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Buddhist Nuns

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EṢĀ AGRĀ: IMAGES OF NUNS
IN (MŪLA-)SARVĀSTIVĀDIN LITERATURE

PETER SKILLING

Buddhist literature evolved over centuries across a widespread area. The Buddhist texts that we know today are social products, constituted by negotiation, compromise, and adaptation. Should we expect them to present a single position on nuns or female spirituality? Should we close our eyes to the positive, and see only the negative, or vice versa, according to our proclivities? Or should we accept that both nuns and monks may be portrayed either positively or negatively, and see what different texts have to say? In this article I look at (Mūla-)Sarvāstivādin *avadānas* from the perspective of a literary anthropologist, revealing embedded values and displaying narratory artefacts related to nunship. I discover positive images connected with teaching and transmitting the Dharma. The very fact of being transmitted and circulated — through manuscripts, sermons, or print media, in Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese, or modern translation — indicates that these texts have been — and still can be — living entities, things of the present, with the power to invoke images, motivate religious practice — and provoke debate.

We are now in a better position than before to study the lives of Buddhist nuns from literary sources. The well-known *Verses of the Elder Nuns*, or *Therīgāthā*, is available in several translations, including the meticulously annotated translation by K.R. NORMAN¹. The commentary, the *Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā* — a skillful weave of bardic, philological, hermeneutic, and narrative genres — is accessible in a new edition of the Pāli and in an excellent translation, both by William PRUITT². The fifth chapter of the

¹ *Elders' Verses*, Vol. II, The Pali Text Society, Oxford (1971, 1992, 1995). Caroline RHYS DAVIDS' *Psalms of the Sisters* (1909) has been superseded by *Elders' Verses* and by PRUITT (see following note).

² *Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā (Paramatthadīpanī VI) by Achariya Dhammapāla*, The Pali Text Society, Oxford, 1998; *The Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs (Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā Paramatthadīpanī VI) by Ācariya Dhammapāla*, The Pali Text Society, Oxford, 1998.

Etadagga-vagga of the *Āṅguttara-nikāya* and its commentary, long available in roman-script editions, is now supplemented by the publication of the sub-commentary³. The chapter deals with thirteen outstanding nuns. Although the Pāli of the commentary itself has not been translated, one may consult U TIN OO's English translation of the "Life Stories of Bhikkhunī Elders" from MINGUN SAYADAW's encyclopædic *Mahābuddhavaṃsa*, a work composed in Burmese on the basis of Pāli sources⁴, and the composite selections in NYANAPONIKA Thera and Hellmuth HECKER's *Great Disciples of the Buddha*⁵. Another source for narratives about nuns is the *Saddharmaratnāvaliya*, a Sinhalese rendition of the *Dhammapada-aṭṭhakathā*⁶. The short but important *Bhikkhunīsaṃyutta* of the *Samyuttanikāya* is available in both a new edition of the Pāli by G.A. SOMARATNE and a new translation by Bhikkhu BODHI⁷. Mōhan WIJAYARATNA has published a study of nuns based on Pāli texts, with an appendix giving the Pāli *Bhikkhunī Pātimokkha* in roman letters⁸. WIJAYARATNA also devoted an appendix to nuns in his *Buddhist Monastic Life*⁹. The Pali Text Society's new edition with English translation *en face* of the Theravādin *Pātimokkha* includes the *Bhikkhunī Pātimokkha*¹⁰, and

³ Primoz PECENKO (ed.), *Āṅguttaranikāyaṇīkā* Volume II, *Catuthā Sāratthamañjusā, Ekanipātaṇīkā* II-XIV, The Pali Text Society, Oxford, 1997, pp. 279-97.

⁴ The Most Venerable MINGUN SAYADAW Bhaddanta Vicittasārābhivamsa, *The Great Chronicle of Buddhas: The State Buddha Sāsana Council's Version*, Vol. 6, Part 2, (edited by U KO LAY [Zeyar Maung], translated by U TIN OO [Myaung]), Rangoon, 1998. For the lives of the nuns in Thai see Banjob BANNARUCL, *Phiksuni: Phutthasavika khrang phutthakan*, Chulalongkorn University Press, Bangkok, 2539 [1996].

⁵ NYANAPONIKA Thera & Hellmuth HECKER, *Great Disciples of the Buddha: Their Lives, Their Works, Their Legacy*, Edited with an Introduction by Bhikkhu BODHI, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 1997, Chap. 7.

⁶ See Ranjini OBEYSEKERE, *Portraits of Buddhist Women: Stories from the Saddharmaratnāvaliya*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2001.

⁷ G.A. SOMARATNE (ed.), *The Samyuttanikāya of the Suttapiṭaka*, Volume I, *The Sāgāthavagga*, The Pali Text Society, Oxford, 1998, pp. 281-97; Bhikkhu BODHI (tr.), *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Samyutta Nikāya*, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 2000, Vol. I, pp. 221-30.

⁸ *Les moniales bouddhistes: naissance et développement du monachisme féminin*, Les éditions du Cerf, Paris, 1991.

⁹ Mohan WIJAYARATNA, *Buddhist monastic life according to the texts of the Theravāda tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990, pp. 158-163.

¹⁰ William PRUITT (ed.), K.R. NORMAN (tr.), *The Pātimokkha*, The Pali Text Society, Oxford, 2001.

the Society has also published a study of certain aspects of the nun's rules¹¹.

But much remains to be done. The Pāli *Therī-apadāna*, an important text in which forty senior nuns relate in verse the deeds of their past lives and the joy of their present freedom, has not yet been translated into any European language, or published in a reliable European edition¹². The account of the thirteen nuns in the commentary and *Etadagga-vagga*, mentioned above, remains to be studied and translated in full from the Pāli.

Outside of Pāli, other useful materials are available. The "Buddhist Sanskrit" *Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya* of the Lokottaravādin-Mahāsāṃghika is available in an edition by ROTH and an annotated French translation by NOLOT, while the related but not identical Mahāsāṃghika *Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya* (available only in Fa-hsien's Chinese translation, done between CE 416 and 418) has been translated into English by HIRAKAWA¹³. Shih Pao-ch'ang's classical compilation of biographies of sixty-five Chinese nuns, compiled in 516, has been translated by Katherine Anne TSAI¹⁴. Articles on aspects

¹¹ Bhikkhunī Juo-Hsüeh SHIH, *Controversies over Buddhist Nuns*, The Pali Text Society, Oxford, 2000.

¹² For *Apadāna* see Sally MELLICK CUTLER, "The Pāli Apadāna Collection", *Journal of the Pali Text Society* XX (1994), pp. 1-42. MELLICK CUTLER is preparing an edition and translation of the *Therī-apadāna* to be published by the Pali Text Society, Oxford. For the *apadāna* of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī see for now Jonathan S. WALTERS, "Gotamī's story", in Donald S. LOPEZ Jr. (ed.), *Buddhism in Practice*, Princeton Readings in Religions, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1995, pp. 113-38.

¹³ Gustav ROTH (ed.), *Bhikṣuṇī-Vinaya: Manual of Discipline for Buddhist Nuns*, K.P. Jayaswal Research Institute Patna, 1970 (Tibetan Sanskrit Works Series No. XII); Édith NOLOT (tr.), *Règles de discipline des nonnes bouddhistes: le Bhikṣuṇīvinaya de l'école Mahāsāṃghika-Lokottaravādin*, Collège de France, Paris, 1991; Akira HIRAKAWA (tr.), *Monastic Discipline for the Buddhist Nuns: An English Translation of the Chinese Text of the Mahāsāṃghika Bhikṣuṇī-Vinaya*, Kashi Prasad Jayaswal Research Institute, Patna, 1982 (Tibetan Sanskrit Works Series No. XXI).

¹⁴ *Lives of the Nuns: Biographies of Chinese Buddhist Nuns from the Fourth to Sixth Centuries, A translation of the Pi-ch'iu-ni chuan compiled by Shih Pao-ch'ang*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1994. For a translation into Thai see Chartsumarn KABIL-SINGH, *Chiwaprawat khong phra phiksuni chin*, Bangkok, 2535 [1992]. One of the biographies was translated earlier by Arthur F. WRIGHT, "Biography of the Nun An-ling-shou", *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 15, nos. 1, 2 (June 1952), pp. 193-196; repr. in Robert M. SOMERS (ed.), Arthur F. WRIGHT, *Studies in Chinese Buddhism*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1990, pp. 69-72. See also Susan WHITFIELD'S reconstruction of the life of Miaofu, 880-961, as "The Nun's Tale", in *Life along the Silk Road*, John Murray, London, 1999.

of the nuns' rules — *Vinaya*, *Prātimokṣa*, *Karmavākya* — according to different sources and traditions appear regularly¹⁵.

With the exception of the Chinese *Lives of the Nuns*, the works mentioned above belong to the Theravādin and (Lokottaravādin-)Mahāsāṃghika traditions. What about the literature of the (Mūla-)Sarvāstivādins, another of the great Indian schools?¹⁶ Does it not have anything to tell us about nuns? Certainly its *Vinaya* includes sections devoted to nuns — the *Bhikṣuṇīvibhaṅga*, *Bhikṣuṇīprātimokṣa*, and their commentaries. It may be that these texts are formally dependent on the corresponding literatures of the *bhikṣus*, but that is the case with the corresponding sections of the *Vinayas* of the other schools, and does not mean that such texts are not worthy of our attention. As legal texts, daily guidelines for the order of nuns, they can only be rich in information¹⁷. Yet for the most part they have been ignored¹⁸.

¹⁵ Recent contributions include Ute HÜSKEN, “Nonnen in der frühen buddhistischen Ordensgemeinschaft”, in Ulrike ROESLER (ed.), *Aspekte des Weiblichen in der indischen Kultur*, Swisttal-Odendorf, 2000 (Indica et Tibetica 39), pp. 25-46; “The Legend of the Establishment of the Buddhist Order of Nuns”, *Journal of the Pali Text Society* XXVI (2000), pp. 43-69 — with a useful bibliography, pp. 66-69. For an English translation of the “foundation story” from the Lokottaravādin *Vinaya* see John S. STRONG, *The Experience of Buddhism: Sources and Interpretations*, Wadsworth Publishing Company, Belmont, California, 1995, pp. 52-56. *Hōbōgirin* and the *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism* both have entries on nuns: *Hōbōgirin*, *Dictionnaire encyclopédique du bouddhisme d'après les sources chinoises et japonaises*, fascicule I, Tōkyō, 1929-30, pp. 73-74 (“Bikuni”); G.P. MALALASEKERA (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, Vol. III, fascicule 1, pp. 43-47 (“Bhikkhunī”). For later periods in China and Japan see Ding-hwa E. HSIEH, “Images of Women in Ch'an Buddhist Literature of the Sung Period”, in Peter N. GREGORY & Daniel A. GETZ, Jr., (ed.), *Buddhism in the Sung*, Kuroda Institute/University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 1999 (Kuroda Institute Studies in East Asian Buddhism 13), pp. 148-87, and Miriam LEVERING, “Miao-tao and Her Teacher Ta-hui”, *ibid.*, pp. 188-219; C. KLEINE, “Portraits of Pious Women in East Asian Buddhist Hagiography: A Study of Accounts of Women who Attained Birth in Amida's Pure Land”, *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 85 (1998), pp. 325 foll.

¹⁶ For a compelling theory on the meaning of the name “Mūlasarvāstivādin” see Fumio ENOMOTO, “‘Mūlasarvāstivādin’ and ‘Sarvāstivādin’”, in Christine CHOINACKI, Jens-Uwe HARTMANN and Volker M. TSCHANNERL (ed.), *Vividharatnakaraṇḍaka, Festgabe für Adelheid Mette*, Swisttal-Odendorf, 2000 (Indica et Tibetica 37), pp. 239-50.

¹⁷ I do not wish to suggest even for a moment that only these sections contain information on nuns. On the contrary, nuns figure in many of the basic monk's rules, and nuns range freely through the entire *Vinaya*.

¹⁸ Exceptions include Ernst WALDSCHMIDT, *Bruchstücke des Bhikṣuṇī-Prātimokṣa der Sarvāstivādins mit einer Darstellung der Überlieferung des Bhikṣuṇī-Prātimokṣa in den*

The (Mūla-)Sarvāstivādin *Vinaya* is a vast, sprawling, unmanageable compilation that has not been edited let alone indexed. But there is no need to despair, since material on nuns is readily accessible (and has long been so) in two digests of *avadānas* of the (Mūla-)Sarvāstivādin school, the *Avadānaśataka* and *Karmaśataka*. The first was translated into French by FEER in 1891 and edited in Sanskrit by SPEYER between 1906 and 1909¹⁹; the second was studied and summarized by FEER in 1901²⁰. But they have not received much attention, perhaps in part because they have been treated as fables, as moral tales devoid of historicity.

Avadānaśataka and Karmaśataka

The *Avadānaśataka* is a collection of one hundred *avadānas* in ten chapters of ten *avadānas* each. The Sanskrit manuscripts used by FEER for his translation and by SPEYER for his edition came from Nepal. The *Avadānaśataka* was translated into Chinese during the Wu dynasty (CE 223-53) by an important translator of the early period, the Indo-Scythian layman Chih Ch'ien²¹, and into Tibetan by Jinamitra and Devacandra in

verschiedenen Schulen, Kleinere Sanskrit-Texte Heft III [Leipzig, 1926], repr. in Monographien zur indischen Archäologie Kunst und Philologie, Band 2, Franz Steiner Verlag, Wiesbaden, 1979; Bhikṣuṇī JAMPA TSEDROEN, *A Brief Survey of the Vinaya: Its origin, transmission and arrangement from the Tibetan point of view with comparisons to the Theravāda and Dharmagupta traditions*, Dharma edition, Hamburg, 1992 (Foundation for Tibetan Buddhist Studies: Vinaya Research 1); KARMA LEKSHE TSOMO, *Sisters in Solitude: Two Traditions of Buddhist Monastic Ethics for Women: A Comparative Analysis of the Chinese Dharmagupta and the Tibetan Mūlasarvāstivāda Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa Sūtras*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1996.

¹⁹ Léon FEER, *Avadāna-çataka: Cent légendes bouddhiques*, [Annales du Musée Guimet XVIII, Paris, 1891] repr. APA-Oriental Press, Amsterdam, 1979; J.S. SPEYER (ed.), *Avadānaçataka: A Century of Edifying Tales belonging to the Hinayāna*, St. Pétersbourg, 1906-09 (Bibliotheca Buddhica III); also P.L. VAIDYA (ed.), *Avadāna-śataka*, Darbhanga, 1958 (Buddhist Sanskrit Texts, No. 19). FEER'S translation was made from manuscripts. For the Tibetan see *Avadānaśataka*, Peking Kanjur (Otani Reprint) 1012, Vol. 40, *mdo u*.

²⁰ L[éon] Feer, "Le Karma-çataka", *Journal Asiatique*, neuvième série tome XVII (1901), pp. 53-100, 257-315, 410-86.

²¹ Lewis R. LANCASTER in collaboration with Sung-bae PARK, *The Korean Buddhist Canon: A Descriptive Catalogue*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1979, Cat. No. 981. For Chih Ch'ien see Étienne LAMOTTE, *La Concentration de la Marche Héroïque (Śāraṅgamasamādhisūtra)*, Brussels, 1975, pp. 74-79; *Śāraṅgamasamādhisūtra: The Concentration of Heroic Progress*, An early Mahāyāna Buddhist Scripture translated and

about CE 800. The *Karmaśataka* is a collection of “one hundred” (127 according to FEER’s count) tales of deeds. The only extant version is a Tibetan translation by Mūlakośa and gÑags Jñānakumāra reported to date to the reign of Khri lde gtsug brtan (first half of the 8th century)²². The Sanskrit does not survive — so far as I know not even any fragments have been found — and there is no Chinese translation²³.

Accounts of the suppression of monastic Buddhism in Tibet by King Glañ dar ma, who took the throne in about 836 and was assassinated in 842, relate that the *Karmaśataka* was one of the texts that was saved. The 14th-century historian Bu ston reports that dPal gyi rdo rje, after assassinating Glañ dar ma, fled to Eastern Tibet (Khams) taking with him the *Abhidharmasamuccaya*, the *Vinaya Prabhāvatī*, and the *Karmaśataka*²⁴. The 15th-century scholar ’Gos lotsaba states that at the time of the persecution three monks of the retreat centre of dPal Chu bo ri fled to Western Tibet, “taking with them essential *Vinaya* and *Abhidharma* texts [such as] the *Karmaśataka*, etc.”²⁵. If we accept these accounts at face value we can conclude that the *Karmaśataka* was revered from the early period of Buddhism in Tibet. If we question their historicity — they are given only in sources compiled centuries after the event — we can conclude that by the 14th century the *Karmaśataka* was considered an important

annotated by Étienne LAMOTTE, English translation by Sara BOIN-WEBB, Curzon Press in association with the Buddhist Society, Richmond, Surrey, 1998, pp. 66-72.

²² References in this article are to FEER’s summary (FEER 1901), a modern printed edition (of the first part only), *Las brgya tham pa*, mTsho sñon mi rigs dpe skrun khañ, Xining, 1995 (referred to as *Las brgya tham pa* 1995), and, for the story of Somā (see below), the Derge Kanjur 340, *mdo sde a*, 28b7-31a3 (referred to as *Karmaśataka*, with reference to folio number, side, and line). In the Peking Kanjur (Otani Reprint) the *Karmaśataka* is Cat. No. 1007, in *mdo* section, Vol. *su*.

²³ To be fair, I should mention that there is a Mongolian version, which I presume to be entirely dependent on the Tibetan.

²⁴ For references see Peter SKILLING, “From bKa’ bstan bcos to bKa’ ’gyur and bsTan ’gyur”, in Helmut EIMER (ed.), *Transmission of the Tibetan Canon: Papers Presented at a Panel of the 7th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Graz 1995*, Vienna, 1997 (= Vol. III of Ernst STEINKELLNER [Gen. ed.], *Proceedings of the 7th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Graz 1995: Beiträge zur Kultur- und Geistesgeschichte Asiens*, Nr. 22, Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse Denkschriften, 257. Band), p. 89.

²⁵ For references see SKILLING, “From bKa’ bstan bcos to bKa’ ’gyur and bsTan ’gyur”, p. 95.

text. In either case the narrative may not be an historical *fact* (and I will not enter into the question of whether or not such a creature exists) but may nonetheless be *true*, in that it expresses the cultural values of its age. The same may be said for the narratives of the *Karmaśataka* itself.

The *Karmaśataka* and *Avadānaśataka* are highly processed biographical texts²⁶. They share many of the same tales (including some of those of the nuns) and use many of the same formulas, and there is no reason to believe that the *Karmaśataka* is any younger than the *Avadānaśataka*. For purposes of this study I take them to be broadly contemporary, and to belong to the beginning of the Christian Era²⁷. In any case, the Chinese *Avadānaśataka*, dating as it does to the second quarter of the third century, appears to be the oldest datable collection of Buddhist biographies. Thus the text certainly merits our attention.

One feature distinguishes the stories of the two *Śataka* collections from the Pāli *Therīgāthā* and the *Therī Apadāna*. In the latter two the Therīs speak for themselves in verse. The *Śataka* collections do not include any of the verses, and the ladies have no voices and very little existence beyond the stereotyped phraseology of highly processed narrative. (Supriyā speaks a verse on *dāna* from the time of birth. Otherwise, verses occur in the stories of Kṣemā and Virūpā, while the stock *avadāna* verse *na praṇaśyanti karmāṇi, kalpakotīśatair api ...* occurs at the appropriate place in all the stories.)

In the *Karmaśataka* the stories of the nuns are scattered throughout the work. In contrast, in the *Avadānaśataka* the ten accounts of nuns are grouped together in the eighth decade. As FEER remarks, “Tous les héros de la huitième décade sont des femmes qui parviennent à l'état d'Arhat”. FEER notes that with one exception (no. 8) the heroines are young women who are all, with one exception (no. 5), “filles de bonne maison”. That

²⁶ In contrast, the *Divyāvadāna* is a loose collection or anthology. Even its contents are not fixed.

²⁷ Like most of the dates proposed for early Indian Buddhist literature, this date is precarious. The tales themselves might belong to the Aśokan and early post-Aśokan periods, some being certainly post-Aśokan. The collections could have come into being by the Christian Era. LAMOTTE places the *avadānas* in the context of the Sanskritization of literature in the second century CE: Étienne LAMOTTE, *Histoire du bouddhisme indien des origines à l'ère Śaka*, Louvain, 1958, pp. 653-54.

is, there are three daughters of kings, two daughters of merchants (*śreṣṭhī*), and one daughter each of a brahman, a rich Śākya, and of the famous Anāthapiṇḍada. The young exception is a dancer, and the one who is not young is a decrepit slave²⁸.

FEER notes that all but one of the young ladies of good family share a common trait: an invincible opposition to marriage. Does this suggest that women were driven to the nunneries by unhappy marriages? Not so — in most cases they are averse to marriage from the start, and are attracted to the spiritual life in its own right.

I do not propose that the stories be taken literally, as “historical biographies” or “true life stories”. To do so we would have to believe that Suprabhā (No. 1) was born with a shining jewel attached to her throat, that Śuklā (No. 3) was born covered with a pure white cloth, and that Mukṭā (No. 7) was born with a string of pearls wrapped about her head²⁹. (These marvellous qualities are satisfactorily explained in due course: they were the results of acts of generosity in previous lives. Suprabhā had offered jewels to the stūpa of the past Buddha Vipasyin; Śuklā had offered *kaṭhina* robes to the past Buddha Kāśyapa and his following; Mukṭā had tossed a precious string of pearls onto the head of the Buddha Kāśyapa.) The value of the accounts is that they embed contemporary social attitudes, that they express social identities, and that they reflect what was acceptable and possible for renunciant women.

Nuns and the transmission of scripture

Traditional accounts of the transmission of the Buddha’s Dharma have little to say about the role of nuns, or of women. Were the scriptures transmitted entirely by monks and males in Indian Buddhism, or did nuns or females play any role? The question is not addressed in these terms in

²⁸ See FEER 1891, p. 259.

²⁹ The examples are from *Avadānaśataka*. The story of Śuklā is included in the mediæval Japanese anthology, *Konjaku Monogatari*: see Yoshiko K. DYKSTRA (tr.), *The Konjaku Tales, Indian Section*, Intercultural Research Institute, Kansai University of Foreign Studies, Osaka, I 177-80.

any traditional sources that I know of, and we must therefore collect evidence scattered in inscriptions and early texts. I have presented and discussed some of the evidence in earlier articles³⁰. In this paper I would like to examine the evidence of the *avadānas* of the *Avadānaśataka* and *Karmaśataka*.

According to tradition the Buddha praised individual disciples as foremost in particular abilities or qualities. In the Pāli canon the *locus classicus* for this is the *Etadagga-vagga* of the “Book of Ones” of the *Aṅguttaranikāya*, which lists forty-three monks, thirteen nuns, ten laymen, and ten laywomen³¹. The corresponding section of the (Mūla-)Sarvāstivāda *Ekottarikāgama* — which surely existed — has not been preserved in the original or in translation, but references to foremost disciples are scattered throughout their literature. Of the ten nuns in the *Avadānaśataka*, four are described as foremost (*eṣā agrā*) in their stories:

Supriyā in having performed merit (11.2, *kṛtapuṇyānāṃ*);
 Somā in having heard much and in retaining what she has heard
 (22.4, *bahuśrutānāṃ śrutadhāriṇāṃ*);
 Kacaṅgalā in analysis of Sūtrānta (43.8, *sūtrāntavibhāgakartrīṇāṃ*);
 Kṣemā in great wisdom and great eloquence (50.9, *mahāprājñānāṃ mahāpratibhānāṃ*).

The last three excel in abilities related to learning and teaching. The same three nuns are known in the Theravādin tradition, but only one of them is described as foremost in the *Etadagga-vagga*³². This is Khemā, equivalent to the Kṣemā of the *Avadānaśataka*, who in the *Etadagga-vagga* is declared foremost in having great wisdom (*mahāpaññānaṃ*), just as in the *Avadānaśataka*. The other two nuns are not listed in the

³⁰ Peter SKILLING, “A Note on the History of the Bhikkhunī-saṅgha (II): The order of nuns after the Parinirvāṇa”, *W.F.B. Review* XXX.4/XXXI.1 (Oct.-Dec. 2536/1993-January-March 2537/1994), pp. 29-49; “A Note on the History of the Bhikkhunī-saṅgha (I): Nuns at the time of the Buddha”, *W.F.B. Review* XXXI.2-3 (April-Sept., BE 2537 = 1994), pp. 47-55; “Nonnen, Laienanhängerinnen, Spenderinnen, Göttinnen: Weibliche Rollen im frühen indischen Buddhismus”, in Ulrike ROESLER (ed.), *Aspekte des Weiblichen in der indischen Kultur*, Swisttal-Odendorf, 2000 (*Indica et Tibetica* 39), pp. 47-102, especially §II.

³¹ *Aṅguttaranikāya* I 23-26. The two laymen Tapassu-Bhallikā are counted as one.

³² I leave out of consideration here Supriyā. In Pāli there is an *upasikā* Suppiyā, foremost of those who wait upon the sick: see MALALASEKERA, DPPN II 1224-26.

Etadagga-vagga, and the qualities in which they excel are not ascribed to nuns. (Two other *Etadagga* nuns possess skills related to the transmission of the Dharma: Paṭācāra, foremost in mastering the Vinaya [*vinayadharāṇaṃ*], and Dhammadinnā, foremost in preaching [*dharmakathikāṇaṃ*]).

The Avadāna of Somā

The (Mūla-)Sarvāstivādins dedicated an interesting *avadāna* to Somā, one of the nuns declared foremost in their texts but not in the *Etadagga-vagga* or elsewhere in Pāli. The *avadāna* relates how Somā memorized the entire *Prātimokṣa* on a single hearing from the Buddha himself, causing him to declare her “foremost of the nuns who retain what they have heard”. The story is told in the *Karmaśataka* (No. 91), *Avadānaśataka* (No. 74), and *Ratna-avadāna-mālā* (No. 19), which agree on the substance of the tale but differ on many details³³. For the most part they use the same formulas, formulas with close parallels in (Mūla-)Sarvāstivādin literature such as the *Vinaya* from Gilgit. I give here a summary of the *Karmaśataka* version.

Somā was the daughter of a brahman of Śrāvastī³⁴. She had a healthy and pampered childhood. She quickly mastered the art of writing, and learned all of the brahmanical treatises from her father at home³⁵. Later she heard that Śramaṇa Gautama was staying in Śrāvastī and, with her parents’ permission, went to see him in Prince Jeta’s Grove. Seeing the Buddha, the Blessed One, his body beautifully adorned with the thirty-two features of a Great Man, like a lamp set in a golden vessel, like a sacrificial post studded with different kinds of jewels — the Buddha, the Blessed One with a mind radiant, stainless, and perfectly pure — she was enraptured. The joy expe-

³³ *Karmaśataka*, Derge Kanjur 340, *mdo sde a*, 28b7-31a3 (summary in Zhe chen ’gyur med Padma rnam rgyal, *mDo las byuñ ba’i gnam rgyud sna tshogs*, Kruñ go’i bod kyi śes rig dpe skrun khañ, Beijing, 1992, pp. 416-18); Feer (1901) 442-43; *Avadānaśataka* No. 74, FEER pp. 275-79; SPEYER II 19-23; Peking Kanjur (Otani Reprint) 1012, Vol. 40, *mdo u* 202a5-205a4. The reference to *Ratna-avadāna-mālā* (not seen) is from FEER (1891) xxvi. (I am grateful to Matthieu RICARD, Kathmandu, for the copy of the Derge.)

³⁴ *Avadānaśataka* describes him (with a stock passage) as a wealthy brahman, a master of the three Vedas and ancillary literature, who taught the mantras to five hundred young brahmans. The *Karmaśataka* gives him the name Zla ba bde ba = Somakṣema?

³⁵ According to *Avadānaśataka* she was intelligent, bright, and clever, and learned whatever mantras her father taught his brahman students the instant she heard them.

rienced by one who cultivates a mind of calm (*śamathacitta*) for as long as twelve years cannot match the joy experienced when a person first sees a Buddha, a joy that arises by cause of his or her accumulated roots of merit. Enraptured, she approached the Blessed One, paid homage with her head at his feet, and sat in front of him in order to listen to the Dharma. The Blessed One understood her state of mind, intelligence, and character, and taught the Dharma tailored to suit her character. The girl Somā, in that very seat, realized the fruit of stream-entry, shattering with the diamond-mace of wisdom (*jñānavajra*) the mountain of the personality-view with its twenty soaring peaks (*vimśatisikharasamudgatam satkāyadṛṣṭisailam*). Having seen the truth she rose from her seat, arranged her robe over one shoulder, raised her hands palms together toward the Blessed One, and spoke to him: “O Sir, O Blessed One, if I am fit for the status of a nun who goes forth and fully ordains in the well-expounded Dharma-Vinaya, I wish to lead the exalted life (*brahmacaryā*) under the Blessed One.”

The Blessed One entrusted her to Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī, who performed the going forth and full ordination rites and gave her instruction. By dint of energy, practice, and perseverance Somā cast off all defilements and realized the state of a worthy one (*arhatva*).

At one time, when the Blessed One had said to the monks, “Let the nuns perform the monastic rites in assembly separately”, because Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī was unable to recite the *Prātimokṣasūtra*, she went to the place where the Blessed One was; arriving, she paid homage with her head at his feet and sat to one side. Seated to one side Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī said to the Blessed One: “The Blessed One has declared, ‘Let the monks perform the monastic rites in assembly separately; let the nuns perform the monastic rites in assembly separately’. The Blessed One has expounded the *Prātimokṣasūtra*

³⁶ *Karmaśataka* fol. 30a3: *sañs rgyas bcom ldan 'das rnam ni tshig re re nas zlos śiñ chos gsuñs mi srid de, de'i skabs med do. Avadānaśataka* II 21.14 has: “The Blessed One answered ‘O nuns: The Tathāgatas, the Worthy Ones, the truly and fully Awakened Ones do not teach the Dharma phrase by phrase’” (*na hi bhikṣuṇyas tathāgatā arhantaḥ samyak-sambuddhāḥ padaśo dharmam uddiśanti*). The only other known usage of *padaśo dharmam* + verb is in a *Prātimokṣa* rule: Sarvāstivāda *pāṭayantikā* no. 6, *yañ punar bhikṣur anupasaṃpannaena puḍgalena sārdaṃ padaśo dharmam vācayet pāṭayantikā* (Georg VON SIMSON, *Prātimokṣasūtra der Sarvāstivādins*, Teil II, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht in Göttingen, 2000 (Sanskrittexte aus den Turfanfunden XI), p. 205, tr. p. “Wenn ein Mönch mit einer nichtordinierten Person zusammen die Lehre Wort für Wort rezitiert, dann ist es ein Pāṭyantikā-Vergehen”. The rule is no. 6 in the Tibetan Mūlasarvāstivādin *Prātimokṣa*, *yañ dge sloñ gañ, gañ zag bsñen par ma rdzogs par pa dañ tshig gis chos 'don na lhuñ byed do* (Satis Chandra VIDYABHUSANA, *So-sor-thar-pa (Khrims) or a code of Buddhist monastic laws*, repr. R.N. Bhattacharya, Calcutta, 2000, p. 77). In the Theravādin *Pātimokkha* the rule is no. 4, *yo pana bhikkhu anupasaṃpannaṃ padaśo dhammaṃ vāceyya, pācittiyaṃ*,

to the monks but has not expounded it to the nuns. I request the Blessed One to teach the *Prātimokṣasūtra*. I wish to learn it from the Blessed One.” The Buddhas, the Blessed Ones do not teach the Dharma phrase by phrase³⁶. The Blessed One then spoke to Mahāprajāpātī Gautamī, “Well, Gautamī, if you are able to remember it after a single recitation, I will expound it”³⁷. Then, at that time, the nun Somā was seated there in that assembly. She arranged her robe over one shoulder, raised her hands with palms pressed together toward the Blessed One, and spoke to him: “I request the Blessed One to expound the *Prātimokṣasūtra*. I will remember it after a single recitation.”³⁸ Then the Blessed One expounded the *Prātimokṣasūtra* to the nuns. When he had recited it a single time, the nun Somā learned it, and then went on to learn the *Three Piṭakas*. Whatever verses there were, she learned them all, and so the Blessed One proclaimed her to be foremost of those who could remember what they heard³⁹.

The nun Somā is not unknown in Theravādin tradition. In her famous *Bhikkhunī-saṃyutta* verses, Somā rejects Māra’s insinuation that a woman cannot attain the awakened state. Her verses are given in the *Therīgāthā*,

“If any bhikkhu should make someone who is not ordained recite the Dhamma word by word, there is an offence entailing expiation”: William PRUITT (ed.), K.R. NORMAN (tr.), *The Pātimokkha*, The Pali Text Society, Oxford, 2001, pp. 46-47. Although the translations as “word by word” or “line by line” seem adequate, the precise meaning and significance of the rule elude me, and the Theravādin *vibhaṅga* (*Vinaya* IV 14-15) is obscure. Cf. also *Avadānaśataka* II 19.8 *padaṣo vyākaraṇaḥ* or (from SPEYER’S n. 2) *Divyāvadāna* 619.24 *padaṣo vaiyākaraṇaḥ*.

³⁷ *Karmaśataka* 30a4 *kye gau ta mī gal te lan ciḡ smras pas ’djin nus na ni bstan par bya’o*; *Avadānaśataka* II 21 *ult yadi yuṣmākaṃ kācid uccahate sakṛd uktaṃ dhārayitum evam aham uddiṣeyam*.

³⁸ *Karmaśataka* 30a5 *lan ciḡ bka’ stsal pas, bdag gis gzuñ bar ’isal lo*; *Avadānaśataka* II 22.3 *ahaṃ sakṛd uktaṃ dhārayiṣye*.

³⁹ *Avadānaśataka* stops with the *Prātimokṣasūtra*, and does not mention the *Three Piṭakas* or “verses” (*tshig su bya ba*).

⁴⁰ William PRUITT, *Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā*, pp. 64-65; *ibid.*, *The Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs*, pp. 87-90; G.P. MALALASEKERA, *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names*, [1937] repr. Oriental Reprint, New Delhi, 1983, II 1310.

⁴¹ *Aṅguttara-nikāya* I 25. In the Pāli version the Buddha praises thirteen nuns. In the Chinese *Ekottarāgama* he extols fifty-one nuns (for references see Peter SKILLING, “A Note on the History of the Bhikkhunī-saṅgha (II): The order of nuns after the Parinirvāṇa”, *W.F.B. Review* XXX.4/XXXI.1 (Oct.-Dec. 2536/1993-January-March 2537/1994). In the corresponding section of the Chinese translation of an *Ekottarāgama* of unknown school, a Somā is declared to show great compassion for people who do not want to choose the way indicated by the Dharma, which seems a bit obscure: see Bhikkhu PĀSĀDIKA (tr.), “Ekottarāgama”, *Buddhist Studies Review* 4.1 (1987), p. 50.

and her past life is told in the commentaries⁴⁰. But as noted above she is not among the thirteen nuns singled out for their outstanding achievements in the *Etadagga-vagga*⁴¹. The story of the transmission of the *Prātimokṣa* to the nuns, by the Buddha or anyone else, is not, as far as I know, related in Theravādin literature. The **Varṣāvastu* in the Chinese translation of the Sarvāstivādin *Vinaya*, however, regards teaching the *Prātimokṣa* to *śikṣādatta-śrāmaṇerīs* to be a duty of sufficient significance that a monk is authorized to break the rains-retreat for up to seven nights in order to travel to teach the two divisions of the *Prātimokṣa* to a *śikṣādatta-śrāmaṇerī*⁴².

Nuns and the transmission of the Dharma

Somā is not the only nun to have taken part in the transmission of the Dharma, although she may have had the best memory, and have played a key role in the transfer of the *Prātimokṣa* to the sisters. Another nun who transmitted the teaching is Kāśī-Sundarī. In a past life, Kāśī-Sundarī built a *vihāra* perfect in every way and donated it to Kāśyapa Buddha and the *bhikṣu-saṃgha*. She offered all requisites to the monks (*bhikṣu*), requested permission from her parents, and went forth. Having studied the *Tripitaka*, she became a coherent and eloquent teacher of the Dharma⁴³.

Kacaṅgalā, as seen above, was foremost in analysis of the sūtras⁴⁴. Her story is told in the *Karmaśataka* (No. 33), *Avadānaśataka* (No. 73),

⁴² Shayne CLARKE, “The Existence of the Supposedly Non-existent *Śikṣādattā-śrāmaṇerī*: A New Perspective on *Pārājika* Penance”, *Buddhist Studies (Bukkyō Kenkyū)* XXIX (March, 2000), pp. 163-64.

⁴³ *Las brgya tham pa* (1995), p. 76.1 *de rab tu byuñ nas sde snod gsum bsblabs te rig pa dañ grol ba'i spobs pa dañ ldan pa'i chos smra bar gyur to*. For the stock compound *rig pa dañ grol ba'i spobs pa dañ ldan pa* = *yuktamuktapratibhāna* see Jens Braarvig, “*Dhāraṇī* and *Pratibhāna*: Memory and Eloquence of the Bodhisattvas”, in Vol. 8.1 (1985) of this esteemed journal, pp. 17-29.

⁴⁴ *Las brgya tham pa* (1995) 304.6 (FEER p. 262), *ñā'i ñān thos kyi mdo rnam par 'byed pa rnams kyi mchog*; *Avadānaśataka* II 43.8 *eṣāgrā me bhikṣavo bhikṣuñāṃ mama śrāvīkāñāṃ sūtrāntavibhāgakartrīṇāṃ yaduta kacaṅgalā bhikṣuṇī*. The *Avadāna* spells the name Kacaṅgalā, the Pāli texts Kajaṅgalā (with variants). *Las brgya tham pa* (1995) has *Ka tsañ ka la*.

⁴⁵ Charles WILLEMEN (tr.), *The Storehouse of Sundry Valuables*, Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, Berkeley, 1994 (BDK English Tripitaka 10-I), pp. 20-21. The text dates to Yen-hsing 2 = CE 472.

Tsa-pao-tsang-ching (No. 6)⁴⁵, and *Ratnamālāvadāna* (No. 17). The Theravādin *Etadagga-vagga* does not count Kajaṅgalā among the foremost nuns, but elsewhere in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* she is praised as intelligent and wise by the Buddha for the exposition she gives to the lay-followers of Kajaṅgalā. When the lay-followers relate her talk to the Buddha, the Blessed One states that “if you, householders, came to me and asked about this matter, I would explain it just as it has been explained by the nun Kajaṅgalā. Just that is its meaning: remember it thus”⁴⁶. This, from a Buddha, is high praise indeed. The phrasing is stock, and at least one other nun — the eloquent Dharmadinnā — is praised in similar fashion, as are a number of monks⁴⁷. In the (Mūla-)Sarvāstivādin version the Buddha praises Dharmadinnā to her face: “Excellent (*sādhu*), Dharmadinnā, excellent! Had the lay-follower Saga questioned me about the very same points in the very same phrases and the very same words, I would have explained the very same points in the very same phrases and the very same words, just as [you have] explained”⁴⁸.

Human nature being what it is, we should not expect all learned nuns to be model members of the *saṃgha*. The (Mūla-)Sarvāstivādin *Vinayavibhaṅga* describes Sthūlānandā, a nun known for her greed and inappropriate behaviour, as “one who has heard much [teaching] (*bahuśrutā*), one

⁴⁶ *Aṅguttaranikāya* V 58.21 *sādhu sādhu gahapatayo paṇḍitā gahapatayo kajaṅgalā bhikkhunī, mahāpaññā gahapatayo kajaṅgalā bhikkhunī. sace pi tumhe gahapatayo maṃ upasaṅkamitvā etam atthaṃ puccheyyātha, aham pi c’etaṃ evam eva vyākareyyaṃ, yathā taṃ kajaṅgalāya bhikkhuniyā vyākataṃ. eso c’eva tassa attho, evaṃ ca naṃ dhāreyyātha*. This sutta is the only one listed by MALALASEKERA under Kajaṅgalā (DPPN I 482). AKANUMA (p. 333) does not list any Chinese counterpart.

⁴⁷ For Dharmadinnā see *Majjhimanikāya* I 304.32.

⁴⁸ Śamathadeva, *Abhidharmakośa-upāyikā-tīkā*, Peking Tanjur (Otani Reprint) 5595, Vol. 118, *mñon pa’i bstan bcos tu, 12a7 bcom ldan ’das kyis dge sloṅ ma chos sbyin la ’di skad ces bka’ stsal to. chos sbyin legs so legs so. ña la yañ dge bsñen sa ga don ’di ñid dañ, tshig ’di ñid dañ, yi ge ’di ñid kyi dri ba ’dri na ña yañ don ’di ñid dañ, tshig ’di ñid dañ, yi ge ’di ñid kyis bstan pa bñin du luñ bstan par bya’o*. There are significant differences between the three available versions: the (Mūla-)Sarvāstivādin *Dharmadinnāsūtra* preserved in full citation in Śamathadeva’s anthology, the Chinese translation in the *Madhyamāgama*, and the Pāli counterpart, the *Cūḷavedalla-sutta* (*Majjhimanikāya* 44).

⁴⁹ *Vinayavibhaṅga*, Peking Kanjur 1032, Vol. 43, *’dul ba ñe, 213b4 sbom dga’ mo de mañ du thos pa, sde snod gsum dañ ldan pa, rig pa dañ grol ba’i spobs pa can*; F. Anton von Schiefner, *Tibetan Tales derived from Indian Sources*, tr. from the German into English by W.R.S. RALSTON, repr. Sri Satguru Publications, Delhi, 1988, p. 243.

who has mastered the *Tripīṭaka* (**traipīṭikā*), a coherent and eloquent teacher”⁴⁹. She relates the life of the Bodhisattva from his descent from the Tuṣita Heaven up to his defeat of Māra, in detail and in full, just as taught in the *Abhiniṣkramaṇasūtra*⁵⁰. No matter that she does this for money, to an actor who wants to make a play on the life of the Buddha and who has already been turned away by the monks: the point is she can do it.

Aspiring to be foremost

To attain the position of a foremost disciple, female or male, monastic or lay, is not a casual affair. It involves, first and foremost, an aspiration in the presence of a previous Buddha, followed by a few æons of dedicated practice. The initial aspiration arises when the individual sees a Buddha proclaim one of his disciples to be foremost in a certain quality. The individual then aspires, “Just as so-and-so has been proclaimed, may I in future be proclaimed”. In the context of our study, the important point is that nuns foremost in teaching abilities were held to have been proclaimed foremost in teaching abilities not only under Buddha Śākyamuni, but also under past Buddhas such as Kāśyapa. That is to say, it is a normal state of affairs. The aspiration of Somā is described as follows⁵¹:

The monks asked the Buddha to explain Somā’s past deeds, including why she was able to remember everything she heard and was proclaimed foremost of those who remember what they have heard.

The Blessed One replied, “This has happened by power of aspiration (*praṇidhāna*)”. The monks asked, “Sir, what aspiration did she make?”

The Blessed One replied, “O monks, formerly, in times gone by, in this very same Auspicious Æon (*bhadrakalpa*), when the human life-span was 20,000 years, there arose in the world the Blessed One Kāśyapa — a truly and fully Awakened One, perfect in knowledge and conduct, Well-farer, knower of the world, unsurpassed charioteer of people to be trained, teacher of gods and humankind, Awakened One — and in his teaching (the future Somā) went forth. The truly and fully Awakened One Kāśyapa proclaimed

⁵⁰ *Vinayavibhaṅga*, 213b4-214a1, *des de la ... mñon par byuñ ba'i mdo las rgya cher ji skad gsuñs pa bñin thams cad rgyas par bstan to*; SCHIEFNER p. 243-44.

⁵¹ *Karmaśataka* 30a7.

the preceptress under whom she had gone forth to be foremost of those who remember what they have heard. At the point of death (the future Somā) made the following vow (*praṇidhāna*): “Here I have lived the exalted life under the truly and fully Awakened One Kāśyapa, but I have not attained any special quality (*guṇagaṇa*). Kāśyapa has predicted that the brahman youth Uttara will become a Buddha — may I serve him, may I not miss him, may I go forth in his dispensation!⁵² May I cast off all defilements and realize the state of a worthy one (*arhatva*). And just as Kāśyapa proclaimed my

⁵² The story of Gautama’s past life as the brahman youth Uttara is related in the *Ghaṭikara-sutta* (*Majjhimanikāya* 81), *Bhaiṣajyavastu*, and *Saṅghabhedavastu* (Raniero GNOLI [ed.], *The Gilgit Manuscript of the Saṅghabhedavastu*, Part II, Rome, 1978, II 22-30). The Buddha identifies himself with Uttara at the end of this ancient *jātaka* (p. 30.14): *kiṃ manyadhve bhikṣavaḥ? yo ’sāv uttaro māṇavaḥ aham eva sa tena kālena tena samayena*. The Gilgit manuscript of the Sanskrit *Bhaiṣajyavastu* refers the reader to a *sūtra* version in the *Madhyamāgama*. Ernst WALDSCHMIDT, “Central Asian Sūtra Fragments” (in Heinz BECHERT, ed., *The Language of the Earliest Buddhist Tradition*, Göttingen, 1980, p. 143), gives a brief description of the *Nandīpāla-sūtra* and its parallels. See also Marcel HOFINGER: *Le Congrès du Lac Anavatapta (Vies de Saints Bouddhiques), Extrait du Vinaya des Mūlasarvāstivādin Bhaiṣajyavastu*, II: *Légendes du Bouddha (Budhdhavadāna)* (*Publications de l’Institut Orientaliste de Louvain* 38), Louvain-la-Neuve, 1990, 102-115, “Nandīpāla et Uttara”. For a Lokottaravādin version see E. SÉNART, *Mahāvastu* I (1882), pp. 317 foll., translated J. J. JONES, *The Mahāvastu*, Vol. I, London, 1949 (repr. 1973), pp. 265-285. The *Upāyakaśālya-sūtra* gives a detailed account from a Mahāyāna perspective.

⁵³ *śākyamuniḥ śākyādhirājaḥ*: cp. the *Sukhāvativyūha* in Jérôme DUCOR (ed., tr.), *Le Sūtra d’Amida prêché par le Buddha*, Peter Lang, Bern, 1998, §18, p. 165.15, *bhagavatā śākyamuninā śākyādhirājena*; Tibetan p. 174.19, *bcom ldan ’das śākya thub pa śākya’i rgyal pos*.

⁵⁴ The whole passage is stock: cp. *Saṅghabhedavastu* II 66.29 *bhūtapūrvaṃ bhikṣavo ’sminn eva bhadrake kalpe vimśatīvarṣaśatāyūṣi prajāyāṃ kāśyapo nāma samyaksambuddho loka udapādi vidyācaraṇasaṃpannaḥ yāvad buddho bhagavān ... (67.1) tasyāyaṃ pravacane pravrajītaḥ; tatrāneṇa <na> kaścīd guṇagaṇo ’dhigataḥ; yasya sakāśe pravrajītaḥ sa bhagavatā kāśyapena bahuśrutānāṃ śrutadharāṇāṃ śrutasannicayānām agro vyākṛtaḥ; sa maraṇakālasamaye praṇidhānaṃ karoti: yan mayā bhagavati kāśyape samyaksambuddhe anuttare dakṣiṇīye yāvad āyur brahmacaryaṃ caritam, na ca kaścīd guṇagaṇo ’dhigataḥ, anenāhaṃ kuśalamūlena yo ’sau bhagavatā kāśyapena samyak-sambuddhena uttaro māṇavo vyākṛtaḥ, bhaviṣyasi tvaṃ māṇava varṣaśatāyūṣi prajāyāṃ śākyamunir nāma tathāgato ’rhan samyaksambuddha iti tasyāhaṃ pravacane pravrajya sarvakleśaprahāṇād arhatvaṃ sākṣātkuryām; yathā ca me upādhyāyo (see Gnoli’s n. 2, p. 67) bhagavatā kāśyapena samyaksambuddhena bahuśrutānāṃ śrutadharāṇāṃ śrutasannicayānām agro vyākṛtaḥ, evam mām api sa bhagavān śākyamuniḥ śākyādhirājaḥ bahuśrutānāṃ śrutadharāṇāṃ śrutasannicayānām agro vyākṛtyād iti; tat praṇidhā<na>vaśād etarhi mayā bahuśrutānāṃ śrutadharāṇāṃ śrutasannicayānām agro vyākṛtaḥ. See also *Saṅghabhedavastu* II 3.23-31; 51.29-52.13.*

preceptress to be foremost of those who remember what they hear, so may the Sage of the Śākyas, the King of the Śākyas⁵³, declare me to be foremost of those who remember what they hear⁵⁴.

Similar tales of initial aspiration are told for other nuns (and, of course, monks). One of the most dramatic of the nun's tales is that of Kṛṣṇā Gautamī (sKem mo Gau ta mī), related in the (Mūla-)Sarvāstivādin *Vinaya*, the *Sūtra of the Wise and the Foolish*, and elsewhere⁵⁵. Under Kāśyapa Buddha she vowed to be foremost of the nuns who master the *Vinaya* under the future Buddha Śākyamuni⁵⁶.

Mundane details: teaching, vihāras, and titles

Where and whom did the nuns teach? In some cases they were invited to the homes of lay-followers. *Karmaśataka* No. 36 (*Bag ma gtoñ 2*) relates that on one occasion Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī went to the house of the householder Datta to teach the dharma⁵⁷. When she saw her Bag ma gtoñ was inspired to become a nun herself. In some cases the people went to the nuns. *Karmaśataka* No. 8 (*bDe byed ma*), the story of Kṣemā, states that when Kṣemā grew up she went for refuge, took the precepts, gave alms, and went constantly to the nun's *vihāra* at Śrāvastī to listen to the Dharma⁵⁸. Kajaṅgalā, in the discourse mentioned above, is approached by

⁵⁵ For a summary of the *Vinaya* version see Jampa Losang PANGLUNG, *Die Erzählstoffe des Mūlasarvāstivāda-Vinaya analysiert auf Grund der tibetischen Übersetzung*, The Reiyukai Library, Tokyo, 1981 (Studia Philologica Buddhica III), pp. 194-96.

⁵⁶ *Vinayakṣudrakavastu*, Peking Kanjur (Otani Reprint) 1035, Vol. 44, 'dul ba ne, 128a4 ji ltar bdag gi mkhan mo 'di la bcom ldan 'das 'od sruñ yañ dag par rdzogs pa'i sañs rgyas kyis 'dul ba 'dzin pa'i nañ na mchog tu gsuñs pa de bzin du bdag kyañ bcom ldan 'das sã kya thub pa sã kya'i rgyal po des 'dul ba 'dzin pa'i nañ na mchog tu gsuñs par śog śig. In the Theravādin *Etadagga-vagga* (*Aṅguttaranikāya* I 25) it is Paṭācārā who is declared to be the foremost *vinayadharā*. In fact the narratives of Kṛṣṇā Gautamī, Paṭācārā, and other nuns are conflated in the different sources, and only a full-scale study could hope to disentangle them, or at least lay bare the degree of confusion.

⁵⁷ In *Karmaśataka* there are two stories named Bag ma gtoñ, Nos. 35 and 36. The Sanskrit equivalent of "Bag ma gtoñ" is not clear. FEER (1901) 266-67 reconstructs the title as "Pradeyā-tyāga", but it may well be simply "Āvaha", as given in Tshe riñ dbañ rgyal's lexicon: see Lokesh CHANDRA, *Tibetan-Sanskrit Dictionary*, Supplementary Vol. 5, International Academy of Indian Culture, New Delhi, 1993, p. 1236a.

⁵⁸ *Las brgya tham pa* (1995) 80.5 ... dge sloñ ma'i gtsug lag khañ du yañ rgyun mi 'chad par 'gro žiñ chos ñan to.

the lay-followers of Kajaṅgala, who ask her to explain her a brief teaching of the Buddha in detail. In the sūtra named after her in the Chinese *Madhyamāgama* the famous teacher Dharmadinnā (Pāli Dhammadinnā) teaches the female lay-devotee Visākhā at Anāthapiṇḍada's Pleasance in Prince Jeta's Grove in Śrāvastī⁵⁹. In the Pāli counterpart, the *Cūḷavedalla-sutta*, Dhammadinnā teaches the layman Visākha in the Kalandakanivāpa in the Veḷuvana at Rājagaha.

Anāthapiṇḍada's Pleasance and Kalandakanivāpa were both sites of monastic institutions. It is not clear whether these institutions subsumed nunneries under the same overall name or whether nunneries had separate institutional status and names, except in one case, that of the *bhikṣuṇī-vihāra* named Rājākārāma, near the Jetavana at Śrāvastī, where *Karmaśataka* No. 5 (*sGur bu 2*, the second *Kubjapatra* story), opens⁶⁰. As far as I know this is the only early nunnery known by name⁶¹, and as far as I know it has not been located, even provisionally. How big was it? How was it laid out, how was it endowed? When a nun's *vihāra* at Śrāvastī is mentioned but not named, as for example in the *Dharmadinnāsūtra* or the *avadāna* of Kṣemā, can we assume it was the Rājākārāma? Or were there other nunneries at Śrāvastī? Were at least some nuns' residences were independent? How were they administered? How were they financed or endowed?

The term for nunnery, not only in *Karmaśataka* but elsewhere, is *vihāra* (*gtsug lag khañ*)⁶². The use of this term to describe nunneries as well as the residences of male monastics seems natural enough, but it is not without significance. Another building met with is the *dge sloṅ ma'i dbyar khañ* (= *bhikṣuṇī-harmikā*?), to which Bhadrā resorts in the *Vinayavi-bhaṅga*⁶³. I hope that further study of (Mūla-)Sarvāstivādin literature will lead to the compilation of a glossary of monastic terminology, not only of residences, buildings, and suchlike, but also of hierarchical terms, for,

⁵⁹ Bikṣu THICH MINH CHAU, *The Chinese Madhyama Āgama and the Pāli Majjhima Nikāya, A Comparative Study*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1991, p. 269.

⁶⁰ *Las brgya tham pa* (1995) 51.6, *dge sloṅ ma'i gtsug lag khañ rgyal po'i kun dga' ra ba zes bya ba*.

⁶¹ SKILLING, "A Note on the History of the Bhikkhūnī-saṅgha (II)", p. 30.

⁶² *dge sloṅ ma'i gtsug lag khañ*, at e.g. *Las brgya tham pa* (1995) 179.7 (at Mathurā?); 337.11 (at Śrāvastī); 346.9.

⁶³ Op. cit., *the* 43a3.

of course, monks, nuns, and all monastics. It is noteworthy that nuns are described as “great female auditor” (*ñan thos chen mo* = *mahāśrāvīkā*), counterpart to “great male auditor” (*mahāśrāvaka*), and “female elder” (*gnas brtan ma* = *sthāvīrī*), counterpart to “male elder (*sthavira*)⁶⁴. Another technical title is “preceptress” (*mkhan mo* = *upādhyāyini*)⁶⁵.

An insecure vocation

Whether or not nunneries were within or adjacent to monasteries, the situation of nuns could be precarious. There are accounts of assaults on nunneries launched by bands of males, whether wantons or jilted husbands. In *Karmaśataka* No. 35 (*Bag ma gtoñ 1*) a young girl inclined towards renunciation flees to a nunnery at Śrāvastī to avoid an arranged marriage. There she is initiated into the order and becomes an *arhatī*. The frustrated bridegroom sets out in hot pursuit with a troop of confederates to take her away. He searches the nunnery and then sees the young girl: head-shaven, red-robed, seated cross-legged in *dhyāna*. He attempts to take her hand but she rises up into the air and performs such wonders (of the sort often performed by Pratyeka-buddhas) that she overawes the youth and his gang, who beg her pardon and become stream-winners and then *arhats*.

In *Karmaśataka* No. 36 (*Bag ma gtoñ 2*) a young nun is so beautiful that young men try to abduct her from the nunnery. In the popular tale of Mahākāśyapa and Bhadrā, after Bhadrā has ordained she is kidnapped by a wicked minister and handed over to King Ajātaśatru, who violates her⁶⁶. Clearly the security of nuns was not guaranteed.

⁶⁴ *Las brgya tham pa* (1995) 51.7-8, in the phrase *nyan thos chen mo*, *gnas brtan ma gnas brtan ma rdzu 'phrul thob pa*.

⁶⁵ For terms related to nuns see further SKILLING, “A Note on the History of the Bhikkhunī-saṅgha (II)”.

⁶⁶ SCHIEFNER, op. cit., pp. 204-05; for the Pāli version of the story see PRUITT, *The-rīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā*, 66-74 on the verses of Bhadda Kāpilānī (*The-rīgāthā* 63-66). For the version of the Chinese “Abhiniṣkramaṇasūtra” see Samuel BEAL, *The Romantic Legend of Śākya Buddha*, [London, 1875] Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1985, p. 320. For the *avadāna* of Mahākāśyapa see *Avadāna-kalpalatā of Kṣemendra* (Buddhist Sanskrit Texts 23), Vol. II, Second edition edited by Dr. Sridhar TRIPATHI, Mithila Institute, Darbhanga, 1989, Chap. 63.

The use of formulas

As noted above, the texts under study are highly formulaic: again and again we meet the same phrases, passages, and paragraphs. When a woman requests “going forth” (*pravrajyā*) the formula states that the Blessed One entrusts her to Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī, who performs the ceremony and instructs her⁶⁷. Sometimes the instruction is given by an anonymous preceptress⁶⁸. In one case Mahākāśyapa turns Bhadrā over to Mahāprajāpatī Gautamī who has her go forth and take ordination (*upasampadā*)⁶⁹. It is noteworthy that this formula does not mention the participation of any monks (*bhikṣu*) in the ceremony. This may be a case of abbreviation, as seen also in Pāli texts like the *Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā*, or it may have a greater significance⁷⁰. The *Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā* goes to great length to deny that the “*ehī* ordination” — direct ordination by the Buddha himself — was ever used for nuns, but there is tantalizing evidence to the contrary⁷¹.

Another formula used in the *avadānas* describes the attainment of the state of *arhat* by a nun. It is no different than that used for a monk, and ends with the phrase:

⁶⁷ So for Somā, *Karmaśataka* 30b6 *de nas bcom ldan 'das kyis de skye dgu'i bdag mo chen mo gau ta mi la gtad nas, skye dgu'i bdag mo chen mo gau ta mis der rab tu phyuñ nas, bsñen par rdzogs par byas nas de la luñ phog go*. See also *Las brgya tham pa* (1995) 73, 82, 303.

⁶⁸ *m Khan mo = upādhyāyinī*, *Las brgya tham pa* (1995) 337.12.

⁶⁹ *Bhikṣuñīvinayavibhaṅga*, P 1034, Vol. 43, ‘*dul ba the*, 41b3, *des de skye dgu'i bdag mo chen mo la yoñs su gtad nas des de rab tu phyuñ bsñen par rdzogs par byas so*; cf. SCHIEFNER, *Tibetan Tales*, p. 204.

⁷⁰ *Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā* (PRUITT) 66.35 *aparabhāge Mahāgotamiyā santike pabbajjam upasampadañ ca labhivā*.

⁷¹ The relation between the rules and norms of *Vinaya* and the accounts of ordination in narrative literature — whether in Pāli or Sanskrit, or in Tibetan or Chinese translation — needs to be investigated. For discrepancies in the Pāli versions, see Liz Williams, “A Whisper in the Silence: Nuns before Mahāpajāpatī?”, *Buddhist Studies Review* 17.2 (2000) 167-73.

⁷² See *Las brgya tham pa* (1995) 74.6, 82.16, 179.17, 304.3, 337.15: *dbañ po dañ ñe dbañ dañ bcas pa'i lha rnam kyis mchod ciñ rjed pa dañ gus par smra ba'i gnas su gyur to*. Cf. *Avadānaśataka* (FEER) 14; for the Sanskrit formula see (SPEYER) I 207.13 *sendropen-drānaṃ devānāṃ pūjyo mānyo 'bhivādyaś ca saṃvṛtaḥ*.

⁷³ Kanga TAKAHATA (ed.), *Ratnamālāvadāna: A Garland of Precious Gems or A Collection of Edifying Tales, Told in a Metrical Form, Belonging to the Mahāyāna*, The Toyo Bunko, Tokyo, 1954 (Oriental Library Series D. Volume 3), p. 115.4, of Śuklā.

... she became an object for the offerings, reverence, and respectful speech of the gods with Indra and Upendra⁷².

In the *Ratnamālāvadāna* realized nuns are praised in similar terms⁷³:

*sadevāsuralokānāṃ pūjyā mānyā samantataḥ
vaṃdanīyā cābhitoṣyā ca vabhūva brahmacāriṇī.*

or:

sa devāsuralokānāṃ vaṃdyā pūjyābhavat satī⁷⁴.

Another common formula suggests that for the narrators, or perhaps for the society which produced the *avadānas*, having a female child did not pose a problem. At least in the “good families”, the daughter is cosseted from birth. According to the formula, birth and naming ceremonies (*jātimaha*) are held for the baby girl, who is entrusted to the care of eight nurses made up of four pairs, each pair with a specific duty — two to feed her, two to wash her, and so on. Under this care the little dear flourishes, well-fed with the dairy products so popular in Indian lore, and “blossoms like a lotus in a pond” (*vardhate hradastham iva pañkajaṃ*).

These are formulas, stock passages. Do they have any significance? I believe they do. They have not fallen out of the sky, but were produced by society, by the Buddhist community. They embed and thereby transmit the idea that like a monk a nun can become an *arhat*, and then — just like a monk — deserve the offerings of gods and humans. The formulas are codes or metaphors that express female (and male) potentials.

Envoi

(Mūla-)Sarvāstivādin literature portrays nuns as teachers, some of whom played a significant role in the transmission of the Dharma. I have given only a few samples, collected at random, from a rich source, the *avadāna* literature. There is a great deal more to be learned from this literature not only about the role of nuns, good, bad, and neutral, but also about the

⁷⁴ Ibid., 380.1, of Kṣemā.

⁷⁵ See for example *Peṭakopadesa* 112.2 *buddhānaṃ bhagavantānaṃ sāsaṇaṃ tividhena saṅgahaṃ gacchati, khandhesu dhātūsu āyatanesu ca.*

process of education and training within the community as a whole. Instruction seems to begin with explanation of aggregates, elements, and bases (*skandha-dhātu-āyatana*)⁷⁵. This developed into exegetical traditions, complex Abhidhamma systems, and monastic educational institutions.

Several of the important stories, such as that of Somā, have no counterpart in the literature of the Theravādins of Sri Lanka. What are we to make of this? When we recall the role of Saṃghamittā Therī in the establishment of Buddhism in the Isle of Ceylon, and the explicitly positive image of nuns as teachers presented in the *Dīpavaṃsa*, we cannot say that the role of nuns was ignored in Sri Lanka vis-à-vis North India. But society changes, and what we have, at any rate, are only fragments of history or narrative related to nuns, embedded in records devoted to other subjects. We do not have a “Bhikṣuṇīvaṃsa” or any kind of history devoted to nuns. And I do not think that there ever was, at least after the earliest period, a single or linear history of the nun’s order. The affairs of the *saṃghas*, including the order of nuns, would have evolved differently in different societies and at different times over the vast regions in which the *saṃghas* were established. For as soon as the *saṃgha* spread we must speak of monastic communities, of *saṃghas*, for in the post-Aśokan age there was no central authority. We know so little about the history of these *saṃghas* that it seems audacious to form any general conclusions. We can suggest, on the basis of our fragmentary evidence, that some monastic centres, such as Vallabhī and Nālandā, evolved into great centres of education, and maintained this identity for centuries. In some areas the ascetic forest tradition may have been strong, but since even forest monastics depended on the town for support, they were certainly not uninfluenced by social evolution or upheaval. The *saṃghas* in some areas may have become totally corrupt, with married monks and nuns tilling the soil and engaging in trade⁷⁶. In some areas the *saṃgha* ceased to exist as an institution, and *caityas* and *vihāras* were abandoned. But insofar as monastic orders survived, nuns or female renunciants must have also sur-

⁷⁶ I take the references in Mahāyāna sūtras (for example the *Rāṣṭrapālaparipṛcchā*) and other texts (*Rājatarāṅgiṇī*) to this state of affairs to be more than rhetorical, and believe this happened at a very early date, let us say by the beginning of the Christian Era. It is one of the topics that must be addressed if we are to understand the social history of *saṃghas*.

vived, and our task is to reconstruct, from fragmentary and even contradictory records, at least an outline of a history.