



Ute Hüsken. *Die Vorschriften für die Buddhistische Nonnengemeinde im Vinaya-Piṭaka der Theravādin*. (Monographien zur Indischen Archäologie, Kunst und Philologie, edited by Marianne Yaldiz, Vol. 11). Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1997, 519 pages, ISBN 2-496-02632-4, DM 148.00.

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This voluminous work is the revision of a dissertation supervised by Professor Heinz Bechert at the University of Göttingen, Germany. Like so many other works by German Indologists, this one bespeaks a meticulous philological methodology. The work provides the first detailed and comprehensive discussion of those rules which exclusively govern the monastic life of Buddhist nuns following the Theravāda tradition. The subject of the book is the rules for nuns as preserved in the pertinent sections of the *Vinaya-Piṭaka* and as elucidated in its commentary *Samantapāsādikā*. The author not only presents each rule in its original text and in German translation but also uncovers their interrelatedness as well as some of their inherent contradictions. This approach provides the reader with a comprehensive representation of the complex nature of the monastic life of Buddhist nuns and brings issues into focus which were of a conflicting nature at the time when the *Vinaya* was codified. The accounts of the inauguration of nuns' orders receives thorough coverage, since these orders are seen as indicative of the approach taken by the Buddha — or by the compilers of the *Vinaya* — toward women in general and female renunciants in particular. In discussions of nuns' rules in comparison with monks' rules, similarities as well as differences between the two monastic communities become evident. Although she provides this comparative context for discussing the nuns' rules, the author excludes from

her deliberations those rules which without modification apply to monks and nuns equally.

Hüsken's work fills a gap in scholarly publications dealing with the rules governing the communities of Buddhist nuns of the Theravāda tradition. While an increasing interest in the position occupied by women within Buddhist traditions has over the last decade spawned a number of books addressing one or the other aspect of this larger topic, none has addressed the complexity and entirety of rules pertinent to Buddhist nuns within the Theravāda tradition as thoroughly as this book. The work constitutes a solid basis for further discussion of the role of women and of women renunciants within the Theravāda tradition and the larger world of Buddhism. Such a thorough scrutiny of the nuns' rules as presented in the authoritative Theravāda texts is all the more important as it is widely accepted that the Pāli *Vinaya* constitutes the oldest layer of Buddhist texts. Therefore, the pertinent *Vinaya* texts reveal more than any other text the legal position of women renunciants in early Buddhism.

The structure of the book follows that of the Pāli sources. Discussion of individual rules is framed by the organization of the original texts. The two texts comprising the nuns' rules, the *Bhikkunīvibhaṅga* and the *Cullavagga*, categorize the various infractions according to their severity, beginning with those which warrant expulsion from the *saṅgha*. The comparison and problematizing of each rule occur within the discussion of the category of infractions to which the rule belongs. In a final section to each chapter, the author synthesizes her findings and provides a cohesive assessment of the various categories of infractions, and a discussion of how the rules set up a legal framework within which the lives of early Buddhist nuns unfolded. A special section is devoted to comparing the nuns' rules with those of the monks.

After introducing her main sources, Hüsken provides a candid summary of previous research on women in Buddhism and on the nuns' rules. Extensive bibliographic references facilitate a retracing of her own assessments of previous publications whereby she sees in the publications dating from the early decades of this century more accuracy and originality than in the later works, which she dismisses in most cases as only popularizing the research provided by earlier generations of Indologists. A subsequent section details the method she has chosen to discuss the individual rules. First, the various infraction categories are covered according to the *Bhikkunīvibhaṅga* and then the tenth chapter of the *Cullavagga*. Each rule is rendered in its original and in translation, which makes extensive use of the word-for-word Pāli commentary incorporated in the *Suttavibhaṅga*. To facilitate understanding of the primary text, the word-for-word com-

mentary is quoted and translated in the appropriate footnotes. A comparative context is provided by references to related or similar rules for monks.

Wherever appropriate, Hüsken discusses the introductory narrative to a specific rule. Waldschmidt and other scholars held the opinion that these introductory narratives are a later addition to the rule to provide a quasi-rational explanation for why the Buddha had to proclaim the rule. While in the *Bhikkuvibhaṅga* a monk is always reporting to the Buddha another monk's questionable behavior (which provokes the Buddha to proclaim the rule), in the *Bhikkunīvibhaṅga*, with one exception, a nun's objectionable behavior is always reported by a monk. Another difference is that if the offender is a nun, the Buddha addresses her only indirectly through one of the monks. Whether or not these introductory narratives reflect historical fact is irrelevant vis-à-vis the issue that the nuns are presented in the text as not being admitted into the immediate proximity of the Buddha, who would not engage in an unmediated conversation with them.

These narratives portray nuns within similar judicial confines as in the secular law books of India. In contrast to currently popular views — such as those expressed in *Buddhism After Patriarchy or Passionate Enlightenment* — that early Buddhist traditions treated renunciant men and women not too differently, Hüsken's erudite study of the original texts reveals quite a different picture. The monks' rules are given as the default mode of a renunciant's proper behavior. The nuns' rules do not stand up independently. Most likely, they were later written as a sort of appendix to the monks' rules (p. 17). To take male behavior as the norm to which female behavior is compared is a widespread procedure, as was recently candidly illustrated by M. M. Van de Pitte in an article unmasking the latent and often blatant sexism in contemporary ornithological literature (*Environmental Ethics*, Vol. 20, pp. 19–39). In other words, the compilers of the nuns' rules were not more or less sexist than others in their socio-cultural environment; they were part of that environment and far from willing to challenge well-accepted opinions about the inferiority of women. This picture of the Buddhist nuns in the Pāli *Vinaya* stands in contrast to some of the *Therīgāthā* poems in which early nuns speak positively of their meditative experiences and of their claim to enlightenment.

What does Hüsken's work contribute to our understanding of the position of early Buddhist nuns in comparison to monks? Why should we read it? First, and above all, it puts the discussion on the solid ground of the original texts, which are subject to historical philological scrutiny. Secondly, only on the basis of the original texts and their commentaries can and should a meaningful discussion about the position of nuns versus monks be entertained. The synthesis Hüsken gives at the end of each chapter re-

veals the complexity of the situation. Any generalization as to how the rules of nuns made them equal or inferior partners in the *saṅgha* has to account for the different treatment of nuns and monks in many rules. Some of the discrepancies and variations between text and commentary become apparent in Hüsken's discussion of the tenth chapter of the *Cullavagga*, which also comprises the narratives surrounding the eight *garudhamma*, or "important rules" that nuns must take upon themselves in order to be fully ordained. Mahāpajāpatī, the Buddha's stepmother, introduces most of the issues, which then lead to the proclamation of the pertinent rule. However, by doing this she is challenging the existing arrangement between the sexes. For instance, her request that seniority in the *saṅgha* should be the sole reason for determining the amount and kind of respect to be paid other members of the *saṅgha*, regardless of his or her sex, is firmly rejected by the Buddha. One way to interpret the passage is as indicating that Mahāpajāpatī would have preferred seniority to be the sole criterion. Her own ordination, by accepting the eight important rules, is called into question as she did not receive the ordination from the nuns' as well as the monks' order since the former did not yet exist. A similar irregularity must be assumed for those women who immediately followed her — an important argument in the current discussion about whether full ordination for nuns can be reinstated (p. 476). One may argue that if at the inception of the nuns' order serious irregularities were acceptable, why are they now unacceptable to a number of monks? Nuances in the narrative leading up to the rule that only monks should teach nuns the *Vinaya* seem to indicate that in the earliest phase of the nuns' *saṅgha* the *Vinaya* was taught by nuns. The same infraction (riding in a cart pulled by some draught animal) warrants for monks and nuns different punishments; needless to say, the one for the nuns is more severe. One of the most important differences in the rules is that there is no provision for nuns to leave the *saṅgha* in a formal way (which is available to monks with the corollary of a re-entry into the *saṅgha*). Thus, for a woman to join the *saṅgha* was an irrevocable decision, whereas it could be revoked by a monk. Any attempt to reinterpret the intent and nature of the rules so that they would be more in accord with our contemporary social views of gender equality and inclusivity will be defeated by the fact that only heterosexual women capable of bearing children were eligible for ordination (p.411–412, 474). This particular rule finds its match in the rule determining that only heterosexual potent men were allowed to enter the *saṅgha* (the term *paṇḍaka* identifies a man "lacking in maleness" and not eunuch as often misunderstood). Hüsken justifies the rule about only admitting fertile women into the *saṅgha* with the remark that otherwise the *saṅgha* might have become a place for widows and women

who were considered “unsuitable” wives. The detailed discussion of the rules, together with the pertinent commentary, reveals a plethora of cultural information, for instance about the common use of tampons or the prohibition for nuns to use enclosed toilets. Despite its technical appearance, the book is a fascinating read. It will be a classic for a long time. Scholars and students of early Buddhism, of classical Indian culture, and of women and religion will appreciate this work as an excellent contribution to our understanding of the position of renunciant women in the period of early Buddhism in India. Hüsken has to be congratulated for this achievement.