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Family Matters in Indian Buddhist Monasticisms

Reviewed by Cuilan Liu

McGill University
cuilan.liu@mcgill.ca

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cozort@dickinson.edu

A Review of *Family Matters in Indian Buddhist Monasticisms*

Cuilan Liu¹

Family Matters in Indian Buddhist Monasticisms. By Shayne Clarke. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014, xiii+275 pages, ISBN 978-0-8248-3647-4 (cloth), \$52.

Shayne Clarke's *Family Matters in Indian Buddhist Monasticisms* is a remarkable contribution that revolutionizes some of our most basic notions of monastic life in India around the turn of the Common Era. The author challenges the romanticized picture of Indian Buddhist monasticism in which monks and nuns were perceived as socially dead and devoid of all familial and marital ties. Citing donative inscriptions and stories from Buddhist monastic law codes (*Vinaya*) preserved in all the six extant traditions in Sanskrit, Pāli, Chinese, and Tibetan, the author attempts to and convincingly does rectify this misperception and unveils a pan-*nikāya* and pan-Indian picture of a family-friendly Indian Buddhist monasticism found in narratives of all the *Vinaya* texts. In this rectified presentation of Indian Buddhist monasticism, the author reveals astonishing evidence that suggests, to give a few examples, that lay couples could remain legally married after ordination as monks and nuns; monks could look after nuns who were their "ex-wives"; and nuns who got pregnant could

¹ McGill University. cuilan.liu@mcgill.ca.

remain ordained, give birth, and raise the newborns in the nunnery. And the list goes on.

Before outlining the contents of the book, it is perhaps necessary to point out that the author is extremely careful in choosing, evaluating, and differentiating the primary sources used to support his central arguments. Having chosen to rely primarily on Buddhist monastic law codes, the author divides them into two categories: rules of comportment and deportment for individual monks and nuns outlined in the *Prātimokṣa* rules, and institutional laws governing monastic cooperation that are collected in sections such as *Khandhakas* in the Pāli *Vinaya*. While both types of materials are used, the author views those in the second category as more valuable for the present study. To work with these texts, the author accepts a hypothesis that dates all the extant monastic law codes to around the first few centuries of the Common Era (21). He evaluates the function of such Buddhist monastic law codes as sources that provide us with “records of what some monks seem to have thought other monks and nuns should and should not do” (30), but “not a direct window on what monks and nuns actually did” (30). This treatment reveals the author’s rejection of extreme positions that view the Buddhist monastic law codes as completely historical or completely fictional. The author thus recommends that, although interpretation of stories from monastic law codes must be handled with caution to differentiate them from representation of historical fact, it is also important not to “discount everything that the monastic lawyers said by reason of the fact that we cannot establish what actually happened on the ground in Indian Buddhist monasteries and nunneries” (167).

Arranged in five chapters, this book faithfully focuses on the central subject suggested by its title to discuss the treatment of family matters in Indian Buddhist monasticism. While the importance and continuity of familial ties in Indian Buddhist monasticism have not been completely overlooked by all scholars, this book presents the first comprehensive study on a subject insufficiently questioned in general, much

less discussed in detail. In a total of five chapters, the author convincingly argues that rather than severing all familial and matrimonial ties, Buddhist monks and nuns, at least as portrayed by the authors/redactors of extant Buddhist monastic law codes, continue to interact and associate with their biological and matrimonial kith and kin within and/or beyond monastic confines.

Chapter one introduces a variety of scholarly misperceptions on Buddhist monasticism that assert the severance of all familial and matrimonial ties as a prerequisite for entrance to religious life, a misperception drawn largely from *Sūtra* literature such as the *Rhinoceros Horn Sūtra*, whose extant Gāndhārī copy written on birch-bark dates to around the first century B.C.E. The main factor contributing to this misperception, as suggested by the author later in the book, “is a privileging of *Sūtra*” texts (162), where Buddhist monks and nuns are depicted as having severed all familial ties when entering the religious life.

Chapters two to four elaborate on this central argument by subsequently discussing issues concerning the tolerance, acceptance, and legislation of family, spouse, and motherhood in Indian Buddhist monasticism. In chapter two, the author presents evidence from donative inscriptions and stories found in narratives within the Buddhist monastic law codes to conclude that, from the perspective of the authors/redactors of the Buddhist monastic law codes, severance of familial ties with biological and matrimonial kin was not a prerequisite for entrance into religious life. On the contrary, Buddhist monks and nuns, at least as portrayed in the *Vinaya* texts, were allowed and did continue to interact with their kith and kin, lay or monastics, within or beyond monastic confines. Giving that these references date between the first to the eighth or ninth centuries, the author suggests that in Buddhist monasticism, such continued interaction between monastics and their family members had been accepted for “the greater part of the history of Buddhism in India”(76).

Chapter three focuses on the interaction between Buddhist monastics and their lay or ordained “former” spouses. By presenting stories in which monks and nuns interact with their former partners, who are now lay or ordained, in a way similar to the time when they were lay couples, the author argues that, although marital dissolution of some kind was recognized by monastic authors/redactors, Buddhist monks and nuns who were married before entering religious life could remain legally married after they did so. This argument is illustrated by *Vinaya* stories in which monks continue to visit their lay wives or share alms with those who have become nuns but were unable to gather sufficient food, or nuns fan and serve water to monks who were their husbands, or monks impregnate nuns who then give birth to and nurse their babies in the nunnery.

A detailed discussion on pregnant and nursing nuns is found in chapter four. The author convincingly demonstrates that, although a nun who knowingly ordains a pregnant or nursing woman commits a minor offence, this regulation neither prevents these women from receiving ordination nor revokes their received ordination (127). Yet it is perhaps necessary to add to this observation that making it an offence, albeit a minor one, does discourage nuns from ordaining such women and thus reduces their chances of getting ordained. While the cited stories come from *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya*, in which pregnant and nursing women are ordained and subsequently give birth to and/or nurse babies, the author argues that the acceptance of these women is found in most other *Vinaya* texts except the Chinese translation and Sanskrit original of the *Mahāsāṃghika Lokottaravāda Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya*. In that *Vinaya*, pregnant women are not allowed to be ordained immediately but must wait until the babies are born and the care for the newborns is properly arranged. The author further elaborates on a nuanced observation that, although nuns who knowingly ordain such women commit a minor offence, there is “no rule that prohibits or even makes it an offense for nuns to give birth” (128). The lack of prohibition, however, as the author carefully adds, is not to suggest that childbirth and child rearing were entirely

free of problems. It is also important to note that the cases presented by the author deal specifically with the ordination of pregnant and nursing women, not with ordained nuns who become pregnant. Yet even in the case of a nun who becomes pregnant after ordination, such as the nun Guptā, she is not expelled solely for pregnancy but is allowed to remain in the nunnery to deliver and raise the baby.

A potential exception to this observation is found in a *Prātimokṣa* rule in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* that states that nuns who raise children commit an offence. Yet upon closer reading, the author clarifies that the rule is referring to nuns babysitting the child of laypersons or of another nun. A mother nun who looks after her own child, however, still commits no offence (144).

The book closes with the conclusion in its final chapter, chapter five, that Indian Buddhist monasticism is family-friendly. The conclusion then discusses the implications for the study of Buddhist and non-Buddhist monasticism in South Asia and beyond.

Overall, evidence presented in all five chapters is analyzed to support the author's persistently reinforced argument that monastics' continued interactions with laypersons or monastics with whom they had biological or spousal ties were present and tolerated in Indian Buddhist monasticism. The author suggests that one possible motivation for such tolerance is related to the authors/redactors of the extant Buddhist monastic law codes, whose primary concern was the preservation of the corporate image of the monastic community. This principle led them to proscribe behaviors that could harm this image but to lay down no rules about behaviors that are less likely to do so. In the study, the author has demonstrated that behaviors that were less likely to invite criticism from the lay community were tolerated. These include continued interactions with biological and matrimonial kin, continued marital relationships between monastics and their lay or monastic spouses, pregnancy and childbirth unrelated to breaches of celibacy, and parenting of children within the monastic community. Therefore, in order to minimize

these activities' damage to the corporate image of the Buddhist monastic institution and so avoid loss of lay support, the monastic jurists chose to negotiate a place for them within the monastic confines and so keep such affairs in house. For instance, in analyzing stories concerning pregnant and nursing nuns, the author tries to interpret the tolerance of pregnant and nursing nuns by monastic jurists as a way to avoid inviting dual criticism over the monastic community's impurity and cruelty if pregnant and nursing nuns were expelled and exposed to the public. For this purpose, the monastic lawyers legislated a place within the monastic confines for mothering nuns to look after their children. Moreover, the author also provides a reasonable explanation on the necessity of providing such a place: to help and support pregnant and nursing nuns who were victims of sexual assault and rape.

Some of the stories presented as evidence to support the book's central argument are problematic and the author is clearly aware of some of these problems. In chapter five, when discussing the nun Guptā who was nursing her newly born son in the nunnery, the author wonders how Guptā's relatives, who were supposedly not living in the nunnery, could hear the boy crying within the nunnery. Other problematic stories are also found in the book. One example is the story concerning the nun Dharmadinnā, who had acquired religious status as first Buddhist householder, then a novice, and finally a fully ordained nun while staying at home. The text informs us that she cut her hair when she entered the religious life at home and stayed home for an additional period but managed to conceal it from her father, who disapproved of her choice to enter religious life. It would be hard to imagine that her father was completely unaware of the disappearance of the hair of his daughter whom he planned to marry off soon. These problems in the stories do not challenge the present study's central argument yet may suggest the need to reevaluate their weight when used to establish an argument for Indian Buddhist monasticism's position on family matters.

In discussing such a big topic on Indian Buddhist monasticism, the author has carefully limited the scope of his investigation to Indian Buddhist monasticism as preserved in Buddhist monastic law codes and avoided touching issues concerning gaps between Buddhist ideals and practice. The present study is perhaps particularly indispensable for scholars working on the later forms of lived Buddhist traditions in Central, East, and South Asia, as it invites readers to reconsider a widely circulated belief that today's Buddhist monasticism practiced in certain or most of these regions is corrupted and degenerated. The author views these "later forms of Buddhist monasticism such as those found in Central Asia, Kaśmīr, Nepal, and Tibet not in terms of corruption and decline but of continuity and development of a monastic or renunciant ideal that we have yet to understand fully" (117-118). While further researches on aspects of Buddhist monastic life beyond family matters are needed to prove this suggestion's applicability to pan-Asian Buddhism, it is at least true when one considers the treatment of interactions among family members in early Indian Buddhist monasticism and the implementation of this treatment in Buddhist monasticism practiced in regions such as Tibet.

Apart from Buddhist specialists, a wider audience will also likely enjoy reading this book by a leading *Vinaya* scholar who writes with clarity, simplicity, and no lack of humor. The author's efforts in making this highly specialized scholarly analysis accessible to a wider public audience without compromising its rigorous scholarship are apparent: non-English terms are translated with original spellings in all available sources; all quotations are translated into English; and central points are persistently reinforced. Overall, this book reflects the fruits of the author's continued fine research reinvestigating received assumptions about Indian Buddhist monasticism and an excellent command of all available primary sources on the subject. It amends our perception of Indian Buddhist monasticism based on widely circulated assumptions, demonstrates the consequence of selective use of a certain kind of literature for the study of Buddhist monasticism, and sets a fine example of

how to critically extract and interpret marginal information to reconstruct a possibly more representative understanding of early Buddhist monasticism. As Paul Groner writes on the dust jacket, this book “is clearly destined to be a classic in the field.”