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Buddhism Through American Women's Eyes. Edited by Karma Lekshe Tsomo. Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion, 1995. Pp. 179. ISBN 1-55939-047-6, US \$12.95, UK £8.95.

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As Buddhism has moved to the West, American women are interested to hear and experience the teachings and, in a pragmatic way, to learn the effects of Buddhism on women's lives. Tsomo identifies Western women's need to receive instruction in a familiar format rather than within an Asian cultural package which may alienate them.

Tsomo notes that the only record we have of women speaking personally about their Buddhist spiritual life is in the *Therīgāthā*, which contains the words of the female elders (*therīs*) who lived in a very different time and culture. Yet contemporary women wish to hear from, relate to, and share experiences with today's women. They are confused as they encounter mixed messages in the Theravādin, Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions, particularly when confronted by the gap between rhetoric and reality in some schools. The relation between spiritual practice and everyday life is often questioned by Western women, whose Buddhist teachers respond in different ways. Therefore, women have found personal interaction in discussion groups to be "encouraging, fruitful and strengthening" (p. 12).

This book had its origins in such a group meeting. Forty women met at a Buddhist women's retreat in California in 1989, "to explore together what Buddhism can offer women" (p. 155). The flexible structure of the retreat catered to the needs of both new and experienced meditators. Tibetan Buddhism ensured diversity. "Our intention," writes Tsomo, "was to learn from one another, to understand new ideas, and to hear one another's experiences of trying to live the practice day by day" (p. 155).

The book chapters correspond to the talks given by experienced female practitioners during the retreat. Of the thirteen chapters, three discuss Buddhist philosophy, the idea of being Buddha, and relating the concepts of dharma and karma to everyday life. The other chapters take as their starting points immediate situations in which the writers have been involved and show the relevance of Buddhist practice to these. There are chapters on stress, relationships, peace, ethics, mothering, abortion, alcoholism and death. Individual stories are told candidly, and their variety and style sustain interest. In these accounts of Buddhism, we learn how helpful the practices of meditation, compassion, mindfulness and non-attachment can be. Other teachings are shown to be valuable in particular situations. These stories may well be helpful to a reader in similar circumstances. However, two of the first three chapters deal with death, and this may discourage Western readers whose culture often ignores the topic. While the value of these chapters and the contribution that Buddhism makes in this area are to be acknowledged, the chapters would be better placed after those dealing with life, rather than preceding them. The notes on contributors engender further interest, and the glossary offers assistance to any non-Buddhist

reader.

Balance in the book is achieved by the inclusion of a long chapter on monastic life, written by five women who were ordained in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Burma, France and, more recently, the United States. Tsomo believes that the “life in contemplative Buddhist communities should be available as an alternative for women” (p. 125). Noble comments that “there are differences between Asian and Western approaches to Buddhadharma, especially in regard to form and content” (p. 152). Nevertheless, “when Buddhist women unite, they manifest the potential for spreading wonderful light, for being conduits for the Buddha’s blessings” (p. 152).

Tsomo’s own experience of Eastern monasticism and a Western university education has enabled her to edit the book with considerable skill and understanding. Her earlier book, *Sakyadhita: Daughters of the Buddha* (1987), presented the ideas and experiences of women who attended a conference of Buddhist nuns at Bodhgaya in India. That event was of historical importance for Buddhist women, and Tsomo’s earlier book has preserved the essence of the event for generations to come.

The present work is a further milestone, recording the practice of Buddhism in the West. It will help to meet the needs of new Buddhists who live in countries not traditionally Buddhist, but it will also be of interest to both Asian women and the general reader. The book portrays Buddhism in a fresh, personal and dynamic way, suggesting its richness, variety and pragmatism, qualities which appeal to Westerners. Like the retreat that generated it, the book provides “a vision of Buddhism’s future in North America” (p. 158).