

*The Case of the Vanishing Nuns:
The Fruits of Ambivalence
in Ancient Indian Buddhism*

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For a number of years I have been fascinated by a puzzling aspect of the history of ancient Indian Buddhism. The Indian order of Buddhist monks was still flourishing in 1198 A.D., when Turkish invaders began the series of raids that would destroy its greatest monasteries within the next forty years. Many centuries earlier, however, the parallel order of Buddhist nuns had virtually disappeared from the historian's view. Yet the order of *bhik-*

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shunts, "female beggars," as these women were called—flourished in China and Japan until modern times. The very similar order of Jaina nuns that probably even antedated the *bhikshunis*' venture still prospers in Jaina regions of modern India. Furthermore, even as the nuns themselves became less prominent, other women remained important to the Buddhism of India. The generous gifts of great laywomen-donors are on record until the tradition's final days. And the same centuries that were so silent for the nuns produced the Vajrayana path with its women *siddhas*, who are described in the next chapter of this volume.

Materials on the nuns are very sketchy, and we will probably never know in detail what caused their decline. The most likely cause was a general decline in the Buddhist community's economic fortunes that had a long-term impact on the men's order as well. But bad luck hit the nuns first and disproportionately; thus we must look further to explain the reasons for the different fates of monks and nuns.

At the root, the major problem of the women's order probably rested in the Buddhist tradition's inability to affirm completely the idea of women pursuing the renunciant's role. This led to an institutional structure that offered women admirable opportunities for spiritual and intellectual growth, but not for the institutional and scholarly leadership that such growth should have fitted them to assume. The nuns' troubles were compounded by an ambivalent image created in a tradition of Buddhist stories that sometimes praised their achievements but just as often undercut and attacked them.

NOW YOU SEE THEM; NOW YOU DON'T

To appreciate the puzzle of the nuns' disappearance, one must have some minimal acquaintance with the sources and facts of the order's history in India. Overall, the history of the nuns, like that of the larger Buddhist community in India, can be divided into three phases.

The first, so-called primitive, period extends from the Buddha's first conversions (ca. later sixth century B.C.) and the early spread and consolidation of the tradition's teachings and institu-

