



Transforming Tara; Meanings in Motion

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Transforming Tara explores what Green Tara, a female Tibetan Buddhist deity means to a group of Australian women practicing Tibetan Buddhism. Representations of the feminine have an enormous impact upon shaping women's self-perceptions. This research offers an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the appeal that Buddhist female religious symbols have for Western women, as well as the personal and social implications of deity practices. As such, the paper contributes further knowledge to the relatively little dedicated sociological research and analysis that has been conducted on the appeal of Buddhism for Australian individuals.

The results are based on focus groups I conducted with female Tibetan Buddhist practitioners in Australia. The research revealed that Tara's femaleness, her diverse, multiple aspects and her compassionate activity in the world were of greatest significance to the women interviewed. As a female embodying multiple and apparently conflicting traits, Tara gave permission to the women to adopt attributes that lie outside the more unilateral prescriptions of their own cultural (religious) symbols. There was evidence to suggest that this facilitated a degree of personal transformation that also affected social relations in progressive ways. The degree to which such effects can be considered to be a form of social activism or Engaged Buddhism is explored. The paper concludes that the integration of personal and social change constitutes a significant appeal of Green Tara specifically and Tibetan Buddhism generally.