

BOOK REVIEW

Feminine Ground: Essays on Women and Tibet

Edited by Janice D. Willis

Snow Lion Publications, 1989

Reviewed by Nancy Herington

As editor Janice D. Willis states in her foreword, this collection of seven essays by Western women scholars is not limited by time, subject, or methodology. All of the contributors have been trained in the Tibetan and Sanskrit languages and are concerned with contemporary feminist issues, but their interests include such topics as the life of a famous eighth century adept, the development of a sociology of Tibet, and a scholarly discussion of the term "dakini," as well as case studies of Tibetan nuns in exile. Students of Zen Master Seung Sahn who have been baffled and delighted by his "crazy wisdom" poetry will particularly enjoy the Ecstatic Song by Laksminkara. It is not possible to review every section here, so I will highlight those which best illustrate the scope of this compact little book.

"Down With the Demoness: Reflections on a Feminine Ground in Tibet" by Janet Gyatso suggests that the land, the actual ground of Tibet, has been regarded as a demoness from pre-Buddhist times. To ignorant American Tibeto-philosophers who cherish images of a Buddhist land of eternal peace, the ancient epithets may be shocking: "Land of the Bad Ones," "Land of the Red-faced Flesh-eating Demons." Sui and T'ang dynasty historians describe the Tibetans as ruthless and aggressive. It is Buddhism which subdues this wild demoness-land with the building of chapels at certain spots in the country, transforming Tibet into a "dharma palace." Who is the demoness and why is she female? These are some of the questions Gyatso explores and, in the process, introduces us to pre-Buddhist Tibet and its rich mythology, showing its affinities with other mythologies.

After the first four essays in which the reader revels in the heady world of Tantric adepts, ecstatic poetry and creation myths, Barbara Nimri Aziz's "Moving Towards a Sociology of Tibet" is a cold shower that reminds us that Tibet is a country in the twentieth century and that, as Janice Willis warns, stories of miraculous women cannot be the basis for grasping social realities. Aziz (and other women scholars) test the premise that Tibetan Buddhism is an egalitarian ideology. Sadly, the evidence seems to show yet another example of religion's failure to practice what it preaches. The common word for woman in Tibetan is "skye-dman" which translates literally as "born low." No parent is pleased over the birth of a girl. Girls receive harsh treatment and are made to assume numerous domestic duties while their brothers attend school. Aziz points out that the only biographies we have of Tibetan women are accounts of outstanding religious figures, and stresses the importance of all other information gathered from

and about Tibetan women now, whether they lived in Tibet or in exile. She describes her case study of women working in a modern Lhasa hotel as an example of how sociological study can begin.

Janice D. Willis in "Tibetan Ani-s: the Nun's Life in Tibet" and Karma Lekshe Tsomo in "Tibetan Nuns and Nunneries" introduce us to the little-known world of women who have chosen spiritual life. These last two sections help readers of both sexes to assimilate the bewildering, magnificent, even intimidating mass of information presented in this book. As a Zen student, I have often wistfully thought that I could practice better if I lived someplace else, like Tibet. However, in five case histories, Willis shows us women struggling with the issues of marriage, obligations to parents and earning a living while trying to study, meditate, and do retreats. Tibetan society allows these women the freedom to experiment until a balance is found that suits individual needs. Westerners, ironically, have much more rigid attitudes about what constitutes religious life. Karma Lekshe Tsomo describes nunneries in Tibet as well as six in exile. Here we see women of all ages living together, developing communities, and exploring new areas of scholarship and practical skills, evolving programs that will meet their needs and interests and help preserve their country's religious culture.

All of the essays have copious notes and readers who want to pursue further study can glean a tremendous amount of information from them. A bibliography would have been appreciated along with something about the Tibetan language and names. Still, this book more than lives up to the editor's hope that it will be instructive and enjoyable — the truest sense of edifying.

Nancy Herington lives in Flagstaff, Arizona and is a long-time member of the Kwan Um School of Zen. □

The Kwan Um  School of Zen

Dharma Mirror

Manual of practice forms

Completely new edition edited by

Senior Dharma Teacher Merrie Fraser

Available May, 1991

\$25 postpaid (overseas add \$6 surface, \$15 air)

Discounts for KUSZ Dharma Teachers

The Kwan Um School of Zen

528 Pound Road, Cumberland RI 02864

(401) 658-1464 • FAX (401) 658-1188