

Karma Leskshe Tsomo (editor)

Buddhist Feminisms and Femininities

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Reviewed by Ashby Butnor, 2019

Ashby Butnor is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Colorado State University. Her philosophical work and interests focus on the embodied dimensions of moral perception and action through engagement with a plurality of traditions, including Zen Buddhist philosophy, phenomenology, and feminist theory. Her co-edited volume, *Asian and Feminist Philosophies in Dialogue: Liberating Traditions* (Columbia University Press, 2014), introduces the field of feminist comparative philosophy and the growing dialogue between contemporary feminist theory and the classical texts and philosophical traditions of Asia.

Quote:

"Tsomo finds Buddhist philosophy to be amenable to women who are struggling for liberation. She highlights some central Buddhist concepts--such as anatman (no-self) and sunyata (emptiness)--that can provide a philosophical underpinning for a Buddhist feminism."

With *Buddhist Feminisms and Femininities*, Karma Leskshe Tsomo has assembled a collection of essays that illustrates the variety of Buddhist women's lives and communities in relation to both gender injustice and Buddhism itself. Tsomo is careful to explain that this collection includes very specific local and contextual examples of Buddhist women's communities.

Although she explicitly rejects the claim that feminism is a Western enterprise, she is sympathetic to those who find feminism to be "tiresomely analytical and largely irrelevant to women struggling for survival" (2). Tsomo's task then is to demonstrate how Buddhist women, both historically and currently, have forged their own feminist paths "on their own terms" within the confines of their patriarchal religion and societies.

Tsomo finds Buddhist *philosophy* to be amenable to women who are struggling for liberation. She highlights some central Buddhist concepts--such as *anatman* (no-self) and *sunyata* (emptiness)--that can provide a philosophical underpinning for a Buddhist feminism. According to Tsomo's analysis, since Buddhism theoretically rejects any underlying essence or inherent nature of anything--including "gender" and "woman"--there is no philosophical basis for any form of discrimination within Buddhist traditions (5-8). In Mahayana teachings, we also see the influence of "Buddha nature"--the belief that all sentient beings have the potential for spiritual awakening. These theoretical truths are widely acknowledged, but Tsomo admits that there is difficulty in applying them to social-justice movements: "[T]hese teachings do not adequately explain, justify, or serve to correct the blatant gender inequalities in Buddhist societies that are the source of many miseries" (7).

Tsomo claims that sexism within Buddhism arises from the culturally ingrained beliefs about women and perceptions of female embodiment that are embedded within the patriarchal societies where Buddhism resides. Even if these values never existed within Buddhism itself (a debatable claim), Buddhism has succeeded so well across the globe because of its ability to adapt to indigenous worldviews and practices, including patriarchal ones. Despite the Buddha's own (reluctant) affirmation of women's pursuits for liberation and the valorization of pioneering Buddhist women in some canonical literature (10), perceptions of women as weak, irrational, dull, foul, and animalistic persist. These repeated descriptions of women's inferiority can have long-lasting effects, as many chapters in this volume attest. As Tsomo claims, "assumptions about gender identities have enormous consequences for human beings' psychological and spiritual health and development" (19). Despite outright social discrimination and concurrent

internalized oppression, we see in this volume examples of the persistence, ingenuity, audacity, and creativity of Buddhist women to create space for themselves in male-dominated secular and religious communities.

The volume is divided into two sections: "Buddhist Feminisms: Texts and Communities" and "Buddhist Femininities: Demystifying the Essential Feminine." Generally speaking, both sections attempt to demonstrate how a variety of Buddhist women from across Asia and different historical periods have authentically tackled issues of oppression and identity in their respective communities. Tsomo's hope is that the juxtaposition of these specific endeavors will demonstrate a Buddhist rethinking of feminism, a more inclusive collection of women's voices, and a move from abstract theorizing to tangible action toward gender justice. "By acknowledging this diversity of Buddhist perspectives, sensibilities, and assumptions, we can usefully question what it means to be feminine and cross-culturally re-envision what it means to be a feminist" (22).

The first section, "Buddhist Feminisms: Texts and Communities," focuses primarily on how, given the social, cultural, and religious conditions of the times, some Buddhist women have managed to flourish. The first piece, Karen Lang's "Reimagining Buddhist Women in India," does a lot of groundwork in recovering Buddhist women's religious history by reading "against the grain" of male dominance in the religious canon as well as noncanonical commentaries and narratives. Lang discusses the formation of the very first order of Buddhist nuns and provides examples of Buddhist nuns and laywomen who have been praised in the tradition for their particular virtues and skills despite the repeated condemnation of women in other respects. Lang also introduces a recurrent theme throughout the volume: the connection between gender and the

spiritual path. There are numerous references in the canon, monastic codes, and teachings about the desirability of the male form and even the necessity of the male form for enlightenment.

Although certainly contested and debated among traditions and schools of Buddhism, women's potential for enlightenment and Buddhahood *as women* (that is, without being reborn as male or instantaneously transforming into males) remains an open question. These dogmatic claims about gender and enlightenment also stand in contrast to the central Buddhist concept of *anatman*, or lack of essential nature. Lang discusses the argument that given the interdependence of all conceptual constructs, hang-ups about gender, a conventional truth, make no sense at the level of ultimate truth. Regardless, gender holds a lot of power within both the tradition and Buddhist societies.

Similar historical accounts pervade the articles in this section, though often with more focus on individuals or communities than on texts during specific sociohistorical moments. Eun-Su Cho highlights how women of the royal court subverted Confucian restrictions on Buddhist practice during the Chosôn period of Korea; Christine James discusses the controversial Japanese figure Raichō Hiratsuka, founder of the women's literary magazine *Seito* in 1911, who advocated for self-awareness through Buddhism; Robekkah Ritchie gives an aesthetic reading of female Thai monastics of the Asoke community in the twentieth century who embody their religious, ethical, and political values through dress and activism. In addition to subversions of masculine norms, we also learn more about the conditions surrounding Buddhist women during these specific periods through these stories, such as Japanese Buddhism's condemnation of women to the Blood Pool Hell and the limited, and subordinate, options of most Thai women seeking a Buddhist path.

These historical accounts provide immense insight into the position of women in Buddhist communities, the textual and cultural justification for their subordinated positions, and, importantly, the variety of ways that Buddhist women have advocated for themselves and women's avenues to spiritual practice and refuge generally. However, two areas seem underdeveloped: the extent to which these cases are philosophically examined within the volume and the ability to connect them to the development of what may be called Buddhist *feminisms*. The first criticism may be unfair insofar as the volume is clearly interdisciplinary. We learn much from the textual, historical, sociological, and anthropological work being done by this collection of scholars. However, to bring relevance to these religious histories, more theoretical analysis of the significance of these histories and genealogies would have been helpful.

An exception to this first criticism is Ching-ning Wang's "A 'Great Man' is No Longer Gendered: The Gender Identity and Practice of Chan Nuns in Contemporary Taiwan." Wang's piece stands out in the volume because it masterfully engages the Buddhist gender question from a variety of angles. For example, Wang provides a textual analysis of the Chinese Buddhist term "*da zhangfu*" ("great man"; "spiritually advanced practitioner") for its gender significance (including hermeneutical issues of translation), pits Mahayana Buddhism's gender essentialism against its doctrine of egalitarianism, and juxtaposes fieldwork with contemporary Taiwanese Buddhist nuns to assess the extent of the textual influence on the reality of Buddhist women's lives. Wang argues that the generic reading of *da zhangfu* (as opposed to masculine "great man") expressed by her field subjects is "a critique of both the androcentric use of masculine pronouns in Chinese Buddhist scriptures and of scholarly uses of textual scripture that overlook real

practices in society" (129). However, her analysis does not stop there. She points to issues of gender essentialism in Buddhist religious scholarship and engages contemporary feminist theory to "deepen our analysis and encourage women's active agency rather than seeing women as passive victims of patriarchy or androcentrism in Buddhist communities" (130). Her work is an important contribution to the growing field of feminist comparative philosophy.

The second criticism raises the question of whether there is anything that may be called a Buddhist feminism, or multiple Buddhist feminisms, arising through the juxtaposition of these accounts. Given that the volume title and this particular section title promise such an articulation, the reader may be disappointed by the lack of such a discussion. Tsomo clearly rebukes hyper-intellectualized Western feminist theory as the only paradigm of feminism. She claims, "The point is not how Buddhist women understand the varieties of feminism that have developed in Western philosophies and culture, but how feminist thinking and sensibilities are emerging unscripted in Buddhist communities, imagining and creating equitable spaces for women within traditionally patriarchal Buddhist philosophies and cultures" (2). This is a fine endeavor, and it seems sensible that we "allow [feminist] questions and categories to emerge on their own among women in other parts of the world" (2-3). However, in this section, we don't see a sustained discussion of what this may entail. In the conclusions to a couple of chapters, we read about some long-lasting effects of outstanding women: for example, how the efforts of Chosôn Buddhist women "shine through in the contemporary Korean Buddhist landscape" (Cho, 82) and about how Raichō Hiratsuka was "pivotal in the development of the women's movement in Japan and influential for generations of Japanese women" (James, 102). However, these brief statements appear in the final paragraphs of their respective chapters rather than taking center

stage in the authors' arguments. Hearing more about how these women contributed to feminist ideas and movements within Buddhism and/or their respective communities would have helped to thematically contextualize these varied pieces.

An exception to this second criticism--the lack of a clear path to Buddhist feminisms from these varied examples--is Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa's discussion of the connection between Buddhism and feminism in "New Buddhist Women Across Borders: Buddhist Influences and Interactions in Alternative Histories of Global Feminisms." In her examination of the development of Buddhist modernity at the turn of the twentieth century, Holmes-Tagchungdarpa explicitly discusses the "underground connections between Buddhism and feminism [that] continue to see individuals and communities borrow from each other to make claims toward a different and more just world" (167). Despite the focus on liberation and freedom during the rise of Buddhist modernity, Holmes-Tagchungdarpa notes the absence of women and discussions of gender at this time. To assist in the reclaiming of women's role in the spread of Buddhism and in the creation of global feminist networks, Holmes-Tagchungdarpa highlights some remarkable female contributors as well as more contemporary Asian women who were greatly influenced by Buddhism in the construction of their feminist worldviews, such as Raichō Hiratsuka and Kim Iryop. Holmes-Tagchungdarpa explains how these women found inspiration and intellectual affinity with Buddhist ideas and practice for their own liberatory projects and how we may see an "underground genealogy of links between Buddhist modernists and feminists" if we examine these projects and these women more closely (174).

The second section of this anthology is titled "Buddhist Femininity: Demystifying the Essential Feminine" and promises to explore "concepts of femininity in Buddhist cultures and what these concepts have meant for women at critical junctures in history" (Tsomo, 15). An excellent example of this is Lisa Battaglia's chapter, "Only Skin Deep? Female Embodiment and the Paradox of Beauty in Indian Buddhism." Battaglia explores the dichotomy between beauty expectations for different categories of Buddhist women in the early tradition. On the one hand, nuns are expected to erase all traces of gender and beauty, to take on the form of a "transcendent androgyne" or "unmarked default male" (208), for the sake of spiritual attainment, as beauty is considered "a psychological and soteriological obstacle for renunciant women" (184). Textual evidence abounds on the unsatisfactory nature of desire and bodily pleasure, the filth and foulness of the human body (and the female form in particular), and the impurity and impermanence of beauty. On the other hand, Buddhist laywomen are portrayed, in literature and the material culture, as exceedingly beautiful, even sensuous, with curvy figures and suggestive postures. What could explain this striking contrast of feminine beauty standards within Buddhism itself? Battaglia argues that ugliness is "the price exacted upon women for following a disturbingly nontraditional role," laywomen (typically pious and devoted wives, mothers, and benefactors) typify the alignment of beauty and virtue--to the extent that it applies to women (206). Battaglia concludes by engaging with some Western feminists, such as Luce Irigaray and bell hooks, to ponder the possibility of "an explicitly feminine and female liberation" (208) wherein "female beauty is *not* a signifier of attachment and suffering, but instead of awakening" (210).

Battaglia's chapter most explicitly discusses Buddhist femininity, and the final chapter, Jeff Wilson's "Feminine? The Role of Meditation in the Production and Marketing of Gendered Lifestyles," also takes on the issue of gender construction--though in a very different context and manner. In a rather sharp departure from the other chapters in the volume, Wilson looks at how Buddhism, particularly mindfulness practice, has been co-opted by North American self-help "gurus" to market different forms of femininity, corresponding with different stages of adult womanhood. From the young "mindfully extravagant tranquilista" to the selfless mother to the powerful and wise crone, we see non-Buddhists manipulate Buddhist ideas and terminology to produce and sell "quasi-Buddhist" feminine lifestyles. The subject matter of Wilson's piece is equal parts intriguing and appalling. The chapter both highlights a disturbing trend of cultural appropriation and commodification (my reading, not Wilson's) and provides an analysis of the failure of such a move. Despite lifting mindfulness out of a patriarchal tradition, in this process of co-optation Wilson argues that mindfulness loses its revolutionary feminist potential to critique and transform conventional gender norms. In fact, this movement does quite the opposite: "For these authors and readers, the utility of Buddhist meditation lies not in its ability to overturn conventional lifestyles and thought processes, but in helping to live them more comfortably" (300).

The remaining chapters in this section do not explore the issue of femininity straight-on, if at all. Nor do any of the chapters even mention the concept of the "essential feminine" that is alluded to in the section title (perhaps with the exception of Wilson's description of the crone trope). The remaining chapters range from Matthew Mitchell's discussion of Pure Land Buddhist nuns' pursuit of justice through lawsuits at the Zenkōji temple complex in Japan, Holly Gayley's look

at three different regional hagiographies of Tibetan visionary Khanor Tare Lhamo, and Michelle Sorensen's study of an explicitly female-centric form of Buddhist practice. Whereas the first two of these pieces seem not to discuss the topic of femininity, the third piece promises to examine how Buddhist women in India and Nepal "understand their gender identities through the practice of *chöd*" and "how women reflect on and adapt their own experiences of being embodied as a female" (271). The practice of *chöd* involves the creation of a sculptural effigy (a female form, in this case) and then dissecting it and offering it in a ritualized feast. Sorensen explains its significance: "Through such practices, *chöd* allows women to counter representations of inferior, disgusting, or horrific female bodies by visualizing their own bodies as offerings that will benefit all sentient beings" (274). In this way, the women are able to enact bodhisattva practices in their own female bodies. Although this practice does seem spiritually significant, Sorensen explains that gender norms are not actually challenged through this practice as the practitioners do not emulate historical female figures, do not aspire to become *dākinīs*, and still believe in male superiority (280-81). Therefore, it is unclear to what extent this practice produces any sort of "Buddhist femininity" given that gendered beliefs and expectations are not transformed through it.

The individual chapters of *Buddhist Feminisms and Femininities* are interesting and insightful insofar as they give us a glimpse into different Buddhist women's communities, past and present. There is so much to learn from this volume, and especially from those chapters that provide significant theoretical analysis alongside their sociological, ethnographic, religious, and/or textual foundations. As discussed here, my main difficulty is with how the collection is framed and organized. It's not clear that this is a book primarily about Buddhist feminisms and

femininities, that is, the two themes upon which the entire volume is based. I believe readers would be better served if the editor had been more specific with her presentation, or, alternatively, if there had been more commentary to draw out the connections and unifying topics the chapters. Themes such as "textual foundations," "spiritual practice," "pioneering women," and "female embodiment" would have given us a better sense of what this volume offers and how it highlights diverse women's relationships to Buddhist practice and to gender justice. I do wholeheartedly recommend this volume for those interested in Buddhist women and their communities and practices, and hopefully this review will give the reader a clearer sense of what to expect.