

Miranda E. Shaw

A Passionate Path of Women's Active Contributions in Tantric Buddhism

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The luxurious worldly attire of a Bodhisattva indicates that the Bodhisattva participates fully in worldly life but does so ... without any loss of equanimity. Bodhisattvas manifest such an appearance in order to “fulfill” beings’ “wishes” for beauty, protection, joy, amazement, and inspiration. The concept of the Bodhisattva is so central to the Mahāyāna that its practice methodologies are characterized as the Bodhisattva path. (Kamata and Shaw 2003, 176)

Dr. Miranda E. Shaw is a multi-award-winning author on women's contributions to Tantric Vajrayana Buddhism in South Asian and Himalayan regions, including India, Tibet, and Nepal. Her seminal book, *Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism*, published by Princeton University Press in 1994, won the James Henry Breasted Prize for the best book on Asian History published between 1990 and 1994 from the American Historical Association, the Tricycle Prize for Excellence in Buddhist Scholarship, and the 1995–96 Critic's Choice Most Acclaimed Academic Book award. Her notable and extensive work is a testament to her long, enduring, and significant

career and contributions in redefining Tantric Buddhism with a feminist sensibility. Her second book, *Buddhist Goddesses of India* (2015), is also well-reviewed and widely read. In addition to her duties as an associate professor of religious studies at the University of Richmond in Virginia, she has lectured extensively and written many articles, book chapters, and essays on the subjects of Tantric Buddhism and Indian goddesses. Her work as an academic professor and writer has “taken her a long way from her Methodist childhood in Ohio” (Griffin 1999, 13), leading her to concentrate on women’s historical and contemporary contributions to Tantric Buddhism in India, Tibet, Bhutan, and Nepal. Although “Shaw [says she] eschews labels, declining to give her age, marital status or to tie herself down to a specific religion,” Buddhism and goddess worship inspire her most (Griffin 1999, 16-17).

Miranda Eberle Shaw was born on May 9, 1954 in Ohio to her parents John Norris and Merry Grant Norris, who supported and nurtured her throughout her life. She attributed her love of books to her grandmother, Frances Wilson Eberle. She is grateful to her mother for her constant appreciation of her success and to her life companion, Kenneth Rose, with whom she has shared her intellectual journey and to whom she is indebted for his “personal and scholarly ministrations” (Shaw 1994, xiii).

Early Inspiration, Education with Honors and Early Career

When Shaw was in junior high school, a family friend gave her a copy of the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads. These contrasted sharply with her Midwestern upbringing and sparked an interest she ultimately pursued in her education and career (Griffin 1999a, 17). Early on in her studies in art history and then religion, she was aware of the lack of a woman’s perspective in Tantric Buddhism, even though there are many female sky-dancers, *apsara* and *dākinī* images in the visual aesthetics of the religion. The intense female imagery in Tantric *thangkas* inspired her to pursue their deeper meaning, which led her to study the historical background and religious significance of these rich visual aesthetics (University of Richmond 2010; Griffin 1999, 14-15).

After graduating from Ohio State University with honors, *cum laude*, in 1978 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in art history, she remained there on a full scholarship to pursue a PhD. However, Shaw realized that her understanding of Tantric art would require immersion in language and religious studies. In 1981, she began studies in religion at Harvard Divinity School and Harvard University. During her time there, she acquired three degrees with honors. In 1983, she received a master’s in theology (MTS) and, in 1985, a Master of Arts in the study of

religion (MA) at the Harvard Divinity School. In 1992, she was awarded a PhD with distinction in the study of religion from Harvard (Shaw, pers. comm., January 9, 2020).

As a pre-doctoral student, she accumulated many distinguished honors and grants. She was a University Fellow at Harvard University from 1983–85 and received Harvard’s annual Bowdoin Graduate Literary Prize in 1986. She received two Radcliffe Grants for Graduate Women in 1987 and 1988 and received the Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship for Research Abroad in 1987–88. She was able to study the Tibetan Language in 1988–89 with the Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship and was awarded the Charlotte W. Newcombe Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship for 1989–90. Finally, she accepted the Harvard Whiting Fellowship in the Humanities in 1990–91 to complete her dissertation.

Shaw was taught and influenced by many notable teachers and colleagues along the way. She studied with, among others, American Buddhist scholar Robert Thurman, who is currently Indo-Tibetan Buddhist professor at Columbia University, Mastatoshi Nagatomi, distinguished and first Professor of Buddhist Studies at Harvard University, and Lama Sonam Jorphen Rinpoche, who is the head of the monastery of Rinchen Paldri in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal.

Early in her professional career, she was invited to contribute to the exhibition catalog, *Circle of Bliss: Buddhist Meditational Art*, which was shown at the Columbus Museum of Art in Columbus, Ohio and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) in 2003–04. In an email communication with the author (June 7, 2020), Shaw described her significant role in shaping and unifying the catalog’s entries. In addition, she co-authored two articles for the catalog, which will be explained in more detail later.

Tantric Buddhist Formation — the Influential Teachers

Shaw’s travels to India, then Nepal, led her to study, do field research, and write on the missing story of women in Tantric Buddhism. In India and Nepal, seedbeds of Tantric practice and development, she was encouraged and guided by many Indian scholars and Tibetan lamas, gurus, khenpos, and tulkus from the four major schools of Tantric Tibetan Buddhism; the Nyingma (rNying ma-རྟེན་མ་), Kagyu (Bri gung bKa’ brgyud-བློ་གློ་བུ་ལྷན་དུ་བཞུགས་པའི་ལུགས་), Gelug (dge lugs pa-དགེ་ལུགས་པའི་ལུགས་), and Sakya (Śākya-སྐ་བློ་གློ་བུ་ལྷན་དུ་བཞུགས་པའི་ལུགས་). Six months into her first year and a half of field research in India, she met with the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, India. She secured the Dalai Lama’s approval of her research into Anuttara Yoga Tantra, the most esoteric form of Tantric practice, and

the realm in which women and women's writings have a prominent role. This official approval was a turning point (Shaw, pers. comm., June 7, 2020).

Recording the lineage of Tibetan Tantric teachers is an important Tibetan tradition. In honor of this practice, Shaw's teachers and Tibetan guides are listed here:

- From the gDe-Lugs (Gelug-དགེ་ལུགས་) lamas of Tsongkhapa lineage, she worked with Lati Rinpoche, Tara Tulku Rinpoche, and Gungru Tulku.
- From the Bri gung bKa' brgyud (Drigung Kagyu-བློ་གྲུང་བཀའ་བརྒྱུད་) tradition, she worked with H. H. (Drikung Kyabgon) Chetsang Rinpoche—the 37th throne holder of the Drikung Kagyu lineage and 7th reincarnation of the Chetsang Rinpoche—Ayang Rinpoche, and Khenpo Konchog Gyaltzen.
- From the Karma bKa' brgyud order (ཀམ་མཁའ་བརྒྱུད་) she worked with H. H. Sharmarpa Rinpoche, His Eminence the 10th Nenang Pawo Rinpoche (1912–91), Trangu Rinpoche, Luding Khenchen Rinpoche, and Khenpo Abbe.
- From the Sakya school (Śākya-ས་སྐྱ) she worked with H. H. Sakya Trizin, Jetsun Chime Luding, and, finally, Luding Khen Rinpoche.
- From the Nyingma (rNying ma-རྟེན་མཁའ་) tradition of Padmasambhava, H. H. Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche (1910–91), Minglin Trichen (sMin gLing khri chen rin po che -མིང་ལྷིང་ཁྱི་ཅེན་པོ་ཅེ) (1938–2008), Tulku Thondup, and Lama Tsultrim (Allione).¹

From 1959, when the Land of Snows—another name for Tibet (ka ba can gyi yul-ཀ་བ་ཅན་གྱི་ཡུལ་)—was conquered and occupied by the Chinese and renamed the Autonomous Region of Tibet, handing this knowledge down to the Tibetan diaspora became increasingly important. Many Tibetans escaped over the Himalayas to live in exile in India, Bhutan, Nepal, and other places that welcomed them as political refugees around the world. Shaw would not have been able to visit the monasteries to do research on Tantric Buddhism for her dissertation and her book on Tantric practice and women, *Passionate Enlightenment*, if it had not been for the teachers who so willingly assisted her.

Early Career and Success

As mentioned above, one of her early successes as a young tenured professor was the publication of articles in the groundbreaking art exhibition and its accompanying large-format, 560-page catalog, *Circle of Bliss: Buddhist Meditational Art*. This exhibition was shown in 2003 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and in 2004 at the Columbus Art Museum in Columbus, Ohio. The exhibit contained over 160 objects of Himalayan art, providing a “detailed analysis”

of and insightful historical scholarship about these aesthetic masterpieces in their “socio-religious context” (Huntington and Bangdel 2003, 9). She co-authored two articles for this catalog: “A New Identity: The Vow of a Being Destined to Enlightenment, Bodhisattvas: Perfected Beings as Exemplars,” with Mayumi Kamata and the text for Article #153 in the exhibition of Shri (ཞེ) Palden Lhamo (dpal lhan lha mo-དཔལ་ལྷན་ལྷ་མོ་), the “Glorious Goddess” and “Protectress of Tibet,” with John C. Huntington (Huntington and Bangdel 2003, 498). Her writing and editing were significant contributions to this art exhibition, which was, for the first time, organized around the ritual purpose and practice of the objects presented instead of solely for their aesthetic value. At the time of the exhibition, Stephan Markel, curator and department head of South and Southeast Asian Art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, wrote a review for *Orientalism Magazine*. He recounts that these practices, “previously taught only to initiated disciples ... have gradually become a subject for modern scholarship over the last 65 years. With this public awareness, it has become possible to explain these esoteric processes ... connecting the works of art to their underlying meditative practices. No prior exhibition of Himalayan Buddhist art has ever attempted this deep a level of contextual explanation” (Markel 2003, 26, 31). The opportunity to collaborate as a contributing colleague to this unique exhibition that related the art object to actual religious ritual and practice allowed Shaw’s knowledge and expertise in art history and esoteric Buddhism to excel. This provided her with a practical experience of presenting religion in a pragmatic, new way that she has carried throughout her writing and career.

From the beginning of her academic pursuits, Shaw received a number of research grants and other awards that funded and promoted her postgraduate work. Often, she received these more than once, such as the writing fellowship from the Schwab Charitable Trust Kayamandala Fund in 2009–10, 2011–12, 2012–13, and 2014–15, the American Academy of Religion’s Research Grant in 1999–2000 and 2007–08, and a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship for 1995–96 and 2007–08. She also received a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Stipend in 1993.

Professional Career — Teaching

Since 1998, Dr. Shaw has been an associate professor of religious studies at the University of Richmond in Richmond, Virginia. She was an assistant professor from 1991–98. Before that, she was a research assistant at Harvard University’s Center for the Study of World Religions from 1989–91, where she taught two seminars, entitled Buddhist Meditation and the History of Tantric Buddhism. Her teaching

embodied the Harvard University ideal of “the public intellectual.” She was guided by Harvard’s emphasis on the need for the scholar and professor to participate in “broader cultural conversations beyond one’s classroom and immediate academic peers” (Shaw, pers. comm., June 7, 2020). This broad understanding of education is at the heart of Shaw’s understanding of her vocation as an educator. It has informed her teaching, writing, and public interviews, which promote a reinterpretation of Tantric studies through a feminist lens.

Award Winning and Ground-breaking Book — Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism

Dr. Shaw is primarily known for her scholarship on goddesses, goddess practice, and the existence and contributions of women in Tantric and Tibetan Buddhism. She has made vital and historic additions about women’s agency within Tantric practice through several books, numerous articles, interviews, symposia, Buddhist dance performances, and edited book entries. Most notably, her books *Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism* and *Buddhist Goddesses of India* are used worldwide as authoritative sources on these subjects.

Shaw’s detailed research and analysis in *Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism* brings awareness and attention to the female side of women’s experience in Tantric Buddhism. This focus counters the dominant, one-sided narratives that give preference to male experience and male advancement in teaching. Her career in academia has focused on correcting biased perceptions and improving recognition of women’s contributions and active involvement in Buddhism either as lay practitioners or historical *siddhas*—Tantric adepts who successfully attain the goal of their meditation practice (Huntington and Bangdel 2003, 535). Her work also focuses on a feminist reconsideration of mythical female figures such as *ḍākinīs*. She has explained these female figures’ roles in order to ameliorate misinformation, confusion, and incomplete understanding within the practice of Tantric Buddhism’s complex teachings.

Women’s Share in Tantric Buddhism

Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism, published by Princeton University Press in 1994, won the James Henry Breasted Prize for Asian History from the American Historical Association in that same year. This prize, named in honor of James Henry Breasted (1865–1935), who founded the Oriental Institute at

the University of Chicago, is awarded for the best book in English on any field of history prior to the year 1000 CE. The book also received the Tricycle Prize for Excellence in Buddhist Scholarship and the 1995–96 Critic’s Choice Most Acclaimed Academic Book designation. In this book, Shaw explains the development of Tantric Buddhism, the role and agency of women, and women’s experience of Tantric practice. Shaw cites numerous sources from both Tibetan and Indian texts, as well as many Western scholars who have studied historical and contemporary Tantric knowledge and understanding at the highest levels in this form of Buddhist study, ritual, and practice. The book was approved and blessed by H. H. the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, at the time it was published. Shaw summarizes her book this way:

This treatise challenges Western assumptions concerning medieval Tantric Buddhism. [I] draw on interviews and archival research to demonstrate that Tantric beliefs promoted co-operative relationships between men and women and relied upon women as a source of spiritual insight. (Shaw 1994, 12)

Passionate Enlightenment is available in Korean, French, German, Italian, Russian, Swedish, and Asian editions. At this writing, a Polish edition is in progress. Her book is widely read because her expert scholarship has made a clear and elegant case for explaining the teachings of Tantric Buddhism. Her feminist methodology pays particular attention to women’s active roles as seekers, leaders, and adept practitioners. Her knowledge of the practice explains the subtleties of Tantrism developed by the Nyingma school—a branch of Mahāyāna Buddhism practiced primarily in Tibet, but also in Nepal, Bhutan, and specific areas of India. Her research clarifies many misunderstandings that the West has about the role of a female consort in this practice. She dignifies the partnership between a woman and another who is on the path to learning and enlightenment. She suggests this relationship can lead to a profound, spiritual, intimate union. This union can be sexual. However, more importantly, it is about deep, sacred intimacy. She adeptly illuminates that this intimate union is mutually fulfilling for the individuals who have jointly agreed to engage this practice together. In *Passionate Enlightenment*, Shaw assists her readers in understanding this high-level, sacred, and complex practice as a reciprocal exchange that does not necessarily insist on the sexual. She goes on to shed light on a mutual relationship between two people, where each partner achieves understanding, tenderness, affection, gentleness, warmth, friendship, and special knowledge about the other. This partnership, in turn, can bring new knowledge and understanding about oneself. Shaw emphasizes, in ways that others have not, that tantric practice is anathema to desire, lust, or only sexual pleasure.

Women's Presence is Everywhere in Tantric Tibetan Buddhism

Passionate Enlightenment explores the active role women have had throughout history in a context where women have been theoretically diminished, hidden, or erased from historical and contemporary records. She uses feminist hermeneutical strategies such as suspicion, retrieval, and remembrance. Shaw explains her feminist philosophy this way:

It is crucial to restore to historical accounts the eminent women whose importance can be measured in terms of conventional historiographic models, but it is also necessary to redefine historical importance so that women's lives and concerns are included. Eliciting a gynocentric [her-story/her-storical] design often requires the application of creative hermeneutical strategies, such as strategies for reading texts to extract information about women. (Shaw 1994, 12-13)

These feminist concerns and methodologies were foreshadowed in her early writing in *Circle of Bliss*. In the first article, co-authored with Mayumi Kamata, about Bodhisattvas, Buddhas, and other enlightened beings, such as *dakas* and *dākinīs* (mkha' 'gro ma – མཁའ་འགྲོ་མ་), bodhisattvas, not generally female, remain in the world to help others, including women, achieve enlightenment. Buddhas, male or female, are the supreme enlightened beings. Male *dakas* (heroes) and female *dākinīs* (sky-dancers) are sacred protector spirits, advanced in their practice (Ozer and Lingpa 1999, 162). Images of these were crafted to be used as aids for practitioners to focus on when doing visualizing meditations or placed in temple settings or monasteries.



Image 1: Shadakshari Lokeshvara, China, Yuan Dynasty, c. late 13th or early 14th century, silver with parcel gilding; gilt copper alloy base, H:5-1/2 in. (13.9 cm) W: 4-5/8 in. (11.7 cm.) D: 3-1/8 in. (7.9 cm). (Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. The E. Rhodes and Leon B. Carpenter Foundation, from the Berthe and John Ford Collection (91.532).)

Her second article, written in collaboration with John Huntington, is about Shri Palden Lhamo (dpal ldan lha mo – དཔལ་ལྷན་ལྷ་མོ་), considered the female leader of all Tibetan female spirits. Shri Palden Lhamo is a Dharma Protector, a goddess, a female with authority and responsibility to protect and bless the Dalai Lamas. Illustrated here, she is a symbol of Tibetan statehood, and her great importance is closely tied to the fortunes of the Tibetan people (Huntington and Bangdel 2003, 498).



Image 2: Shri (Palden Lhamo), Central Tibet, c. 1750–1850, opaque watercolor and gold on cotton cloth, H: 28-1/2 in. (72.4 cm. W: 21-1/4 in (54 cm.). (Los Angeles County Museum of Art. From the Nasli and Alice Heeramaneck Collection, Museum Associate Purchase (M. 83. 105.17).)

Shaw develops this concern for women figures and practitioners more fully in *Passionate Enlightenment*, where her research into Tantric Buddhism exposes many aspects of its patriarchal, gynophobic nature.

In an interview with Ellen Pearlman in *Tricycle*, Shaw clarifies her view of “the importance of women in the tradition of tantric teachings and practices.” For her, “Tantric Buddhism is a nonmonastic, noncelibate strand of Indian, Himalayan, and Tibetan Buddhist practice that seeks to weave every aspect of daily life, intimacy, and passion into the path of liberation” (Pearlman 1994). In her book, Shaw argues against the dominant interpretation of Tantric practice, which de-emphasizes the role of women and sees them as marginalized and subordinated, if not downright degraded and exploited. Her desire to uncover the hidden role of women led her to embark on a two-year quest doing fieldwork in India and Nepal. What she found was extraordinary. She recovered forty previously unknown works by women from India’s Pala period (eighth through twelfth centuries CE). The Pala dynasty ruled

primarily in what is now known as Bihar and Bengal in India. The Pala Court practiced Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhism, which they eventually introduced to Tibet. With her important discovery, she has been able to reinterpret the history of Tantric Buddhism during its first four centuries. Shaw claims that the tantric theory of this period, heavily influenced by the Pala Empire, promoted an “ideal of cooperative, mutually liberating relationships between women and men while encouraging a sense of reliance on women as a source of spiritual insight and power” (Pearlman 1994).

Feminist critiques address male dominance on a global scale. Feminist theory suggests that this global dominance has shut down women’s ability to be seen and heard as a vital part of religious history. In *Passionate Enlightenment*, Shaw retrieves and writes this history anew with an energized force not seen previously in Buddhist Tantric studies. Women from around the globe, whether they are scholars, religious adherents, or political advocates, are increasingly aware of how gender biases have side-lined them, causing economic poverty and a lack of educational opportunities. They are beginning to see how these biases relegate them to the home and hide them away as caretakers of children and others. Critiques of these biases inform Shaw’s work. Greatly influenced by the pioneering feminist work of Gerda Lerner and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, she pursued this work. Shaw brings this feminist awareness into focus. She works to expose and redefine the androcentrism that exists throughout Tantric and other forms of Buddhism, even as she brings the latent feminine principle into focus (Shaw 1994, 12-14).

In one interview, she makes a poignant observation about perceptions and presences of women in our societies. “In 1999, I watched a procession of 800 women carrying different kinds of food to all the shrines in Patan. It was an amazing procession and a great tribute to all the women of their society,” Shaw said. “I look at female images in our own culture and ask whether there are images of female sacredness. The fund of positive female images is quite limited. I have observed that there is an affirmation when one is exposed to positive, divine images of females. It makes you think about gender in a different way” (University of Richmond 2010).

Sexuality in Tantric Buddhism

Shaw observes that in a Western, Judeo-Christian context, the sexual act is viewed dualistically. On the one hand, it is necessary for procreation and encouraged by religious leaders. On the other hand, sexual desires and actions are taboo and viewed as a sign of human sinfulness. The idea of ritual intimacy, as addressed in

Tantric Buddhist practices, totally escapes its purview. Shaw refutes dualistic notations of sexuality in her critique and reconsideration of this Western religious worldview. Her research identifies a value-laden sexuality in Tantric Buddhism, whose purpose is a quest for “right” relationship between consenting partners. This “right” relationship glorifies each partner’s spirit through an intimate exchange that creates self-growth as they join together. This joining together is a mutual sharing of each person’s soul, passion, heart, emotion, consciousness, will, essence, core, and being. In several interviews with various interlocutors, she states that this is a very different view than the one assumed in the research initiated by the Victorian British during their invasion of Tibet (December 1903–September 1904) and colonial occupation of India (1858–1947). Her rethinking of their misguided understanding is expressed by a response to one interview in 1999, in *Common Boundary*:

“I was compelled to discover what insights lay behind these images. I would look at the goddesses and their eyes would grip me and hold me,” Shaw said. “‘Look for us,’ they would command. ‘Look for us and you will find us.’” Shaw’s conclusion based on what she found about those goddesses is that women are, and have always been, the queens rather than the pawns in Tantric Buddhism. (Griffin 1999, 15)

[Shaw] goes on to say, “Both Wicca and Tantric Buddhism teach that the spirit and matter are intertwined. The divine can be manifest through the body, heart and mind. You don’t have to escape the world to discover spirituality. You don’t have to repress emotions, physical desires, and instincts. If you follow them to their source, their root, you will find spiritual knowledge and power” (Griffin 1999, 16).

Across her works, she concludes that the sexual union sought in Tantric Buddhist practice has nothing to do with pure sexual attraction. It is, rather, a mutual quest for a deepening of spiritual connection with each other which, according to Tantric belief, cannot be achieved without this type of union with the other.

In *Passionate Enlightenment*, Shaw explains that the Tantras are sacred texts and that their purpose is for a mutual advancement toward enlightenment. Partners are embarking on a journey that is without ego-gratification of either one. Their reasons for the practice, then, must be agreed upon with absolute clarity. Partners must share a precise idea of what those reasons are and that this is a sacred practice. Tantra practice of this kind is always initiated by the women—a principle that prevents the manipulative misuse that has occurred in the West. She continues to elucidate the subtleness that the texts describe here and that there is always an “elaborate decorum” to be followed by the male to be sure that he is worthy of her as a partner in this practice. Indeed, he pays her “homage” in various

ways according to the Yogini Tantras, which the Tibetans call the “Mother Tantra.” This homage can be in the form of prostrations, circumambulations—walking around her to the left—following the “etiquette behavior of the left,” serving her meals with his left hand, and remaining on her left side. These rituals prove that he is not self-serving but civilized and refined to make him worthy of being her spiritual companion. He is there to serve her. Shaw’s reconstructive expertise in the field of Tantric Buddhism and specialty in its Himalayan forms is not disputed. Through her work in *Passionate Enlightenment*, she has been instrumental in bringing a more greatly nuanced and corrected interpretation to the practice of Tantric Buddhism (Pearlman 1994).

Her Research — Archival, Art Historical, and Ethnographic

Dr. Shaw has done extensive field research in her discipline. She has traveled and investigated Tantric Buddhism in Nepal, India, and Japan. She has done comprehensive research—textual, art historical, and ethnographic—in various locations in India studying texts on women in Tantric Buddhism, such as Calcutta, Dharamsala, Ladakh, Dehra Dun, and Bodh Gaya—all significant sites known for rich Buddhist history, places that storehouse that history, or both.

Her textual research concentrated on and included searches for texts by women, biographical material on women, and evidence of women’s practices. Toward this end, she visited many Asian libraries and manuscript archives and even found crucial texts in collections held by religious groups and individual practitioners. She spent numerous hours translating and interpreting the texts. This work included consultation with scholars and masters with diverse areas of expertise, such as Sanskrit philology, Tibetan language, and Vajrayana practice and imagery (Shaw, pers. comm., June 7, 2020).

Works of art constituted another area of Shaw’s inquiry. Her exploration encompassed museums, repositories of archaeological photographs, temples, private collections, and the homes and workshops of artists currently producing Vajrayana art. The ethnographic dimension of her research focused on observing rituals, documenting activities at sacred sites, and conducting interviews of masters, scholars, and practitioners (Shaw, pers. comm., June 7, 2020).

She traveled to Japan in 1988 to interview the shingon (Japanese Buddhist Tantric) priest Shinichi Tsuda on his textual research on Indian Tantra. From 1988–89 and in 1991, she went to Calcutta, Dharamsala, Ladakh, Dehra Dun, and Bodh Gaya, India, as mentioned above, to conduct interviews and research in those locations on women and Tantric Buddhism. In 1992 and 1993, she went to Nepal to

research the dance tradition of the Vajracharya Buddhist priests of the Kathmandu Valley (Shaw, pers. comm., January 7, 2020).

In 1995, she did ethnographic and archival research into Tibetan and Newar living goddess traditions, sites, and manuscript collections in Nepal. She traveled to India and Nepal in 1997 and 1999–2000 to examine Buddhist goddesses in local museums, to translate Sanskrit texts about these goddesses, to photograph the annual Kali Puja and Durga Puja–Hindu goddess festivals in Calcutta—and finally to do field research on goddess traditions in Kathmandu, Nepal. This research produced her book, *Buddhist Goddesses of India*. From September to October 2007, she ventured to Kathmandu, Nepal once again. However, this time she went to gather information on the annual Kumari festival and the Purana Guhyeshvari shrine. She also conducted follow-up interviews of female trance mediums that are part of her book manuscript for her forthcoming volume, entitled *Buddhist Goddesses of Tibet and Nepal* (Shaw, pers. comm., June 7, 2020).

Skillful Means: Interviews and More

Shaw was featured online on the website *The Yogini Project*. This website is no longer active. However, during its tenure, it was a well-visited, empowering online resource. It was a vehicle for women practitioners of Buddhism, scholars, translators, filmmakers, bloggers, and others, well-known and respected in their respective fields, to come together as a community. Participants, including Shaw, were united in the mission to bring knowledge of the feminine in Vajrayana Buddhism and its practice to a broader audience.

Vajrayana Buddhism uses oral tradition to pass teachings from one disciple to the next. To this end, Shaw makes time for in-person, oral interviews that pass on her knowledge about what promotes a healthy view of sexuality for women through her explanation of Tantric Buddhism and what she calls the “feminine divine” (Shaw 2015, 32). Her interviews and other writings reflect and connect the sacred found in the feminine to the feminist work of her colleagues, such as Acharya Judith Simmer-Brown, who calls this concept in Buddhism the “feminine principle” (Simmer-Brown 2003, 40) and Neela Bhattacharya Saxena, who calls the feminine divine “gynocentric ‘pregnant nothingness’” (Saxena 2015, 4–18). Each woman has used her own “skillful means” to recognize and retrieve the voices of women in religious venues in India and the Himalayan region.

Shaw’s theological exploration encourages feminists to find the connection to the feminine divine. Shaw pushes her readers to remember and reconnect the mind and body and to embrace what she calls our embodied divinity, our body/mind principle, and our gynocentric pregnant nothingness. Shaw does this

through her involvement with dance, which began through her research in Kathmandu. In her review, entitled “Weaving and Dancing Embodied Theology,” of a new book by Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, Shaw explains how she sees dance as a theological retrieval of the body:

My embodied theology centers on dancing ... to invigorate my body after doctoral work [which] led me to a Tantric Buddhist dance practice in Kathmandu. The somatic exploration revealed patriarchal shaming and violations held as bodily memories and hidden barriers to well-being that dancing could break through. Rather than viewing my body as a receptive medium of experience or an instrument to do my bidding, I engage ... my body's spontaneous dancing, as a creative stream of guidance, wisdom, and healing. The dance at the heart of my embodied theology requires no formal training. To dance simply involves a shift from routine functional motions to moving deliberately, allowing visceral impulses to generate movements ... Attuning to our moving body can draw our awareness and senses to a single focus. (Shaw 2017)

It is through dance, as skillful means, that Shaw reintegrates the mind/body dualism, not only in Christianity but also in Buddhism. Shaw uses weaving as an analogy in this article to suggest that the energies represented by the divine female principle and pregnant nothingness intertwine through dance to create a theological cloth woven into a binding tapestry of religious practices and beliefs.

Another way that Shaw made a skillful contribution was at the recent “scholar salon” on May 27, 2020, hosted by the Association for the Study of Women and Mythology (ASWM). Her presentation was entitled, “Wild Felines and Divine Females as Guardians of Sacred Place.” Here Shaw’s research offers a new and different vision of wild felines and revered female figures. Her explorations of the fierce feline aspect of the feminine continues her work on the “feminine divine” in her early article on Shri (ཤྱི) Palden Lhamo (dpal ldan lha mo – དཔལ་ལྷན་ལྷ་མོ་), the “Glorious Goddess” and Protectress of Tibet. In the image she described in this earlier article, the goddess is dressed with a tiger-skin skirt, surrounded by other fierce figures that are her attendants, one of which is lion-headed. There she identified that these fierce animal symbols represent the protective instinct of a mother who will block any harm that may come to her child, whether animal or human (Huntington and Bangdel 2003, 498). In the 2020 salon, she talks about the “nuances of power evoked by the leonine imagery.” She looks at the “shared character of the leonine females as guardians of sacred place (caves, settlements, cities, empires, nations).” She examines the roles of the female lions in order to understand the reverence for, and trust vested in, a power that can be thought as common to wild felines, divine females, and women. She goes on to identify

ecofeminism as a response to the violent rise of patriarchal conquest and an effort to reclaim female, leonine ferocity in order to protect our sacred home, mother earth (AWSM 2020).

Beyond Passionate Enlightenment: Buddhist Goddesses of India, Tibet and Nepal

Shaw extended her research into women's presence in Tantric Buddhism by documenting Buddhist goddesses in India. This research, supported by a Fulbright scholarship, resulted in her book, *Buddhist Goddesses of India*, published by Princeton University Press in 2006. It won the ForeWard Magazine Religion Book of the Year Award in 2006 and a Choice Outstanding Academic Title Award in 2007. Kent Davis reviewed her research saying, "While some have criticized Shaw as a 'feminist,' my perception is that she is a realist, conducting research where previous scholars have missed crucial connections, or chosen not to make them" (Davis 2010, 4). In *Buddhist Goddesses of India*, Shaw shows herself to be a feminist who is also a realist. Shaw rethinks and highlights the actual roles of women and the feminine in Tantric Buddhism. She courageously champions a holistic, realistic way of seeing that identifies a need for new definitions in sacred sexuality that promote equality and mutuality. Her definitions enrich and broaden the West's often androcentric distortions of sexuality. Her search for women's divine presence within Buddhism and, in particular, Mahāyāna Buddhism is nuanced in this volume. Her fieldwork on this volume began with research in India because it is the source for Buddhism and then expanded to include Tibet, Nepal and the Himalayan region, other bastions of Tantric Buddhism. She expands the roles, incidences, existence, and manifestations of women throughout the Buddhist pantheon. She presents a comprehensive survey of Buddhist goddesses in this volume, which she claims no one has ever done. She explains concepts and their functions as they relate to goddesses in the Buddhist pantheon, such as *dhāraṇī*—sounds that "carry" the essence of the deity—and *vidyā*—"to know." Often, these essences carry a salvific function but are elusive and mystically able to change form. Shaw helps us to see that these deities act in many manifestations and do not live on the margins of Buddhist practice but are fully integrated.

Shaw combed libraries, museums, and monasteries in India for previously unknown or ignored primary sources. She also critically evaluated available secondary sources in light of her current research. With so much new information coming to light now, she has been able to correct misidentifications. Shaw deftly amends and furthers our knowledge about how Buddhism fits within the goddess movement today. She uses the term "goddess" boldly and authoritatively because,

based on her research, women's divine presence exists of its own accord, no longer tethered for its meaning to a dominant male gender role. In *Buddhist Goddesses of India*, Shaw states that "exploring the relationships between human and divine females will facilitate increasingly nuanced analyses of the varying status, roles, participation and contributions of Buddhist women in different historical venues" (Shaw 2015, 451).

Conclusion

The teachers would look at the sky for unusual cloud formations or a rainbow or something out of the ordinary. When they received that confirmation, they would work with me while continuing to watch for signs. They felt that it was significant that I was a woman. These teachings have been guarded by female spirits through the centuries, and the teachers felt it was natural that the *ḍākinīs* would choose to reveal the teachings to a woman at this time. So, they felt that I had been sent or chosen by the *ḍākinīs* to translate these teachings in the West. They believed that these teachings could not be revealed without the cooperation and blessings of the *ḍākinīs*. That is not to say that there is anything special about the transmitter, the method that was chosen to transmit them. What is special is the transmission. (Pearlman 1994)

Dr. Shaw's academic career has been one of transmission. Through her dedicated commitment to her subject, women in Tantric Buddhism, she has transmitted a critical reassessment and reconstruction of the feminine principle that not only lifts the role, work, and knowledge of women into a broader audience but builds an important foundation for women within Tantric theory and practice in Tibet and the rest of the world. By doing so, she has addressed misconceptions around Tantric sexual practices that have relegated women to a servile role in this ritual system, lifted up the positive mutuality involved in these practices, and reconceived women as honorable and dignified in their equal access to enlightenment. Shaw's enormous body of work, including over one hundred book chapters, articles, conference papers, symposia, lectures, essays, dance presentations, and interviews, has transmitted transformative information about the practices and mystical rituals of Tantric Buddhism from the monasteries, lamas, and gurus of India, Tibet, and Nepal, to Western culture to create a more informed global understanding about where women belong within religious discourse.

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Notes

1. Many of Shaw's teachers listed here are still practicing, doing ministry as their lineages continue. Here is a listing of their websites in order: 1. His Eminence Kensur Kyabje Lati Rinpoche (www.lionsroar.com/his-eminence-kensur-kyabje-lati-rinpoche-spiritual-advisor-to-the-dalai-lama-1922-2010/); 2. Venerable Tara Tulku Rinpoche (www.shambhala.com/snowlion_articles/ventara-tulku-rinpoche-gives-guhyasamaja-in-toronto); 3. Ayang Rinpoche (ayangrinpoche.org/about-ayang-rinpoche); 4. Khenchen Konchog Gyaltsen Rinpoche (drikungdharma.org/khenchen-konchog-gyaltsen-rinpoche); 5. Shamar Rinpoche, the 14th Shamarpa or 'Red Hat Karmapa (www.diamondway-buddhism.org/buddhist-teachers/shamar-rinpoche); 6. "His Eminence Nenang Pawo Rinpoche (kagyuu.org/eminence-nenang-pawo-rinpoche); 7. the Venerable Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche (gampoabbey.org/our-abbot-the-venerable-khenchen-thrangu-rinpoche); 8. Thrangu Rinpoche (thrangumonastery.org/teachers/v-v-thrangu-rinpoche); 9. His Eminence Luding Khenchen Rinpoche (www.tsechen.org/index.php/english/about-sakya/sakya-masters/44-his-eminence-luding-khenchen-rinpoche); 10. His Holiness the 41st Sakya Trichen (hhsakyatrizin.net/sakya-trichen); 11. H. E. Jetsun Chimey Luding (www.sakyangongaling.it/h-e-jetsun-chimey-luding); 12. His Eminence Luding Khenchen Rinpoche (www.tsechen.org/index.php/english/about-sakya/sakya-masters/44-his-eminence-luding-khenchen-rinpoche); 13. Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche (shechen.org/spiritual-development/teachers/dilgo-khyentse-rinpoche); 14. Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche (www.shambhala.com/authors/g-n/dilgo-khyentse-rinpoche.html); 15. Minling Trichen Rinpoche (www.nyingma.com/artman/publish/mindrolling_trichen_rinpoche_.shtml); 16. Tulku Thondup Rinpoche (www.tulkuthondup.com/about-tulku-thondup-rinpoche); 17. Lama Tsultrim Allione (www.taramandala.org/introduction/lama-tsultrim-allione/bio/).