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# DIGNITY & DISCIPLINE

*Reviving Full Ordination for Buddhist Nuns*

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## The Vinaya Between History and Modernity:

SOME GENERAL REFLECTIONS

Jens-Uwe Hartmann

FOR MANY YEARS I have been following the endeavor to reestablish the bhikṣuṇī ordination, mostly by reading about it, but also through some participant observation, especially in connection with a research project on modern forms of Buddhism in Nepal during the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> At present I am engaged in research on the recently discovered Buddhist Sanskrit texts from Afghanistan, and there are a number of fragments of Vinaya texts among them, but regrettably they do not contribute anything new as far as the subject of this conference is concerned. Therefore I am unable to present new facts from old texts; what I will do instead is summarize three of the more general thoughts I have had observing the attempts to reintroduce the ordination of nuns.

These thoughts start from the question whether scholarship—and especially our kind of academic scholarship—is in a position to help in solving in a narrower sense the legal and in a wider sense the religious problems connected with such a phenomenon as the reinstatement of an order of nuns in forms of Buddhism from which it has disappeared or the establishment of a nuns' order where it was never introduced. Apparently there are certain objections to the reinstatement of the nuns' order within the relevant traditions, and these objections are centered on legal and historical questions. I am not a specialist in Buddhist law and therefore feel unable to address the

1. Bechert and Hartmann 1988.

legal intricacies; however, sometimes I wonder if the legal problems serve only as a pretext and hide a more general and not very rational reluctance to introduce major changes in those traditions. If this impression is correct, scholarly research will not be able to provide an efficient antidote, since scholarship by definition employs rationality in its argumentation and argues against rational objections, not against emotions. In a way, I am even asking if a conference such as ours has any hope at all of providing results that will move things forward in the desired direction. I am by no means arguing against holding such a conference; rather I am asking how much the process of taking a final decision will be informed by, and profit from, the kind of knowledge generated on such occasions by scholarly research. Striving for a decision is, as in politics, more a quest for majorities than for insights. On the other hand, insights will not hurt, and sometimes they may even help in winning the necessary majorities.

A second, and to my mind very important, problem is the question of perspective within the field of religion. There are various perspectives from which it is possible to view, analyze, and understand any given religious phenomenon. Religious texts are such phenomena, and a compilation of rules and regulations such as the code for Buddhist monks and nuns is no exception. Every perspective functions within a certain field of methods and premises, and each perspective will yield a certain result. Paradoxically, all the results may be “true” within their respective fields yet mutually exclusive. To give an example: seen from the religious, i.e., the Buddhist, perspective, the Vinaya contains the word of the Buddha, and as such it represents a collection of rules and their respective interpretations that go back to the lifetime of the Buddha and were gathered together shortly after his death. However, seen from an academic perspective, the Vinaya is an anonymous compendium of literature that was continuously changed, adapted, and enlarged during many centuries by an unknown number of authors and redactors. Its nucleus is the *Prātimokṣa-sūtra*, the confession formula, which in itself already reveals signs of historical development and amalgamation of older and younger parts. Altogether, six complete versions of the Vinaya have survived until today, although there were probably more when Buddhism still flourished in India. All of them show that the Vinaya must have originated at a time when the community of monks was a group of homeless ascetics wandering around throughout the year, with the sole

exception of the rainy season, when travel was both difficult and potentially harmful to other living beings. On the other hand, in the same Vinaya we find all sorts of regulations for buildings, even up to such facilities as toilets. As scholars looking from the historical point of view, we understand this seeming discrepancy between homeless wandering ascetics and monks residing in permanent dwellings as a slow historical process taking several centuries, a process that continuously necessitated the introduction of new rules in order to adapt to the changing lifestyle of the community of monks and nuns. The old rules were kept and new rules were added, until this development reached a standstill around the middle of the first millennium C.E. and the texts of the various Vinayas became more or less fixed and finalized. In our view, this reflects a process of constant adaptation carried out by countless unknown Vinaya masters who added the new rules whenever necessary, authorizing them via the same guidelines that were used earlier for the rules proclaimed by the Buddha himself.

Historically, there can be no doubt that the Vinaya was continuously modified and enlarged by the monks. Today three Vinayas are fully or partly preserved in Indian languages; they differ with regard to the number and order of rules, and they use three different Indian languages (Pāli, Sanskrit, and the so-called Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit heavily influenced by Middle Indian). It is not likely that the Buddha himself proclaimed these different versions, and therefore the differences can only be explained as historical developments. It is evident that Vinaya masters in India, living many centuries after the Buddha, felt the need and the right to adjust their sacred lore to changes within their community. Evidently it is possible today to accept the result of all those changes as authoritative, but then it should perhaps also be possible to emulate the Vinaya masters of old and do what they did, namely adjust sacred lore to present-day needs.

At first sight, the two views, the academic and the religious, do not seem really compatible, and to argue from an academic standpoint against a Buddhist view or vice versa may lead to a futile dispute between positions marked by either belief or rationality. Interestingly enough, an inner-Buddhist variant of such a dispute seems to underlie the present considerations on the integrity of the various Vinaya lineages. Today, three traditions are still alive, the Theravāda in South and Southeast Asia, the Mūlasarvāstivāda in Tibet, and the Dharmaguptaka in China and Korea,

and each of them takes the integrity of its own lineage for granted. When we look at such a lineage from the historical point of view, we find that its integrity can be doubted or even falsified. However, it is absolutely impossible to prove a tradition's integrity, since historical research will never be able to provide enough reliable data for excluding the possibility of a break in the lineage at some point in the past. Integrity cannot be reliably and convincingly established over a long period of time. This holds true for any given lineage, be it Tibetan, Chinese, or Southeast Asian. Therefore, when some Tibetan Vinaya masters assert the unbroken continuity of their own ordination lineage while casting doubt on the integrity of the Chinese tradition, they mix the two perspectives and employ rationality and belief at the same time, but for different ends—rationality for doubting the other tradition and belief for accepting their own.

This implies a methodological problem, and it raises the question of whether it is reasonable to expect legally applicable results from the ongoing research into the legitimacy of Vinaya lineages. In my opinion, all such endeavors will by necessity be futile, because the desired result—some kind of positive proof—is *a priori* unobtainable for a historical process that spans 2,500 years. When I read such sentences as “The *bhikṣu* lineage in China can be documented all the way back to the Buddha,” and even “The *bhikṣuṇī* lineage in China can be documented from the time of Ching Chien (Jing-jian), the first Chinese *bhikṣuṇī*, in 357 C.E.” in a research paper on the lineage of *bhikṣuṇī* ordination,<sup>2</sup> I cannot help regarding such statements as wishful thinking. China is an extremely historically minded culture with a tremendous number of historical records, but I would never expect reliable documentation to go back continuously until the year 357 C.E.; in India, without any historical records at all, it is completely out of the question, and such validity claims can be based on nothing but belief.

A third point I would like to make is that the Buddha apparently was a pragmatist. There are countless examples in the scriptures that illustrate how, in each case, the Buddha considered the specific situation of his audience and how he taught according to the needs and faculties of his listeners.

2. The Committee of Western *Bhikṣuṇīs*, “Research Regarding the Lineage of *Bhikṣuṇī* Ordination: A Response to Necessary Research Regarding the Lineage of *Bhikṣuṇī* Vinaya” (unpublished manuscript), 7.



Such pragmatism has not been limited to the Buddha himself; even without drawing attention to such concepts as *upāya*, it is easy to see a certain pragmatic attitude as a hallmark of Buddhism. Doubtless, this has been one of the reasons for the tremendous success of this religion all over Asia and now in the West. This pragmatism permitted, first of all, the necessary local adaptations when Buddhism began to spread all over India and beyond, and it allowed, secondly, innovation through continuous modification of the received set of beliefs and practices. For more than a thousand years after the death of the Buddha, the monks must have been very pragmatic when it came to modifying their rules and regulations. This explains, for example, why monks in Tibet wear robes very different from those worn by Sinhalese or Chinese monks. It also explains why certain rules of the Vinaya were kept but no longer enforced, even without the explicit consent of the Buddha. One of the better-known examples would be the clear-cut prohibition against a monk accepting gold and silver, i.e. money, with his own hands.<sup>3</sup> Quite often there is a notable difference between the contents of some of the rules and their implementation, between the normative and the factual, a divergence that is by now a time-honored and generally accepted practice.

The observation of such divergences appears to have a bearing on some of the legal problems seen as obstacles to the reintroduction of the order of nuns. One example could be the question whether a *bhikṣuṇī* ordination has to be performed by the monks alone or by both *saṅghas*; another example could be the question whether monks and nuns belonging to different Vinaya traditions are allowed to join in performing a valid ordination. As far as I can see, both questions will have to be answered from a pragmatic point of view because no absolutely satisfying legal solution is offered in the existing Vinayas. It is also not very likely that additional scholarly research will cut such Gordian knots since to date hardly a stone has been left unturned by scholars, but to no avail, I am afraid.

One of the needs strongly felt in postmodern societies is gender equality, and deficiencies in this regard are easily, and often justly, targeted by critics.

3. See Rosen 1959: 103 for the version of the Sarvāstivāda Vinaya and page 44 for references to the corresponding rule in the other Vinayas. This prohibition is rather differently observed today—very strictly in Thailand but much less so or even not at all in other parts of the Buddhist world.

Buddhism is no exception here; it will have to remedy these deficiencies if it is to survive. There is the well-known and oft-cited prophecy, put in the mouth of the Buddha himself, that the duration of Buddhism will be shortened by the introduction of the order of nuns.<sup>4</sup> Today, however, it may turn out that not introducing the order will prove harmful in such societies where the demand for equal opportunities does not hesitate to insert itself in the domain of religious specialists, be they priests, monks, or otherwise.

4. Cf. Hüsken 2000 and 2006.