
The Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa Sūtras in Context

Vinaya: Foundation of Buddhist Monastic Life

The institutional structure of monastic Buddhism is founded on the Vinaya, that section of the Buddhist canon (Skt. Tripiṭaka, “Three Baskets”) which explains ethical standards and behavioral guidelines for practitioners. Moral discipline is taught as the basis for spiritual practice—the foundation on which concentration and wisdom are developed. The Vinaya texts explain ordination procedures, specific restraints regulating the everyday conduct of monastics and how these developed, allowable exceptions to the rules, explanations of what constitutes an infraction, and procedures for dealing with infractions of the rules. The Vinaya provides useful background information on each transgression by including the stories of how a *bhikṣu* or *bhikṣuṇī* originally gave offense to the lay community or to other monks and nuns, necessitating the creation of a prohibition. The Vinaya texts of the Tibetan canon (Kangyur) all belong to one school—the Mūlasarvāstivāda. They include 17 *vastus* (“bases for training in morality”) organized into four sections: the Vinayavibhaṅga, the Vinayavastu, the Vinayakṣudrakavastu, and the Vinayottaragrantha.¹ The *Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa Sūtra* is located within the Vinayavibhaṅga section. Vinaya literature preserved in Chinese represents at least seven different schools, with *Bhikṣuṇī* Vinaya texts of five schools, including complete *Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa Sūtras*.²

There are seven types of Prātimokṣa precepts set forth in the Vinaya texts: those of a *bhikṣu* (fully ordained monk),

a *bhikṣuṇī* (fully ordained nun), a *śikṣamāṇā* (probationary nun), a *śrāmaṇera* (male novice), a *śrāmaṇerikā* (female novice), an *upāsaka* (layman), and an *upāsikā* (laywoman). These types of precepts are undertaken as a lifetime commitment. An eighth type of precept, which does not entail a lifetime commitment, is described in the Abhidharmakośa literature: the twenty-four hour lay precepts (*upavāsaka*).³ The five precepts a Buddhist layperson (*upāsaka* or *upāsikā*) voluntarily undertakes for life are (1) to refrain from taking life, (2) to refrain from taking what is not given, (3) to refrain from telling lies, (4) to refrain from sexual misconduct, and (5) to refrain from taking intoxicants. The ten precepts undertaken by a male or female novice (*śrāmaṇera* or *śrāmaṇerikā*) include these five (except here, the fourth precept entails refraining from sexual activity altogether), plus (6) to refrain from singing, dancing, and viewing entertainments; (7) to refrain from using ornaments and cosmetics; (8) to refrain from using high or luxurious seats and beds; (9) to refrain from handling gold and silver; and (10) to refrain from taking untimely food. The precepts of a fully ordained monk (*bhikṣu*) number more than 200, and the precepts of a fully ordained nun (*bhikṣuṇī*) number more than 300. Although the substance of the precepts is fundamentally the same for all the Vinaya schools, the specific numbers of precepts may vary slightly from one school to another.

To maintain the standards of behavior and ethical integrity of the order, procedures were instituted for the confession of faults committed by individuals within the Saṅgha. On the new moon and full moon days of each month, the community of fully ordained monks (Bhikṣu Saṅgha) is required to assemble to read the *Bhikṣu Prātimokṣa Sūtra*, which lists the precepts for *bhikṣus* and summons the assembly to affirm its purity with regard to each category of prohibited actions. Rituals of repentance and specific amends are prescribed for expiating offenses of each category, corresponding to the degree of severity of the various transgressions. Separately, the community of fully ordained nuns (Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha) is required to assemble to read the

Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa Sūtra, to similarly affirm its purity and refresh its intention to lead “the pure life.”

Five categories of infractions are common to both *bhikṣu* and *bhikṣuṇī*, which are arranged in descending order of severity: (1) *pārājika-dharma*, the “defeats,” root downfalls, or transgressions requiring dismissal from the monastic life; (2) *saṅghāvaśeṣa-dharma*, the “remainders,” or “transgressions requiring suspension”; (3) *niḥsargika-pāyantika-dharma*,⁴ the “abandoning downfalls,” or “lapses entailing forfeiture”; (4) *pāyantika-dharma*, or “propelling downfalls,” or simply, lapses; and (5) *śaikṣa-dharma*, the “faults” or “misdeeds.” In addition, there are two *aniyata-dharma* (“individually confessed downfalls” or indeterminate offences) for *bhikṣus* and eight *pratideśanīya-dharma* (“offences requiring confession”) for *bhikṣuṇīs*. The seven *adhikaraṇa-śamatha-dharma* (“methods for pacifying or resolving disputes”) appear in the *Prātimokṣa Sūtras* of both *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs*.

The first category of transgressions, the *pārājika*, includes serious offenses that are grounds for expulsion from the community. There are four *pārājika* for *bhikṣus*: (1) to refrain from sexual intercourse, (2) to refrain from telling lies (specifically, lies about one’s spiritual attainments), (3) to refrain from taking that which is not given (over a specified minimal value), and (4) to refrain from taking life (specifically, a human life). Not only is engaging in the action itself prohibited, but also causing or encouraging someone else to do it or rejoicing in someone else’s doing it is proscribed. There are four additional *pārājikas* for *bhikṣuṇīs*; simply phrased, these are (5) having bodily contact with a man whose mind is tainted by desire; (6) arranging to meet a man, and so on, with amorous intentions; (7) concealing a *pārājika* of another *bhikṣuṇī*; and (8) obeying a *bhikṣu* who has been expelled from the Saṅgha. The lesser categories of transgressions concern a wide spectrum of proprieties for monastics, including the possession and handling of individual and communal property, associations with the laity and with members of the opposite sex, methods of conflict resolution, protocol within the community, and etiquette

while traveling and visiting. On the basis of these rather extensive guidelines, monastics are counseled to deduce what would be suitable deportment in situations that have not been specifically described. Whatever accords with the monastic code laid out in the Prātimokṣa is allowable; whatever contradicts it is proscribed.

One general way of distinguishing the various types of Buddhist precepts, or rules of training in ethical conduct, is the extent of commitment in terms of time. Although Buddhist precepts are generally undertaken for life, in both Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions, there are also precepts which are observed for a period of 24 hours. In Thailand, there is also the prevalent custom of monks and nuns receiving temporary ordination for a period of a few weeks, a few months, or even a weekend. In most cases, however, precepts are undertaken as a lifelong commitment.

Another distinction to be made concerning Buddhist precepts is between Prātimokṣa (in Tibetan, literally, "individual liberation") precepts and *bodhisattva* precepts. Both types of precepts are an admixture of rules and ethical ideals, and both types may be taken by both renunciants and laypeople, although specific levels of Prātimokṣa precepts are distinguished: two for householders and the rest for those who have left the household life. Various levels of the Prātimokṣa precepts are taken in both Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhist countries by individuals who so choose, whereas *bodhisattva* precepts are undertaken only in the Mahāyāna countries.

According to Indian and Tibetan scholars, the early Buddhist community split into eighteen schools, each with a distinctive, though closely related, rendering of the Prātimokṣa precepts.^b Three of these have continued until the present day as active schools of Vinaya or monastic discipline: the Dharmagupta school of the Chinese canon, the Mūlasarvāstivādin school of the Tibetan canon, and the Theravādin school of the Pāli canon. The Dharmagupta school is currently practiced in China, Hong Kong, Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam; the Mūlasarvāstivāda is practiced in Bhutan, Mongolia, Nepal, Tibet, and the Himalayan border areas of India;

the Theravāda (also known as Sthaviravāda) is practiced in Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.

Two major lineages of *bodhisattva* precepts are still practiced today: The precepts of the *Brahmajāla Sūtra*, preserved in the Chinese canon, are practiced in China, Korea, and Vietnam, and have also been influential in Japan; the precepts of the *Bodhisattvabhūmi Sūtra*, preserved in the Tibetan canon, are practiced in those countries following the Tibetan tradition. Nuns in China, Korea, and Vietnam commonly adopt both the full precepts of the Dharmagupta Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa as well as the *bodhisattva* precepts of the *Brahmajāla Sūtra* as practiced in their respective traditions. Nuns in Tibet commonly adopt both the *śrāmaṇerikā* precepts of the Prātimokṣa and the *bodhisattva* precepts of the *Bodhisattvabhūmi Sūtra*. This study, which takes as its topic of analysis the *Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa Sūtras* of two schools of the Buddhist monastic tradition, raises the issue of how monastic life evolved and is interpreted for ordained women within these particular schools.

Buddhist Monasticism in Context

As might be expected, there is much common ground between Eastern and Western monastic traditions. Although the two traditions have developed in different geographical areas, there are remarkable similarities between them, and there is evidence that Western monasticism may have been influenced by Asian monastic models. In both traditions, there are correlates: the renunciant as the embodiment of an ascetic ideal, the monastic life as a social ideal, the notion of simplicity of lifestyle as a requisite for spiritual attainment, the tension between the eremitic and cenobitic models, and the confrontation between an idealized spiritual model and everyday human frailty. In the ritual of entering the religious life, identical elements can be found: review of the candidate's qualifications, the profession of intent to lead the religious life, prostration at the feet of the community elders, changes in name and dress, and so forth. As might also be

expected, there are areas of wide divergency between the two traditions as well. Divergent elements include the nature and duration of vows, the nature and degree of community organization, diet, forms of liturgical ritual and dress, and especially the philosophical foundations of religious life.

The Buddhist monastic tradition arose in emulation of the lifestyle of Śākyamuni Buddha, who appropriated the lifestyle current among renunciants in the India of his day. Foreswearing the household life in his determination to achieve awakening, he is said to have left the luxurious life of his youth and wandered for six years in the style of a homeless ascetic. After his enlightenment under a tree near the banks of a river, he continued to live a renunciant lifestyle. Eschewing both extreme asceticism and sensual indulgence, he taught a middle path of sound moral conduct as ideal for the spiritual life. In time, thousands joined the ranks of his followers, adopting his lifestyle as a model for their own. They were known as the Saṅgha and became revered as exemplars of the religious life.

The guidelines of the early Saṅgha community included restraint of the senses, mental alertness, and contentment with food and clothing, in addition to following the precepts. The qualities of mindfulness and wakefulness were added at a later time, although they may arguably be subsumed under the rubric of mental alertness. The concept of *śīla*, moral conduct, is held to be foremost among the three trainings (*trīṣa-śikṣā*) of a Buddhist follower. These three — *śīla*, *samādhi*, or concentration, and *prajñā*, or wisdom — are the essential elements for achieving *nirvāṇa* and perfecting the monastic life. And *śīla*, the culmination of the ethical ideal, is said to be the foundation upon which the other two trainings rest. As Jotiya Dhirasekera puts it, "it is clear from the evidence of the Suttas that out of the threefold *śikṣā* special emphasis was laid on *śīla* as the foundation of all spiritual attainments. The Buddha himself is seen assuring his disciples of the efficacy of *śīla* as the basis of spiritual progress."⁶

As the number of ordained followers grew, *śīla* became a paradigm for conducting the spiritual life of the Saṅgha community. The concept was elaborated in the Vinaya texts,

which describe the allowable and desirable conduct of a Buddhist renunciant. The Vinaya texts transmit the precepts with narratives to show how they arose and how they are to be understood. Although these contextual materials may have been added later or created to illustrate the rule, they show a human, conditioned, and practical source rather than an absolute, divine, or unbending command. While all rules and contextual materials may not originate from the Buddha himself, they do reveal the attitudes and ideals of the early Saṅgha. Accordingly, the exceptions to the rules allowed by, or attributed to, the Buddha show that he (and the early community) was attempting to fashion a set of guidelines that was neither too strict and uncompromising nor too lax. A typical instance for the formulation of a precept is when a monk or nun misbehaves and the matter is brought to the attention of the Buddha, either by the more modest members of the ordained community or by irate members of the lay community. The offender is then brought before the Buddha who first verifies the report asking, "Is it true, as is said, that you . . . ?" The offender then corroborates the report replying, "It is true, lord, that. . . ."

For example, the rule against sleeping in a place with laypeople for more than two nights was not set forth, as might be supposed, out of an elitist attitude on the part of the Saṅgha but, on the contrary, to avoid humiliation at the hands of laypeople. The incident that precipitated drafting the precept reveals no moral fault on the part of the Saṅgha but only their humanity: When some laypeople shared sleeping quarters with some monks and viewed them sleeping, they criticized them as "careless, thoughtless, naked, mumbling, snoring."⁷ Because such perceived breaches of etiquette make mendicants vulnerable to reproach by the laity, the precepts are as much to protect the Saṅgha from the criticism of the laity as from their own human foibles.

Members of the Saṅgha are enjoined to refrain from doing many actions that laypeople do and from using many things that laypeople use. This is not only to prevent them from indulging the senses, but intentionally to set them apart from laypeople who enjoy a different way of life. Prohibitions

usually evolved out of practical considerations, most often in response to complaints from critics of the new faith or from lay Buddhist followers who were scandalized by a miscreant's conduct. Complaints against members of the ordained community who behaved "like householders who enjoy pleasures of the senses" are frequent. In other words, the laity expected the renunciants to behave more ascetically than themselves. If monks and nuns indulged in delicious foods and sweets, in sports and comfortable furnishings like the laity, what was to set them apart and make them worthy of gathering alms?

Another function of the prohibitions was to ensure the harmonious functioning of a large and diverse community. "The Buddha is represented in the canonical texts as laying great stress on unity among his disciples: . . . 'Members of the Community who live united, in friendship and without disputes, are happy, recite (the disciplinary code) together and live in comfort.'"⁸

Buddhist religious life rests on the theory of cause and effect that presumes an individual, momentary stream of consciousness on which actions of body, speech, and mind make an indelible impression. Like dyes coloring a piece of cloth, wholesome and unwholesome deeds are seen as subtly coloring the consciousness, with these impressions ripening later as happiness or misery. Uncontrolled ordinary beings, enslaved by sense experience, are seen as habitually engaging in negative deeds, thereby planting the seeds of their own future grief. To reverse this devolutionary process, restraint of the senses is advised and contentment with food, clothing, and shelter are extolled. The expected consequence is not only a lifetime of human happiness, but eventually, freedom from the sufferings of birth and death altogether.

Studies on Buddhist Monasticism and Their Methodologies

A large number of studies have been conducted on various aspects of Buddhist monasticism by both Asian and West-

ern scholars. A large proportion of these studies have applied textual analysis without actually engaging in hermeneutics. Examples of such a textual approach include didactic and philological studies on Vinaya, such as W. Pachow's *Comparative Study of the Prātimokṣa*, T. W. Rhys Davids and Hermann Oldenberg's translation of *Vinaya Texts* in three parts, Akira Hirakawa's *Monastic Discipline for the Buddhist Nuns*, Kani Lal Hazra's *Constitution of the Buddhist Saṅgha*, I. B. Horner's *The Book of the Discipline, Parts I–VI*, Charles S. Prebish's *Buddhist Monastic Discipline: The Sanskrit Prātimokṣa Sūtras of the Mahāsaṅghika and Mūlasarvāstivādins*, and Krom Phrayā Vijirañāṇavarorasa's *The Entrance to the Vinaya* in three volumes. Although Chatsumarn Kabilsingh's *A Comparative Study of Bhikkhunī Pāṭimokkha* includes a certain amount of feminist analysis, it is also primarily a textual study.

Another corpus of studies has employed phenomenological methodology to understand Buddhist monasticism. Sao Htun Hmat Win's *The Initiation of Novicehood and the Ordination of Monkhood in the Burmese Buddhist Culture* is a good example of this approach. It faithfully catalogs the "agenda of procedures" involved in monastic life, such as presentation of the aspirant, the changing of robes, the appointment of a preceptor, the ordination rite, the code of discipline, the "confessional catechism," monastic education, and at the end, one and a half pages of the presumed result, entitled "The Peace and Tranquility." Such a cut-and-dried record sets aside social, historical, psychological, and comparative considerations to focus specifically upon the "what" of monastic life in a specific setting.

Another example of the phenomenological approach from the Buddhist side is Rabindra Bijay Barua's *The Theravāda Saṅgha*. The history and organization of the Saṅgha, ritual, regulations, and elements of the monastic daily life—food, dress, medicines, prayers, almsround, studies, preaching, repair of buildings, meditation, duties, teacher/pupil relationships, pilgrimage—as well as the stages of spiritual attainment, are all given ample attention. Appendices detail the lives and achievements of various members of the

Theravādin Saṅgha in Bangladesh, Burma, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, respectively, and another appendix of both early and more recent Buddhist councils rounds out the volume. Patrick Olivelle's study, *The Origin and Early Development of Buddhist Monachism*, while attempting a historical approach and relying heavily on textual analysis, is also primarily phenomenological. The works of Sukumar Dutt and Nalinaksha Dutt, while incorporating typological analysis, especially on the themes of ritual, meditation, ethics, specific doctrinal matters, and particularly the eremitic lifestyle, its pre-Buddhist origins and cenobitic conclusion, are also basically phenomenological studies.

Probably the most thorough and balanced historical surveys of specific traditions of monastic life are the three volumes on Chinese monasticism by Holmes Welch⁹ and R. A. L. H. Gunawardana's *Robe and Plough*.¹⁰ The latter examines extensive historical records to shed light on the structural, social, economic, political, diplomatic, and ritual dimensions of Saṅgha life in Sri Lanka from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries. As such, it is a valuable record, and the historical methodology of careful documentation of existing literary sources and inscriptions is an essential framework for understanding the roots and development of monastic traditions. The monastic thread in the cloth of other cultures deserves to be equally as ably chronicled.¹¹

The application of feminist analysis has begun only recently in the field of religious studies and has thus far been limited primarily to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Asian religions are rapidly coming under scrutiny, however, and an increasing number of such studies can be expected to appear in the near future. I. B. Horner, in *Women Under Primitive Buddhism*, employed what may be classified as an anthropological/sociological approach, which is valuable as the earliest example of a work on Buddhism employing feminist analysis. Horner's combination of sociological and feminist analysis is highly effective; indeed, it is impossible to divorce the conditions of Buddhist women in the early formative period from the social conditions of that time. Nevertheless, in this work Horner discusses nuns as a

significant segment of the Buddhist population, shedding light on their predicament within a male-dominated society, rather than discussing monasticism as an institution. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh's *Thai Women in Buddhism* is similar, though she does devote one chapter to "Buddhist Texts from a Feminist Perspective." Hanna Havnevik's study, *Tibetan Buddhist Nuns: History, Cultural Norm, and Social Reality*, takes an anthropological approach. Although this study incorporates a feminist perspective, a thorough, rigorous feminist analysis of the Buddhist or any other Asian monastic tradition has yet to be written. When it is, it will most likely focus on one particular tradition—Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Tibetan, and so on—due to the unique historical contexts of these traditions. Ideally, it will employ a combination of methodologies to investigate the varied facets of a complex phenomenon.

Perhaps the most thorough and systematic comparative study of Eastern and Western monastic traditions to date is W. L. A. Don Peter's *Buddhist and Benedictine Monastic Education*. Regarding monastic life as a process of education and training, he analyzes the Theravādin Buddhist and Benedictine Christian monastic educational systems comprehensively from the perspectives of history, asceticism, institutions, methods of correction, missionary activity, contributions to scholarship and culture, and the educational implications of identifying a canonical language (Pāli and Latin) within these monastic systems. In his citing of sources to illustrate points of comparison, a certain amount of textual and hermeneutical analysis is undertaken. In his final chapter, "Education for the After-Life," he explores the values and ideals of each tradition in relation to its soteriological goal. Viewing each tradition as a system of mental culture for self-purification and character development through meditation, with the goal of translating the teachings into everyday life, he ventures to postulate universals, such as the educational implications of a cenobitical lifestyle.

Surveying the field of textual resources specifically on Buddhist monasticism, a preponderance of etic, textual,

and phenomenological studies is evident, as well as a dearth of emic, theological, and experiential studies. Contrary to the preconception of the West as rational and scientific and the East as mystical and intuitive, studies on Buddhist monasticism are rarely personal and "spiritual" in orientation. It is noteworthy that existing studies of Eastern monasticism are most often conducted in the vein of objective analysis, whether phenomenological, textual, or historical. This contrasts markedly with recent trends in contemporary social science and humanities research in the United States, which is taking a more personal and experiential approach, with structural and feminist analysis expressions of this trend. It may be postulated that Western culture, perhaps as a corollary of the ethic of individualism, is overall more self-consciously reflective than other cultures. While studies of Christian monasticism focus more on the psychological, sociological, spiritual, and structural elements of religious life, analysis of these elements is almost totally lacking in treatments of Eastern monasticism, whether conducted by Asian or Western scholars. As yet, studies incorporating feminist and liberationist analysis are also scarce.

The Prātimokṣa

Originally *śīla* was a very broad concept, incorporating all aspects of the Noble Eightfold Path. Over time, however, it came to refer to ethical conduct as determined by certain guidelines of moral behavior and to the life of purity (*brahmacārya*), identified particularly with the Saṅgha. Eventually, the concept narrowed even further to specifically denote the rules of the *Prātimokṣa Sūtras*, the monastic codes of discipline.

There is considerable speculation regarding the etymology of the term Prātimokṣa. Most commentators trace it to the Sanskrit root *muc*, "to free or liberate," but Sukumar Dutt takes it to mean bond.¹² In any case, if it was in existence by the time the Mahāsaṅghika school split away from the Theravādin after the Council of Vaisāli,¹³ as some

scholars contend, it may be assumed that the code was composed within a hundred years of the passing of the Buddha. The exact dating of this first schism, however, remains an extremely controversial point.¹⁴

The origins of the *Prātimokṣa Sūtra* are somewhat obscure. Apparently its original form was much simpler than the versions extant today. Sukumar Dutt is of the opinion that it consisted merely of a declaration of faith in verse form that the *bhikṣus* gathered to recite once every six years, a tradition begun by Vipāśyin.¹⁵ Gradually, however, it took on the nature of an actual confession of faults at a bimonthly assembly of the *Bhikṣu* or *Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha*. There is no way of ascertaining when the *Prātimokṣa Sūtras* became crystallized into their present forms, but it is clear that eventually two prerequisites were needed before the recitation of the *sūtra* could begin; namely, the profession of purity by those in attendance and the giving of consent to the proceedings by those absent for such reasons as health. Reaffirmations of purity by those assembled are found throughout the proceedings, in the form of the ritual formula "Are you pure in this regard?" This occurs after the recitation of each category of precepts. Dhirasekera observes that the purity of absentees must likewise be repeatedly declared, but is convinced that standards of behavior declined once the confession of specific transgressions before the community lapsed: "The Pātimokkha recital thereafter ceases to be a powerful instrument in the proper maintenance of monastic discipline."¹⁶

The question he raises is a legitimate one. After the practice of establishing the purity of those assembled through the declaration of purity was instituted and the practice of actual confession of faults in the assembly lapsed, the *up-ṣadha* procedure became ritualized and its disciplinary function was severely weakened. Assuming that authority for assigning penalties to wrongdoers was still vested in the assembly, once the recitation of the *Prātimokṣa Sūtra* assumed the form of a routine ritual, what alternative procedures were instituted in place of public disclosure before the community? Perhaps the process of adjudication and the

punishing of offenders was too irksome or cumbersome, yet in the absence of a precise and enforceable system of censure, is there not a danger that the behavior of miscreants might be tolerated or ignored? If guilty monks or nuns are excluded from the assembly, does that not effectively remove them from the disciplinary discretion and control of the community? In other words, what is to prevent an errant monk from wearing the robes and going his merry way? This indicates the need for research to discover when and why the system of public disclosure lapsed, what methods of censure took its place, and what disciplinary measures are employed in the living Saṅgha traditions today.

From the beginning there has been a creative tension between factions that emphasized either the spirit or the letter of the precepts. Dhirasekera illustrates these various interpretations by citing the differences of opinion between two learned Sri Lankan monks: Culābhaya Thera, who held to the narrower interpretation, and Sumana Thera, who promoted the broader. "To Sumana Thera *śīla* meant something more than the discipline brought about by the Pātimokkha, although he was quick and ready to recognize the very significant part it played in the life of a monk." For him, "the term *śīla* was used in the Canonical texts to mean implicitly the wider concept covered under the fourfold classification" of *śīla* [*catupārisuddhisīla*]; namely, "Pātimokkhasānvara [restraints of the Pātimokkha], Indriyasaṅvara [restraint of the senses], Ājīvapārisuddhi [purity of livelihood] and Paccayasannissita [moderation with respect to requisites] *śīla* as well as of the Cūla, Majjhima, Mahā and Magga and Phala *śīlas*."¹⁷ In Dhirasekera's view (from Sri Lanka), the Vinaya, specifically the Prātimokṣa, gradually came to take precedence over the other branches of the fourfold classification. "The sole basis of monastic discipline now seems to be the code of the Pātimokkha which is aptly described by Buddhaghosa as the *sikkhāpadaśīla* [the morality of rules of training]. Here one immediately feels that there is a complete disregard of the role of the Dhamma as a disciplinary force among the disciples."¹⁸ Whether or not one agrees with Dhirasekera's opin-

ion that the Prātimokṣa assumed greater importance in relation to increasing laxity in the Saṅgha and triumphed at the expense of the Saṅgha's Dharma focus, the fact remains that the Vinaya, and specifically the Prātimokṣa, is central for ordained Buddhists even today.

Of the studies concerned specifically with Vinaya, the body of texts on Buddhist monastic discipline, most deal exclusively with Bhikṣu Vinaya, the discipline of the monks. They mention the formation and development of an order for women only in passing or devote a chapter to it at most. Although these studies differ somewhat in perspective, they generally begin by tracing the formation of the monastic order of monks during the lifetime of the Buddha, prefaced by a discussion of the historical context of the tradition of wandering ascetics in India. They proceed to discuss the behavioral conventions and disciplinary parameters that defined the lifestyle of the Buddhist renunciants. These studies debate certain historical questions, such as whether the tradition of bimonthly recitation preceded the formulation of the rules or vice versa, whether a clear evolution of the Saṅgha from eremitic to cenobitic models can be postulated, whether the formulation of the *Prātimokṣa Sūtra* preceded or followed the compilation of the *Vibhaṅghas*, and so forth. What is clear through all of these discussions, however, is that when moral injunctions to live by the spirit of *śīla* proved inadequate, it became necessary to institute formal rules of training to regulate the conduct of the monastic order.

Apart from its religious and sociological significance, the *Prātimokṣa Sūtra* constitutes one of the oldest legal codes in existence. Especially considering the paucity of general documentation available, it has considerable value both as a historical and sociological record of life in India of the fifth and sixth centuries B.C.E. Although the *Prātimokṣa Sūtra* seems to have lost its legal function as time went by and assumed, through fortnightly recitation, more of a bonding and strengthening function, the document nevertheless provides information of inestimable worth to the legal historian, illuminating the social mores of the day, as well as legal proceedings, methods of conflict resolution, and penalties for infractions.

Considerable discussion has taken place as to whether the *Bhikṣu* and *Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa Sūtras* are extracts from or condensations of the *Bhikṣu* and *Bhikṣuṇī Vibhaṅghas* or whether, on the contrary, the *Vibhaṅghas* are elaborations of the *Prātimokṣa Sūtras*.¹⁹ In either case, by explaining in detail the precedent on which each precept is based, the *Vibhaṅghas* are of great value in contextualizing the precepts and giving them life. Presenting the backdrop against which each precept was formulated, these stories imbue the precepts with direct relevance. By illustrating the exceptional circumstances under which such behavior would be allowable, the stories related in the *Vibhaṅghas* give texture and shadow to what might otherwise appear a rigid and legalistic inventory of rules.

These records of exemptions allowed show evidence of a system with considerable built-in flexibility. The maxim applied is, "What is in accord with the precepts is allowable; what is in conflict is prohibited." Therefore, a large measure of common sense is enjoined upon the practitioner in the everyday application of the guidelines. The guidelines are reinforced by the community only in cases of conflict or incidents of conduct that go beyond the allowable bounds. Responsibility for evaluating particular circumstances is laid at the feet of the individual.

When adjudicating a particular instance of misconduct not specifically mentioned in the Vinaya, the appropriateness of an action is determined by whether or not it is in conformity with the body of rules already formulated. Judicial responsibility for interpreting the precepts rests in the hands of local Saṅgha communities, which function independently and make decisions as a group on the basis of consensus. The jurisdiction of each particular Saṅgha community is demarcated by boundaries circumscribing the geographical area within which the community's legal responsibility extends (*sīmā*). These communities were fluid and the *sīmā* boundaries could be redrawn whenever it was deemed necessary or advisable. Yet, while the boundaries were in place, all Saṅgha members within the *sīmā* were responsible to the group and

any procedure (*karman*) held with even one individual absent was held to be unlawful.

The Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa Sūtra and Its Historical Background

The story of Mahāprajāpatī and her leadership in the creation of the Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha has often been told. Some five years after the Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha was founded, the Buddha's stepmother (and aunt), Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī, accompanied by a large retinue of women, approached him with her request to join the order. Although modern scholarship questions their validity, traditional renditions of this incident recount that the Buddha hesitated three times before admitting these women to the order, saying "Be cautious, Gautamī, of the going forth of women from home into homelessness in the Dharma and discipline proclaimed by the Tathāgata." When the Buddha's attendant (and cousin) Ānanda questioned him concerning the spiritual capacities of women, the Buddha is said to have replied that women are as capable as men of achieving liberation, a fact verified by the multitude of women who achieved the state of an *arhat* during his lifetime. Having thus affirmed women's equal capacity for spiritual achievement, the Buddha is said to have relented and agreed to establish the female counterpart of the Bhikṣu Saṅgha.

There are abundant stories of the early *therī* and many corroborating references to document the spiritual attainments of women, especially ordained women, in the early centuries of the history of the order.²⁰ Approximately 60,000 Buddhist nuns throughout the world continue their legacy to the present day. Historically the number of nuns has generally been fewer and their role overshadowed by the monks, who enjoy higher social status and numerous privileges in Buddhist societies. However, an international movement has been created in the last ten years that encourages women to fulfill their potentialities and promises to redress this imbalance.²¹

As noted, any number of general works on Vinaya are available, many of which are cited in the accompanying bibliography. Most of them, however, deal almost exclusively with Bhikṣu Vinaya. There is no need to reiterate that information here, except by way of introduction. Instead attention will be given to providing a general background to Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya, which has received far less attention than its male counterpart. This study takes as its basis the fundamental text of the Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha, the *Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa Sūtra*, according to which Buddhist nuns have for centuries ordered the lifestyle of their communities. This text, in its several renditions, enables us to understand the fundamental vows undertaken by female Buddhist renunciants in the various Vinaya schools and the regulations that were formulated to govern their monastic life.

The complete text of the *Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa Sūtra* exists in a number of different editions. That of the Theravādin school is preserved in Pāli, whereas that of the Mūlasarvāstivāda school is preserved in Chinese²² and Tibetan. Although strikingly similar, the Chinese and Tibetan versions of the Mūlasarvāstivādin school *Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa Sūtra* exhibit important differences in the enumeration and content of the precepts, which deserve further study. The remaining complete versions—those of the Dharmagupta,²³ Mahāsaṅghika,²⁴ Mahīsāsaka,²⁵ and Sarvāstivāda²⁶—exist only in Chinese. Although possibly as many as 100 nuns from Western countries have received ordination as *bhikṣuṇīs* thus far, no complete English translation of the precepts they have pledged to abide by has heretofore been published. In fact, as far as is known, this constitutes the first English translation of any *Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa Sūtra* in full; that is, including the introductory and concluding verses, and the ritual pronouncements that begin and end each category of precepts. This statement requires some explanation.

The translation from the Pāli by I. B. Horner, published by the Pāli Text Society, lists the precepts to be observed solely by the *bhikṣuṇīs* as they appear within the framework

of the *Bhikkhuni Vibhaṅga*; those precepts that the *bhikṣuṇīs* observe in common with the *bhikṣus* appear separately, in the *Bhikkhu Vibhaṅga*. Of the 311 precepts or training rules for *bhikṣuṇīs*, 181 are to be found among the 227 rules for *bhikṣus*; the remaining 130 are exclusive to *bhikṣuṇīs*. Hence, to compile a comprehensive listing of the *bhikṣuṇī* precepts in the Pāli, one must refer to a separate text recording the monks precepts, culling those precepts that apply to nuns and eliminating those that, for example, specifically regulate the conduct of monks vis-à-vis nuns. To my knowledge, such a compilation has not been done; in fact, such a work would necessarily be somewhat artificial. Nevertheless, from the abridged form of the Pāli *Bhikkhunī Vibhaṅga* and “a surviving fragment of a few lines belonging to the Tibetan Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa,” Horner adduces the existence of an earlier, autonomous version of the Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa in Pāli now lost to us.²⁷ The existence of complete Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa texts in Chinese supports her hypothesis. However, the fragment on which she bases her claim belongs to the Sarvāstivādin school, rather than to the Mūlasarvāstivāda. Moreover, she seems unaware of the existence of a complete Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa of the Mūlasarvāstivādin school in the Tibetan. The complete Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa of the Mūlasarvāstivādin school in Tibetan translation is nonetheless available to us in the Kangyur in a number of editions with very slight variations or lacunae.

As noted previously, the Pāli version records only those precepts that are exclusive to *bhikṣuṇīs*, omitting those precepts held in common with the *bhikṣus*. This procedure has led to variations in ascertaining and enumerating the total number of *bhikṣuṇī* precepts. The Chinese and Tibetan versions seem to be the only extant documents that record the *bhikṣuṇī* precepts in full, including introductory verses, concluding verses, and precepts held in common with the *bhikṣus*. One may speculate as to whether the Pāli version is an abbreviated form of the complete text or whether the Chinese and Tibetan versions have been reconstituted later, possibly by the translators.

Although *bhikṣuṇīs* do have considerably more precepts to observe than *bhikṣus*, this does not in itself indicate that nuns have more defilements, as popular Buddhist culture would have it, or that the Vinaya is discriminatory, as charged by feminist critics. It is, rather, a factor of the later establishment of the *Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha*. In that the order of nuns was established five years later than the order of monks, the *Bhikṣuṇī Saṅgha* was considered junior in standing and, in effect, "inherited" the body of precepts that had been formulated for monks during the first five years of the establishment of the *Bhikṣu Saṅgha*, such as the major injunctions to refrain from sexual conduct, taking life, theft, false speech, and so on. From a comparison of the *Bhikṣu* and *Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa Sūtras*, it is obvious that the majority of the nuns' precepts were formulated in response to the misbehavior of monks. In the Pāli, as noted above, 181 were formulated on the basis of a monk's misconduct, but only 130 were formulated on the basis of a nun's. A similar differential maintains in the other extant Vinaya schools.

An English translation from Chinese of the Dharmagupta version of the text, completed by Shu-lien Miao, exists in a privately circulated manuscript form.²⁸ This translation has until now been the primary source of reference for Western women receiving *bhikṣuṇī* ordination.²⁹ Akira Hirakawa translated two texts of the Mahāsaṅghika school, the *Bhikṣuṇī Dharma* and the *Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya*, under the title *Monastic Discipline for the Buddhist Nuns*³⁰ but does not include a translation of the *Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa Sūtra*. A German translation of fragments of the Sarvāstivādin version, by Ernst Waldschmidt, has been published under the title *Bruchstücke des Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa der Sarvāstivādins*.³¹ Although it includes very useful commentary and comparative analysis, it does not give a translation of the *sūtra*. A rough French translation based on the Mūlasarvāstivādin text exists,³² but it also omits introductory and concluding passages. An edition of the Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit *Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa Vibhaṅga* of the Ārya-mahāsaṅghika-lokottaravādin school, edited by Gustav Roth with an introduction and annotations in English, is a valuable re-

source³³ but does not deal specifically with the *Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa Sūtra*.

The Chinese canon remains the largest source of materials on the *Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa*, preserving as it does the texts of five different Vinaya schools. These texts were translated into Chinese principally during the fifth, sixth, and seventh centuries.³⁴ Chatsumarn Kabilsingh has done valuable pioneer work on the *bhikṣuṇīs* precepts,³⁵ translating the Theravādin precepts from the Pāli, along with five schools of the precepts from the Chinese. Still, these do not constitute complete translations, since the introductory and concluding verses have been omitted.

Although it is the *bhikṣuṇī* precepts that concern us here, it is important to note that there are extensive correlations between the *Bhikṣu* and *Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa Sūtras*. The majority of the precepts are, in fact, identical. Even where precepts appear different at first glance, there are cases where the gender distinctions in a precept formulated for *bhikṣus* have simply been reversed for *bhikṣuṇīs*. For example, in both the Dharmagupta and Mūlasarvāstivāda *Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa* (the ninth and fifth *pāyantika*, respectively) the identical precept is found: "If a *bhikṣuṇī* teaches more than five or six sentences of Dharma to a man, unless a knowledgeable woman is present, she commits a *pāyantika*." In the *Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa*, this precept reads, "If a *bhikṣu* teaches more than five or six sentences of Dharma to a woman, unless a knowledgeable man is present, he commits a *pāyantika*."

It is interesting to investigate the origins of this precept. According to the story given in the Pāli Vinaya,³⁶ it was occasioned when the monk Udāyin delivered Dharma teachings privately, first to a housewife and then to the daughter-in-law of the household, each of whom suspected sexual innuendos in the other's encounter. When the matter was brought to the attention of the Buddha, he initially prohibited monks from teaching Dharma to laywomen but subsequently, when the laywomen criticized the monks for not giving teachings to women, allowed them to teach them up to five or six lines. A number of precepts exhibiting such a

reversal of roles might be cited, but the point is that women, in advocating the establishment of an order for women, found themselves under the jurisdiction of a code formulated originally for men. In the majority of cases, the precepts were apparently as applicable to one gender as to the other. In other cases, where the precepts obviously did not apply to women, such as the prohibition against urinating while standing, they were simply dropped. In certain other cases, however, the *bhikṣuṇīs* may have been made accountable for precepts that suited them imperfectly. Such an evaluation will require a thorough feminist analysis based on accurate translations of all available original texts.

Any comparative investigation of two or more religious traditions requires, as a bare minimum, study of their central texts and tenets. As the pioneering figure Max Müller has succinctly put it, "But before we compare, we must thoroughly know what we compare."³⁷ Hence, to validly consider points of difference and similarity between the Chinese and Tibetan monastic codes of ethics for women requires a close reading of the primary texts on which these two traditions are founded. Therefore, original translations of the *Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa Sūtras* of the Dharmagupta and Mūlasarvāstivādin schools are presented here.