

José Ignacio CABEZÓN, ed., *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*. State University of New York Press, 1992. xix + 241 pp. Paper \$16.95. ISBN 0-7914-0758-6.

This rich collection of essays is a convincing demonstration that issues of gender can add a new dimension to Buddhist studies, revealing much of interest in details that would otherwise seem insignificant. The volume is remarkably free from ideological insistence and from any sense of people having axes to grind. The serenity of the contributors, perhaps due to their Buddhist experience of dispassionately noting the arising of phenomena, allows them to open up new fields to scholarly attention, even if in many of these fields no clear definition of the fundamental issues has yet emerged.

The basic attitude of the Buddha to gender differences, according to *Alan Sponberg*, is that they are “soteriologically insignificant” (p. 9). This “soteriological inclusiveness” (the first of four attitudes he distinguishes in the Buddhist approach to gender) was, however, limited in early Buddhism because Buddhists did not see that “sexual identity is as much socially constructed as it is biologically given” (p. 11), and so failed to apply nondiscrimination as thoroughly here as in the case of caste distinctions. (This remark suggests the need for a basic reflection on the degree to which one can expect Buddhism, or any other ancient tradition, to be aware of issues that have, after all, only recently emerged in the West.) The second attitude, “institutional androcentrism,” prevailed in Buddhism due to the fact that “for women to regulate and protect themselves” in convents not subordinate to male authority was “socially unthinkable” at the time (p. 17). Thus the order of nuns was marginalized and eventually died out. Meanwhile a third attitude, “ascetic misogyny,” positively rejected the ideal of inclusiveness. Sponberg thinks this was an overreaction against the threat to monastic detachment that women presented, though some Buddhists were quick to see that misogyny “is itself a form of clinging and bondage” (p. 23). Finally, in Mahāyāna, a new ideal of “soteriological androgyny” emerges, when wisdom is presented as the “mother of all Buddhas” (p. 26).

José Cabezón takes up this theme. He queries the claim that the use of woman as the symbol of a positive spiritual quality, Wisdom, was a great leap forward in the religious thought of India. When Wisdom is pictured as the

mother of a large variety of spiritual beings, is not this female figure thereby “implicated in acts of promiscuity” (p. 108)? And, he continues, is not woman seen as inferior to man in this construct, in which the male figure symbolizes the compassionate Skill in Means that is central to the development of Mahāyāna spirituality? This discussion seems to have become entangled in a fundamentalist literalistic attitude to metaphor. *Carolyn Bynum*, an influential theorist in this field, is quoted to the effect that gendered symbols may “refer to gender in ways that affirm or reverse it, support or question it” (p. 188). Doesn’t such a global declaration court the danger of falling into otiose speculations, to which feminist concerns lend a spurious urgency? The feminist questions serve well to launch the historical study of gendered categories, but the concern with judging these categories as “positive” or “negative” can shortcircuit the hermeneutical process, imposing current conceptions of gender on the past. “For the Arawak Indians the genders are (1) male Amerindian and (2) everybody and everything else,” according to Douglas Taylor (MARALDO 1992, p. 43). The cross-cultural thinking such conceptions demand can be hampered by too fixed a focus on issues of gender justice.

Several of the essays convey the flavor of life in modern Asia. *Eleanor Zelliott’s* interviews with ex-Untouchable women in a modern Buddhist conversion movement in India show that their religion is “the path to self-respect, progress, uplift” (p. 100). *Tessa Bartholomeusz* tells of shortlived revivals of the female sangha and the activity of a female renunciant movement in Sri Lanka, recalling the Wesleyan Mission’s 1888 diagnosis: “The dominant force for Buddhism in the Island is Woman” (p. 46). *Bardwell Smith* uncovers serious problems experienced with abortion in Japan, seeing public interest in the *mizuko* as symptomatic of a “broader social sense of disconnection” (p. 68). The medical profession has “a tremendous economic stake in abortions” (p. 70) which number one million a year (twice the official figure), and contraceptives are kept unavailable. Misfortune is often seen as the “evil spell (*tatari*) caused by the spirit of an aborted child” (p. 78). The *mizuko kuyō* offers a “redressive ritual,” helping women to go through the mourning process, but failing “to address the specific factors that make abortion so frequently necessary...because doing so would reveal other sources of conflict and pain” (pp. 86–87). *Barbara Reed*, writing from Taiwan, asks “whether the female symbol of Kuan-yin Bodhisattva helped Chinese women transcend the restrictions of a Confucian-defined, male-dominated society” (p. 159). Kuan-yin’s compassion for suffering experienced by women because of their sex (menstruation, childbirth) may confirm the view of Chinese moralists that “women are in special need of salvation because of the impurities and inferiority of their female forms” (p. 165). Kuan-yin’s other role was to liberate women from marriage or help them cope with its stresses by providing sons; this again “perpetuated the values of the male family” (p. 170). In Taiwan today, where the figure of Kuan-yin has become independent of the Buddhist context, devotional books about Kuan-yin have an empowering

value for women.

The essays on historical texts seem to benefit little from the gender theory on which they draw. *Miriam L. Levering* sensitively weighs the problems faced by Rinzai master Ta-hui's attempt to extend to women the Zen rhetoric of equality. He adapted the masculine image of the Zen hero (*ta-chang-fu*) to women, but could not avoid a condescending tone: "Even though you are a woman, you have the will of a *ta-chang-fu*," a formulation that shows the androcentric character of Chinese Buddhism in general and of Ch'an in particular (p. 151). In contrast, *Paula Richman* claims that a sixth-century Tamil writer, Cāttaṅār "undercuts, reverses, and extends conventional ideas about 'masculine' and 'feminine'" (p. 111). How? He "uses the conventional phrases about female beauty only to mock them" (p. 119), to underline the impermanence of beauty. But isn't this standard religious didacticism? Cāttaṅār's freedom in manipulating literary conventions about relations between men and women reflects a Buddhist freedom from bondage to stereotypes (p. 131), but to read him as contributing to a debate on gender may distort his central religious concern, which is to emphasize impermanence and detachment.

Leonard Zwilling gives this summary of his essay: "The textual sources surveyed here are at least consonant with a contemporary view of homosexuality as a probably organically or genetically based orientation, with the same moral significance (or insignificance) of heterosexuality" (p. 210). In fact the sources he quotes seem to say something quite different. Buddhaghosa, for example, confuses homosexuality with hermaphroditism (p. 206), a view quite different from the contemporary hypotheses to which Zwilling alludes. The rule that "offenses committed with a *pandaka* [one who has lost his *indriya* or masculinity principle] require less severe punishment than those involving a woman, although more than if they were committed with a socially normative man" (p. 207), far from putting homosexuality and heterosexuality on the same plane, entails a stigmatization of homosexuality (sighted in the cultural stereotype of the *pandaka*) as opposed to homosexual acts. In a double bind logic, the *pandaka* was considered "incapable of religious discipline" and also "incapable of the unrestraint one must have the capacity to check if one is going to successfully lead the religious life" (p. 205); sadly, such a stigmatized group, the *hinñjras*, is still found in India today. When Zwilling says that the refusal to recognize *pandakas* as members of the community was "a practical concession to prevailing conventions" (p. 209), he seems to suppose that Buddhists were necessarily superior to the prejudices of the culture. *Paul Gordon Schalow* discusses three seventeenth-century literary works based on the legend that Kōbō Daishi "introduced male homosexual love to Japan," an achievement which "apparently was thought of as compatible with his other spiritual and secular accomplishments" (p. 216). *Kōbō Daishi's Book* (1598), an *ars amoris* for priests and acolytes, is taken to "represent not just religious heterodoxy but a challenge directed at a society defined by Confucian ethical constructs that discouraged sexual activity as

socially disruptive” (p. 221). This is surely an overinterpretation. It should be kept in mind that, despite its title, the work was not a Buddhist text, and thus had as little to do with “religious heterodoxy” as a common bawdy tale set in a religious community. Similarly, to find evidence of “a generous view of human sexual need in the Japanese religious tradition” (p. 222) in the poems and stories of Kitamura Kigin and Ihara Saikaku seems to move too quickly from the realm of imagination to that of fact. Talk of a “complex blend of social, religious, and sexual issues” (p. 228) may distort the focus on this literature by missing its lightness.

REFERENCE

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