

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

**by Caroline Starkey.**

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*Reviewed by Sarah Shaw*

This book represents an important step in our understanding of the female monastic orders in Buddhism and how they are adapting and settling into a culture where, until recently, Buddhism would have appeared alien. Are there nuns in Britain? How are they faring and what sort of people are they? Starkey's thorough and notably well substantiated work gives us a deeply scholarly overview of the topic, but is written in a maturely empathetic style that makes us only tangentially aware of the painstaking research and corroboration that have contributed to her important ethnographic and theological study.

Starkey starts her book with a simple image, that of a distinguished nun giving a *dharmā* talk at a Buddhist meditation centre in Manchester, and impresses upon us just what a development this has been in the acculturation of Buddhism in British society. She then lays out her methodology with care. As she notes, this is the first multiple-tradition work that makes a "concentrated and sustained" exploration of the experiences of ordained Buddhist women in Britain. She asks a number of questions: how do the women fit in to the traditional Buddhist structures? What kind of people are they? Do they interact with debates on gender, and how do they situate themselves with regard to them? We get a fascinating slice of how a new tradition to the UK has adapted and started to settle itself in an environment where Buddhist nuns still seem a novelty to many. Her chosen subjects and interviewees, those practising as nuns in a number of different Buddhist orders in Britain who were willing to engage in her survey, number only twenty-five (one had ordained previously). She explores their journeys, however, with a scrupulous attention to historical

background and context which, alongside the depth of her questions about motive, orientation and practice, renders this sample number appropriate. We find out about the evolution of what is in effect a microcosm of British Buddhist practice, manifest in dedicated women who perhaps embody trends operating in all the four assemblies: monks, nuns, laymen and lay women, the four groups felt necessary for a thriving Buddha *sāsana* and the perpetuation of the teaching.

Taking a largely ethnographic and religious studies approach, she rightly highlights narrativity in her analysis (p.10): in such a small study the character and life events of those who have espoused these goals are of particular interest. She interviewed the women in her study individually and clearly spent time with each one. She anticipates criticisms of what seems at first sight a more personal approach, with subtle investigation of the methodological problems involved. By guarding the privacy of her informants, she notes, she has sometimes had to do things that would seem vague: specifying Tibetan rather than a specific lineage, for instance, or saying ‘a few’ where the number involved would itself divulge information. She is careful to explain the parameters of such reserve, however, and it is a small price to pay for something she has clearly earned: trust. The ethnographic implications of this sense of relaxation of boundaries with the nuns are of course enormous. All the nuns were given the chance to edit, adjust comments and to withdraw information if they wished. So while an emphasis on the personal and the idiosyncratic might suggest a purely anecdotal approach, as we see in her comprehensive study it combines the best of both worlds: we get the etic benefit of a scrupulous attention to data, facts and detail in a contextualised background, at the same time as hearing, often eloquently, the emic comments of the women concerned. They clearly spoke to her in full confidence that their reflections and accounts of feeling would be valued and correctly represented.

The introductory chapter and Chapter 2 (“Buddhism in Britain”) together constitute a highly up-to-date historical account of the evolution of Buddhism in Britain, how the first groups were started, and the part women, often lay, had to play in this process. More high-profile figures, such as Caroline Rhys Davids and the Reverend Master Jiyu Kennett, are discussed, the latter in some detail as one of the first women to take an ordination in Britain, in the Zen group at Throssel Hole Priory. Starkey also notes the role women had in establishing Buddhist organisations in the UK such as, notably, Venerable Myokyo-Ni (Austrian-born Irmgard Schloegl, 1921–2007). At this point it seems also worth mentioning a laywoman whose name Starkey perhaps never even encountered, so skilful

was this woman's ability to work under the radar of public knowledge. Miss Connie Waterton was a key figure in the mid-twentieth century development of Buddhism in the UK. A leading founder of the still operative Buddhist Society of Manchester in Sale in 1951, which I believe is one of the oldest Buddhist Societies in the UK, she and Russel Williams taught meditation there for years, with her being very much the senior and older partner. Russel was the front man and is now more widely known: but Connie was, as he freely acknowledged, his guiding influence, a meditation mentor of considerable experience and teaching ability.<sup>1</sup> This detail rather reinforces a point that Starkey makes in various ways throughout her book: that women involved in Buddhism in the UK, whatever their denomination, tend to have a strong practice orientation and, if they do go on to be nuns, see that aspect of monastic life as key. Starkey's study of Buddhism in general in the UK is certainly the most thorough and comprehensive I have read in the last few years; it also gives us an overview, that I had not encountered before, of the kind of women involved in setting up groups and the extent of their interests. As she notes, adaptation, diversity, along with the difficulty of treading a sometimes knife-edged balance between traditional practice and modern Western mores, prove key to understanding the way the various nuns involved have come to act within and adjust to their chosen life.

From here, the account moves fluidly to closer study of the women involved. Chapter 3 ("British Buddhist Women and Narratives of Conversion") explores the kind of people who have chosen this way of life, their motives, and their backgrounds. The nuns represent most of the major Buddhist groups of the United Kingdom: Amida Shu, the Serene Reflection Meditation Tradition/the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives; Thai Forest Sangha (Theravāda) and, for Tibetan Buddhism, the Gelug, Karma Kagyu, and Nyingma orders. The organisation Triratana (once Friends of the Western Buddhist Order) is also an interesting and helpful addition here, whose members ordain as laypeople. Her study highlights various aspects of ordination, the procedures involved, and even the dress that is adopted at different stages of commitment and engagement.

As she explains, in the end her focus group constituted largely ethnically 'white' women, a reflection in part of those who have chosen this life in the UK, but also as she notes, of those willing to participate in the survey. It was also the author's wish to scrutinise closely the ways indigenous culture absorbs

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<sup>1</sup> See Russel Williams, *Not I, Not other than I: the Life and Spiritual Teachings of Russel Williams*, edited by Steve Taylor, Alresford, Hants: O-Books, 2015, 132–139.

Buddhist female monasticism; she details ventures by other ethnic groups. She found most of her subjects could be termed ‘middle-class’: many are highly educated and left good professions and homes to take up the monastic life. The motives of these women then become interesting: why do they do this? To what were clearly a wide range and depth of questions, she found varied answers. The spiritual search of some had been motivated by a strong sense of *dukkha*, triggered by a personal crisis such as bereavement or divorce. Many, however, had been prompted by an active wish and a search for meaning that had grown through what would be considered by most to be a happy and successful life. Several had had good jobs and in some cases, marriages and children: they had felt drawn to the life of a nun as a sense of urgency (*samvega*) and faith (*pasāda*) had deepened. Most felt more at home living as a nun; their first-person comments speak of the movement towards ordination as a journey to where they felt they belonged, despite all the major difficulties they recount in adjusting to the discipline and procedures involved. Many had been part of Buddhist groups for some time, and wanted to strengthen their connection to the tradition and participate actively in communal living within that; others had come recently to Buddhism, and had been surprised by the calling that had made them feel that they wished to pursue such a dramatically different lifestyle. A “wider community of practice” seems to be perceived by most as important, as well, of course, as attraction to the tenets and perceived peacefulness of Buddhism – features that attract lay Buddhists too. While Starkey is wisely wary of making too rigid comparisons, she notes that there appear to be many parallels with nuns in Thailand, where the background motives of nuns have also been researched, with comparable results.

After this vivid picture of a cross-section of motives and interests, the steps towards and including “ordination”, however that is constituted in the various traditions, are explored. These usually involve specific stages from lay woman to postulant, novice, and finally ordinand. Chapter 4 (“Deepening commitment: The path to ordination”) takes each of the orders in turn, explaining the actual rituals involved. Again, analysis of the detail of ceremonies and what that involves for the practitioner is punctuated with helpful and frequent accounts provided by the women as they describe feelings, physical experiences and thoughts undergone through each transformation. Interestingly, none of those who participated were under thirty, though some had been when they first became nuns. This presents a very different picture from South and Southeast Asia. Starkey comments that this is possibly a result of the lack of exposure to

nuns in UK society, where Buddhism is not widely known and practised. Women would have encountered Buddhism later in life, as an unfamiliar tradition, rather than being steeped in Buddhist values from childhood. It should also be stressed that one motive explicitly stated to be significant and crucial for S and SE Asian nuns in taking ordination, the wish to arouse merit for both oneself and one's family, was not stated by her interviewees. The understanding that by adopting the holy life one is bringing immeasurable benefit not only for oneself but also for one's larger circle of family and relations, whether departed or living, is perhaps a feature that still feels culturally different in the UK.

Full 'ordination' as a nun was not always technically possible. Despite this, many had found the ceremony whereby they adopted their chosen life deeply memorable. As Starkey concludes, a sense of belonging, a kind of conversion, whether rapid or gradual, and a sense of the chosen life opening up possibilities not there in the lay life animate many of the narratives of the nuns: "As Ceola (OBC) explains: the doors happened to open for me in that way, at that stage, and came about in this form, if you like" (p.95). Although the details of some of the rituals were not disclosed, almost all felt deep joy on taking their vows. One Tibetan nun (Elizabeth, Gelug) says of her *ragjungma* ordination: "There wasn't anywhere else I wanted to be, there wasn't anything else I wanted to do, there was no ifs or buts, or whatever, I couldn't wait. In fact, they had to get me to slow down!" (p.98). The difficulties involved in the adjustments to monastic life are not underplayed. Many recorded periods of real struggle and cultural dissonance with the new discipline and conditions involved. But throughout the sometimes painful internal processes involved, the ameliorative support of friendship and trust with teachers and companions is stressed.

Chapter 5 ("Buddhist Couture") is divertingly informative and insightful. It always amazes me and other newcomers at Buddhist conferences in S and SE Asia, just how beautiful, richly expressive, and colourful the often highly elaborate accoutrements to the dress of so many orders are. Robes seem to reflect the commitment of the people involved at every level of engagement. If you talk to anyone who has been or is a member of the Sangha, male or female, shaving the head, the adoption of robes, and simply knowing how to be comfortable while wearing garments that often seem strange and even magnificent, are often cited as major turning points. I have noticed that those who have taken ordination often describe it with amusement, some mild alarm, but also a sense of awe: those participating are, after all, undergoing ceremonies and rituals which in many cases date back to the early days of Buddhism. In this chapter there is a welcome

emphasis on the sheer physical detail of ritual, dress and the shaving of the head, both from the practitioner's point of view and from that of their often symbolic intent, "unpacked" for each tradition. Starkey explores these procedures, for each of the orders. Again, there is frequent recourse to quoted comment:

As Ailith (OBC) explains: "I think wearing robes is important because ... it's a reaffirmation that this is what I'm doing, this is the life I'm living, these are the choices I've made, which ... for me it's a reminder." (p.113).

Starkey notes how frequently this word 'reminder' features, and what this means. Dhannadipa (Theravāda), for instance, says:

"They are a constant reminder that I've orientated my life towards awakening and towards the Dhamma. And whatever else is going on, I only have to look down and there's this robe and it's a reminder." (p.113)

How the robes are made, and the way they are often sewn by hand by the participants and the care that goes into ensuring every stitch and fold are right, help to substantiate a sense of the import of the ordination or ceremony. Dhanadipa (Theravada) sums it up: "I just find it a very beautiful thing to be able to live within" (p.118). Clearly there are difficulties too, and Starkey records these: one said she had never worn the colour involved and had not felt it suited her. More generally, many felt that they were always being ambassadors for Buddhism, and felt an ongoing sense of responsibility because of that: this was usually a positive experience, but sometimes onerous too. Another nun, Delia (OBC), sees shaving the head as an "active expression" of her Buddhist practice:

"From the place of the willingness and deep wish to give oneself to monastic life, to keep shaving the head is both a symbol of this aspiration – and actually an expression of the active doing of it." (p.114).

Another useful area of observation is the assignation of a new name, often the case at such ceremonies: although some nuns reported difficulties with paper work and hospitals as a result of a new denoter of identity, these too often act as a reminder. "(Amida) explained that in her tradition names are chosen because they reflect: 'an aspect of our personality that's there but nascent or weak or dormant and that needs to be brought out to the surface.'" (p.115). Sensitive

focus on such detail helps to explain the whole. This chapter felt crucial and, through its frequent citation of the nuns' comments, Starkey provides thorough analysis of the motives, experiences and aspirations of those who choose to adopt the robe. Dress and spiritual practice really do feel 'intertwined'.

I must admit I felt reluctant to leave these observations for Chapter 6 ("Loaded words: Attitude to feminism and gender equality"). Starkey, however, provides us with an easily assimilable overview of some of the key problems and debates now colouring any consideration of the status and recognition of female monastic lines. She acknowledges and examines the complexities involved, again supported by comments from the nuns, whose responses vary. Some felt strongly for reinstatement of the female lines, others were cautious but optimistic, feeling that by living in this way they were offering support for the nuns' movement as a whole. Some felt such issues were, in the end, peripheral to the overall endeavour of the Buddhist path, though there is also an urgency that arises from the knowledge that the way of life nuns can enjoy now is not guaranteed in the future. Starkey's concluding remarks to this chapter, which sum up her discussion and interviews, are worth quoting in full:

I began to ask myself whether my question about feminist engagement and attitudes to gender equality was, in itself, rather limiting. These are questions that are asked repeatedly of Buddhist nuns (and, indeed, other religious women) the world over. No matter how generally or gently I asked the question about equality or women's roles in Buddhism, I felt I was already setting up a binary and an opposition – forcing my participants to choose a perspective or a position and stick to it. The reality is far more complex. Even for those women who were, to many extents, ardent 'campaigners', their priority was living out Buddhist teachings in their local area and with a community of practice that they wanted to foster and develop. Those who wanted to distance themselves from the issue in entirety continued to differ in their approach, shaped in part by the institutional histories of different Buddhist groups in Britain. Although challenging simplistic assumptions about who British Buddhist women are and what motivates them is important, continually reducing this to 'the F word' is a blunt instrument, and doesn't get us very far in appreciating the entirety of women's daily lives, their relationships with communities, and the commitments that they make. (pp.160-1)

In Chapter 7 (“Pioneers and volunteers: women building British Buddhism”) Starkey brings in the bricks and mortar of Buddhist practice, in a literal sense: how the nuns relate to and act within their physical buildings, the land, and by extension with the communities in and around the temples or monasteries where they lived. Here they seem to be building, in many and all senses of the word. Some are involved in actual physical work around the land and physical structures; at another level, most are participating in communal life within their community and outside it, the “locations” not only of edifices, geographical features but also social organisms too. One nun, Rajana (Forest Sangha), makes this connection, and notes the difficulties involved at all these levels, from sometimes physical work to building up a sense of friendship within the community itself:

“We just had to make a lot of mistakes and that’s never a very pleasant experience ... the whole process of learning how to work together, learning how to be in community, wasn’t easy.” (p.175).

As is traditional, of course, many nuns also move around, locate to different monasteries or temples, and, in the case of international orders, to different countries too. Starkey deals with the *anicca* of these shifts, but notes too how important it can be to develop some sort of rootedness, perhaps within one location or monastery, and one community – even though that might in many cases be largely within the larger network of online companions too. One senses she feels that how this process occurs will for many women be crucial, as there are many factors that still make the communities of nuns fragile and uncertain.

Starkey’s conclusion brings her back to her subtitle: Commitment, Connection, Community. All of these threads have been evident throughout her discussion; her exploration of “locations”, and how these women relate to their environment, both physical and emotional, gives a sensitive and nuanced picture of how the nuns’ order happens to be now. The UK is not an indigenously Buddhist country; we do not yet offer the supports multi-generational communities of nuns in Buddhist locations might naturally provide. The book itself is uplifting, showing shadows as well as light, but one feels it ends on a serious note. While these nuns are important for the perpetuation of Buddhism, as she concludes, it is not always easy for them and their future is still uncertain.



This book will be of great interest to anyone who would like to find out about the ways Buddhism has become acculturated and accepted in British society in general: the nuns' experiences feel like vignettes that open windows onto larger Buddhist perspectives in the UK. The fact that in this process of absorption an acceptance of nuns has occurred too, shows us how carefully and gradually those involved in what must have felt like a pioneer undertaking have integrated into community life in the United Kingdom. This is an achievement: the phenomenon of Buddhist nuns in the United Kingdom is recent and until the end of the twentieth century largely unheard of. I remember visiting the then Chithurst, now Cittaviveka, in the Thai Forest Sangha tradition, in 1979. There was great excitement at the arrival of four nuns to a special house for them. It really did seem unusual – perhaps the kind of adventure it must have been for those very first Buddhist nuns in the third and fourth century BCE, also living in a society where their calling would have seemed very much against the grain. This continuing sense of adventure is palpable behind the emic responses recounted here, by women who clearly trusted their interviewer. Starkey's close analysis gives them the context and explanatory detail they deserve.