

# Zhao Hui (1957- )

## *An Innovative and Reforming Taiwanese Bhikkhuni*

by Dr. William Chu



For many Western female monastic aspirants, the Taiwanese Bhikkhuni Zhao Hui (1957-) is an obscure figure who has otherwise been a long-time vocal advocate for women's rights in Buddhism, including the abolition of the Eight Weighty/Special Precepts (gurudharmas Sanskrit, garudhammas Pali) that all Mahayana nuns are expected to observe in their relationship with monks. She has inspired a number of Taiwanese Buddhist organizations to conduct bhikkhuni ordinations without using the gurudharmas. For the sake of clarification, it is important to note that the gurudharmas are not a part of Theravada bhikkhuni ordination.<sup>1</sup>

Born in Burma and emigrated to Taiwan at the age of ten, she was ordained in her college years by Yin Shun (1906-2005), the abbot of Huiji Lecture Hall (Huiji Jiangtang) until his final years. Her ordination master, Yin Shun, was one of the most erudite and influential Chinese Buddhist monastics of modern times. Much of Zhao Hui's scholarship and reform ideas were inspired by him. Active in both Buddhist and secular reform movements, Zhao Hui has championed various causes by issuing exceptionally prolific corpus of twenty-five books and more than forty articles, lecturing and teaching at a number of Taiwanese colleges and seminaries, and undertaking public actions some considered to be provocative such as fasting to protest the removal of a Buddhist icon from a municipal park in Taipei, petitioning former Taiwan President Chen Shuibian to issue a declaration making the Buddha's birthday a national holiday (as

he had done earlier for Christmas), and carrying out intense debates with politicians against the euthanization of stray animals. She is currently Leading Dharma Master (zhidao fashi) at the Buddhist Hongshi College in Taoyuan, a Buddhist seminary she helped found in 1993.

Zhao Hui has been an avid proponent for the revival of the bhikkhuni lineage wherever it has died out (Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos) or where it never has been established (Tibet, Mongolia, and the Himalayan Kingdoms). She is also one of the key architects in Chinese-speaking circles of Buddhist reforms to address gender inequality issues. Many of her works focus on advancing scriptural and scholarly arguments for the full re-establishment of bhikkhuni lineage everywhere and against subjecting female monastics to the gurudharmas.

Regarding monastic precepts in general, Zhao Hui understands them as serving the purpose of dealing with specific situations and conditions rather than being moral or inviolable absolutes. She attempts to demystify the Vinaya—the monastic codes of discipline (which includes precepts, ordination rites, confession rites, and commentaries)—by emphasizing the historical, evolutionary, condition-specific nature of its development. She maintains that many of the Vinaya precepts were established after the Parinirvana of the Buddha, rather than during his lifetime. She also maintains that the Vinaya contains procedures by which qualified monastics may carry out their revision to address issues arising in different situations and

localities. She often quotes Yin Shun on this issue:

“Many regulations in the [earliest] Saṅgha went through the process of initially being abolished (kai) and then re-established (zhi), only to be re-established and abolished several more times. After the Buddha’s demise, his disciples developed mutually and significantly different monastic regulations in accordance to their different ideologies and locations. Some were more rigorous and conservative and developed a fastidious style... Some valued liberality and gave rise to something more expedient in nature... In conclusion, as Buddhist ideas and institutions are transmitted throughout the world, they cannot but be subject to the law of change.”<sup>2</sup>

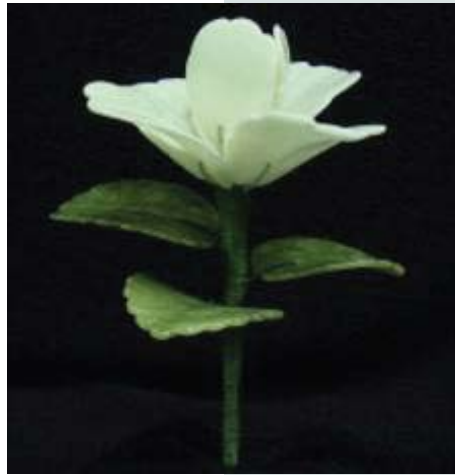
Following Yin Shun’s example, Zhao Hui cites the Four-Part Vinaya (the Chinese Sifenlü) in stating what she considers the six foremost reasons (artha—benefits) for the Vinaya’s creation: the Vinaya is meant to lead to “[communal] harmony, blissful [dwelling/peaceful settlement of the clerics], purification [of morality], edification [of lay people], [personal] realization [of the stopping of effluents/outflows], and the ultimate goal [of making Buddhадharma endure in the world].”<sup>3</sup> As charters of the monastic constitution, these six reasons were understood by her as exhaustively encompassing the intended purposes of all meaningful monastic regulations.

In her lectures, Zhao Hui often follows an argument originally advanced by her teacher Yin Shun: considering the Buddha’s caution against attachment to rituals and moral injunctions that are irrelevant to personal and communal

ability, and pragmatism of the Vinaya, but also that it is the Saṅgha’s obligation to continuously revise the Vinaya through proper procedures as conditions change. In other words, the implication of Zhao Hui’s arguments is that the Vinaya is no longer a static but dynamic vehicle through which all qualified monastic members can perpetually review and revise the Vinaya. All ordained community members enjoy this right, and are enjoined to see that it is their duty, to oversee the wholesome evolution of the Saṅgha.<sup>5</sup>

Zhao Hui argues against the reactionary insistence on preserving the Vinaya as it is, in other words, “not establishing those rules which the Buddha did not establish in the first place, and not abandoning those rules the Buddha had elected.”<sup>5</sup> She believes that blind conformity to ossified conventions would defeat the initial purpose of the Vinaya’s creation, which was first and foremost “to ensure the long survival of the Buddhадharma in the world.”<sup>7</sup>

Zhao Hui’s Vinaya scholarship primarily gears towards the abolition of the gurudharma. The gurudharmas are an addendum that bhikkunis are supposedly required to follow in addition to the Bhikkhuni precepts. Tradition has it that the gurudharmas were created in response to admitting Mahāprajāpatī, the first bhikkhuni-aspirant, into the monastic community. All other women who subsequently joined the Saṅgha would also be required to follow these rules, or so insist some traditions. Zhao Hui uses very strong language by referring to these gurudharmas as “unequal treat-



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amelioration (śīlavrataparāmarṣa), all valid precepts of clerical moral training must be designed to conform to these six guiding principles. In other words, individual precepts should theoretically serve as vehicles for bringing about the stated goals of the Vinaya rather than as inherently inviolable dogmas. If they are not conducive to the benefits of the monastic community and are blindly and inflexibly followed, then these so-called precepts would degenerate into meaningless, ritualistic behavior.<sup>4</sup>

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ties” (bu pingdeng tiaoyue). Similarly, they are increasingly deemed objectionable by nuns everywhere.<sup>8</sup>

The gurudharmas have been described as “a covenant containing eight articles that subordinates nuns to monks,” and thus compels all nuns to “recognize the monks’ overriding leadership,” whether it is justified and deserved or not.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, not all recensions of the Vinaya contain or refer to the gurudharmas. The Vibhajyavāda and the Sarvāstivāda recensions of the Vinaya maintain that the gurudharmas were



the indispensable prerequisites for any woman to receive full ordination, while the Mahāsaṅghika and the Sammitiya versions fail to make any mention of them at all.<sup>10</sup> To Yin Shun and Zhao Hui, this lack of consensus—this discrepancy between different versions of the Vinaya—implies the problematic status of the gurudharmas.<sup>11</sup>

Now let us turn to the gurudharmas themselves. They are: (1) women are required to receive full ordination by both the bhikkhu and bhikkhuni assemblies (in contrast to men receiving it only once from the bhikkhu assembly); (2) nuns are required every half month to request instructions from monks and report the results of their poṣadha, or confession rite, to them;<sup>12</sup> (3) nuns should not dwell in a place without access to monks during the three-month rainy-season retreat (vārsika) in order that they may benefit from the monks' supervision and instruction; (4) after the rainy season retreat, nuns are required to perform pravāraṇā (the reporting of one's misdeeds) to both the bhikkhu and bhikkhuni assemblies (in contrast to monks performing this once to their own assembly); (5) even a nun with a century's seniority (C. shouju baisui) should properly venerate, salute, prostrate to a newly ordained monk with but one day in robes (in contrast to monks showing deference strictly by seniority alone); (6) a nun should not abuse or revile a monk; (7) a nun should not point out any infraction committed by a monk (in contrast to monks being obliged to perform such mutual inspection in a dutiful and forthright manner); (8) failure to comply to any of the gurudharmas should result in the punishment of "mānatva" (probation with penance for a period of two months to be overseen by both Assemblies).

Zhao Hui finds the last four of the gurudharmas to be the most objectionable. Given that they are worded quite differently in different recensions, she surmises that they were added at a later date than the first four. While the first four are allegedly intended to protect and assist nuns in the pre-modern environment where many might be hostile to their newly created community, Zhao Hui argues, the last four are more debilitating and subjugating to women.<sup>13</sup>

In addressing the fifth rule, Zhao Hui complains that it is contrary to the Buddha's spirit of offering reverence to people according to their virtues and conduct rather than to their backgrounds or inborn traits.<sup>14</sup> The sixth rule is moot, too. The Vinaya clearly states that Buddhist clerics are refrained from scolding anyone to begin with—the inclusion of an additional proscription against nuns scolding monks is redundant and unnecessarily discriminatory.<sup>15</sup>

Zhao Hui finds the seventh rule particularly preposterous. It is vital for monastic peers to point out each other's errors during precept-recitation regardless of gender—such candid and mutually helpful behavior goes a long way to ensure the community's purity.<sup>16</sup> Even lay women, Zhao Hui exclaims,

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are allowed to point out monk's infractions according to some sources, but with this gurudharma rule, somehow nuns are less eligible than lay women to perform this vital function?<sup>17</sup> She cites the example of, again, Mahāprajāpatī, who on one occasion did point out some monks' improper behavior and reported them to the Buddha. In doing so, Mahāprajāpatī was apparently breaching the seventh rule, which was that a nun could not point out an infraction made by a monk. Zhao Hui interprets this incident as proof that even this pre-eminent nun did not bother to adhere to the gurudharmas. Further, Zhao Hui argues that instead of criticizing Mahāprajāpatī for not observing the gurudharmas, the Buddha rebuked those monks who acted in a conceited manner.<sup>18</sup>

In this case, story of the Buddha's response shows that he clearly sided with the person in the right rather than making any fuss about Mahāprajāpatī's failure to adhere to the seventh rule of the gurudharma. Zhao Hui infers that this particular rule was therefore not laid down by the Buddha himself, since the Buddha apparently did not stop Mahāprajāpatī from performing an otherwise perfectly permissible, if not encouraged, duty to admonish and counsel one's monastic peers, regardless their gender.<sup>19</sup>

In regard to the eighth gurudharma, which spells out the punishment for not properly observing all eight rules of the gurudharmas, Zhao Hui agrees with Yin Shun that the specified punishment is excessively harsh. For a senior nun to, say, fail to stand up and properly pay homage to an incoming male novice (which constitutes the breaking of the fifth gurudharma) and be punished for two months in both assemblies is definitely unreasonable and difficult to implement.<sup>20</sup>

Zhao Hui's effort on this issue—which expands upon Yin Shun's enormous legacy—has contributed to changing trends on the island. The four largest Buddhist organizations in Taiwan—Foguangshan, Ciji, Zhongtai, and Dharma Drum—have



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all virtually done away with the gurudharmas in their ordinations. These organizations have also uniformly indicated sympathy to foreign bhikkhuni-aspirants who struggle with gaining recognition of their full monastic status—their sympathy is evidenced by their willing ordination of foreign nuns with that unique quandary, and by their numerous public announcements and publications stating their position on the issue. Also, a panel was held in Taiwan in 2002 to discuss the abolition of the gurudharmas. Some of the most prominent Buddhist leaders on the island, including those of the four major organizations, participated and decided that it was “resolved” that the efforts should be made to re-establish the Bhikkhuni Sangha everywhere, that such efforts are completely justifiable and legitimate, and that the gurudharmas should be formally stricken from the ordination ceremony.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Though not a part of Theravada bhikkhuni ordination, all but three of the garudhammas do appear in the Theravada Vinaya but as mere Pacittiya/Expiation rules which only require a private confession to another bhikkhuni to clear a bhikkhuni of the offense. The garudhammas and their equivalent Pacittiyas are: Bhi Pac 56 = Gar 2; Bhi Pac 59 = Gar 3; Bhi Pac 57 = Gar 4; Bhi Pac 63 = Gar 6 (though not identical); and Bhi Pac 52 = Gar 7. The rules lacking a matching Pacittiya are Gar Nos. 1, 5, and 8.

<sup>2</sup>Yifofa yanjiu fofa, p. 3-5

<sup>3</sup>The six reasons were deduced from the ten listed in T22.570c. Cited in Yuanshi fojiao shengdian zhi jicheng, p. 194-205

<sup>4</sup>The six reasons were deduced from the ten listed in T22.570c. Cited in Yuanshi fojiao shengdian zhi jicheng, p. 194-205

<sup>5</sup>Lüxue jinquan, p. 10; see also p. 362

<sup>6</sup>T22.967b

<sup>7</sup>See T22.1015a;

<sup>8</sup>Lüxue jinquan, p. 352.

<sup>9</sup>Yuanshi fojiao shengdian zhi jicheng, p. 402.

<sup>10</sup>Yuanshi fojiao shengdian zhi jicheng, p. 407

<sup>11</sup>Yuanshi fojiao shengdian zhi jicheng, p. 407.

<sup>12</sup>However, Nancy Barnes describes this rule as “Every half month the bhikkhuni must ask the bhikshu saṅgha when a monk will be sent to give them the exhortation to keep the eight rules and when the Uposatha ceremony should be performed”). See Barnes, “Buddhist Women and the Nuns’ Order in Asia,” in *Engaged Buddhism*, p. 261.

<sup>13</sup>Lüxue jinquan, p. 360-361

<sup>14</sup>Lüxue jinquan, p. 360-361

<sup>15</sup>Lüxue jinquan, p. 360-361

<sup>16</sup>Lüxue jinquan, p. 360-361

<sup>17</sup>Lüxue jinquan, p. 360-361

<sup>18</sup>T22.648. Cited in Zhao Hui. Lüxue jinquan, p. 360.

<sup>19</sup>Zhao Hui. Lüxue jinquan, p. 360.

<sup>20</sup>Zhaohui. Lüxue jinquan, p. 371-372

<sup>21</sup>Taiwan Ribao (Chinese L.A. Daily News), April, 21, 2002, p. A12