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Sisters in Solitude: Two Traditions of Buddhist Monastic Ethics for Women.
By Karma Lekshe Tsomo. Albany, New York: State University of New
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This volume, published in the "Feminist Philosophy" series of the State University of New York Press, presents translations of the *Bhikṣunī Prātimokṣa Sūtras* of the Dharmaguptaka and Mūlasarvāstivādin schools of Buddhism, along with a comparative analysis of their contents.

The author, christened Patricia Jean Zenn, became interested in Buddhism as a young child, eventually earning a Bachelor's degree in Oriental Languages from the University of California, Berkeley, and a Master's Degree in Asian Studies at the University of Hawai'i (in 1971). In 1977 she took the vows of a novice nun (*śrāmaṇerikā*) in the Tibetan tradition in southern France, and in 1982 completed her full ordination by taking the *Bhikṣunī* precepts at Beomeo Temple near Pusan, Korea. The details of her life are presented as a short spiritual autobiography in the Preface to *Sisters in Solitude*. For many years she studied at the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives and the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics in Dharamsala. Throughout her career she has been interested in the role of women in modern Buddhism. She was a founding member of Sakyadhita ("Daughters of the Buddha"), an international alliance of women devoted to Buddhist practice, and has been instrumental in facilitating conferences in Thailand (1991), Sri Lanka (1993), Ladakh (1995), Cambodia (1997), and California (1998). Previously, she edited *Sakyadhita: Daughters of the Buddha* (Snow Lion) and *Buddhism Through American Women's Eyes* (Snow Lion). Her motivation in publishing *Sisters in Solitude* falls clearly in line with the sentiment expressed in a passage near the end of her Preface:

Since receiving the *bhikṣunī* precepts myself, I have been involved in a burgeoning international Buddhist women's movement and have worked to gain acceptance for the *bhikṣunī* ordination in countries and traditions where it does not now exist. Despite serious educational and economic disadvantages, Buddhist women in Asia, both lay and ordained, are becoming increasingly aware of their spiritual and social worth. In this fertile climate of awakening feminist consciousness, fostered through continual networking, publications, discussions, and conferences, the potential exists for reinstating an order of fully ordained nuns in all Buddhist countries. The restitution of the *Bhikṣunī Saṅgha* would stand as a symbol of women's spiritual power and equality and serve as a bridge linking women in Buddhist cultures with women's movements in other countries (p. xi).

To be sure, the above statement suggests that Karma Lekshe Tsomo's volume will be very different in style and content from the vast majority of

research on nuns' *Vinaya* that has preceded her work. It is of course widely acknowledged that I. B. Horner's landmark work in translating the Pāli texts of both the monks' and nuns' *Vinaya* tradition (published in six volumes between 1938 and 1966), as well as her important early book *Women Under Primitive Buddhism* (1930), are pioneering efforts at recognizing the importance of the role of women in Buddhism. Nonetheless, Horner's translations and interpretations are certainly more fully characterized by her impressive philological skills than her feminism. Additionally, until quite recently nearly all the subsequent research on nuns' *Vinaya* reflected philology more than feminism. As such, Akira Hirakawa's *Monastic Discipline for the Buddhist Nuns* (1982), which translates the Chinese version of the nuns' *Vinaya* of the Mahāsāṃghika school, Gustav Roth's *Bhikṣunī-Vinaya: Manual of Discipline for Buddhist Nuns* (1970), an edition of the Sanskrit version of the nuns' *Vinaya* of the Mahāsāṃghika-Lokottaravādin school, and Chatsumarn Kabilsingh's *A Comparative Study of the Bhikkhunī Pāṭimokkha* (1984), are all known to her, but rarely utilized due to their almost exclusively philological, historical, and text-critical content. There is no indication she is aware of Édith Nolot's important *Règles de Discipline des Nonnes Bouddhistes: Le Bhikṣunīvinaya de l'École Mahāsāṃghika-Lokottaravādin* (1991) or my own *A Survey of Vinaya Literature* (1994), each of which might have informed her study.

The book is organized into five chapters. The first chapter contextualizes the place of the nuns' *Prātimokṣa* in the development of Buddhist history and literature. It progresses from a consideration of *Vinaya* as the foundation of Buddhist monastic life to a short presentation of the role and function of Buddhist monastic life. She then briefly reviews some of the major studies of Buddhist monastic life, moves ahead to an explanation of the structure and function of the *Prātimokṣa*, and concludes the chapter with a summary of the historical background of the *Bhikṣunī Prātimokṣa Sūtra*. Although Tsomo seems to understand the profound difference in meaning and function between the terms *Vinaya* and *śīla*, this distinction is seriously underdeveloped. Moreover, she sides with Jotiya Dhirasekera, author of *Buddhist Monastic Discipline* (1982), in presuming that once the *Prātimokṣa* became ritualized as part of the *Poṣadha* ceremony, "its disciplinary function was severely weakened" (p. 15). My own work suggests that this conclusion is wrong. As I wrote in "Vinaya and Prātimokṣa: The Foundation of Buddhist Ethics" (published in A.K. Narain [ed.], *Studies in the History of Buddhism* [Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corporation, 1980], p. 248):

With the maturation of the monastic order in Buddhism, it also

became critically apparent that pragmatic considerations had to be reckoned with. By having all offenses...*confessed and dealt with before* the actual Poṣadha ceremony, more time was freed for other monastic concerns. Thus, the ritualized recitation of the Prātimokṣa becomes intensely meaningful. It seems to become the *formal embodiment* of a tradition, by this time long in practice, of expecting and demanding the highest cultivation of ethical life by practitioners of Buddhism. In so doing, the ritualization of the Prātimokṣa reveals not that ethics and morality were overlooked, but rather that they continued as strongly as ever, simply recast into the formalistic mould that Buddhist monastic life had adopted. Considered in this perspective, Prātimokṣa is not just monastic "glue," holding the saṃgha together, but the common ground on which the internally enforced life of śīla is manifested externally in the community.

Tsomo's section on the *Bhikṣunī Prātimokṣa Sūtra* is very useful, not only for outlining the various versions of the text in the various *nikāya* Buddhist schools, but because she emphasizes the critical importance of the Chinese and Tibetan versions, thus highlighting why they were selected for translation in this volume. A bit of sectarian history relating the nature and development of the Dharmaguptaka and Mūlasarvāstivādin schools would have further accented why these texts were chosen, but in fairness to the author, such a discourse might also have been seen as ancillary, and especially so since it has been examined by many other scholars.

Chapters Two ("The *Bhikṣunī Prātimokṣa Sūtra* of the Dharmaguptaka School) and Three ("The *Bhikṣunī Prātimokṣa Sūtra* of the Mūlasarvāstivādin School") follow, presenting the translations of the respective texts. Like all *Prātimokṣa* texts, each of the categorical sections is presented as a bare compendium of rules pertinent to that category. As such, even when combined with the preliminary and concluding verses to the *Prātimokṣa* recitation, each text is compact, with the Dharmagupta text occupying forty-eight pages and the Mūlasarvāstivādin text occupying fifty-five pages. In keeping with the purpose of the book, Tsomo's notes are kept to a minimum, avoiding lengthy philological arguments, and instead offer useful commentary on the meaning and application of technical terms.

Chapter Four, "A Comparison of the Chinese Dharmagupta and the Tibetan Mūlasarvāstivādin *Bhikṣunī Prātimokṣa Sūtras*," is a slim chapter of thirteen pages outlining the structure of each text, and comparing the texts in a highly superficial way in the *pārājika*, *saṅghāvaśeṣa*, *niḥsargika-pāyantika*, *pratideśanīya*, and *śaikṣa* categories of offenses, as well as a short statement about the *adhikaraṇa-samatha* section of the text. She notes the Dharmaguptaka text to have 341 rules and the Mūlasarvāstivādin text to have

365, excluding the *adhikaraṇa-sāmātha* portion of the text, which contains an additional seven items in each case. It is here that a highly fruitful comparative examination might have been made, with interesting conclusions drawn. In the monks' *Prātimokṣa* much could be learned about the specific behaviors and values of each sect from the textual disparities, particularly in the *śaikṣa dharma* section. A cursory examination of the translations of each nuns' text suggests similar findings. For example, the Dharmaguptaka text includes twenty-six regulations for proper worship at a *stūpa*, while the Mūlasarvāstivādin text posits no *stūpa* regulations. It is also highly interesting that both the monks' and nuns' *Prātimokṣa* texts present precisely the same number of *stūpa* regulations. As I have speculated elsewhere (see Śaikṣa-dharmas Revisited: Further Considerations of Mahāsāṃghika Origins," *History of Religions* 35, 3 [1996], 258-270), it may be possible to postulate that it is the incorporation of these *stūpa* regulations that explains why the Dharmaguptaka *Vinaya* was the most widely accepted *Vinaya* in China. This is no small point. In the 1989 issue of the *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, Gregory Schopen wondered creatively about the absence of *stūpa* regulations in the Pāli *Vinaya* in his article, "The Stūpa Cult and the Extant Pāli Vinaya" (pp. 83-100), prompting Richard Gombrich to respond in the following year's issue with "Making Mountains Without Molehills: The Case of the Missing Stūpa." One can only presume that matters not germane to the issue of feminism were excluded from detailed consideration here.

Chapter Five, "Linking Past and Future," is a short six-page conclusion. Tsomo is absolutely accurate when she comments that "The regulations date to a time when the nuns and monks were reclusive mendicants and some had to be adjusted when the Saṅgha became settled in monastic communities" (p. 149). She acknowledges that although the regulations may not be applicable in modern society they provided a comprehensive ethical basis for Buddhist women who were courageous enough to undertake the profoundly rigorous training of a nun in an often less than supportive environment. At the end, Tsomo concludes:

The challenge now for the new generation of Buddhist women practitioners is to capture the spirit behind the precepts and interpret them in an authentic yet viable way, conducive to personal growth. It is doubtful that nuns today will feel bound to a simply legalistic interpretation of the precepts; more likely their approach will be to awaken and renew the spiritual life force of the tradition (p. 150).

It is here that the book disappoints me. Although there are now likely

in excess of 100 nuns from Western countries who have received *bhikṣuṇī* ordination, none is better equipped to reflect on this future challenge than Karma Lekshe Tsomo. Yet she ends the book just as one's appetite for more reflection is thoroughly whetted and one's intellect provoked. No doubt, the book offers much in its translations, presented in an easily accessible fashion, and in its important contribution to continuing studies of nuns' *Vinaya*. This reviewer hopes that Karma Lekshe Tsomo's next book will pick up where this one concludes and offer her understanding of the shape of that "new generation of women Buddhist practitioners" and the way in which it might "awaken and renew the spiritual life force of the tradition."