

***Tara: The Liberating Power of the Female Buddha.* By Rachael Wooten. Boulder, Colorado, 2020. viii+312. \$17.99 (paper).**

“We hold in our hearts the deep wish that all beings, not simply ourselves, will benefit from our practice” (3). This elegant encouragement from the heart of Buddhism pervades Rachael Wooten’s *Tara: The Liberating Power of the Female Buddha*. From the first chapters, the reader has the sense that, not only is author encouraging us on our journey, but that the power of Tara herself is present as we encounter this text. We ourselves are part of a greater whole. Wooten’s long-time engagement with, and delight in, Tara greets us graciously in these pages; her generosity as an author is palpable.

I began this review of with a touch of writer’s block, so, I created an experiment: to call upon Tara, specifically Tara Who Fulfills All Activities, one of the twenty-two unique Tara meditations offered here, and ask for help. This form of Tara “activates [your] feeling of connection to the limitless potential within [you]” (225).

Wooten encourages readers to use the depiction of Tara on the inside flap of the front cover as a visual focus. I placed the image of Green Tara (lovingly rendered for the book by Giovanna Silvani-Weidmann) in my prayer space, and said, “Okay, Tara Who Fulfills All Activities, please help me find my voice.” Within hours, my direction emerged, and words began to flow.

Author Rachael Wooten is a Zurich-trained Jungian analyst, psychologist and interfaith activist, whose path has been informed and deepened by her engagement with Buddhism, Christianity, Indigenous traditions, and Judaism. As such, she writes about Tara with a careful eye on deep ecumenism, a term she learned from Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, meaning “we can and should find nourishment in traditions other than our own. No single spiritual path contains all of the ‘vitamins’ that are needed. [Schachter-Shalomi] wrote that we must undertake ‘the more intrepid exploration of deep ecumenism in which one learns about oneself through participatory engagement with another religion or tradition.’” (from [www.aleph.org](http://www.aleph.org)) Informed by this stance, Wooten has created an approach to Tara that can resonate with readers from a range of backgrounds, both within and outside Buddhism.

Weaving Tara teachings, praxis, sacred stories, personal reflections and drawing on stories from work with clients, Wooten guides an introduction to the twenty-two forms of Tara. Every chapter introduces us to a form of Tara, each with a unique appearance, reflections, praises (drawn from traditional Buddhist texts), a mantra and a practice to allow Tara to be fully present with particular aspects of our lives. Wooten includes rich instruction from traditional sources, a framework for practice, step-by-step instructions in formal *sadhana*, along with accessible, shorter forms. Wooten’s expertise in the topic, profound and accessible, helps the reader to see Tara as helper, companion, clearer of obstacles and creative, nurturing presence.

I am certain there are no “wrong answers” as to which manifestation of Tara to engage: ultimately the particulars of her expression are less vital than the engagement itself. If the reader’s intention is to use the book as a guide for personal practice, it takes time to get to know the various images of Tara and how they might fit particular situations.

*Tara* should have a wide readership, with three main areas of reach: Wooten's work is appropriate for academic settings. The combination of explication and practice would make this a welcome addition to undergraduate Buddhist studies. With Wooten's strong background in psychology, *Tara* fits into psychology of religion studies as well.

Because Tara brings forward feminine imagery and qualities, the text would serve well in feminist studies of comparative religion. Wooten notes that Tara's names (such as Queen of Heaven and Evening Star) "are also associated with Inanna and Mary, revealing the archetypal thread of the Divine feminine woven throughout history" (163). A conversation between Wooten's *Tara* and Joyce Rupp's *Your Sorrow is My Sorrow: Hope and Strength in Times of Suffering*, which traces a path through the life of Mary, mother of Jesus, and Lynn Gottlieb's book on the Shechinah, *She Who Dwells Within: Feminist Vision of a Renewed Judaism*, for example, would be enriching.

Finally, general readers interested in Buddhism, personal praxis or feminine theology will find a welcome companion here. As noted, surveying the book in its entirety to become acquainted with Tara's manifestations is helpful in creating personal practice.

One of the great ecumenical teachers of the twentieth century, Ram Dass (born Richard Alpert and raised in Judaism), told a story about a young Jewish man whose parents were deeply concerned about his engagement with Buddhism. The young man said to Ram Dass, "When I'm a Buddhist, my parents go crazy, but when I am the Buddha, they love it." Wooten's exceptional awareness of deep ecumenism and archetypes should reassure reader of any background that there is no need to become Buddhist to engage with Tara; there is no triumphalism here.

Wooten's voice as an author is congenial and inviting. She shares many of her own experiences in unfolding Tara. Wooten's humanness—her struggles, snags, triumphs, and insights—assure the reader that this is not a "should" book. Rather, it is a generous, gentle offering of tools to the reader from an experienced practitioner.

Beloved Lebanese poet Kahlil Gibran wrote that "When you work you are a flute through whose heart the whispering of the hours turns to music. . . work is love made visible." Reading this book is like hearing a love song. By themselves, Wooten's love of Tara and her genuine affection and hopes for the reader make this book informative, but also shape it as a guide to revisit regularly for support and encouragement. In *Tara*, Rachael Wooten's voice is that flute. She has done the work of making Tara's compassion visible.

Chava Bahle  
Suttons Bay, Michigan



The views, opinions, and positions expressed in all articles published by the *Journal of Interreligious Studies* (JIRS) are the authors' own and do not reflect or represent those of the JIRS staff, the JIRS Board of Advisors, or JIRS publishing partners.