Social and Engaged: Learning Transformations, Gender and Trans-Formations in Buddhist Teaching

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Prologue

Can there be a view from which the viewer is absent? Or a view point which is not also a point of view? Simplistic facticity assumes an external objective world. The basic objectivist stance is that the world exists without mediation, without interpretation, quite self-sufficient in its existence – it does not need perception of it to come into being. Nor, from such a simple objectivist stance, is gender identity anything other than a factual given: a-historical, outside culture, beyond even the necessity of self-conscious reflection of the identity's owner. However, there are few philosophical systems, and few individuals, who would not recognise that humans construct and shape their environment and identity, at least in part, by perception and interpretation. A certain amount of social, cultural and historical constructivism is allowed into even the most robust of realist worldviews. There is always the viewer and the viewed, both equally real.

Curiously, certain forms of Buddhism assert that there is no real world to perceive, nor is there any real perceiver of the world. All is, (or is not) nothing (*sunyata*). Buddhism is neither realist, nor anti-realist, in this sense, for it denies the validity of either position. Equally, there is no self (*anatta*) to perceive a gender or an identity. *Nirvana* (a word that perhaps describes this understanding) is neither a place nor a state, nor is it even a purposive action; it is neither delusion, nor the wisdom (*prajna*) that recognises delusion. By inaction all is accomplished: by having no 'view', of world or of self, all views are included.

But if this is the deep understanding of the meditating nun or monk, it leaves little room as a worldview for purpose or meaning, for acting in the world. So, there is a tradition of practical wisdom in Buddhism that enables the individual to function with meaning. In historical versions of the Mahayana this is encapsulated in the actions of the

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Bodhisattva. Bodhisattvas are individuals who have attained the realisation of *nirvana*, yet, instead of being released from the endless cycle of *samsara* (birth, death and rebirth), they elect to continue engaging in the world, driven by compassion for all sentient beings. They are, primarily, teachers.

This short article is informed by two great teachers, Peggy Morgan and Rita Gross. Their academic practice of teaching and sharing is supported on the foundations of research and writing. Their writing informs their practice as pedagogues. As teachers they offer a way of understanding, a perspective on the world for the student to interpret, to recognise their own and other's points of view and become transformed by learning.

Pedagogy and Personality

> Then the Buddha said to Śāriputra: "Did I not previously tell you that all the Buddha Bhagavats explain the Dharma with various explanations and illustrations, using skilful means, all for the sake of highest, complete enlightenment? All of these teachings are for leading and inspiring the bodhisattvas. Moreover, Śāriputra, I will now clarify what I mean with illustrations. Those with wisdom will be able to understand through these illustrations. (*The Lotus Sutra* 2009:56)

There is a term in Sanskrit for the tradition of passing on teachings from guru to student called *parampara.* It is my good fortune to work in a certain *parampara*, that of Peggy Morgan. I have described this same understanding in reference to one of my other great teachers, Ursula King (2017:2) While Ursula was my supervisor for Masters and doctorate, I met Peggy at a conference in 1997, where she encouraged me to join the British Association for the Study of Religions, a significant part of my academic identity for over twenty years – and where both Peggy and Ursula, as ex-Presidents of the association, remain committed supporters. As I completed my PhD in 2000, an academic position came up to establish a new programme in Religious Studies, alongside the existent Theology degree at Westminster College (where Peggy was an academic member of staff). It was an exciting opportunity to set up a new programme, as at the same time Westminster College merged with Oxford Brookes University. The post was in fact a replacement for James Cox (also an ex-President of the BASR) as he had moved to Edinburgh University. Peggy was planning her retirement (from the college), but she had also planned that there would be a period of handover and support for the new post-holder. I took the post and was delighted both to have Peggy as mentor in my first academic role and to discover the substantial and high-quality teaching materials in the

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study of religions strand of the Bachelor in Theology programme. Of course, Peggy had nurtured and maintained a robust programme design, underpinned by high quality learning materials for distance and face-to-face learning (ironically, as I write, this is exactly the kind of programme Universities are now developing to deal with the effects of Covid 19).

Not only did Peggy support me developing learning and teaching materials in the study of religions, but she also introduced me to Oxford and led me on tours around the city to sites of religious and cultural interest, while introducing me to religious leaders and facilitators – sources that I would use in organising trips and events for my new undergraduate cohorts. I also first visited the Ashmolean Museum with Peggy, where we will continue to meet for tea and cakes, after the prohibitions of the coronavirus crisis of 2020.

It is true to our friendship that in recent correspondence during the UK 'lockdown', we had been sharing our interest in wildlife and the natural world in which she remarked on the large number of bees visiting her garden and, perhaps with reference to the Buddhist understanding that Buddha is always 'going on' ie that practice is always ongoing whether a lay person or a Boddhisattva, she wrote:

> "Came across this: 'Aerodynamically the bumble bee should not be able to fly, but the bumble bee does not know it, so it goes on flying anyway' Stay safe and well" (personal correspondence, May 2020)

In recovering memories of our friendship, and Peggy's influence on my life and work, I lately realised that I had in fact used Peggy's published work in my first career as a secondary school teacher. As a teacher of History and Religious Education in the 1990s, I had used one particular text as a resource from the *Looking into World Religions* series (sic), published by Batsford. In *Being a Buddhist* (1989) I had a resource that explained some core characteristics of Buddhist life and practice. One of the chapters is entitled, 'Giving Loving Kindness and Friendship' and relates to *maitri or metta*, which is a central ethical and practice-based approach within most Buddhisms. It can be translated, as Peggy notes in the chapter, 'as both loving kindness and friendliness' (39). Moreover, she begins the chapter with an example of phenomenological *eidetic* essentialism about the core of Buddhism: 'Someone once asked the present Dalai Lama what his religion was. His reply was very direct: "My religion is kindness"' (38). The point is not framed that way – it is, after all, a text for younger readers - but the source is authoritative, however one views essentialist reductions. These points aside, as I look at the text now, it is the selection of sources used that intrigues me as pointers towards Peggy's understanding of

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the key features of Buddhist practice. In describing *metta,* Peggy uses a source written by Dharmachari Subhuti from a modern Buddhist organisation established in 1967, not a classical source. It is particularly apt in this section to cite his (and her) understanding of friendship:

> Real friendship involves an awareness of the other's potential. We do not simply see what they are but what they could be. Not only do we have powerful feelings of well-wishing towards our friends, but we hope that they will grow. Our friendliness would lead us to do everything we could to help them realise their potentiality. Real friendship is not need-based but growth-based and becomes fully possible when both friends are committed to developing as individuals. (from *Buddhism for Today*, D. Subhuti, cited in Morgan, 1989:39)

This narrative preamble is resonant with the experience of meeting and talking with Peggy. The narrative discourse is the sharing. Such passing on of experience and knowledge is the essence of the pedagogues' skilful means, or skill-in-means – it is often not the direct content of the lesson, but that the lesson is a step, or a partial step, toward another truth. Thus, (as an apt simile), in the academic study of religions, we use the term 'religion' while recognising that it is functionally incapable of covering the diversity and complexity of the phenomena we will later examine. We use the term, while we unpick its clumsy catch-all conception of religiosity. We share, at the start of undergraduate teaching, the exoticisation and reification of 'religions', gently unmasking the cookie-moulding tendency of the concept, before forcefully challenging its paradigmatic construction. And our students find themselves at the end of their programme in a wholly other place than where they began. Peggy's skilful sharing works like this.

Peggy Morgan's concern for teaching has always extended beyond higher level institutions. She has sought to engage and support organisations that develop teaching materials for younger and older students, such as the Shap Working Party on World Religions in Education. She has also published widely texts for schools and lay readers. These include, *Buddhism in the Twentieth Century* (1984), *Being a Buddhist* (1989) and entries in the Dorling Kindersley *Encyclopedia of Religion* (2004), as well as multiple other publications. In 2006, Peggy and I co-wrote the text *Get Set For Religious Studies*. This was for a series at Edinburgh University Press that aimed at the transition of students from secondary level teaching to undergraduate teaching. In fact, we found it was used both for A levels and high schools as well as first year undergraduate courses. Peggy's interest in laying secure foundations for understanding how to study religions, as much as what religions are, underpins two of her key contributions to the academic study of

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religions: *Six Religions in the Twentieth Century* with W. Owen Cole (1984, revised and expanded to *Six Religions in the Twenty-first Century*, 2000) and *Ethical Issues in Six Religious Traditions* with Clive Lawton (1996, second edition, revised and expanded, 2007).

One specific text, among the plethora that are used in the many-jewelled net of Buddhisms, which has drawn the attention of Peggy Morgan is that of the 'The Sutra of the Lotus of the Wonderful Law' – The *Lotus Sutra* (see, for example, 1998 and 2004). The *Lotus Sutra* is an effective model for Morgan's own interests in gender and pedagogy as an academic writing and thinking about Buddhism. As some scholars on the sutra have observed:

> One text in particular lends itself to a discussion of women and children, the *Saddharma puṇḍarīka Sūtra* ("The Sūtra of the Lotus of the Wonderful Law") or *Lotus Sūtra* (*Lotus* for short). The *Lotus* espouses all major Buddhist doctrines, has provided fodder for many thinkers, and is a source of much popular lore and practice. It is especially famous for its inclusiveness, a point reflected in the vast array of characters inhabiting its verses -- thousands of monks, nuns, laymen and women, *bodhisattvas,* gods, titans, centaurs, demigods, monstrous birds, ogres, ghosts etc. The *Lotus* is also notable for its use of child imagery (it continually refers to devout Buddhists as "sons/daughters of Buddha" and features the famous parable of "The Burning House" in which sentient beings are compared to children) and the presence of noted female Buddhists such as the historical Buddha's foster mother, Mahaprajapti, and his former wife, Yashodara. (2012: 60-61)

The next sections investigate in a little more depth how this sutra develops the importance of women within the Buddhist tradition and how a wider inclusivity makes transformation a process for all humans, beyond gender.

Emphasising Gender and Ethics in Buddhist Studies

The importance of gender in consideration of the Lotus Sutra has been highlighted by a number of significant scholars of Buddhism, such as Peggy Morgan and Rita Gross, as is noted in a study of key elements of the sutra ('Women and Children *Last*? Buddhism, Children and the *Naga* King's Daughter', 2012):

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> Another contemporary scholar, Peggy Morgan, discusses ethics in the *Lotus Sutra* from a more Western perspective. Morgan draws on Rita Gross' work *Buddhism After Patriarchy* to highlight her argument that the *Lotus Sutra* has more or less established a positive position for women. Gross also stresses how bodhisattvas are often depicted with feminine (as well as masculine) qualities, a fact that suggests their true nature as enlightened beings is beyond sexuality, including any "essential" characteristics of either male or female (qtd. in Morgan 362). Morgan observes, "This affirms that the enlightened nature belongs to women as well as men, those in female as well as male forms" (Morgan 362). (2012:66)

Neither Morgan nor Gross have shied away from highlighting the patriarchal history of Buddhism. It has been the work of scholars such as these, to uncover both the patriarchal structure and history of Buddhism and recover the positive role of women in a history that has mostly been written by men. For Morgan, one practice an academic can follow to recognise the role of women is simply the selection of illustrative material where affirmation is implicit in the presentation of female characters. One such example is in her consideration of female characters in Buddhist stories:

> An old lady who was a member of the Pure Land Buddhist sect was walking along a street when she met a Zen master, who rather teasingly said to her: 'On your way to the Pure Land, eh, Granny?' She nodded. 'Amida is there, waiting for you, is he?' She shook her head 'Not there? The Buddha not in his Pure Land? Where is he then?' She put up her hand and pointed to her heart. She then continued her walk. The Zen master was surprised and pleased. He called after her. 'You are a real believer in the Pure Land.' (Morgan, 1990)

In the short article from which this example is taken, which is aimed at teachers, Morgan uses the subtitle 'People in the tradition — *his and her stories'* (my emphasis). The deliberate inclusion of gender within the category of story is an important element of Morgan's contribution to understanding contemporary Buddhism for teachers and children. In the article, this is equally echoed in her selection of indicative key persons in Buddhist history which includes 'Mahaprajapati, the Buddha's aunt, who had brought him up after his mother's death and pressed for an order of nuns to be founded and, with Ananda's persistent support, became the first of this new order' (Morgan, 1990) and also her bibliographical selection of resources on women in Buddhism.

Morgan's conception of how stories work for children, also functions almost as a self-reflective commentary on her understanding of pedagogy, while her purposive

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selection of illustrative material underpins her ethical perspective for the necessity of including gender. We do not judge right or wrong interpretations, her pedagogical philosophy seems to suggest, but we can *select and direct* content and examples:

> Good stories, then, are effective: they work. It also seems to me that they work all the more powerfully because we are usually happy to leave their appreciation resting in the experience of each child, without any rigorous testing of exactly what s/he has gained from listening or of any right or wrong interpretation of each story. (Morgan, 1990)

Peggy Morgan's interest in Buddhism is of course more encompassing than is covered by the Lotus Sutra, or even by matters of gender – though gender underpins her wider interests. She is interested in ethical Buddhism and iconography and representation and, especially, in modern transformations of Buddhism that make the varied doctrines and multiple denominational branches relevant to modernity.

In a 2003 article entitled 'Wealth and Poverty in Buddhist Texts' Morgan delineates some of the key movements and figures who she deems important to the contemporary tradition:

> There is now a good body of secondary analytical work on those contemporary and sometimes controversial Buddhist movements, which come under the name of Engaged Buddhism or Socially Engaged Buddhism. The movements focus on issues of gender, environment, peace, work in prisons and hospices, for example, all of which have a wealth and poverty dimension. The talks and writings of the key figures in the movement are key *contemporary* texts for Buddhist reflection. These key figures are from a variety of Buddhist cultures and contexts. For example, Thich Nhat Hanh is a Vietnamese Zen monk living in a community in France and with a global sangha network; Sulak Sivaraksa is a Thai lay-activist; A T Ariyaratne the founder of the Gandhian inspired Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka; Ken Jones a Welsh ecological activist; Chatsumarn Kabilsingh and Rita Gross are active for women in Thailand and the USA, but with global outreach and from Theravada and Tibetan Buddhist backgrounds respectively. Going back historically, there are also figures such as Dr B R Ambedkar, whose portrait has become an iconic text for the bodhisattva ideal amongst the ex-untouchable communities who became Buddhists. Ambedkar influenced the British founder of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, Venerable Sangharakshita, and is linked

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> through their Karuna Trust with self-help programmes amongst some of India's poorest communities.

The figures in this listing come from a range of traditional and more modern denominational strands in the broader Buddhist tradition. There are Theravadans and Mahayanans, people from across the globe, men and women. All are activists whose interests and activities are political and social. They apply interpretations of Buddhist teachings to global cultures and societies in order to bring about social change, that is more egalitarian and (to use a term with particular contemporary resonance) inclusive. Morgan's selection and affirmation of these figures and their associated movements places her in the same tradition. Some of these figures and their ideologies have been, as Morgan notes, controversial across the wider Buddhist network and within their own political cultures. For some Buddhists, these new networks are transgressive, they are not Buddhism. Yet scholars of religion, such as Morgan, embedded in the study of the history of religions, in descriptive phenomenology, seek to avoid doctrinal prescriptivism, and simply map the trajectories of religious adaptations. Morgan would merely agree with the social facts of changing forms of Buddhism as analysed by sociologist Phil Henry that,

> What is apparent is that the level of practice of the vast majority of engaged Buddhists … leaves one in little doubt that the changing circumstances (identities-in-transition) in a globalized environment are no less Buddhist for the practitioners than at any other time in history (Henry, 2006:30)

No scholar of religion though can claim to 'simply map' or 'merely agree with the social facts'. The selection of material, the emphases in research focus, are a manifesto of personal interests and objectives. Peggy Morgan's interests in gender, teaching and socially engaged Buddhism reflect both significant academic concerns and personal objectives to transform people and the world.

Putting the Trans in Trans-Formation in the Lotus Sutra

Morgan begins her article on 'Ethics and the Lotus Suutra' (1998) with a personal ascription of identity:

> My approach to the study of the *Lotus Suutra* and to the subject of the *Lotus Suutra* and Ethics is from the perspective of a western woman with a Christian

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> background and as an academic who teaches in the field of the study of religions or religious studies (1998)

It is an important statement of ethical values, not a caveat of mere biography. For, as she goes on to note, this particular article 'can be placed quite naturally against the background of my recent writing on ethics' (ibid. her reference is to the first edition of *Ethical Issues in Six Religious Traditions* edited with W Owen Cole, 1996). The ethics of personhood, and a persons' relations and actions with others is a core value of the wisdom of interpretation of texts, as much as ethics in daily social engagement.

In Morgan's analysis of the Lotus Sutra, a key theme is that of the possibility of enlightenment for women, and, more broadly, the non-gendered nature of the Buddhist ideal type of an enlightened being:

> Westerners who are not used to the conventions of Buddhist art often react to the rounded forms of the images of buddhas and bodhisattvas and, in the case of bodhisattvas, to their jewelled robes, with comments about their feminine appearance. It can be suggested that this sense of ambiguity is entirely appropriate since the true nature of an enlightened being is beyond sexuality, beyond the characteristics of male and female. (1998)

Morgan is arguing for an inclusive understanding of enlightenment that recognises women as capable of reaching this state, not from a bi-gendered inclusivity but because Buddhism is non-gendered, is 'beyond' sexuality'. Rita Gross, takes the ethics of gender ascription further in her challenge to fixed gender identities:

> Our clinging to our notions of gender can cause us suffering, but it can also cause others to suffer – something that should bother any Buddhist committed to Buddhist ethics (2018:97)

So, for Gross, a statement of personal identity, is a satisfactory beginning, but it is contingent on the deeper realisation that such categorisations may themselves *cause* consequent suffering if applied as absolute distinctions of personhood.

There is then, a progression between the approach of Morgan, that seeks to recollect and highlight the role of women, and then emphasise the non-gendered aspects of Buddhist teachings, and the approach taken by Gross in her last work, *Buddhism Beyond Gender*, which more vigorously challenges the gendered nature of Buddhism. It is

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a distinction akin to the various 'waves' of feminism whereby earlier forms of feminism sought to challenge patriarchal structures and uncover the history of women, to make her-stories too, and the later forms of feminism which have systematically unpicked the patterns of patriarchy and constructions of gender normativity.

Gross is uncompromising in her analysis of the way patriarchy influences Buddhism and creates a 'prison of gender roles':

> … I have repeated many times. Classical Buddhism presents an *intolerable contradiction between its gender-neutral and gender-egalitarian teachings and its male-dominant institutions* (her emphasis, 2018:25)

The reason that the Lotus Sutra is the locus of such debates about gender and enlightenment in Buddhism revolves around a key section of this long and complex text. (This sutra is often the focus of analysis of the central Mahayana teaching of 'skilful means' – *Upaya Kausalya* - and the trope of the burning house, rather than reification of the feminine or even positive representation of female characters in the narrative). This key section for a feminist reading relates to the daughter of the *naga* king. We see in the presentation of the daughter exactly the patriarchal assumptions both Morgan and Gross have highlighted in the tradition. The Sutra explicitly refers to the traditional assumption, prevalent not only within Buddhism but also in the Indic cultures from where the text derives, of the pollution of the female body.

> At that time Śāriputra spoke to the daughter of the *nāga* king, saying: "You say that you will soon attain the highest path. This is difficult to believe. Why is this? The female body is polluted; it is not a fit vessel for the Dharma. (2009:184)

Corporeal pollution is, then, ascribed to the impossibility of spiritual realisation (the Dharma and the 'highest path'). Yet the daughter of the *Naga* king does achieve the 'highest, complete enlightenment' – by transforming, becoming trans-sexual:

> Then the assembly there all saw the daughter of the *nāga* king instantly transform into a man, perfect the bodhisattva practices, go to the *vimalā* world in the south, sit on a jewelled lotus flower, and attain highest, complete enlightenment, become endowed with the thirty-two marks and eighty excellent characteristics, and expound the True Dharma universally for the sake of all sentient beings in the ten directions.

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> Then the bodhisattvas, *śrāvaka*s, eight kinds of *deva*s, *nāga*s, and so on, humans and nonhumans of the *sahā* world, all saw in the distance that the daughter of the *nāga* king had become a buddha and was universally teaching the Dharma for the sake of the humans and *deva*s in that assembly. They rejoiced greatly and honored her from afar (2009:185)

The pronoun for the daughter, though she has transformed into a man remains feminine. What are we to make of this bi-gendered Buddha? Or, is she not bi-gendered, but, in fact transgender? The Sutra repeatedly emphasises that the path laid out is available for all sentient beings, for 'monks and nuns, 'sons or daughters of a virtuous family'. It would seem this Buddhism of the Lotus Sutra crosses time to address contemporary gender identity politics and the concerns of LGBTQ+ discourses on sexuality and gender.

But it would be a generous interpretation that states this is formal recognition of the equality of women either in the institutional tradition, or in the teachings. She is not even identified with her own name, but through ascription to her father – 'the daughter of the *Naga* King'. It is only by transformation to a male that she attains enlightenment. Yet, that she does, that she is transgendered, identifies the *Naga* king's daughter as a positive model for both women and transgendered people in the Buddhist teachings.

Freed from the 'prison of gender' we may excise the cultural baggage of patriarchy and valorise the inclusivity of the Sutra:

> "O Nakṣatrarājasaṃkusumitābhijna! This sutra saves all sentient beings. This sutra makes all sentient beings free from suffering. This sutra greatly benefits all sentient beings and brings their aspirations to fulfilment, just as a clear, cool pond satisfies the thirsty, as a fire satisfies those suffering from cold, as clothes for the naked, as a caravan leader for merchants, as a mother for her children, as a boat for the traveller, as a physician for the sick, as a lamp for the gloom, as a treasure for the poor, as a king for the people, as the sea for traders, and a torch for those in darkness. In the same way, this *Lotus Sutra* frees sentient beings from every suffering, all the pains and bonds of illness and of birth and death." (2009: 285)

Unfortunately, Rita Gross' death in 2015 meant she was not able to address transgender issues in Buddhism. In the foreword to *Buddhism Beyond Gender: Liberation from Attachment to Identity*, Judith Simmer-Brown notes that 'Shambhala editors informed me that Rita had, in fact, intended to include a short section on this topic, but it was never completed' (2018: xvi).

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Morgan concludes her analysis of the Sutra with the clear statement that gender is not a feature of the possibility of Buddhist enlightenment

> We are left with the queries "What are these external forms that we judge so important? How do they relate to Enlightenment?" These questions are central for the Buddhist and are ones to which there is a confident answer that physical forms are illusory and insubstantial compared with the potential for Enlightenment that is within all sentient beings. (1998)

Transformation by Sharing

Metta is both loving kindness and friendship. Both are practices, not merely existential categories. The constancy of love and compassion is not fixed, it is a constant practice. It is one of the boons of Buddhist teaching that practice and action are entwined with understanding of emotional and mental states. Equally, in the ethics of social engagement there is a focus on action.

In the inclusivity of the Lotus Sutra worldview, we are all practitioners, whatever our gender identity. The Sutra uses the trope of the burning house for a parent who seeks to lead their children to safety, though they do not understand the danger they are in. The Sutra refers to a father, but we may assume it is any parent, just as we may assume the children are female, male, intra-sex or trans.

> This house is already engulfed in flames. If my children and I do not get out, we shall perish in the fire. I will now use skilful means to help my children escape from this disaster. (2009:57)

Clearly a burning house and the existential safety of children are ultimate concerns. In the language of the academic study of religions, Religion is defined as an 'ultimate concern'. So too are the practices we choose to undertake in the living of our lives – we say, 'I gave my life to …' to describe our personal histories. Our ultimate concerns are partly defined by the history of our practices. For Peggy Morgan we see this in the academic study of religions, of Buddhism particularly, of highlighting the role of women in these studies, and of sharing and teaching about these ideas for many years.

I would argue that sharing and teaching are both actions and practices, that can develop loving kindness and friendship. They are also both cores to change and transformation. Humans transform in relation to others. Transformation occurs because of

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teachers, gurus and friends. In the Buddhist tradition, a person who is recognised as one who has deep knowledge of the texts, of the practices that underpin deep understanding, is called a Dharma-teacher. It is appropriate to recognise that, for many students and friends, Peggy Morgan has been a transformative Dharma-teacher.

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