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BUDDHISM AND DEPTH PSYCHOLOGY REFINING THE ENCOUNTER



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BOOK REVIEWS

Deborah Bowman, *The Female Buddha: Discovering the Heart of Liberation and Love* (Boulder, CO: Samadhi Publications, 2012).

REVIEWED BY PATRICIA REIS

Deborah Bowman begins her introduction to this lavishly illustrated book with what Jungians call a big dream:

I was walking in a large English garden in which there were three towering figures of female Buddhas carved out of stone. Each was over 100 feet tall sitting peacefully in meditation. In awe, I walked between them on quiet carefully tended pathways. The wonder and serenity I felt in the presence of these majestic figures are indelible in my memory. (p. 8)

This prescient dream arrived at a time of great inner and outer turmoil in her life. Bowman, a transpersonal psychologist who has studied and practiced Buddhism, understood the magnitude of spiritual depth emanating from this towering trinity. She does not attempt to analyze the dream beyond saying it was a necessary compensation, bringing

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inner balance to her personal psyche. The dream also brought awareness of a collective imbalance; the peace, wisdom, gentle strength, refuge, and love embodied as female signified the very qualities kept in the background as Buddhism wended its way from East to West. The dream became a spiritual landmark, giving direction to her journey.

Bowman first encountered the female Buddha in the form of Guanyin in Vietnam, where she traveled with her husband, a Vietnam War veteran, on a trip of reparation, healing, and meditation practice. Over the course of the next seventeen years, she continued her pilgrimages, searching for Guanyin, the female Buddha, in Bangkok, Thailand, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Myanmar.

A gifted photographer with a sensitive eye, Bowman's visual images are at the heart of the 128-page book. Sculptural images of Guanyin range from monumental to intimate; the women devotees she photographed, laywomen and nuns, are all ages. My favorites are a smiling, saffron-robed nun from Thailand exchanging devotional gazes with a monastery dog as she tenderly places her hand on his head. Another is of an elderly Vietnamese woman seated in repose inside a temple courtyard; a small blue towel drapes her head, a bamboo hat is by her side, and a timeless expression of warmth radiates from her open face. The photographs are accompanied by pith teachings from exceptional women dating from the Buddha's time to the present. Many of the names are familiar, including the Nobel Peace Prize recipient from Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi. *The Female Buddha* is a record of Bowman's quest and is wonderfully personal, thoughtful, and inclusive in scope, but not without its challenges.

The book begins with a single quote from a contemporary female teacher from Taiwan, Master Wu Yin, "Being a great human being is not related to gender, it depends on caring about the well-being of all our fellow sentient beings." This quote about gender transcendence opens the door to Bowman's seventeen-page introduction where she tackles some hotly contested issues within the American Buddhist community.

As Bowman notes, during the past century the transmission of Buddhism from East to West came through Asian male teachers and writers and masculine images of Buddhism, despite the fact that, as she discovered in her travels, the face of Buddhism in large parts of

East Asia is also depicted as female. Not only that, but in the countries she visited women practitioners far outnumbered the men she encountered; nuns make up the majority of monastics, and nuns and laywomen provide the material support for most Buddhist activities, including temple, educational, and hospital facilities. Bowman's dream vision, her subsequent travels in Asia, and her meetings with women devoted to Guanyin, whom Asian women refer to as the "lady Buddha," inspired the book. Bowman offers her work with a desire to awaken Western practitioners of all religions to what she calls the universal "feminine qualities" of gentleness and strength, compassion and freedom.

Bowman provides a brief history of the evolution of Kwan Yin, preferring to use her Chinese name, Guanyin. When Buddhism entered China in the second century it was accompanied by the Indian male icon of compassion, the bodhisattva, Avalokiteśvara, with his thousand eyes and arms that perceived suffering and offered succor to those in need. In the eighth century he changed form, and Guanyin, "the one who hears the cries of the world," (re)emerged as female.

I say re-emerged as I suspect there was an indigenous, pre-Buddhist female predecessor to Avalokiteśvara/Guanyin. The evolution of deities in myth and legend from more ancient female ones is a common phenomenon. For example, the prehistoric goddesses of Old Europe connected to the female mysteries of life, death, and rebirth later became hybridized as consorts and virgins in Greek mythology while retaining attributes of their earlier power. So too does Guanyin retain remnants of her more ancient past as the lotus-goddess, the lotus being a primordial symbol of the vulva and the generative powers of water and mud. Perhaps this is consciously or unconsciously part of her appeal.

In Guanyin's iconography, a willow branch she holds or an animal such as a dragon or lion on which she sits or stands indicates her primal ties to nature and instinctual energy. Unlike the more prominent temple Buddhas, Guanyin's placement is typically found in homes, at the entrances of temples, in caves, children's cemeteries, or, as in Bowman's dream, a garden setting. Her wide popularity with women creates a special world of devotional practices; some of Bowman's photographs show women offering lotus blossoms along with their petitions for healing, fertility, and children's well-being. These practices can make Guanyin appear more folk goddess than representative of abstract spiritual attainment.

It is well known that a culture that reveres divine female imagery offers no guarantee that their women will be valued. In fact, Bowman is quick to note that many of the Guanyin devotees she met and observed were women without full access to traditional positions of religious authority: poor laywomen or nuns living in impoverished monasteries. As a more accessible source of refuge, healing, and compassion, similar to the Virgin Mary, Guanyin's heart-centered attributes of benevolence, mercy, and love make her a preeminently maternal figure, one particularly attentive to women's needs. But unlike Mary, Guanyin is not considered an intercessor or go-between in the relations of humans and a male father god; as a female bodhisattva, an enlightened being who forgoes nirvana for the sake of relieving suffering for all, she has the power and the buck can stop with her.

In the West, no figure is more contested than that of mother. We are all "of woman born" as the poet Adrienne Rich said; all humans have passed through a woman's body to attain existence and in her capacity as birth-giver, we call that woman mother. How we engage with this mortal truth, whether we revere or revile, praise or blame, elevate or subjugate this woman is not only a matter of personal history but also of our cultural and religious conditioning. Christianity, for instance, split the mother into Mary, the sexually untainted mother of God, and Eve, the sexually cursed mother of all humans. Western psychological theories with their Judeo-Christian underpinnings have followed suit, placing the blame for our ills firmly on the altar of the mother. Our conscious or unconscious ambivalence, fear, and hostility toward actual mother figures and by extension toward all perceptions of women's power undoubtedly have their basis in our earliest experiences of profound vulnerability and dependence on our first caretaker. The desire for an idealized, if not romanticized, mother with the attributes of unconditional love, one who offers protection, solace, and compassion for our pain, is at the root of our deep longing for a mother liberated from such conflicts.

Why does Guanyin not have breasts? In her iconography, the only female signifier is the veil she wears. Bowman acknowledges that the

asexual ideal of the mother, expressed in the common form of Guanyin without breasts, matches a worldwide characterization of woman as saint versus woman as whore In these sexless

depictions we observe the cultural preference towards an absolute ideal at the expense of our experience as physically embodied beings. (p. 11)

Unlike Christianity, Buddhism, especially Tibetan, does not shun highly sexualized female deities, as evidenced by the one image of Tara included in the book, a full-breasted, powerfully sexual image. Bowman notes that images of Guanyin in a more womanly form are beginning to appear, and she quips, "Guanyin is growing up and so are we." Outside of monotheistic religions, a deity can shape-shift to serve certain cultural needs. Change in form implies a change in meaning. What would it mean for this maternal female Buddha to have breasts? What would have to change?

Confusion arises in Bowman's introduction, primarily to do with Buddhist ideals of the absolute, such as gender transcendence, and the relative world in which women face hard realities in their engagement with these spiritual practices. This confusion is illustrated by Bowman's quote from the preeminent feminist Buddhist scholar Rita Gross: "Even in some Buddhist cultures, which posit a very strong ethic of caring in the bodhisattva ideal, in practical, everyday ways, nurturing and caring for relationships are low priorities compared to practicing meditation and studying dharma texts." Bowman responds to this statement by asking, "Isn't selflessness, a quality to be realized through study and meditation, not put to the ultimate test in our ability to care for other beings? Is service not an equally essential training ground for enlightenment?" (p.12) Pondering this exchange, I realize that both women are talking about valuing the deeply relational work of women, mothers and nonmothers alike. Both women protest and resist ranking women's devotion lower on the hierarchy of consciousness. The distance between spiritual absolutes and women's reality, between theory and praxis, is a measure of the distance Buddhists have yet to go.

In the 1970s and '80s, along with the rise of the women's movement in the West, numerous women were drawn to Buddhism for its lack of a dominating father god and its offer of an equal chance at enlightenment. More than half of the women who are quoted in this book are contemporary Western Buddhist scholars, writers, teachers, translators, nuns, physicians, priests, activists, and founders of retreat centers and abbeys. Most have risen through the ranks of

Asian male teachers and have been deeply engaged for years in significant thinking and writing about the relationship of women to Buddhist thought and practice, thereby influencing the current shape of Buddhism in the West. Some have brought a feminist analysis to bear on the hierarchical power structures inherent in the ancient lineages and continued in contemporary practices, and they have critiqued notions of the feminine, not as some essential set of qualities, but as culturally preferred constructions. Others have translated the earliest Buddhist wisdom texts composed by women or explored the role of early women poets in articulating their experiences of reaching enlightenment. Although Bowman references each woman's contribution, it is unfortunate that she did not include a full bibliography. Their works comprise an important body of knowledge, inquiry, and critique.

Toward the end of her introduction, Bowman states what I believe is her own manifesto.

It is time for all of us to stop scraping and bowing before doctrines and aspects of any tradition that denies our inherent greatness. Women in particular must work to overcome thousands of years of patriarchal thinking that limit our potential. Men must strive equally hard to see through their history of privilege in the religious sphere. We must all become the Buddha we were born to be, great human beings of peace and understanding. (p. 13)

The first Noble Truth of Buddhism relates to the fact of human suffering. The second Noble Truth investigates the cause of our suffering. There is no spiritual bypass. We need to acknowledge, investigate, and pass through the sufferings of our gender—female, male, trans—in order to attain a release from suffering, though not from our gendered wisdom. Gender matters. In projecting our need and our idealizations onto a sacred image like Guanyin we see our own values reflected back to us. Cultivating tenderness, mercy, compassion, deep listening, and hearing in ourselves and for each other requires gendered work. Otherwise there is no need for a female Buddha. By contemplating the images compiled in *The Female Buddha* we open to this possibility.