

Paula ARAI, *Women Living Zen: Japanese Soto Buddhist Nuns*. 272 pp. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. Cloth \$63.95. ISBN 0-19512393-X.

BUDDHIST WOMEN, especially female monastics, have been an important and viable component of the Buddhist tradition. However, they have been “invisible” and almost non-existent in the historiography of Japanese Buddhism, and especially in Zen scholarship. Many of us are already aware of the androcentric tendency that has traditionally existed in Buddhist institutions, but Arai points to our own lack of awareness in the selection of research areas and materials, as well as scholars’ own bias and Eurocentric assumptions that have contributed to the perpetuation of this trend. The book, which is based on an intimate examination of a group of Sōtō Zen nuns affiliated with Aichi Senmon Nisōdō nunnery in Nagoya, makes a valuable contribution to Zen studies by adding missing bits. The research has been based on face to face interviews, participant-observation, and written sources, and there seems to be a conscious attempt to adopt “critical scholarship” in order to present “their perspective”; that is, “what the nuns think of their own lives” (p.6). In spite of negative social images and lack of scholarly writings, the picture she presents here is that of “strong, devout, and resilient” (p. 8) female monastics, whose narratives yield interesting insight into their role and participation in the Zen tradition.

Chapter 2 puts in historical and social context changes in the position of nuns since the first Japanese Buddhist nun Zenshin-ni became known in the late sixth century. There is a discussion on Dōgen’s attitude to women, which resembles the debate in the study of Buddhist women as to why the Buddha originally “hesitated” in accepting women into his monastic community. The Sōtō Zen nuns seem to be unanimous in accepting their founder’s view towards women to be inclusive and undiscriminatory, but the contradictory views on Dōgen’s attitude by others are important since it points to the difficulty in reconciling religious ideals and social reality: having to perpetuate a religious doctrine whilst administering a monastic institution in which women were considered to be a liability. This reality is carried further into

Chapter 3, where the twentieth century Sōtō Zen nuns are tested in their unwavering commitment to the belief in Dōgen's positive view of women in the face of actual discrimination in the institutional hierarchy that has consistently undermined them as novices. In this context, Arai describes the nuns as committed monastics who sought out ways to rectify their disadvantaged position by "combining monastic discipline and training with secular education" (p. 50). Subsequently, they managed not only to raise the standards of nuns but also to achieve structural changes that worked to their advantage in the Sōtō Zen sect.

Chapter 4, one of the most rewarding chapters, investigates the activities, discipline, and working of the monastic system that allows it to function effectively and harmoniously. It reveals that within a seemingly hierarchical nunnery structure, different skills and individual abilities are incorporated by effective allocation of chores under insightful leadership, and used for the ultimate aim of drawing out the fundamental Buddha nature in all. In fact, while experiencing different aspects of monastic life and assuming respective responsibilities, notions of authority and "seniority," irrelevant to the chronological age, assume different significance as the length of service and ones commitment to the collective ideal became paramount. These Buddhist values, originally cultivated for harmonious human relationships within Zen institutions, seem to have become appropriated in modern Japanese corporations and organizations as one of their effective managerial tools. However, the original religious aim to achieve "egolessness" seems to have become substituted for self-sacrifice and service for the ultimate benefit of Japanese corporations.

Chapter 5 finally puts the Sōtō Zen nuns in the context of contemporary Japanese society and provides us with further insight into the social position of Japanese women and their religious aspirations. Arai suggests that the meaning of "renunciation" has become "Japanized" and made different from what was originally understood in India (p. 85), but that it is important to understand that the notion of "renunciation" provided an alternative path for these Sōtō Zen nuns and Japanese women searching for a meaningful spiritual life in post-war Japanese society.

Arai's sensitive first-hand account is at times emotional, but the reflexive recollections that derive from her personal experiences and interactions with the nuns are insightful and well documented. As the nuns "grasp the core of the texts" (p. 112) in their everyday activities, we learn how Zen teaching is actually understood in practice. While her writing is fluent, it is unfortunate that her constant attempt to impose theoretical and methodological considerations results in inconsistencies and a disruption of an otherwise interesting flow of observations. Although I understand that Arai's work is not meant to be conclusive, I would have expected some more information in regard to their relationship with the priests and lay donors. Since Sōtō Zen temples are not exempt from the Japanese Buddhist practice of passing their temples through hereditary channels, I wondered how long these nunneries that seem to be "unique" could stay away from the notion of private holding. By the same token, I wondered how as celibate female monastics they perceived

and related to the married priests' wives. One last point of criticism I want to raise is that the uncritical usage of the term "traditional" is problematic. The author's repeated claim that the "traditional" values have allowed Sōtō Zen nuns to achieve respect and advance their position, should be rephrased. In fact, the qualities that she listed here—patience, grace, discipline, strength, modesty, kindness, harmony, beauty, and so on—are timeless qualities that have been frequently invoked to discredit contemporary values as corrupt and inferior in contrast.

However, the book is valuable in providing us with a different mode of appreciation in order to understand the position of women living in other religious and cultural context. While feminist studies have been too preoccupied on a one-dimensional and oppositional mindset, Arai forces us to see that there are other strategies such as those adopted by Sōtō Zen nuns that have been effective and successful. They have used their experience of suffering and hardship as a leverage to overcome oppression and discrimination, and are finally achieving respect and fair treatment with patience and perseverance. These nuns have not seen themselves as "victims of an oppressive system or misogynist individuals" (p. 150), but have regarded problems in life as an opportunity to develop and grow.

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