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Dakini's Warm Breath: The Feminine Principle in Tibetan Buddhism

By Judith Simmer-Brown



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The primary emblem of the feminine in Tibetan Buddhism is the dakini, or "sky-dancer," a semi-wrathful spirit-woman who manifests in visions, dreams, and meditation experiences. Western scholars and interpreters of the dakini, influenced by Jungian psychology and feminist goddess theology, have shaped a contemporary critique of Tibetan Buddhism in which the dakini is seen as a psychological "shadow," a feminine savior, or an objectified product of patriarchal fantasy. According to Judith Simmer-Brown—who writes from the point of view of an experienced practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism—such interpretations are inadequate.

In the spiritual journey of the meditator, Simmer-Brown demonstrates, the dakini symbolizes levels of personal realization: the sacredness of the body, both female and male; the profound meeting point of body and mind in meditation; the visionary realm of ritual practice; and the empty, spacious qualities of mind itself. When the meditator encounters the dakini, living spiritual experience is activated in a nonconceptual manner by her direct gaze, her radiant body, and her compassionate revelation of reality. Grounded in the author's personal encounter with the dakini, this unique study will appeal to both male and female spiritual seekers interested in goddess worship, women's spirituality, and the tantric tradition.



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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Simmer-Brown (chair, religious studies, Naropa Univ.) has produced a comprehensive, scholarly, and intriguing study of "dakini," the feminine principle in Tibetan Buddhism. She defines dakini as a symbol "who personifies in Tibetan Buddhism the spiritual process of surrendering expectation and concept, revealing limitless space and pristine awareness." The methodology she employs in her study includes both scholarly preparation and training in Vajrayana Buddhist practice traditions. She is sensitive to and articulate about feminist issues related to her subject and on this basis finds the prevailing modes of feminist and Jungian paradigms lacking in their assessment of dakini. Therefore, she proposes more appropriate methodologies that draw on the disciplines of history of religions and gender studies. As she reviews the Indian historical background of dakini, she is careful to differentiate dakini in Tibetan tantric literature from dakini's "Hindu tantric cousins." While Thinley Norbu's *Magic Dance: The Display of the Self-Nature of the Five Wisdom Dakinis* is more poetic, Simmer-Brown's work is more scholarly and focused. It also includes an examination of the hagiographic lore about dakini and ends with a description of dakini as the protector of tantric teachings and midwife of the transmission of teachings. Recommended as a landmark study which will be a useful addition to any library's holdings on Tibetan Buddhism. David Bourquin, California State Univ., San Bernardino

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Review

"A comprehensive, scholarly, and intriguing study of 'dakini,' the feminine principle of Tibetan Buddhism. A landmark study."—*Library Journal*

"Simmer-Brown has written what is destined to be a classic among vajrayana practitioners, Buddhists of other schools, and readers interested in Buddhism."—*Shambhala Sun*

"*Dakini's Warm Breath* is not only readable, but exhilaratingly lucid."—*Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*

"A scholarly and fascinating exploration into the feminine principle in Tibetan Buddhism."—*Bodhi Tree Book Review*

"A book-length discussion of dakinis, who are one of the most elusive aspects of Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism, is a welcome addition to the growing literature on symbols of the feminine in Buddhism. Simmer-Brown skillfully interweaves traditional stories with commentaries by contemporary Buddhist teachers to provide the most complete discussion of this topic to date."—Rita Gross, author of *Buddhism after Patriarchy* and *Soaring and Settling: Buddhist Perspectives on Contemporary Social and Religious Issues*

From the Inside Flap

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spirit-woman who manifests in visions, dreams, and meditation experiences. Western scholars and interpreters of the dakini, influenced by Jungian psychology and feminist goddess theology, have shaped a contemporary critique of Tibetan Buddhism in which the dakini is seen as a psychological "shadow," a feminine savior, or an objectified product of patriarchal fantasy. According to Judith Simmer-Brown--who writes from the point of view of an experienced practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism--such interpretations are inadequate.

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