

The Structure and Curriculum of the Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya Institute of the Pongnyōngsa Nunnery in Korea

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Introduction

This paper is concerned with the Kūmgang Yurwŏn 金剛律院 (Diamond Vinaya Institute) founded by me (1932-), Abbess of Pongnyōngsa 奉寧寺¹ and President of the Pongnyōngsa Monastic Seminary for Nuns². The main purpose of this paper is to introduce the Diamond Vinaya Institute by focusing on its structure and curriculum. This paper consists of five sections. The first section addresses Korean monks' and nuns' struggle to maintain monastic celibacy during the Japanese colonial period (1910-45), as a broad historical background of the establishment of the Diamond Vinaya Institute. The second section provides a brief explanation of the educational system of the Pongnyōngsa Monastic Seminary for Nuns with which the Diamond Vinaya Institute is affiliated. The third section presents a survey of the main Buddhist monastic disciplinary texts studied at the Institute. In the fourth section, the daily and bi-monthly practices of student nuns at the Institute are examined. The last section

¹ The Pongnyōngsa Nunnery (<http://www.bongnyeongsa.org/html/intro.html>) is located in the City of Suwŏn near Seoul, Korea.

² In summer of 2007, seventy-two student nuns are studying Buddhist texts at the Pongnyōngsa Monastic Seminary for Nuns.

of this paper focuses on the roles of the student nuns at the Institute during the period of an intensive monastic training for female haengjas 行者 (postulants).

Monastic Celibacy in Traditional Korean Buddhism

Throughout the history of Korean Buddhism³, the bhikṣuṇī saṃgha has been closely modeled after the bhikṣu saṃgha. Their harmonious and collaborative interactions can be said to resemble the relationship between bhikṣu and bhikṣuṇī saṃghas in ancient India at the time of the Buddha. One of the most important elements of Korean Buddhist monastic life, which both bhikṣus and bhikṣuṇī saṃghas commonly observe, is celibacy.

During the Japanese occupation of Korea from 1910 to 1945, however, the traditional monastic practice of celibacy was severely threatened. This was largely due to the political support for married monks by the colonial government. Hence, the number of Korean monks who adhered to their celibate lifestyle decreased rapidly.

The colonial policy toward Korean Buddhism affected the general attitudes of the monastic community toward the Vinaya. Consequently, at the end of Japanese colonial rule, there remained only a few celibate monks who had continued to study the Vinaya.

In June 1950, five years after the liberation from Japan, the Korean War (1950-1953) broke out. In 1951 at the height of the war, I was a war refugee studying Buddhist

³ Buddhism first came to Korea during the fourth century A.D.

monastic disciplinary texts with two other nuns under Master Chaun 慈雲 (1911-1992), the most prominent Vinaya expert in modern Korean Buddhism. The texts I studied included: the Samini yurüi 沙彌尼律儀 (Precepts and Decorums for Śramaṇerikā), Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa, and Fan-wang ching 梵網經 (Book of Brahmā's Net).

In 1981, I studied the proceedings for a dual ordination for nuns and received Master Chaun's handwritten copy of the Sukyeübö̃m 授戒儀範 (The Guidelines to Ordination Proceedings). I was also recognized as the first bhikṣuṇī vinaya master by Master Chaun in modern Korean Buddhist history. One year later when the Korean Buddhist Jogye 曹溪 Order reinstated a dual ordination for nuns, I played a key role as an bhikṣuṇī instructor at the revival of a dual ordination for nuns with the full support from Master Chaun. With the revival of the dual ordination, I continued to serve as one of the three principal bhikṣuṇī vinaya masters⁴ at the annual dual bhikṣuṇī ordination platform.

Master Chaun's far-sightedness in educating Korean nuns and my pioneering efforts to study the Vinaya under his tutelage came to fruition in June, 1999 when I established the Diamond Vinaya Institute at the Pongnyōngsa Monastic Seminary for Nuns, the first of its kind for nuns.

⁴ The three principal Vinaya masters are: the chōn'gye asari 傳戒阿闍梨 or the preceptor, the kyosu asari 教授阿闍梨 or the instructor, and the kalma asari 羯磨阿闍梨 or the confessor.

Education at the Pongnyōngsa Monastic Seminary for Nuns

Myochōn 妙典 (1916-2003) and I founded the Pongnyōngsa Monastic Seminary for Nuns in 1974 within Pongnyōngsa⁵. This seminary is one of the five traditional monastic seminaries for nuns which belonging to the Jogye Order. With the establishment of the Diamond Vinaya Institute in 1999, Pongnyōngsa became a center for nuns to study both the Vinaya and other Buddhist texts. Two separate halls are designated for the two types of study, but both halls are located within the large monastic compound.

As with other nuns' seminaries, education at the Pongnyōngsa Monastic Seminary for Nuns is based on the seventeenth-century curriculum of the traditional Korean monastic seminaries called kangwōn 講院. Student nuns at the seminary live together in one large room that is also used for communal activities such as performing rituals, studying, eating, and group work.

The curriculum of the seminary is divided into four courses: Samikwa 沙彌科 (the Śramaṇera Course); Sajipkwa 四集科 (the fourfold Collection Course); Sagyokwa 四教科 (The Four Teachings Course); and Taegyekwa 大教科 (The Great Teachings Course). The curriculum for the seminary is split into two phases: the recitation and the advanced textual-study tracks. In the former, students study the writings of Chinese and Korean Sōn masters. At this level, the nuns are required to memorize

⁵ More than seven hundred nuns graduated from the Pongnyōngsa Monastic Seminary for Nuns so far. The seminary has produced nine bhikṣuṇī Buddhist teachers so far.

each lesson of the texts. They recite each lesson loudly in unison over and over again, rocking their bodies side to side, which is the traditional reading mode for beginners in Korean Buddhist monastic seminaries. Memorization is an important method of disciplinary practice at the monastery and demands the utmost effort from novice students. The recitation track thus aims to inculcate in the nuns the importance of self-discipline, which is central to Korean monasticism. The main method of recitation for beginners is focused on panmunsuhaeng 反聞修行 (lit. practice of reflective hearing)⁶ of the Buddhist teachings to penetrate one's mind. The textual-study track focuses on Buddhist scriptures. Rather than focusing on learning through recitation, students in this track read their texts silently. By reading and questioning the content of the texts, advanced student nuns are expected to offer their own interpretations of and insights into the texts they study by articulating the Buddhist teachings in their own words. This method is designed to help them deepen their understanding of Buddhism. It takes the student nuns four years to complete the entire curriculum required by the seminary.

The Main Texts at the Diamond Vinaya Institute

As the first vinaya institute for Korean nuns, the Diamond Vinaya Institute allows nuns to develop specialized knowledge of monastic disciplinary texts while training

⁶ According to the Shou-leng-yen ching 首楞嚴經 (Skt. Śūramgama-sūtra) or the Sūtra of the Heroic March Samādhi, the meaning of panmunsuhaeng is that one hears all sounds with one's nature and reflects on them.

according to the three-hundred-forty-eight bhikṣuṇī rules of the Ssu-fen lü 四分律 or the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya. The Diamond Vinaya Institute is housed in a small vinaya hall within the monastic compound of Pongnyōngsa. In keeping with the restrictions of the Jogye Order, the Institute only accepts a small number of student nuns: about ten nuns are currently enrolled. Application requirements are any bhikṣuṇī who graduated from a monastic seminary can apply for admission to the Institute.

Student nuns accepted to the Institute take two years to complete its curriculum. I teach most of the classes at the Institute. Because the majority of the students tend to come to the Institute right after they finish their training at monastic seminaries, they are familiar with the educational method of silent reading and developing their own interpretations of monastic disciplinary texts. In the first year, they focus on the Chinese Samini yurūi and Tsung-tse's 宗蹟 Ch'an-yüan ch'ing-kuei 禪苑清規 (Pure Rules of Ch'an Monastery), including some Chinese commentaries on the monastic discipline. In the second year, they study the Pi-ch'iu-ni Ssu-fen lü 比丘尼四分律 and the Fang-wang ching, along with the history of Indian, Chinese, and Korean bhikṣuṇī saṃghas.

The Daily and Bi-monthly Practices at the Institute

All the nuns at Pongnyōngsa, including those of the Diamond Vinaya Institute, rise at 3:00 A.M., long before dawn, to attend a morning ritual at the main Buddha hall at

3:30 A.M. They have breakfast at 5:25 A.M. also before sunrise. After breakfast, they have class from 6:30 to 8:00 A.M. At 10:00 A.M., they gather for a regular mid-day ritual at the main Buddha hall before having lunch at 11:25 A.M. After lunch, they read silently on their own until late afternoon. Evening meal is served at 4:55 P.M. and is followed by a regular evening ritual at 6:30 P.M.⁷ When the evening ritual is over, the entire class gathers in the Vinaya hall for a debate session which serves as part of their preparation for the next day's class. During the remaining hours of the night, they study individually⁸ until they go to bed at 10:00 P.M.

During the three-month long summer and winter retreats, the student nuns at the Institute perform on every full and new moon day by the lunar calendar the ritual of the Fan-wang ching and the ceremony of the Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa. At the end of the regular morning service at the main Buddha hall, all the nuns at Pongnyōngsa recite together the ten major and forty-eight minor precepts that should be observed by bodhisattvas in Mahāyāna Buddhism. This ceremony is led by one of the instructors of the monastic seminary who is appointed by the assembly of nuns, and who sits on a high dais in front of the Buddha statues.

On each full and new moon day by the lunar calendar during the retreats, the student nuns also conduct the Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa ceremony. Only those who have received the bhikṣuṇī ordination are permitted to participate in this ceremony. One of the students at the Institute sits on a high dais in the hall and recites each of the

⁷ According to the seasons, there are slightly differences of the regular schedule of the evening ritual.

⁸ Occasionally, the student nuns continue studying on into the night.

three-hundred-forty-eight bhikṣuṇī rules together with her classmates. The ceremony proceeds with a simple recitation of the Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa in order to keep these rules fresh in their minds.

One noteworthy element of this ceremony, at the end of each category of the bhikṣuṇī rules, is that a recitation leader does not ask her classmates in the name of the assembly of nuns whether any of them has transgressed the rules, or request whoever has committed an offense to confess it. There are two forms of repentance for a nun who has committed an offense: voluntary and non-voluntary. A voluntary form of such requests is performed during the regular morning ritual. In the daily morning ritual, the assembly of nuns at the monastery performs one-hundred-eight repentance prostrations together, reciting the Taech'amhoemun 大懺悔文 (Chants of the Great Repentance). In other words, the regular morning ritual of one-hundred-eight repentance prostrations is a way in which the individual nuns purify themselves. A non-voluntary form of repentance requires a nun who has violated a monastic rule to confess her offense and to perform her repentance before the assembly of nuns at Pongnyōngsa.

The Roles of the Student Nuns at the Diamond Vinaya Institute

While the nuns study at the Vinaya Institute, they also play an important role in training female postulants. The student nuns of the Institute are summoned twice a year by the authorities of the Jogye Order to teach sūbūi 習儀 (learning decorums)

female postulants who gather at major monasteries for twenty-three days of intensive monastic training prior to the śrāmaṇerikā (novice) ordination. The main goal of this program for female postulants who are prospective members of the bhikṣuṇī saṃgha is to teach them to develop steadfast faith in Buddhism and to maintain mindfulness in all aspects of their monastic lives, such as observing ten śrāmaṇerikā precepts, performing rituals, chanting, serving teachers, the formal four-bowl meal ceremony, prostrating, walking, talking, sleeping, clothing, sitting, fulfilling daily monastic duties, and so on.

Conclusion

Since its establishment in 1999, twenty-one nuns graduated from the Diamond Vinaya Institute. Several of them became teachers at the Pongnyōngsa Monastic Seminary for Nuns and have taught Buddhist texts to younger generations of nuns for years. Some of the Institute's graduates have devoted themselves to Sōn practice at Sōn nunneries. In March 2007, I appointed Chōgyōn 寂然 (1955-), one of the first graduates from the class of 2001, to be Director of the Institute. In April 2007, Chōgyōn served as an assistant instructor at the annual bhikṣuṇī ordination platform under my supervision. A month later, I transmitted my Vinaya lineage to two bhikṣuṇīs: Chōgyōn and Shinhae 信海 (1965-).

This official transmission of my bhikṣuṇī Vinaya lineage marks a significant achievement of the Diamond Vinaya Institute. For the first time in the history of modern Korean Buddhism, the vinaya line was passed down from bhikṣuṇī to

bhikṣuṇī. The establishment of such a bhikṣuṇī vinaya lineage signifies an official recognition of nuns' authorities and autonomy in regard to the bhikṣuṇī dual ordination within the Korean Buddhist monastic community at large.

Furthermore, the Diamond Vinaya Institute has inspired other seminaries to develop their own vinaya institutes. For example, a second vinaya institute for nuns was opened by the Ch'öng'amsa 靑巖寺 Monastic Seminary for Nuns in April this year. In May, 2007, the increasing awareness of the importance of vinaya study and the necessity of formal schools for it in Korean monasticism is clearly evidenced by the fact that representatives of all the existing vinaya institutes met to draft legislative guidelines for establishing and maintaining a vinaya institute in the Jogye Order. That not only bhikṣu but also bhikṣuṇī leaders were invited to this historic meeting attests indirectly to a distinct contribution that the Diamond Vinaya Institute has made to Korean Buddhism.