repository of love and compassion which will always have limits. Rather, refuge in the buddhas and bodhisattvas can mean tapping into that endless spring or fountain of love and compassion that all beings are constantly radiating. Practice (and work in the world) is never simply to be understood as being powered solely by our own efforts and capacities. Rather we are tapping into the love and compassion of buddhas and bodhisattvas, in fact of all beings.<sup>614</sup> Refuge becomes a reminder, not just of our individual capacities but of something that is coming from beyond ourselves and ultimately empowers our love of self and unconditional love for others. Such love and compassion is limitless because it is the love that comes from the mutual dependence of all things. It is also a reminder of how/why we are able to be liberated despite feeling weak or too trapped in *samsara*. This is what we take refuge in and what empowers practice. Could this be another way for women to give themselves to the care of an empowering community, even to the care of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, when they feel that their work and effort are not enough? As the Christian feminist theologians have insisted about God empowering the human in spiritual practice, so too Buddhist feminist theologians can think of refuge as

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<sup>614</sup>For example, John Makransky's meditations start with visualizing benefactors as a way to eventually tap into the communal source of love and compassion, reminding the practitioner not just of what one has but of what is coming from beyond oneself. See his book *Awakening through Love*. In particular, he writes: "...spiritual benefactors who first learned to receive the enduring wish of love from others before them and then radiated that wish to us all. Buddhas, bodhisattvas, holy beings, spiritual teachers – many have blessed us with that radiant wish even before we had heard of them. From them, we can learn to recognize this, acknowledge it, receive it, participate in it, and pass it on." *Awakening through Love*, 30.

that which empowers their practice and enriches the understanding of “empowerment” in the web of interdependence.<sup>615</sup>

For John Makransky, dialogue with the Christian notion of salvation (and debates between human effort vs. grace), emphasized this “other-powered” aspect on the issue of the agent of compassion and transformation. He says,

From this perspective, it would not be correct to say that the transformative power of the practice comes just from re-conditioning the subjectivity of the practitioner, as if the ego-centered personality were the primary agent of the practice. The ultimate *agent* of *tong-len*, gradually discovered from within its practice, is innate Buddhahood (*dharmakaya*), which works in and through the practitioner from beyond her ego-centered mind, to do what is not possible for that mind.<sup>616</sup>

Such insight into the dynamics of Buddhist practice can be helpful for Buddhist women who are coming in with feelings of inadequacy or inferiority. Furthermore, it once again highlights the communal aspect of spiritual liberation and unconditional compassion implied in the doctrine of dependent origination. It also helps to articulate an empowering way for women who do not have to rely just on themselves (doesn't this fuel one's delusion about self as independent and autonomous?) but also on the greater community of the sangha, and the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, not just for their “individual” transformation/empowerment but for the transformation of society as well. It also shows how one's agency works with the power of others (not fully reliant on just one or the other) in order to reach liberation and freedom from suffering. This articulation

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<sup>615</sup> One important shift in the articulation of Buddhist refuge that may be particularly important for Buddhist women today is the retrieval and emphasis of spiritually mature women within this field of refuge. Though the field of refuge has always included realized women in the past, present, and future, in the past, within patriarchal cultures that raised up men mostly as exemplars, spiritually women were not public figures. In the present though this is changing and in the future it is likely that many women will be publicly known as realized sangha. For example, some Buddhist feminist teachers already include and emphasize female spiritual benefactors in their field of refuge.

<sup>616</sup> John Makransky, “Thoughts on Why, How and What Buddhists can learn from Christian Theologians”.

regarding “agency” goes back to the heart of issues regarding “dependence” and how there is a right kind of “dependence” on others which does not result in a loss of self or agency, but empowers such agency. In that case, we cannot just let go of the language of “surrender” or “dependence” because if we take the doctrine of emptiness and dependent origination seriously, then some kind of “dependence” is necessary for the empowerment and transformation of the self. Transformation cannot be done in isolation, but needs right relationships to make it possible. In the Buddhist case, it requires refuge (understood as faith, trust and dependence) in the Buddha, the dharma and the *sangha* for empowerment. In this space of refuge, we are able to do what “is not possible for the mind” to do independently of others and without tapping into that ultimate wisdom and compassion of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas that is one’s own power but also empowered by innate Buddhahood. This is the power that the practitioner taps into in meditation practices.



## Conclusion

### **I. The contribution of the interruption of the Buddhist feminist voice to Christian feminist theology in particular, and to Christian theology in general.**

As mentioned in the introduction, this dissertation aimed at a “double-interruption” by bringing in the voice of the religious other into the discussion of Christian theology while also bringing the feminist voice into Buddhist-Christian dialogue. From the beginning, I noted the analogous concern of our Christian and Buddhist writers: critiquing the notions of *kenosis* and emptiness while also showing how they could be retrieved in the discussions of a relational self and how this happens in practice. The Buddhist insistence that emptiness (and the strong relational self that women search for, as Klein argues) can only be realized through spiritual practices supported Coakley and Grey’s move of understanding *kenosis* within the spiritual life. For Coakley, *kenosis* in contemplation can lead to the empowerment of self, of finding “power-in-vulnerability” that leads to a renewed understanding of the paradox of the cross and resurrection. For Grey, *kenosis* within the spiritual life is what is necessary in order to fight the fragmentation that women experience, not only in their own selves, but also in our current culture.

Moreover, in the previous chapter, I articulated the various ways that the interruption of the voice of Buddhist feminists enriches and deepens the Christian feminist discussions on *kenosis* and theological anthropology and the role of spiritual practices in these discussions. There, I showed how Klein and Gross’ discussions on no-self and emptiness broadened the Christian feminist discussion of *kenosis* to include the

notion of “letting go” of preconceived gendered notions of self and God, as well as valuing the body and emotions (which women are usually identified with) as one learns to let go of dualistic tendencies that lead to suffering. Understanding *kenosis* in this way serves as the foundation for the discovery of a self beyond the usual limited notion of women as “weak” or “passive” to a more empowered notion of self. It opens women up to new ways of understanding or experiencing themselves by learning to “let go” of old, sinful ways of self.

In Klein and Gross’ articulation of how a strong yet relational self can begin to be formed through meditation (which includes the development of states of stability, calm, and nonjudgmental awareness which they argued are important for women), Coakley and Grey find support for their own articulation of how Christian contemplation and spiritual practices can serve to illuminate new ways of understanding the self and the self-in-relation, and seeing these practices as the place where self-love and self-acceptance are cultivated in a way that opens us to a real love and attention to the other. This sense of our relationship with others was described by Coakley as the discovery of our “mutual interpenetration” with each other as part of the Body of Christ. As Mary Grey has argued, this search for new images and descriptions of our relationality can be supported by the images and descriptions of interdependence articulated in Buddhism, such as that of Indra’s net. Images of interdependence such as these can lead, as all four feminists argue, to a real love and compassion for others.

One of the major contributions of our Buddhist feminist authors to the Christian discussions has been their reinterpretation of wisdom and compassion. In particular, they

emphasized how women should not start with compassion, but as Gross repeatedly stated, women must start with cultivating self-love and nonharming before one exercises compassion for the other. Furthermore, they also emphasized how compassion for the other must begin with compassion for oneself, particularly by becoming attentive to the various layers of our own suffering and through that, to cultivate compassion for the suffering of others. Ultimately, one must cultivate wisdom together with compassion to make sure that one's compassion is effective, not covertly self-seeking, but also does not harm or exclude oneself. As I demonstrated, this challenges Christian feminist discussion on *kenosis* and *agape* to emphasize the love of *self*, and to articulate the Christian virtues and vision necessary to support a love for the other that includes a love for oneself. In those discussions, I offered the possibility of thinking about the virtue of prudence as an analogue to wisdom as that which can direct our actions in our various ways of relating to self and others.

One of the main differences that emerged in these discussions was how Christian spiritual practice is centered on God and how Christians understand the whole practice to be empowered by God. This, as mentioned, was problematic for many Buddhists who interpret this as a dualistic tendency that leads to further suffering. However I highlighted how this particular aspect within the Christian feminist discussions could serve to deepen Buddhist reflections on what truly empowers their practice. In so doing, I hope to have demonstrated the kind of interreligious learning that Boeve, Clooney and Roberts all argued for in the introduction. It is a dialogue that does not reduce religions

to mere similarities but highlights differences in a way where true learning can occur, including learning more about our own tradition in a deeper way.

In the end, the Buddhist feminist discussions on practices and the need for female imagery and models in these practices, led me back to Mary - to her story and to Marian devotions – as a rich resource that serves as an example of the kind of *kenosis* that Coakley and Grey argue for.

## **II. The contribution of the interruption of feminist voices to Buddhist-Christian dialogue on *kenosis* and *śūnyatā***

In Chapter One, I reviewed the critiques leveled against the Masao Abe dialogues, in particular that of E.D Cabanne and Gregory Ornatowski. Both of these authors saw the need to recontextualize the Buddhist-Christian dialogue regarding *kenosis* and emptiness within the spiritual life/practices of both traditions, not limiting it to intellectual concerns but ultimately to the soteriological concern of both traditions to which these doctrines are tied. In the previous chapters and as summarized in the section above, I have shown how both our Buddhist and Christian feminist writers were focused on recontextualizing *kenosis* and emptiness within the spiritual life. More specifically, in response to Ornatowski's suggestion to take into account other meanings of emptiness, the survey of Rita Gross and Anne Klein brought us back to the various meanings and uses of emptiness within Indo-Tibetan practices, such as its epistemological use against clinging to views. This was helpful in reminding our Christian feminists writers of the “unknowing” and “unmastery” of our notions of self and God. It also allowed us to explore the notion of emptiness as interdependence and how this was a rich resource for

women in both traditions of re-articulating the kind of relational self that they are searching for.

Furthermore, all four authors insisted on a kind of priority of spiritual *praxis* before ethical/political action. For example, I demonstrated how Coakley argues for a new understanding of *kenosis* as the act of surrender or vulnerability and dependence within contemplation as the ground for greater engagement and commitment to others and the world, as well as re-contextualizing theology within contemplation. I also described Klein's argument for the importance of meditation, of mindfulness or visualization practices, in women's search for an empowered self and empowering relationships. There too was Gross' autobiographical narrative of how her meditation helped her to see the clarity in anger that allowed for more effective action without the negative emotion. She emphasized the necessity of clarity and insight to ensure that one's action is effective and appropriate, demonstrating how wisdom is necessary for compassion. In the end, Gross summarizes the necessity of spiritual practice in the face of suffering and violence today, which echoes the sentiment of the other authors we have discussed. She writes,

What good is spiritual discipline in times when oppression and injustice are rampant and when vast numbers of people who claim they are religious favor aggression and violence as the way to cope with their pain ... But what other than genuine spiritual discipline will give us the patience to continue in the face of such discouraging circumstances? What else will give us the patience to remain non-aggressive in the face of so much provocation? What else will enable us to continue to respond with kindness toward those who are aggressive and hateful to us, who would destroy or oppress us if they could? What else can sustain us in the face of pervasive sadness for ourselves and our world? What else can enable us to see so clearly the sacredness of our world and to treasure properly the incredible fragility of our lives? ....In many ways, we live in difficult, dangerous times. But one thing we can experience to a far greater extent than any

generation prior to our own is the ability to appreciate each other's spiritual disciplines and their transformative potential.<sup>617</sup>

Despite the kind of “primacy” given to spiritual practice, these Buddhist and Christian writers also argue that spiritual practices must lead to ethical/political praxis in the world. This, for example, was one of the key lessons learned in the reinterpretation of the relationship of wisdom and compassion, that to focus only on the cultivation of wisdom, without the practice of universal compassion (now understood to include liberation from social suffering and injustice after the dialogue with Christianity) is insufficient or is bondage. Coakley argued this as well, stating that the practice of contemplation far from being an escape from the world leads to deeper engagement in the world, partly by forming us into people who are able to be more attentive, able to listen better to the cries of others and therefore better able to respond to particular needs of others. The same point was also clearly demonstrated by Grey in her discussion of how Thomas Merton and Etty Hillesum's spiritual lives brought them more deeply into the suffering of the world and need to fight against such suffering.

In the end, the discussion of these Buddhist and Christian women on the importance of practice (in both senses described above) and how the teaching on *kenosis* and emptiness should not just be discussed and understood but *practiced*, contributes to the new direction in Buddhist-Christian dialogue that many of its participants argue for, a dialogue that addresses the social ills and reality of the people today, and ties the teachings more concretely to practice (both spiritual and ethical) showing their

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<sup>617</sup> Rita Gross, “Conclusion” in *Christians Talk about Buddhist Meditation, Buddhists Talk about Christian Prayer*, eds. Rita Gross and Terry C. Muck (New York: Continuum, 2003) 156-7.

interdependence with each other in order to be relevant today. As David Chappell, from the Buddhist side argues,

Today, however, most Buddhist dialogue efforts imply that the present needs are not primarily intellectual but moral: how to act as partners to overcome social injustice and economic exploitation in both East and West by cultivating spiritual and communal values that will restore a global kinship and responsibility for each other and our Mother Earth. Contemporary Buddhists who advocate interreligious dialogue see this as a task not just for their minds and mouths, but also for their hearts and hands.<sup>618</sup>

Paul Ingram, from the Christian side, echoes the same sentiment when he writes that:

...“theological reflection, centering prayer, and interreligious dialogue without works is dead” for the same reasons that “faith without works is dead.” For me, a central point of the practice of faith is the liberation of human beings and all creatures in nature from forces of oppression and injustice and the mutual creative transformation of persons in community with nature [...] Consequently, any religious practice needs to include focus on practical issues that are not religion-specific or culture-specific, meaning issues that confront all human beings regardless of what religious or secular label persons wear.<sup>619</sup>

Hence, the comparative work in Chapter Four opens up Buddhist-Christian dialogue in this new direction, broadening the discussions beyond doctrines and teachings into explorations of spiritual practice and effective action in the world today. It also models the kind of solidarity needed in a fragmented world and the “interruption” that Boeve argues is necessary in this religiously plural context.<sup>620</sup>

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<sup>618</sup> David Chappell, “Buddhist Interreligious Dialogue: To build a Global Community” in *The Sound of Liberating Truth: Buddhist-Christian Dialogues in Honor of Frederick J. Streng*, eds. Sallie King and Paul Ingram (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1999) 25.

<sup>619</sup> Paul Ingram, “On the Practice of Faith: A Lutheran’s Interior Dialogue with Buddhism” in *Christians Talk about Buddhist Meditation, Buddhists Talk about Christian Prayer*, Rita Gross and Terry Muck, eds. (New York: Continuum, 2003) 35.

<sup>620</sup> Furthermore, this attention to suffering, to ethical action and the work is liberation is necessary, not just in interreligious dialogue but in the work of comparative theology as well. As Tracy Tiemeier has argued, “if comparative theologians do not more carefully interrelate culture, religions, and liberation, they run the (even if unintended) risk of being at best irrelevant and at worst a tool of the new imperialism. Grounding comparative theology in cultural and socio-political considerations will not ‘dilute’ the intellectual rigor of the discipline; rather, it will deepen it.” Tiemeier, “Comparative Theology as a Theology of Liberation” in *The New Comparative Theology*, 149.

In broadening Buddhist-Christian dialogue into the realm of spiritual and ethical *praxis*, this work shifts the focus from Masao Abe's concern of addressing irreligion to the challenge of addressing suffering (particularly, though not exclusively, the suffering of women). I would argue (as Mary Grey has) that part of the reason for irreligion today is because religions do not address the specific suffering in the world and hence has become superfluous in many peoples' lives. Furthermore, many people no longer find life-giving aspects of such religions in a world that has dealt so much suffering and death in the past century. For this reason, Jon Sobrino, a liberation theologian, has argued that the only credible mark of the Church today is to become a church of mercy, and to take people down from their crosses and fight against injustice and suffering.<sup>621</sup> In the same way, Mary Grey, as we saw, argued for the necessity to combat the fragmentation and alienation that is experienced in the world today and how Christianity must address such issues, in order to remain relevant and credible in the world today. Of course, dialogue with Buddhism has shown how we cannot just concern ourselves with the obvious physical injustice and suffering that we see in the world today but also with the subtler levels of suffering that lead to actions that inflict suffering on people. Hence, the relevance of religions today is contingent upon how they address the continued suffering and injustice in the world today, and how articulations of salvation or liberation must include such consideration. This entails, as our Buddhist and Christian feminists argue, looking at religions themselves to see whether/how they may have contributed to such suffering. For this reason, my discussion of our various authors always began with their

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<sup>621</sup> See Jon Sobrino, "The Samaritan Church and the Principle of Mercy" in *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (New York: Orbis Books, 1994) 15-26.



awareness of how *kenosis* and emptiness are contentious doctrines for women. For example, I focused on how Coakley was aware of how *kenosis* and practices of contemplation have been used to promote women's dependence and passivity, and how Rita Gross observed that the wrong understanding of emptiness (of thinking that things on the relative level are irrelevant) has led to continued gender inequality in Buddhist institutions.

However, it is also clear in the writings of these Christian and Buddhist authors that though patriarchal interpretations of Christian and Buddhist teachings and practices have contributed to the suffering of women (and other marginalized groups), Christian and Buddhist teachings and practices can also continue to be a resource for women, to become part of the "antidote" against the suffering in the world. This was their main project. In particular, their attempt to retrieve and re-imagine the doctrines of *kenosis* and emptiness brought them back to their broader contexts of the spiritual practices within their traditions and the concern for salvation (in the Christian tradition) and liberation/enlightenment (in the Buddhist tradition). In both cases, they highlighted the need for such discussions to move beyond intellectual/doctrinal interpretations into the level of practice and highlight the necessity to broaden the dialogue around *kenosis* and *śūnyatā* to focus on practice (both spiritual and ethical) in order to address issues of suffering. This shift to addressing suffering responds to Catherine Keller's concern that Buddhist-Christian dialogues, by not taking into account these religions' patriarchalism, may deepen the suffering of women. Furthermore, the dialogue between our Buddhist and Christian feminists re-directed the previous conversation to include the specific

suffering of women, and in so doing, also articulated new ways of re-thinking their Buddhist and Christian doctrines and practices in ways that broadens the dialogue and opens new avenues of continued exploration.

One particular avenue that should be explored in further Buddhist-Christian dialogue as well as in feminist comparative work is the inclusion of the voices, interpretations and concerns of women from other parts of the world such as Asia. As Tracy Tiemeier argues, comparative work needs to “move beyond the cultural monolith of white America by making sure that how and where we theologize is also reconsidered in light of new currents in Asian theology.”<sup>622</sup> Her admonition highlights one of the limits of this work – that though it has considered the voice of the marginalized other (both women as well as the religious other), it is still a work that focuses on “white” European/North Americans and their particular Western feminist concern of searching for a self. What particular concerns do Asian Christians and Buddhists have? What images and practices do they find life-giving? It is necessary to develop a dialogue with the voices of Buddhist and Christian Asian women who could contribute in ways that teach us to become even more attuned to the voices of the other in the differences and in their particular experiences and concern. The addition of these voices could critique the current project and help us to broaden our horizon of understanding. Including these voices could then broaden our solidarity to a more global level while at the same time learning to become more sensitive to the particularities of our socio-historical-economic and cultural locations.

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<sup>622</sup> Frank Clooney, “Response” in *The New Comparative Theology*, 197.

### III. The contribution to a renewed Christian theology

In articulating the contribution of the Buddhist feminist voices for Christian feminist theology, it also became clear to me how this project also contributes to Christian theology in general. In particular, the focus on *praxis* (both spiritual and ethical) in these dialogues supports current conversations within Christian theology regarding the relationship of spirituality, theology, and morality.

Philip Sheldrake, in his book *Spirituality and Theology*, has traced the split between the two from the Middle Ages all the way to the Enlightenment period. He concludes though that “Western theology and spirituality are in the process of overcoming an ancient and radical divorce that began in the late middle Ages and was reinforced by the Enlightenment. The last twenty years have seen the beginnings of a serious conversation between spirituality and theology. This is vital to both.”<sup>623</sup> Specifically, he points to liberation and feminist theology as important movements that have influenced the reintegration of spirituality and theology. This kind of relationship between spirituality, theology and morality is what we see argued for by both of our Christian feminist writers, Sarah Coakley and Mary Grey. For example, Coakley points to the necessity of a contemplative *theologie totale*. She argued for the importance of starting with contemplation in order to come to a deeper understanding and articulation of Christian doctrines as well as the cultivation of the proper humility (the “unknowing”) that is required so that we are always open to that “knowledge-beyond-knowledge”, the Mystery of God. It is also such a practice that cultivates a true attentiveness to the

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<sup>623</sup> Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and Theology: Christian Living and the Doctrine of God* (New York: Orbis Books, 1998) 95.

marginalized other which becomes the foundation of one's action for them that is more than just mere "good political intentions." Mary Grey too, as we saw, argued for the development of a feminist spirituality that could address the current state of fragmentation in the world, through a re-ordering of our desire back to God and to the other. These kinds of feminist work then contribute to the work being done today by contemporary theologians that reintegrate spirituality, theology and morality.

A major contribution of this project is the dialogue with Buddhist feminists that reinforces this wholistic understanding of theology. In the Buddhist feminist discussions, I emphasized how intimately connected the teaching of emptiness was with the practice of meditation (that is, how emptiness is realized/experienced in meditation and how meditation practices led to new articulations regarding emptiness), as well as how wisdom and compassion were interdependent. This reminded us of how Christian practices of *agape* or *kenosis* must be done with the wisdom or vision of interdependence (and love of self, other and God) that can only be cultivated through spiritual practices. Furthermore, the dialogue with Buddhist feminists (who used emptiness as a tool against clinging to views) showed how the doctrinal understanding and articulations of God must always be challenged and enriched by a spiritual discipline of "unknowing" that moves us out of a sense of superiority of "knowing" God and other that blocks true knowledge and wisdom. On the other hand, the Christian stance on justice, and particularly liberation theology's insistence on *praxis*, also serves to call Buddhist traditions into more social analysis and activity, and as I argued, a deeper looking at the "negative side" of interdependence. As we saw, Karma Lekshe Tsomo has said that she thinks Christian

women can learn much from Buddhism in terms of meditation while Buddhist women can learn more in terms of service to society. Rita Gross herself has talked about finding a “prophetic voice” within Buddhism. Here, we see the ways that Buddhists and Christians can help each other to critique their traditions and renew them in order to face the situation in the world today. This encounter between these Christian and Buddhist feminist writers is a good example of how theology must be related to spirituality and ethics. It also begins to explore the impact of other religions for Christian theology and spirituality. This was one of Sheldrake’s concerns when he observes the current context of the global encounter of world faiths and writes that:

...Raimundo Pannikar, argues that whereas Christian theology traditionally operated within what he calls a “dialectical dialogue” (that is, by argument *against* ‘the other’) it now needs to accept a “dialogic dialogue” that is open to the values of ‘the other.’ The disturbing impact of this new context for Christian theology and spirituality has hardly begun to be explored.<sup>624</sup>

All this points us back to understanding theology as engaging the whole person – head (doctrine), heart (worship), and hands (moral), or as Miguel Diaz would argue, a theology is not just faith seeking understanding, but also faith seeking justice and as well as adoration.<sup>625</sup> This emphasizes the importance of the reintegration of spirituality and theology which we saw was argued by our Christian feminist authors and supported by

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<sup>624</sup> Sheldrake, 60. My point above of how the Buddhist feminist insistence of nonclinging to views challenges Christian feminists to a spiritual “unknowing” that leads to doctrinal humility is also relevant to the development of this “dialogic dialogue” that Sheldrake seeks. As Catherine Cornille has argued, one of the conditions important for interreligious dialogue is humility, and yet within Christianity itself, “it [humility] has more often been regarded as an attitude to be adopted *toward* rather than *about* the truth of Christian doctrine.” Catherine Cornille, *The Im-possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2008) 28. She also contends that dialogue with Buddhism could enrich the Christian understanding of humility since Buddhist discussions of humility include humility about all doctrinal formulations. Cornille, 54.

<sup>625</sup> Miguel Diaz, *On Being Human: US Hispanic and Rahnerian Perspectives* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001) 18. These three approaches are taken from Gerald O’Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology: The Three Styles of Contemporary Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993).

the Buddhist feminist writers discussing their own concerns about the links between practice and teachings. In the end, the dialogue among these feminists emphasizes not just this wholistic aspect of theology, but that such a wholistic theology demands PRACTICE! PRACTICE! PRACTICE!<sup>626</sup> This is the key message that both our Christian and Buddhist feminist authors emphasized. Furthermore, Sheldrake himself argues that “[t]heology as a whole, not merely spirituality, is practical and needs to be practised.”<sup>627</sup> Moreover, both disciplines (of theology and spirituality) imply some kind of transformation in one’s search for truth for “there is never an authentic disclosure of truth which is not also transformative.”<sup>628</sup> This is exactly what we found our writers arguing for in the end: practices that lead to the transformation of the self, of society, and of their institutions, both Buddhist and Christian (in their teachings and practices) in ways that can become more life-affirming for all. Such transformations of the self were probably best expressed by Coakley, as previously quoted, in what she hopes are the fruits of practice for women: “personal empowerment, prophetic resistance, courage in the face of oppression, and the destruction of false idolatry.” On the other hand, both Mary Grey and Rita Gross argued for the transformation of their communities, of the

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<sup>626</sup> The Buddhist-Christian feminist dialogue that I have undertaken has emphasized the importance of practice understood as both ethical as well as spiritual practices. Hence, a faith that does “justice” and “adoration” as mentioned. This same dual notion of practice is observed by Paul Knitter in his own encounter with Buddhism. He says that there is “‘practice’ in its Buddhist sense – the daily exercises that one follows in order to stay in good spiritual shape,” and there is “‘practice’ more in its Christian meaning – the activities one performs in order to live out one’s spirituality in the world, local and global. Generalizing grossly, what Buddhists mean by practice is more interior and personal, while what Christians mean is more external and social.” Knitter, *Without Buddha I could not be a Christian*, 167. As Knitter notes, these are gross generalizations, and as I have demonstrated, both our Christian and Buddhist feminist authors are concerned with **both** kinds of practice, arguing for the necessity and interdependence of both, in order to deepen one’s spiritual life and empower one’s commitment to the suffering world.

<sup>627</sup> Sheldrake, 22.

<sup>628</sup> *ibid.*, 23.

Church and the *sangha*, to become places where the transformation of the self and society can begin.

In the end, my hope is that this work on the comparison of Buddhist feminist discussions on emptiness and the Christian feminist discussions on *kenosis* is performative of the power of *kenosis* and the kind of mutual learning and transformation that can happen in the dialogue with another tradition. Moreover, it provides the “interruption” that I described in the introduction, the kind of interruption necessary for growth and a deeper understanding and discovery of self, other and God, particularly in our interreligious encounters and in our articulations about our understanding of theological anthropology and the relationship between self and o/Other within Christian theology. Ultimately, my interruption sheds new light on unexplored areas within Christian theology and Buddhist-Christian dialogue. I hope that such interruption provides light and hope in this suffering world, partly fragmented by religious and cultural differences, showing ways that religions can learn with and from each other (and how these religions can learn from the voices of) in ways that are fruitful to both but also address the greater need in the world, the alleviation of suffering in all its forms.

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