

The Temple hosted internationally known author and teacher, Dr. Rita M. Gross, on Friday, May 2nd. Dr. Gross led a discussion with Temple members on her forthcoming book, *Religious Diversity—What's the Problem? Buddhist Suggestions for Flourishing with Religious Diversity*. Dr. Gross said in her presentation that religious diversity is a blessing, not a problem, and that it is more important that we all live together in peace than that we all believe the same thing. In other words, kindness is the great unifier of all genuine religious expression. It matters less what religion we espouse than whether we express kindness and compassion to each other.

She said that the hard duality that religion sometimes provokes is a mistake. The fundamental error we make is to ignore the fact that the self and others always arise interdependently. In our tendency to pin others down with duality, we sometimes create labels for each other, which runs counter to the aspiration of all major religions. One example she used was the term, “heathen.” That person doesn’t exist; no one thinks of him or herself as a “heathen.” Only the label exists.

Dr. Gross warned people away from the popular notion of thinking that all religions are essentially the same. That’s not at all accurate, she said, especially when you compare non-theistic religions like Buddhism to theistic religions. The task before us, though, is to resist the temptation to consider our own religion as the “one true faith.” We have to recognize that our perspective is but one perspective, and as we begin to see our “world” as one among many, we learn about ourselves in the process.

Later that evening, Dr. Gross spoke at the University of Michigan on the topic of Buddhism and Feminism. She is reknowned for her innovative work on gender and religion, and is the author of *Buddhism After Patriarchy: a Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*. At the discussion, Dr. Gross brought up a fundamental dichotomy that while many traditional Buddhists are comfortable in their assurance that gender is unreal, they are still comfortable adhering to gender norms and call the claims of those who bring up the topic as irrelevant. She said that although a female body “doesn’t reveal anything essential about me, so much is projected on to me as a result of my gender.”

She spoke at length about the sense that women are considered inferior in traditional Buddhist hierarchy, as reflected in the traditional concept of the less fortunate female rebirth. Dr. Gross spoke personally about the isolation she felt when she raised these issues with Buddhist teachers; she was told that when she “grew up as a Buddhist” she would give up her concerns, “that practice would make you content.” She said that as she grew in her Buddhist practice she became less angry, and that her anger was transformed into clarity. She said that it was important to give up anger but not to acquiesce to injustice.

She talked about the need to restore female ordination lines that have been eliminated. The problem, she identified, was that in traditional cultures lay people

wanted to dedicate their merit to those they saw as the highest on the ladder, and monks were seen as higher than nuns, so as the funding for nuns practice dried up the lineages were lost.

Finally, on an upbeat note, she said that the foundations of true equity are already in place in Buddhism, and that with the rapid rise of women's autonomy and independence in many parts of the world, the future can be bright. She said that, currently, 50 percent of teachers in the West are women.

She ended her presentation with passage from the Pali Paranirvana Sutra, where Mara came to the Buddha and said, "Isn't it time you died yet?" The Buddha answered emphatically that his work would not be complete until monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen were competent to teach the Dharma. In that passage, Dr. Gross said, he acknowledged that women were worthy of a place in teaching the Dharma, and that the only hurdle now is that Buddhist men need to recognize that need in the same way the Buddha did.