

# Buddhist Women's Voices

Alice Collett, *I Hear Her Words: An Introduction to Women in Buddhism*, Windhorse Publications, 2021, pb, 266pp, £16.99.

*reviewed by Dānasamudrā*

One of the earliest, if not the first, discussion of the role of women in Buddhism in English comes in the introduction to Caroline Rhys Davids' translation of the *Therīgāthā* (1909), which explores in some detail the role of women in early Indian society and is clearly written from Rhys Davids' own feminist perspective. In *Women under Primitive Buddhism* (1930), I.B. Horner, another remarkable female scholar of Pali, produced the first English-language account of women in Buddhism, and in doing so drew on a wide range of canonical and non-canonical texts. In her introduction she highlights an issue that has plagued scholars in many disciplines trying to uncover the lives of women in the past: the fact that most of the texts that we have were written by men, and in the case of Buddhist texts have been transmitted orally for centuries before being written down.

Although Horner lived long enough to write the foreword to Diana Paul's *Women in Buddhism* (1979) (she died in 1981), her outlook as a writer about women in Buddhism belongs to the first-wave feminism of her mentor and teacher Caroline Rhys Davids. Second-wave feminism asserts that patriarchal society has oppressed women in all aspects of their lives, and since the 1970s has used that as a lens through which to examine and critique the ways in which patriarchy is enacted. Scholarship produced from this perspective has tended to present religion as another tool with which men suppress and control women's lives. However, in all fields of study, feminist scholars have done a great deal to open up awareness of the hidden lives of so many women across the centuries; women who made vital and often ground-breaking contributions to every aspect of human endeavour and who have simply been written out of history.

In *I Hear Her Words*, Alice Collett acknowledges with appreciation the hinterland of women's research on women in Buddhism, but she also critiques the work of her predecessors, adding a new dimension to existing debates, and paints the picture of women in contemporary Buddhism on a much wider canvas than many readers will be familiar with. The book is intended as an introduction for the general reader but that does not limit its scope; it interrogates matters of doctrine as well as chronicling the lives of women both contemporary and historical. The book is divided into two sections. In the first,

‘Asking questions about Buddhism’, Collett explores a number of doctrinal issues in relation to women, and in the second, ‘Voices through the centuries’, she records the lives of women who have played a crucial role in keeping Buddhism alive and relevant throughout history.

There is a widely held belief, often reinforced by casual contact with traditional Buddhist societies, that Buddhism views women as inferior to men. This view has also appeared in the work of some western scholars and led Rita Gross to undertake, in *Buddhism after Patriarchy* (1993), a ‘feminist revalorization of Buddhism’ which involved ‘repairing the tradition’ (3). Collett starts her book with the statement that ‘there is no justification to support the notion that women are inferior to men within Buddhist doctrine and ethical formulations’ (3). She does recognise, however, that the development of Buddhism in societies which traditionally viewed women as inferior has meant that cultural views became ingrained as key elements of Buddhist tradition and led to negative views and treatment of women. One of the aims of her book is to challenge the narrative of Buddhism’s negativity towards women by uncovering and celebrating texts and women who undercut it. Collett argues that the positive contribution of women to the development and practice of Buddhism has been obscured by the emphasis, both within Buddhist traditions themselves and in Buddhist Studies scholarship, on what is negative about women in the texts and traditions. In the introduction she identifies four key topics which are cited in evidence: (i) the belief that women are inferior to men; (ii) that it is bad karma to be born a woman; (iii) that a woman cannot become a Buddha; and (iv) issues around the ordination of women. Using a mixture of critical textual analysis and reference to contemporary practice in Buddhist countries, Collett briefly demonstrates that the received view on all these topics can easily be challenged.

The first chapter poses the question of whether Buddhism supports gender equality. Collett starts by considering how far discrimination against women can be seen as a breach of the precept of *ahiṃsā*. She rightly argues that when acknowledgement of difference becomes judgement that the person who is different is of lesser value, then that becomes discrimination and brings about harm. She claims that one of the most frequently cited examples of discrimination against women in early Buddhism, the eight special rules (*garudhammas*) that governed the nuns’ Order, may well have been put in place to protect the nuns in a society where women were forbidden to live independent lives. Her argument is certainly plausible, and elsewhere in the book she adduces textual evidence that the rules could not, as is usually claimed, have come from the Buddha because they relate to an aspect of the monastic sangha which did not exist in his time: the probationary stage of ordination. In her overview of feminist approaches to Buddhism, Collett draws on the work of

a number of Asian women scholars whose views provide a useful corrective to the assumptions made by western liberal scholars such as Rita Gross.

Collett locates her discussion of some of the most misogynistic texts in the context of the wider issue of desire in Buddhism and in particular sensual pleasure. She points out that there are examples of texts which recognise that desire is a hindrance to spiritual development equally for men and women. Then, in a section entitled 'Women are the problem, not desire', she goes on to critique Āsvagoṣa's version of the story of Nanda, the *Mahāratnakūta* and Śāntideva's *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, all texts which present women in the worst possible light as manipulative and dangerous to men and also as repellent and disgusting. They make very unpleasant reading and could be used to demonstrate why Buddhism, in Gross' words, needs to be 'revalorized'. Collett argues that, despite the fact that there are not many such texts, their arguments have been given undue attention. Although we have no way of knowing what the intention of these texts was, nor if they represent widely held views, there can be no doubt that there were monks who had issues with women and blamed them for their own shortcomings and difficulties around living a celibate life.

Collett goes on to explore women in Buddhism in relation to several key teachings: dependent arising, non-self and emptiness. In each case she argues that, properly understood, these teachings make no distinction between women and men, and cites evidence from a range of traditional and more modern sources to support her position. There does not seem ever to have been any contention that this was not the case, and she does not suggest that there was. Rather, she is using the examination of doctrine in relation to gender as a way to support her argument that Buddhist teaching does not discriminate against women despite the actions and writings of individual male Buddhists. As she says in the conclusion to the book:

No Buddhist doctrine nor ethical formations support the idea that women are inferior to men. The real aim is letting go of preoccupations with gender. (218)

The second part of the book provides a rich and kaleidoscopic view of the practice of Buddhism by women throughout history and in many countries. It serves both as a record of the struggles women have faced, and still face today, in being recognised as serious practitioners of the Dharma and as a celebration of their resilience and determination to follow a spiritual path. There are accounts of restraint, even physical violence, meted out to women who tried to become nuns or to live as ascetics, but these are stories of remarkable women who were prepared to commit themselves to their practice and often teach other women in the face of humiliation, physical constraints and societal disapproval.

Collett starts with early narratives such as the lives of early nuns in both China and India and then moves on to more modern examples drawn from across the Buddhist world. Some of the modern and contemporary examples record the lives of women who have significantly affected the development of the Buddhist tradition in the countries where they live.

In countries which practise Theravāda Buddhism, the question of ordination looms large. There is no surviving nuns' ordination lineage in any Theravādin country, but there are still many women who choose to live what amounts to a monastic life. In Sri Lanka these are called *dasa-sīla-mātās*, in Cambodia *tun ji*, in Burma *thilashin* and in Thailand *mae chis*. What emerges from these accounts is that across South East Asia, regardless of the attitudes of their society and of the monastic hierarchy, women have found a variety of ways to practise the Dharma as nuns, renunciates, lay practitioners and teachers and that some of them are challenging traditional views of women within Buddhism both by their example and by active campaigns for change.

Before writing about the lives of women practitioners of Mahāyāna Buddhism in East Asia and Tibet, Collett points out the importance of figures such as Tārā and Guanyin in the tradition. She cites the fact that Guanyin is the Buddha Avalokiteśvara transformed into female form and also the claim made in a late Tibetan text that Tārā chose to gain enlightenment in a female body (163), but does not develop an argument about whether this has improved the position of women practising within the Mahāyāna tradition. Later she also writes at some length about *dākinīs* in the Vajrayāna tradition, but again does not discuss how this has affected either women's practice or views about women. In the chapter on Korea and Taiwan and the one on Tibet, Collett writes about inspiring female practitioners, many of whom will be unfamiliar to the general reader.

The final chapter of the book deals with women practising Buddhism in the West. Of course, this is an area in which there is plenty of material already available, but Collett offers a historical overview and then groups western women practitioners according to the traditions to which they belong. Well-known figures such as Ayya Khema and Tenzin Palmo appear here, but although she was not herself a westerner, the omission of even a passing reference to Dīpa Ma, the root teacher of so many influential western Buddhists, especially in the USA, and herself such an extraordinary practitioner, is unfortunate.

Collett highlights the moral leadership of women such as Pema Chödrön and Zenkei Blanche Hartmann in the context of the scandals surrounding the leaders of Buddhist institutions in the West, such as Shambhala and the San Francisco Zen Center, but it is not entirely clear why this was deemed relevant to a discussion of women in Buddhism, except perhaps as an indicator of the

context in which western women are practising. This point is not, however, made explicitly.

When Collett turns to the Triratna Buddhist Order, into which she has herself been ordained, she provides an even-handed discussion of the controversy surrounding Subhuti's book, *Women, Men and Angels*, which takes up much of this section. She also goes on to highlight the role of Triratna among Ambedkarite Buddhists in India and in particular the positive impact this has had on the lives of women from dalit and other low-caste backgrounds.

As a feminist writer I have spent much of my life uncovering the lost histories of women, and we are still doing that with the Triratna Women project, which seeks to ensure that women's experience is heard as clearly as men's. Even now in the West, we cannot take that for granted. *I Hear Her Words* offers a very valuable and wide-ranging introduction to the topic of women in Buddhism. Collett has drawn on a diverse selection of sources, and there will be much material that is new to most readers.

It is not, however, always an easy book to read. The opening section is especially confusing. It starts with reference to a female Japanese haiku master and Buddhist nun and offers a brief statement of the author's intention in writing the book. It then moves on to a historical narrative which foregrounds the role of women in the story of Buddhism, the argument about the key topics I just mentioned, and only then, on page 18, does it go on to provide the fuller introductory overview of the book with which one might expect it to begin. Collett has included a great deal of material, and since the book is aimed at the general reader, there is a need to explain terms and set the sources in context – but at times this can get in the way of the core discussion. The sections on female deities and *dākinīs*, for instance, while interesting, do not develop a coherent argument and do not add to the reader's understanding of the biographies which form the core of the second part of the book. The way in which the book is constructed means that the reader often has to jump between sections to find all the material on a particular topic. For example, there are accounts of lives of Chinese nuns in both chapters 4 and 6, yet there is no obvious editorial reason why this should be the case. These reservations aside, this book is a valuable contribution to the literature on women and Buddhism. It demonstrates that women have already had a profound impact on how Buddhism has developed and been practised across time and place, and implicitly raises the question of how women will shape Buddhism in the future.

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