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Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism. By Miranda Shaw.
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This is a fine book that presents a pioneering contribution to Tantric Buddhist studies. Modern scholarship has gone quite a way towards establishing Tantra as a legitimate field of academic study, overturning an earlier puritanical wariness about taking seriously a spiritual path so frankly erotic. Nevertheless, this very same scholarship has also tended to devalue the significance of women in the development of Tantrism. The received view has been that the development of Tantric Buddhism in India reflects a general cultural pattern of male dominance. This view is, however, at odds with the self-representation of the living tradition of Tantric Buddhism preserved in Tibet. It is also, Shaw argues, very markedly at odds with what we can recover of the Indian tradition from Sanskrit and Tibetan textual sources.

Shaw explicitly locates her work within an expanding body of literature on women and religion, and seeks to introduce the notion of gender as an analytic category into Tantric studies. Utilizing the interpretive principles of recent feminist historiography, she presents women *tantrikas* as active shapers of history and interpreters of their own experience. Looking afresh at the Indian textual tradition from this perspective she exposes many unsupported (and often insupportable) gender assumptions which have underpinned the received view that women were marginal and even exploited in a religious movement created by men for the enlightenment of men. Instead we are offered an engaging picture of Tantrism as a distinctive religious movement very much shaped by its women practitioners' ideals of gender relations and sacred sexuality.

The book is divided into eight chapters. The first, "Seeking the Traces of the Sky Dancers," outlines the scholarly and theoretical contexts of the study and its methodology. Interestingly, Shaw notes that the derogatory picture of Tantric yoginis presented by many Western male scholars is actually reinforced by certain feminist assumptions about the universality of Western constructions of gender and power, with their corresponding emphasis on dominance and exploitation. The second chapter provides a succinct religious and historical introduction to Tantric Buddhism in India. The rise of the movement is presented not as evidence of decadence and decline in Buddhism, but as the "crowning cultural achievement" (20) of the extremely rich *Pāla* period (700–900 CE). In chapter three, "Women in Tantric Theory," the author describes the very positive Tantric understandings of female embodiment. Rules requiring expression of respect for women served not only to control male impulses to dominance, but also to empower women through a sense of their own divinity. Tantric gender ideology sought to structure male and female spiritual development in complementary ways so as to achieve a union dedicated to their mutual

liberation. In “Women in Tantric Circles” (chap. 4), Shaw argues that women were present and fully participated in Tantric circles as adepts and experts. The strongest evidence for this derives from writings of the women themselves. Here and in succeeding chapters she draws on some forty texts by women which she discovered in the course of her archival research. The fifth chapter shows how women helped to create Tantric Buddhism by introducing new meditations and by adding their insights to the movement’s evolving ethos. Some of these founding mothers can be named, others remain anonymous (though the traces of their presence are evident). But Tantric theory as a whole should properly be seen as the product of both men and women. “Women in Tantric Relationships” (chap. 6), explores the sexual yoga distinctive of Tantra. Tantric union, with its emphasis on intimacy between men and women, is presented as a practice involving reciprocity, not domination or coercion. Chapter seven discusses a very influential Tantric treatise (the *Vyakṭabhāvānugata-tattva-siddhi*) composed by the eighth-century woman practitioner *Sahajayayoginīcintā*. It is clear from Shaw’s writing that *Sahajayayoginīcintā* had received an excellent education and was well trained in both religious and secular matters. She also represents a historically documented instance of a *type* of accomplished woman practitioner very different from the received view of women as marginalized and exploited in Tantric circles. The assumption that the (often anonymous) available Tantric texts were all written by men and describe only the practices and experiences of men is unwarranted. Instead it is more plausible to read them as the creations of both men and women. The final chapter offers some concluding remarks about the significance of the author’s findings for various historiographic, iconographic, and Buddhological issues.

This book is a major contribution to the history of Indian Buddhism, brilliantly recapturing a lost sense of the important creative role of women in the formation of Tantra. It is also an exemplary instance of how feminist historical scholarship can restructure our androcentrically distorted perception of a body of data. Moreover, although the book is primarily an academic work of historical scholarship, it is extremely well-written and should be accessible to the general educated public. This, together with Shaw’s obvious enthusiasm for the Tantric ideal, means that Western practitioners should find it a suggestive source of positive gender ideals that are implicit in the Buddhist tradition (even if they are often imperfectly realized in practice).

One small demurrer. The most serious challenge to Shaw’s revisionist historical thesis is one she explicitly mentions: namely, that her sources will be accepted as authentic but reinterpreted as evidence only of token-

ism. Of this response she writes:

Sources that contradict current historical views can easily be dismissed as anomalous doctrines that were never invoked in practice or as rhetorical statements that do not represent deeply held beliefs. No amount of “proof” can refute such a position. One can only articulate the assumptions underlying the position and present an alternative interpretation, hoping to determine which one is more internally consistent and makes sense of a broader range of available evidence (173).

That is, rational choice between competing theories is to be (fallibilistically) decided by appeal to coherence and explanatory power. Notwithstanding this pre-emptive strike, my impression (from other reviews and from conversations) is that the skeptical response to Shaw’s revisionist thesis is still very much alive and well. Perhaps this is because Shaw relies mostly on the cumulative plausibility of her case, rather than explicit dialectics against her opponents. It may nevertheless be helpful in evaluating the skeptical rejoinder to make somewhat more explicit here what I take to be the underlying logical structure of her argument.

The received view about Tantra that is Shaw’s target obviously affirms something like the following two theses: A: The Tantric textual tradition devalued women; B: Tantric practice devalued women. These two theses are logically independent: neither *entails* the other. However, the received view supposes evidence for the truth of the first thesis is evidence for the truth of the second thesis. In other words, given the truth of A, B is more probable than not. Or more formally: C: $\Pr(B/A) > \Pr(\text{not-}B/A)$. Shaw rejects the received view by denying A, and hence the alleged evidence for B. She does not reject the evidential principle expressed by C; indeed, as we shall see, she implicitly accepts an analogous principle.

Shaw’s revised view affirms something like the following pair of theses (essentially the negations of the first pair): D: The Tantric textual tradition valued women; E: Tantric practice valued women. Once again, these two theses are logically independent: neither *entails* the other. However, clearly Shaw believes that the evidence for the truth of the former thesis is supposed to be evidence for the truth of the latter. In other words, given the truth of D, E is more probable than not. Or more formally: F: $\Pr(E/D) > \Pr(\text{not-}E/D)$.

I believe that Shaw’s case for the truth of D is overwhelmingly persuasive. Hence if we accept F, E is more probable than not. But the skeptical response to Shaw’s revisionism in effect argues that even if Shaw can establish D, this would not establish E. The textual tradition is *normative*, not

descriptive, and it is naive to suppose merely on the basis of the texts that Tantric practice actually embodied those norms.

There are indeed well-known difficulties in our modern attempts to reconstruct the history of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist practices from its normative texts. However, these difficulties are equally difficulties for the received view. More particularly, if we reject Shaw's evidential principle F, then surely we must also reject the analogous principle C. In other words, if the truth of D is not evidence for the truth of E, then neither is the truth of B evidence for the truth of A. But then the skeptical rejoinder undercuts the received view just as much as the revised view!

Prima facie both C and F seem intuitively plausible. Presumably what the skeptic might instead want to do is support a modified version of the received view which concedes D but denies E. Assuming the truth of D, what the skeptic then has to do is undermine the intuitive plausibility of F in a way that does not also undermine C. One way this might be done is by appealing to the case of Tibet. Tibetan Buddhism venerates the Indian Tantric texts and accepts the normative ideal affirmed in D. However, in practice the Tibetan tradition has been very involved with the creation of patriarchal institutions which appropriated the Tantric tradition. The original Tantric vision survived only among a minority of yogins and yoginis outside of the monasteries.

Shaw freely admits this happened in Tibet. Her explanation is that from the tenth century we find increasing Tibetan monastic appropriation of the Tantric tradition and "a reinterpretation of Tantric symbols to be compatible with a celibate lifestyle" (177). This seems plausible, but was the situation really any different in India? Surely the appropriation of Tantra by the Indian monastic universities was already well underway in the *Pāla* period. But if that is right, then the textual tradition's valorization of women is not in itself good evidence for the descriptive claim about the status of women in Indian Tantric circles—unless, of course, there are other relevant causal factors which make the Indian situation disanalogous to the Tibetan. It would be interesting to hear Shaw's views on what these factors might be.