

Article

Living Vinaya in the United States: Emerging Female Monastic Sanghas in the West

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Abstract: From late January to early February 2018, the first Vinaya course in the Tibetan tradition offered in the United States to train Western nuns was held in Sravasti Abbey. Vinaya masters and senior nuns from Taiwan were invited to teach the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, which has the longest lasting bhikṣuṇī (fully ordained nun) sangha lineage in the world. During this course, almost 60 nuns from five continents, representing three different traditional backgrounds lived and studied together. Using my ethnographic work to explore this Vinaya training event, I analyze the perceived needs that have spurred Western Buddhist practitioners to form a bhikṣuṇī sangha. I show how the event demonstrates the solid transmission of an Asian Vinaya lineage to the West. I also parallel this Vinaya training event in the West to the formation of the bhikṣuṇī sangha in China in the 4th and 5th centuries, suggesting that for Buddhism in a new land, there will be much more cooperation and sharing among Buddhist nuns from different Buddhist traditions than there are among monastics in Asia where different Buddhist traditions and schools have been well-established for centuries. This Vinaya training event points to the development of the bhikṣuṇī sangha in the West being neither traditionalist nor modernist, since nuns both respect lineages from Asia, and reforms the gender hierarchy practiced in Asian Buddhism. Nuns from different traditions cooperate with each other in order to allow Buddhism to flourish in the West.

Keywords: bhikshuni; sangha; Vinaya; Buddhism in the West; Buddhist nun; Thubten Chodron; Sravasti Abbey; bhikshuni ordination; lineage; transmission; Buddhism in America; monasticism; bhikshuni revival movement

From 22 January to 8 February 2018, the first Vinaya (code of Buddhist monastic discipline, the guidelines for Buddhist monastic communities) course in the Tibetan tradition, ‘Living Vinaya in the West,’ was offered in the United States to train Western nuns. The course was held in Sravasti Abbey, one of the first Buddhist monasteries in the U.S. In this 18-day Vinaya course, Vinaya master Bhikṣuṇī Wuyin and six senior nuns from her Luminary Nunnery in Taiwan were invited by Bhikṣuṇī Thubten Chodron, the founder and abbess of Sravasti Abbey, to teach the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, which has the longest lasting bhikṣuṇī sangha (community of full-ordained nuns) lineage in the world.

Venerable Thubten Chodron is among the first generation of Western students to ordain as a nun in the Tibetan tradition. At the same time, she was among the first cohort of Western nuns to receive the bhikṣuṇī ordination, which she did in Taiwan in 1986. As a well-known teacher and prolific author, Ven. Chodron is also renowned for her commitment to improve conditions for Buddhist nuns (Chodron 2000, 2001; Haas 2013). During this course, almost 60 nuns from Germany, France, Australia, Mexico, Columbia, Singapore, Taiwan, Canada, Ecuador, Argentina, and the U.S. and representing the three different traditional backgrounds, the Tibetan, Theravāda, and Mahāyāna, lived and studied together. This first Vinaya training in the West, ‘Living Vinaya in the West,’ in 2018, originates from another educational course, ‘Life as a Western Buddhist Nun,’ held in Bodh Gaya, India, in 1996. This

first course of bhikṣuṇī Vinaya training happened in Asia and was co-organized by Venerable Chodron, who invited Master Wuyin to give direct guidance on how to live according to the Vinaya and observe bhikṣuṇī prātimokṣa, the code of ethics and discipline for fully ordained nuns. The first training of its kind, this teaching was later edited as a book entitled *Choosing Simplicity*. Published in 2000, the book is one of the first English-language commentaries on the Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa (WuYin 2001). Another book, *Blossoms of the Dharma*, with the talks of the nuns and other representatives given at ‘Life as a Western Buddhist Nun’ was also published (Chodron 1999).

For the course ‘Living Vinaya in the West’ in 2018, Venerable Chodron again invited Master Wuyin from Taiwan to teach the bhikṣuṇī Vinaya. However, this time, more than twenty years on from the bhikṣuṇī Vinaya training held in Bodh Gaya in 1996, the course was conducted in Newport, Washington State in the U.S., where Sravasti Abbey is located. As the first such training offered in the U.S. for Western nuns, the language used was mostly English. While Master Wuyin and some other faculty taught, a professional translation from Chinese to English was provided as well. The majority of the students were Caucasian nuns with many Asians from various countries as well, however, at the same time, the students were highly diverse in terms of not just their ethnicity or nationality, but also their international Buddhist training background as well. For example, there were western nuns resident in Germany, France, Canada, Australia, South America, and other cities in the United States, who came expressly to join the course. There were German nuns then studying Buddhism in Australia or India. There were Taiwanese nuns doing research or offering religious services in the U.S. There were also the resident nuns of Sravasti Abbey, some of whom were Latino or Asian American, or nuns from Europe, Canada, South America, and Asia. Most students were in Tibetan traditions, but a few were from Theravāda traditions and Chinese Mahāyāna traditions as well. Moreover, since this course was an unusual opportunity to receive Vinaya teachings, the organizers also opened the course to familiar śrāmaṇerī (female novices) and śikṣamāṇā to allow them to participate. So there were one bhikṣu, one śrāmaṇera, and several śrāmaṇerī and śikṣamāṇā students in attendance as well. This event was also unique in terms of the monastic-lay relationship. Unlike the current situation of Buddhism in America, where lay teachers are mainstream but Western monastics, in particular nuns, are much less supported (Tsomo 2002), this Vinaya course drew more than 40 volunteers to help out, by driving nuns from Spokane airport to the venue, by cooking meals, and so forth.

Scholars and practitioners have observed significant challenges facing Western Buddhist monastics in the non-traditional environment of Buddhism in America. Ayya Yeshe has even expressed the concern that Western monastics might become “an endangered species” (Yeshe 2018). Western nuns, in particular, often are neither seen as being part of Buddhism in the West, predominantly led by lay Buddhists, nor do they have the institutional support from their lineage traditions in Asia, and have faced difficulties gaining recognition for their monastic lifestyle in Western society (Li 2000; Tsomo 2002; Numrich 1998; Kornfield 1985). To the degree that Buddhism in the West has largely tended to deemphasize monasticism, this Vinaya training event may be seen as constituting a clear counter trend. Using my ethnographic work to explore this Vinaya training event in the West, I analyze the needs of Buddhist practitioners in the West to form a bhikṣuṇī sangha. This event not only shows the solid transmission of an Asian Vinaya lineage to the West, but also shows how Western practitioners respect their Asian teachers and Westerner monastics’ wish to practice monastic ethics in forming a female monastic sangha in the West. Moreover, I will use the first Vinaya course in the West as a case study to explore the development of bhikṣuṇī sanghas in the West. The establishment of bhikṣuṇī sanghas in the West on the one hand needs an established bhikṣuṇī lineage and the guidance of an experienced bhikṣuṇī sangha from Asia. On the other hand, to establish a bhikṣuṇī sangha in the West, Western monastics must adapt the rites and precepts to their current cultural context. Therefore, I also suggest that the Vinaya course points to the bhikṣuṇī sangha in the West being neither traditionalist nor modernist, a dichotomy often applied to the development of global Buddhism, but one hard to grasp in the contemporary international bhikṣuṇī revival movement (i.e., the revival of the bhikṣuṇī lineage and sangha), a transnational exchange of nuns between Asia and the West.

1. A Global Female Monastic Sangha for Vinaya Studies

Among the Buddhist schools of thought—the Tibetan, Theravāda, and East Asian Mahāyāna—Chinese Buddhism is perceived as holding the world’s oldest and lasting bhikṣuṇī (fully-ordained female monastic) sangha tradition since the 4th century CE (DeVido 2010). In Asian countries that practice Tibetan and Theravāda traditions, the bhikṣuṇī lineage and sangha have been defunct for centuries, with the exception of the recent revival of the bhikṣuṇī lineage in Sri Lanka in the late 1990s. In Bhutan, the Indian Himalayas, Mongolia, Nepal, and Tibet, nuns have access to novice ordination (*śrāmaṇerī*) (Gutschow 2004). Nuns of the Theravāda Buddhist traditions in Southeast Asia do not have access to either novice or full ordination but they have created alternative renunciant orders, such as the Thai *maechee* and Myanmar *thilashin* (Barnes 2000; Falk 2001; Seeger 2009; Kawanami 2013; Salgado 2013). The only countries currently offering a full ordination platform in Asia are China, Korea, Vietnam, and Taiwan, apart from the recent revival of the bhikṣuṇī lineage in Sri Lanka. With the exception of Sri Lanka, disciplinary codes of monasticism in these countries are based on the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya. As the world’s oldest continuous female monastic lineage, the Chinese bhikṣuṇī sangha and its lasting establishment are based on the fundamental principle of moral formation which manifests in the adaptation and application of the Vinaya originally established in Indian society.

Notwithstanding the great importance of the Vinaya in the Buddhist tradition, it has generally received less attention than scriptural texts and meditation in the overall landscape of Buddhism in America. Buddhist scriptures, the Tripitaka, or three baskets, includes three parts: Sutra (teaching), Vinaya (monastic discipline), and Abhidharma (commentary). According to the *Samantapāsādikā* (*Shan jian lü pi po sha*), “Buddha said to Elder Ānanda, ‘After my parinirvāṇa, the Vinaya is your master; it can sustain the dharma forever. Even if there were only five bhikṣus left who understand and observe the Vinaya, they would be able to sustain the Dharma forever.’”¹ The Vinaya are the disciplinary texts that describe ethical conduct or rules for Buddhist individuals and communities, particularly for monastics and the monastic sangha, and includes two parts: The *prātimokṣa* or precepts, and *skandhakas*. The *prātimokṣa* is a list of rules governing the behavior of Buddhist monastics, and *skandhakas* deal with the collective rules for the operation of the sangha as a social and religious institution. Therefore, the Vinaya includes not only precepts for regulating monastic ethical conduct, but also guidelines for monastic community life, such as the use of resources, medicine, buildings, monastic meetings, ordination, decision-making, and so on. Ideally, the sequence of one’s monastic life in relation to Vinaya is to begin with the novice and *śikṣamāṇā* ordination and begin to learn the Vinaya, then receiving full ordination and refining one’s knowledge and practice of Vinaya. The *Vinayavastu* (*Gen ben shuo yi qie you bu pi nai ye chu jia shi*) says the Buddha made a rule that fully ordained monastics must train for at least five years with their master before they may visit other places for further studies or practice. This means that a monastic has to stay at least five years with his or her master in order to learn how to observe Vinaya properly.² Therefore, in order to observe Vinaya properly, a monastic need not only to be fully ordained, but to also learn Vinaya with a master afterwards.

Since the Vinaya training course was announced a year earlier, the organizer Sravasti Abbey designed this Vinaya training course event to invite Western nuns or nuns who live in the West, regardless of their level of ordination or Buddhist tradition, to participate. Sravasti Abbey, founded in 2003, as a bhikṣuṇī sangha itself, is in the Tibetan Gelugpa tradition with Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, a Vinaya lineage followed in current Mahāyāna traditions. This rare opportunity provided nuns

¹ *Samantapāsādikā* (*Shan jian lü pi po sha*). In *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*. Edited by Takakusu Junjirō. Tokyo: Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō Kankōkai, 1988, vol. 24, No. 1462, pp. 786, a20–27.

² Yijing. *Vinayavastu* (*Gen ben shuo yi qie you bu pi nai ye chu jia shi*). In *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*. Edited by Takakusu Junjirō. Tokyo: Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō Kankōkai, 1988, vol. 23, No. 1444, pp. 1032, b19–21.

of different Buddhist traditions, from different countries and of different cultures, to study the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, to live and practice together, and a global female monastic sangha naturally formed during these three weeks.³ As a Taiwanese Mahāyāna nun, when I first saw the event banner online, a picture of Western nuns from Tibetan traditions and Chinese nuns from Mahāyāna traditions standing and sitting together, a scene seldom seen in Asia, I was very curious as to how international nuns from diverse traditions, countries, and cultures studying Vinaya together would look like. I was also curious about who the people interested in coming to this event were. The event banner was announced on the Sravasti website, and sent to several email lists related to Western nuns or nuns living in the West.

There were forty participants in total in the program plus seven faculty. I interviewed seven of them by email. Initially there were around ten participants whom I asked for permission to interview, but it turned out that only seven people responded to my email and agreed to be interviewed. These interviewees represent the three Buddhist traditions, are diverse in terms of their ethnic, cultural and geographic backgrounds, and their bhikṣuṇī ordination years are also diverse, ranging from one to over twenty years. They, like the other participants, knew about this Vinaya course through email lists or friends.

1.1. Motives to Attend

Traveling a long way to teach the Vinaya in America, Venerable Master Wuyin, who is 77 years old this year, has a deep understanding of the current situation of Buddhism in many different countries, and has her eye on how to put the Vinaya into practice in modern life. Her renowned Vinaya knowledge and her flexible and practical explanation of how to observe Vinaya attracted Western nuns or nuns living in the West from different traditions to grasp this rare opportunity to learn Vinaya from a recognized master. In this global or international female monastic sangha for Vinaya studies, most of the nuns taking part in the Vinaya training event came from the Tibetan tradition, but there were also three nuns from the Theravāda tradition and four nuns from the Mahāyāna tradition as well. Bhikṣuṇī Thubten Tarpa, ordained in 2008 in Taiwan and the most senior disciple of Thubten Chodron in Sravasti Abbey, states her motives for this event and sees how this event benefits her sangha:

“This was a rare opportunity to learn from a Vinaya master and her sangha for whom I have the upmost[sic] respect. As the host sangha it was beneficial for us. It allowed younger members to get highly involved, it allowed the community to come together as a team for an event that I consider our most important event held at our Abbey to date. It allowed everyone in our sangha, which is a relatively young sangha in ordination years for the most part, to learn from our elders. This kind of inspiration is important as much as the detailed Vinaya rites, rules, procedures, etc. that were covered. And from which we benefited in our Vinaya education.”⁴

The nuns attending this event came from different backgrounds. They have diverse living circumstances: Living in nunneries, in dharma centers, in monasteries, or living by themselves. For other nuns in the Tibetan tradition, their motive to attend this event was not only to learn more about the Vinaya, but also to gain experience of Sravasti Abbey as a monastery. Sravasti Abbey has been a model for some Western nuns in the Tibetan tradition for their nunneries in the West. There are also nuns in Tibetan traditions from different countries in the process of looking into higher ordination. These nuns in Tibetan traditions realize how important and integral knowledge of Vinaya is for monastic life, so they grasped this rare opportunity to receive Vinaya teachings, which are seldom provided in dharma centers, and of living in a nunnery following the Vinaya. Many nuns

³ ‘Living Vinaya in the West’ banner, received through email, date: 16 February 2017.

⁴ Interviewed by email, 28 December 2018.

have experience living or interacting with nuns from other traditions, such as Vietnamese, Korean, Taiwanese, or Theravāda traditions, who have been formally trained in the Vinaya for years. These nuns' manners and poise and their knowledge of how to act correctly in different situations inspire other nuns who have not been trained in Vinaya. They consider being able to spend some time "living" the Vinaya in a monastic setting, seeing and having the chance to practice how to conduct themselves to benefit them to have a more subdued mind and to act and speak more appropriately. This very rare opportunity of undergoing Vinaya training in English, hosted by a master at a Tibetan Buddhist nunnery, therefore, attracted nuns in Tibetan traditions from international countries to attend.

For the Theravāda Buddhist nuns coming to this course, although the bhikṣuṇī ordination has been revived since the late 1990s in Sri Lanka, the longevity of the strong bhikṣuṇī lineage based on the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya was the main reason drawing them to participate in this training. The Mahāyāna student nuns, all resident in the U.S. currently, were attracted by Master Wuyin's profound Vinaya knowledge and expertise, and they were interested in having the new experience of living with their Western dharma sisters.

1.2. Daily Schedule

With the exception of special days, such as the first day (January 22nd) of registration and the last day of the closing ceremony (February 7th), the daily schedule e daily schedule first day was as follows:

5:00 a.m.	Wake up
5:30–7:00	Meditation Practice
7:00–7:30	Breakfast Preparation
7:30	Breakfast (in silence)
9:00–10:30	Teachings
10:50–11:45	Teachings or Group Discussions
12:00 noon	Lunch and cleaning up
2:30–4:30	Teachings
4:30	Study time and personal interviews with Ven. Wuyin
6:00 p.m.	Medicine Meal and cleaning up
7:00–8:15	Meditation practice (Chanting on Tuesdays and Saturdays)
8:15–10:00	Study time

Every day from 7 p.m. until the end of breakfast was a time of noble silence. Apart from the time devoted to teaching, the course schedule was basically the same as Sravasti Abbey's daily schedule. This three-week course coincided with several regular ceremonial activities in Sravasti Abbey, such as Pujas and ceremonies in the Mahāyāna tradition (Buddha-name chanting and Repentance rituals). There were many points in this event which followed tradition, such as the meal line (the meal was buffet style) and sitting in class ordered by ordination year. The seniors received their meal first and sat in the front of the class. But there are also innovations, such as every Wednesday the meal order was reversed, and the volunteers went first, then the śrāmaṇerīs, and then bhikṣuṇīs. For the meal seating, except for the first few days seated by ordination order, on other days people could choose seats and have exchanges with different people. The first 15 min of the meal was held in noble silence, and afterward people could talk and exchange ideas. Every day there was also cleaning up work after mealtimes assigned for everyone, a routine in monasteries.

The interesting thing which was different in those three weeks was that international nuns from diverse Buddhist traditions all took part in these activities. For many of them, it was the first time to participate in a ceremony or practice different from their own tradition. Therefore, Sravasti Abbey also held several introductory sessions for nuns from other traditions who were interested to participate but who were not familiar with the ceremony procedures. In this intra-religious dialogue among different Buddhist traditions, there were occasionally amusing but important dialogues which came out naturally. For example, while one nun from Sravasti Abbey explained the procedure of Guru Puja before the ceremony, a Theravāda nun asked whether the food offered to everyone in the ceremony

could or should be eaten immediately. “Of course you can!” answered an organizer nun, “but only after the ceremony.”

In the period of Vinaya course, there was also one poṣadha (fortnightly recitation of precepts) and one śrāmaṇerī ordination ceremony held by Sravasti Abbey. The poṣadha was based on the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, so only bhikṣuṇīs ordained in the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya attended. For the śrāmaṇerī ordination ceremony, all nuns, regardless of tradition or lineage, participated. Bhikṣuṇī Changhwa, a Mahāyāna nun ordained in 2005 from the Chan Meditation Center in New York (a branch temple of Dharma Drum Mountain) was moved by seeing the solemn ritual procedure performed by the Sravasti Abbey nuns:

“At the beginning of the ceremony, six nuns made lines and walked to invite Venerable Wuyin, a ritual of inviting the master to ascend to the high seat. These nuns played dharma instruments very well, and they sang the Praise in English. It was the first time I heard people sing the Praise in English but without changing the rhythm. For the Western nuns, they are less supported by their societies. Tibetan Buddhism and Theravāda Buddhism are still monk-centered, and nuns in those traditions have less opportunities for training. Many years ago, I attended the Western Monastic Gathering in San Francisco. At that time, almost all of them were from the West, mostly nuns. They were sentimental and told me that they could not obtain the bhikṣuṇī ordination. They said even after being fully ordained, they were not accepted by the bhikṣu sangha. Some of them were even driven out from monasteries. There were so many tearful stories. But this time, everyone gathered to study. We sang together, we laughed together, and we were full of confidence. For the first time, I witnessed Western nuns singing the Incense Praise in English. Also for the first time, I witnessed the ordination ceremony completely hosted by Western nuns. To me, this Vinaya course in the West is really a historic change.”⁵

1.3. What Was Learned

The 2018 course emphasized many practical dimensions of the Vinaya in regulating institutional Buddhist life in modern times. The main focus of the course was to study the prescriptive guidelines, known in Sanskrit as the skandhaka section of the Vinaya; to establish the procedures essential to a sangha community: Ordination, varṣa, poṣadha, and regulations regarding medicine, lodgings, and so forth; and also to draw out the spirit behind these practices. Topics such as: How to define the sangha property? How is the Buddhist sangha a religious institution in relation to society? What are sangha karmans (a meeting of the monks or nuns for the purpose of ordination, for the confession of sins, or for the expulsion of the unrepentant, and so on) and how to operate them according to Vinaya? Introduction to legal repentance and its procedure in sangha assembly. How to establish a proper territory for a bhikṣuṇī sangha. What are the key principles for keeping personal wealth and property and financial activities? What are the key principles for the distribution of resources in the sangha? What are the key principles for common understanding and common resolution of disputes in the sangha? How to ensure the succession of Buddhist religious communities so that they will be sustained forever? The training contents were rich, including lectures, digital course packs, videos, activities, discussion groups, and well-prepared (the faculty from Taiwan spent one year preparing beforehand). These teachings will be compiled for future publication as well.

During the course, nuns from the three Buddhist traditions of Tibetan, Chinese, and Theravāda had deep discussions revolving around the different customs and practices stemming from their Buddhist traditions and living situations in their countries. They had a rich exchange not only on ways to observe the precepts, but also on how to handle interpersonal relationships within the sangha

⁵ Bhikṣuṇī Changhwa, “Reflections on ‘Living Vinaya in the West’”, shared by email list, 15 February 2018. Bhikṣuṇī Changhwa gave permission to publish on 30 December 2018.

community, and on the difficult situations and challenges they encountered, often sharing from their personal spiritual journeys. The course content even included using lively and humorous skits to present the participants' various life experiences. Nuns from different traditions and countries were grateful and appreciative of the causes and conditions that came together, and seized the opportunity to seek advice from both Venerable Master Wuyin and Venerable Chodron. Nuns appreciated having their Vinaya and Dharma questions clarified by interviews with masters. A nun from Australia summed up what she learned from this course:

"If I had to use one word to sum up what we learnt it would be "Harmony." We learnt how the Vinaya helps monastics live together with others in a harmonious way. This helped me reflect about some of my past behavior and how it may have inadvertently caused disruption. I now think more about and give more weighting to how my actions may negatively affect the harmony with my community, although not 100% weighting as I do believe there are times we need to speak up and point out when things are not OK. In addition, I learnt that the Vinaya is not a set of restrictive rules Buddha imposed on us that must be followed or else! It is a set of guidelines (trainings) developed by Buddha due to his great kindness and wisdom, that aim to help us live harmoniously in community and to develop our minds. I learnt that by following them I benefit, they are for my own good." ⁶

As previously stated, nuns were also impressed by how the Vinaya was practiced and "lived" at Sravasti Abbey and in other large and longer-established bhikṣuṇī communities based in Taiwan. Nuns from these monastic communities played wonderful role models in general. Seeing these role models on how things are done, how people conduct themselves, how they respond to life events with the Vinaya and Dharma as a guide was very inspirational.

To witness elder nuns who have lived in these precepts and Vinaya and Dharma and how they have molded themselves helps junior nuns walking on the monastic path. Bhikṣuṇī Thubten Choedroen, a senior nun from the Shide Buddhist Nunnery in Germany, is certain that this Vinaya course in the setting of the Abbey will continue to support her in her personal practice and influence her nunnery. She was impressed and moved by Venerable Wuyin herself and some of her senior students/young teachers who were accompanying her. Bhikṣuṇī Choedroen had been at the first 'Living as a Western Buddhist Nun' seminar in Bodh Gaya in 1996. Now, twenty-two years later, she felt she had a greater sense of responsibility, not only for herself but for future nuns. For her, this course:

"It is like a lifeline to a traditional Asian nunnery, combining the theory of Vinaya with the practical application. It has given me more confidence and orientation. Before the course there was a big gap in my mind between my experience of a traditional Asian nunnery (e.g., during the ordination and training in Hsi Lai Temple Los Angeles, organized by Foguangshan 1988) and what I felt could be done as a Westerner here in Germany. Through experiencing the community at Sravasti Abbey, I felt this was a realistic combination of Asian monastic tradition with Western monastics and mind training. What also moved me was Venerable Wuyin's concern for nuns' welfare, especially to relieve them of anxiety related to their Vinaya practice, her sense of humor and ability to relate on a human level. In conversations at the end of lunch I heard about the hardships Ven. Wuyin had as a nun in Taiwan. She persevered by finding ways of benefiting society, so that monastics were seen with appreciation and respect. Having good contacts with the local people is something I have picked up from her." ⁷

⁶ Interviewed by email, 26 December 2018.

⁷ Interviewed by email, 26 December 2018.

As a Tibetan nun full-ordained for 30 years, Bhikṣuṇī Choedroen started her newly founded Buddhist nunnery in Germany and lives with another two nuns. She, therefore, pays much attention to how to establish a monastery in a new land. For her, Venerable Wuyin's teaching on how to keep on good terms with neighbors and locals are practical:

"I remember another important piece of advice from Ven. Wuyin. It was a quote by Ananda and went something like this: [I]f you are in a different region and you see they have different customs, then you should refrain from doing things that would disturb the inhabitants, even if it is something the Buddha said we should do. And you should do things in accordance with their tradition in order to maintain harmony."⁸

After returning home, some nuns try to share their Vinaya learning with their communities. Venerable Choedroen shares with other nuns her notes in Germany and Denmark by the internet. She saw her experience of the community at the Sravasti Abbey in the course was very important support for her nunnery in Germany. By living in this Vinaya course in Sravasti Abbey, she felt it was possible to live in a community with a stringent schedule and good guidance. Another nun returning back to Australia also shared the documents and notes she took with other nuns, as appropriate for their level of ordination, who had expressed an interest in Vinaya training.⁹ In sum, the six harmonies, the importance of motivation, of self-confidence, of referring to the original events that brought about precepts and knowing these etc., these subjects were all important and helpful. Nuns realize there was a lot more to learn.

2. Bhikṣuṇī Sanghas in A New Land: Cooperation among Different Traditions

This 'Living Vinaya in the West' course has striking parallels with the story of the establishment of the Chinese bhikṣuṇī sangha in 4–5th century China (Schuster 1985). At that time, Chinese nuns wished to establish the bhikṣuṇī sangha—the order of fully ordained nuns—but there were no bhikṣuṇīs who could give ordination and teach Vinaya to the Chinese nuns. However, there were bhikṣuṇīs from the "Lion Kingdom"—that is, Sri Lanka—who traveled by boat to China to give the bhikṣuṇī ordination (Cheng 2007, pp. 1–2). In a parallel gesture, today in the 21st century, Taiwanese nuns took an international flight from Taiwan to Sravasti Abbey in the U.S. in order to give Vinaya teachings to Western nuns. Due to the open attitude toward diverse Vinaya lineages, the cooperation among Buddhist nuns from different traditions happened in both early China and in the contemporary West, in the context of Buddhism arriving in a new land. As the bhikṣuṇī ordination has not yet been fully restored in the Tibetan Buddhism, this has lead Western nuns practicing in the Tibetan tradition to seek and transmit the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya bhikṣuṇī lineage in the Dharmaguptaka tradition. In their nunneries in the West, their Vinaya tradition comes from Chinese Buddhism and their Dharma practice lineage comes from Tibetan Buddhism. In addition to Sravasti Abbey, in this Vinaya course there were other nun leaders from France, Germany, and Canada coming to learn Vinaya, and whose sanghas are in Tibetan traditions yet with Dharmaguptaka Vinaya bhikṣuṇī lineages as well. Sravasti Abbey serves as a platform for the transmission of the bhikṣuṇī lineage, based on the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya lineage and the bhikṣuṇī sangha formation, from Asia to the West. Its sangha operations, such as poṣadha (precept recitation gathering), ordination ceremony, and other practices, such as repentance rituals and Buddha-name chanting are drawn from Chinese Mahāyāna, particularly Taiwanese Buddhism. However, their doctrinal learning and practice, such as meditation and ceremonies are mainly in the Tibetan tradition. On the side of western Theravāda nuns, though the Theravāda bhikṣuṇī lineage has been revived since 1998, western nuns in the Theravāda bhikṣuṇī lineage also participated in this Dharmaguptaka Vinaya training course, a Vinaya lineage different from their own (Pali Vinaya).

⁸ Interviewed by email, 26 December 2018.

⁹ Interviewed by email, 26 December 2018.

The Vinaya course in 2018, therefore, suggests that the bhikṣuṇī sangha formation in the West has a solid Vinaya lineage transmission while at the same time being more cooperative and sharing between Western Buddhist monastics than is the case in Asia, where different Buddhist traditions and schools have been well-established for centuries.

In order to discuss the development of cooperation among different Buddhist traditions in bhikṣuṇī sangha in the West, I would need to explore the contemporary bhikṣuṇī lineage revival movement. The bhikṣuṇī lineage transmission in the West is one of the diverse manifestations of the contemporary bhikṣuṇī movement. There are three living Vinaya lineages in current global Buddhism: The Pali Vinaya in Theravāda traditions in Southeast Asia; the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya in Mahāyāna traditions in East Asia; and the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya in Tibet, Mongolia, and certain areas in Russia in Central Asia. In addition to the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, which was translated in China as the *Four Part Vinaya* (*Si fen lü*) in the 5th century CE., there are other Vinaya texts in early Buddhist sects translated into Chinese: The Sarvāstivāda Vinaya (*Shi song lü*), the Mahāsāṃghika Vinaya (*Mo he seng qi lü*), the Mahīśāsaka Vinaya (*Mi sha sai bu he xi wu fen lü*), and the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya, a Vinaya not just observed in Tibetan Buddhism but also preserved in Chinese Vinaya texts (*Gen ben suo yi qie you bu pi nai ye*). Though these Vinaya texts are not currently living Vinaya lineage, some of them were observed by monastic sanghas in Chinese Buddhist history (Heirman 1999, 2001, 2002, 2007, 2008). Moreover, these Vinaya texts have been and remain important references for Chinese Vinaya masters until now.

In 1987 in Bodh Gaya, India, the first international conference on Buddhist nuns was held, resulting in the establishment of Sakyadhita International Buddhist Women's Association. One of the main goals of this organization is to revive the bhikṣuṇī lineage where it does not exist and help to establish the bhikṣuṇī sangha (Tsomo 1999, 2014). Western nuns play an important part in this initiation of the contemporary bhikṣuṇī movement, and it later became an international foreground supported by nuns from South Korea, Taiwan, and other Asian countries as well. The central issues of the debate in the bhikṣuṇī lineage revival movement, as Susanne Mrozić states, "range from the minutiae of Buddhist monastic regulations to the politics of national and ethnic identity," and she observes "a tension between local and international conceptions of the Buddhist monastic community" (Mrozić 2009, p. 360). She observes that a successful bhikṣuṇī movement depends on how the local Buddhist monastic community accepts the form of bhikṣuṇī ordination, whether international or local. She concludes that the bhikṣuṇī lineage revival movement is not only about religious matters, such as Vinaya regulations, but how international, or national and ethnic identity significantly plays an important role.

In order to understand these complex debates in the issue of the current bhikṣuṇī lineage revival movement, we need to explore how the first bhikṣuṇī ordination in different Buddhist traditions or locations happened or is happening. Let me explain the Vinaya procedure on how to give full ordination to new nuns first. The Vinaya delineates several ways to operate a full ordination procedure. The most, if not only, legitimate form, is called the twofold ordination, that is, a quorum of 10 bhikṣus and 10 bhikṣuṇīs is needed for bhikṣuṇī ordination according to the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya. In terms of tradition, very interestingly, no version of the existing Vinaya texts points out that all officiants in the ordination ceremony have to come from the same tradition, but for a valid ordination ceremony it has to refer to "the same legal procedures and the same prātimokṣa" (Heirman 2001, p. 297). In the current bhikṣuṇī revival movement, the strong opposition is to whether this twofold ordination could be open to different lineages (Heirman 2011). So for a Vinaya lineage tradition without bhikṣuṇīs, the question becomes whether this tradition accepts bhikṣuṇīs from other Vinaya lineage tradition to officiate in the ordination ceremony, or allows bhikṣuṇīs ordained by other Vinaya lineage traditions to be part of their local sangha.

Let us review the current first bhikṣuṇī ordination in the Theravāda tradition. In 1988, there were five Sri Lankan nuns ordained at an international ceremony in California, conducted by a Taiwanese transnational organization, Foguangshan. This bhikṣuṇī ordination was based on the Dharmaguptaka

Vinaya, Mahāyāna Chinese monks and nuns officiated, but the ordinands were international monastics (Li 2000). When these nuns went back to Sri Lanka, their ordination was not accepted by the local community so they continued to live in an alternative nun's order. In 1996, 10 Sri Lankan nuns were fully ordained in Sarnath, India. This was also an international ceremony but conducted by South Korean monks and nuns. In East Asian Mahāyāna traditions, the ordination ceremony is called the "Three-platform Ceremony," that is, new monastics take a novice, full ordination, and bodhisattva vows during the ceremony. This ordination was controversial for Sri Lankans because opponents saw it having as a Mahāyāna nature, that is, in the ordination, nuns wore Korean robes and took bodhisattva vows. In 1998, 21 Sri Lankan nuns were fully ordained at an international ceremony, conducted again by Foguangshan in Bodh Gaya, India. This ordination was well prepared in terms of custom (Sri Lankan nuns wore Theravāda robes during the ceremony), procedure (Theravāda nuns left before conferral of the bodhisattva vows took place), language (translated into both Sinhala and English). This ordination was also supported by Sri Lankan monks, who both selected the ordinands and officiated at the ceremony (Mrozik 2009). Most importantly, shortly after the international ordination, these nuns went to Sarnath to undergo a Theravāda sangha ceremony (*karma*) to convert their bhikṣuṇī lineage from Dharmaguptaka to Theravāda.¹⁰ This ordination marked as the formal revival of bhikṣuṇī lineage in Sri Lanka.

For Tibetan Buddhist traditions, in 2007 the Dalai Lama convened an international conference in Hamburg, Germany to discuss how to make full ordination possible for nuns in the Tibetan Buddhist exile community. In this conference, Vinaya experts presented rich Vinaya studies and many of the presenters had a global vision of the Buddhist sangha (Bodhi 2010; Gyatso 2010; Dhammananda 2010; Tsomo 2010). They are open to ordination involving Dharmaguptaka nuns, a Vinaya lineage different from the existing Tibetan lineage of Mūlasarvāstivāda. However, the Indo-Tibetan nuns, strongly preferred single ordination in the Mūlasarvāstivāda traditions and ordination as well as Vinaya texts in the Tibetan language, a lineage perceived as local (Mrozik 2009).¹¹ The recent effort of reviving the bhikṣuṇī lineage is supported by the 17th Karmapa, whose vision is not single ordination but twofold ordination. Twenty-one Mūlasarvāstivāda novices were re-ordained as Dharmaguptaka novices, which happened in Bodh Gaya in 2017, and Taiwanese nuns from Nanlin Temple in Taiwan officiated. In the next step, these Tibetan nuns will receive śikṣamāṇā ordination first, and after two years of śikṣamāṇā ordination they will receive the twofold ordination by Dharmaguptaka nuns and Mūlasarvāstivāda monks. According to the Vinaya, new nuns receive the 'precept substance' while ordained by the bhikṣu sangha in the bhikṣuṇī twofold ordination. In this way, therefore, nuns will receive the Mūlasarvāstivāda precept substance and become Mūlasarvāstivāda bhikṣuṇī nuns, therefore the Mūlasarvāstivāda bhikṣuṇī lineage will be formally revived (Gyatso 2017).

The first bhikṣuṇī ordination in China dates back to the 4th century according to the *Bhikṣuṇī Biographies* (*Bi qiu ni zhuan*). The first nun ordained as a bhikṣuṇī was named Zhu Jingjian. The first bhikṣuṇī ordination platform in China was conducted only by the bhikṣu sangha. This lasted until the fifth century, when bhikṣuṇīs from the Lion Kingdom (Sri Lanka) traveled by boat to China to give the twofold sangha bhikṣuṇī ordination, that is, ordination by both the bhikṣu and bhikṣuṇī sangha. This was the standard version of the bhikṣuṇī full ordination platform according to the Vinaya. As a result, a nun named Huiguo, along with 300 nuns, obtained the twofold sangha bhikṣuṇī ordination in

¹⁰ Interview with Ven. Thubten Chodron at Kurukulla Center, Boston, on 11 April 2018. Ven. Thubten Chodron was invited as one of the 22 ordination witnesses *ācāryas* in this international bhikṣuṇī ordination in 1998 (Li 2000).

¹¹ Ven. Thubten Chodron offered her first-hand observation to me on this international conference at Hamburg, 2007 by email (11 September 2018): "I attended this conference and the Indo-Tibetan nuns were not sure that they wanted to become bhikṣuṇīs. They were more interested in receiving a better Dharma education. Also, because they live in the Tibetan community and their teachers are Tibetan monks, they wanted to stick to the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya that the Tibetan monks used. Furthermore, they didn't know if either the Dharmaguptaka or the Mūlasarvāstivāda ordination procedure was correct—their monk teachers had told them there was doubt about the validity of the lineage and that they didn't need to become bhikṣuṇīs because they had the bodhisattva precepts which were higher than prātimokṣa precepts."

Nanlin temple to establish the bhikṣuṇī sangha in China.¹² The establishment of the bhikṣuṇī lineage in China would not have been possible without the supportive local bhikṣu sangha, the Sri Lankan bhikṣuṇī sangha, the sponsorship of the Emperor, and, most importantly, the strength of those women's commitment to religious life (Cheng 2007, pp. 1–2). In terms of which Vinaya referred in the ordination, according to the *Bhikṣuṇī Biographies*, the first bhikṣuṇī ordination in the 4th century in China was based on the Mahāsāṃghika Vinaya. However, for the second ordination, that is, the first twofold bhikṣuṇī ordination in the 5th century in China, there is no historical record. Ann Heirman suggests the most likely one is the Sarvāstivāda Vinaya but the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya cannot be excluded either. The most unlikely is Pali Vinaya, the most probable tradition that the officiant Sinhalese bhikṣuṇīs were from, because the version of its Chinese translation at the end of the fifth century was never presented to the emperor and was subsequently lost in China (Heirman 2001, pp. 277, 301). However, the ordination procedure was unified to be based on the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya in China in the Tang Dynasty (618–907), due to Vinaya Master Daoxuan's prolific commentaries and his successful promotion of this tradition, and the emperors' wish to unify the ordination procedure and control the Buddhist community. Since then, the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya has become the only one distinct Vinaya tradition that the ordination procedure in China referred to (McRae 2005; Heirman 2002, pp. 423–24).

For the bhikṣuṇī lineage in the West, because of the current bhikṣuṇī revival movement in Asia illustrated above, before the revival of the Theravāda bhikṣuṇī lineage in 1998, all Tibetan, Theravāda, Mahāyāna Western nuns went to East Asia to receive bhikṣuṇī ordination based on the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya. After 1998, however, Tibetan and Mahāyāna nuns in the West still go to East Asia to receive bhikṣuṇī ordination based on the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, but those in the Theravāda tradition go to Sri Lanka to receive bhikṣuṇī ordination based on the Pali Vinaya. There are also occasional full ordination ceremonies conducted in the West in recent years. Nuns in the West also receive full ordination in these ceremonies as well.

The historical development of bhikṣuṇī ordination in China offers several interesting points of contrast with regards to contemporary assumptions about the Vinaya in Theravāda and Tibetan Buddhist societies. The current presumption in the global Buddhist community is that a monastic has to be ordained by officiants from the same tradition and that the ordination procedure must come from the same tradition also. However, no version of the existing Vinaya texts says that all ordination officiants must come from the same tradition as the ordination candidates, nor do they say that monastics cannot convert to a Vinaya lineage different from his or her own. What Vinaya emphasizes is that a formal act for a harmonious sangha assembly has to be based on the same legal procedures and the same prātimokṣa, like ordination, poṣadha (confession and restoration of precepts), varṣa (rain retreat), pravāraṇā (invitation to give feedback on one's actions), and so on. The development of the ordination ceremony in China shows that Chinese Buddhists did not hold to one distinct Vinaya as the only legitimate lineage. Put another way, the national or ethnic identity does not have to be the same as a particular Vinaya lineage. This open attitude toward Vinaya might stem from not having only one distinct Vinaya text, since many were translated into Chinese during the early Buddhist development in China, which makes Chinese Buddhists' conceptualization of Vinaya plural and diverse.¹³ The case that no record as to which text the first twofold bhikṣuṇī ordinations were based on might imply that what mattered to Chinese Buddhists in this plural and diverse Vinaya environment was how to conduct the ordination ceremony based on legal procedure, instead of which Vinaya traditions the participants came from. To Chinese Buddhists, the most important issue was how to establish the bhikṣuṇī sangha first, and how to make women fully ordained to practice a fully renounced path and have the leadership skills to spread Buddhism.

¹² T.2063, pp. 934c2–5a5. See also Masaaki 2002 (Masaaki 2002).

¹³ What I mean by Chinese Buddhists' conceptualization of Vinaya being plural and diverse refers to the fact that in the Chinese tradition, different Vinayas are cross-referenced only for the purpose of exegesis, but vinayakarmas are not performed by employing a mixture of Vinayas. The performance of mixed karmas relying on different Vinayas is not considered legitimate.

Next we will look at the first bhikṣuṇī ordinations which took place outside India, whether they prefer women's leadership or prefer historical Vinaya identity. My suggestion is that in the current bhikṣuṇī lineage revival in Southeast Asia, the Theravāda tradition, and in Central Asia, the Tibetan tradition, historical Vinaya identity is more important. In those countries or regions where the bhikṣuṇī revival is taking place against a preexisting backdrop of longstanding Buddhist tradition, maintaining continuity with existing Vinaya lineage traditions is a more pressing concern than in the West, where no prior tradition exists. The contemporary Western situation also shares parallels with early China, in so far as bhikṣuṇī ordination is concerned, women's leadership comes first before identifying one particular Vinaya lineage.

In summary of the above review of the first bhikṣuṇī ordinations, revived or about to happen in different traditions, we see that for early Chinese Buddhists, there was no particular Vinaya lineage from India that they felt they would have to attach to. In addition to the first twofold bhikṣuṇī ordination as an international twofold lineage ceremony, with the bhikṣu side possibly from the Sarvāstivāda Vinaya lineage, and the bhikṣuṇī side possibly from the Pali Vinaya lineage, historically monastic sanghas had diverse Vinaya lineages, and it was not until the Tang Dynasty that they were unified within the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya. Moreover, in China, the Vinaya texts of several different schools were translated and Vinaya masters were often expert in one school of Vinaya but at the same time also referred to Vinaya texts of other schools as well. Therefore, in the Mahāyāna tradition the attitude toward Vinaya is practical in the sense of sangha establishment and studies, as well as being open to diversity. A similar practical and open attitude toward Vinaya lineage and studies was also a feature of this Vinaya training course in the West. Since the bhikṣuṇī sangha based on the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya was established much earlier, nuns in the West from all three Buddhist traditions (Tibetan, Theravāda, and Mahāyāna) are open to learning the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya. In these training courses, we see nuns from the three different Buddhist traditions all coming together to learn. On the other hand, in the case of the revival of the bhikṣuṇī lineage in the Theravāda and Tibetan traditions, because their historically long established bhikṣu sanghas are based on distinct Vinaya lineages, for the nuns of these traditions in Asia to be of the same Vinaya lineage as their dharma brothers is important not only in terms of their Buddhist identity but ethnic and national identity and solidarity as well.¹⁴ In sum, my suggestion is that for Buddhism in a new land, such as in the West at present, as in early China, as there is no bhikṣuṇī sangha, the necessity to establish one first makes Buddhist society prefer leadership and learning Vinaya texts as a priority. In the case of Sravasti Abbey, a nunnery based on Tibetan Buddhist practice, in addition to this Dharmaguptaka Vinaya training, they want to transmit the Dharmaguptaka lineage and plan in the future to be able to give the Dharmaguptaka bhikṣuṇī ordination together with Chinese or Western bhikṣus who follow the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya. However, for lands where Buddhism is already established, though there is no bhikṣuṇī sangha, to (re)establish the first one became important to consider their coherency with their ethnic or national identity.¹⁵

The open attitude toward diverse Vinaya lineages from different Buddhist traditions for Buddhism in a new land, such as in early China and this Vinaya training event in the current West, suggests that there is more cooperation among nuns from different Buddhist traditions than their counterparts in Asia where different Buddhist traditions have been established for centuries. Bhikṣuṇī Thubten Tarpa states:

¹⁴ Nevertheless, in the current case of the efforts of the 17th Karmapa to revive the Mūlasarvāstivāda bhikṣuṇī lineage, an international version is planned, but it has not yet happened so I do not include this in this discussion.

¹⁵ Venerable Thubten Chodron suggests that there are other exceptional conditions of Western nuns following Tibetan traditions who have not taken bhikṣuṇī ordination in the Dharmaguptaka tradition for some reason. Some of them want their ordination to be given by Tibetan lamas who follow the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya. Others do not care what Vinaya lineage their bhikṣuṇī ordination comes from and do not think about being able to give the ordination themselves in the future. Email comments, 11 September 2018.

“It is not new historically that traditions have supported each other with Vinaya lineages. I think the Buddha would be happy with how we are doing things here at Sravasti Abbey—for he did teach one Vinaya with a purpose to help those who wish to ordain and grow spiritually though living the Dharma and Vinaya. Also, the overlap of the existing living traditions of the Vinaya have infinitely more in common than ways of being diverse. To promote harmony, I find it helpful to remember this.”¹⁶

Nuns appreciate the experience of learning Vinaya with other nuns from different traditions. Bhikṣuṇī Thubten Tsultrim, a German nun in the Tibetan tradition, ordained in 2017 in Taiwan and is now resident in the Chenrezig Institute in Australia, thinks that although different traditions follow different Vinaya lineages, they all come down to the original message and establishment of the precepts through Shakyamuni Buddha:

“It is wonderful (living with nuns from different traditions). If one is used to studying one lineage it might be challenging, but in the end the precepts came from the Buddha and have the same source in all traditions, so it does not matter in the end. Tibetan Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism etc., all the lineages, all the labels came about after the passing into parinirvāṇa. There is one purpose for all, to live an ethically moral life as the base for achieving the steps on the path, to become a cause for happiness. The transmission and preservation of the actual Vinaya is very important, but one has to be careful not to get caught up in the politics of it. The most important is the development of a kind, loving and compassionate “heart”, and the respect and tolerance of each other’s background. If we keep an eye on this goal, it does not matter how many precepts one has taken or which tradition one comes from. The sharing through the living of the Vinaya is most helpful.”¹⁷

To many nuns, the Vinayas across schools are at the essential core the same. They are legal codes for the behaviors and practices of monastics and monastic communities. Bhikkhuni Niyyanika practices in the Theravāda tradition, ordained in 2017, and now lives in a small but rapidly growing Theravāda bhikkhuni monastery in Northern California. She considers cooperation among different traditions a blessing for the emerging Western sanghas:

“Each of the Vinayas give ten reasons for the establishment of the monastic rules (Pali Vinaya, Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, and Mahāsāṅghika Vinaya). They are very similar across Vinayas. However, the true essence of the Vinaya is not its legal bearing, but the living of monastic life in a manner that continues to bring out the qualities of the ten reasons for having a legal code. Therefore, coming together across traditions to discuss and participate in the lived experience of holding Vinaya, is a blessing. It may even be a crucial blessing for the still emerging Western Sangha, as our numbers are still quite small within each tradition and we are spread around the world.”¹⁸

Having a space for Western monastics and all monastics living in the West to meet with and learn from Asian monastics practicing in Asian communities is important. It is also important to discuss with each other how the maintenance of Vinaya in a Western societal context encourages the monastics to look deeply at the inspirational underpinnings of the Vinaya and hold steady to that even while adapting some of the practices to be appropriate to time and place. To Bhikkhuni Niyyanika, she believes such an exercise is most wisely done in the community and, given how small nuns’ individual communities are, to forge that community across practice traditions, Vinaya schools, and countries of residence gives Western nuns much more wisdom from which to draw. She states:

¹⁶ Interviewed by email, 28 December 2018.

¹⁷ Interviewed by email, 28 December 2018.

¹⁸ Interviewed by email, 29 December 2018.

“In these early stages of Sangha development in the West, being mutually supportive as friends in the Dhamma across traditions and schools brings nutriment and hope into each of our individual monastic and small community lives. Nearly twenty years ago, the Western Buddhist Monastic Gathering (formerly called Western Buddhist Monastic Conference) was started so that monastics from varied Buddhist traditions could gather for this nutriment and hope . . . The issues of the Western world come to all of us regardless of tradition, so it is excellent that we can cross traditions to discuss how to skillfully address these issues. Such cross-tradition sharing and cooperation has been of enormous benefit to the community where I reside.”¹⁹

Bhikkuni Niyyanika observes that other nuns in her nunnery have also found good spiritual friends of various traditions. She considers that the cooperation among different traditions is just as Buddha said: “Good friends, companions, and associates are the whole of the spiritual life.” (SN 42.2, Ajahn Sujato translation).²⁰

The experience of living and studying Vinaya together with nuns from different traditions helps one to be flexible, to learn how others see things, and to appreciate the diversity of ways of expression that Buddhism has taken, in general and in the Vinaya as well in the world. For them, nuns from different Buddhist traditions have much more in common than they have differences. They found they could learn from each other, and sometimes they found the way of holding the Vinaya in other traditions gave them inspiration. For them, traditions of Buddhism are no longer limited by geography, and nuns can now easily interact, support and share information with other nuns from other traditions who live in other countries. Western nuns in particular benefit this way as they are a comparatively small group in number. In addition, Western nuns do not have the traditional amount of support and training so they consider different Buddhist traditions working together to be beneficial.

In addition to the welcome cooperation among different Buddhist traditions, Western nuns’ openness to different Vinaya lineages also suggests further bhikṣuṇī sangha formation crossing Buddhist traditions in the future, leading to new hybrid forms in the field of global Buddhism that may possibly change the boundaries of Buddhist traditions as they presently exist. The phenomenon of crossing traditions has already occurred in Western bhikṣuṇī nunneries in Tibetan traditions with Dharmaguptaka Vinaya in the Chinese Buddhist tradition, such as the case of Sravasti Abbey, the Shide Nunnery in Germany and the Vajrayogini Institute in France. There are also other bhikṣuṇī ordinations of Tibetan nuns with preceptors from the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya in the Vietnamese tradition, such as the first bhikṣuṇī ordination of Tibetan nuns in Australia in 2003.²¹ There was one bhikṣuṇī ordination of four Tibetan nuns with preceptors from the Theravāda tradition in March 2018 in Australia.²² One nun ordained in this ceremony expressed her motive of taking bhikṣuṇī ordination in the Theravāda tradition:

“Yes, most Tibetan Buddhist nuns take ordination with Dharmagupta but for various reasons . . . it isn’t common, to my knowledge we are the first to do so. I was thinking taking them with Ayya Santini and Ajahn Brahm (he has monasteries in Australia) might open up a pathway for Australian Tibetan Buddhist nuns to take full ordination without having to go overseas for ordination and for further training.”²³

¹⁹ Interviewed by email, 29 December 2018.

²⁰ Interviewed by email, 29 December 2018.

²¹ Lama Choedak Rinpoche. Abstract: Experience of being the Tibetan Buddhist Teacher to Convene and Sponsor the First Tibetan Initiated Bhikshuni Ordination Ceremony held in Canberra, Australia in October 2003. *International Congress*. <http://www.congress-on-buddhist-women.org/49.0.html>; and Lama Choedak Rinpoche. The First Bhikhuni Ordination in Australia. <http://www.buddhanet.net/ordination01.htm>.

²² Buddhist Nuns Ordained. *Religions for Peace Australia*, 17 March 2018, <http://religionsforpeaceaustralia.org.au/?p=4519>.

²³ Interviewed by email, 28 December 2018.

Ajahn Brahm has offered Theravāda bhikṣuṇī ordination in Australia since 2009, and his courageous decision of offering Theravāda bhikṣuṇī ordination in 2009 lead him to be forced out from his lineage in Thailand (Ajahn Chah Forest Sangha lineage).²⁴ Ayya Santini is the first nun in Indonesia ordained as a bhikṣuṇī in the Theravāda tradition.²⁵ The lack of support for bhikṣuṇī ordination in Tibetan and Theravāda traditions in Asian countries has been recompensed by the collaboration of bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇīs from different Buddhist traditions in the West. The cooperation among different Buddhist traditions helps the bhikṣuṇī sangha in the West flourish with a character of crossing Buddhist traditions.

3. Traditionalist or Modernist

David McMahan observes that the system and pedagogy in modern meditation centers have become privatized, deinstitutionalized and detraditionalized. These meditation centers, in contrast to traditional Buddhist temples, emphasize democratic management and equal learning opportunities for people of different backgrounds. The tendency of some contemporary Dharma centers is also toward a change in the power structures of Buddhist organizations; shifting away from male-centered, monastic-centered, and master-centered power relationships in favor of more egalitarian and decentralized operation. The role of the teacher is one of pedagogy and profession, not authority, and the management is ideally transparent and democratic. Monastic or lay, men or women; all have equal access to learning, authority, leadership, and opportunities to teach. These Dharma centers oppose the patriarchal, male-centric system of management and pedagogy in traditional temples, which emphasizes lineages, the authority of teachers, male-centric ethics and monastic-lay hierarchy. The elements in Buddhist meditative traditions that have endured in contemporary society are sitting in meditation, retreats, Dharma talks, meditative instruction, and interviews—which are seen as the core of practice regardless of the influence of local cultures as Buddhism spread throughout Asia. Therefore, Buddhist practice in modernity is often seen as training in mindfulness, a tool for living in the present moment, and a contemplative exploration of one’s inner self—not necessarily associated with religion, culture, tradition, or social institution; hierarchical relations between teachers and students, monastics and lay, men and women (McMahan 2008, pp. 187–88). Those aspects, once crucial to the Asian mode of Buddhism of the past, have become less relevant or irrelevant to modernized Buddhist practice in many, but not all, Dharma centers.²⁶

There is a tendency of some Western Dharma centers to oppose the patriarchal, male-centric system of management and pedagogy in traditional temples, which emphasizes lineages, the absolute authority of teachers, male-centric ethics and strict monastic-lay hierarchy. They refuse to see monastics as necessarily the authorities on Buddhadharma and the subject of practice, or to limit the laity to the role of donors and supporters. Buddhist practices are a tool for living in the present moment, and a contemplative exploration of one’s inner self—not necessarily associated with religion, culture, tradition, or social institution; hierarchical relations between teachers and students, monastics and lay, men and women. Those aspects, once crucial to the Asian mode of Buddhism of the past, have become largely irrelevant to modernized Buddhist practices, particularly meditation.

In the current Western Buddhist modernist discourses, a “modern” Buddhism—that is, one that emphasizes egalitarianism between teachers and students, monastics and lay practitioners, and men

²⁴ Why Ajahn Brahmavamsa was excluded from the Wat Pa Phong Sangha. *The Buddhist Channel* <http://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=70,8661,0,0,1,0#.XCmFpc8zZAY>.

²⁵ “Reviving the Bhikkhuni Sangha in Indonesia: an Interview with Ayya Santini,” *Buddhist Door Global*, 25 November 2016. <https://www.buddhistdoor.net/features/reviving-the-bhikkhuni-sangha-in-indonesia-an-interview-with-ayya-santini>.

²⁶ These Dharma Centers, I would argue, referred to here are operated mostly by non-immigrant, or convert Buddhists. There are many other centers that are led by Asian masters and chant in Asian languages—such as in Tibetan in the Tibetan tradition—that have more hierarchical structures, etc.

and women is advocated in opposition to “traditional” hierarchical practices in Asian Buddhism.²⁷ However, the Vinaya training event represents a development that is hard to dichotomize according to the so-called “traditionalist” and “modernist” duality in Western Buddhism.²⁸ On the one hand, this Vinaya training event demonstrates Western nuns emphasizing a solid transmission of an Asian Vinaya lineage, eagerness to have monastic Vinaya training, and their wish to form a bhikṣuṇī sangha in the West. Participants in Tibetan traditions desire to situate themselves formally within the Vinaya tradition, and to gain traditional training and status. Their belief is that combining ethical training and bhikṣuṇī ordination in the Dharmaguptaka tradition is compatible with their chief practice lineage in the Tibetan tradition (which is different from nuns in contexts with a long Buddhist history). This event also shows the rituals, monastic codes, different regulations and procedures of sangha life, such as the use of resources, meetings, ordination, precept reciting, ceremonies, chanting, and so on from Asia are well adapted into local Western culture. These nuns can be seen as sincerely wishing to learn from Asian lineage authorities and preserve the meaning and purpose of the ancient lineage while updating superficial aspects to accord with modern society. This Vinaya training course demonstrates respect for lineage authority and traditional learning hierarchies that goes against tendencies toward horizontality in teacher-student and lay-monastic relations in some streams of Western Buddhism.

On the other hand, however, this Vinaya training course shows that many of the attitudes and values that David McMahan associates with “modern Buddhism” are also shared by the Western nuns who took part in the Sravasti Abbey event. That is, even though their interest in becoming ordained in a traditional Vinaya lineage shows respect for traditional structures or institutions of authority, this does not mean they do not also share many “modern” ideas found elsewhere in the contemporary Western Buddhist landscape. Indeed, their struggle for equality for nuns (women practitioners) is underpinned by a democratic, egalitarian ideology that is modern in itself. Sravasti Abbey also actively participates environmentalism or joins marches related to women’s rights and environmental issues. And the cooperation and sharing among Buddhist nuns from different Buddhist traditions in the West are also different from monastics in Asia where different Buddhist traditions and schools have been well-established for centuries. All of these aspects of engaged Buddhism are new or modern in ways that might not be common in current Asian Buddhism.

4. Conclusions: The Bhikṣuṇī Sangha in the West

By participating in the first Vinaya training event in the U.S., ‘Living Vinaya in the West,’ I use it as a case study to explore bhikṣuṇī lineage and the emerging bhikṣuṇī sangha in the West. This first Vinaya training in the West not only successfully transmitted the bhikṣuṇī Vinaya established some 2500 years ago in India applied to contemporary Western societies, a different Buddhist tradition and culture than Asia, but the lived experience of an Asian sangha which guides nuns’ application of these precepts also plays a key part for the future bhikṣuṇī sangha to flourish in the West. I show how the event demonstrates the solid transmission of an Asian Vinaya lineage to the West, respect for Asian lineage authority among Western practitioners, and a desire on the part of Westerners to practice monastic ethics in forming a female monastic sangha in the West.

²⁷ For example, Buddhism in Asia is interpreted as a top-down model (Prebish and Baumann 2002, pp. 2–3), as a hierarchical relationship between teacher and student (Wetzel 2002, p. 279), as patriarchy (Boucher 1993, p. 3; Seager 2012, p. 217; Wetzel 2002, pp. 281–82), as out-of-date (Fields 1998, p. 202), and Asianness as liability (Nattier 1998, p. 193), and so on. These discourses presume an opposition between monastic and lay, teacher and student, men and women in Asian Buddhism, within which Asian Buddhism is constructed as traditional, as opposed to the modern and new Buddhism in the West.

²⁸ I recognize the pluralistic nature of Buddhism in the current West, that is, there are not just so-called “ethnic” and “convert” Buddhisms, but also the diversity within the latter category. Most of the nuns taking part in the Vinaya training event came from the Tibetan tradition, which tends to be more “traditionalistic” in its expression in the West, compared to other forms of Buddhism which tend to be more “reformist,” such as Stephen Batchelor’s one. In Tibetan Buddhism in the West, most teachers are Tibetan, the guru-disciple relationship is heavily emphasized, as are empowerment rituals and so on. Some Tibetan Buddhist sanghas in the West, such as the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahāyāna Tradition, do encourage monasticism, however, most do not—they generally cater to lay practitioners.

I also parallel this Vinaya training event in the West to the formation of the bhikṣuṇī sangha in 4–5th century China, suggesting that for Buddhism in a new land, there will be much more cooperation and sharing among Buddhist nuns from different Buddhist traditions than there is among monastics in Asia where different Buddhist traditions and schools have been well-established for centuries. Through a review on how the first bhikṣuṇī ordinations occurred or were revived in places outside of Indian Buddhism, I offer my observations on the characteristics of the bhikṣuṇī lineage in the West along with its historical lines. Within the context of the global bhikṣuṇī revival movement, Western Buddhist nuns have shown a preference for learning Vinaya and strengthening the bhikṣuṇī sangha first, rather than limiting themselves to only following or learning their own traditions' Vinaya. I discuss how Western nuns transmitting the bhikṣuṇī lineage which combines long standing bhikṣuṇī lineages in East Asia with the wish to establish a bhikṣuṇī sangha in Western society. Therefore, this Vinaya training event points to the development of the bhikṣuṇī sangha in the West being neither traditionalist nor modernist, since nuns both respect lineages from Asia, and reforms the gender hierarchy practiced in Asian Buddhism. Nuns from different traditions cooperate with each other in order to allow Buddhism in the West to flourish.

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