

Women in British Buddhism: Commitment, Connection, Community, by Caroline Starkey. Routledge, 2020. 222pp., Hb. £120, ISBN-13: 9781138087460; Ebook £33.29, ISBN-13: 9781315110455.

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Caroline Starkey's trailblazing inaugural monograph delivers an extensively researched ethnographic study which centres on women's contributions to Buddhism in Britain. The study is a revision of her 2015 doctoral research project, which showcases the narratives of twenty-five women from seven Buddhist traditions. The book uncovers the transformative, yet hidden, impact of women in contemporary British Buddhism, providing the first "multiple-tradition study that gives concentrated and sustained consideration to the experiences of ordained Buddhist women" (3).

Starkey's close engagement with women's experiences positions the book well among the emerging interest in lived Buddhism in Britain, which is fast gaining traction in the sociology of religion. She contributes to the field's diverse intersectional understandings, building upon research such as Smith, Munt, and Yip's (2016) *Cosmopolitan Dharma*, which offers a distinct focus on race, sexuality, and gender. Further studies include *Understanding Young Buddhists* by Page and Yip (2017), which emphasizes the perspectives of young adult practitioners in their negotiation and management of sexuality and social positioning in relation to family and kin. Beyond the scope of Buddhism in Britain, there are many recent publications on Western Buddhism which enrich the cosmopolitan focus on practitioners' lived experiences. For instance, the edited collection *Transcending* (2019) forefronts the often-neglected voices of trans Buddhists in the USA, including accounts of isolation, transphobia, and aggression. *Women in British Buddhism* consolidates the importance of analyzing gendered perspectives in the field of lived Buddhism. Starkey unpacks the women's unique experiences in the development and practice of a "British Buddhism", with thorough attention given to the micro-practices of religious belonging. From the outset, she emphasizes that "women who have taken Buddhist ordination in Britain have received limited academic attention" in contrast to ordained British men, and are neglected and undervalued by scholars specializing in the sociology of Buddhism (3). Thus, she positions these narratives as providing a crucial and timely contribution to the field.

The book is divided into eight chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 emphasize the position of women within British Buddhism more generally, introducing the practitioners and institutions that make up the book's social and cultural context. Starkey out-

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lines her research methods, highlighting her own attendance of “retreats, teachings, meditations, communal gatherings, and ritual events” (11). The empirical data collection involved participant observation and multiple interviewing undertaken both in person and online, including at Buddhist centers, homes, and cafes, as well as via telephone, video call, and email. In chapters 3 to 8, Starkey forefronts the interviews with women from the following Buddhist communities and schools: the Amida Trust, the Forest Sangha, the Triratna Buddhist Community, the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives, the Tibetan Gelug, Karma Kagyu, and Nyingma (10).

Chapter 3 is titled “British Buddhist women and narratives of conversion.” This focuses on *how* the women became involved with their respective groups and teachings and *why*, in addition to the ways in which women articulate their conversion experiences. Through this lens, Starkey uncovers “what might be important to British Buddhist women and the groups they are connected to” (58). She engages with Buddhist doctrinal concepts (such as the Three Jewels) and meta-narratives (such as the narratives on the eight *garudhammas*) as constructed by the perspectives of the participants. Deeper engagement with these constructs is generally omitted from Starkey’s narrative, though endnotes often provide more detailed discussions or point to relevant studies. Starkey offers a confident explanation of the various organisational hierarchies, as well as the Buddhist symbolism used within each tradition. Starkey categorizes conversion narratives by the method of contact, denoting whether this was “accidental,” “casual,” or a “committed” search for religious belonging. Additionally, she posits several catalysts as common influences in the decision to convert: a feeling of dissatisfaction or *dukkha* (65), a search for epistemological meaning (66), and a desire for connection and community (68).

In chapter 4, “Deepening commitment: The path to ordination”, Starkey considers the choice to ordain more fully. She offers a comparative approach to women’s ordination which includes studies of different contexts, particularly in parts of Asia and the West. Through this she aims to provide a “multidimensional investigation of the rationale for Buddhist ordination amongst women in contemporary Britain” (81). The line of questioning is poignant and critical, namely: “What is the attraction of a remote Buddhist monastery, where rules regulate your every waking moment, and your sense of individuality, style and independence is seemingly curtailed?” (81). The reasons provided for engaging with this path are both spiritual and practical. While some considered ordination as the next logical step in their religious journey, with increased access to retreats and study groups and the opportunity for deeper engagement with meditation practices, others articulated their calling through Buddhist terminology, expressing an awareness of *dukkha*, or a desire for a deeper connection to the sangha. Developing the overarching theme of connection, Starkey articulates the individual and communal motivation to partake in and contribute to “a community of like-minded others” (101).

In the fifth chapter, “Buddha couture: Ordained Buddhist women and dress,” Starkey considers topics of personal asceticism undertaken by monastic women. To do so adequately, she incorporates several aspects of religiosity under the term “dress,” including clothing (robes and ceremonial), naming, and head-shaving (ton-

sure) (109). Though naming is not alluded to in Buddhist *vinayas* as one of the “four requisites” (such as clothing), the women in the study articulate it as an important aspect of the “ordained “outfit”” (107). In this sense, “dress” is constructed as evoking both physical and internal changes and challenges. The subject of dress is certainly underexplored by the surrounding corpus of literature, particularly in relation to its effect on inner spiritual changes. Starkey draws on the perspective of Linda B. Arthur (1991), as she argues that dress provides a cultural snapshot which requires detailed investigation due to its potential to express complex concepts, ideas, and values. Starkey explores the potential for spiritual conflict through dress via a nuanced construction of two Buddhist realities: “the everyday or conventional, where dress is significant, and the ultimate, where dress is inconsequential” (108). This is particularly relevant where items of clothing may relate to different hierarchical positions within certain schools (as is the case within the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives). Perhaps the most intriguing discussion is the psychological benefits of dress, such as the spotlighting of individual dedication to practice, the personal reaffirmation of spiritual duty, or the ability to make a personal statement of spiritual values. Starkey aptly recognises this as its “dynamic functionality” (197). Common to the participants was the importance of feeling connected to their faith through clothing, as one individual eloquently articulated, “the robe holds me as if I’m clothing myself in the Buddha’s words and the Buddha’s teachings” (111).

Chapter 6, “Loaded words: Attitudes to feminism and gender equality”, is particularly eye-opening. Starkey primarily engages with the question, “How do ordained Buddhist women in Britain relate to ideas of gender equality and feminism?” (11). She notes finding this aspect of the project ethnographically challenging due to her participants’ sceptical interpretations of feminist terminology. In the analysis, she constructs “gender equality” and “feminism” as “loaded words” (135). For many of the practitioners, feminism is understood as political, others comprehend it as forceful, and some as entirely irrelevant to the Buddhist endeavour. Starkey emphasizes the heterogeneity in the approaches to feminism and gender equality between participants as well as between traditions and schools. Nevertheless, these conflicts are navigated with ease, and Starkey ultimately argues that the feminist/non-feminist binary constitutes a deficient oversimplification. She also emphasises the limitations of her findings by contrasting Page and Yip’s (2017) study of youth religiosity. This posits further potential research questions such as, “Does age and time connected to Buddhist groups shape [these] attitudes?” (160). She notes that, for young Buddhist lay practitioners, gender equality is considered a “non-negotiable” aspect of their practice. It is here that the distinct limitations of the sample are pointed out, as most of the practitioners were white and older, with most being over 50. Starkey also acknowledges the need to consider geographical differences more closely.

Chapter 7, “Pioneers and volunteers: Women building British Buddhism” focuses primarily on the question, “[w]hat relationships do ordained British Buddhist women have with their locality?” (11). Starkey emphasizes how women’s pioneer-

ing roles in the development of Buddhism in Britain have gone largely underexplored, particularly as “narratives of women’s building work, vision, hardship and learning have not always been prioritized in the published scholarly history” (168). Here, Starkey’s contribution is distinct in its exploration of the in-depth minutiae of religious life; she layers stories of “female monks learning to brick-lay in the remote Northumbrian countryside, pioneering *dharmacharinis* putting in underfloor heating in rural Wales, and women performing Buddhist protection rituals around a northern English city” (167). She explores the experiences of women who were permitted to ordain while maintaining familial responsibilities and celibate long-term relationships, highlighting particularly the spiritual benefits and practical difficulties of their managing both religious and family life. The findings are encouraging in their subversion of stereotypes relating to the Buddhist tradition and women practitioners. Within institutional boundaries, gender perceptions appear (for the most part) suspended or significantly challenged. The pragmatic challenges of organization, teaching, finances, and manual labour are considered shared responsibilities within most settings. I particularly welcomed the final discussion of this chapter, “[m]ovement and transnational connection,” as otherwise the book focuses primarily on local Buddhist practice in Britain. There is also a small but intriguing discussion surrounding the use of online networks by both Buddhist organizations and practitioners. This mentions the potential for doctrinal and philosophical conflicts among different Buddhist communities, especially in relation to the use of social media. The debate also points to social media’s role in connecting women practitioners and helping them overcome isolation or geographic distance. Furthermore, social media similarly allowed the women to maintain relationships with their family, friends, and local communities. In the concluding chapter, Starkey draws attention to the themes outlined within the subtitle and introduction of the book, expanding on the constructs of “commitment,” “connection,” and “community” in more explicit terms. It is through these structures that Starkey defines a unique framework for ordination which is appropriate to the context of British convert Buddhism. A fourth construct, “complexity,” may well have been added to this remit due to its continuous exploration. Throughout the book, Starkey systematically exposes the heterogeneous reality of Buddhist practice, evident as a unique product of her research design and diverse multi-tradition engagement. Oftentimes commenting on disparate participant experiences, Starkey affords each narrative its own legitimate point of expression. Within this final chapter, she constructs similarities between narratives with ease, uniting women’s experiences independent of institutional belonging. The analysis transcends the rigidity of binary constructs, including the “traditional” and “non-traditional,” “East” and “West,” “feminist” and “non-feminist,” as well as more inherent differences between groups. The author complicates the term “ordination” as multiplicitous in meaning, owing to it masking “some very real differences in hierarchical status, lifestyles, and institutional roles for women” (195).

As already pointed out by Amy Langenberg in her review of this book, Starkey fails to theorize the term “woman” when introducing her sample. It is therefore

assumed that this stems from self-identification. As an academic with an interest in queer Buddhist spaces and experiences, I feel it prudent to expand on this seemingly limited expression of gender identity and point out the gaps in the literature. It is crucial that, in addition to cis-gender women, we also consider the contributions of non-binary, transgender, gender-fluid and queer practitioners in the development and understanding of contemporary Buddhist experiences. As Manders articulates, “trans Buddhists are dealing with isolation, marginalization, discrimination, erasure, and transphobia in their sanghas” (2019, 1). To ensure the unique experiences attributed to the umbrella of gender and sexual identities are sufficiently represented, it would be advisable to engage with such axis of difference in explicit terms. Perhaps though, it is more appropriate to consider that, while Starkey presents a valuable addition to the inclusion and analysis of women’s experiences, this perceived limitation serves only to vindicate the author’s primary understanding that further academic development of Buddhist lived experiences is needed. The book is unique in its multi-traditional approach to the study of British Buddhist women’s narratives, and the prevailing research pertaining to women in British Buddhism is, in the author’s own words, often “several decades old” (3).

Starkey devotes space to the overlooked voices of ordained Buddhist women in Britain and provides a unique focus on its underexplored micro-practices, emphasizing the importance of its “rank and file” practitioners to wider institutional understandings (10). The book makes for a truly compelling read, drawing on Starkey’s almost “decade of interest in female ordination” (2). *Women in British Buddhism* contributes significantly to the intersection of lived religion, Buddhism, and gender by not only exposing points of conflict and unequal practice, but by providing a unique celebration of women’s contribution to and development of Buddhism in Britain.

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