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III. BOOK REVIEWS

Die Frau im frühen Buddhismus, by Renate Pitzer-Reyl. Marburger Studien Zur Afrika- und Asienkunde, Serie B, Asien, Band 7. Berlin: Verlag Von Dietrich Reimer, 1984. 104 pp.

This instructive study devoted to a critical consideration of the position of women in early Buddhism is probably the only full-length recent German monograph on the subject. Though it takes into account (and at some levels grows from a review of) previous work in the field, it also, significantly, encompasses some distinctive interpretative elaborations which can both sharpen and deepen modern understanding of the portrayal of women in the ancient Pali sources. *Die Frau im frühen Buddhismus* should attract the especial attention of those interested in feminist concerns and gender issues as they relate to early Buddhism; but students of religious history might also find the clearly and carefully articulated investigation it presents quite informative, for although the origin and the development of women's contacts with early Buddhism are indeed important to the history of religion, the details involved are rarely given close scrutiny in the many publications of this decade that have sought to clarify the relationship between women and the world's religious traditions.

Historical-textual approaches tend to dominate the discussions in *Die Frau im frühen Buddhismus*. Its essential subject matter is presented in five sections. Pitzer-Reyl sketches initially the status of women in pre-Buddhist India dominated by the patriarchally oriented Vedic-Brahmanical belief system, and then delves into the place accorded to women in early Buddhism through a fairly detailed consideration of a set of interrelated topics. Most notable among these are the origin and the ground-rules of the female religious Order (*bhikkhuni sangha*), the reasons motivating women to enter the Order, the education of novices and ordination, the life-style of nuns (with particular a focus on the religious goals that they held before them) and the lay woman's role *vis à vis* Buddhist practice, as well as the social world which had come under the influence of Buddhism. The study closes with some reflective remarks on early Buddhism's depiction of women.

Buddhism, which is shown to have manifested a reformist outlook and egalitarian proclivities at its inception, indeed emerges as quite a contrast to Brahminism in Pitzer-Reyl's introductory clarifications. Highlighting the starkly negative position accorded to women in both the secular and religious spheres within the laws of Manu, Pitzer-Reyl indicates in no uncertain terms that Buddhism considerably softened the overriding patri-

archalism inherent in Brahminism, providing women previously unavailable opportunities to participate in religious life as fully valued persons. However, the ascetic grounding of Buddhism's soteriological quest, it is also pointed out, actually resulted in the retention of some old perceptions relating to the feminine: the identification of women as seductresses, possessed with a salvation-hindering sexuality ("erlösungshinderlichen Sexualität") is especially mentioned in this connection. Though Pitzer-Reyl is careful to observe that this is not the sum and substance of the Buddhist portrayal of women, it is nevertheless taken as a notable informing idea in Buddhism's stance in regard to gender, one which was apt to be highlighted or reinforced in stressful and demanding situations (like those associated with the founding of the female Order, or again, in contexts of individual difficulty encountered by monks engaged in ascetic practice).

In delving into the details of the investigation Pitzer-Reyl turns first to the canonical record of the events leading to the founding of the female religious Order (Mahāprajāpati's pleas for admittance, Ānanda's supportive intervention and the Buddha's own positive assessment of women's capacities for spiritual advance). Significantly, the Buddha's celebrated hesitations about allowing women to join the Order are attributed in large part to an anxiety concerning their impact on monks' celibate life. But in the course of a rather close examination of the historic eight ground rules (*garudhammā*) instituted as a precondition in this context, Pitzer-Reyl finds several indications of female subordination. Rules governing both the *uposatha* and *pavāranā* ceremonies, for instance, are viewed as providing for the male control of the female religious, though considered overall, the latter are also shown to have retained some measure of independence in the conduct of their spiritual activities.

Why did women want to join the Buddhist Order? What were the social backgrounds of those who actually did so? These important questions are addressed on the basis of the information which the *Therīgāthā* and its commentary in particular provide (and withal taking into account modern inquiries of Horner, Caroline Rhys Davids, *et al.*). The decision to enter the *saṅgha*, it is argued, was often arrived at under the influence of religious elders, including the Buddha; but women were also moved by a yearning for salvation that sprang from within (characterized as "die Sehnsucht nach Erlösung, den Wunsch nach Befreiung vom Rad der Existenzen"). The *saṅgha* which was open to all social classes provided, Pitzer-Reyl observes, a secure refuge to many

widows and former wives of monks. Though almost the entire caste spectrum was represented in it, those in the less privileged lower castes were under-represented there: Buddhism's elitist spiritual demands, it is surmised, probably struck a more responsive chord among the cultured rather than the illiterate poor at the bottom of the social ladder.

Pitzer-Reyl's clarifications of the novitiate prescribed for new entrants to the Order (*sāmaṇerīs*), the requirements governing their ordination (*upasampadā*) and the life-style of fully fledged *bhikkhunīs* follow in the main the relevant canonical details as given in the Vinaya texts. Care was taken, it is shown, to ensure that only properly prepared and instructed persons were received into the Order; and save during the brief rainy season (*vassa*) spent communally indoors under strict rules, the female religious are portrayed as leading itinerant existences, conforming to the hallowed tradition of homeless renunciation—begging their meals from lay folk, occasionally preaching or discussing the *dhamma* among them, and, above all, cultivating an esoteric spirituality. In view of the exclusion of all opportunities for self-indulgence and the stringent enforcement of chastity, a Buddhist nun's life is described as ascetic, and in some ways strictly so (without even scope for charitable work, unlike in the case of their Christian counterparts in Europe). Still, asceticism, we are also reminded, did not become its end: the goals held forth, rather, were spiritual self-culture and the liberated (*arahant*) state.

How successful were women in attaining these goals? Drawing attention to the *Bhikkunī Vibhaṅga* Pitzer-Reyl maintains that the female Order had to contend with problems of discipline, laxity and the like (which, significantly, are noted to have been sometimes resolved with help in the form of the Buddha's own caring intervention). But through a survey of the *Therīgāthā* articulations (where, it is observed—some in terse, pointed verses, others in long details—the thoughts of *bhikkhunīs* who had attained the *arahant* state are recorded), women's success in their soteriological endeavours are of course duly highlighted. Not only did many female religious grasp the essentials of the *dhamma*, but they also gained proficiency in higher concentration culminating in supernormal knowledge (*abhīññā*), projecting their crowning experience of liberation itself as an unparalleled sense of calm (formally articulated by the expression, "I have become cool, quenched"). Viewing these achievements in the light of the conception of the *arahant* state projected in the *Sutta piṭaka*, Pitzer-Reyl emphasizes that nuns thus became equals to monks in reach-

ing the most elevated levels of religious insight.

Notable elucidations on women's overall influence and social standing under early Buddhism emerge from the discussions in the latter part of the monograph where the preaching and teaching activities of nuns and the role of lay women are examined. Even though the *bhikkhunīs* were not members of a missionary Order, they are nevertheless shown to have been a channel for the communication of the *dhamma* especially among women in the laity (who traditionally looked after the material needs of the *saṃgha*). However, not the smallness of their number (as Oldenberg indeed had suggested) but rather their "subordination" ("Unterordnung") to the male fraternity, according to Pitzer-Reyl, was the single major constraint against the expansion of the influence of the female religious both within the *saṃgha* as well as the wider society outside. Still, many evidences for a positive estimation of Buddhism's attitudes to women are finally detailed. Underscoring the gender neutral approaches implicit in the Buddha's teachings, the inclusion of women in his earliest circle of lay followers and his unhesitating association with women drawn from all strata of society in his religious discussions, Pitzer-Reyl notes that Buddhism brought about certain "improvements" ("Verbesserungen") in their condition. These improvements are shown to be highly significant *vis à vis* Brahmanism, and are notably linked to Buddhism's repudiation of the rituals central to that system (where women played an unesteemed secondary part), and the rejection of many of the underpinnings of its thinking about women as such (that maternity and the bearing of sons was important, and the devaluation of widows, the unmarried and the barren, for example, are noted to have no place in Buddhist thinking). Testimony to the salutary impact of Buddhism's religious revaluation ("religiöser Aufwertung") of womanhood are identified within several Nikāya sources: according to Pitzer-Reyl, under Buddhist influence, daughters became less unwelcome, wives were apt to become more respected and treated as companions and mothers acquired a greater say in domestic affairs. Yet Horner's more admiring judgements in this sphere (as set forth in *Women Under Primitive Buddhism*, London, 1930, pp. 52 ff.) are not endorsed, and are in fact described as plainly excessive ("geradezu überschwenglich"). Viewed as a whole, Pitzer-Reyl finds in Buddhist sources a notably improved consideration for women in comparison with Brahmanism, as well as a retention of some of the attitudes inherited from the latter system. Taking into account Nikāya sources (*Anguttara*

Nikāya, II, 62, and also Diana Y. Paul, *Women in Buddhism*, Berkeley, Calif., 1979, pp. 33ff.), Buddhism's negative perspectives regarding femininity are located in its characteristic perception of women as an embodiment of sexual vitality and passion. Buddhism, in Pitzer-Reyl's opinion, did not basically transform traditional Indian ideas on the conduct and the ways of women. What was achieved, it is emphasized, was something more limited: it softened their harsher features, avoiding in its writings projections of a profound devaluation of women.

Despite reliance on translations instead of original texts, *Die Frau im frühen Buddhismus* deserves to be viewed as a well researched, scholarly investigation. Its basic conclusions, which bring to light the existence of a body of positive ideas and progressive attitudes towards women within early Buddhism, are particularly noteworthy, for they can indeed help correct tendentious projections of the system evident not only in important present-day writings on feminism (cf. Marilyn French, *Beyond Power: Women, Men and Morals*, London, 1985, comments on Buddhism), but also, more significantly, in certain studies on early Buddhism itself (Uma Chakravarti's references to "discrimination against women" in *The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism*, Delhi, 1987, pp. 33, 35 merit especial mention in this connection). However, certain aspects of Pitzer-Reyl's exposition are vulnerable to criticism. Believers in particular might be somewhat chagrined by the rather bald statement (made early in the monograph apropos the implications of the *garudhammā*) that a *bhikkunī* can never rise to the dignity of a *bhikkhu* ("Eine Bhikkhunī kann nie die Würde eines Bhikkhus erlangen"): this way of putting things obscures the fact (of course fully recognized elsewhere in the study) that a woman could be an *arhant*, the highest dignity in Buddhist religious life which, needless to say, was the final goal of every man in the Order as well. In this connection it is also useful to observe that the roles assigned to monks in the conduct of some religious functions within the *bhikkunī saṅgha* hardly deserve to be judged from purely abstract perspectives as a circumstance which reflects a particular distribution of authority among gender groups. These roles could well have been viewed by contemporaries as supportive involvement which was not only desirable (given culturally impressed perceptions about women's need for protection), but religiously meaningful as well (for after all, the Buddha and his leading disciples were males). On the other hand, those who are mindful of recent clarifications on the many subtle ways in which male prejudices can be lodged

in both thought and theories (cf. M. Vetterling Braggin, 'Femininity', 'Masculinity' and 'Androgyny': A Modern Philosophical Discussion, Totowa, N.J., 1982; J. Grimshaw, *Philosophy and Feminist Thinking*, Minneapolis, Minn., 1986) would no doubt note that Pitzer-Reyl's textual analyses proceed on mainly conventional lines, and that they encompass no attempts to probe into the thinking in Buddhist sources on the basis of the insights and the new evaluative frames which current feminist philosophical critiques have tended to generate. However, a case could well be made for bringing the latter to bear on those analyses, for patriarchal attitudes are sometimes camouflaged.

Even so, taken as a whole, there is much to commend in this monograph. Many readers might perhaps note with relief that naive reductive accountings that loom large in many modern studies relating to early Buddhism are absent here: what one encounters, rather, is an attentiveness to texts and for the most part a balanced interpretation of their contents. Accordingly, *Die Frau im frühen Buddhismus* should indeed be ranked among the small (yet growing) number of writings that seek to investigate and discuss an important subject—the status of women in Buddhism.

Vijitha Rajapakse

Ālayavijñāna: On the Origin and the Early Development of a Central Concept of Yogācāra Philosophy, Two volumes, by Lambert Schmithausen. *Studia Philologica Buddhica*, monograph series, IVa-b. Tokyo: International Institute for Buddhist Studies, 1987. vii–ix + 700 pp. ISBN #4-906267-20-3.

There has been, until now, no monographic treatment of the *ālayavijñāna* concept in any Western language. There are, of course, obligatory (usually brief) discussions of the concept in virtually every work on Yogācāra. But if we consider only works written in languages other than Japanese, the best single resource remains Louis de La Vallée Poussin's brief introduction to the topic written more than fifty years ago ("Note sur l'*ālayavijñāna*," *Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques* 3 (1934): 145–168). The work under review here far outstrips anything previously available on the topic, and will, no doubt, remain the starting-point for further research for a long time to come.