

**PROGRAM**

**Gender Asymmetry in the Different Buddhist Traditions Through the  
Prism of Nuns' Ordination and Education**

Conference to be held October 26-27, 2020

At the University of Perugia (Italy)

## 1. Abstract

### **Gender Asymmetry in the Different Buddhist Traditions Through the Prism of Nuns' Ordination and Education**

In Buddhist monasticism, women are relegated to second rank mainly for two reasons: First, they do not always have access to the same level of education as their male counterparts and therefore are not credited with the same learning (erudition). Second, in some countries they are excluded from one or all ordination rites. Thus we have on the one hand full-fledged monks, and on the other female religious practitioners who, in several Asian countries, are not ordained (Burma, Sri Lanka and Thailand) or only semi-ordained (India, Mongolia, Nepal and Tibet). As for Chinese and Korean monasticisms, there are fully ordained nuns but they still have to respect traditional norms regarding gender hierarchy. The resulting asymmetry between ordained men and women is a facet of living Buddhism. This is a sensitive and much debated topic, rarely approached from a scholarly perspective, which has caused debate over the last years among Asian and Western feminists, and also in the wider Buddhist monastic community. The conference and its subsequent publication aim to focus on the attitudes, perceptions, experiences and actions of the Buddhist nuns themselves.

#### **透過尼僧受戒與佛學教育的視角考察不同佛教傳統的性別秩序**

在佛教僧院制度當中尼僧處於次要地位，究其原因主要有二：首先，她們並不總是能夠有機會獲得與男僧同等水平的佛學教育，因此不被認為具備同樣的學識（博學）。其次，在某些國家她們被排除在某個或者全部的傳戒儀式之外。因此一方面男僧受具足戒成為比丘，另一方面尼僧在亞洲一些國家要麼不能受戒（如緬甸、斯里蘭卡、泰國），要麼只能受持減半的戒律（印度、蒙古、尼泊爾、西藏）。至於中國、臺灣和韓國的僧院制度，有受具足戒的比丘尼，但是她們還是要遵循性別秩序的規約。由此造成的受戒比丘與尼眾之間的不對等是當今佛教的一個面相。這是一個敏感且頗多爭議的主題，近年來在亞洲和西方的女性主義者以及更廣大的佛教僧團當中都引發了爭論，不過從學術角度出發的探討尚為數不多。本次研討會及其後續出版的論文集旨在著重考察佛教尼僧自身的態度、觀念、經驗和行為。

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## 2. Conference Schedule

### **Gender Asymmetry in the Different Buddhist Traditions Through the Prism of Nuns' Ordination and Education**

October 26-27, 2020, University of Perugia (Italy)

#### **Day 1: 26 October 2020**

9:00: Greetings and Introduction

#### **Section 1: Educational Patterns for Buddhists Nuns**

Chair: Adeline Herrou

9:30: Daniela Campo, *Nuns' Education in a Chan Monastery in Jiangxi*

10:15: Nicola Schneider, *A Revolution in Red Robes: The First Generation of Tibetan Nuns Who Has Obtained the Doctoral Degree in Buddhist Studies* (geshema)

11:00-11:15: Coffee Break

11:15: Yu-chen Li, *Non-monastic Educational Profile of Taiwanese Buddhist Nuns and Their Religious Identity*

12:00: Eun-su Cho, *Female Monastic Society in Korea – Between Tradition and the Desire for Change*

12:45: Discussion

13:30: Lunch

#### **Section 2: The Issue of Ordination and Rules for Buddhist Nuns**

Chair: Ann Heirman

15:00: Darcie Price-Wallace, *Telling Stories Differently: Changing Landscapes of Ordination for Buddhist Nuns in the Tibetan Tradition*

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15:45: Ester Bianchi & Amandine Péronnet, *Assessing the Emergence and Impact of Nuns Dual Ordination in New Era China*

16:30-16:45: Coffee Break

16:45: Bhikkhunī Dhammadinnā, *Dimensions of Gender Asymmetry in the Contemporary Revival of the Theravāda Bhikkhunī-saṅgha*

17:30: Martin Seeger, *Female Renunciation and the Historical Absence of the Theravada Bhikkhunī Order in Thailand: The Interrelationships Between Male and Female Monastics and the Creation of New Vinaya Rules*

18:15: Anthony Scott, *Opening Up Enlightenment and the Reintroduction of Female Ordination in Twentieth-century Burma/Myanmar*

19:00: Discussion

20:00: Dinner

## **Day 2: 27 October 2020**

### **Section 3: New Ways of Buddhist Practice: Revivals & Inventions**

Chair: Alexander von Rospatt

9:00: Agata Bareja-Starzyńska, *Buddhist Nuns in Mongolia - Beginnings and Development*

9:45: Trent Walker, *Khmer Nuns and Filial Debts: Buddhist Intersections in Contemporary Cambodia*

10:00-10:45: Coffee Break

10:45: Yoshiko Ashiwa, *"No" Gender Limits for Practice of Teaching and Realizing Peace: A Case of Nipponzan Myohoji*

11:30 Thi Sinh Ninh, *The Status of Nuns in Vietnam From the Buddhist Revival (The 30s Of The Twentieth Century) to the Present Period*

12:15: Discussion & Concluding Discussion

13:30: Lunch

### **3. List of Participants with Titles and Abstracts of Presentations**

**- Ashiwa, Yoshiko (Hitotsubashi University, Tokyo)**

*“No” Gender Limits for Practice of Teaching and Realizing Peace: A Case of Nipponzan Myohoji*

Nipponzan Myohoji is a group of the Nichiren order founded in 1917 by Nichidatsu Fujii. After World War Two, it has become the most active pacifist group in Buddhism in Japan. Its engaged activities are better known abroad than in Japan. It has founded peace pagodas around the world, such as in England, US, Italy, and India and is involved in antiwar, antinuclear, anti discrimination, minority and indigenous people's rights, and environmental movements, cooperating with local activists and other religions. Its strength lies in the strong individualism of its clerics, as practitioners of Buddha's teaching, regardless of whether they are nuns or monks. The building and care of a peace pagoda, helping local people and organizing a peace walk as pilgrimage is only carried out by their determination to realize the Buddha's teaching. These activities are their ways of self-training as education, the ultimate devotion to Buddha's teaching.

It is undeniable that gender issues have traditionally existed in Nipponzan Myohoji. However, it is quite significant that the roles and functions of nuns and monks depend on their strength for pursuing the teachings, and their practical abilities of actions. In regard to this, there are almost no scholarly studies.

In my paper, I will introduce the group's short history, motivations and activities as nuns, ideas on the debates of gender issues in religious secular worlds, and their social, political and religious thoughts and actions. Then I will argue how issues of gender asymmetry in education and teaching can be overcome, or not.

**-Bareja-Starzyńska, Agata (University of Warsaw)**

*Buddhist Nuns in Mongolia -- Beginnings and Development*

The paper focuses on the establishment of Buddhist female order in Mongolia in the 90ies of the 20th cent. and its further development until today. It provides a short historical introduction on the dissemination of Buddhism among Mongols and shows the situation of Mongolian nuns against the broader background of Buddhist believers in Mongolia with

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emphasis on the female practitioners. The role of local Buddhist teachers as well as foreign masters for the establishment and development of nunneries is discussed. Temples and monasteries which are the main centers of female Buddhist activity are shortly described. The most important problems of Buddhist nuns in Mongolia are shown including their education, ordination, social acceptance and others.

**-Bhikkhunī Dhammadinnā (Āgama Research Group director / Dharma Drum Institute of Liberal Arts, Taiwan)**

*Dimensions of Gender Asymmetry in the Contemporary Revival of the Theravāda Bhikkhunī-saṅgha*

The principle of gender asymmetry encoded in the Vinaya account of the foundation of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* has furnished a legal rationale for the early historical establishment of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, with the acceptance of the eight *garudhammas* on the part of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī constituting her own ordination as the first *bhikkhunī* as well as the agreement enabling the ensuing foundation of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*. The legal implications of one of these *garudhammas* has then furnished the legal basis for the contemporary revival of the then discontinued Theravāda *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*.

The author's earlier fieldwork with traditional monastic law experts has shown that such an interpretation affords the sole basis that stands a chance to be recognized by the traditional Theravāda establishments as being compliant with and emic to Theravāda legal ideology (as opposed to revival attempts conducted in cooperation with the East-Asian Dharmaguptaka tradition).

The present contribution explores how such a gender asymmetry, crucial to the legitimacy and legitimation of the revived *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*, nevertheless continues to involve experiences of legal, institutional, emotional and existential dissonance among members of the re-established *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* in Sri Lanka.

The perspective adopted combines a scriptural, specifically legal-hermeneutical focus with extensive fieldwork with male and female religious communities and their lay support base in Sri Lanka.

**-Bianchi, Ester (University of Perugia) & Amandine Péronnet (University of Perugia / INALCO)**

*Assessing the Emergence and Impact of Nuns Dual Ordination in New Era China*

This contribution is focused on the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination procedure known as “dual ordination” (*erbuseng jie* 二部僧戒) in modern China, a procedure stipulating that nuns' ordination should be carried out in front of an assembly of nuns and monks in succession. These rules for nuns' ordination were a typical topic of discussion among Buddhist circles during Republican China, but they were implemented in Mainland China only in the 1980s. This was mainly due to the efforts of two prominent nuns, namely Longlian 隆蓮 (1909-2006), who was based in Sichuan, and Tongyuan 通願 (1913-1991), from Wutaishan.

The first *bhikṣuṇī* ordination after the Cultural Revolution, conferred according to the dual ordination system, was held successively in Chengdu's Tiexiang nunnery 鐵像寺 and Wenshu temple 文殊院 in 1982. After this first significant event, this became the most common procedure for nuns. And actually, since 2000 official regulations clearly state that nuns ordination must follow the *erbuseng jie* procedures. Ordination conferred by monks alone has thus become illegal.

In tracking the evolution of dual ordinations in modern China, we will particularly focus on the legacy left by Longlian and Tongyuan. A legacy that can be found in procedures implemented by Wutaishan's Pushou temple 普壽寺, the most influential Chinese Buddhist nunnery in the contemporary era. Issues that will be addressed include: relation between dual ordinations and the “triple platform ordination” system (*santan dajie* 三壇大戒), involving novice, *bhikṣu* or *bhikṣuṇī*, and Bodhisattva ordination; the figure of the *śikṣamāṇā* (female probationer); the connection with the revival of nuns lineages in the Theravada and Tibetan traditions; etc. Longlian believed that the introduction of “dual ordination” resulted in the improvement of the status of nuns within the Buddhist *saṅgha* and in the outer society. This paper aims to assess the persistence of gender asymmetry in Chinese monastic Buddhism today, with particular reference to the issue of ordination.

**-Campo, Daniela (University of Strasbourg)**

*Nuns' Education in a Chan Monastery in Jiangxi*

The Great Monastery of the Golden Mountain (Dajinshan si 大金山寺) is a monastic complex for nuns located near the city of Fuzhou, in Jiangxi province. The temple is thus

located in the south-eastern part of China, the main area nowadays affected by Han Buddhism, and it belongs to the Chan meditation school. The abbess, Master Yinkong 印空 (b. 1921), is one of the very few Buddhist masters still alive who entered religion before 1949 and engaged in the religious reconstruction of the 1980s. Being a female institution, Dajinshan offers an insight into the smaller portion of the Buddhist clergy. Moreover, it belongs to the category of large monasteries (that is, with a community of at least one hundred monastics), which are less commonly occupied by nuns than small convents in China.

The Jiangxi Institute of Buddhist Studies for nuns (Jiangxi nizhong foxueyuan 江西尼眾佛學院), established in 1994 in Dajinshan, is the only Institute for nuns in China to be especially axed on Chan studies and meditation practice. Based on fieldwork, this presentation will consider the educational program of the institute as well as the experiences of the students involved in its training.

#### **- Cho, Eun-su (Seoul National University)**

##### *Female Monastic Society in Korea – Between Tradition and the Desire for Change*

Scholars have observed that Korean Buddhist nuns have comparatively high social status among Asian countries, probably next to that of Taiwanese nuns. These female monastics (*bhikṣuṇīs*) consider it a point of pride and a crucial part of their long, almost 1,700 year history, that their status is almost equal to that of male monastics (*bhikshus*): nunneries in Korea operate with a high degree of autonomy. They receive systematic training in lecture halls and meditation rooms, and receive full ordination.

However, this claim of equal status meets challenges of gender discrimination once the nuns step outside of the boundaries of the hierarchy within the Buddhist Sangha. The Sangha legislation of the Jogye Order, the major Korean Buddhist order, specifies that the head of the Order should be a monk. Nuns are not usually given chances to participate in the Order's governance. During the course of the past ten years, there have been a few cases of nuns being appointed for positions in the Administration; but these are generally token positions, such as the head of the Division of Culture. Only 10 seats of the Buddhist council among 81 are given to nuns, even though of the entire fifteen thousand monastics in Korea currently,

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the number of nuns is almost equal to that of monks. They have to accept pervasive traditional norms, such as being taught the Eight Grave Rules in their ordination ceremony.

While many nuns complain about the external gender hierarchy, expressing their desire to overcome the present situation and sometimes even challenging it, it is also noted that they themselves harbor varied prejudices as well. They glorify the achievements of the past according to the stipulations of the current ideology, duplicating the biases of the past. I will gauge the current status of gender sensitivity in Korean Buddhist society of both monks and nuns, by analyzing their perceptions toward the issue of gender inequality, and the effort taken to rectify the current situation.

This presentation introduces the history of female religiosity in Mongolia and the attempts at introducing female monasticism and religious education.

**- Li Yu-chen (National Cheng Chi University)**

*Non-monastic Educational Profile of Taiwanese Buddhist Nuns and Their Religious Identity*

After the first Triple Platform Ordination in 1953, more than 75% of legally ordained monastic members in Taiwan have been female. Strikingly, while the average age of Taiwanese nuns is getting younger, their educational profiles becomes higher. At least 30% of Taiwanese Buddhist nuns received college education before the 1990s and, as of 2011, 92% of the nuns residing in Taipei have graduate degrees. Today in Taiwan, nuns obtaining doctoral degrees and holding a professorship at public universities outnumber monks.

Most Taiwanese Buddhist educational institutions are open to both the cleric and the laity, and define “Buddhist learning” mainly as *Abhidharma*. The *Abhidharma*-centered curriculum inspires not only strong sense of Indian orthodoxy, but also emphasis classic languages such as Sanskrit and Pali. Simultaneously, Humanistic Buddhism – a prominent feature of contemporary Taiwanese Buddhism – requires modern learning and skills. Many Taiwanese nuns with bachelor and doctoral degrees in non-Buddhist disciplines contribute to the development of Humanistic Buddhism; however, they are also often criticized for their “too secularized performance”.

The educational profile may improve nuns' social status; ironically, it does not consequently bring nuns equal status as their male peers in the monastic community. This article is a study of Taiwanese Buddhist nuns' education related to their devotion to Buddhism, to their

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consequent vocational development, and to their interpretation of religious cultivation. In the context of the gender division of labor, I will investigate the relation between ordination and monastic education, as well as the definition of monasticism from the perspective of contemporary Taiwanese Buddhist nuns.

**-Ninh, Thi Sinh (Faculty of History, Hanoi Pedagogical University 2)**

*The Status of Nuns in Vietnam from the Buddhist Revival (the 30s of the Twentieth Century) to the Present Period*

While studying the Buddhist revival movement in Vietnam (1931-1945), I have realized that monks played an important role in the Buddhist revival because they were enthusiastically engaged in the revival activities, but the role of the nuns seemed to be unremarkable. In addition, regarding the training of talented monks - which was considered as an essential task because the *saṅgha* would take on the future prospect of Buddhism, there were many training activities for monks, such as opening schools, sending monks to study abroad (monk Tri Hai was sent to China, monk Thai Hoa was sent to Cambodia), while educational activities for nuns were very few. This situation has changed after nearly a century. The nuns not only participate in the leadership of the Buddhist Association at all levels, but also head many sects of Buddhism with typical faces such as the chief nun Hue Giac (the head of the Liên Tông Tịnh Độ Non Bồng), the chief nun Nhu Thanh (Hue Lam Pagoda, Ho Chi Minh City), etc.

Based on references from archives, Buddhist newspapers, and fieldwork, my paper will concentrate on the understanding of the status of Vietnamese nuns from Buddhist revival to the present period; at the same time, it will show the reasons for that change from the perspective of Vietnamese culture and society.

**-Price-Wallace, Darcie (Northwestern University, Department of Religious Studies)**

*Telling Stories Differently: Changing Landscapes of Ordination for Buddhist Nuns in the Tibetan Tradition*

Based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork, including over sixty interviews, this paper explores a centuries-old debate within Buddhism about the ordination of women by listening

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to the stories of Himalayan and Tibetan Buddhist nuns. In doing so, it urges scholars to rethink what gender parity entails in hierarchical religious communities.

Buddhist nuns' ordination has been a contentious issue for the entirety of Buddhism's twenty-five-hundred-year history, beginning with the Buddha's initial refusal and eventual acceptance of female ordinands. Presently, nuns who practice in the Tibetan tradition cannot receive their full vows, a complex, highly esteemed ritual process including 364 vows that guide ethical conduct and permit access to education and the study of canonical texts. The dominant narrative holds that the fully ordained nuns' lineage was lost when Buddhism entered Tibet in the eighth century, and lingers in the present-day full-ordination movement for Tibetans-in-exile in India.

This paper looks at how the past is wielded in discussions taking place in the present, and how the outcome of those debates will shape the future trajectory of Buddhist nuns. At first glance, the debate arises out of two, ostensibly incommensurable claims: that nuns should have access to full-ordination, a claim based on calls for gender equity, and that full-ordination for nuns is not part of the Tibetan "tradition," a claim based on how contemporary monks interpret thirteenth-century monastic law. However, the ordination debate cannot be reduced to these two binary perspectives. I clarify how these nuns, who by no means are monolithic in their views, understand gender and its relationship to ordination. Through telling their stories differently, nuns continue to innovate the past, present, and future of Tibetan Buddhism.

**-Schneider, Nicola (University of Bonn)**

*A Revolution in Red Robes: The First Generation of Tibetan Nuns Who Has Obtained the Doctoral Degree in Buddhist Studies (Geshema)*

For centuries, Tibetan nuns had no access to formal monastic education and thus could not obtain the two main titles equivalent to a 'Doctor of Buddhist Philosophy' that are common in Tibetan Buddhism: the *geshe* (*dge bshes*)-degree in the scholastic-orientated Gelukpa school and the *khenpo* (*mkhan po*)-degree in the more practice-orientated Nyingmapa school. However, since the late 1980's both curriculums were little by little introduced in some nunneries in Tibet, as well as in exile, India. Since the 1990's, nuns can become *khenmos* (the female form of *khenpo*) and in the mean time, several dozen have passed the exam with success. As for the *geshema*-degree (the female form of *geshe*), the first batch of nuns has

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passed their final exam in 2016, the Gelukpa study program taking not only many more years (21 years in total compared to 9 years for the *khenmo*-degree), but also because part of the curriculum was banned for nuns due to their monastic status. Nuns in Tibet being only semi-ordained, or *śramaṇerī*, were not allowed (and always are not allowed), to study the *Vinaya* part pertaining to the vows of a *bhikṣuṇī* because they have not undergone full ordination.

In my presentation, I will in particular trace back the long journey that Tibetan nuns have gone through before being allowed to access the *geshema*-degree. I will then analyze some of sociological profiles of these new *geshemas*, since many of them come from different countries and regions of the Himalayas that make up the Tibetan cultural sphere. This will provide a first glimpse of the impact that the opening of higher Buddhist education to women has had. We will try to understand what this will eventually mean for the future of Tibetan Buddhism and also, implicitly, for the position of women in the religious sphere more generally.

**-Scott, Anthony (University of Toronto)**

*Opening Up Enlightenment and the Reintroduction of Female Ordination in Twentieth-century Burma/Myanmar*

My presentation revolves around an excerpt of the *Commentary on the Questions of Milinda* (*Milindapañha-aṭṭhakathā*) promoting the reintroduction of the order of nuns in modern Burma/Myanmar. Written in Pali by the Mingun Jetavana Sayadaw (1868-1954) in the late 1930s and published in 1948, this commentary combines textual arguments with a proleptic access into the Buddha's knowledge of the future (*anāgataṃsañāṇa*) to resolve tensions between primary and secondary regulations (*paññātti*) in the *vinaya*. Active around the same time, Ashin Ādiccavaṃsa (1881-1950) also called for the reintroduction of the *bhikkhunī sāsana* in 1935 with the publication of his *Instructions on the Order of Nuns* (*Bhikkhunī Sāsana Upadesa*), the manuscript of which was typed by the Mingun Jetavana's lay student, U Myat Kyaw. Ādiccavaṃsa was formally sanctioned by the *saṅgha* and staged a series of debates on the subject, while hundreds of copies of the Mingun Jetavana's commentary were confiscated by the independence administration, though not before it was etched in stone. In this paper I will explore the connections between these figures and compare the arguments set forth in the *Milindapañha-aṭṭhakathā* by the Mingun Jetavana and Ādiccavaṃsa's second such book, *Treatise on the Story of the Bhikkhunī Affair* (*Bhikkhuni Ayeḥ Puṃ Kyamḥ*). By

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contextualising these arguments with the history of the Mingun Jetavana, I suggest that his reforms around female ordination can be understood as part of a broader project, that of opening up the possibility of enlightenment to both lay women and men through the practice of insight (*vipassanā*) meditation.

**- Seeger, Martin (University of Leeds)**

*Female Renunciation and the Historical Absence of the Theravada Bhikkhunī Order in Thailand: The Interrelationships Between Male and Female Monastics and the Creation of New Vinaya Rules*

In the absence of an established and officially recognized Theravada *bhikkhunī* order, Thai women have pursued other forms of Buddhist renunciation. Thai *mae chis*, whose spiritual practice is the most well-known and widely practiced form of female renunciation in Thailand, have existed for at least 400 years. *Mae chis* wear white robes, shave their head and eyebrows, and are also characterized by their practice of keeping the eight or ten Buddhist precepts. However, despite their long history, there is a dearth of historical sources on *mae chis'* monastic life and spiritual practice. Biographies of and substantial Buddhist texts authored by Thai female practitioners emerged arguably only in the 20th century and are generally quite rare, with a few notable exceptions.

In this paper, I will make use of some of the earliest available Thai texts that provide more detailed insights into female monasticism and soteriological teaching and practice, and the interrelationships between male and female monastics. In addition, by focusing on two Thai female monastic communities, I will also examine two different sets of monastic training rules that, even though based on Pali canonical precepts, were created in the 20th century with the aim of enabling women to pursue soteriological practice in a monastic environment. One of these communities belongs to a famous lineage of the Thai forest tradition, whereas the other has been created in the urban area of Bangkok.

**-Walker, Trent (Chulalongkorn University)**

*Khmer Nuns and Filial Debts: Buddhist Intersections in Contemporary Cambodia*

This paper draws on voices from a broad spectrum of Khmer nuns—including ten-precept *ṭūn jī* alongside more recent *sāmaṇerī* and *bhikkhunī* communities—to engage changing

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constellations of gender asymmetry in twenty-first Cambodia. Both traditional and modernist Khmer Buddhist teachings explicitly emphasize the imperative of children repaying a debt of gratitude (*gun*) to their parents. At the same time, Khmer culture features a normative, but almost entirely implicit, expectation that a meaningful life requires reproduction and child-rearing. Buddhist nuns from across the status spectrum sit at various intersections of these two narratives, and as a result are feared as much as they are revered. Recent trends, including temporary *tūn jī* status for teenagers and expanding opportunities for nuns to teach in Buddhist contexts, suggest that shifting patterns of female celibacy and filial piety are set to play out against nascent Cambodian debates over *bhikkhunī* ordination.