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*Women in British Buddhism:
Commitment, Connection, Community*

Reviewed by Sarah-Jane Page

Aston University
s.page1@aston.ac.uk

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vforte@albright.edu

A Review of *Women in British Buddhism: Commitment, Connection, Community*

Sarah-Jane Page¹

Women in British Buddhism: Commitment, Connection, Community. By Caroline Starkey. London: Routledge, 2020, x + 212 pp., ISBN 978-1-138-08746-0 (Hardcover), \$155.00.

The aim of Caroline Starkey's book, *Women in British Buddhism*, is to chart the contribution made by ordained women in British Buddhism. Many of these women were pioneers in their respective traditions, forming the initial Buddhist communities, and directly engaging in the physical toil to cultivate functioning Buddhist communities, often in demanding conditions. Indeed, this is a story that has hitherto been underexplored, and Starkey's participant observation and repeated interviews with twenty-four ordained women offers a compelling insight to fill in such research gaps. Starkey recruited from numerous Buddhist traditions and subsequently notes some of the similarities as well as the differences that emerge on the basis of affiliation. While the Triratna Buddhist Order and Community formed the largest group from which participants emerged, Starkey also interviewed women from Amida, the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives, Theravāda/Thai Forest Sangha, and Tibetan traditions and is

¹ Department of Sociology and Policy and Centre for Critical Inquiry into Society and Culture, Aston University. Email: s.page1@aston.ac.uk.

therefore able to undertake a comparison between the different groups, with particular focus given to gender equality.

Chapter one introduces the concepts and methods, emphasizing the research principles and questions. Starkey is principally focused on a deeper understanding of women who seek ordination and how they came to be ordained. She is also keen to understand three further dynamics: how these women stand in relation to Buddhist hierarchies and power dynamics, their perception of gender inequality, and how their spiritual practice is understood within the British context. Starkey unpacks the term “ordination.” She reflects on its Christian roots but critically retains its usage for being the best term available to describe the various forms of participants’ engagement with Buddhism. This is also the term commonly used by participants themselves.

Chapter two, “Buddhism in Britain,” starts by charting the development of Buddhism and the ways in which Buddhism has adapted and changed when contextualized to Britain. Starkey is keen to emphasize the diversity apparent between traditions, while also noting similarities, such as around the centrality of meditation and an evident focus on women’s participation. She offers a clear overview of how different Buddhist traditions have approached gender and their perspectives on women’s ordination, noting the various contentions that have emerged. For example, in the Tibetan *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*, women can become novices only and are barred from the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination, as the lineage is not recognized as being transmitted to women in the Tibetan context, which causes much contestation. Though controversial, there have been recent attempts to restore the lineage and some women who participated in Starkey’s study had received the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination. Meanwhile in the late 1970s in the Thai Forest Sangha, British women were permitted to take ten precepts, known as the order of *sīladharā*. However, while deemed an important step, this ordination is not considered equal to that of men’s ordination, and, similar to the Tibetan context, higher forms of ordination are typically closed off to women. In 2009, a monastic in Australia who performed

a higher (*bhikkhuni*) ordination was expelled from the Forest Sangha. Such ongoing inequalities has prompted some women in Britain to leave the Forest Sangha altogether. Other traditions such as the Triratna Buddhist Order and Community—a highly popular order which is culturally rooted in Britain and draws from various Buddhist traditions—has always had gender-equal ordination paths.

Chapter three, “British Buddhist Women and Narratives of Conversion,” begins to explore the participants’ stories and how they came to Buddhism. Most had not been raised as Buddhist, and Starkey details their introduction to Buddhism, where formal commitment could take many years to forge. In other cases, deep engagement was swifter. Indeed, Starkey’s participants were typically white and older, often being over fifty. Starkey notes that it is unusual for young women to desire ordination. Greater involvement could be premised on dissatisfaction with one’s life and a desire to spend more time on Buddhist practice. Often the women came from economically privileged backgrounds, were well-educated, and had well-paid careers, but they noted that “something was missing from life” (65). Because of their age dynamic, Starkey aptly describes this as “rear-view mirror dissatisfaction” (66). Buddhism offered them a different and more fulfilling path, which enabled them to find answers to the questions they currently had regarding their lives.

Chapter four, “Deepening Commitment: The Path to Ordination,” goes into greater detail regarding how the participants decided on an ordination track and why this decision was made at this particular point in the lifecourse. Indeed, because those who had children typically no longer had intense caring responsibilities, this was a moment to pause and reflect and make a decision about what they wanted out of the rest of their lives at this critical juncture. Because of their privileged location in terms of social class and ethnicity, participants had always had an element of choice regarding their biographies, and Starkey reflects on how her participants were positively enabled to decide on the ordination path; this

contextual choice may differ markedly to Buddhist women's experiences in other parts of the world.

Chapter five, "Buddha Couture: Ordained Buddhist Women and Dress," offers an innovative exploration of clothing practices, something that is underexplored in research terms. Starkey emphasizes how enthusiastic her participants were in talking about this topic. Indeed, in terms of their experiences, the women interviewed underwent dramatic forms of clothing and transformation, especially when ordination entailed shaving one's head and donning robes. All at once, dress became a marker of identity, signifying belonging to a particular Buddhist tradition, as well as functioning as something one should not be materially attached to. Clothing therefore was concurrently significant and inconsequential. Also revealing was the investment in dress, such as women who crafted their own robes—even when they had little sewing experience.

Chapter six, "Loaded Words: Attitudes to Feminism and Gender Equality," explores the ways in which participants oriented themselves to gender equality and feminism. Crucially, Starkey separates these issues, demonstrating that while participants were often keen to emphasize their commitment to gender equality, they were often less enthusiastic about endorsing feminism, saying "Typically, the women in this study prioritized what they saw as 'Buddhist practice' over 'feminist politics'" (135). Starkey recognizes that this is well-trodden research ground, with questions about gender equality and feminism being perennially asked of religious women, and the researcher effect that is created when such questions become binarized. Instead Starkey emphasizes the continual and finely-grained responses that her participants had to these questions, making categorization challenging and perhaps even undesirable. However, Starkey does offer a useful grouping in terms of whether her participants were actively campaigning for gender equality, whether they had discreet concern, or whether they purposefully distanced themselves from such issues.

Chapter seven, “Pioneers and Volunteers: Women Building British Buddhism,” sheds fresh insights into the role ordained women played in the creation of Buddhist communities, including the physical building of communities from scratch. This is another underexplored topic that offers important knowledge into these pioneer women’s experiences and how this enabled participants to forge strong community ties and forms of belonging, while also challenging gender stereotypes in the process. Starkey also reflects on some of the challenges faced by her participants, such as financial hardship, as well as how the experiences of managing family-based care work with the demands of ordination.

The concluding chapter brings together the key themes of the study—these being commitment, connection, and community. Commitment was underscored by the women’s pledges to Buddhism and specifically, to the ordained path, with ordination acting as a significant step in their journeys. Connections were forged with particular material objects—their clothing, their embodied selves (new names, shaved heads, new commitments), while community threaded through their experience as they belonged to particular locations and Buddhist communities.

Overall, Starkey offers a compelling, rich, and detailed insight into the lives of ordained Buddhist women living in Britain. It is also commendable that an older demographic of Buddhists is the subject of investigation, given that research attention of late has typically focused on younger cohorts. Also of significance is the way that Starkey allows the voices of the women to come through, giving much space to their quotes and their stories and experiences. By the end of the book Starkey notes how some of her participants had relinquished the ordained path, but very little information was given regarding these decisions, perhaps because it was beyond the scope of the research. Indeed, the dynamic nature of one’s Buddhist journey is embedded in such processes, with commitments being temporal and changing over time. Future research could focus on these changing dynamics through the lifecourse and how

belonging and commitment are subject to change at various “critical moments” (Thomson et al. 339) throughout one’s life.

Starkey’s analysis also puts the spotlight on how dress impacts on how we forge our identities and how we interact with the world. This is a significant contribution to the research field. Pushing this further, to what extent are certain power dynamics embedded in dress choices? How is religious dress embodied in terms of social class, gender, and ethnicity, pertinent given the ordained women’s own privileged social location in terms of social class and ethnicity, but the disadvantage experienced in terms of gender? Although dress has often been considered a frivolous and unimportant topic in research terms (Entwistle 21-22), such an exploration can tease out the various ways social inequalities are forged and maintained. At one point, for instance, one of Starkey’s participants reflects that the robes she wore were more readily suited to a male body rather than a female one, with the male body therefore implicitly taken as normative (Acker 139; Puwar 33).

Indeed, gender inequality is a strong theme of the book, and it is clear that, even in traditions strongly subscribing to gender equality, there are still examples of unequal practices. This also points to whether there are differences between how communities narrate their identities more broadly and the unequal experiences encountered on the ground—issues that may only be fully understood once one has been embedded in a Buddhist community for some time. Given the various ongoing controversies regarding unequal access to particular ordination paths, such discussions about Buddhism and gender equality will not disappear anytime soon.

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