

Female Agency in Two Sanskrit Vinayas

Amy Paris Langenberg
Eckerd College

Structure of *Mahāsāṅghika-Lokottaravādin* *Bhikṣuṇī-vinaya*

- *Aṣṭau Gurudharmāḥ* (8 principles to be respected)
- *Bhikṣuṇīnām Prātimokṣa-vibhaṅgaḥ*
(commentary on the disciplinary rules for nuns)
- *Bhikṣuṇī-prakīrṇakam* (miscellaneous matters for nuns)
- (*Bhikṣu-prakīrṇakam*)

“That the dharma literature is a record of custom is obfuscated by the fact that the idiom of all the dharma literature is one of eternality and timelessness. This means that there are no contemporaneous references which can help us to establish the chronology of these ideas, nor is there admission that custom and practice changed and evolved over time. It is further obfuscated by the fact that the dharma literature clings to the claim that all of its provisions can be traced directly or indirectly to the Veda, the very root of dharma.”

Richard Lariviere, “Dharmaśāstra, custom, ‘real law,’ and ‘apocryphal ‘smṛtis’”
1997, reprinted in *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32 (2004), 612.

When the MSV recounts tales of unusual funeral or money-lending practices, or stories about the mischievous deeds of naughty monks, these might indicate such activity in the monastic communities when the MSV was finally redacted, or during one of its earlier layers of composition and agglutination. But then again, they might not. It might simply mean they were able to imagine such practices. . . . Alternatively, it might reflect the narrators' wish that their readers believe that the early sangha was rather badly behaved – perhaps so that the misdeeds of the narrator's contemporary monks might seem less egregious . . . Or, quite possibly, the narrators feared that that monastics might one day engage in such activities . . . and fictitiously depicted such acts preemptively in order to prohibit them. Or perhaps what we see at any given moment arises from the obviously fertile imaginations of the consummate storytellers whose art dazzles us as we read the MSV.

Damchö Diana Finnegan, *"For the Sake of Women, Too": Ethics and Gender in the Narratives of the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya*, 2009 dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 38

gurudharma 4 (Roth § 89-90)

Now how is it, Gautamī, that the nuns' community must not avail themselves of first-time offerings of food, beds and seats, and housing before the assembly of monks do?

Someone who makes a food offering to the nun's community should be told, "You must do it following the most excellent procedure." Then if he says, "There is no faith in that for me, no grace," he is to be told, "As for us, we do not accept [this offering]." Now he says, "My mother, my father, a member of my men's organization, a professional associate, one of my friends, have all previously given [a food offering] to them but I [myself] have never previously made an offering to the noble ones. Let the noble ones receive [a food offering]." If [in this way] the assembly of nuns causes even as much as one bowl of rice to be offered to the assembly of monks, then, should it accept even one-hundred-flavor food, this does not constitute a fault.

3 Interpretive Modes

- Reading the texts as literary products of a certain (gendered) worldview
- Reading the texts as normative statements about ethical ideals connected to core Buddhist teachings or rituals formative of and foundational to Buddhist community life
- Reading the texts as records of custom -- records of the complex monastic life of Buddhist communities as they developed over time.

Text 1: legally equal, ritually unequal

When a certain nun died in Śrāvastī, her bowl and robes had been left with a monk. After the nuns had cremated her corpse, they assembled at the retreat house of the nuns, and when they looked for the bowl and robes, when they did not find them, after they came to know that they were with a monk named so-and-so in a vihāra, they went to the vihāra, and after venerating the feet of the monks, they said, “Noble Sirs, the nun named so-and-so has died, and since her bowl and robes are here and we are seeking them, you must return them!”

....

The Blessed One said: “If the bowl and robes are a nun’s they are the nuns’, and since the nuns are the owners monks must not keep them!”

gurudharma 1 (Roth §20-21)

When the monks enter the residence of the nuns, by all of the nuns whether old, young, or in the middle, to all of the monks, whether old or young or in the middle, a respectful gesture should be made, raising their cupped hands in salutation. In the case of a nun who is old, weak, and sick, she should honor with her head the feet of whomever she is able. Having made cupped hands at the level of her head, she should honor the remaining. She should say, "I honor the feet of all of the noble ones."



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Text 2: behaving like a wife

pācattika dharma 79 (Roth §193)

Gartodara (“Hollow-belly”), Gartodara’s mother, and Gartodara’s father, wandered forth from householdership into homelessness. . . .

Gartodara’s father was eating. Fanning him, Gartodara’s mother stood opposite and held his water pot. He prattled on about various events of the past that were unpleasant to her. She jammed the water pot onto his head, then she hit him about the head with the fan handle.

“You ignorant useless spiteful old man!” she said. “You are speaking of things that should not be mentioned!”

She was seen by the nuns. . . . The nuns briefed Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī on the matter. Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī told the Lord.

The Lord said, “You have done ill, mother of Gartodara. This is not the teaching (*dharma*), this is not the discipline (*vinaya*). You stand by this monk with water and fan while he eats. It is not suitable to stand by with fan and water in this way.”

Text 3: physical and social vulnerability

bhikṣuṇī prakīrṇaka 31 (Roth §283)

They attached anklets, affixed earrings, put on bracelets, ornamented [Sudinnā], draped her with red garments, concealed her [under a veil] and surrounded her by four or five female attendants. That man, standing in the doorway, watched them [thinking], “When she comes out, I will grab her.” When he saw her coming out [he thought], “She must be a housewife surrounded by servants. That one is no nun.” Now, when that nun reached [her] place of refuge, she was seen by the [other] nuns. They said, “Āryā, that Sudinnā has run away from [the nunnery].” [Sudinnā] said, “I have not run away. It is just that my husband’s brother wishes to take me away. Fearful of him and desiring protection, I [dressed] in this way.”

Text 4: collusion with a laywoman

bhikṣuṇī prakīrṇaka 32 (Roth §284)

The lord was staying at Śrāvastī. The nun Sthūlanandā was on begging rounds. She approached a great and superior household for alms. There, a stillborn male child [had been born] to a woman. She said to her, “Noble lady! Take this child away! Please take it, Noble lady! I will give you something.”

“I will not take this away,” said the nun.

“I will give you anything and everything!” [the woman pleaded].

Greedy, [Sthūlanandā] replied, “Put it in this bowl.” After covering it, she left.

Text 5: practicing the medical arts

pācattika dharma 82 (Roth §196)

A nun, mother of Chandaka, was accepted in the inner household of the king. She was skillful with root medicines, leaf medicines, and fruit medicines. With the king's relatives, the ministers' relatives, merchants' families, and [other] excellent families, she established a hostel for women. She cured fainting fits. She offered medical treatments such as black ointment, [other] ointments, emetics, purgatives, sweat-treatments, nasal treatments, and bloodletting. Before she left, she received soft food and hard food.

Text 6: menstrual law

Bhikṣuṇīvibhaṅga commentary corresponding to *prāyaścittika* 144 [Derge Kangyur 'dul wa (Volume 9) Ta 299a7-299b.6]:

For women, because of the degenerative force of previous karma, every month, blood trickles out. Because of this, the lord told (nuns) to wear a special garment for concealing the menstrual flow. At the time he said to “keep a special garment,” [the Lord knew] it was sure to fall if [a nun] put it on and walked, so, at the same time he instructed [them to] “keep a special garment,” he [also] said to “attach it with a string.”

Text 7: purity concerns

bhikṣuṇī prakīrṇaka 16 (Roth §269)

The Lord was staying at Śrāvastī. At that time, the nuns were washing their menstrual cloths in the bathing place for women. The women looked upon them with contempt, [saying], “This entire place has been made impure by [their] blood.” The nuns briefed Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī on the matter. Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī told the lord. The Lord said, “It is not suitable to wash menstrual clothes in the women’s washing place. A nun who washes her menstrual cloth in the women’s washing place transgresses against monastic discipline.” This is said regarding the women’s washing place.

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