

Reading Slowly

A Festschrift for Jens E. Braarvig

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Translation and Transcreation: Monastic Practice in Transcultural Settings

Ute Hüsken (Heidelberg University)

Introduction¹

This essay on “translation and transcreation” addresses one of Jens Braarvig’s passions: translations, and how they work—or fail to work. I happily dedicate this piece to him, in deep gratitude for his friendship and collegiality.

This chapter looks at the relationship of text and practice in the process of the establishment of Theravāda nuns’ communities (*bhikkhunīsaṅgha*) in Europe and the USA.² In this process not only linguistic gaps are to be bridged. I will point out some ways in which the translation of text into practice in this context necessarily encompasses processes of transformation, or *transcreation*.

Importantly, transcreation takes place already when a text is edited (Silk 2013/14 [2015]), or when it is translated from one language into another.³ One example relevant in our context is the translation of the term *bhikkhunī*. In the Pāli texts *bhikkhunī* designates a woman who has undergone the monastic ceremony of “full ordination” (*upasampadā*).⁴ In academic English writing *bhikkhunī* is often translated as “nun”. This and other English terms were coined by the early translators (Rhys Davids, Oldenberg, Burnouf) from the late 19th century onwards, for whom Christian concepts and terminology were major reference points. These early translations have since been widely used in Buddhist studies written in English—perpetuating and coining a language which one might call Buddhist Hybrid English. However, many contemporary Theravāda *bhikkhus*, *bhikkhunīs* and laypeople object to the use of the English term “nun” and prefer—when using English—“monastic”, “female monk”, “woman monk” or “lady monk” instead, since for them “nun” triggers notions of Catholic women who are not ordained as priests. However, for

1 I would like to thank Saphinaz Naguib (Oslo), Petra Kieffer-Pülz (Weimar), Ayyā Tathālokā (Dhammadharini, California), Ayyā Sucintā (Anenja Vihara, Germany), Ayyā Sudhammā (Charlotte, South Carolina) and Ayyā Dhammadinnā (Dharma Drum Institute of Liberal Arts, Taiwan) for valuable input on earlier versions of this paper.

2 In this article, I mainly draw from my recent work with Buddhist *bhikkhunīs*’ communities in California, in North and South Carolina, and in Germany.

3 Spivak (2010, 64) even claims that any attempt to communicate requires a process of translation.

4 The term for a man after “full ordination” is *bhikkhu*.

example in Thailand the English term “lady monk” is used for *bhikkhunīs*, whereas “nun” is used as a generic term covering both *bhikkhunīs* and Buddhist ascetic women, who are not fully ordained. These latter women (*mae chi* in Thai) do not undergo “full ordination”, yet live ascetic lives, wearing a white robe and shaving their heads (Collins and McDaniel 2010). In English academic writing concerned with Vinaya issues, these women need to be distinguished from those women who have in fact undergone full ordination (see Hüsken and Kieffer-Pülz 2012, 257). In short, the terminology felt to be appropriate depends largely on the context of the conversation, and, for example, some academics might strongly oppose to the use of terms which are perfectly acceptable in other contexts.⁵

As is well known, translations characterized the transmission of Buddhist teachings and discipline from the very beginning. The Buddha’s own language was most likely an old form of Māgadhī, and a form of Māgadhī was indeed used as a literary language for the early Buddhist tradition (Roth 1980, 78). Soon the Buddha’s words were translated into other languages. According to the Pāli texts, this was explicitly encouraged by the Buddha when he asked the members of his monastic community to preach “in their own language” (*sakāya niruttiyā*).⁶ While this language policy contributed significantly to the worldwide success Buddhism, it also accelerated the rapid diversification into different Buddhist traditions with own texts. The resulting diversity was (at different times in different areas) also recognized as problematic, causing traditions to gravitate towards standardization—as is well known, the Theravāda canonical texts in Pāli are one outcome of such processes. Pāli, the imagined and reconstructed language of the Buddha (Hinüber 1982), is today’s *lingua franca* of sacred texts of the Southern Buddhist traditions, practiced in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia and other South and South East Asian countries. While the texts were also translated into local languages, the liturgical language remained Pāli—a language still used as language of communication between Buddhist scholars in different South and South East Asian countries. As we all know, since the late 19th century, these Pāli texts have also been translated into Western languages, often in the context of the academic inquiry.

From a conservative Buddhist perspective, these multiple translation processes are sometimes in tension with the perception that the legitimacy of all Buddhist traditions is based on an uninterrupted lineage, going back to the Buddha, which goes hand in hand with the perception that the canonical Pāli texts are in fact “the word

5 In order to avoid ambivalences, I use the terms *bhikkhunī* and *bhikkhu* throughout this essay.

6 Vin II 139,1–16 / Cv V.33.1. This language policy was in contrast to the then mainstream Brahmin traditions, which used Sanskrit as language of their religious texts and rituals, contributing significantly to the creation and maintenance of an exclusive religious elite. It should be mentioned that the precise meaning of the phrase *sakāya niruttiyā* is widely discussed; for a more recent discussion of older literature on the topic, see Levman (2008–2009).

of the Buddha". These Pāli texts enjoy very high authority and are at the core of monastic legal acts (*kamma*)⁷ and many other liturgies (e.g. *vandana* and *pūjā*).

Yet with a text like the Buddhist monastic discipline, which is not only to be recited, preserved and transmitted, but which is also to be understood and adhered to, very quickly questions regarding meaning and proper application arise. Moreover, locally grounded customs, values and understandings, which are not necessarily connected to Buddhist teachings and discipline to a similar degree shape the monastics' actual practice. Each translation of aspects of Buddhist monastic discipline from textually fixed norms into practice is thus a complex and sometimes bumpy process. We find evidence for this process already recorded in the canonical Pāli texts. Thus, in a number of introductory stories, which narrate the events that lead to the formulation of a Vinaya rule,⁸ it is reported that a first version of a rule was amended by the Buddha, since the monastics did not know how to apply it properly. In other instances, circumstances arose which made an amendment of a rule necessary. For example, soon after the Buddha prohibited sexual intercourse with a woman for the monks, he also had to include female animals in this prohibition, since one monk assumed that having sex with a female monkey was not a problem.⁹ While we do not know if not all of these stories are based on historical facts, they are nevertheless evidence for the early Buddhist community's negotiations of the meaning and application of individual rules. This potential ambiguity of the words of the rules is also reflected in the sometimes very lengthy casuistries, in the Word-by-Word-Commentaries and in the formulas, which state under which circumstances the behavior described in the rule is not considered to be an offense (*anāpatti*). These sections are part and parcel of the canonical Vinaya text.

Not surprisingly, after the passing of the Buddha conflicts and negotiations about the meaning and proper application of the monastic regulations multiplied. The farther away in time and space, the more potential for tension between "the word" and its "meaning" exists, requiring ongoing explanations, interpretations and adaptations. Many of the commentaries and sub-commentaries on the Vinaya were written by Buddhist scholars in order to clarify the precise meaning of the canonical texts. The geographical spread and the passing of time brought about many differences in practice within the diverse monastic communities, even *among* the Theravāda traditions. While differences in the interpretation of the teachings are more easily accommodated within one community,¹⁰ agreement between local monastic communities regarding the application of the rules pose more immediate problems. Such

7 While the recitation of the monastic rules (*pāṭimokkha*) every two weeks is a normative requirement for a minimum *saṅgha* (unless there are serious impediments), many monastic communities forego the recitation of the rules.

8 On these introductory stories see Schlingloff 1963. Schlingloff convincingly argues that in many cases the introductory stories seem to have been added at a later stage.

9 First version: Vin III 21; second version: Vin III 22.

10 See Kieffer-Pülz 2006–2007; appeared 2009, and references there.

differences in practice come to the forefront when monastics from different communities and with potentially slightly different practices have to perform legal acts (*kamma*) together. In these cases, clear-cut regulations are necessary. Already in the Vinaya we find narratives about monks from different practice communities, deviating for example in the date of the Pātimokkha recitation, to be performed once every two weeks. This recitation can be performed either on the 14th, or on the 15th day of a month. In the Vinaya such differences are accepted, yet the need was felt to prescribe in detail whose custom should be followed, if monks were coming in (*āgantuka*) who followed a different calendar than the resident monks (*āvāsika*).¹¹

More problematic is the case if the procedures of the ordination ceremonies differ in two communities. The integrity and legitimacy of a local monastic community and its individual members hinges on their adherence to one common monastic discipline, and here especially to the ordination procedure laid out in this Vinaya.¹² Should ordinations be carried out deviating from these prescriptions, the ordained persons might not be considered monastics by others, and all later legal acts of the community (including ordinations) with an “improperly ordained” monastic as part of the minimum quorum might in turn be rendered invalid. From a Vinaya-perspective, an ordination carried out not according to the rules thus threatens the legitimacy, if not existence of entire lineages. To be on the safe side, some traditions therefore developed an ordination ceremony for guest monastics from a different community, which then ensured that they were “of good standing” from the perspective of the hosting community.¹³ Performing monastic legal acts together thus requires agreement on the details of the legal acts of the community, and the mutual trust and conviction that the other members of the community have not committed offenses that would exclude them from the participation in these legal acts.

Monastic Discipline and Ordination Practices

Precisely such differences of opinion regarding Buddhist monastic discipline are at the heart of the contemporary debates about the revival of the ordination of women in Theravāda Buddhism. To cut a long story short: the historical Buddha is said to have founded first an order of monks (*bhikkhusaṅgha*), and not much later also an order of nuns (*bhikkhunīsaṅgha*). A community of Buddhist *bhikkhunīs* might thus

¹¹ See Kieffer-Pülz 1992, 8.1.2.

¹² The Vinaya also regulates all other regular legal acts of the monastic community, such as the half-monthly observance day (*uposatha*), the invitation ceremony at the end of the rainy season (*pavāraṇā*), and other monastic rituals.

¹³ This can be done through a so-called *dalhikamma*; see Kieffer-Pülz 2011, 358ff.. Different local traditions developed different ways of dealing with this problem.

have existed since the 5th or 4th century BCE.¹⁴ However, the ordination of women was discontinued in the early second millennium CE.¹⁵ Since the 1980s however, there have been concerted efforts to revive a women's ordination in the Theravāda tradition. Early ordinations within this revival movement involved non-Theravāda monastics and are thus questionable from an orthodox Theravāda legal viewpoint and in fact, most Theravāda monastics and institutions still refuse to accept any ordination of women in their fold of the Theravāda tradition.¹⁶ However, in spite of this opposition, the *bhikkhunīsaṅgha* today seems to be firmly established in many places.¹⁷ Yet discussions about its legitimacy continue. Here—at least on the surface—Vinaya arguments are of prime importance, with a specific focus on the ordination procedures.¹⁸

In contrast to the early ordinations in the 1980s and 1990s, today ordinations can be performed with only Theravāda monastics participating. This means that all monastics involved in women's ordinations refer to the same text, the Pāli Vinaya. Yet even within this frame the translation of the text into practice still requires a good amount of negotiations between different agents involved. For, when performing legal acts of the community (*saṅghakamma*) such as an ordination (*upasampadā*) together, the different local *bhikkhunīs*' communities or individual *bhikkhunīs* need to agree on one common way of translating Vinaya norms into practice. In addition, agreement has to be reached regarding the integration or omission of locally evolved aspects of practice which have no basis in the Vinaya.

When in June 2015 the ordination of a Theravāda *bhikkhunī* was held in Germany, members of diverse Theravāda *bhikkhunīs*' communities (from California, North Carolina, Germany, and Sri Lanka) came together to act as the performing *bhikkhunīsaṅgha*. They had to agree on a common practice for this possibly first ever ordination of a Theravāda *bhikkhunī* in Europe. Incoming *bhikkhunīs* were required since the local *bhikkhunīs*' community was not large enough: according to the

14 The first inscriptional evidence for the existence of *bhikkhunīs* are the Aśoka inscriptions. Von Hinüber (2008) suggests that the establishment of the *bhikkhunīs*' order took place after the Buddha's demise. For a critical evaluation of this thesis see Anālayo 2008. For a further discussion of the textual evidence from different Buddhist traditions, see Strauch 2014. The discussion between von Hinüber and Anālayo is continued in Hinüber 2015 and Anālayo 2016.

15 On the disappearance of the Theravāda *bhikkhunīsaṅgha* in different regions see Skilling 1993 and Kieffer-Pülz 2000. In South India a sizeable *bhikkhunīsaṅgha* still existed in the 11th century (Kieffer-Pülz 2013).

16 Only the Dambulla branch (originally a sub-sect of the Syāmanikāya) in Sri Lanka officially acknowledges the ordination of women in the Theravāda tradition. In Myanmar and Thailand no *nikāya* officially accepts women's ordinations. Yet individual *bhikkhus* in these Theravāda countries do support *bhikkhunī* ordination and even participate in these ordinations on a personal basis, albeit not as representatives of their respective *nikāyas*.

17 For a detailed account of the beginnings of the re-establishment of the Buddhist *bhikkhunīs*' *saṅgha*, see Tathālokā 2017.

18 For details see Hüsken and Kieffer-Pülz 2012 and Hüsken 2017.

Vinaya, the ordaining *saṅgha* of *bhikkhunīs* has to consist of at least five members. However, the necessity to have more Theravāda *bhikkhunīs* present was not the only reason to invite *bhikkhunīs* from the USA and from Sri Lanka. The head *bhikkhunī* of the German monastery, who acted as the *pavattinī* (preceptor), explained to me that the presence of Theravāda *bhikkhunīs* from other parts of the world also emphasized the significance of the fact that Theravāda *bhikkhunīs* *saṅgha* was about to take root in Europe. While this ordination is one significant step in the process of the establishment of the Theravāda *bhikkhunīs*' communities, it also brought to light that issues of actual practice on the ground are not solved by resorting to the Vinaya texts alone.

Details regarding the *sīmā*, the boundary of the community, necessary for every legal act of the *saṅgha*, were quite intensely discussed before the actual ordination among the participating *bhikkhunīs*. Every communal act has to be performed by a "complete" *saṅgha*. "Completeness" is established with reference to the monastic boundary (*sīmā*): every member of the *saṅgha* within the boundary has to actively take part in the legal act (for details, see Kieffer-Pülz 1992). Adherence to these rules is essential for the validity and general acceptance of the ordination. However, as it turned out, the Sri Lankan *bhikkhunīs* over the centuries had developed practices which were considered essential by them. In contrast, the German head *bhikkhunī*'s monastic background was informed by the Thai forest tradition, which has developed practices different from the Sri Lankan tradition represented by the Sinhalese *bhikkhunīs*. Thus the German preceptor *bhikkhunī* had planned to establish a *sīmā* which encompassed the area where the lay people and monks would be sitting, in accordance with the Thai forest tradition. In this arrangement, the lay people would be within the *sīmā*, and during the procedure the performing *bhikkhunīs* would be sitting within an arm's reach from each other, thus creating the legally relevant community for the ordination.¹⁹ In contrast, the Sri Lankan *bhikkhunīs* preferred a *sīmā* in which only the performing *bhikkhunīs* would be present.²⁰ Understandably, the Sri Lankan *bhikkhunīs* were concerned about their participation in a legal act of the monastic community which did not conform to their own tradition. This *sīmā* therefore was established in accordance with the wishes of the Sri Lankan *bhikkhunīs*. The boundary was made smaller, now encompassing only ca. 1/3 of the room, excluding all but the participating *bhikkhunīs*.²¹

Another issue debated before the ordination was the ceremonial *kāyabandhana*, a "body-girdle" worn on top of the robes. This specific piece of garment is not mentioned in the Vinaya in the context of legal acts of the *saṅgha*, yet is worn by all participants in an ordination ceremony in Sri Lanka. Here, however, the German

19 See Kieffer-Pülz 1992, 195.

20 In at least one contemporary Sri Lankan tradition, *sīmās* may not be crossed during the legal act by anything or anyone, not even by e.g. an electricity line (Kieffer-Pülz 2017–18).

21 I came to know that the *bhikkhus* also had some negotiations among themselves, however, I do not know any details thereof.

head *bhikkhunī* insisted that no *kāyabandhana* was necessary for the ordination, since she anticipated that—given that the ordination was to take place on the next day—the making of *kāyabandhanas* for all monastics involved would be too stressful. Moreover, in her perception a ceremonial *kāyabandhana* was not necessary, since she had been mostly exposed to the Thai forest tradition of Ajahn Chah, where a ceremonial *kāyabandhana* is not used during full ordinations. In the end the ordination was performed without *kāyabandhanas*, following the forest Thai tradition, and the Sri Lankan nuns complied.

For all *bhikkhunīs* the most important aspect regarding both issues (*sīmā* and *kāyabandhana*) was compliance with the Vinaya regulations. Yet clearly, specific local traditions were likewise important. This mingling of different local understandings of the Vinaya and local practices not dealt with in the Vinaya then created a new practice, which did not fully mirror any pre-existing ordination practice.²² The coming together of different traditions based on the same text resulted in a compromise, in a new practice. This seems to be the rule rather than the exception in situations where different cultures of practice meet, which is the standard situation for *bhikkhunīs* living in the West.²³

Most of the first pioneer *bhikkhunīs* living in Europe or the USA lived for years together with monks' communities so they enjoyed direct instructions by experienced monastics and had concrete examples of practice. Yet since most of these *bhikkhunīs* have been involved with two or more long-standing Theravāda cultures of practice, namely that of the Thai forest tradition, that of the Thai monastic tradition, that of the Sri Lankan forest tradition and the greater Sri Lankan tradition of practice, often coupled with experience of the Burmese monastic Vipassana culture of practice, they had to navigate this amalgam of experiences and practices individually. Yet when these first women establish *bhikkhunīs'* communities, this variety of influences and experiences had to be navigated communally, in the process of establishing a routine of communal monastic living in a non-Buddhist environment. These “new” traditions are solidifying as practices of the communities of *bhikkhunīs* in the West.

Importantly, with the gradual establishment and spread of the *bhikkhunīsangha* in the USA and more recently in Europe, not only the ordination but many aspects of the *bhikkhunīs'* daily life are negotiated, based on diverse perceptions of Buddhist

22 As Blackburn (1999) showed, the reliance on other than Vinaya sources for the practice education of monastics is not a recent phenomenon but over time the text of the Vinaya became less important in the education of the monastics, and the Vinaya's content was taught through other texts. As Kieffer-Pülz (2017–18) shows, the Vinaya text itself was predominantly resorted to by specialists in cases of disagreement over correct monastic procedures.

23 Ayyā Tathālokā informs me (email communication, 17.7.2017) that it was a quite conscious decision, following the advice of *bhikkhu* mentors, to try to “re-amalgamate the disparate traditions of our Theravada teachers (Sri Lankan, Thai and Burmese), with research of, reference to and adherence to Vinaya.”

monastic discipline, in dialogue with and in response to local monks' communities, the supporting lay communities, and among the *bhikkhunīs*. Still many of the *vihāras* in the USA are home to only one or two *bhikkhunīs*. Therefore, when these *bhikkhunīs* come together and live for some time together, they have to negotiate among each other a common monastic practice, based on the Vinaya text. While doing so, they also have to respect and respond to the expectations of their lay supporters. This is a special challenge in a setting where the Buddhist monastic community is still perceived as foreign, and where Buddhist lay practitioners have to learn from the *bhikkhunīs* what it means to support a *bhikkhunī*.

According to the monastic discipline the individual *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs* depend on the lay community for the most basic aspects of their existence: food, shelter, medicine and clothing. While these interactions between lay and monastic communities are well established in Buddhist countries (Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, etc.), in new Buddhist monastic communities in places without a tradition of Buddhist practice, details and proceedings connected to the lay support of the monastics have to be communicated by the *bhikkhunīs* to their lay followers.²⁴ In this process, often new proceedings suited to the respective setting have to be established by the *bhikkhunīs* in collaboration with their lay supporters.

Food and Eating

A major occasion of monastic-lay interactions are issues connected to food and eating. The Vinaya contains many restrictions regarding food. Importantly, Buddhist monastics are supposed to live on alms-food and only eat until noon.²⁵ Moreover, they are not supposed to cook their own food, and the permission to store food is extremely restricted.²⁶ The meals are typically provided by lay people on a regular basis, providing daily occasions for interaction between the monastics and lay people.

While in the Pāli texts the *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunīs* are often depicted as going on alms-rounds to collect their food, which is also common practice in Southeast Asian Theravāda countries, the procedure of an alms-round proves to be impossible in

24 As Ayyā Dhammānā informs me, even in Theravāda countries such as Sri Lanka *bhikkhunīs* face similar challenges, since the lay community has a perception of a *bhikkhunī*'s lifestyle, social role and material needs based on those of the non-ordained nuns who are known to them.

25 Pācittiya 37 (Vin IV 85). In practice there always have been many different ways to organize this. Very early on invitations for lunch were common. Rules for these invitations are also given in the Vinaya. These occasions for taking meals are mentioned as one of the three *nissayas* for a female monastic's life, which are to be explained to a woman immediately after ordination; see Vin I 96, 1–4 Vin II 273, 34–274, 20 (Hüsken 1997, 421).

26 Only items that count as medicine may be stored for up to seven days (Nissaggiya Pācittiya 23; Vin III 251).

settings where the monastics do not live in a distance to their lay supporters that can be managed on foot or by local transport.²⁷ This is usually the case for *bhikkhunīs*' monasteries in the USA. The lay supporters often live quite far away and it is impossible for the *bhikkhunīs* to walk to their houses; but it is also very difficult for the lay people to regularly come to the monasteries with prepared food before meal times.²⁸

The solutions for this problem found by the *bhikkhunīs* can be quite different and depend very much on the specific circumstances. While one individual *bhikkhunī* lives with her family and thus is able to partake in the meals provided by relatives, most groups of *bhikkhunīs* living together in one monastery depend on lay Buddhists supporting them on a regular basis, or on lay women (or semi-monastic women) living with them, who buy groceries, cook the food and offer it to the *bhikkhunīs* at mealtime.²⁹ While the funds might be provided by different lay donors, the work connected to feeding the *bhikkhunīs* is provided by volunteers. Yet when such volunteers are not available—this might be the case in places where Buddhist monastics are a very rare sight and where the network of lay supporters is therefore not tightly knit—the monastics make a huge effort to find enough supporters who commit to come with prepared food at meal times. This is however a precarious situation for the *bhikkhunīs*, and a challenging duty for rather small lay communities.³⁰

At times also *what* monastics can, should or should not eat has to be negotiated. While in general the monastics have to finish their last meal for the day before noon (Pācittiya 37; Vin IV 85), there are certain food categories classified as “allowables” (*sattāhakālika*; lit. “which is of a duration of seven days”, i.e. food that has to be consumed within seven days), which can be consumed after noon. These are also

27 Going on alms-round is practiced by some communities in California, but rather as an educational exercise, both for the *bhikkhunīs* and for the people living in the town or city the monastery is situated in. One important aim of the alms-round here is to create an occasion for interaction between the monastics the local population.

28 This is not just an issue to be solved for *bhikkhunīs* in the USA or Europe, but also for *bhikkhus* living there.

29 These are so-called “stewards”—mostly young women, who for different reasons chose to live with the *bhikkhunīs* as volunteers. They are not monastics and are therefore allowed to (and required to) cook and doing chores for the *bhikkhunīs*. Some of these women use their time with the *bhikkhunīs* to find out whether a more committed monastic life could suit them.

30 Therefore, occasionally individual *bhikkhunīs* or communities in the US and Europe chose to cook their food in the absence of lay support, as a “survival” strategy. According to the Vinaya, such transgressions of rules only requires a simple confession before other *bhikkhunīs*. Yet some *bhikkhunīs* expressed that they would rather live as 8- or 10-precept nuns (who do not have the same restrictions) than as *bhikkhunīs* who break the Vinaya rules on a regular basis. However, for *bhikkhunīs*, in contrast to *bhikkhus*, the decision to leave the monastic community implies that they are not able undergo ordination again (Hüsken 1997, 472 and references there; see also Kieffer-Pülz 2015–2016).

called “tonic medicines”, which are named as ghee, oil, butter, honey and sugar in the relevant Vinaya rule (Nissaggiya Pācittiya 23; Vin III 251). Online fora discussing these issues often mention cheese along with butter.³¹ However, which items precisely count as “allowables” may also differ among the monastic communities. While I experienced in the USA that the most common afternoon “allowables” are cheese and chocolate, the latter was not permitted in a German *bhikkhunī* monastery.

Another contested issue—albeit on different grounds—is the question of whether the monastics’ diet should be vegetarian or not. On this point, Buddhist traditions have developed very differently and the question of whether a Buddhist is or has to be vegetarian is contentious between different traditions. While in India Buddhists were not vegetarian in the 7th century CE, vegetarianism was the prevalent stance in Chinese Buddhism at that time. By the late 19th century vegetarianism and Buddhism were considered inseparable in China (Barstow 2013, 76f.). In contrast, the Buddhist traditions based on the Pāli texts are generally not vegetarian³² and today meat eating is relatively common for example among Buddhists in Thailand, Myanmar and (though to a lesser degree) in Sri Lanka.

Mahāyāna traditions deal with the perceived discrepancy between Buddhist ethics and Buddhist monastic discipline in the Māṃsabhakṣaṇaparivarta chapter of the Mahāyāna *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* (4th/5th cent. CE). This text refers to the tension between the general principle (valid for monastics and lay people) that a Buddhist should encourage others not to kill³³ and the fact that—according to several Vinayas—the consumption of some kinds of meat is permissible. Reference is made here to a relevant passage which is also given in the Pāli Vinaya, namely that a monk may eat meat if it is “pure in three ways”: the monk may not have seen, heard, or suspected that the animal was killed for him (Mv VI.14.31; Cv VII 3.14–15).³⁴

31 See for example Ajahn Brahmavamso in “Newsletter, July–September 1990, Buddhist Society of Western Australia”; online at <https://www.urbandharma.org/udharma3/eating.html> (last access: 4.3.2017). These medicines can be stored up to seven days (Nissaggiya Pācittiya 23; Vin III 251). “The degree of infirmity required before a monk is allowed to consume these [tonic-]medicines is a controversial point... It seems that feeling rundown or feeling tired after physical exertion would be sufficient cause to be able to make use of the Five Medicines” (see “The Bhikkhus’ Rules: A Guide for Laypeople”, compiled and explained by Bhikkhu Ariyesako. *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 17 December 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/ariyesako/layguide.html>; last access: 4.3.2017).

32 These different attitudes towards vegetarianism are one reason why the Theravāda traditions are considered “corrupt” by members of the Chinese and Taiwanese traditions.

33 In this context, not only the five *sīlās* and the first Pārājika rule for monastics, but also the recommendation not to be a butcher or hunter by profession are often referred to. Thus in the *Jīvakaśutta* it is said that a person that slaughters an animal for a Tathāgata produces considerable demerit (MN I 371).

34 This is repeated in the Majjhimanikāya in the *Jīvaka Sutta* (MN I 369).

Together with the evidently generally accepted assumption that monastics should accept what is given to them as alms-food,³⁵ and that one should eat carefully what has been given,³⁶ it seems to be implied that vegetarianism is—at least according to the Pāli texts—not an inevitable choice for Buddhist monastics.³⁷ On the contrary, not only seems the Buddha himself to have eaten meat,³⁸ but he also is reported to have explicitly refused to make vegetarianism mandatory, as is evident from the Vinaya's narrative concerning Devadatta.³⁹ He attempted to impose more severe asceticism on the monastics by asking the Buddha to make five ascetic practices mandatory rather than optional, including the rejection of meat and fish as alms-food (Cv VII 3.14–15). The Buddha rejected Devadatta's suggestions and stuck to his original ruling, namely that while a monk may follow these five provisions, none of them are mandatory (Vin II 196–7).

Yet the conundrum of ethics and monastic discipline remains an issue until today. One *bhikkhuni* living in the USA was born and grew up in Sri Lanka and thus from childhood onwards was used to Buddhist monastics eating meat. However, she herself at some point decided to become vegetarian for ethical reasons: she had watched some graphic video clips about intensive animal husbandry and large scale slaughter of animals for human consumption. Therefore, she decided to abstain from eating meat. While I experienced that she usually refuses to mention any other food preferences of hers, she does mention to the lay followers that she does not eat meat. Lay people are generally not familiar with the relevant regulations in the Buddhist monastic discipline, but are well aware of the prohibition to harm others and the general Buddhist attitude of compassion towards fellow beings. Therefore, this stance is not problematic in a contemporary American setting, since at least Caucasian lay Buddhists there rather would assume that vegetarianism is the rule rather than the exception among monastics. The issue becomes however more

35 Sekhiya 28 (Vin IV 190). Sekhiya 37 demands that a monastic should not ask for specific food, unless he or she is sick (Vin IV 193).

36 Sekhiya 29–48.

37 “The Bhikkhus' Rules: A Guide for Laypeople”, compiled and explained by Bhikkhu Ariyesako. *Access to Insight (Legacy Edition)*, 17 December 2013 deals with this question and suggests: “[a monk] should be grateful and recollect that the food he is given is what enables him to continue to live the bhikkhu life, and that as a mendicant he is not in a position to choose what he gets. If he later comes to know the family and they ask him about Dhamma, he will be able to explain the precept about not killing. This may cause them to reflect on their attitude to meat eating.” (see <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/ariyesako/layguide.html>; last access: 4.3.2017).

38 The relevant passage relates to the Buddha's last meal, which reportedly was *sūkaramaddava*. While the meaning of the term *sūkaramaddava* is not entirely clear, also from other passages in the canonical texts it is evident that the Buddha was at least an occasional meat eater (Harvey 2000, 160).

39 On Devadatta see for example Mukherjee (1966); see also Borgland (forthc.).

complex if we add health considerations into the mix. A certain Western *bhikkhunī* does not do well with carbohydrates at all, and is encouraged by her doctor to live on a diet very rich in protein to prevent further illness. Consequently, she let her lay community know that she needs a non-vegetarian diet with little carbohydrates to stay healthy.

In neither case the food preferences are problematic in terms of monastic discipline, since the Vinaya allows the consumption of meat under specified circumstances, and since the *bhikkhunī* Pāṭidesanīya rules allow to request fine foods (including meat) when ill, but does not require the monastics to eat meat.⁴⁰ However, in the specific situation of contemporary *bhikkhunīs* in the USA, a different problem arose, when the mentioned two monastics following different food regimens lived together for a few weeks. At that point a major concern of the hosting—non-vegetarian—*bhikkhunī* was that her rather young Buddhist lay community might be irritated by the fact that only two Buddhist *bhikkhunīs* would differ so fundamentally regarding their diet. This is not a trivial concern, since food and food supply are major issues which most immediately link monastic and lay communities. Those *bhikkhunīs* who are trying to establish their presence in settings that do not have former experiences with Buddhist monastic communities have to tread very carefully. How is a young lay community supposed to understand that what they have learned to be Buddhist food practice is not Buddhist in the first place, but rather individual—especially when one *bhikkhunī* looks “more authentic” (being Sri Lankan) than the other (being a Caucasian white woman)? Clearly, the Theravāda *bhikkhunīs* have to negotiate among each other, and with the lay community, what Buddhist monastic practice actually means.⁴¹

Conclusion

The first ordained women in the newly re-established Theravāda *bhikkhunī* lineage had and still have to navigate different local Theravāda traditions in their own practice. While this is a challenge, the confluence of different practice traditions also gives them a certain liberty to decide from case to case as to how to perform aspects of the ceremonies and daily life. The first women to re-establish the Buddhist *bhikkhunīs*’ tradition were and are necessarily strong individuals, having to break the ground. Not surprisingly, diverse local Theravāda *bhikkhunīs*’ practices emerge, which in turn guide the next generation of *bhikkhunīs* and shape the understanding of the lay community what it means in practical terms to be a female Buddhist monastic. An “exemplary monastic life” therefore can look rather varied. Yet the

⁴⁰ These issues today also discussed among the Buddhist lay followers in the USA; see for example <https://dhammawheel.com/viewtopic.php?t=24351> (last access 4.3.2017).

⁴¹ For another example of negotiations of contemporary Buddhist practice, see Borgland 2017.

ability to translate norms into practice, and to adapt to and incorporate differences, is fundamental to the success of the *bhikkhunīs*' tradition.⁴² The negotiations in the context of the ordination in Germany mentioned above integrated different performative habits into one performance, creating a new ritual for all participants involved. The ordination was the result of negotiations between diverse local practice traditions, an attempt to harmonize different monastic norms in a common ritual. Importantly, many rules of the Vinaya have also been established with reference to general norms prevalent at the time and place of the rule's formulation. These Vinaya rules were established because lay people complained that the monastics behaved "like householders, enjoying the senses" (*seyyathāpi giḥī kāmabhoginiyo*). This expression clearly refers to local (lay) practices and customs, from which the monastics needed to differ, and which were then (as negation) translated into monastic discipline.

Questions of translation always have been important in the interpretation and application of Buddhist texts. In the process of its adoption from others and transmission to others, Buddhist monastic discipline always has been translated (and thus transcreated) from one community of practice to another community of practice.⁴³ These translations were from one language to another, from one social setting into another, and from a time period into another, and from text into practice, and back into texts, or in any mixture of any of these components, as in the examples presented here. While especially in times of conflict the text of the Vinaya reappears as a site of prime importance for the actors, it is evident that these translations can never be reduced to simple language operations. Rather, this complex process of translation is a critical engagement with texts and practices, inevitably creating something new.

While Buddhist monastic discipline is a law text (Hecker 1977) it is also much more than that. It is a template for the "good monastic life", even if it might rarely be realized in its full form. While the rules conceptually encompass their own transgressions, they still provide a steady framework that connects female Theravāda Buddhist monastics worldwide. In fact, the different practices are connected through the common Vinaya rules, which are an important factor in building and maintaining the community, locally and globally, defining the identity of the monastics as distinct from the lay people, and tying the present *saṅgha* to the *saṅgha*'s past at the same time.

42 Buddhism throughout its long history was resilient due to its exceptional capacity to integrate local cults and gods who were subdued and often installed as "protectors of the *dhamma*."

43 Importantly, according to the canonical texts the rules for monks were transcreated into rules for nuns when the nuns' monastic community was established (Hüsken 1997, 17–22). The result can be characterized as a gendered translation of monastic law.

Abbreviations

- Cv *Cullavagga*; vol 2 of Vin.
 MN *Majjhima-Nikāya*, ed. V. Trenckner, Robert Chalmers, 3 vols., London, 1888–1899 (Pali Text Society).
 Mv *Mahāvagga*; vol. 1 of Vin.
 Vin *Vinaya Piṭaka*, ed. Hermann Oldenberg, 5 vols., London, 1879–1883 (Pali Text Society).

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