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## Book Review

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*Buddhist Women Across Cultures: Realizations.*

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**Tsomo, Karma Lekshe, ed.** *Buddhist Women Across Cultures: Realizations*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1999, viii + 326 pages, ISBN 0-7914-4138-5, US \$21.95 (cloth).

*B*uddhist Women Across Cultures: Realizations, a collection of articles by various female authors on the topic of women and Buddhism, both stands on its own and also represents a genre that has grown in the US in the last decade. Among numerous other collections of writings on the same topic that line the Eastern religion shelves of bookstores lie two other volumes edited by Karma Lekshe Tsomo (*Sakyadhita: Daughters of the Buddha*, Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 1988 and *Buddhism Through American Women's Eyes*, Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1995), along with another, *Swimming Against the Stream: Innovative Buddhist Women* (UK: Curzon Press, 2000, scheduled for publication this fall). Collections of this sort in bound-book format began appearing in the mid-1980s; Tsomo's editions span the life of the genre. *Buddhist Women Across Cultures*, among the genre's most recent offerings, represents a maturation of Western understandings of Buddhism, feminism, and the intertwining of the two.

As did *Sakyadhita: Daughters of the Buddha*, this book developed from papers presented at the Sakyadhita conferences organized by an international association of Buddhist women called Sakyadhita, "Daughters of the Buddha." Since the first gathering in Bodhgayā in 1987, there have been six subsequent conferences held around the world. The book is divided into two major sections, plus an epilogue and a prologue. The first, "Buddhist women in Asian Traditions," consists of nine chapters divided into three sections by location: "South Asian Traditions," "East Asian Traditions," and "Tibetan Tradition." The second, "Contemporary Buddhist Women," consists of seven chapters subdivided thematically into "Forging Identity" and "Shaping New Traditions: Unity and Discourse." Articles in the first half of the book are written by both Eastern and Western women (including Tsomo herself, a Western woman

with an Eastern name), while articles in the second half are, with one exception, written by Western women.

Characteristic of such collections, the opinions, knowledge, and levels of sophistication reflected in the individual articles vary greatly. Unlike many other books of the genre, however, this volume offers the insight not only of a variety of women, but also of women from a variety of cultures. Regardless of the book's explicit division by location, the cross-cultural nature of *Buddhist Women Across Cultures*, in combination with its specific focus on women's issues and experiences, de-emphasizes cultural differences in favor of the categories of woman and Buddhist. Throughout the writings of Eastern and Western authors alike, what provides the cohesive force of the book and stands out most prominently are certain common themes threaded throughout the book.

One frequently revisited theme involves *bhikṣunī* (Pāli: *bhikkhunī*) ordination, the full ordination of women into the Buddhist order. This practice is currently and historically available in some Buddhist countries and not in others. In her introductory essay, Tsomo relates brief histories of *bhikṣunī* orders in Buddhist countries (East and West) as well as of contemporary Asian women's struggles to establish *bhikṣunī* ordination in locations where it is unavailable. Senarat Wijayasundara provides an even-handed discussion of Theravādin *bhikṣunī* ordination in South Asia, particularly Sri Lanka and Thailand, set against a brief history of Chinese nuns in early Buddhist history. Wijayasundara offers some practical strategies for reestablishing *bhikṣunī* traditions that remain true to precedents set in Buddhist tradition. Several other articles, such as those by Lorna Dewaraja, Beata Grant, and Paula K.R. Arai, specifically address *bhikṣunī* ordination, and many others mention it. Of these, several bemoan Asian women's inability to receive ordination as well as the financial difficulties that groups of ordained women face within cultures in which donations to male orders are believed to yield superior merit. A single opposing voice, Dharmacharini Sanghadevi, questions the value of *bhikṣunī* ordination. Despite the fact that, as her contributor biography states, Sanghadevi herself has ordained women into the Friends of the Western

Buddhist Order, she asserts that “bhikṣuṇī ordination in the technical sense is not necessary for living a simple, celibate lifestyle as a practitioner” (p. 274). Sanghadevi also worries that support of *bhikṣuṇī* orders solely for the sake of supporting women could lead to unworthy nuns gaining support, and that the *bhikṣuṇī* order might subsequently reflect poorly on the monastic order in general.

Another of the book’s themes, closely related to the issues underlying *bhikṣuṇī* ordination, revolves around the patriarchal, and sometimes sexist, doctrines, statements, and rules embedded both in tradition and in canonical texts. A frequently referred-to example lies in Buddha’s initial refusal to allow the ordination of women, his prediction that the new order would shorten the life of the *Dharma*, and his institution of a hierarchy of any *bhikṣu* (monk) over any *bhikṣuṇī*.

Women’s reactions to the tradition that attributes these statements and actions to Śākyamuni vary widely throughout the book, as they do throughout the entire genre. One common response ignores these elements of the story, focusing instead on Buddha’s comments about women’s capacity to achieve enlightenment and his eventual acceptance of a *bhikṣuṇī* order. Frequently, however, this results in a whitewashing of sexist statements and portrays the Buddha as fully egalitarian. Statements such as Tsomo’s “the Buddha affirmed the equal potential of women to achieve spiritual enlightenment and recognized their right to wear the robes of a Buddhist mendicant. The Buddha was unable to ensure the total reformation of patriarchal Indian society, however” (p. 5) and Dewaraja’s reference to “the Buddha’s liberal attitude toward women” (p. 68) paint a picture of Śākyamuni as staunchly pro-feminist.

When authors who take this view do mention negative comments attributed to the Buddha, they frequently give rationalizations for why he would make such statements. Dewaraja offers a rationalization cited frequently in the genre of women and Buddhism collections: the “real reason” the Buddha was reluctant to allow a *bhikṣuṇī* order and subsequently imposed the additional vows was that he knew the Indian men of his patriarchal society would never accept female equality, and

he had to appease these men (p. 73). In one of the book's final chapters, however, Tsomo finally tackles this difficult issue by asking the question that arises in the face of Dewaraja's rationalization: "Could the Enlightened One have been so concerned about public opinion and so lacking in the courage of his convictions?" (p. 246).

Another response to the tradition that attributes sexist comments and actions to Śākyamuni attempts to demonstrate that they do not originate with the Buddha, but were inserted into the texts or into tradition later on. Hae-Ju Sunim's piece, for example, concentrates on repudiating some of the sexist comments in early *sūtras*, while other articles, including Tsomo's, investigate whether sexist comments should be attributed to Śākyamuni. By questioning the veracity of the texts, these authors hope to disarm the strength of later writers' use of the Buddha's authority to forward their sexist views. Attempting to overturn long-held beliefs about what Buddha said or what within Buddhist texts "counts" or doesn't, however, brings up difficult questions concerning the value of tradition, how one defines "legitimate" tradition, and where lines should be drawn in the pursuit of actively changing traditions. Such questions about tradition in turn raise a concern voiced by several of the book's authors: how will the movement of feminism eastward affect cultural Buddhist traditions? This question lies at the core of Tsomo's essay about changing consciousness in Himalayan cultures. To make her point, Tsomo paints a very positive (bordering on naively idealistic) portrait of a equanimous, serene, traditional Himalayan culture that nonetheless provides women unequal access to the *Dharma*. She points out that increasing feminist awareness in the East may well lead Himalayan women to greater understanding of doctrine and teachings, but also questions what effect this same tendency might have on cultural Buddhist values and tradition. "The same winds of change that promise to free women have equal potential to destroy them" (p. 183).

Western Buddhists may be wary of the changes that Western-flavored Buddhism infused with feminism may bring as it seeps into Eastern cultures, but the trend is nonetheless generally, in this book and others

of the genre, heralded as positive. Yet the opposing view does exist, even among some Western women. Dharmacharini Sanghadevi again serves as the dissenting voice, outlining the benefits of gender-separated study groups, retreats, and communities. She writes, “From a *Dharma* perspective, it is not helpful for women to fight against male leadership . . . instead, it is helpful to cultivate receptivity to those we can genuinely learn from, whether women or men” (p. 272). Sanghadevi’s voice is an important contribution to a collection that seeks to include women of all perspectives because her point of view is held by many whose opinions are rarely expressed in books of this genre. The extent to which this reviewer finds Sanghadevi’s stance irksome (as no doubt do many of the readers of this review), however, demonstrates the strong conviction that many Westerners have about their values in this regard, a conviction that probably indicates a fair amount of willingness to spread these values into other cultures in spite of fears about how traditional *Dharma* may be negatively affected.

Another theme that runs through this book involves the formulation of strategies for infusing Buddhist tradition with feminist concerns in ways that do not collide with that tradition. This strategy looks to Buddhist women’s writings and experience as the basis for discussing women in Buddhism. Beata Grant adopts this approach in her article, using as its text poetry written by eighteenth-century Chinese nuns. Grant informs readers that most educated Chinese of this period wrote poetry, and some of these poems (even if only a scant quantity) written by nuns have survived. Western feminist historians term this methodology cross-cultural montage. Where mainstream historical writings about women are rare, other sources, such as court records, diaries, or personal correspondence, do contain rich information about women’s lives. These sources are compiled as the “texts” from which women’s history can, at least to some degree, be read.

Elizabeth Harris takes a similar path in her exploration of women’s voices in Buddhist texts such as the *Therīgāthā*. She believes that the most “reliable indicators of the situation [of women] in early Buddhism

are contained in the words of the nuns and in dialogues between nuns and laypeople” (p. 58). She goes on to assert that highlighting women’s words in Buddhist texts takes on great importance as a counterbalance to the more sexist passages. Arai expresses the same sentiment, concentrating on what women said and did both historically and in present-day Japan. Sarah Pinto takes on a similar strategy as well in her discussion of pregnancy and childbirth in Tibet, achieving results that underscore the value of the methodology. Westerners understand, Pinto informs us, that Tibetans consider childbirth “dirty.” Through conversations with Tibetan women, however, as well as with Tibetan men, she concluded that while men mean dirty as in “impure,” women mean dirty as in “messy.”

Taking women’s writings and experiences as the most important source for discussions of women and Buddhism is the stated methodology of the book, which is “to document Buddhist women’s actual involvement, including their self-reflection, interactions, and interpretations of the tradition” (p. 1). This slant toward experience as the most crucial measure accords well with Western understandings of Buddhism itself. Ritual and doctrine, which in culturally Buddhist countries often figure more heavily than in the West, generally take a secondary role to the practitioner’s experience in the minds of Westerners. Using experience as the basis for making statements about women’s realities is also a strategy utilized by some feminist writers and historians. This methodology sometimes draws criticism from scholars, however, who object to the use of one person’s or a few people’s experience to make definite statements about the experience of a larger group of people. This tension between extrapolating from one’s experience versus relying primarily on sources outside one’s experience lies at the root of one form of criticism that this book might receive—and that contributors to this book, such as Rita Gross, have, in fact, already received.

Many of the issues taken up by the themes outlined above coalesce in yet another of the book’s themes: the creation of role models and “heroes” for Buddhist women through the identification and glorification of those female Buddhist figures who stand out historically or mythically.

Arai maintains that “it is important to include the ways that women have been oppressed, but it is perhaps more important to extend one’s purview to include what women *have* accomplished, especially when they do so in spite of oppressive circumstances” (p. 107). Janice D. Willis’s article concentrates on this goal, providing names of female figures from Tibetan Buddhism, present and past, from the “special lineage of renowned women practitioners” (p. 146) that she has formulated.

The value of such work lies in the inspiration that women find in having female figures to whom they can relate, particularly in the midst of a largely male history and lineage. Yet this strategy, popular in this book and in others of the genre, has problematic elements. One potential problem harkens back to the care that one must take when extrapolating out from one’s own experience. As Anne Klein, a contributor to this collection, writes elsewhere, Westerners should not assume that the women of any given culture (in the cases of both Willis’s article and Klein’s comments, Tibet) value female figures as role models for women. In a book such as this one, which attempts to build bridges between Buddhist women of various cultures, assumptions about the feminist values of female Buddhist figures could lead to misunderstandings.

Another potential problem with this strategy lies in the very valuation that the identification and glorification of female figures who stood out implies. Mainstream history is the history of heroes, of prominent figures who succeeded, defeated others, distinguished themselves, or won in some fashion. Historically, the role of the hero has been an overwhelmingly male one, and the valuation given to the heroic figure perpetuates the historical, patriarchal values that govern our sense of history and achievement. The fact remains that we *do* have these values, and for that reason locating female role models is important for Western Buddhists. Stressing this strategy as the way to place women in Buddhist history and to value their contributions, however, runs the risk of creating a history of tokens, for regardless of how many women can be shown to have succeeded in men’s roles, there will always be far more men who have done the same. Another strategy that would give women their own



role models without perpetuating patriarchal models of history and success would consist of revaluing history and the strength of women's contributions, looking at those roles that women *have* filled, and finding the glory therein. Women are present throughout Buddhism, both currently and historically. We as a culture are simply not used to reading for or seeing them. As Arai states, "historiography, not history, is at fault in the omission of the contributions of women" (p. 107).

As is generally true of books of this genre, the articles and themes of this collection underscore the ways that Westerners are affecting and changing the *Dharma*. In the book's introduction, Tsomo writes, "Buddhism's dialogue with feminism has already caused some major shifts within Buddhism" (p. 29). Westerners are shaping a *Dharma* appropriate to Western culture, as exemplified by Rita Gross's suggestions for Western interpretations of some of the vows. Gross would like to reconceptualize the right livelihood vow to include a work/life balance that avoids "workaholism," while expanding the vow to abstain from sexual misconduct to include careful consideration of and planning around reproduction. Engaged Buddhism, political feminist interpretations of Buddhism, and this very book point to ways in which Westerners are marking the *Dharma*, making it their own. As Anne Klein notes, "American sensibilities are increasingly a part of Buddhism in the West, especially when it comes to matters like engagement—social or personal" (p. 213).

The development of forms of Buddhism marked by Western values and sensibilities not only establishes a Western *Dharma*, but also begins to spread back East, fomenting change and infecting traditional, culturally Buddhist forms with modern Western sensibilities. Again, this collection, along with the Sakyadhita conferences, stands as evidence of this phenomenon. Much of the sentiment expressed by the articles in this book surrounds the desire of women, both Eastern and Western, to nurture the growth of more woman-friendly forms of Buddhism, as well as to deepen the infusion of Buddhism with more explicitly feminist values. Sara Shneiderman expresses the hope of many of the book's authors that Asian women might "be able to gain as much from our Western feminist

history as we do from their Buddhist tradition” (p. 223).

Shneiderman goes on, however, to highlight a very interesting phenomenon concerning the forms of Buddhism practiced by Western and Eastern women, which are particularly underscored when Western women visit and study at Eastern Buddhist monasteries and centers. She observes that Western women in ethnic Asian Buddhist settings tend to receive the same treatment and privileges as monks. They also share much more common background with monks than with nuns in terms of what they study, their familiarity with both texts and ritual, and the strength of their self-confidence and sense of privilege. “It may be precisely our independence and self-confidence, inculcated in many from a young age that allow us to adopt Buddhist traditions as positive, empowering ones” (p. 227).

Shneiderman questions the “we are all sisters” sentiment expressed by many Western women in their understanding of the relationship of women and Buddhism worldwide, particularly in light of the masculine forms of Eastern Buddhism to which Western women gravitate. She points out that the assumption that woman as a category takes precedence over categories of nationality falls sharply to one side of the feminist debate over essentialist views (which hold that biology is the primary determinate of behavior) versus constructionist views (which hold that gender roles are primarily learned). She argues that the imperative that women “should connect with each other as ‘women’, regardless of their other life circumstances, suggests an essentialist position in which, regardless of cultural, religious, racial, economic, and other differences, *all* women share a universal understanding based on their membership in the category of ‘women’” (p. 231).

Klein, also sensitive to the feminist debate over essentialist versus constructionist views, sees in Buddhism the possibility for both men and women to bridge the gap articulated by the debate. Klein points out that many of the ways Westerners approach Buddhism involve their infusion of it with their own values. They are attentive to ways in which they change the *Dharma* and to their strategies for projecting Western values and ideas of self onto Buddhism. In the academy, for example, “by and

large it has been those aspects of Buddhist traditions that seem to reflect contemporary values, rather than those that challenge them, that have been studied most closely” (p. 210). Westerners will, of course, produce new forms of the *Dharma* with distinctly Western characteristics, but what remains to be seen is how Western subjectivity will be affected and changed by the *Dharma*. Klein counters concerns such as Sanghadevi’s, who feels that women should not feed their egos by struggling for authority and power, by suggesting that Westerners can open to the radically different sense of subjectivity offered by both the intellectual and experiential dimensions of Buddhism and combine this experience of self with Western values. “Recognizing such a dimension of subjectivity could go a considerable way toward alleviating the impasse between essentialist and constructionist or postmodern depictions of personhood” (p. 210).

The importance of the Western reshaping of the *Dharma*, particularly in a world where Western influence figures so heavily in almost every culture, cannot be denied. Westerners look at the spread of feminist values and the values articulated through engaged Buddhism and see positive results for groups of people such as women. This book both contributes to the dissemination of Western values throughout the East via the *Dharma* and celebrates the degree to which that goal has already been achieved. For Western women Buddhists, a key question posed by Tsomo bears considerable weight: “can women come to terms with sexist elements in the tradition?” (p. 295), through some combination of acceptance, revaluation, and reworking of *Dharma* and Buddhist tradition. Another key question posed by Klein, however, asks whether Western Buddhists—feminist-minded, politically-minded, academic—will allow ideas to spread equally effectively in the other direction, allowing Western subjectivities—constructed through psychology, consciousness-raising, and fierce individuality—to be as affected and infected by the *Dharma* as the *Dharma* is by Western ideas.

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