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Review of: Women Living Zen

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part of the twentieth century. Unfortunately, this is only one chapter in the book. One wishes more of the book read like this.

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JAPAN

Women Living Zen. By PAULA KANE ROBINSON ARAI. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. xix, 233 pp. \$39.95 (cloth).

This is an anthropological study, carried out with love, care, and attention to detail, of the Japanese Sōtō nuns. Why would modern (Japanese) women want to give up the comforts of modern life, part with their beautiful hair—a powerful symbol of womanhood—and become monastics? What are their self-perceptions and their daily lives like? Arai ably answers these questions. She first takes the reader on a journey through the history of Japanese monastic Buddhist tradition, which began when three women were ordained sometime around the year 590. She then clarifies the modern academic arguments surrounding Dōgen's view of women's capacity for enlightenment, and upholds the egalitarian interpretation of Dōgen (which is the interpretation held by the nuns). She next lets the reader experience, first hand, the lives of contemporary Sōtō Zen nuns. By the end of the journey, readers will find themselves moved, their humanity reassured and refreshed.

Arai deftly shows how confident and competent these monastic women are—far different from the uninformed perception of nuns as second-class citizens—especially in her account of how the nuns succeeded, during the last one hundred years, in claiming their rights to temple leadership, Dharma transmission, and advanced education from within the structure and despite the strictures of the highly male-dominated Sōtō Zen Administration. To historically minded readers, chapters 2 (Historical Background) and 3 (Twentieth-Century Leadership) offer a wealth of information. For those who wish to get to know the thoughts and daily lives of the nuns, chapters 4 (The Monastic Practices of Zen Nuns) and 5 (Motivations, Commitments, and Self-Perceptions) contain singularly insightful accounts.

One of the main reasons why nuns were able to improve their status within the Sōtō sect turns out to be their firm and abiding commitment to the monastic way of life, as laid out by Dōgen. Arai reminds the reader, whenever necessary, that monastic women are empowered by Dōgen's egalitarian conviction of women's ability to attain enlightenment. Arai emphasizes the contrast that presently holds in Japan: whereas most monks get married, practically every nun remains single, which enables her to devote her energy to important tasks. This, in turn, enhances the nuns' sectarian position. For instance, Kojima Kendō, a key figure in the "Nuns' Rights Movement," distinguished herself in the ministry in Hawaii, 1938–41, and Kitō Shunkō, Arai's "bodhisattva," who introduced her to the world of Sōtō nuns, worked to help establish the Japanese Temple in Bodh Gaya, India. These women could not have done their

job had they been married (p. 140). This is just another example of how female monastics today animate Japanese Buddhism by their commitment to the ideal of monasticism.

Arai concludes that Sōtō nuns are the mainstay of contemporary monastic life, and that these women have become the carriers of traditional Japanese culture—be it tea ceremony, flower arrangement, cooking, calligraphy, composition of poetry in Chinese, or polite use of the Japanese language, *keigo*. Hence, monastic women play a vital role in society and history, by preserving the Japanese culture.

A few quibbles and comments: my article, “Women in Shinto: Images Remembered,” in Arvind Sharma, ed., *Religion and Women* (SUNY 1994), if cited, would have supported Arai’s emphasis on the power of female spirituality (pp. 32–33). The effect of the post–World War II legal and social changes under the Allied Occupation Forces seems to merit more attention and analysis as they obviously improved the nuns’ status within the Sōtō sect. I personally would have liked to see some accounts of monks and the Sōtō Administration in reaction to (or against) the nuns’ rights movements, because I would think the struggle on the part of monastic women to attain equality was not always easy and could not be realized without the understanding and compassion of their male colleagues. Were there significant male monastic figures who helped diminish the monkish discrimination against nuns? Another question that often crossed my mind while reading the book was the position of nuns in Rinzai Zen. Do they enjoy equality similar to that the Sōtō nuns enjoy? There is another small point: because there are a number of monastic males who are committed to celibacy, a sweeping statement such as “monks usually defer these tasks [of arranging flowers and serving tea to guests] to their wives” (p. 114) might fall too harshly on some celibate male monk ears.

Typographic errors are few: it is *sengjia*, not *seng-chia*, in *pinyin* (p. 14); it is Chūō-sen, not Chūo-sen (p. 57). And there is one very felicitous typo on page 122: “Many of these women perceive their monastic experience to be fun,” until one reads the next line, “damentally,” and realizes that a hyphen is missing. But this happy omission of a hyphen strengthens the image of these joyous monastic women, whose photos included in the book are full of radiant smiles!

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Nōmai Dance Drama: A Surviving Spirit of Medieval Japan. By SUSAN M. ASAI.
Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 1999. viii, 248 pp. \$65.00.

Nōmai are ritual, narrative, and comic performances belonging to the *Yamabushi kagura* tradition. They are performed by men in a number of villages in the Higashidorimura district near Osorezan on the Shimokita Peninsula of Northern Honshu. Susan Asai describes the religious and historical setting, as well as the training, staging and, in particular, musical structure of this folk performing art. Based on a year of on-site fieldwork, when she documented performances and training sessions, interviewed numerous masters, and experienced ways in which *nōmai* functioned within the community, her research brings together important information on a little-studied subject.

Yamabushi kagura was brought to Northern Honshu by mountain ascetics well known for their powers in exorcism. Their *shūgendō* sect combines Buddhism, Shinto,