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**Edited by Christopher Patrick Miller, Michael Reading, and Jeffery**  
**D. Long. Landham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020**

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## ***Beacons of Dharma: Spiritual Exemplars for the Modern Age.*** **Edited by Christopher Patrick Miller, Michael Reading, and Jeffery D. Long. Landham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020**

Karma Lekshe Tsomo<sup>1</sup>

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While the canon is replete with biographies of individual spiritual exemplars—Paramahansa Yogananda’s *Autobiography of a Yogi*, Thomas Merton’s *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and the Dalai Lama’s *Freedom in Exile* come to mind—few have examined exemplars across faiths. This collection focuses on Hindu masters from many different perspectives and practices, as well as a variety of Buddhist, Jain, and Sikh masters. The editors set their focus on religious leaders and spiritual guides who have served as sources of inspiration and “dispellers of darkness.” Their introduction discusses the defining characteristics of these “beacons of Dharma,” recognizing that the Sanskrit term *dharma* is “polyvalent and uniquely understood within each traditional context.” (xiii) The editors invite the contributing authors to uncover new scholarship regarding the “distinctive philosophies, ethical commitments, overall life work, etc.” of their subjects and to offer insightful proposals about “how the remedial and redemptive power embodied by each.... can best serve our contemporary world.” (ix) The chapters are woven around these central themes.

Female spiritual exemplars figure prominently in this collection of biographies, some as individuals and others in partnership with male exemplars. The first chapter tells the story of Puja Shri Acharya Chandanaji, a highly educated, “rebellious” Jain nun who became controversial for her activism. In expounding compassionate social service as integral to asceticism over and above the traditional Jain focus on individual liberation, she stretched the boundaries of what was allowable for a Jain ascetic and what was expected from a Jain nun. Similarly, but from within the Hindu tradition, the fifth chapter documents the life and spiritual significance of Mata Amritanandamayi—Amma, “the hugging saint”—who has become an internationally recognized embodiment of the Divine Mother. As a beacon of “unconditional love and compassion,” she has stretched the bounds of orthodoxy by her practice of physical contact with the millions who seek her out, ignoring and thus transcending culturally prescribed caste and gender taboos.

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✉ Karma Lekshe Tsomo  
tsomo@sandiego.edu

<sup>1</sup> Theology and Religious Studies, University of San Diego, San Diego, USA

Among the female exemplars who are profiled in association with male figures, the second chapter describes the lives and work of Swami Vivekananda and his close disciple Sister Nivedita, an Irish devotee of Kali, the Divine Mother. Against the political, social, and religiously pluralistic background in which they lived, they tread and espoused the universalistic path of Vedanta to create “a bridge between the religious and cultural worlds of India and the West.” The sixth chapter describes the inspirational impact of Sri Sarada Devi (Holy Mother), the spiritual wife and widow of Sri Ramakrishnan, who represented both the transcendent divine and embodied love in maternal form. Although her spiritual path took shape in partnership with the illustrious Sri Ramakrishnan, and she receives little mention in the texts of his tradition, she became a central figure in continuing the spiritual movement he initiated and her image appears on altars “alongside Sri Ramakrishnan and Swami Vivekananda” to this day. (101–102).

The tenth chapter focuses on Vandana Shiva’s ecospiritual interpretation of Mahatma Gandhi’s concept of *swadeshi*, or self-reliance, and *swaraj*, or democratic self-governance. Building on Gandhi’s revolutionary and widely influential work, she challenges violent, exploitative economic structures, advocating instead for nonviolent, sustainable ecosystems conjoined with decentralized “real democracy.” She interprets *prakriti* as the creative feminine principle that activates the interconnectedness between human beings and the natural environment. The eleventh chapter takes the book’s purview further afield, geographically and conceptually, highlighting the work of the American Buddhist nun Pema Chodron. Trained in the Tibetan tradition, she engages classic Buddhist teachings such as *lojong* (training the mind), compassion, and awakening to address social violence and injustices. Significantly pushing the envelope in addressing structural racism, she has been challenged to address her own White privilege and to radically reexamine practices such as subduing internal enemies (the delusions of one’s own mind) and (counterintuitively) identifying the suffering of the oppressor.

The majority of the trailblazing figures discussed in this book lived in modern times or are still alive, which makes them especially relevant for contemporary readers. Tanya Storch’s chapter, “Beacons of Dharma from the *Biqiuni zhuan*,” is relevant in a different way. It takes us back in time, to the early centuries of the transmission of Buddhism to China, when two nuns, Jingian and Zhixian, boldly initiated the *bhiksuni* lineage in China and thus paved the way for the contemporary revival of full ordination around the world.

On the cusp of the fifth and sixth centuries CE, the scholar monk and court historiographer Baochang compiled his *Biqiuni zhuan* (Accounts of *Bhiksunis*/Buddhist Nuns). This in itself shows how far afield the Dharma was blossoming and how well it was enduring. His work includes the biographies of 65 notable fully-ordained Chinese nuns who lived between 313 and 516 CE, a span of more than 200 years, and constitutes the most complete record of the achievements of Buddhist nuns ever produced in China. Modern scholars and practitioners owe a great debt of gratitude to him, to those who helped preserve the text over the centuries, and to those who translated it, since it documents a lineage of full ordination for Buddhist women that has continued up to the present day.

Storch retells the stories of Jingjian and Zhixian, two of the nuns profiled in the *Biqiuni zhuan*, by framing them historically. Going back to the beginnings of Indian Buddhist chronology, she recounts the heroic efforts of the first Buddhist nuns—Buddha Śākyamuni’s aunt and stepmother Mahāprajāpatī, and her followers—who broke through patriarchal hegemony to initially establish the *bhikkhuni sangha* (female monastic order). She acknowledges the debt of gratitude Buddhist women owe to Sanghamitta and Mahinda, sent by their father King Aśoka to spread the Dharma in Sri Lanka in the third century BCE, and to the Sinhalese nuns who traveled as part of a diplomatic delegation from Sri Lanka to China in the fifth century CE. In both cases, these early Buddhist nuns were not only pioneers in establishing the four required components of an ideal Buddhist society—laywomen, laymen, fully ordained *bhiksus* and *bhiksuniīs*—but they also served as exemplars of female courage and leadership in efforts that are highly relevant today.

Against this backdrop, Storch narrates the heroic efforts of Jingjian and Zhixian, the remarkable pioneers who challenged centuries of patriarchal Confucian custom to set a precedent for Buddhist women’s empowerment. She describes the “period of domestication” when the Buddhist teachings and practices transmitted from India were gradually adapted to make them compatible with Chinese social, cultural, and religious norms. Storch’s account reminds us to revisit Baochang’s biographies, which not only represented an important historical breakthrough by taking women’s lives seriously, but also continue to inspire contemporary efforts to make Buddhism truly egalitarian.

As a historian of Chinese Buddhism, Storch positions her subjects within the broader expanse of history. She explains the groundbreaking significance of Jingjian, who pioneered the ordination of women in the fourth century CE, even before the required monastic texts reached China. Then she highlights Zhixian, whose monastic discipline was said to be a “model of sheer perfection.” This pioneering nun grew up as the daughter of a magistrate in Hubei province. The Daoist governor of the province, who despised Buddhism, attempted to deplete the ranks of Buddhist monastics by creating examinations for them that were impossible to pass. After Zhixian eloquently and knowledgeably answered all the exam questions, the governor insisted that she stay alone with him for further questioning, a violation of monastic precepts. When she refused, he flew into a rage and stabbed her more than 20 times. After surviving this brutal assault, she became an exemplary Dharma teacher whom birds followed and “accompanied ... with joyful chirping.”

Storch likens the achievements of the first Buddhist nuns in China to the first women to hold public office in the United States. Setting women’s achievements during the fifth century BCE in India and the fourth century CE in China side by side with women’s achievements during the twenty-first century in the United States cuts through Orientalist preconceptions about the backwardness and misogyny of non-Western cultures. She draws parallels between the ordination of Jingjian on a platform in the middle of the Si River in China with the ordination of the first seven Roman Catholic nuns on a boat in the middle of the Danube River in 2002. As ever, women have had to use skillful means to avoid the wrath of established, male-dominated institutions. By arranging her ordination on the Si River, Jingjian sought to avoid implicating any specific monks’ monastery in the pioneering ordination

of Buddhist nuns and avert a blow-up with the influential monk Daochang, just as, by arranging their ordination in the middle of a river, the Danube Seven sought to avoid implicating any specific Catholic diocese in the groundbreaking ordination of Catholic nuns and avert a blow-up with the Vatican. In neither case were the nuns' ordinations recognized as valid by the authorities, nor did they achieve equal status with their male counterparts. But, although the Catholic nuns were excommunicated along with the bishop who ordained them (Rómulo Antonio Braschi), in both cases the nuns who dared to challenge the inequitable policies of their respective religious establishments continued to practice, teach, and benefit their respective communities, sending a strong message to future generations. Both Buddhist and Catholic pioneering nuns elected to ordain "in a place geographically and symbolically free from the men's clerical objections and persecutory actions." Yet, whereas female Catholic priests still have not been recognized as such to this day, Buddhist nuns in China were accepted and laid the groundwork for the full ordination that was conducted later, with the arrival of Sinhalese nuns in the fifth century, strictly in accordance with the monastic codes (*vinaya*).

Storch's commentary on these nuns makes a valuable contribution, helping the modern reader understand the hardships, social criticism, and sometimes even brutal physical attacks that early generations of Buddhist followers endured to establish the Dharma in China. She shows how they overcame fear with exceptional courage, achieving control over their emotions as well as their bodies through the practice of Dharma, interpreted by Buddhists as mental and moral cultivation. She goes further by raising uncomfortable questions about whether the early Chinese Buddhists went too far in their abandonment of the physical body. Redolent of the harsh austerities that Prince Siddhartha pursued and then rejected on his way to Buddhahood, some Chinese Buddhists regarded abnegation of the body as an expression of detachment, which sometimes led to cases of self-immolation, even though there is no evidence of this practice in India. She argues that their actions were motivated by the pure wish to protect the Dharma, just as Zhixian's heroism saved the practitioners of her monastery in a time of persecution. She regards Jingjian and Zhixian as beacons of Dharma in an age rife with the persecution of women, risking their lives to help others express their "creative and spiritual potential." Rather than being cowed by patriarchal oppression, these courageous nuns became models of virtue, compassion, and commitment—models that continue to inspire others up to today.

Most of the renowned figures profiled in this volume seem to propose that the tension between contemplative practice and social engagement is a false dichotomy, even that spiritual practice necessitates humanitarian efforts. Certainly the editors could have included other illustrious contemplatives and religious activists who might challenge this assumption. Storch's chapter seems to offer a counterpoint, yet one could argue that, by breaking through gender barriers and persevering in their efforts to establish a lineage of full ordination for nuns, Jingjian and Zhixian benefited millions of Buddhist women and transformed Chinese society and religious life.

Now that this book has laid the biographical groundwork for understanding these spiritual giants, scholars may now further analyze the connections among them and also the significant contrasts. A number of common themes emerge that are intertwined in the chapters, lending coherence to the volume. One such theme is the

vibrancy of the spiritual impulse that flowed between the Dharma traditions of India and other lands, especially Asian lands and North America. Given India's history of British colonization, these interactions and mutual influences may not seem surprising, yet remarkably many of these purveyors of Dharma were extensively educated in both their own heritage spiritualities and in the Western academic sense. The chapters explicitly or implicitly address the tension between spiritual evolution and service to humanity that runs through many religious traditions, a dilemma that both religious leaders and ordinary practitioners encounter, especially in the modern world. Some of the authors note a tendency to equate spirituality with individualism and social service with community, yet many of the teachers who are profiled and the vast audiences they attracted seem to acknowledge and advocate that spirituality and service are mutually entailing. Rather than being seen as antithetical, as is commonly supposed, spiritual development and active social service (*seva*) are seen to exist in symbiotic relationship, instantiated in the lives and communities of the eminent figures profiled in this volume. These remarkable beings bequeathed legacies demonstrating the successful integration of spiritual cultivation and selfless social engagement, of personal achievement and expansive social benefit, inspiring successive generations.

## Declarations

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