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 āvadānas 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 Therigāthā, is available in several translations, including the meticulously annotated translation by K.R. Norman. The commentary, the Therigāthā-āṭṭhakathā — 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 Pruitt. The fifth chapter of the

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Etadagga-vagga of the Aṅguttara-nikāya and its commentary, long available in roman-script editions, is now supplemented by the publication of the sub-commentary. 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 encyclopaedic Mahābhuddhavamsa, a work composed in Burmese on the basis of Pāli sources, and the composite selections in Nyanaponika Thera and Hellmuth Hecker’s Great Disciples of the Buddha. Another source for narratives about nuns is the Saddharmaratnāvali, a Sinhalese rendition of the Dhammapada-āṭṭhakathā. The short but important Bhikkhunīsamyutta of the Saṃyuttanikāya is available in both a new edition of the Pāli by G.A. Somaratne and a new translation by Bhikkhu Bodhi. Mōhan Wijayaratna has published a study of nuns based on Pāli texts, with an appendix giving the Pāli Bhikkhunī Pātimokkha in roman letters. Wijayaratna also devoted an appendix to nuns in his Buddhist Monastic Life. The Pali Text Society’s new edition with English translation en face of the Theravādin Pātimokkha includes the Bhikkhunī Pātimokkha, and

the Society has also published a study of certain aspects of the nun’s rules\(^\text{11}\).

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 edition\(^\text{12}\). 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-Mahāsāṃghikas 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 HIRAKAWA\(^\text{13}\). Shih Pao-ch’ang’s classical compilation of biographies of sixty-five Chinese nuns, compiled in 516, has been translated by Katherine Anne TSAI\(^\text{14}\). Articles on aspects

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of the nuns’ rules — *Vinaya, Prātimokṣa, Karmavākya* — according to different sources and traditions appear regularly\(^\text{15}\).

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?\(^\text{16}\) Does it not have anything to tell us about nuns? Certainly its *Vinaya* includes sections devoted to nuns — the *Bhikṣunīvibhaṅga, Bhikṣunīprātimokṣa*, 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 information\(^\text{17}\). Yet for the most part they have been ignored\(^\text{18}\).


\(^{16}\) 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.), *Vividharatnakaranaṇḍaka, 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 Avadānakātaka and Karmaśataka. The first was translated into French by Feer in 1891 and edited in Sanskrit by Speyer between 1906 and 1909; the second was studied and summarized by Feer in 1901. But they have not received much attention, perhaps in part because they have been treated as fables, as moral tales devoid of historicity.

Avadānakātaka and Karmaśataka

The Avadānakātaka 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 Avadānakātaka 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’ien, and into Tibetan by Jinamitra and Devacandra in


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 (Sūramgamasamādhisūtra), Brussels, 1975, pp. 74-79; Sūramgamasamādhisūtra: 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 Mülakośa and gNags Jñānakumāra reported to date to the reign of Khri lde gtsug brtan (first half of the 8th century). The Sanskrit does not survive — so far as I know not even any fragments have been found — and there is no Chinese translation.

Accounts of the suppression of monastic Buddhism in Tibet by King Glaṅ 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 Glaṅ dar ma, fled to Eastern Tibet (Khams) taking with him the *Abhidharmasamuccaya*, the *Vinaya Prabhāvatī*, and the *Karmaśataka*. 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.” 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

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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 sJon mi rīgs dpe skrun khaṅ, 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*, 2867-31a3 (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.


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 texts. 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 Era. 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 Kśemā and Virūpā, while the stock avadāna verse na praṇāśyanti karmāṇi, kalpakōṭiṣatair 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”.

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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 Śākyan, and of the famous Anāthapiṇḍada. The young exception is a dancer, and the one who is not young is a decrepit slave.28

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 case 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 Muktā (No. 7) was born with a string of pearls wrapped about her head.29 (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 Vipaśyin; Śuklā had offered kathina robes to the past Buddha Kāśyapa and his following; Muktā 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 articles\textsuperscript{30}. 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 Anguttaranikāya, which lists forty-three monks, thirteen nuns, ten laymen, and ten laywomen\textsuperscript{31}. 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, kṛtapuṇyānām);
- Somā in having heard much and in retaining what she has heard (22.4, bahuṣrutānāṃ śrutadhārīnām);
- Kacāngalā in analysis of Sūtrānta (43.8, sūtrāntavibhāgakartrīnām);
- Kṣemā in great wisdom and great eloquence (50.9, mahāprājñānāṃ mahāpratibhānānāṃ).

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\textsuperscript{32}. This is Kṣemā, equivalent to the Kṣemā of the Avadānaśataka, who in the Etadagga-vagga is declared foremost in having great wisdom (mahāpaññānāṃ), just as in the Avadānaśataka. The other two nuns are not listed in the


\textsuperscript{31} Anguttaranikāya I 23-26. The two laymen Tapassu-Bhallikā are counted as one.

\textsuperscript{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, DPPP 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 [vinayadharānaṁ], and Dhammadinnā, foremost in preaching [dhammakathikānaṁ]).

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 details. 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 Śrāvasti. 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 home. Later she heard that Śrāmaṇa Gautama was staying in Śrāvasti 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 exper-

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33 Karmaśataka, Derge Kanjur 340, mdo sde a, 28b7-31a3 (summary in Zhe chen ’gyur med Padma mam rgyal, mDo las byuṅ ba’i gtam rgyud sna tshogs, Kruṅ go’i bod kyi šes rig dpe skrun khaṅ, 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 (viṃśatishikharasamudgaṇatam 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 (brahmaçaryā) 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: saṁs rgyas bcom ldan ’das rnams ni tshig re re nas zlos śiṅ chos gsums mi srid de, de’i skabs med do. Avadāṇaśataka 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 bhikṣunyas tathāgatā arhantaḥ samyaksambuddhāḥ padaśo dharmam uddhiṣṭaḥ). The only other known usage of padaśo dharmam + verb is in a Prātimokṣa rule: Sarvāstivāda pātayanti kā no. 6, yaḥ punar bhikṣur anupasampannena purṇaṃ padaśo dharmam uddhiṣṭaḥ vācayet pātayanti (Georg von Simson, Prātimokṣasūtra der Sarvāstivādin, Teil II, Vandehoeck & Ruprecht in Göttingen, 2000 (Sanskrittexte aus den Turfanfunden XL), p. 205, tr. p. “Wenn ein Mönch mit einer nichtordinierten Person zusammen die Lehre Wort für Wort rezitiert, dann ist es ein Pātayanti-Vergehen”. The rule is no. 6 in the Tibetan Mūlasarvāstivādin Prātimokṣa, yaḥ dge sloṅ gah, gah zag bṣiṅen par ma rdzogs par pa daṅ tshig gis choṅ don na lhuṅ 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 Pātimokkhā the rule is no. 4, yo pana bhikkhu anupasampannanti padaśo dharmam ti vāceyya, pācittiyaḥ,
to the monks but has not expounded it to the nuns. I request the Blessed One to teach the Prātimokṣastra. 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 Mahāprajāpatī 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 Prātimokṣastra. I will remember it after a single recitation.”38 Then the Blessed One expounded the Prātimokṣastra 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 Bhikkhuni-samyutta 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 Avadānasataka II 19.8 padaśo vyākaraṇaḥ or (from SPEYER’S n. 2) Divyavadāna 619.24 padaśo vaiyākaraṇaḥ.

37 Karmasataka 30a4 kye gau ta mī gal te lan cīg smraṇas pas ’dzin nus na ni bstan par bya’o; Avadānasataka II 21 ult yadi yuṣmākaṇī kācīd uccahate saṃkṛd utkāṃ dhārayitum evam aham uddhīsyaṃ.
38 Karmasataka 30a5 lan cīg bka’ stsaḷ pās, bdag gis gzuṅ bār ’tsal lo; Avadānasataka II 22.3 ahaṃ sakṛd utkāṃ dhārayiṣye.
39 Avadānasataka stops with the Prātimokṣastra, and does not mention the Three Piṭakas or “verses” (tshig su bya ba).
and her past life is told in the commentaries\textsuperscript{40}. But as noted above she is not among the thirteen nuns singled out for their outstanding achievements in the \textit{Etadagga-vagga}\textsuperscript{41}. The story of the transmission of the \textit{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 \textit{Prātimokṣa} to \textit{sīkṣādatta-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 \textit{Prātimokṣa} to a \textit{sīkṣādatta-śrāmaṇerī}\textsuperscript{42}.

\textbf{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 \textit{Prātimokṣa} to the sisters. Another nun who transmitted the teaching is Kāśī-Śundarī. In a past life, Kāśī-Śundarī built a vihāra perfect in every way and donated it to Kāśyapa Buddha and the bhikṣu-sāṅgha. She offered all requisites to the monks (bhikṣu), requested permission from her parents, and went forth. Having studied the \textit{Tripiṭaka}, she became a coherent and eloquent teacher of the Dharma\textsuperscript{43}.

Kacāngalā, as seen above, was foremost in analysis of the sūtras\textsuperscript{44}. Her story is told in the \textit{Karmaśataka} (No. 33), \textit{Avadāṇaśataka} (No. 73),

\textsuperscript{40} Shayne Clarke, “The Existence of the Supposedly Non-existent \textit{Sīkṣādattā-śrāmaṇerī}: A New Perspective on \textit{Pārajika Penance}”, \textit{Buddhist Studies} (Bukkyō Kenkyū) XXIX (March, 2000), pp. 163-64.

\textsuperscript{41} Las brgya tham pa (1995), p. 76.1 de rab tu byaṅ nas sde snod gsum bslabs te rig pa daṅ grot ba’i spobs pa daṅ ldan pa’i chos smra bar gyur to. For the stock compound rig pa daṅ grot ba’i spobs pa daṅ ldan pa = yuktamuktapratibhāna see Jens Braarvig, “Dhāranī and Pratibhāna: Memory and Eloquence of the Bodhisattvas”, in Vol. 8.1 (1985) of this esteemed journal, pp. 17-29.

\textsuperscript{42} Las brgya tham pa (1995) 304.6 (FEER p. 262), ṇa’i ŋan thos kyi mdo rnam par ’byed pa rnam kyi mchog; \textit{Avadāṇaśataka} II 43.8 esāgrā me bhikṣavo bhikṣunānāṃ mama śrāvikānāṃ sūtrāntavibhāgakartrīṇāṃ yaduta kacāngalā bhikṣunī. The \textit{Avadāṇa} spells the name Kacāngalā, the Pāli texts Kajāngalā (with variants). Las brgya tham pa (1995) has Ka tsan ka la.

This sutta is the only one listed by M. ALALASEKERA under Kaja n gal (DPPN I 482). AKANUMA (p. 333) does not list any Chinese counterpart.

47 For Dhammadinn a see Majjhimanik aya I 304.32.

48 Samathadeva, Abhidharmakośa-upāyikā-tīkā, Peking Tanjur (Otani Reprint) 5595, Vol. 118, mṇon pa'i bstan bcos tu, 12a7 bcom ldan 'das kyi ḡe sleñ ma chos sbyin la 'di skad ces bka' ssa tu, chos sbyin legs so legs so, ḡa la yān ḡe bsñen sa ga don 'di niñ dañ, tshig 'di niñ dañ, yi ge 'di niñ kyi dri ba 'dri na ḡa yān don 'di niñ dañ, tshig 'di niñ dañ, yi ge 'di niñ kyi don pa bzin du luñ bstan par bya’o. There are significant differences between the three available versions: the (Mūla-)Sarvāstivāda Vinayavinibhaṅga describes Sthūlānandā, a nun known for her greed and inappropriate behaviour, as “one who has heard much [teaching] (bahuṣrutā), one

46 Aṅguttaranikāya V 58.21 sādhu sādhu gahapatayo. paññātā gahapatayo kajaṅgalā bhikkhuṇī, mahāpañña gahapatayo kajaṅgalā bhikkhuṇī. sace pi tumhe gahapatayo maṃ upasāṅkaṃiti ētam atthām puccheyyātha, ahām pi c’etaṃ evam eva vaṅkareyyaṃ, yathā taṃ kajaṅgalāya bhikkhuṇīyā vaṅkataṃ. eso c’eva tassa attho, evañ ca na ḍhāreyya ṭa.

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

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⁴⁹ *Vinayavibhaṅga*, 213b4-214a1, *des de la …mñon par byuṅ ba’i mdo las rgya cher ji skad gsuṅs pa bzìn thams cad rgyas par bstan to*; SCHIEFNER p. 243-44.
⁵¹ *Karmaśātaṭaka* 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 (praṇīdhāna): “Here I have lived the exalted life under the truly and fully Awakened One Kāśyapa, but I have not attained any special quality (gunaṇaṇa). 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! May I cast off all defilements and realize the state of a worthy one (arhatva). And just as Kāśyapa proclaimed my


54 The whole passage is stock: cp. Saṅghabhedavastu II 66.29 bhūtāparyvāṇo bhikṣavo ’sminn eva bhakrakhe kalpe vinivāstvarṣaṣātāyūṣi prajāyām kāsyapec nāma samyaksambuddho loka udāpādi vidyācaranasaṃpannah āyavad buddho bhagavān ... (67.1) tāṣāyaṃ pravacane pravrajitaḥ; tatrātana <na> kaścid guṇaṇaṇo ’dhigataḥ; yasya sakāsē pravrajitaḥ sa bhagavatā kāṣyapena bahuṣrutāṇāṁ śrutadharāṇāṁ śrutasanniccayānāṁ agro vyākṛtaḥ; sa maraṇakālasamaye praṇīdhānaṁ karoṭi: yan mayā bhagavatā kāṣyape samyaksambuddhe anuttare daksinīye āyav āyur brahmacaryena caritam, na ca kaścid guṇaṇaṇo ’dhigataḥ, anenaḥma kuśalamālāna yuṣu bhuṣagavatā kāṣyapena samyaksambuddhe uttaro māṇavo vyākṛtaḥ, bhavīṣyati tvaṃ māṇava varṣaṣātāyūṣi prajāyāṃ śākyamunī nāma tathāgaṭo ’rhan samyaksambuddha iti tāṣāyaṃ pravacane pravrajya sarvaklesaprahāṇūd arhatvam śākṣātākyūram; yathā ca me upādhyāya (see GNOLI’s n. 2, p. 67) bhagavatā kāṣyapena samyaksambuddhe bahuṣrutāṇāṁ śrutadharāṇāṁ śrutasanniccayānāṁ agro vyākṛtaḥ, evam mām api sa bhagavān śākyamunīḥ śākyādhīrājāḥ bahuṣrutāṇāṁ śrutadharāṇāṁ śrutasanniccayānāṁ agro vyākuryād iti; tat praṇīdhā<na>-vaśāḥ etarhi mayā bahuṣrutāṇāṁ śrutadharāṇāṁ śrutasanniccayānāṁ 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 Śākyas, declare me to be foremost of those who remember what they hear.

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 Kṛṣṇa Gautamī (ŚKem mo Gau ta mī), related in the (Mūla-)Sarvāstivādin Vinaya, the Sūtra of the Wise and the Foolish, and elsewhere. Under Kāśyapa Buddha she vowed to be foremost of the nuns who master the Vinaya under the future Buddha Śākyamuni.

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 gtoṇ 2) relates that on one occasion Mahāprajāpātī Gautamī went to the house of the householder Datta to teach the dharma. When she saw her Bag ma gtoṇ 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 Śrāvasī to listen to the Dharma.

Kajāṅgalā, in the discourse mentioned above, is approached by...
of Kajangala, 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 Viśākhā at Anāthapiṇḍada’s Pleasance in Prince Jeta’s Grove in Śrāvastī. In the Pāli counterpart, the Culavedallasutta, Dhammadinnā teaches the layman Viśāka in the Kalandakaṇīvāpa in the Veḷuvana at Rājagaha.

Anāthapiṇḍada’s Pleasance and Kalandakaṇīvāpa 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 Rājakārāma, near the Jetavana at Śrāvastī, where Karmaśatakā No. 5 (sGur bu 2, the second Kubjapatrā story), opens. As far as I know this is the only early nunnery known by name, 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 Dhammadinnāsūtra or the avadāna of Kṣemā, can we assume it was the Rājakārāma? 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 Karmaśatakā but elsewhere, is vihāra (gtsug lag khaṅ). 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 khaṅ (= bhikṣuṇī-harmikā?), to which Bhadrā resorts in the Vinayavibhaṅga. 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,
of course, monks, nuns, and all monastics. It is noteworthy that nuns are described as “great female auditor” (ñan thos chen mo = mahāśrāvikā), counterpart to “great male auditor” (mahāśravaka), and “female elder” (gnas brtan ma = sthāvirī), counterpart to “male elder (sthavira)⁶⁴. Another technical title is “preceptress” (mkhan mo = upādhyāyini)⁶⁵.

An insecure vocation

Whether or not nunneryes 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 gtoṅ 1) a young girl inclined towards renunciation flees to a nunery at Śrāvastī to avoid an arranged marriage. There she is initiated into the order and becomes an arhati. The frustrated bridegroom sets out in hot pursuit with a troop of confederates to take her away. He searches the nunery 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 gtoṅ 2) a young nun is so beautiful that young men try to abduct her from the nunery. In the popular tale of Mahākāśyapa and Bhadrā, after Bhadrā has ordained she is kidnapped by a wicked minister and handed over to King Ajātashatru, 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)”.
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 Mahāprajāpati Gautamī, who performs the ceremony and instructs her. Sometimes the instruction is given by an anonymous preceptress. In one case Mahākāśyapa turns Bhadrā over to Mahāprajāpati Gautamī who has her go forth and take ordination (upasampadā). 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-āṭṭhakathā, or it may have a greater significance. The Therīgāthā-āṭṭhakathā goes to great length to deny that the “ehi ordination” — direct ordination by the Buddha himself — was ever used for nuns, but there is tantalizing evidence to the contrary.

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:

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67 So for Somā, Karuṣatāka 30b6 de nas bcom ldan ’das kyis de skye dgu’i bdag mo chen mo gau ta mi la gth nas, skye dgu’i bdag mo chen mo gau ta mīs der rab tu phyǔn nas, bsñen par rdzogs par byas nas de la luṅ phog go. See also Las brgya tham pa (1995) 73, 82, 303.


69 Bhikṣuṇīvinayavibhāṅga, P 1034, Vol. 43, ‘dul ba the, 41b3, des de skye dgu’i bdag mo chen mo la yoḥs su gth nas des de rab tu phyǔn bsñen par rdzogs par byas so; cf. SCHIEFNER, Tibetan Tales, p. 204.

70 Therīgāthā-āṭṭhakathā (PRUITT) 66.35 aparabhāga Mahāgotamiyā santike pabbajjaṁ upasampadaṁ ca labhītavā.

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: dبا이나 po dañ ne dbañ dañ bcas pa’i lha rnams kyis mchod cih rjed pa dañ guṣ par smra ba’i gnas su gyur to. Cf. Avadāṇāsataka (FEER) 14; for the Sanskrit formula see (SPYEYER) I 207.13 sendropendraṇām devānāṃ piyō māṇyo ‘bhivādyāsa ca saṃvrtaḥ.

… she became an object for the offerings, reverence, and respectful speech of the gods with Indra and Upendra. In the Ratnamālavadāna realized nuns are praised in similar terms:

\[sadevāsuralokānāṃ pūjā mānyā samantataḥ vaṃdaniyā cābhitosyā ca vabhūva brahmacarīṇī.\]

or:

\[sa devāsuralokānāṃ vaṃdyā pūjābhavat sat.\]

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 paṁkajāṇi).

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

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74 Ibid., 380.1, of Kṣemā.
75 See for example Petakopadesa 112.2 buddhānaṃ bhagavantānaṃ sāsanaṃ tividhena saṅgahaṃ gacchatī, khandhesu dhūtāsu 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 Tabropane, 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 “Bhiṅśaṃvaṃsa” or any kind of history devoted to nuns. And I do not think that there ever was, at least after the earlist 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 trade\(^76\). 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 Rāṣṭrapālaparipraccchā) and other texts (Rājatarāṅginī) 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.