

REVIEW ARTICLES

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Research on Buddhist Nuns in Japan, Past and Present

RUCH, BARBARA, General Editor. *Engendering Faith: Women and Buddhism in Premodern Japan*. Michigan Monograph Series in Japanese Studies, NO. 43. Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, The University of Michigan, 2002. lxxviii + 706 pages. Map, plates, list of characters, selected bibliography, index. Cloth US\$69.00; ISBN 1-929280-15-7.

Fister, Patricia. *Art by Buddhist Nuns: Treasures from the Imperial Convents of Japan* 尼門跡と尼僧の美術. New York: Institute for Medieval Japanese Studies, 2003. 91 pages. Paper, n. p.

NARA NATIONAL MUSEUM, Editor. *Special Exhibition: Women and Buddhism*. Nara: National Museum, 2003, xvii + 263 pages. Explanations of works exhibited, lists (Japanese and English) of works exhibited. Paper, n. p.

JOSEI TO BUKKYŌ TŌKAI KANTŌ NETTOWĀKU 女性と仏教東海・関東ネットワーク, Editor. *Bukkyō to jendā: Onnatachi no Nyozegamon* 仏教とジェンダー—女たちの如是我聞. 1999. Osaka: Toki Shobō.

JOSEI TO BUKKYŌ TŌKAI KANTŌ NETTOWĀKU, Editor. *Jendā ikōruna Bukkyō o mezashite: Zoku onnatachi no Nyozegamon* ジェンダーイコールな仏教をめざして—続女たちの如是我聞. 2004. Osaka: Toki Shobō.

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WHEN SCHOLARS of Religious Studies talk about Buddhism the focus is usually on Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhism of South and Southeast Asia, Tibet, and Japan. Traditionally they concentrate on monks and doctrines. A fairly comprehensive bibliography listing the scarce literature in Western languages on women in Buddhism can be found in Barbara Ruch's monumental reader, *Engendering Faith*, one of the publications under review.

While conducting research for my PhD thesis in Japan, I heard of a friend staying at a convent in Kyoto during her research there. From my perspective, the nuns themselves were invisible in modern Japanese society. I clearly recall my astonishment, while on Taketomi Island in the Yaeyama Archipelago of the Ryūkyū Islands in the first half of the 1990s, when I learned that the Buddhist temple on that island was inhabited by a nun and her husband, a monk. While he ran the local museum she was not to be seen in public.

On the other hand, there is quite a tradition of research of women involved with Shinto and Japanese folk religion. My own studies clearly revealed that women had played an important role in religion even as late as the twentieth century in Okinawa (WACKER 2001). Nevertheless, I still did not suspect nuns of earlier times to have had as a great impact on Japanese Buddhism as the monumental volume edited by Barbara Ruch demonstrates.

In this short article I will first take up the epoch-making volume by Barbara Ruch together with the catalogues of two exhibits that took place in 2003 in direct relation with this volume—one held in Kyoto entitled “Art by Buddhist Nuns,” the other held in Nara entitled “Women and Buddhism.” Then I will discuss two publications by modern Buddhist nuns and lay women. The latter publications approach the topic of “Women in Buddhism” from a socio-religious point of view.

Engendering Faith: Women and Buddhism in Premodern Japan

The publication of this reader is the first in a series of projects of the Institute of Medieval Japanese Studies (IMJS) of Columbia University, New York, headed by the editor, Professor Emerita Barbara Ruch. A specialist on medieval

Japanese literature and cultural history, she is also the director of the international Imperial Buddhist Convents Survey Project. The prologue of the volume reveals some initial findings of this project. In the year 2000 the IMJS opened a small branch office in Kyoto, which serves as a base for the work with Imperial Buddhist Convents in the area and the Restoration of Convent Treasures Projects, which are funded by the World Heritage Foundation. In 2002 the Center for the Study of Women, Buddhism, and Culture, which serves as an archive for microfilm and research materials on convent culture, was opened in Kyoto. It is also a meeting place for Buddhist nuns from Southeast Asia, Taiwan, the People's Republic of China, Korea, and Japan, as well as a resource center for graduate students from Europe, Asia, and the Americas. As such it also is the location for public lectures, exhibitions, and programs related to the culture of convents (IMJS report 2000/12). All this happened just in time to celebrate the thirty-fifth anniversary of the IMJS and the tenth installment of the international Imperial Buddhist Convents Survey Project in October 2003. But let us now turn to the book itself.

This volume is the outcome of a unique collaboration between Japanese and North American scholars. It brings together the results of long-term research by two study groups that first held a meeting in 1989. The Japanese study group, led by Nishiguchi and Ōsumi, had already published four volumes of essays (ŌSUMI, NISHIGUCHI 1989) of which ten were selected, translated, and adapted for this reader. The North American study group added ten more essays to make up a veritable treasure trove of new information in English, capable of dissolving any prejudice against the religious practice of nuns and lay women in medieval Japan.

The contributors as well as the translators are briefly introduced in the appendix. It is a truly interdisciplinary work spanning from social history, history of religions, and art of medieval Japan to archaeology (Nicole Fabricand-Person) and literature (Marian Ury, and most of the translators with the exception of Philip Yampolsky). Only one author (Nagata Mizu) is a Buddhologist. It is also a highly egalitarian project: The contributors and the translators are of both sexes, and the deep insights of professors emeriti as well as the brilliant and fresh views from young promising scholars are bound up into one volume.

The volume is well-structured, starting off with a three-page table of contents, notes to the reader, remarks on transliteration, and pronunciation, which is especially important for readers not familiar with Japanese language. Chronological tables and a map of Japan delineate the historical and regional setting for the following chapters. In the appendix the scholar of Japanese studies finds a very useful and extensive list of characters for names and terms used throughout, a selected bibliography containing mostly but not only literature

in Japanese. A thirty-odd-page index finishes off the more than seven hundred pages of this volume.

The introductory section contains two essays each by Ōsumi Kazuo and the editor, Ruch. To orient the reader into the themes of the volume, Ōsumi writes about a “New Age of Research on Women and Buddhism.” This new tendency in Buddhist Studies has already led to the publication of two volumes of essays by the members of two sister study groups based in Tōkai and Kantō, edited by Kawahashi Noriko 川橋範子, to be further explored a little later in this essay. He then continues to summarize the role of women in the early times of Buddhism in Japan. Ruch then gives a detailed introduction into the chapters that make up the main body of the volume. If the reader remains unsure by this point, he will definitely be convinced of the importance of the subject by the time he reads the Prologue, in which Ruch tells the story of Abbess Mugai as far as it has been unraveled so far. This essay is the link to the international Imperial Buddhist Convents Survey Project. The whole volume is dedicated to Mugai and a photograph of her statue appears in the beginning (page ii) of the book.

The main body of the volume is made up of twenty chapters in five sections according to their focus. Section I, “Women in Early Chinese and Japanese Buddhism,” by Chikusa Masaaki, starts out with Buddhist nun communities in China. The other two chapters are about court women and Buddhism in Japan from the seventh to ninth centuries (Hongō Masatsugu), and Empress Kōmyō and the development in state Buddhism (Mikoshihira Daisuke). This certainly leaves the impression that early Buddhism was mainly focused on an aristocratic elite. However, one must take into consideration the dearth of material on the lives of the lower classes in general, and especially the non-tangible aspects of culture that hinder their study. This data illustrates how aristocratic women acted independently of the men in both their natal and marital families and had great political influence.

There are also very basic questions that need to be answered: Who is considered a nun? How and why do women become nuns? How are they portrayed in literature? The chapters of Section II, “Nuns and Nunneries,” offer some answers looking at the various forms of tonsure (Katsuura Noriko), the procedures of ordination (Paul Groner), convents or living quarters being converted into a temple (Ushiyama Yoshiyuki), widowhood (Ushiyama, Martin Collcutt) and divorce (Anne Dutton, Diana E. Wright) as points in life when women decide to dedicate at least some time if not the rest of their lives to practicing Buddhism.

But what about the Buddhist scriptures and their manifestly misogynic teachings? Are there any scriptures in favor of women? Those questions are tackled in section III, “Scriptural Issues in the Salvation of Women.” The first chapter examines the issues of the three obligations, the five obstructions, and

the eight rules of reverence (Nagata), all of which are cited over and over again in traditional Buddhist studies to prove that women cannot earnestly practice Buddhism and gain Buddhahood. The second chapter focuses on a story in the *Lotus Sutra* relating how the Dragon King's Daughter—aged eight—achieved enlightenment (Yoshida Kazuhiko). This chapter and the *Lotus Sutra* as a whole seem to have a major impact on female Buddhist believers. The last chapter of this section makes a big jump into the eighteenth century to examine Buddhist teachings of Jiun Sonja's (滋雲尊者 1718–1804) school in the historical setting of the Edo period (Paul B. Watt). Jiun placed the Buddhist precepts above the Confucian teachings of virtue and stressed that only through Buddhist faith is a believer able to transcend “his or her role in the family to a life of chastity and compassion toward all sentient beings” (335). Particularly the first and third essays of this section suggest that the misogynist teachings in Buddhist scriptures and the tendencies of newer sects, such as the True Pure Land Sect founded by Shinran, to install women in important and socially visible offices need to be reviewed within a socio-historical framework.

The two chapters of Section iv, “Deities and Icons,” take their starting point in iconography but both also relate to female believers and sponsors by taking a look at the context in which such art might be produced by a female artist and/or a female sponsor. (Fabricand-Person, Hank Glassman). Readers interested in more visual signs of Buddhist nuns' faith can refer to the catalogues of the two exhibitions I mentioned, which will be introduced in some detail later on.

The Section v is dedicated to “Faith and Practice,” with a strong focus on death (Nishiguchi Juno) and the hereafter (Obara Hitoshi, Susan Matisoff, Endō Hajime, and Ruch). Both recipients of rituals and practitioners are—at least in part—women. Endō's essay also is the only one that focuses explicitly on non-aristocratic women, or rather couples. His study looks at the True Pure Land sect (Jōdo Shin Shū) founded in the Kamakura era. It is well known that during this period, the introduction of faith as a main element sufficient for salvation made possible the spread of Buddhist teachings to the masses. Ruch's essay shows that women at that time were active proselytizers who aimed their sermons especially toward women and taught them the promises of the *Lotus Sutra*.

As a whole the volume's articles teach the reader one main message: Even in medieval Buddhism Japanese women never were reduced to being mere passive recipients of teachings. Throughout medieval history Japanese women could maintain important roles in religion and society: They were the first to go abroad to study Buddhism in Korea (Ōsumi), and they were active proselytizers (Ruch section v). Through patronizing temples they helped to bequeath a truly rich material culture as can still be witnessed nowadays. The *Lotus Sutra*, and more precisely the Devadatta chapter, promises Buddhahood to women (Nagata) and its influence on Japanese women penetrates the whole volume: Besides

Yoshida's essay on the Devadatta Chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, it is also mentioned by Ōsumi, Chikusa, Mikoshihira, Groner, Katsuura, Ury, Nagata, Glassman, Nishiguchi, and Obara. Wives and daughters played important socio-religious roles in their True Pure Land Congregations (Endō). Nishiguchi demonstrates that after death one's sex was considered irrelevant as women, especially mothers of monks, were interred within the holy precincts that they could not enter while alive. This, too, is a sign of medieval Japan being a basically egalitarian society in which social power was evenly distributed among the sexes. Neither political and military power wielded by men nor religious and political power of (aristocratic) women dominated the other sex. Taking the vows and tonsure was always done through the will of women, most often in early childhood, or after being widowed. Yet it could also be used as a means to sever marital ties during the husband's lifetime (Dutton, Wright) After all, both male and female powers not only coexisted but enhanced each other. The means may be different but the tendency is similar to what I found in the Kingdom of Ryūkyū as late as the nineteenth century before it was annexed to mainland Japan to become the modern prefecture of Okinawa. While men were prominent in politics and scholarship, women were important social and religious leaders with respect to practicing faith (WACKER 2001).

I am not the only one who considers this reader to be epoch-making: This is the first time such findings of Japanese and Western (American and Canadian) scholars are published together, and thus the volume makes a fine introduction into the matter. Haruko Wakabayashi "strongly recommends [it] to scholars of all fields related to premodern Japan" (WAKABAYASHI 2005; 204). Ford is a little more critical of the work because he feels it lacks a concluding essay that sums up the implications of the studies presented in this volume for methodology, thus providing an outlook on further investigation into the field (FORD 2004, 452). However, as the editor, Ruch, already gives a detailed introduction into the chapters that make up the main body of the volume, this seems needless. Actually, in an interdisciplinary collaboration such as this, discussion of traditional methodologies used in the various disciplines might very well have distracted the authors from their goal: To publish their findings in a field of studies neglected so far.

Exhibitions in Kyoto and Nara

The same year *Engendering Faith* was published, there were two exhibitions of works of art by Buddhist nuns. "Art by Buddhist Nuns: Treasures from the Imperial Convents of Japan" was held in April in Kyoto at the Nomura Art Museum. As the subtitle suggests, this exhibition is closely linked to the imperial Buddhist Convent Research and Restoration project, which in turn is conducted

by the Medieval Japanese Studies Institute at the University of Michigan (MJSI) headed by Ruch. Due to limited space it was a small exhibition, but the catalogue was put together with much care. As it also serves as an anniversary publication to commemorate the thirty-fifth of the MJSI and the first of the Center for the Study of Women, Buddhism, and Culture, it is bilingual, with English following the Japanese text.

Two notes in celebration by Ruch and Kasanoin Jikun 花山院慈薫, the twenty-seventh generation Abbess of Daishōji Imperial Convent, are followed by greetings from Hirayama Ikuo 平山郁夫, Chairman of the Foundation for Cultural Heritage, and Setouchi Jakuchō 瀬戸内寂聴. Manabe Shunchō 真鍋俊照 gives a short introduction to the art of Buddhist nuns of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The main author of the catalogue, however, is Patricia Fister, Associate Professor at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies, who gives a more detailed information on “The Artistic Practices of Aristocratic Buddhist Nuns” before introducing the eleven abbesses whose work was on display at the exhibition. She stresses that “the creation of devotional art was a vehicle for expressing, and in some cases, exploring their spirituality” (18). Just as the various essays in the reader stressed the importance of the *Lotus Sutra*, here we learn that this scripture explicitly teaches that producing and dedicating works of art are a way of attaining Buddhahood. It might be even due to those ardent female practitioners that female deities, the foremost being Kannon and her manifestation Nyoirin Kannon, were prominent in paintings. Just as the abbots and famous teachers were portrayed, there are many portraits of abbesses and their mentors, painted by nuns, who had studied painting with famous painters of the Kanō school. Such is the case of Shōzan Gen'yō 照山元瑤尼 (Fumyōin 普明院, 1634–1727), who studied with Kanō Yasunobu 狩野安信 and the priest-painter of the Ōbaku Zen school, Takuhō Dōshū 卓峰道秀, who himself had studied under Kanō Tan'yū 狩野探幽. Another field the nuns excelled in is classical poetry, both Chinese and Japanese. Their calligraphy also included sutra copying and Zen texts. While the above mentioned works of art can be found in monasteries as well, needlework is a purely feminine way of expressing belief. The twenty-nine objects on display were classed into eight categories: Buddhist paintings, sacred images, portraits, Buddhist phrases and texts, sutras, paintings, Japanese and Chinese poetry, and embroidery. In the catalogue, each item is depicted followed by its detailed description in Japanese and English. The essay part closes with the biographies of eleven abbesses, all but Ryōnen Gensō 了然元総, the daughters of emperors. The bibliography is divided into subsections to list separately the literature pertaining to these nuns, with a general section at the beginning.

The second catalogue documents a much larger exhibition, “Women and Buddhism” 女性と仏教 (*Josei to Bukkyō*), with the subtitle *Inori to hohoemi*

[“Prayers and smiles”] written only in Japanese, which was held from April to May 2003 at the Nara National Museum. More than 194 items, including many Important Cultural Properties and National Treasures, were grouped into nine classes: (I) Women and the Reception of Buddhism in Japan, (II) Women of the court and Buddhism, (III) Aspiring after the Pure Land, (IV) Faith and Miracles, (V) Women and Faith in the *Lotus Sutra*, (VI) Images of Mothers and Children, (VII) Women and Kamakura Buddhism, (VIII) Images of Women of Faith and (IX) Various Aspects of the Faith of Women. While the exhibition in Kyoto by nature of the project focused on aristocratic nuns and their works of art of the Tokugawa era, the one in Nara included many other aspects of women in medieval Buddhism. This catalogue, too, is mostly bilingual, with the English translation of the short introductory remarks to each section and brief details of the artefacts covering the pages iv to xvii. While the foreword by the Director of the Nara National Museum, Washizuka Hiromitsu 鷺塚泰光, and the President of the Osaka Head Office of the *Sankei* newspaper, Tamura Seiki 田村正希, can also be enjoyed by a reader without knowing Japanese, the keynote essay “Inori to hohoemi” by Nishiyama Atsushi 西山厚, the Director of the Shiryō Kanri Kenkyūshitsu 資料管理研究室, was not translated.

Nishiyama’s truly enlightening article comprises a short history of “Women and Buddhism” from the first nun Zenshin to the empresses such as Kōmyō of the Nara era and others through the Heian era while touching on any object on display in the exhibition that might be related to these women. Nishiyama explores how the founders of new schools of the Kamakura era—Hōnen, Shinran, Ippen, and Eison—thought about female believers and how they drew them into their congregation. He shows how even the introduction of Zen during the Muromachi era was promoted by a woman. The main thread followed through the ages is the impact the “five obstacles” (*goshō* 五障) might have had on women wanting to live according to the faith. His conclusion is that although misogynist teachings based on this concept found their way into the Buddhist doctrine from the Heian era onward, there must have been very few women, who took the theory that they would first transform themselves into a man before being able to attain salvation at face value. To them the chapter of the salvation of the daughter of the dragon king must have read as “women can attain salvation” without that prerequisite. This idea subsequently was contradicted by those schools of the Kamakura era that propagated the belief in Amida or that the chanting of his name was enough for salvation, no matter what kind of life the person had lived before. Nevertheless, for female readers, Nishiyama’s suggestion to modern Buddhist women that they learn from their predecessors and live their lives within the framework given by Buddhist doctrine with a prayer (on their lips) and a smile (on their faces) leaves a strange impression.

The titles of the exhibits are listed in English, but for detailed explanations

again the reader has to go to the explanatory section in Japanese. So while the Kyoto catalogue is clearly dedicated to both readers of English and Japanese, the Nara catalogue provides only a short introduction to those not able to read Japanese. This is a pity, as valuable information is only available to the specialist in the field.

Women and Nuns in Modern Buddhism

The works reviewed here so far concentrate on women, mostly aristocratic nuns in medieval and Tokugawa Japan and display the findings of scholars not necessarily members of the Buddhist congregation. Now let us look at two publications by the twin networks of “Women and Buddhism” (Josei to Bukkyō 女性と仏教) of the Tōkai and Kantō regions. The networks were founded in 1996 (Tōkai) and 1997 (Kantō) respectively and consist mainly of women who directly experience the impact Buddhist teachings have on their school: Buddhist nuns and lay women married to Buddhist monks. At first it was mainly the Jōdo Shinshū, Sōtō Shū, and Nichiren Shū groups that were represented, however by the publication of the second volume in 2004 members of Shingon Shū and Tendai Shū had also joined.

The first volume, which was published in 1999, was the first document of discussions on the role of women in Buddhism between women and men across the borders of the various Buddhist schools. Imai Masaharu, professor at Tsukuba University who specializes in the medieval history of Buddhism explains the subtitle of the book. “Nyozegamon,” which can be translated as “Such I heard,” is taken from the first words of each sutra. Therefore, “onnatachi no nyozegamon” [such women heard] reflects the purpose of both these publications: To make known to the public how women understand the Buddhist teachings and how they propose to reform Buddhism. The goal of volume 1 is to take stock: How do nuns and lay women live within the various schools, what are the restrictions they encounter, and where do they feel discriminated against?

The prologue by Kawahashi Noriko explains a little more about the discrimination against wives of priests. Chapter I is entitled “Women in the Scriptures” and comprises two theoretical essays: Nagata Mizu explores Shakamuni’s view of women. His fellow Buddhologist Tsuruoka Ei puts the misogynist view in Japanese Buddhism into the context of the late Kamakura era, the age of *mappō*.

The main sections of this book are made up of very personal accounts of how women experience Buddhism in their everyday lives. Chapter II comprises three essays on women in history and doctrine as seen from the point of view of women. Chapter III explores the position of women in the congregation and the system, and mainly discusses nuns. Chapter IV reports on the situation of

women in the temples where they call for a gender-equal Buddhism. The last section, “In search of a revival of Buddhism,” records a discussion between five members of the two study groups.

The second volume was published five years later, in 2004 and takes up the title of Chapter IV of the first volume, *Jendā ikōruna Bukkyō o mezashite* ジェンダーイコールな仏教をめざして [In search of a gender-equal Buddhism]. In the Foreword Kawahashi introduces a brief history of the study groups and notes that their voices now are also heard in public, with members of the Tōkai Network giving lectures and a newsletter being published by the Kantō Network. The main body of the second volume is made up of short essays by various members that were published as a column *Honne de talk* 本音でTALK [Speaking frankly] on the women's page in the *Chūgai Nippō* 中外日報 over a period of more than three years. Besides this, the publications of the networks are also being used in lectures for lay people by Sōtō and Nichiren monks. However, their work is not always welcomed as there are also monks who warn their female listeners against the thoughts disseminated by the networks. In fact, it is generally considered rather un-Japanese to voice criticism about the group you are a member of. As such disloyalty may incur expulsion, some of the authors cannot publish under their real names. Kawahashi again stresses that the group aims at resolving the problems discrimination against women brings about within the framework of Buddhist teachings, rather than just opting to leave the group. The goal is to reform modern Buddhism in such a way that women can live their faith to the full. In Chapter I again, after the discussion of some issues of discrimination against women in Buddhism by various authors, Nagata provides some theoretical background on the views of Buddhist teachings on humans, the theory of *goun* 五蘊, the theory of humans consisting of body and soul (118), namely the physical form (*shikiun* 色蘊), the four psychological elements of pure feeling (*juun* 受蘊), perception (*sōun* 想蘊), wish (*gyōun* 行蘊), and consciousness (*shikiun* 識蘊). In the last section he explicitly states that the scriptures basically make no difference between the *goun* of men and women (135–37).

The last essay of this chapter provides an example for the reconstruction of Buddhism in Tibet as practiced at the Depun monastery. Chapter II consists of thirty-four essays of the series “Speaking frankly.”

Like volume I, the second volume closes with a discussion about the essays of Chapter II and two comments: Kawahashi implores her colleagues to not take their eyes off the real problem, and Kumamoto Einin 熊本英人, a monk of the Sōtō Shū group, admonishes his fellow practitioners that it does not help to simply deny that there is any discrimination against women.

So while Buddhist nuns and lay women of medieval times spoke through their writings and art work of hope and devotion, modern Buddhist women in Japan add their words of hope and devotion free of complaint on their situations.

These two volumes are important material from within the Buddhist world and make good reading for a scholar interested in how Buddhist women live and think about their lives nowadays.

Conclusion

The studies taken up in this essay show vividly how interest in the subject of women in Buddhism has risen in the past two to three decades in both Japan and the Western world. It is definitely not just a pet subject of feminist scholars, as the sizeable number of male contributors, scholars and monks alike, represented in all the studies demonstrates. As Buddhism is mainly an Asiatic religion, it is only natural that discussion on the joys and woes of living a life in faith in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries began in an Asian country such as Japan and was first published in Japanese only. The narration of modern Buddhist women on their experience makes good material for further studies by Western scholars of comparative religious studies or Japanese social studies in general.

A symposium on “Constructing Gender in Religious Symbolic Systems,” scheduled to take place in Zürich in May 2006, indicates that interest in the rest of the academic world in the lives and practice of female Buddhists has been stimulated. These volumes are the first on a new shelf in one’s library that could be labeled “Women in Buddhism through the Ages.” We should now be on the lookout for more publications about women in other Buddhist countries, and for similar ones on women in Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Taoism, and so on.

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