

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

---

NANCY AUER FALK

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-*

---

*Nancy Auer Falk* holds a Ph.D. in History of Religions from the University of Chicago and is currently Professor of Religion at Western Michigan University. She has written a number of articles on various aspects of women and images of women in the Buddhist and Hindu traditions, and on Buddhist lay religion in ancient India.

*Author's note*—Portions of the research for this chapter were supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities (Summer Stipend, 1976) and Western Michigan University's sabbatical leave program (1977-78). An earlier version of this study was presented during the 1978 W. Y. Evans-Wentz Lecture Series at Stanford University.

*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-

tions to the time when the great emperor Ashoka (ca. 272-236 B.C.) became a patron of Buddhism and facilitated its spread throughout and beyond the Indian subcontinent. Sources for this period are exclusively oral traditions; these were preserved by means of memorization and were recorded in writing only at later times. According to these traditions, the Master himself founded the women's order during the early years of his teaching career. The inspiration for its founding is said to have come from the Buddha's maternal aunt, Mahapajapati by name, who had raised him from birth after the death of his mother. The order was founded on the premise, affirmed in the Buddha's own teachings, that women were as capable as men of reaching *arhat*-ship, the state of spiritual liberation characterized by total victory over desire. Memories of the early days testify to the order's thriving existence. It drew women from all walks and conditions of life, especially the mercantile and aristocratic classes that provided the entire tradition with its major bases of support. Many were matrons, turning to the order's rest after a full and exhausting life; others were young, moved by disgust for marriage or saddened by the death of children or other kin. Through the path of renunciation many of these women achieved the *nirvana* (coolness) that they sought. An extraordinary testimony to their accomplishment is a collection of stanzas preserved in Buddhism's southern, or Theravada, tradition, in which their most distinguished members celebrate their new spiritual freedom.<sup>1</sup>

The second period extends from the time of Ashoka through two later great empires, the one ruled by the Satavahanas in the south (ca. 55 B.C.-250 A.D.) and the other by Kushanas in the northwest (ca. 20 A.D.-240 A.D.) During this period, the Buddhist order became a significant religious force throughout India. Although the nuns' presence is still attested to in some works of literature that originated during this period, the most important historical testimonies to their existence are the numerous inscriptions left by donors to Buddhist building projects and monuments. These provide evidence of a thriving nuns' community in virtually all areas where the men's order is also well attested to. Especially in the south, the nuns seem to have been both numerous and wealthy. Their names are found in inscriptions in num-

bers almost equal to the monks' and they were able to offer generous gifts themselves as well as to receive donations.<sup>2</sup>

During the third period of Buddhist history in India, after the third century A.D., the nuns' fortunes deteriorated; the few traces of the women's order suggest that the order became much smaller. This was a time of general diminution for the Buddhist community as a whole, although it remained strong in some regions and kingdoms. It was also the best-recorded period in Buddhist history. One would expect, therefore, to find abundant materials on the nuns. Instead, they become almost invisible. I have found a few inscriptions: the last gift from a nun was recorded in 550 A.D. in the city of Mathura,<sup>3</sup> and a few donations reveal a small cluster of convents near the famous Buddhist "university" at Valabhi (last on record, 629 A.D.).<sup>4</sup> None of the famous philosophical treatises and commentaries that made the period so illustrious are attributed to nuns. Moreover, nuns rarely appear in the brief sketches of eminent figures' lives that are found so often in literary sources of the times. Once in a while we catch the nuns' shadow in the background: thus we learn that the Buddhist nun-mother of Kumarajiva, a famous scholar of northwest India who later made his home in China (ca. 344–413 A.D.), was an important influence in his life;<sup>5</sup> that another eminent monk, Vasubandhu, used part of the many gifts offered to him to build housing for nuns in the northern capital city of Patna, where he tutored members of a royal household (ca. 455–467 A.D.);<sup>6</sup> and that the widowed sister of the Buddhist emperor Harshavardhana *may* have taken the vows with her brother at the end of his rule (ca. 605–647 A.D.).<sup>7</sup>

Even the Chinese pilgrims who have otherwise provided such rich records of later Buddhist life in India have surprisingly little to say about the nuns. Fa Hsien, who traveled across northern India in 399–400 A.D., mentions the *bhikshunis* only once, in describing a rite at Mathura. Hsüan Tsang, who lived in India for more than twenty years (629–643 A.D.) and visited virtually all of its major centers, refers to nuns only in connection with the same rite described by Fa Hsien.<sup>8</sup> He must have seen nuns, however, for twenty-eight years later another voyager, I Ching, encountered them during his stay at Tamralipti in east India. I Ching

noted how strictly they were supervised; they had to walk two by two outside the monastery grounds and traveled in fours if they visited a lay household. But he was most impressed by their poverty:

Nuns in India are very different from those of China. They support themselves by begging food, and live a poor and simple life. . . . The benefit and supply to the female members of the Order are very small, and monasteries of many a place have no special supply of food for them.<sup>9</sup>

I Ching might have mentioned also that in India the nuns lived very differently from the monks. The monks he saw lived in richly endowed monasteries, and their lives could hardly be called poor or simple. Clearly the nuns had seen better days.

#### AN ECONOMIC MATTER

As brief as it is, I Ching's note on the nuns provides an important clue to the crisis in the women's order. Their singularly poorer state, as compared to the monks', indicates that they had problems in finding economic support. The record of Vasubandhu's contribution to the nuns in Patna probably means that the Patna community faced the same problem.

It is important at this point to examine the economic structure of the Buddhist monastic community.<sup>10</sup> The community had begun as a loosely knit group of mendicant wanderers. As early monks and nuns moved from town to town, they lived on handouts provided largely by lay members who had also taken refuge in the Buddha's doctrine. The beggar's life was essential to the community's discipline, for it helped the renunciants to sever their ties to all worldly things. Hence it was retained as an important part of the monastic rule even after the wanderers began to settle down in fixed and permanent monastic settlements. Thus monks and nuns remained dependent on donations. Lay persons built their monasteries, provided their robes and other modest possessions, and fed them, either as they went on daily begging rounds or by supplying food to monastery kitchens. Some of the wealthy made large endowments; a king, for example, might

donate tax revenue from a village to ensure a favored monastery a continuing supply of basic requisites. Still, as in the Buddhism of Southeast Asia today, many of the renunciants' needs were cared for on a day-to-day or year-to-year basis. During times when Buddhism experienced a broad base of popular support, the whole monastic community flourished. This was especially true when the supporting community enjoyed an abundant surplus of wealth, as was the case, for example, in the southern empire of the Satavahana (or Andhra) dynasty, where the most successful nuns' community appears to have been located. When the economic bottom dropped out or popular support was eroded by competition from other religious teachings, the renunciants were in a less comfortable position. Both these negative forces were operating in the third century A.D., when the fortune of the nuns began to turn. The merchants and members of the Satavahana court, who had been the principal supporters of the Buddhist community, saw their profitable trade with ancient Rome decline and their empire fall to pieces. Furthermore, in many regions where Buddhism had been strong, devotional movements that honored Hindu gods were gaining new converts.

As Buddhism's popular base declined, a different source of support became preeminent. Kings and royal families had been conspicuous donors since the community's earliest days. Perhaps the most famous example of all was Ashoka, ruler of ancient India's largest empire. In those early days royal donors like Ashoka were motivated at least in part by personal commitment to Buddhism. Later, however, the records of royal grants show that many of the generous donors had taken Hindu names. Apparently, their donations had less to do with personal piety than with prestige. The Buddhist community was by now winning a high reputation for its scholarship. Learned stars like the brilliant Chinese visitor Hsüan Tsang were paraded by kings in public debates; famous philosophers like Vasubandhu were sought out to tutor royal families. Royal dynasties built up piece by piece the massive monastery-universities of these latter days, whose reputations shone throughout the Indian subcontinent. In this league, however, the nuns were at a decided disadvantage, for they were not stars, and their community had never enjoyed the lion's share

of prestige. If the men's and women's communities had to compete for donations, there was no doubt that the men would capture the greater share of support.

#### ALMOST EQUAL

The reasons for the nuns' lower profile and lesser fame seem once again to lie partly in the institutional structure of the monastic orders. To find them, we must widen our circle of understanding. Our focus this time is on the Buddhist monastic Rule. According to the claims of the legendary histories that frame it, the Rule was the creation of the Buddha himself, who formulated its two-hundred-plus precepts in response to specific situations arising in his community. According to Western historians, the Rule probably developed slowly over a period of perhaps two centuries, becoming essentially complete around 350 B.C. The monastic Rule became one of the most stable features of the Buddhist tradition; although Buddhism developed many different sects and sometimes very different interpretations of the Buddha's teaching, the provisions of the Rule remained basically constant.<sup>11</sup>

The Rule provided a total framework for Buddhist monastic life. Many of its provisions expand and interpret the Buddhist renunciants' four major moral precepts: not to destroy life, not to take what was not given, not to have sexual relations, and not to speak wrongly. Other provisions spell out the prohibitions against luxury that were also an integral part of Buddhist practice. Still other portions of the Rule stipulate the fine organizational details that allowed the community to run smoothly and furthered its members' opportunity to pursue spiritual liberation.

In most respects the Rule approached monks and nuns with admirable equity. Before the monastic settlements were established, monks and nuns led the same wandering life, free of the domestic ties and labor that left neither men nor women in ancient India much chance for serious pursuit of spiritual discipline. Both monks and nuns went on the daily begging rounds; both held the important biweekly assembly in which the Rule's provisions were recited, violations confessed, and penances determined. Monks and nuns even looked alike; both shaved their heads bare, and

both wore the same patchcloth robes dyed to earth color and draped identically over the left shoulder.

At times the Rule made special provisions to protect and help the nuns. Monks could not call upon the women's skills, for example, to sew or to dye and weave the small rugs on which they sat. Nor could the monks divert to themselves any food or robes that the nuns acquired as donations. For, it was said, "women come by things with difficulty"<sup>12</sup>—thus suggesting, incidentally, that economic problems were not new to the women of the order's later days.

It was important that nuns receive adequate instruction. To facilitate the observance of the rule on celibacy, monks and nuns usually led strictly separate lives; thus, for the most part nuns served as their own teachers. Those of early times sometimes gained brilliant reputations, such as the brahman Bhadda Kappilani, whom the Buddha himself praised for her knowledge of his teachings, or Patācara, whose insight into the meaning of suffering was deepened by a personal history of former rebellion and staggering loss. Nevertheless, the transmission of the teaching was for the most part in the hands of the men's community that had originally traveled with the Buddha; so the Rule allowed women to receive instruction from men as well as from other nuns. Ironically, this provision, so conspicuously designed to benefit the nuns, was probably one of the factors that worked ultimately to undo them, for the corresponding allowance was not given: monks could instruct nuns, but nuns could not instruct monks. Perhaps they did so anyway, informally; some early accounts seem to suggest that this happened at times. But no record of later times ever shows a man citing a woman as his *acharya*, or principal spiritual mentor. Thus the men owed nothing to the women, while that same provision justified their keeping the community's main educational apparatus in their own hands.

Other features of the Rule also play a part in the eventual decline of the nuns' order. In addition to the Rule they shared with the men, the nuns observed another, smaller Rule of their own.<sup>13</sup> Some of its precepts dealt with minor problems special to women—for example, how to cope with menstruation or how to han-



dle the situation if a nun became pregnant. Many others elaborated the eight special rules that, according to legend, the Buddha had imposed on the women as a price for allowing them to found their order. These provided that the women would be permanently subordinated to the men:

1. Any nun, no matter how long she had been in the order, must treat any monk, even the rudest novice, as if he were her senior.
2. Nuns should not take up residence during the annual rainy-season retreat in any place where monks were not available to supervise them.
3. Monks would set the dates for the biweekly assemblies.
4. During the ceremony at the end of the rainy-season retreat, when monks and nuns invited criticisms from their own communities, the nuns must also invite criticism from the monks.
5. Monks must share in setting and supervising penances for the nuns.
6. Monks must share in the ordination of nuns.
7. Nuns must never revile or abuse monks.
8. Nuns must not reprimand monks directly (although they could and did report one monk's offensive behavior to another, who then might take the appropriate actions to correct it).<sup>14</sup>

We must avoid jumping to conclusions about the effects of these rules. Women of ancient India had always been subordinated to men. For the most part the nuns apparently did not find these rules oppressive, although one protest is on record against the rule of seniority. Nor, apparently, did they consider themselves inferior; what little record we have of their thoughts suggests that they either regarded themselves as equals or simply did not think to compare themselves with the men at all.

The extra rules did not hinder women in what was considered to be their most important pursuit—practicing the discipline that led to liberation. Nor did the special rules deny the nuns the opportunity, if they sought this out, to develop their minds and

their insight into the tradition's teachings. In these respects, especially when one considers the time and cultural context, the Rule's approach to women was extraordinarily open.

The damage inflicted by the special rules was of a subtler and worldlier nature. The discriminatory provisions meant that women would never be leaders in the life of the whole community or have any decisive voice in shaping its direction. They meant that the men would never be beholden to any of the nuns, in the way that students are beholden to the teachers whose efforts have helped them find meaning and direction. These negative effects became most pronounced in the days of the great universities and the royal patrons who built their own fame through these foundations. They communicated a damaging image to the greater world that picked up the monastic community's tab, because they affirmed that the monks were the more significant and worthier part of such a community. In other words, the discriminatory rules implied that the men deserved the richer offerings, the more elaborate buildings, and the greater opportunity to shine in court and in public confrontations.

#### ONE HAND GIVES; THE OTHER TAKES AWAY

Unfortunately this image of male superiority was reinforced from another direction as well, for the Buddhist literary tradition conveyed an ambivalence about the nuns that must have further eroded the order's standing. I am concerned here not so much with the sophisticated philosophical literature that was studied and taught primarily in monastic circles as with the many stories that once circulated, and still circulate, in the wider community. Ancient Buddhism, like all the traditions native to India, communicated its fundamental values and much of its understanding of human life and destiny through a rich storytelling tradition. We shall never know, of course, just exactly what form was given to these stories in the different times and regions of India where Buddhism was a living tradition, for the storytelling tradition was largely an oral one, with new versions constantly being shaped as the stories were told and retold. But some versions have been preserved, scattered in many places throughout Buddhist literature.

References to nuns appear in a number of Buddhist stories, especially those that tell about Buddhism's formative period. Such references come in two forms: (a) explicit evaluations of the nuns' spiritual capacities and of their role within the community, and (b) portrayals of their activities and spiritual accomplishments. The ambivalence that I have referred to pervades both types.

For example, one current in the Buddhist storytelling tradition unquestionably carries a strong positive image of the nun. The motif of the women's capacity for *arhat*ship is frequently iterated and is backed up by portrayals of *arhat*-nuns, such as biographical legends about many of the *theris*, famous *arhat*-nuns whose stanzas were mentioned earlier in this chapter. Some of the names and accomplishments of these nuns appear again in stories about the Buddha and his community that accompany accounts of the Buddha's sermons and dialogues with his followers. For example, in one old account the Buddha cites the most distinguished members of each of his community's four segments—the monks, the nuns, the laymen, and the laywomen.<sup>15</sup> Among the nuns we learn of Khema, most eminent in wisdom; of Nanda, first in meditation; of Sona, greatest in energetic effort; and of Sigala's mother, preeminent in faith. This list of distinguished members also includes the nun Dhammadinna, who is cited as the most skilled teacher of the Buddha's insights; Patacara, who knows best the rules of the discipline; and Kisha Gotami, who is first in the ascetic practice of wearing coarse robes. Uppalavanna is chief among those of supernormal powers; Sahula is first in clairvoyance; and Bhadda Kapilani is best at remembering past lives. These are no second-rate achievements. Other narratives scattered throughout the literature recall further details of these women's careers. Mahapajapati, the nuns' founder, had a modest legendary cycle of her own, beginning, as most accounts of great Buddhists do, with stories of the deeds in former lives that brought her to her exalted role as the Buddha's aunt and the nuns' founder and ending with an account of her *parinirvana*, or final liberation.

Perhaps the strongest affirmation of the nuns' role is found in a little collection of stories that was apparently very widely known, since a number of versions have been found from quite different

Buddhist times and regions. This collection contains the stories of ten nuns who, through wit, discipline, and purity of thought, managed to overcome the tempter Mara. All of them speak out strongly as Mara approaches and tries to awaken the lustful thoughts, painful memories, and past fears that would make a weaker person abandon the path of spiritual attainment. The message is clearest and strongest in the words that one of the sisters, Soma, speaks in answer to Mara's remark that she has just a woman's "two-finger intelligence" (enough to use a common and simple way of measuring rice). Soma's answer rings like a credo for all the nuns:

What does the woman's nature do to us if the mind  
is well-composed  
If our knowledge progresses rightly, giving insight  
in the Teaching?  
Pleasure is completely destroyed for me; dark ignorance  
has been pierced.  
Thus know, Evil Death, you are destroyed!  
If a person still thinks to ask: "Am I a woman in these  
things? Or am I a man?"  
This is the one to whom Mara can talk.<sup>16</sup>

Offsetting the impact of such stories as those of Mahapajapati and Soma, however, is another series of accounts, which denigrate the nuns and their accomplishments. Many of these are clearly just tales of human foibles and failings and are not directed specifically at the nuns as such; similar stories are also told about the monks. A few have a gently humorous touch, such as the Vinaya tale of a country bumpkin nun who tosses the contents of her chamberpot over her convent's wall and hits a stuffy brahman on the head.<sup>17</sup> My own favorite is the story of Fat Tissa, who noisily celebrates the nuns' monk patron Ananda above the much more distinguished—but also woman-hating—Mahakasapa, thus bringing down the latter's wrath on poor Ananda.<sup>18</sup>

Other tales, however, strike quite a different and ominous note. Some accounts seem defaced, as though stories initially intended to celebrate the nuns' achievements had been altered to play down their accomplishments. Thus a very old story telling of the efforts of the founder, Mahapajapati, and her initial group of

followers states that they very nearly attained insight on their first day of instruction. But, the story continues, unlike many of their male brethren, they didn't quite make it; thus they had to return for more teaching on the morrow.<sup>19</sup> The implication is that they were a little on the slow side. This didn't-quite-make-it theme appears several times. I know at least one instance in which both the celebratory and the denigrating versions of the same story have been preserved. This apparently popular story tells of a nun who wanted to be first in greeting the Buddha after he had spent a three-month rainy-season retreat in heaven. Not knowing quite how to accomplish this in the glorious company that was assembling for the occasion, she transformed herself into a universal emperor. One of my sources simply reports that she was, indeed, first—thus implying that hers was a great accomplishment. Another source, instead, states that, when she met the Buddha, he informed her that a male meditation master had in fact seen him first with his spiritual eye. And yet a third source reports that the Master censured her for abandoning her proper business of meditation.<sup>20</sup>

Certainly the most damaging of all must have been the story concerning the eight special rules that subordinated the nuns to the monks. It purports to tell how the nuns' order was founded over the Buddha's own objection to letting women renounce the world. To the Buddha's credit, the story may be a fraud, for it does not belong to the oldest stratum of Buddhist literature. But it was widely circulated as the authentic founding narrative; hence its charges must have cast a very long shadow on the nuns' endeavor. It is said that, when Mahapajapati and her retinue of five-hundred Sakya women first approached the Buddha to ask for ordination, he refused brusquely and sent them away in tears. They went home, shaved their heads, put on the renunciant's robes and then, with bare feet, followed the Master and his male disciples to a distant town to show their determination. The Buddha refused again; but this time Fat Tissa's hero Ananda intervened on the women's behalf. The Master finally relented, but he extracted the women's promise to observe the eight rules as a condition for their admission. Many versions of this story include a particularly vicious coda: because the women had been ad-

mitted as renunciants, the Master announced afterward, his teaching would last only five hundred years instead of the thousand that he had originally anticipated.<sup>21</sup>

Once upon a time I attributed these kinds of stories to simple misogyny among the celibate monks' community. Today, after many years of study, I believe that the explanation is probably not so simple. Another group of women—the Buddhist laywomen—comes off very well in Buddhist stories, in spite of the fact that the Buddhist lay community in general was considered spiritually inferior to the monastic community. Buddhist laywomen tend to be presented in much more positive terms than the nuns, and their deeds and virtue are almost invariably praised. The stories that relate to laywomen are far more numerous and more lavishly and enthusiastically developed than those that relate to nuns. The grand heroine of Buddhist storytelling is not the nuns' founder Mahapajapati, as one might expect, but Vishakha, a prominent merchant's daughter and wife who belonged to the early community and who never took the nuns' vows. Also, in the stories of outstanding nuns the focus is often on the deeds that they performed before, not after, taking the renunciant's vows. This is not true for the monks, for there are many, many Buddhist stories whose hero is a monk. Thus one cannot escape the impression that the community was more comfortable with its laywomen than with its nuns and that it probably found the latter's presence to be an embarrassment.

#### WHEN MODELS CONFLICT

As perplexing as the relative strength of the laywomen's position may seem, it offers an important clue to the ambivalence surrounding the nuns' role. Such ambivalence, I believe, is linked to Buddhism's attempts to reconcile two separate and somewhat contradictory understandings of sexual difference, each with its own implications for the respective roles of nuns and laywomen. The first is the more authentically Buddhist of the two and by far the more consistent with the greater body of Buddhist teachings. It perceives the difference between male and female, like other

varieties of human difference, as products of humans' essentially fallen state; this is in accordance with the workings of *karma*—Buddhism's basic premise that different kinds of beings are the products of their own past desires. As one works toward spiritual perfection—essentially by learning to break the hold of desires—the consequences of fallenness, including sexual differentiation, tend to drop away. This means essentially that the process of spiritual development, in which the renunciant's vocation represents a relatively advanced step, tends to nullify sexual identifications and limitations.<sup>22</sup> This ideal of convergence of the sexes is reflected in the renunciants' identical clothes, as well as in their virtually identical spiritual paths and disciplines. It is certainly the basis as well as for the triumphant song of Soma cited in the last section.

The nuns' subordination to the monks, however, as well as their uneasy status vis-à-vis the laywomen appear to draw on another model of sexual difference, which comes not from the Buddhist tradition itself but from the norms of the surrounding culture. This is the model provided by the Hindu conception of *dharma*—the vision of an all-embracing order in which everything and everyone has a place. This "place" is simultaneously a "nature" and a "role"; for being born in a particular slot means that one is at least ideally endowed with the natural capacity to fulfill that slot and has the duty to see that such a capacity is properly channeled. Failure to honor one's *dharma* invites disaster—for oneself, one's family, and ultimately the whole order. The *dharma*'s central image is that of an organism in which the various "slots" are, in effect, the equivalents of bodily members.

Now, a woman's "slot" is that of childbearer. This is also her natural capacity; hence she is the repository of a powerful generative force that seeks, above all, to put babies in the womb. Marriage and motherhood represent the proper and effective means of channeling a woman's generative drive. Her subordination to men further ensures its control—hence, the *dharma* teaching that a woman must always be subordinate to some man: in childhood, to her father; in maturity, to her husband; in old age, to her sons. In her proper place, with a living husband and surrounded by her

children, a woman may achieve great honor. Out of place, she is suspect. The Hindu tradition's distrust of female ascetics is well documented, and so is its unease with other women who fail to fill their ideal role, such as the unmarried, childless, and widowed women who so often took refuge in the Buddhist community.

Buddhism was a path of enlightenment, not a revolutionary vision of renewed social order. It made peace with the Hindu *dharma's* precepts wherever it could, often incorporating them into its own prescriptions for ordinary human behavior and social relationships. Thus the subordination of nuns to monks can probably best be traced historically to the early community's efforts to stay at least somewhat in line with the conventional practice of the day. More important for the nuns, the Hindu *dharma's* values percolated through into popular Buddhist expectations as well. Buddhists, like Hindus, honored fecund housewives, especially if they were also pious laywomen. We can therefore suspect that many Buddhists, like Hindus, also preferred to see women at the hearth rather than on the road or within a monastery's walls. Such preferences could easily compromise early Buddhism's rather remarkable tolerance for renunciant women.

#### ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE

Given the powerful currents pulling against the nuns, I have come to wonder whether, in fact, I have not been puzzled by the wrong mystery. For it is less strange that the nuns finally came in second to the monks (and laywomen) than that they survived so well for so long. When I Ching described the poor and simple nuns of North India, their order had existed for over a thousand years. Furthermore, it continued to survive for at least two full centuries longer. Once upon a time I believed that I Ching had spoken the last word on the nuns and that they must have faded and died out shortly after his visit, yet I continue to discover traces of later nuns. A few days before completing this chapter, for example, I found another record of the nuns in a grant to a monastery of eastern India. Among the allocations for this very large establishment were ten servants for the community of nuns that was housed within the monastery's precinct. The grant is



dated at 885 A.D.<sup>23</sup> Thus it becomes more likely that the nuns lived on until the monks' traces also vanished from Indian history.

# NOTES

1. Therigatha, translated with the traditional commentary by C.A.F. Rhys Davids in *Psalm of the Early Buddhists* (London: Luzac, 1964). For an excellent summary of these and other sources on the earliest nuns, see I. B. Horner, *Women under Primitive Buddhism* (London: Routledge, 1930).
2. It may seem somewhat puzzling that nuns and monks who had supposedly rejected most material possessions nonetheless had the economic resources to make donations to Buddhist building projects and monuments. In some cases relatives remaining within the lay community seem to have offered donations on the monks' or nuns' behalf. In some cases, like that of the distinguished monk-scholar Vasubandhu (see p. 296), the monks or nuns redirected a surplus of gifts that had been offered by laypersons for their own personal use.
3. J. J. Fleet, *Gupta Inscriptions* (Calcutta, 1988), no. 70.
4. K. J. Virji, *Ancient History of Saurashtra* (Bombay, 1955), pp. 263 and 287, no. 49.
5. As described by Richard Robinson, *Early Mādhyamika in India and China* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), pp. 72-73.
6. J. Takakusu, "The Life of Vasubandhu by Paramārtha," *T'oung Pao*, ser. 2, Vol. 5 (1904), p. 286.
7. This is suggested in the romantic epic on Harsha's life, *Harshacarita* (8. 288), but not in historical accounts of Harsha. His sister's knowledge of Buddhist philosophy and enthusiasm for Buddhist teachings are, however, attested independently.
8. For both pilgrims' accounts, see S. Beal, *Buddhist Records of the Western World*, Vol. 1 (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1884), pp. xxxix, 181.
9. J. Takakusu, trans., *A Record of the Buddhist Religion* (London: Clarendon Press, 1896), p. 81.
10. Probably the best available source on the monastic community's structure and history is S. Dutt, *Buddhist Monks and Monasteries of India* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1962).
11. I have followed the most accessible version, the Vinayapitakam of the Southern Buddhists' Pali Canon. For a readily available translation, see I. B. Horner, *Book of the Discipline*, Sacred Books of the Buddhists, Vols. 9-14, 20 (London: Luzac, 1949-1963).
12. Vinayapitakam, Suttavibhanga, Pāṭidesaniya 1.
13. See Vinayapitakam, Bhikkunīvibhanga.
14. Vinayapitakam, Cullavagga 10. 3.
15. Anguttaranikāya 1. 14. 4.
16. Sanyuttanikāya 1. 5. 2.
17. Sanyuttanikāya 16. 10.
18. Vinayapitakam, Bhikkunīvibhanga, Pācittiya 8.
19. Nandakovādasutta of the Majjhimanikāya.
20. The first version was heard and repeated by the Chinese pilgrim Fa Hsien; the second, by the later pilgrim Hsuan Tsang. For both, see Beal, *Buddhist*

*Records*, Vol. 1, pp. x1, 204–205. The third version is translated in S. Levi, *Mahākarmavibhanga et Karmavibhangopadesa* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1932), p. 174.

21. This story has been retold many times throughout Buddhist literature. The most readily accessible version is in the Pali Vinayapitakam, Cullavagga 10.1–3.
22. I am indebted to co-contributor Diana Paul for helping me to understand this model. See her book, *Portraits of the Feminine in Mahāyāna Buddhism* (Berkeley, Ca.: Asian Humanities Press, 1979).
23. Reported in D. K. Barua, *Vihāras in Ancient India* (Calcutta: Indian Publications, 1969), p. 191.