

Book Review

## Women in British Buddhism: Commitment, Connection, Community

By Caroline Starkey. Abingdon: Routledge, 2020, 212 pages, ISBN 978-1-138-08746-0, hardcover, \$155.00; ISBN 978-1-315-11045-5, ebook, \$57.95.

Reviewed by Amy Paris Langenberg  
*Eckerd College*

Caroline Starkey’s readable, extensively researched, and well-balanced book is an ethnographical study of ordained women from multiple traditions in British convert Buddhism. While other studies have examined women in single traditions or considered women glancingly as part of the history of British Buddhism, this monograph represents the first major comparative study of British Buddhist women (3). It makes visible the lived experiences and labors of the “rank and file” (10) of ordained women who have helped to found British Buddhist convert communities since the 1970’s but who, for a number of reasons, have been mostly ignored in scholarship on contemporary Buddhism. In other words, Starkey’s monograph breaks ground by bringing under-privileged voices to the center of scholarly discourse about Buddhism in the West.

The early chapters of Starkey’s book give background on British Buddhism, with a focus on the major communities in her study (Triratna, the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives, the Amida Trust, the Forest Sangha, and three lineages of Tibetan Buddhism). Her account of the diverse and innovative ordination structures of these communities is particularly helpful, and she wisely avoids using the classical *vinayas* as the measure of correctness (a misleading but ubiquitous tendency in literature on ordained Buddhist discipline). The substance of her analysis begins in the third and fourth chapters, where she describes the “conversions” (a term she uses but complicates) of her subjects and their paths to ordination. Particularly fascinating in chapter three (“Narratives of Conversion”) are accounts of their inner feeling states, which Starkey reads against the Buddhist concepts of *dukkha* (suffering, stress, dissatisfaction), *saṃvega* (shock, intensity of feeling), and *pasada* (clarity, grace). In chapter four, on ordination (“Deepening Commitment”), Starkey introduces an important theme of her work: the need to resist “too reductive or essentialist an analysis that posits inexorable differences between

women in ‘the West’ and ‘the East’” (94). This theme arises in connection to the diversity of reasons British women ordain (reasons both “mundane” and “spiritual”) and later in these women’s relationships to gender equality and feminism in Buddhism. In other words, Starkey’s research shows that it is not the case that Asian women prioritize Buddhist values over feminist values, while British women do the opposite, or that Asian women enter the monastic life for social and pragmatic reasons, while British women do so for intellectual and spiritual reasons, as has sometimes been suggested in the literature. Rather, Starkey argues, “all of these threads need to be held together in a sophisticated way, allowing for the identification and critical untangling of similarities and differences” (93).

Following these foundational chapters are three innovative chapters structured around Starkey’s major research questions. Chapter five (“Buddha Couture”) explores the question of “How do ordained women in contemporary Britain understand and operationalize Buddhist discipline?” (11) by gathering and interpreting their experiences with monastic “dress.” In the category of “dress,” Starkey includes head shaving and, somewhat counterintuitively, ordination names. Monastic dress has also emerged in my own ethnographic work as an absolutely basic and crucial aspect of lived monastic discipline, but it has not received due attention, especially in the context of living women’s communities. I was happy, therefore, to see Starkey take up this topic seriously, and to place it in conversation with work on Buddhist materiality and the role of dress in religion generally. Her subjects speak of monastic dress as a daily visual and symbolic reminder of their Buddhist commitments, but also as a “dynamic and generative” site of Buddhist practice (128). For ordained Buddhist women living as religious minorities in Britain, monastic dress is, in Starkey’s words, “a material ‘container’ for complex emotions that arise during a lifetime of committed Buddhist affiliation” and “a way of living and interacting with that commitment each and every day” (129).

Chapter seven (“Pioneers and Volunteers”) focuses on the question: “What relationships do ordained British Buddhist women have with their locality?” In this chapter, Starkey engages Thomas Tweed’s multivalent categories of “dwelling” and “crossing” to explore the physical, emotional, and conceptual levels on which her subjects’ religious lives are shaped by cultural/geographic movement (for instance, travel to Asia and conversion), but also by the choice to “take root or belong in particular places” (168). Following Kim Knott’s theorization of “location” (168), Starkey looks at how British women build Buddhist places by laying bricks and digging ditches, but also through their ideological self-positioning and situatedness in community. For many of Starkey’s subjects, Buddhist practice is primarily “dwelling” within a Buddhist community and “*saiṅha* is the first of the three jewels” (176). Additionally, in this chapter, Starkey comments on her subjects’ mobility between the local and the translocal, both in person and online. Although Starkey is cautious in her conclusions, her data points to a prioritization of the local and the offline among ordained British women, despite the inevitably global dimensions of their Buddhist identities and commitments.

Chapter six (“Loaded Words”) examines the question of “How do ordained Buddhist women in Britain relate to the ideas of gender equality and feminism?” (11) and lies at the heart

of Starkey's project. I predict that this chapter, especially, will become required reading for students and scholars studying gender and Buddhism, as it provides a methodologically sophisticated, exquisitely careful, and beautifully granular account of the diversity of ordained women's views and the conditions for this diversity. Starkey interprets her data using three different modes of analysis. The first is a "perceptual mapping technique" (137) in which she produces schematics of her subjects' feminist orientation plotted against various other factors, including their living situation, views of feminism prior to ordination, perceptions of gender discrimination in their communities, and closeness to the center of power in their organizations. Starkey juxtaposes this analysis with a three-fold typology in which she categorizes her subjects as active campaigners for gender equality, discretely concerned about gender equality, or purposeful distancers from the issue of gender equality. Finally, Starkey reanalyzes her data one more time, taking each tradition or organization as her category of analysis. Her conclusion is that "perceptions about British Buddhist women's strong feminist sympathies or their desire to challenge Buddhist structural inequality on the lines of gender are not born out in empirical evidence" (159). She further proposes that the act of posing questions of feminist engagement or gender equality sets up "a binary and an opposition" while "[t]he reality is more complex, " with even those women who embrace feminism taking the Buddhist teachings and maintaining community harmony as a priority (161).

Taking British Buddhist women's experiences as its primary focus, Starkey's study engages a number of conversations, including those on feminism and Buddhism; gender, class, and race in contemporary Buddhism; transnational Buddhist networks; materiality in Buddhism; and affect and emotion in religion. Her intellectual interlocutors include scholars of contemporary Buddhism in the West such as Ann Gleig, Anna Halafoff, Natalie Fisk Quli, Emma Tomalin, Jeff Wilson, and Andrew Yip; those who study women's communities in Asia and the West, such as Joanna Cook, Ute Hüsken, Hiroko Kawanami, Karma Lekshe Tsomo, and Martin Seeger; and ethnographers working at the intersection of gender and religion such as Tarini Bedi, Antoinette DeNapoli, and myself. Sitting at the juncture of important current conversations in the field of religious studies about the local, the body, affect, and female agency, Starkey's book is both theoretically rich and ethnographically thick. It will therefore also be a valuable resource to scholars working outside of Buddhist Studies in the fields of sociology, gender and women's studies, Asian studies, and religious studies.

Starkey, who is trained in sociology of religion, provides a valuable model for feminist ethnography in her focus on storytelling as important data and her emphasis on "the close, the local, the personal, and the meaningful" (2). Throughout, Starkey scrupulously foregrounds the voices of her subjects, especially when their views may contrast with her own (see chapter six, "Loaded Words") and diligently maps the fine grain and diversity of her subjects' attitudes and

experiences. I also find her ethics as an ethnographer admirable and instructive. This book radiates the respect Starkey affords her subjects as well as her integrity as a researcher. These factors are detectable in the way she turns away from provocative threads of analysis when other concerns are more important to her subjects, or when she mutes some of the specificity of her data in an effort to protect her subjects' privacy and honor their sensitivity regarding certain topics.

At times, this humanities-oriented reader did wish for a more lingering engagement with the particular stories, close local worlds, and emotional landscapes of the women whose stories Starkey spent so much time coming to know. I suspect that Starkey's restraint with respect to narrative texture is keyed at least in part to the synthetic and aggregating nature of her sociological approach. This points to a structural challenge of Starkey's project. Her emphasis on the "local" is in tension with the comparative (multi-tradition) aspect of her research, as it is difficult to aggregate knowledge across traditions and still narrate the lived experiences of women from each community in detail. I also suspect that, at times, Starkey chooses to include less detail or turn away from certain lines of questioning because she wishes to stay alongside the concerns of her interlocutors and protect their privacy. She briefly mentions, for instance, the impact that menopause has on the dynamics of community, but does not press this point despite its saliency to her mostly older research population and the gendered nature of her project (186). Starkey is explicit about her choice to increase confidentiality by dropping attributions to specific people altogether in the chapter where she engages the sensitive topics of feminism and gender equality (135). Starkey's ethical choices raise important questions about how to achieve a balance between incisive analysis and allowing one's subjects to determine lines of questioning and data presentation in ethnographically based scholarship. As mentioned above, Starkey's modelling of an ethical feminist ethnography is a strength, not a weakness, of the project. I would have appreciated, therefore, a more extensive narration of her choices and process as a feminist ethnographer.<sup>1</sup>

British Buddhist women's lives, as they come to life in Starkey's book, have a hiding-in-plain-sight quality. These women make the remarkable decision to ordain in an originally Asian tradition and, in many cases, to wear robes, shave their heads, and change their names. Starkey accentuates, however, the familiar in her deliberate focus on the rank-and-file of ordained women as well as their pragmatic adaptations of Buddhist doctrine and practice to British daily life. The Buddhist worlds these women occupy were built in Britain, over many years and literally by their own hands, and still require their daily tending and maintenance. Starkey's primary concern with the local, embodied, material, and "intimate" (2) aspects of her subjects' histories and experiences (as opposed to, for instance, the transnational networks they

---

<sup>1</sup> Starkey has since written in a more reflective mode of her experiences researching this book. See Caroline Starkey, "Female Agency in Buddhism and Hinduism: Methodological Reflections and Collective Commitments," in *Dynamics of Female Agency in Hinduism and Buddhism*, edited by Ute Hüsken (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

participate in or the cultural politics of the institutions they serve) makes visible a religious landscape so near as to be easily overlooked. There is something rare and difficult in rendering what hides in plain sight.

At the risk of belaboring the obvious, I will finish by flagging the focus on women in Starkey's book. First, I should note that Starkey does not theorize the category "woman," or make explicit the cisgender status of her subjects. What we know with certainty is that all her subjects identify as women. Nonbinary, gender fluid, trans, and queer individuals, cisgender men, and gender categories themselves, are all major and much needed foci of the conversation on gender that started sixty years ago in the days of the Women's Movement. Nevertheless, we have also not yet finished with the topic of women. It is still the case that women's stories go largely untold, women's knowledge largely unknown, women's experiences often discredited, women's leadership largely unrecognized. Of late, the global #MeToo movement and the demise of Elizabeth Warren's candidacy in the Democratic party's primary process for the American presidential election have convinced many of this negligence. In focusing unapologetically on British Buddhist women, Starkey's excellent monograph makes an essential and overdue addition to our knowledge of contemporary Buddhism's "very real complexity" (9).