



*Zen Women:  
Beyond Tea Ladies Iron Maidens,  
and Macho Masters*

Grace Schireson, foreword by Miriam Levering  
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Review by Judy Roitman, JDPSN

In Buddhist contexts, it's easy not to talk about gender—why make man or woman? But both men and women exist, and somehow it is the women's lives and teachings that have largely been lost. This book is Schireson's contribution to ending that loss. The main teacher at three Zen centers and a retreat center, having received transmission from Soju Mel Weitsman in the Soto lineage of Shunryu Suzuki and empowerment to teach kong-ans from the Rinzai master Keido Fukushima, she has the dharma chops to do it.

This is not the first book to talk about women in Buddhism or in Zen. And it will not — should not — be the last. The notion of the book about Zen women is as foolish as the notion of the book about Zen men. Not the first, not the last, and not the only one needed, *Zen Women* remains an essential book for anyone interested in Zen ancestors.

There are maybe a couple of handfuls of books on women Buddhist ancestors in English. I know of only two other non-fiction books focused on Zen women that reach out to the general public: *Daughters of Emptiness* by Beata Grant (poems of Chinese, mostly Zen, nuns collected from various sources, with brief biographies), and *Women in Korean Zen* by Martine Batchelor (her own life as a nun in Korea and the life of her mentor Songyong Sunim). Now we have three.

Schireson writes about a number of real women, in fact a very large number: five from ancient India, nineteen from (mostly ancient) China, ten from Korea, twenty-three from Japan — this alone makes her book invaluable. She organizes her discussion around status within the Buddhist community, e.g., founders and supporters, early Zen dharma heirs, convent nuns, and so on, with occasional reference to the tea ladies and iron maidens of the title. Refreshingly, she only occasionally segregates according to space or time: Korean, Chinese, and Japanese women of various eras jostle up against each other. Why not? After all, as we learn from *Zen Women*, the first Buddhist monastics to appear in Japan were Korean nuns, and the first Japanese person to take Buddhist vows was an eleven-year-old girl. In her final chapters, Schireson looks at the present, asking what we can learn from the women she has presented. And she sticks closely to the historical record.

This historical record has been reconstructed — heroically is the adjective that comes to mind — only recently by contemporary scholars. Besides Grant, these scholars include Paula Arai, Kathryn Blackstone, Eunsu Cho, Patricia Fister, Rita Gross, Susan Murcott, Diana Paul, Barbara Ruch, Kathryn Tsai (who translated the 6th century Chinese Mahayana *Lives of the Nuns*), and the exceptionally productive Miriam Levering. It cannot be stated too strongly how recent this work is. Levering's first scholarly paper on women and Buddhism appeared in 1982, and it took another nine years before anything on

Buddhist women appeared in English in book form: Susan Murcott's *The First Buddhist Women* (poems by and biographies of women in the time of the Buddha) was published in 1991; Rita Gross' *Buddhism After Patriarchy* (Buddhist attitudes and teachings about the female) appeared in 1992; as did the seminal compilation *Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender*, edited by José Cabezon.

The word "historical" is itself problematic. Outside of *Lives of the Nuns* (which predates Zen,) extensive and coherent evidence from China, Korea, and Japan was either not well preserved or not well known in the general Zen world. What we know of most of these women is generally recorded in writings of or stories about men. For example, we know of Lingzhao because she was the daughter of Layman Pang. Even someone like the great Ch'an master Qiyuan Xinggang, one of whose students did write her biography (and who is a major figure in Grant's *Eminent Nuns*), has largely been lost to the wider Zen world. And all too often, scholars must piece things together from scattered sources not primarily concerned with the women whose writing, lives and teachings they are trying to reconstruct. Schireson has absorbed and reconfigured what she has learned from her predecessors, and presented it accessibly and with integrity. Her book is indispensable.

Schireson does not restrict herself to restoring these women to us. She also looks at issues in contemporary western Buddhism, most notably male/female relationships (including sexual) within a Zen community, and lay practice. We may think of these issues as new to Buddhism, but they are not. Many of these women dealt with them, and the institutions they created were necessarily flexible. Restricted notions of the feminine paradoxically led to a broader permissible range of work for nuns than for monks. Women's temples sometimes responded to particular women's challenges (for example, sheltering abused women, or providing a legal means of divorce) that men did not have to face. Temples for upper-class women allowed them to become nuns within a culture of aristocracy they were otherwise not allowed to escape. Needing the permission of fathers, brothers, or husbands to become nuns, a number of accomplished women practitioners had to practice within the demands of lay life. For example, Miaozong received transmission from Ta Hui when she was the privileged wife of a high government official. As we, both men and women, grapple with dharma lives that don't resemble standard monastic training, we can find inspiration and examples from many of these women.

I am grateful to Schireson, and to the scholars who are her sources, for restoring these women to us. But the fact that this scholarship and this book are necessary (and they are) is saddening. As even a cursory familiarity with Zen literature makes clear, women were always part of the landscape. When, in Case 13: No Hindrance of *The Whole World is a Single Flower*, the nun strips off her clothes, the fact that a nun was having a kong-an interview with a male teacher is not considered remarkable. Similarly, it is not remarkable that the nun Shil Che appeared in front of Guji to challenge him (she's the one who wouldn't take her hat off). And all those tea ladies asking how various arrogant monks would clean their minds or with which mind they would eat their lunch — nothing remarkable there either.

So, once we absorb the lives and teachings Schireson is presenting to us, one more step is necessary: to integrate the teachings of and stories about our women ancestors with the teachings of and stories about our male ancestors. Nobody gains from marginalizing these women to the ghetto of "women's issues." In the project of restoring these teachings to their rightful place, *Zen Women* is an excellent place to start. 

