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Sakyadhita

International Association of Buddhist Women

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Awakening to the World of Buddhist Women: 2023 Sakyadhita Conference in Korea

by Bhiksuni Thubten Jampa

Some months ago, Bhiksuni Thubten Chodron asked me if I would join Bhiksuni Samten to hold a workshop at the 18th Sakyadhita International Conference in Seoul, South Korea. Of course, I could not say no. This was an amazing opportunity to share my experiences training at Sravasti Abbey for about 11 years and to connect with so many amazing women and men, supporting each other in our efforts to empower women worldwide. Bhiksuni Chodron also told me it's a helpful conference if one is interested in forming a community. And indeed it was!

This article is just a short summary of some of the lectures, discussions, and cultural activities that were held at the 2023 Sakyadhita Conference. This was the first in-person Sakyadhita conference since 2019, due to Covid. Therefore, many participants looked forward to this conference in Seoul. The event was held at the COEX Convention and Exhibition Center, Seoul's largest event center, located in the Gangnam District. Bhiksuni Samten and I had the opportunity to present a workshop on "Monastic Training for Buddhist Nuns" as an essential part of empowering nuns. I will include my personal experience and information from conference meetings.

On June 23 and 24, conference attendees enjoyed many paper presentations, cultural performances, meditations, tea ceremonies, and an evening lecture on the topic, "Living in a Precarious World: Impermanence, Resilience, Awakening." The nearby Bongeunsa Korean Temple of the Jogye Order co-sponsored the event, along with several governmental departments, including The Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, and the Seoul Metropolitan Government. Bongeunsa took on the huge task of feeding up to 3,000 people three times a day and 5,000 people on Sunday! Bhiksuni Samten and I were amazed by this endeavor.

For me, it was surprising that at the opening ceremony, Oh Se-hoon, the mayor of Seoul, and even Yoon Suk-yeol, the president of Korea, sent their representatives to give messages of welcome to all the Sakyadhita participants. It was just amazing to hear how supportive the government was in hosting Sakyadhita in Seoul. These dignitaries spoke with great admiration about the *bhiksuni sangha* and the Buddha's teachings. I was in awe, thinking how wonderful it would be if our leaders in Europe or the U.S. would speak with such respect about monastics, and about the Buddha and his teachings – if they would support Buddhist events like this in our cities. That is unimaginable at this point, but "I have a dream" that, at some point, politicians will see the truth in the Buddha's teachings and come to respect them.

Korea has a long history of Buddhism, dating back to the 4th century. Today though, it is estimated that less than a quarter of the Korean people are Buddhist. More of these historical facts were presented on the second day in the keynote by Professor Eun-su Cho of Seoul National University, an active longtime member of Sakyadhita. In her talk, titled "What Does Modernity Mean for 19th-century Buddhist Women in Korea?" she noted that women work especially hard to create better conditions for their practice and to create a more meaningful life in the Dharma. Another presentation was about the initiative to create a database that collects data on hundreds of Korean *bhiksuni*s, including their stories, work, writings, and so on. Those who manage the project hope the database will be eventually be enriched with data about monastics and laywomen from all over the world.

On the morning of June 25, the paper sessions were all about the topic of "Women's Ordination, Past and Present." Bhiksunis Pema Dekyi and Namgyel Lhamo spoke about the full ordination of nuns (*bhiksuni*) in the Mūlasarvāstivāda tradition that was held in Bhutan in June 2022. Together with Dr. Tashi Zangmo of the Bhutan Nuns Foundation, they shared how this event evolved, including the joys and challenges of preparing an ordination ceremony for 142 nuns from seven different monasteries in Bhutan and a small number of nuns from other countries. In 2021, His Majesty the King of Bhutan, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, made a royal supplication, asking His Holiness the Je Khenpo, who is the head of the Drukpa Kagyu lineage in Bhutan, to conduct a *bhiksuni* ordination, supported by Her Majesty the Queen, Jetsun Pema Wangchuk. The couple oversaw the training and ordination of the nuns. This ordination event was historical and expected to continue every two years. This will bring huge changes to the nuns' ability to lead their own communities and uphold the teachings in the *vinaya*.

A scholar from the Cambodian Buddhist community, Marla Ouch, presented an update on the situation in Cambodia, where *bhiksuni* ordination is still not accepted. She founded the Cambodian Sangha Initiative to supporting a small number of nuns (so far) who wish to receive training as *sramaneri*s (novices) and eventually become fully ordained *bhiksuni*s. Unfortunately, most monks in Cambodia hold the belief that the *bhiksuni* lineage has been broken and therefore, women can no longer be fully ordained as *bhiksuni*s.

Vanessa R. Sasson presented her new book, *The Gathering: A Story of the First Buddhist Women*. With great passion for the nuns and their history, she shared how she came to write this book, the challenges and joys she encountered along the way, and what she hopes readers will get out of the book. It took her many years of research and personal development to be able to write this story about the first Buddhist women and their initial steps to request ordination from the Buddha. They showed great perseverance in their quest for ordination, which inspires so many women who are following in their footsteps even today.

On the morning of June 26, all the presentations were on the topic, "Pilgrimage, Precarity, and Practice." Many papers were presented, including one by a female Buddhist traveler in Bodhgaya who explained how this sacred site is still a place where women are very under-represented. Another presentation dealt with the situation of the Sri Lankan *bhiksuni*s during the Covid pandemic and how they continued their monastic life during this precarious time. In the afternoon, Bhiksuni Samten and I gave a 1.5-hour workshop with a brief presentation on the history of Sravasti Abbey and developing a monastic community. We shared at length how we learned the monastic rituals and the procedures for training as a monastic at Sravasti Abbey. We also facilitated a discussion group, as this is an essential part

of learning to integrate the Buddhist teachings into our lives.

On the last day, all presentations dealt with the topic of manifesting the Buddhadharma – how Buddhist practitioners apply the Dharma within their communities as chaplains and in prevention work to end violence against women and in families. A young teacher shared her work with engaged youth learning from Buddhist temples in Massachusetts. A young *bhiksuni* from the Vietnamese tradition presented practices of compassion to counteract the widespread phenomena of loneliness, which I hope enriched people greatly.

During the breaks and in the evenings, cultural programs were offered: galleries with Buddhist images, photo exhibits, tea ceremonies, traditional handcrafts such as making paper lanterns, dance and music, and more. At the beginning, middle, and end of the conference, we saw many performances of great musicians, traditional drumming performances, chanting, and such.

The Sakyadhita conference ended with a grand finale at the closing ceremony and a tour of Jingwansa Temple. This was another day of amazing presentations, dedications, musical performances, group discussions, and more. This was also a day where the different national branches of Sakyadhita came together to meet with each other and give their pledges for future development. I had the opportunity to meet the co-founders of Sakyadhita Germany and France, Dr. Thea Mohr and Gabriela Frey. During a short group discussion on the "Future of Buddhist Monasticism" with Korean nuns and laypeople, they really encouraged me to meet Bhiksuni Bongak, the president of the Korean Bhiksuni Association of the Jogye Order, who was also the convener of the 2023 Sakyadhita Conference. An English-speaking nun introduced me to Bhiksuni Bongak and shared my aspiration to support a nuns' community in Europe. Bhiksuni Bongak, along with other Korean nuns, expressed her support and encouraged me to undertake this important task.

The 2023 Sakyadhita Conference was one of the most memorable events I have experienced. I enjoyed spending time with Bhiksuni Samten and so many other nuns and practitioners in Seoul, exchanging our thoughts, our struggles, our hopes, our knowledge, and encouraging each other along the path. This experience was surely due to the wise and compassionate guidance of my teacher, Bhiksuni Chodron. She could foresee that being at the Sakyadhita Conference would be beneficial, as it helped me make meaningful connections that will be inspiring and supportive while proceeding on the path.

Bhiksuni Thubten Jampa ordained and trained for 11 years at Sravasti Abbey, after which she returned to her native Germany. She traveled to South Korea to attend the 18th Sakyadhita International Conference at the request of Bhiksuni Chodron.

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Women Practitioners Inspiring and Supporting Each Other: The 18th Sakyadhita Conference

by Bhiksuni Thubten Samten

The 18th Sakyadhita Conference took place in Seoul, Korea, from June 23 to 27, 2023. I did not expect to be so deeply moved and inspired by the experience. There are many reasons that I can identify and many more may come to light over time. Being in the company of approximately 3,000 women, mostly nuns, was very powerful. To be in the company of women who have committed their lives to full-time Dharma practice in those numbers is a rare experience for a person living in North America. Waiting to cross a busy street and then walking with hundreds of nuns, lay women, and men as we headed to and from Bongeunsa Temple everyday was an unforgettable visual, with flowing robes, smiling faces, palms together when meeting.

The planning and organization of a conference of this size must have taken years, with many teams of people, contributing creative and innovative solutions and so many opportunities to practice fortitude to make the conference a rich and meaningful experience for all. In addition to the conference, our kind hosts offered meals to 3,000 people three times a day. Wonderful meals awaited us. There were no long waits and to ensure that the conference was eco-friendly, meals were served on actual plates and bowls. The dishwashing task must have been huge, but nothing was going into a landfill or recycling depot!

The opening ceremony of the conference included chanting in Pali, Chinese, Indonesian, Tibetan, Vietnamese, and Korean. Beautiful musical offerings by *bhiksuni* and lay musicians brought a sense of closeness and warmth to everyone in the filled-to-overflowing auditorium.

The many congratulatory speeches illustrated the joy and heartfelt wishes for all in attendance, making us feel welcome and rejoicing in this rare and precious opportunity. As described on the Sakyadhita website: "Working at the grassroots level, Sakyadhita provides a communications network among Buddhist women internationally. We promote research and publications on Buddhist women's history and

other topics of interest. Our members strive to create equal opportunities for women in all Buddhist traditions. We work to empower the world's 300 million Buddhist women to work for peace and social justice through local branches, offered free of charge online and through our biannual conferences."

The schedule for the five-day conference flowed seamlessly and seemingly without hitches. If there were any problems, they were handled in a graceful and careful way that did not come into view. On the first full day of the conference, we heard 11 papers that revolved around the topics of Buddhist women in Korea, gender stereotypes, and inspiring resilient figures. The topics for the following days included awakening; women's ordination past and present; pilgrimage, precarity and practice; and manifestations of Buddhadharma. Each and every presenter must have felt the support, appreciation, and gratitude expressed for their work in bringing these topics to our attention. I am looking forward to making the time to re-read each paper.

Dr. Sharon Suh, president of Sakyadhita International, interviewed Vanessa Sasson, scholar and author of *The Gathering; A Story of the First Buddhist Women*. This innovative approach made for a delightful and engaging session. Thoughtful and well-crafted questions allowed Vanessa to share inspiration she gained from the *Therigatha* and its commentary, and her process in researching and writing the book. The retelling of the story of the women's request for ordination shines a light on Vimala, Patacara, Bhadda Kundalakesa, and many others as they walk through the forest to request from the Buddha full access to the tradition. The beautifully written endnotes are just as interesting to read as the main body of the book.

Afternoon workshops were designed for people to gather in smaller groups. Allowing for interaction and discussion, these sessions were a wonderful way to start conversations and share experiences. Bhiksuni Thubten Jampa, who traveled from Germany, joined me in presenting a workshop where we shared how monastics are trained at Sravasti Abbey. Relating the many causes and conditions that led to Bhiksuni Thubten Chodron starting a monastery in northeastern Washington State with the specific purpose to establish the Dharma in the West for generations to come is always an inspiring story to share. We shared the importance and advantages of living in a community and described how one enters this monastic community, from being a lay person, training as an *anagarika*, taking novice ordination and eventually full ordination in a process open to women and men.

Providing translation for the workshops was an extremely kind and thoughtful addition to this conference. Ho Sook Kim appeared about five minutes before our session started, glanced at the notes we had prepared, and joyfully dove into the talk, allowing more than half of the people in our workshop, Korean speakers, to understand and fully participate. We were so grateful for your invaluable contribution, Ho Sook!

Sakyadhita, which means Daughters of the Buddha, is the resul of the first international conference on Buddhist Nuns that took place in 1987 in Bodhgaya, India. To quote from *Sakyadhita: Daughters of the Buddha*, edited by Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Bhiksuni Jampa Tseodron wrote:

> Many people have asked why this International Conference on Buddhist nuns in Bodhgaya has been attracting so much attention. No doubt one reason is the fact that this gathering is the first conference of Buddhist nuns to have taken place in India since the time of Buddha Sakyamuni. It is known that the bhiksus came together for several councils after the Buddha passed into final nirvana, but there is no evidence that bhiksunis played a role at any of these councils. Nevertheless, Buddha Sakyamuni taught that all sentient beings have the same potential (Buddha Nature) to obtain enlightenment, and women today have more freedom than ever before to explore and develop this potential.

The opening address of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama gave many people reassurance regarding the serious objectives of the conference. Some observers feared that the gathering could be misused as a platform for Western feminists in a blind battle for equal rights that would damage Buddhism. Yet all soon discovered that such fears

were unnecessary. The head of the Mahabodhi Temple Management Committee, a highly esteemed monk of the Theravada tradition, stated with pleasure: "Worries that some people had at the beginning of the conference have obviously not been confirmed. The conference took place in a very harmonious and peaceful atmosphere. The nuns can also count on my support."

The far-reaching long-range benefits of the conference are yet to be seen, but there are already some remarkable indications. Not only did the event have historical importance, it was also a landmark gathering of nuns and laywomen of nearly all traditions, with the support of many monks and lay men.

Would those who attended the Bodhgaya conference in 1987 have imagined that 36 years later, 3,000 people would come together to continue the work and the support for Buddhist women? Those of us who had the amazing opportunity to attend the conference in Korea this year had the direct, rich experience of meeting many practitioners from 31 different countries and many different Buddhist traditions. Words really cannot convey the magnificent experience that I had. The kindness and warmth of our Korean hosts is something that will stay with me.

The 18th Sakyadhita conference was a success on all levels. It is my hope that every single person involved in bringing this to fruition has a well-deserved rest and their hearts are filled with deep happiness from having invested so much virtuous effort. I am profoundly grateful to these people, to Bhiksuni Karma Lekshe Tsomo for her unwavering commitment to Sakyadhita, and to my teacher, Bhiksuni Thubten Chodron, for the opportunity to be part of the conference.

Bhiksuni Samten met Bhiksuni Thubten Chodron in 1996 when the future Bhiksuni Chonyi took the future Bhiksuni Samten to a Dharma talk at Dharma Friendship Foundation. The talk on the kindness of others and the way it was presented is deeply etched in her mind. Four Cloud Mountain retreats with Bhiksuni Chodron, eight months in India and Nepal studying the Dharma, one month of offering service at Sravasti Abbey, and a two-month retreat at Sravasti Abbey in 2008 fueled the fire to ordain. This took place August 26, 2010, and was followed by full ordination in Taiwan in March, 2012, when she became Sravasti Abbey's sixth bhiksuni. Right after finishing a Bachelor of Music degree, Bhiksuni Samten moved to Edmonton to pursue training as a corporeal mime artist. Five years later, a return to university to obtain a Bachelor of Education degree opened the door to teaching for the Edmonton Public School Board as a music teacher. Concurrently, Bhiksuni Samten became a founding member and performer with Kita No Taiko, Alberta's first Japanese drum group. At Sravasti Abbey, she is responsible for communicating with guests; assisting with all the retreats and programs; assisting with the forest thinning project; tracking down knapweed; answering email questions; and being part of the team managing the building of the Buddha Hall that will be completed in 2024.

Living in a Precarious and Precious World

by Gabriela Frey

The world is facing immense challenges. Escapism and discouragement do not help. As someone who is involved in international Buddhist women's networks, when I look back on the 2023 Sakyadhita Conference in South Korea, I understand why a life of solidarity, commitment, and awareness is rewarding. The daily news makes it obvious. We live in a precarious, endangered world: environmental

damage, wars, extremism, terrorism, pandemics, poverty, and domestic violence are spreading. Quite a few people try to escape from the oppressive reality by throwing themselves into too much work or losing themselves in overconsumption, discriminating against other people, becoming aggressive or depressed, drinking too much, or numbing themselves with drugs.

The many contributions to the conference by courageous and committed women showed impressively how the transformation from precarious to precious can be achieved under the most diverse life circumstances. But how can the current challenges be met with a clearer head, an open heart, and more equanimity? This question was posed by around 3,000 ordained and non-ordained Buddhist women at the latest conference of Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women, which organizes an international gathering every two years.

In 2023, the gathering took place in Seoul, South Korea, and several men were also among the participants. The title of the conference, "Living in a Precarious World," was followed by the encouraging subheading, "Transience, Resilience, Awakening," so that people could broaden their horizons for constructive solutions that help break out of habits and forge new paths in solidarity. The subtle play on words in the conference motto cannot be translated into German; in "Living in a Prec(ar)ious World," only two letters separate precarious (endangered) from precious (valuable). Precarious turns to precious.

Vanessa R. Sasson goes back to the early days of Buddhism in her book, *The Gathering: A Story of the First Budddhist Women*, which was presented at the conference. After years of research, the scholar of religious studies has summarized the experiences of the first Buddhist women in an impressive narrative format. Inspired by the *Therigatha*, the verses of awakened women, she describes how challenging it was for women in the early days of Buddhism to follow a self-determined and spiritual path. Trapped in patriarchal social structures, women needed incredibly strong determination to break out and find a way to escape

the suffering of enforced immaturity. It was only with great courage, sometimes despair and, above all, female solidarity across class boundaries that these women managed to be accepted into the Buddha's *sangha*, against massive resistance. But even as ordained nuns, their situation remained difficult.

Another important topic concerning the equality of women in the Buddhist world was brought forth by Dr. Tashi Zangmo, president of the Bhutan Nuns Foundation. Her personal life testifies to the great determination that Buddhist women in many countries around the world still need in order to go their own way. Tashi Zangmo was born in a Bhutanese village in 1963 and was the first girl in her family to attend school. She later traveled to India and the U.S. via a series of winding paths, including a period as a secretary, and went on to study Buddhology and Development Studies, a subject area that deals with the causes and effects of international development and globalization processes, completing her doctorate. At the conference, she reported on how, through perseverance, solidarity, and with the support of the Queen and King of Bhutan, the full ordination of women in the Tibetan Bhutan Nuns Foundation tradition was finally restored in the country, despite massive opposition. For those who wish to learn more, the book *Liberated* by Gelongma Pema Deki, published under her former name Emma Slade, is a good read. She was one of the 142 women who were fully ordained in Bhutan in June 2022. The book describes her journey from life as a banker to becoming a nun and founder of the award-winning aid organization Opening your Heart to Bhutan.[1]

Stemming Domestic Violence

Unconscious fears and a lack of communication skills are the main factors that lead to uncontrolled emotional outbursts and aggressive misbehavior. Because violence against women has reached alarming proportions worldwide, Australians Diana Cousens and Anna Halafoff have helped launch a campaign to prevent violence in the family and against women in Buddhist communities, which they presented at the conference. Diana Cousens is deputy chair of the Buddhist Council of of Victoria and an honorary member of

Catholic University Anna Halafoff is a professor of sociology at Deakin University in Melbourne and also a Buddhist.

The anti-violence campaign was initially funded by the Australian Government and involved all religious communities. The Buddhist Council of Victoria addressed and deepened the topic for Buddhists. The two speakers emphasized that domestic violence is a major problem globally, including not only physical and sexual violence, but also financial and emotional abuse. Although many countries have modernized their legislation and authorities have introduced packages of measures, the number of victims is increasing year by year. In addition to the direct victims of violence, others in the immediate environment are often also affected, especially children.

Unfortunately, domestic violence also occurs among members of religious communities. In a broad-based survey conducted a few years ago, a large majority of the population was even certain that religious beliefs are a possible additional cause of violence against women: The survey confirmed that 60 percent of respondents in Europe and as many as 70 percent in Germany accept this.[2] Political and legal frameworks alone are clearly not enough. People in difficult life situations need more easily accessible help. The pilot project launched in Victoria to prevent violence in families includes a handbook for those responsible for religious communities on how to deal with domestic violence.

Another project deals with the topic of how to encourage positive family relationships. A whole range of resources have been developed especially for children. These include, for example, the 100-positive-words postcard on dealing with strong emotions, a poster on how to be a good friend, and infographics on how to treat other people with respect and how to deal with one's own anger. Some of the materials have been translated into several Asian languages. It is mainly unconscious fears and a lack of communication skills that lead to uncontrolled emotional outbursts and aggressive misbehavior, the presenters explained.

From a Buddhist perspective, the presenters emphasized, many people are afraid of the uncertain ground of change and impermanence. This is the case, for example, when someone

cannot accept that their partner is developing new career aspirations, making new friends, or wishing to separate, and hence resorts to violence to stop this. It is therefore important for all of us to recognize and accept the reality of impermanence and ultimately learn to no longer see it as a threat. Our human existence and our environment are precious, and it is in our mutual interests to dedicate ourselves consciously and with a loving heart to caring for others every day.

Solidary, Resilient and Conscious

In conclusion, I would like to recommend that all those who despair of this world with its vast problems and great suffering take part in a Sakyadhita conference. In Seoul, I once again realized how closely impermanence, resilience, and awakening are interconnected. The Buddhist perspective teaches us about impermanence and interdependence. Our human existence and our environment are precious, and it is in the interest of our common well-being to consciously and lovingly care for others every day. If we endeavor to live this way of life together, step by step, it will increase our solidarity with all people, regardless of gender, because we need to free ourselves from our mental gender prisons. This enables us to be more resilient in the face of adversity, leading to a comprehensive awareness, and ultimately to awakening.

Translated from German and reprinted with the kind permission of Buddhismus Aktuell. *For more information on Buddhist women in Europe, visit sakyadhitafrance.org, sakyadhita-germany.org, europeanbuddhistunion.org/network-buddhist-women-in-europe.*

Notes

1. Her work is featured at www.openingyourhearttobhutan.com.
2. https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/166496/umfrage/meinung-ueber-religion-als-ursache-fuer-haeusliche-gewalt-gegen-frauen/

Poaching Textual Authority: The Reception of the *Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya*

Introduction by Amy Paris Langenberg

The four essays collected here were originally presented as a panel at the 2022 American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting. In organizing this panel, Nicholas Witkowski and I chose to emphasize the theme of reception: how *Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya* has been interpreted and practiced in different

historical and cultural contexts. We viewed this as a generative way to address connections between the textual tradition of the Vinaya and the living communities past and present for whom these texts, or the idea of these texts, have importance. A reception-oriented approach shifts the focus from questions of continuity, fealty, and authority to the varied experiences of voices, bodies, and cultures receiving the tradition. We called the panel "Poaching Textual Authority," because, in taking the business of interpretation into their own hands, the Buddhist individuals and communities described in these essays are, in essence, channeling the authority of Buddhist canonical texts, diverting that energy into their own communities and traditions, to various effects and purposes.

Two of the essays consider the reception of Vinaya by living Buddhist nuns' communities, while two address the reception of Vinaya in particular premodern historical moments. Each essay brings to light fascinating aspects of *bhikṣuṇī* worlds and *bhikṣuṇī* texts.

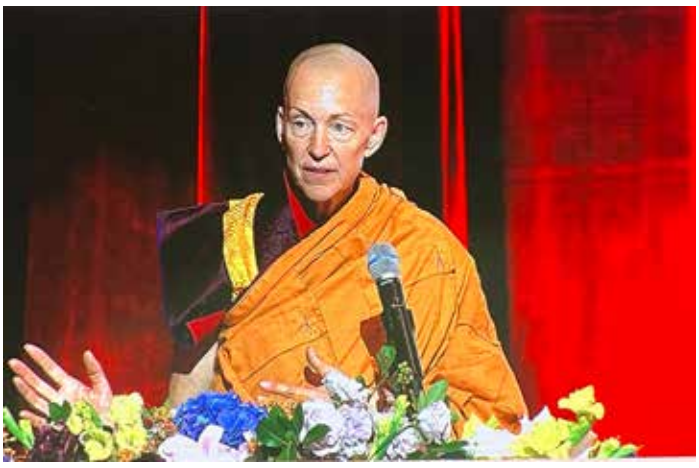
More than a Text: The Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya and the Social Status of Contemporary Bhutanese Nuns

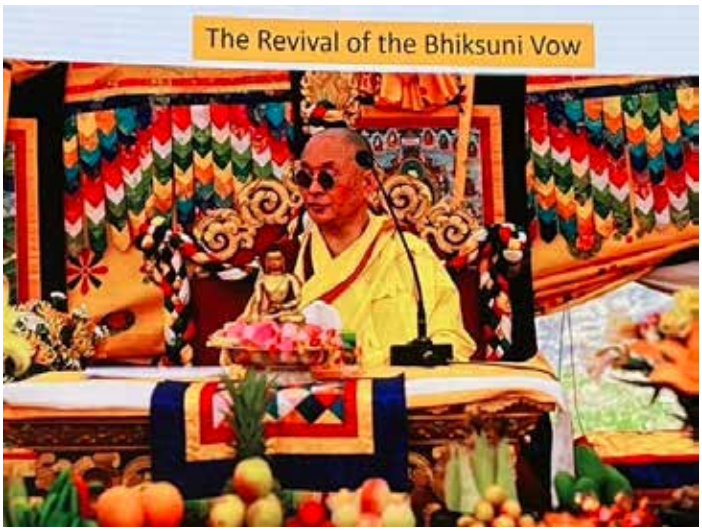
by Manuel Lopez

On June 21, 2022, at the request of the king of Bhutan Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck and the Queen Mother Gyalyum Tshering Yangdon Wangchuck, the 70th Je Khenpo, Tulku Jigme Chodrak conducted a *bhikṣuṇī* ordination for 144 nuns, restoring the Mūlasarvāstivāda female lineage in the Himalayan tradition in an event organized by the Bhutan Nuns Foundation. It is difficult to overstate the importance of this event. By most accounts, *bhikṣuṇī* ordination had never been introduced to Tibet or Bhutan, and nuns only had access to novice status (Skt. śrāmaṇerikā, Tib. *dge tshul ma*) since the introduction of Buddhism in the region.

The issue of female ordination has been central to the modern debate about the status and education of Buddhist nuns. As Amy Langenberg (2018) and others have observed, these issues are interconnected since the ordination issue and access to the *Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya* has a direct impact on the ability of women to achieve the same ritual, educational, and legal status of men within the Buddhist order. The lack of full female ordination in many Buddhist countries places nuns in a position of institutional subordination with impoverished educational opportunities and limited access to Buddhist teachings and training from qualified teachers. Often, the *bhikṣuṇī vinaya* has operated not so much as a received text, a text that we know exists in the canon as well as through its numerous commentaries, but as an ideal, an aspiration, and an inspiration, a symbol of the possibilities for nuns in terms of social status and ritual status, as well as in terms of educational opportunities.

The work of Sakyadhita, the International Association of Buddhist Women, has been central in supporting Buddhist women in their pursuit of full ordination and access to the *Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya* since, according to Venerable Karma Lekshe Tsomo, "the status of nuns within the Buddhist tradition seems to correlate with educational status." The restoration of full ordination is not without its critics, however. A post-colonial discourse problematizes and questions the representation of autochthonous ideas and values of Buddhist women in general, and nuns in particular, through the theoretical lens of liberal feminism. Criticisms are also voiced by conservatives within the Buddhist institutional establishment, who have opposed the restoration of the lineage in those countries where it disappeared arguing that, once lost, it cannot be revived. Attempts at restoring it using a dual sangha ceremony, which in Himalayan Buddhism would include male monks from the Mūlasarvāstivāda tradition, and female nuns from the Dharmaguptaka lineage, has also been questioned since the result would not be a pure lineage. Despite the resistance to change, this last option has





been the approach taken by many nuns who, over the last few decades, have decided to pursue full ordination. However, it has not greatly affected their social, ritual, or educational status once they returned to their nunneries.

In Bhutan, the Je Khenpo, following the lead of the royal family and with the instrumental help of the Bhutan Nuns Foundation, decided to proceed with a single sangha ceremony. His justification was that, despite the objections coming from some quarters, "Vinaya texts such as the *Kṣudrakāgama* and the *Vinaya-uttaragrantha* and many learned commentaries on Vinaya state that *Bhikṣuṇī* vow can come from a purely male *Bhikṣu* Sangha and thus female *Bhikṣuṇī* ordination can be given by male *Bhikṣus* if there are no *Bhikṣuṇī*s." Contemporary figures like the Dalai Lama and the Karmapa have been supportive of the process and have advocated for a path forward for many years already.

The ceremony was the culmination of a remarkable transformation of the lives of nuns in Bhutan over the last few decades. Just forty years ago there were only three nunneries in Bhutan: Jachung Karmo in Punakha, Kila Gonpa in Paro, and Kunga Rabten in Trongsa. Jachung Karmo, the oldest of the existing nunneries in Bhutan was, at the time, abandoned, and had been offered to the Central Monastic Body as a retreat place for monks. Kunga Rabten had been built as a small temple in 1968 by Khenpo Tsultrim Gyatso, a Tibetan lama exiled in Bhutan after the occupation of Tibet in 1959, to host a small group of eleven Tibetan nuns who came with him into exile. Kila Gonpa only had a handful of nuns. None of the nunneries offered formal education to nuns, none of the Bhutanese nuns, with one single exception, were ordained (not even as novice nuns), and because of that, most of them did not even wear formal robes.

It is also important to acknowledge that the path to full ordination was paved by the many Bhutanese nuns who, over the last few decades took important steps that led to this moment. Many Bhutanese women who were interested in becoming nuns traveled to India to receive novice ordination and an education that they could not receive in their own country. The exposure of these nuns to the struggles, but also to the new educational opportunities that Tibetan nuns were offered in India, inspired them to work to transform the status and education of nuns in Bhutan over the following decades. The results have been quite remarkable. During this period, nuns have grown from a handful to over 1,200, and nunneries have gone from the three already mentioned to thirty (and counting), with many nunneries now also opening satellite nunneries or retreat centers in different parts of the country. Never in the history of Bhutan has there been as many nuns or as many nunneries, and Bhutan is currently living a remarkable period in which nuns are attaining a status as ordained nuns (and now, finally, as fully ordained nuns), and an education in numbers never seen in the history of the country.

The full ordination ceremony can be seen as the culmination of a process that was decades in the making. It is also the beginning of a new path, one in which access to the *Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya* is not merely an ideal anymore. The text can now be cracked opened, studied, and interpreted as it has never been done before. Now, Bhutanese nuns and, hopefully, other Himalayan nuns, will be able to create textual and ritual communities that will interpret the text in ways that accord to the opportunities and challenges of contemporary life. The Je Khenpo intimated as much in his speech to the nuns at the ceremony, acknowledging that times are changing, and "what used to be appropriate practice in the past can be a problem now, and what used to be inappropriate practice in the past can be now an appropriate practice. What the Buddha taught as 'permissible' and 'prohibited' must correspond to

such principle." These words seemed to acknowledge that, while tradition is important, Buddhism also needs to embrace change and adapt to new historical and social circumstances.

Although the implications are still not clear for the nuns themselves, this event can radically transform the status of nuns in the not-so-distant future. We must not forget though that access to the new ritual status afforded by the *bhikṣuṇī vinaya* does not imply equality between nuns and monks. Nuns now must follow more vows than monks in

all Buddhist traditions, including the Eight Gurudharmas or "Heavy Rules" that basically subordinate the female order on nuns to that of monks. But their newly acquired status also opens new and exciting possibilities. As fully ordained nuns, they will be able to study vinaya and other vinaya related texts. Nuns will also be allowed to lead and participate in the *upoṣadha* ceremony, the fortnight recitation of the Vinaya rules as set forth in the *prātimokṣa* that novice monks and nuns are not allowed to attend. Finally, this might be the turning point for Buddhist nuns all over the Himalaya since Bhutanese ordained nuns will be able, in the not-so-distant future, to facilitate the ordination of other nuns across the Himalayas. Bhutan seems to have opened the doors wide for transformational change in the Himalayan Buddhist tradition. If that change will come… time will tell.

Himalayan and Tibetan Buddhist Nuns' Perspectives on the Foundational Women's Ordination Narrative

by Darcie Price-Wallace

I asked Löpon Wangmo, a nun of the Sakya nunnery in Uttarkhand, India: "Can you talk about Mahāprajāpatī's ordination?" She answered:

> Mahāprajāpatī was the Buddha's aunt, as we all know. I have read about her since my early studies. Now, we can see Buddhist nuns around the world because Mahāprajāpatī made the honorific request for women to be ordained. Unlike our contemporary moment where women are equal with men when requesting the Dharma, when Mahāprajāpatī made her request, there was no gender equality due to the social environment. She is highly respected by women.[1]

Like most of my interviewees, Löpon Wangmo's answer omitted the eight *gurudharma*s or heavy rules; that is, the expectations for subservience to male monastics that Mahāprajāpatī agreed to before the Buddha agreed to ordain her and 500 other Sakyan women. When I asked about them, she simply replied, "I do not know about them."[2]

In her Sakya nunnery, Löpon Wangmo's interview impressed upon me how her extensive philosophical education, including two Master's degrees, was separate from her knowledge of canonical narratives. When she told me she did not know about the *gurudharma*s, I was perplexed. Why could the *gurudharma*s be such a central aspect of academic discussions of ordination if such a highly educated nun did not know about them?

I had assumed that the *gurudharma*s would hold import for nuns. The women's ordination narrative hinges on their acceptance and ethnographic research has demonstrated nuns' receptivity towards the *gurudharma*s.[3] Across transnational contexts, renunciant women approach the *gurudharma*s in more nuanced ways than the prescribed textual ideal. But how are the *gurudharma*s understood by nuns who have no common lived tradition of full ordination? In the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*, which my interlocutors rely upon in practice, the *gurudharma*s would seem to be indispensable for full ordination.[4] *Vinaya* scholar Carola Roloff argues that instructions on the *gurudharma*s from a monk officiant were a required aspect of the standard ordination rite.[5] How do Tibetan Buddhist nuns in northern India today relate to Mahāprajāpatī's ordination? And are the eight *gurudharma*s relevant for novice nuns?

My case study included thirty interviews with nuns living in Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Ladakh, and Uttarkhand, India across Geluk, Kagyu, and Sakya schools. Only two nuns had full vows, which they had received in Hong Kong in the 1980s. None of my interviewees studied *Vinaya*, but they *had* received aspects of the canonical textual tradition and constitute a textual community, where understanding of texts is woven into their status.[6] These nuns either did not learn about the *gurudharmas* or demonstrated significant room for "variation and resistance" in their interpretations.[7]

Forty-two percent of my interlocutors knew something about the *gurudharma*s. Fifty-eight percent had no awareness of them. Those who had some knowledge implied that the rules remain irrelevant to their day-to-day practices,

particularly for those who were not fully ordained. These responses came from both the novice nuns as well as the two fully ordained Tibetan nuns, one of whom downplayed the rules, and the other of whom was unaware of them.

When asked about the *gurudharma*s, some nuns either said, "I don't know," or asked to skip the question. Even though most nuns re-told Mahāprajāpatī's ordination narrative, they often skipped the final detail of her ordination through acceptance of the *gurudharma*s. In the Sakya nunnery, Tsunma Rinchen, a twenty-five-year-old Kham native, said,

> I do know a little about her ordination. She and her entourage of 500 women requested ordination from the Buddha. The Buddha had no response, so she asked his key disciple, Ānanda, who made the request again to the Buddha. The Buddha declined, noting how difficult it would be because men would harass them. Mahāprajāpatī walked a long distance and waited. She argued that women were also capable of performing whatever men accomplish in the vows. The Buddha then approved, and they were ordained.[8]

On the *gurudharma*s, she stated, "I do not know about these as I am a new nun,"[9] suggesting an absence of systematic transmission of this aspect of the ordination narrative at this nunnery.

Three themes emerged for those who *did* know of the *gurudharma*s: (1) acknowledgment of the (sixth) *gurudharma*[10] about bowing to monks regardless of *seniority*; (2) doubt about the relevance of the *gurudharma*s for contemporary practice; and (3) contextualizing these eight principles as specific to socio-cultural norms of ancient India.

In a Kagyu nunnery in Himachal Pradesh, Tsunma Karma Lekshe Tsomo sat with me in the visitor room. On Mahāprajāpatī's ordination, she told me, "This is a common story." She continued:

> When Mahāprajāpatī approached the Buddha and requested ordination, the Buddha declined at first. Later, Ānanda approached the Buddha and clarified that both men and women equally have the potential to achieve liberation. According to the story, that is when the *gurudharma*s were established. After her ordination, Mahāprajāpatī and the other nuns practiced the *vinaya* precepts well. It is assumed that observation of the eight rules lapsed over time, as some nuns became the teachers of monks and earned their respect.

When I asked about contemporary practice of the *gurudharma*s, she reported, "I think these rules are not observed much anymore."[11] Later she explained, "The rules are generally attributed to the Buddha, but there are inconsistencies in the narrative that make that unlikely. For example, how could the Buddha have required Mahāprajāpatī to accept rules stipulating ordination and expiation of faults by a quorum of both *bhikṣu*s and *bhikṣuṇī*s when the *bhikṣuṇī saṅgha* had not yet come into existence? Also, it is not clear whether the eight *gurudharma*s were intended only for Mahāprajāpatī or for all *bhikṣuṇī*s in perpetuity."[12] Her response added new flavor to the narrative, deflecting the *gurudharma*s to the Buddha's disciples. She spoke to hierarchical structures within the rules, and suggested they include additional prohibitions, which were nonetheless ignored.

Some Geluk nuns insinuated that the *gurudharma*s were a relic of discrimination against women during the Buddha's lifetime,[13] and that they only heard about these rules through studying. Initially Tsunma Nyima Drolkar in Bihar was unsure about the *gurudharma*s, but as I listed the sixth, which requires nuns to bow to monks who are their junior, she interjected, "I agree about the importance of bowing to monks, but not all of them – just our teachers."[14] Geshema Jigme in Himachal Pradesh and I discussed whether the *gurudharma*s discouraged nuns from ordaining: "It is possible, because the *gurudharma*s are difficult to practice."[15]

These nuns generally disregarded the rules as unviable, and since they are not fully ordained, the rules would not be a codified aspect of their daily lives. But Gelongma Sonam, who *did* have full vows, also de-emphasized the necessity of maintaining the *gurudharma*s:

> It does not matter whether or not you can observe the eight *gurudharma*s. If you can, that is great. If you cannot, forget it about it. If nuns are in retreat or in a nunnery, there is much less pressure from others. When you go into the larger community, you may feel some pressure.[16]

Here, she indicated the social significance of the *gurudharma*s for joining larger community gatherings. Gelongma Karma Phuntsok[17] who had ordained at the same time in Hong Kong as Sonam, did not know about the *gurudharma*s – "I don't know these eight" – but when I described them, she elaborated, "When I received my vows,

the monks did the chanting, so I'm not sure whether we took."[18]

From these nuns' response, I interpret that the *gurudharma*s are not relevant to their daily experience. Even for these fully ordained nuns, there is no practice that routinely involves the eight *gurudharma*s – they do not matter in daily life. Across all these interviews, it is evident that when these nuns tell Mahāprajāpatī's ordination narrative, they emphasize her role in the proactive founding of women's ordination practices, and not the subservience implied in the eight heavy rules.

Buddhist Monastic Women as Conduits of Charismatic Authority

by Nicholas Witkowski

Many of us in the Buddhist world in recent years have been rethinking how scholarship on the *Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya* can best contribute to the dialogue about the future of *bhikṣuṇī* institutions. The last two decades of activism within the Buddhist world have dramatically increased the awareness of both monastic hierarchies and lay communities of the incalculable value of an expanded and expansive *bhikṣuṇī-saṃgha*, fully expressive of the many ways in which women engage in dharmic practice. Naturally, when turning to the *Bhikṣuṇī-vinaya* to reflect upon the roots of contemporary *bhikṣuṇī* practice, Mahāprajāpati has taken pride of place as the founder of the *bhikṣuṇī-saṃgha*. Founders receive an enormous amount of attention in the tradition – and so they should because they are the first to open the door. But equally important are those lesser-known figures in Buddhist history who have kept the door open to women's monastic practice in the face of patriarchal forces intent on limiting, or even extinguishing, the public presence of female monastics. Here, I would like to briefly discuss the little-known narrative about the nun Śuklā from the Mahāsāṃghika *Vinaya* tradition, because it decisively argues for *bhikṣuṇī*s' continued role as authoritative figures representing the Buddhist order in masculinized public spaces.

The *Vinaya* narrative opens not with Śuklā being ordained, but in the domestic context prior to monastic life, in order to demonstrate that her bold, powerful, and even rebellious stance against the paternalism of male authority in the household strongly indicates her future stature as a charismatic leader in the *saṃgha*. At one point in the narrative, Śuklā's frustration with her husband boils over and she declaims, "To hell with this domestic lifestyle. Though I only wish to please, only unpleasant things are said [to me]." Unwilling to further tolerate the abuse of her husband, Śuklā immediately joins the Buddha *saṃgha*. From the outset, she is trained by senior nuns who recognize her spiritual prowess; under their guidance, she quickly masters practices of deep meditation and attains advanced stages of awakening. What is striking is that the narrative then moves on to detail not her further meditative exploits or wise leadership, but the deep intracommunal tensions resulting from a profound anxiety about popularity as a charismatic preacher.

> She [Śuklā] was invited to house after house in order to recite texts. Donations, esteem, and fame were offered to her, and her fellow *bhikṣuṇī*s were jealous of her. Lacking the capacity for donations and esteem, they said: "She has cast a spell. And, therefore, it is believed by everyone that they should listen to her and have faith in her." They went to see the Lord saying, "She has cast a spell." The Lord said, "Is it true that you cast a spell, such that people believed that they should listen to you?" She said, "I do not know any spells, Lord. How could I cast a spell?" The Lord said, "She has not cast any spells."[17]

Here, we find yet another example of the classic trope in which a woman with public authority, with charismatic power, is presumed to be a witch, a malignant force, a sorceress. Perhaps even more surprising is that this patriarchal vitriol is uttered by fellow nuns. At the close of the legal case, the Buddha – representing the authority of this *saṃgha* – exonerates Śuklā, thus accepting that the power of the dharma that entitles a monastic to public authority may inhere in the bodies of women practitioners. It is important to emphasize that this narrative presumes a substantial retrograde patriarchal element within the *saṃgha* – even among fellow *bhikṣuṇī*s – that will manipulate public sentiment to tear down the public reputation of monastic women who operate as leaders in public spaces. The text states that "she (Śuklā) is invited from one house to another in order to preach [the dharma] (*bhāṣaṇaka*)." Edgerton's *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary* glosses the *bhāṣaṇaka* as a "reciter or knower of sacred texts." Here, we have in Śuklā the figure of a female monastic who occupies a role primarily reserved for monks, that of teacher of the laity, and in particular, a transmitter of the dharma. In contrast to the common trope of women using their bodies as pedagogical devices that serve only to extinguish the fire of male sexual desire (documented extensively in the work of Liz Wilson[18]), in this narrative Śuklā's body is never discussed. The image of Śuklā presented here departs dramatically from the androcentric eroticized images of women's bodies in Buddhist scripture in that the point of contestation is *only* the nature of rhetorical skill; in other words, whether she is correctly representing the *saṃgha* as a dharma preacher.

Throughout her *oeuvre*, Karma Lekshe Tsomo has challenged contemporary "conservative" factions of senior male monastics, those intent on preventing women monastics from exercising public authority in the name of the *saṃgha*.[19] The case of Śuklā within the *Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya* points to the long-standing nature of this conflict between retrograde patriarchal forces, who viewed women in positions of power as a problem, and those who saw the *saṃgha* as a place in which women and men should meet on equal terms. Despite

the retrograde attempts to eliminate Śuklā's presence from public spaces, this *bhikṣuṇī* insists upon defining the female monastic vocation as a role of *public* engagement. And her advocacy for the female monastic as a public preacher of the dharma is reinforced by the reciprocal relationship she has with a number of enthusiastic householders. She is *repeatedly* invited by members of the Indian public – presumably by the male heads of households – to speak on behalf of the Buddha *saṃgha*. Indeed, the monastic jurists responsible for compiling the *Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya* conclude by representing Śuklā's authority as that of a dharma *bhāṣaṇaka*, when it states that "it is believed by all the people that they should listen to and have faith in her." That the householders should listen to and have faith in her is significant, because by utilizing this terminology, the text is signaling that her speech is a pure conduit for the Buddha dharma. Contemporary "conservative" factions should take note of legal cases in the *Vinaya*, such as that of Śuklā, as the final arbiters of this case conclude that her role as a female dharma teacher in a public space, addressing both women and men, should not be impugned.

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Changing the Rules: Butön Rinchen Drub's Approach to Monastic Legislation for Nuns

by Annie Heckman

There is no singular *Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya* in Tibetan texts. Scholar-monk Butön Rinchen Drub (1290–1360) touched on this plurality when he observed discrepancies between two canonical texts for nuns, the *Bhikṣuṇī-prātimokṣa-sūtra* recitation text and the explanatory *Bhikṣuṇī-vinaya-vibhaṅga*.[20] Gregory Schopen and Shayne Clarke in particular have established the presence of multiple versions of the rules for nuns in Tibetan canonical and commentarial sources translated from Sanskrit.[21] But there also seems to have been room for innovation with these rules in Tibetan monastic legal scholarship itself. I argue that Butön crafted yet another version of nuns' rules when he worked to resolve the discrepancies he saw among canonical sources, and that his invention affords new interpretive opportunities for those interested in monastic law.

Let us consider how nuns might follow rules available in Tibetan texts. Hypothetically: For a nun, is it an offense to sing? To dance? Is she restricted from wearing shoes altogether, or just fabulous shoes? These questions point to just a few of the many unresolved issues that would arise from comparison of the 180 minor offenses entailing expiation, or *pāyantikā*s, across texts for nuns in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*, the one monastic code active in Tibet.

According to the norms of Butön's context, the two major canonical texts for nuns – grouped as *buddhavacana*, the "Word of the Buddha" – should match in terms of rule order and content. While the question of whether ordained nuns were active in Tibet is a matter of some debate,[22] Butön seems to have cared about their texts. What did he do, and what does it tell us about the reception of monastic rules for nuns in Tibet?

Butön observed that these two key texts do *not* match if a reader looks closely at certain spans of rules. He then decided that the explanatory text was the transmission of another sect, mistakenly included in the canon among Mūlasarvāstivādin sources. He created a digest of narratives for nuns' rules, the *Dulwé Gelongmé Lengbum*. According to its colophon, Butön followed the recitation text's order, filling in narratives from the explanatory text and two commentarial works.

But Butön did not simply fill in gaps. My study has shown that Butön made changes to the content of the canonical recitation text *itself* in his digest: at least ten significant changes appear in the *pāyantikā* section. Butön adjusted content from canonical sources to fit some other need – whether rule reasoning, practical application, or some other purpose, I do not know – and his effort suggests that something seems to have been at stake with the rules for nuns.

I alluded to some of Butön's changes above: he includes a rule about ordaining a prostitute where the recitation text discusses ordaining a confused woman. He inserts a rule about massage. He changes rules on hair implements. He limits a rule that restricts dancing to teaching dance, doing the same for singing. For a rule that restricts touching a musical instrument, he includes a rule that restricts teaching, demonstrating, and going to see a performance. He reorders rules on housekeeping, deletes a rule about going to a region in conflict, and inserts a rule that restricts visiting a painter's or dancer's studio.[23]

Using material from non-*buddhavacana* sources when he had the option to do otherwise, Butön stretched the norms of his context as a scholar devoted to the canon. For one example where he clearly leans on a commentarial text instead of *buddhavacana* sources, we can look at shoes. Butön's two main sources both indicate a general restriction on shoes,[24] whereas a commentarial source not classed as *buddhavacana* – a source which Butön also saw as belonging to another sect – provides a more relaxed rule with a narrower scope of restriction:[25]

> "Furthermore, when any nun, making shoes multicolored, keeps them, it is a *pāyantikā*. When a nun, after making shoes high and multicolored with designs, keeps or wears them, it will be a *pāyantikā*."

The rule here is about *fabulous* shoes. And Butön uses this version of the rule in his digest:[26]

> In Śrāvastī, Sthūlanandā was ridiculed for entering a householder's compound having donned high shoes with multicolored designs drawn on them, which was reported [to the Buddha, who said], "When [a nun] keeps multicolored shoes, it is a *pāyantikā*."

Such changes suggest that Butön did not simply *digest* this content. He curated and finessed the minor rules to craft a coherent list that matches *no* other extant source in full: it is its own independent rendering of the rules for nuns, crafted in 1352.

When there appeared to be no working set of rules for nuns in Tibet, Butön decided to make one! Why? Does Butön's interest in adjusting nuns' rules tell us anything about the status of nuns in Tibet in his time? And what interpretive work does his process offer for the use of these rules by nuns today?[27]

At present I would simply like to assert the value of code(s) in disarray. Codes in the plural, with many loose ends, are available to be inherited in Tibetan textual traditions. And it is possible to embrace such contradictions. Consider Donna Haraway's positioning of the cyborg as powerful because of being partial and open to shifts in its parts.[28] Fragmented code is potentially generative not *in spite of*, but *because of*, its hidden controversies and ruptures. Consider philosopher Sadie Plant's embrace of mathematician Ada Lovelace, whose self-professed nervous instability was bound up with the complex pattern-recognition required for inventive computing.[29] Clarity about complex relationships develops not *in spite of*, but *because of*, capacious embrace of eccentric calculation. In adrienne maree brown's argument for the deployment of "emergent strategy" in the overlap of self-help and social activism, we can read an embrace of the shifting patterns that occur with change.[30] Deeper understanding becomes possible not *in spite of*, but *because of*, such shifts. And consider, finally, that an embrace of codes in the plural is not at odds with Buddhist notions of buddha-speech itself, which manifests in varied expedient forms.

As noted initially, there is no singular *Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya* in Tibetan texts. The *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* – or *Vinaya*s – offer rhizomatic, multivocal networks of rules for nuns. This is a good thing for anyone who wants to observe how a monastic code might shift and breathe. These generative textual detours may simply remind us that a high regard for orderly code is as specific and contingent an inclination as any leaning towards the elegant play to be found among diversely emerging sources, cross-referencing impasses, and divergent lists.

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Notes

1. Interview, July 28, 2018.
2. Ibid.
3. Roloff, 2021, 68-80; Salgado, 2013, 78-88; Heirman and Chiu, 2012, 275; Hüsken, 2010, 143–48; Battaglia, 2007, 203–206; Cheng, 2004, 184; Kabilsingh, 1991, 28.
4. Roloff, 2021, 280–81.
5. Roloff, 2021, 281.
6. Blackburn, 2001, 11–13; Langenberg, 2018, 19.
7. Blackburn, 2001,13.
8. Interview, July 28, 2018.
9. Ibid.
10. I am using the MSV enumeration here.
11. Interview, April 25, 2018
12. Personal communication, December 24. 2023.
13. Interview, March 16, 2018
14. Interview, March 18, 2018.
15. Interview, July 21, 2018.
16. Interview, January 22, 2018.
17. Roth 1970, §145.
18. Wilson, 1996.
19. Tsomo, 2007.
20. Toh 4 and 5.
21. Schopen [2008] 2014; Clarke 2011.
22. Mohr and Tsedroen 2010; Price-Wallace 2017.
23. See Heckman 2023, 212–213.
24. Toh 4, Degé 'Dul ba TA 20b2; Tsomo 1996, 114.
25. Toh 4112, Degé Tengyur Mdo 'grel ('Dul ba) TSU 141b2–3 (translation my own).

26. Bu ston Rin chen grub. [1352] 1971, 921.5–6; [1352] 2012, 530.3–4 (translation my own).
27. On such use, see Finnegan and Roloff 2022; Roloff 2021.
28. Haraway [1985] 1991; Heckman 2023, 27.
29. Plant 1997, 31.
30. brown 2017, 13.

Tranquil Awareness and Special Insight: Foundations of Buddhist Meditation

by Karma Lekshe Tsomo

According to legend, Buddha Śākyamuni gave 84,000 teachings and all of them were designed for contemplation. If we accept this line of reasoning, we could say that the Buddha taught 84,000 different types of contemplation or meditation to meet the diverse needs of sentient beings. Meditation can be practiced by people of all backgrounds, alone or in groups, young and old, lay or ordained. The practiced has produced liberated beings for two and a half millenia.

These days, however, it can be argued that in the modern world the vast richness of Buddhist meditation methods has been distilled – or flattened,, depending on one's point of view – to a preference for mindfulness practice. There is a contemporary global movement that promotes mindfulness, awareness, bare attention, and similar practices for health and well-being. Purveyors of these practices teach techniques designed to focus attention on the present moment, typically without reference to the Buddhist foundations of these techniques, and the distinctions between the practices is often unclear. This trend has been critiqued as selective, reductionist, and opportunistic, promoting a form of Buddhist practice that is secularized and propagated without reference to its foundations, namely, traditional Buddhist texts, traditions, and ethical values. As David L. McMahan puts it,

> Consider for a moment how unlikely it is that practices developed by celibate recluses in South Asian over twenty-five centuries ago who renounced their possession, homes, caste, and family identities to search their minds for a way to transcend sickness, ageing, and death – indeed the entire world – would be adapted to help middle-class professionals function better at work, bond with their families, manage their health, and find calm amid the frantic pace of modern life – even improve their golf game or sex life. How did this happen? The answer to these questions proffered by popular books is simple: meditation works.

The rich diversity of meditation practices the Buddha taught provides a variety of meditative technologies suitable for people of different religious, social, and cultural backgrounds. The cultivation of mindful awareness by practicing various meditation practices enables human beings to focus on the present moment, make skillful decisions, and live a satisfying life. But the tool box of Buddhist contemplative technologies is not limited to simply focusing on the present moment. Buddhist contemplative methods can yield benefits far beyond simply living a satisfying life.

Understanding the Nature of Consciousness

Buddhism has a clear focus on understanding the nature of consciousness (the mind) and other phenomena. In fact, the Buddha taught six types of consciousness: visual, audial, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, and mental. The key to achieving liberation from the cycle of repeated birth and death (*samsāra*) is to eliminate unwholesome states of consciousness and cultivate wholesome states. By eliminating unwholesome states of mind, which give rise to unskillful actions, and cultivating wholesome states of mind, which give rise to skillful actions, we are eventually able to see things "as they are," instead of through the filters of distortion and delusion. By understanding the true nature of consciousness itself, sentient beings are able to achieve the bliss of *nirvāna*, freeing themselves from the chains of *samsāra* and its miseries.

Learning to bring the mind under control mind requires

awareness, mindfulness, and discipline. We cannot expect to achieve awakening if we allow the mind and afflictive emotions to run wild. Afflictive emotions distort our perceptions and cause us to behave in ways that undermine our own well-being. With practice, we can learn to transform afflictive emotions such as pride, jealousy, and desire into wholesome qualities of mind, such as loving kindness, compassion, patience, and wisdom. The fact that human beings are capable of eradicating unwholesome propensities and cultivating wholesome propensities is what makes liberation possible.

The *sutta*s make it clear that it is necessary to cultivate both *samatha* and *vipassana* in order to achieve liberation.

> A person who has samatha of the heart within himself but no vipassanā into principles pertaining to higher understanding should approach one who has vipassanā and inquire: "How should activities be seen? How should they be explored? How should they be discerned with vipassanā?" And later he can gain vipassanā…
>
> A person who has vipassanā into principles pertaining to higher understanding but no samatha of the heart within himself should approach one who has samatha and inquire: "How should the mind be steadied? How should it be settled? How should it be unified? How should it be concentrated in samādhi?" And later he can gain samatha…
>
> One who has neither should inquire about both [and "should put forth extreme enthusiasm, effort, endeavor, exertion, unflagging mindfulness, and clear comprehension to acquire them, just as if one's turban or hair were ablaze, one would put forth extreme effort to quench the flames."]
>
> One who has both, established in these beneficial qualities should make further effort for the evaporation of defilements.

Tranquil Awareness

Buddhist texts describe two main branches of contemplative practice or meditation: *samatha* and *vipassana*. The first term, *samatha*, can be translated as tranquil awareness, calm abiding, or meditative quiesence. This is a practice of stabilizing the mind by focusing on a physical object or a mental image for an extended period of time. The object of concentration may be an apple, a candle flame, one's breathing, or another specific object. In certain Mahāyāna traditions, focusing on an image of a Buddha or *bodhisattva* is thought to be especially meaningful and beneficial. In some traditions, the object of concentration may be a sound. For example, in the Theravāda tradition, practitioners may focus on the sound *budho* ("awaken"); in the Chinese Mahāyāna tradition, they may chant the name of a Buddha, such as Amitābha; in the Tibetan tradition, they may recite the *mantra* of a specific Buddha or bodhisattva, for example, *Om mani padme hum*, the *mantra* of Avalokiteśvara, the *bodhisattva* of compassion.[1]

The aim of *samatha* practice is to achieve single-pointed concenration (*samādhi*). Once one is able to focus the mind on a specific object for twenty minutes or longer, it is said that one has achieved *samādhi* and can concentrate the mind on the object indefinitely. When the mind is focused single-pointedly on the object for an extended period of time, it becomes agile, buoyant, and capable of higher meditation practices.

When attempting to focus on a specific object for an extended period of time, it is natural that distractions arise in our mind. These may include memories, regrets, aspirations for the future, and random free associations that often pop into our awareness unbidden. To minimize the onslaught of distractions that arise in our mind, meditators are advised to be selective about the information and images they access. If we indulge in the habit of populating our minds with violent, hateful, and greedy thoughts and images, it is likely that these thoughts and images will arise during our meditation, disrupting our best attempts at concentration. Instead, if we choose to cultivate wholesome thoughts of loving kindness,

compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity, the mind becomes more spacious and flexible. Digital technology provides a helpful analogy. The more rubbish we upload to our hard drive, the poorer the quality of the ideas and perceptions produced; as the old adage says, "garbage in, garbage out." With this in mind, if we wish to achieve liberation, we need to purify our minds of mental defilements. Being fully aware in the present moment gradually enables us to make the choices that liberate our minds of unwholesome habitual tendencies and preconceptions.

There are nine stages of *samatha* practice. Stages one to four are for developing mental stability: placement, continual placement, repeated placement, and close placement. Stages five and six are for developing mental clarity: taming the mind and pacifying the mind. Stages seven to nine are for building strength: thoroughly pacifying the mind, single-pointedness, and equanimity.

The practice of *samatha* involves purifying the defilements of the mind, including desire, aversion, ignorance, and myriad other delusions. The process of clearing away mental defilements is represented graphically in a painting of a meditator and an elephant. The elephant symbolizes our mind. When we begin *samatha* practice, our mind is clouded by delusions. The cloudy skin tone of the elephant represents the delusions of the mind. As we practice the nine stages of *samatha*, the delusions of the mind gradually become weaker and, eventually, purified. As the delusions of the mind are gradually eliminated, the skin tone of the elephant becomes lighter.[8] Through *samatha* practice, we are able to eradicate the delusions of the mind. The wild elephant of our mind becomes tamed, purified, and pacified. The victory banners represent achieving victory over our own mind, as attested by developing single-pointed concentration.

Special Insight

The second main type of contemplative practice or meditation described in the Buddhist texts is *vipassana*, translated as insight or special insight. In explaining the concept of insight, the Buddha taught his followers to see things "as they are." To see things "as they are" is to see their suchness or "thusness," which means seeing things free from conceptual elaborations, judgments, and interpretations. Insight therefore means seeing deeply into the true nature of all phenomena, understanding that they are ultimately unsatisfying, fleeting, and devoid of any enduring, independently existing core or substratum.

There are a number of ways to practice *vipassana*. The most fundamental practice of *vipassana* is associated with the first factor of the Buddha's Noble Eightful Path: right understanding or right view. This practice focuses on developing insight into The Three Marks (or Characteristics) of Existence (*tilakkhana*):

> All phenomenal existence is said to have three interlocking characteristics: impermanence, suffering and lack of soul or essence. This is simply a matter to be realized. There can be no question of getting rid of a soul because one has never had one.[9]

To develop insight is to directly realize the true nature of phenomena. Conversely, to realize the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and insubstantial nature of all phenomena is to realize their true nature. By gaining insight into the true nature of things, we are able to cut through attachment, aversion, and many other delusions. The practice of *vipassana* therefore enables us to avoid disappointment, distress, frustration, and sorrow.

There are many practical benefits to meditating on the Three Marks of Existence. For example, the teachings on the first mark, *duhkha*, tell us that living in this dusty world entails difficulties, distress, and various types of suffering. Life is not all suffering, of course; sentient beings also have pleasurable experiences, though unfortunately they are temporary. The idea that life is nothing but suffering is a widespread misunderstanding of the Buddha's teachings. Through our own personal experience, we can verify that we experience both pleasure as well as pain. By reflecting on the human condition, we quickly realize that despite happy, satisfying moments, no one gets through life without experiencing some unhappiness, disappointment, and loss.

The Buddha's teaching on *anitya*, the second mark of existence, tells us that the things of this world are not permanent. Things fall apart. We lose our job, our health, and our loved ones. We may find what we think is the perfect relationship, only to become dissatisfied when the person does not meet our expectations. We may cling to a person or an object, hoping it will always stay the same and always be with us, but the more we cling, the greater our misery when the person gets ill or ages, or treasured objects get damaged or disintegrate. Once we recognize the fleeting nature of phenomena, we will not be so miserable when we find that they have changed. Very disturbing events, such as crashing a new car or experiencing the serious illness or death of a loved one are examples of scenarios that can

also become openings to develop a deeper understanding of impermanence. If we do not understand that life is full of ups and downs, if we expect life to always be easy and pleasant, if we expect things to always stay the same, then we suffer when we run into problems or our expectations are not met. The more deeply attached to any object of affection, the more difficulty we will have processing the loss.

The third of the Three Marks of Existence, *anatta*, refers to the concept of no-self, the absence of a permanent or independently existent self or soul. The term also signifies the insubstantial nature of phenomena. Understanding the concept of an independent self to be false is difficult, because it challenges our ordinary sense of individual existence and all we hold dear. As human beings, almost from birth, we are conditioned to accept the illusion of a separate, independent existence. The notions of I, me, and mine are deeply entrenched. Therefore, gaining insight into the profound concept of *anatta* requires deep contemplation and wisdom.

Understanding how we exist in the world around us is very relevant in daily life. To gain an understanding of no-self – the absence of a permanent self – is not merely theoretical but has many practical benefits. Without an understanding of no-self, it is very easy to get caught up in self-grasping and self-cherishing. For example, if someone falsely accuses us of saying something or doing something, our natural instinct is to react with indignation, resentment, and anger. Instinctively, we may behave very foolishly, even endangering our life and the lives of othes. In that way, we create a lot of misery and problems for ourselves, in addition to the unwholesome karma we accumulate through anger and hatred. If we understand the true nature of the self to be devoid of substance, devoid of any permanent or independent reality, contingent on circumstances, we can let go of the resentment and anger we feel. With a deeper understanding of *anatta*, we can let go of the pain and suffering we feel at being falsely accused. With nothing solid to hang onto, it becomes easier and easier for us to allow insults, angry attacks, and false accusations to pass us by. We realize that we would simply be working against our own best interests if we cling to what might otherwise be a very painful experience.

The practice of *vipassana* enables us to understand the

defects of desire and attachment, including attachment to permanence, pleasure, and deluded modes of thinking. The practice of *vipassana* enables us to see through the illusion of a permanent, independent self and opens up a space for flexibility and positive change. The term *vipassana* also denotes a group of meditation schools or lineages, many of which derive from Burma. It was once believed that meditation was the exclusive purview of monastics, with laypeople serving as donors to help facilitate the monastics' practice. Since the 1950s, especially in Burma, the practice of *vipassana* meditation has been taken up by laypeople and is now practiced enthusiastically by people around the world.

The Mahāyāna Buddhist traditions also use the term *vipassana* (Sanskrit: *vipaśyanā*) to denote insight into the true nature of things. In these traditions, *vipassana* specifically means the insight or understanding that all phenomena are empty of true existence. Insight into emptiness is virtually the same as insight into no-self; however, the Mahāyāna traditions emphasize that not only compounds, such as the human body lack true existence; even ideas and the smallest, infinitely divisible particles are empty of any true or inherent existence.

To understand the concept of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), Tibetan Buddhists begin by meditating on the lack of true existence of the human person, using oneself as the basis of analysis. The first task is to identify the object of refutation: an independently existent self or soul. In order to refute the notion of an independently existent self, one must have a clear idea of the object one is refuting: the object of refutation. To do that, the practitioner simulates the concept of an independently existent self by various means. For example, one may imagine being falsely accused of theft or some other act of deceit. By taking careful note of one's response to that false accusation, one can get a clear understanding of the "self" that is being falsely accused. In that moment, one's response to being falsely accused is not intellectual but visceral. The indignity and injustice of the accusation arouses an acute and solid awareness of one's self-perception and integrity, which in that moment is suddenly under threat. Although the imaginaire in this reflection (the falsely accused) is a fabrication, the process of conjuring an independently existent self is useful in that it gives one a strong and visceral sense of the notion of an independently existent self appearing to the mind. Although ordinarily one may be unaware of the false self, under duress (for example, when being falsely accused) one's sense of self springs to mind quite vividly. Having conjured this vivid sense of self, one then proceeds to dismantle or deconstruct it.

After identifying the object of refutation (the false self), one investigates the five aggregates ("heaps") or components that comprise the person – the body, feelings, perceptions, mental factors, and consciousness – in an attempt to locate an independently existent self or soul. Methodically searching through the aggregates, one first analyzes whether the body is the self, closely examining each part of the body to see whether or not a self can be found anywhere among the constituent parts of the body. Not find a self anywhere among

the constituent parts of the body, one then systematically analyzes the different feelings, perceptions, mental factors, and types of consciousness.

The Union of Tranquil Awareness and Special Insight

Ultimately, Buddhist practitioners need to develop both tranquil awareness and special insight in order to achieve the goal of the path: liberation (*nirvāna*) or awakening. Being able to stabilize the mind through the practice of tranquil awareness enables one to focus the mind without distractions. With that stability of mind, one can investigate the mind and all phenomena, without becoming distracted, in order to gain insight into their true nature. The combination of tranquil awareness and special insight is known as the union of *samatha* and *vipassana*.

Two contrasting approaches to the union of *samatha* and *vipassana* developed over time in China and Tibet. In discussing the Christian and neo-Confucian denunciations of Chinese Buddhist meditation as quietistic, even nihilistic, the religious studies scholar Bernard Faure says,

> The founder of the Tiantai school, Zhiyi (538–97), attempted to subsume all Buddhist meditative techniques under the binom *zhi guan* (*śāmatha-vipaśyanā*): the first element, which means "calming," is regarded as more passive, and the second ("discernment" or "examination") as more active. With the development of the *Prajñāpāramitā* (Perfection of Wisdom) tradition in Mahāyāna, there arose a tendency to give precedence to *prajñā* over *dhyāna*, wisdom over withdrawal and mental focus.[10]

In the Tibetan Buddhist traditions, the union of *samatha* and *vipassana* refers to developing single-pointed concentration (*samadhi*) with emptiness as the object. This is achieved through alternating analytical meditation (*vipassana*) and tranquil awareness (*samatha*). First, in meditation, the practitioner analyzes the object of concentration – emptiness – until a clear and accurate understanding of the object (emptiness) is achieved. With that clear understanding, the practitioner then focuses attention one-pointedly on that object for as long as possible. When one loses concentration, one returns to analytical meditation to regain a clear and accurate understanding of emptiness and then again focuses single-pointedly on emptiness as the object. One continues alternating *vipassana* and *samatha* practice in this way throughout the meditation session.

In the Moment: Abiding While Not Truly Abiding

Meditation is only one of a vast array of Buddhist practices and is also practiced in numerous other religious traditions, but in recent years, meditation has become emblematic of Buddhism. All the Buddha's teachings are considered beneficial for achieving awakening yet most often, in the popular imagination, Buddhism is associated especially with meditation. As demonstrated by Christian and neo-Confucian critiques, Buddhist meditation is often perceived as being quietistic. The perception that Buddhist meditation is quietistic – only concerned with quieting the mind – is understandable when describing the practice of *samatha*, which aims for "calm abiding" or "tranquil awareness. However, as necessary and desirable as *samatha* practice is for developing single-pointed concentration, there are many more Buddhist meditation practices to choose from, depending on the specific Buddhist school, the advice of the teacher, and the temperament of the practitioner. Techniques for critically analyzing the nature of phenomena (for example, the Three Marks of Existence) and for understanding the human condition are equally valuable aspects of Buddhist contemplative practice and equally necessary for achieving liberation.

Mental cultivation is not just about paying attention to the present moment, not just a matter of placing our attention on one specific object. Most importantly, mental cultivation concerns the quality of our attention and our ability to focus on the object of attention for an extended period of time. Certainly, paying attention in the present moment is useful and preferable to mental wandering, chasing one distraction after another. But the significant question is how wholeheartedly and wholesomely we are able to focus our attention.

Drawing by Emily Mariko Sanders.

An objection may be raised that allowing the mind to roam aimlessly is not necessarily harmful; it may even be restful and a useful alternative to the stress of trying to focus our attention too forcefully. On the other hand, allowing the mind to roam without restraint from one distraction to another is a mental habit that takes time and diligence to unlearn. Allowing the mind to roam unrestrained may also lead to careless actions with unfortunate results.

Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) courses and Vipassana meditation retreats have found dedicated followings around the world. These practices draw heavily on Buddhist meditation techniques, even though their roots in India may not always be acknowledged. Mindfulness practice is widely regarded as an effective tool for managing stress and promoting well-being, but represents only a small fraction of what the Buddhist teachings have to offer. In addition, some teachers of mindfulness may ignore the ethical foundations of Buddhist contemplative practice and the quintessential Buddhist teachings on loving kindness and compassion. Overall, it is safe to say that mindfulness practice can be enormously beneficial for living a contented, blameless life. An added benefit is that mindfulness practice is simple and acceptable to people of all religions or none. Even so, to reach liberation, the goal of the Buddhist path, tranquil awareness and special insight, in conjunction, remain the foundations of Buddhist meditation.

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Notes

1. David L. McMahan, *Rethinking Buddhist Meditative Practices: Meditation in Ancient and Modern Worlds* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 10.
2. In line with the Buddha's teachings on impermanence, Buddhist philosophers and practitioners agree that phenomena arise and perish from moment to moment. However, they may hold different views about whether or not there is a moment of existence between arising and perishing. Some say that the trajectory of attention is arising, abiding, and perishing. Others reject the idea of a moment of abiding, allowing only arising and perishing, arguing that a moment of abiding might easily be interpreted as a moment of true existence, a view that is rejected by most Buddhist schools.
3. Karma Lekshe Tsomo, "Mindfulness and the Six Perfections," *Buddhist Foundations of Mindfulness: Mindfulness in Behavioral Health*. Edited by E. Shonin et al (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2015), 16.
4. Bhikkhu Sujato. *A History of Mindfulness: How Insight Worsted Tanquillity in the Satipattāna Sutta* (Australia: Santipada, 2012), 135–36. Inserted passage from AN 10.54.
5. Lamrimpa, Gen (trans. B. Alan Wallace). *Calming the Mind: Tibetan Buddhist Teachings on the Cultivation of Meditative Quiescence* (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 1995).
6. B. Alan Wallace. "The Buddhist Tradition of Samatha: Methods for Refining and Examining Consciousness," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 6:2/3 (1999): 175–87.
7. B. Alan Wallace. "The Buddhist Tradition of Samatha: Methods for Refining and Examining Consciousness," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 6:2/3 (1999): 175–87.
8. The racial symbolism that associates dark skin tone with delusion and light skin tone with purity warrants critique. These associations appear in the literature of virtually every culture. One study "designed to measure the degree of awareness of black-white evaluative connotation in Caucasian children" found that "the black-white color-meaning concept is developing during the preschool years – the period during which racial awareness was also shown to be developing." Cheryl A. Renninger and John E. Williams, "Black-White Color Connotations and Racial Awareness in Preschool Children," *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 22:3 (1966) 771–85. Other useful studies include Nina G. Jablonski, *Living Color: The Biological and Social Meaning of Skin Color* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012, esp. 157–68); and Douglas Longshore, "Color Connotations and Racial Attitudes," *Journal of Black Studies* 10:2 (1979): 183–97.
9. Studies 10:2 (1979): 183–97.Richard F. Gombrich. *Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*, Second edition (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 2006), 47.
10. Bernard Faure "In the Quiet of the Monastery: Buddhist Controversies over Quietism," *Common Knowledge* 16:3 (2010): 424–38

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