The Trial of Ānanda: Some Thoughts for Modern Times

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Abstract: At the First Council, held shortly after the Buddha's passage into nirvāṇa, Ānanda was charged with several crimes, including failing to ask the Buddha what he meant by "minor rules," encouraging the Buddha to ordain women, and failing to ask the Buddha to extend his lifespan. This essay examines each of these charges, asking whether their historical analysis might provide an avenue for the continuing evolution of the dharma.

Keywords: ordination of women, monastic code, prophecy, First Council, disappearance of the dharma

In 1998, Penguin Books asked me to produce an anthology entitled *Buddhist Scriptures* for its Penguin Classics series. The volume was meant to replace and update a book by the same name edited by Edward Conze, originally published in 1959, some forty years earlier. I had several aims in designing the book. Conze's volume had focused almost exclusively on ancient India, with a few selections from *Chan* and Zen. I sought to include more Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Tibetan works, as well as works from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. After submitting the proposed Table of Contents, Penguin informed me that because the volume was to be published in the Penguin Classics series, modern works—that is, works from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—should be removed. I disagreed but complied with the request. The volume, still over the twice the length of Conze's version, was published in 2004.

Rather than abandon the more modern works, I decided to publish them in a separate volume. In 1932, Dwight Goddard (1861–1939) had published *A Buddhist Bible* with Beacon Press. In some ways, it was an eccentric work; Goddard included some works of his own composition among the translations

of Buddhist texts. However, it was widely read and very influential, especially for Jack Kerouac and the Beat poets. I therefore contacted Beacon Press and asked them if they were interested in a book called *A Modern Buddhist Bible*, an anthology of works by influential figures, East and West, of the past two centuries. They were in fact interested, and the book was published in 2002, two years before the Penguin volume. In that volume, I included a selection from the works of Master Cheng Yen.

All of this is a long-winded way of saying two things. The first is that twenty years after the publication of that book, it was a great honour to be invited to deliver the inaugural Yin-Cheng Distinguished Lecture on Buddhism at Columbia University, for which this essay was prepared, both because of the eminence of Master Cheng Yen and her Tzu Chi Foundation and because of the eminence of Columbia's renowned Buddhist Studies program. The second thing I might say is that, despite the now common use of terms like "Modern Buddhism" and "Buddhist Modernism," there are reasons not to periodize Buddhism in this way. I hope to show that events from the earliest days of the history of Buddhism, or at least the portrayal of those events, provide much that is worthy to ponder for the Buddhist communities of the present day.

My topic is what is often referred to as the "trial of Ānanda," an extraordinary event said to have taken place just after—and in some sources, including the Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya and the *Dazhidu Lun* 大智度論 [Skt. *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra*], just before—the so-called First Council. The term "council" is one of the many terms that scholars of Buddhism have borrowed from Christianity; others include "monk," "nun," "novice," and "abbot." In fact, the term translated as "council" is *saṅgīti*, which literally means "sing together," and hence "recite" or "chant." This first council, therefore, was not an occasion to debate fine points of theology, as in the case of the councils of the Church Fathers of Christianity. It had a very different purpose.

According to the traditional account, it was held just a few months after the Buddha had passed into nirvāṇa and was called by Mahākāśyapa, considered the senior monk and one of the Buddha's closest disciples; it was Mahākāśyapa who had lit the Buddha's funeral pyre. Mahākāśyapa had overheard a monk named Subhadra rejoicing at the Buddha's death, expressing delight that he was no longer around to tell the monks what to do. Alarmed at these words and fearing that the Buddha's teaching was in danger of being lost,

Mahākāśyapa called a gathering of five hundred arhats to memorize and recite everything that the Buddha had taught before it was forgotten.

One of the monks who was asked to attend, the famous Gavāṃpati, decided instead to pass into nirvāṇa. Learning of this, and knowing the urgency of the situation, Mahākāśyapa issued an order that arhats were not allowed to pass into nirvāṇa—that is, they were not allowed to die—before the task of compilation was complete. Upāli, the low caste former barber who was an expert on the monastic code, was selected to recite the vinaya. Ānanda, the Buddha's cousin and long-time personal attendant, was called upon to recite the Buddha's sermons (to borrow another Christian term), that is, the sūtras.

Ānanda was the obvious choice for this task because he had been the Buddha's attendant for the final twenty-five years of his life, and because, as a condition for accepting the position as attendant, he had asked that the Buddha repeat to him anything that he had not already heard. Ānanda also had a remarkable memory. In the kind of hyperbole so familiar in Buddhist texts, he was said to be able to memorize and recite sixty thousand words and fifteen thousand stanzas taught by the Buddha without omitting a single syllable. Of the famous 84,000 teachings of the Buddha, Ānanda is said to have heard them all, 82,000 spoken by the Buddha himself and 2,000 spoken by other monks with the Buddha's approval.

There was an immediate problem, however. Ānanda was not yet an arhat. Knowing that he had to become one before the council was convened, he began to meditate. Meditation may be practiced in any of four postures: sitting, standing, walking, and lying down. On the night before the council, he still had not succeeded. Collapsing on his bed in exhaustion, he achieved liberation in a previously unknown posture, after his feet left the floor and before his head hit the pillow.

It was decided that the council would be held in a cave near Vulture Peak (Skt. Gṛdhrakūṭa-parvata), on whose summit the Buddha had delivered so many famous teachings. The council began with the vinaya, that is, the monastic code. According to the tradition, this code was not presented by the Buddha as a complete system but developed organically over time, as a particular event required that a rule be issued. For the first years of the Buddha's teaching—according to various accounts, five, twelve, or twenty years after his enlightenment—no rules were needed; those monks who have attained one of the four stages of enlightenment are generally ethical. The first rule was made when the

monk Sudinna had sexual intercourse with his wife, at his mother's request, in order to produce an heir for the family. At the council, Mahākāśyapa went through each of the infractions, asking Upāli a series of questions, including where the Buddha had proclaimed the particular rule and in response to whose infraction. This was done in the order in which these rules were established within each of the categories of infractions, beginning with the four that required expulsion from the order (sexual intercourse, theft, killing a human, and lying about spiritual attainments) and continuing to minor infractions that only required confession. In the Pāli monastic code, there are two hundred twenty-seven infractions.

When Upāli had completed his recitation, Ānanda noted that the Buddha had told him that after his death, the monks could ignore the minor rules if the saṅgha decided to do so. When Mahākāśyapa asked him which infractions the Buddha was referring to, Ānanda replied that he had not asked the Buddha. This led to a discussion among the monks as to what the term "minor rules" (P. *khuddānukhuddaka sikkhapāda*) referred, with some monks going so far as to say that any rule other than the four rules prohibiting killing, stealing, lying, and sexual intercourse was minor and thus could be ignored. Mahākāśyapa disagreed, arguing that in the absence of some specification by the Buddha, all of the rules should be maintained. This was agreed. It was a consequential decision, to which we will return later. With the vinaya now established, it was time to turn to the dharma, the discourses of the Buddha, known as the collection of discourses (P. *suttapiṭaka).* However, before Ānanda was asked to begin, he was charged with failing to ask the Buddha what he had meant by the term "minor rule." Ānanda then commenced to recite thousands of discourses, beginning each with "Thus did I hear" and providing the circumstances of each discourse, including where the Buddha was and who was in the audience for each teaching. The recitation required several months.

After hearing Ānanda's recitation, the other arhats found fault with Ānanda for four other things, thus bringing five charges against him: (1) failing to ask the Buddha what the minor rules were, (2) stepping on the Buddha's rainy season robe while he was sewing it, (3) at the time of the Buddha's death, allowing the tears of women to fall on his corpse, thus staining his feet, (4) not asking the Buddha to live for an eon or until the end of the eon despite the fact that the Buddha had said that a buddha could do so, and (5) urging the Buddha to establish an order of nuns. These are the crimes of Ānanda in the

Pāli version.[1] Other vinayas list other crimes: that Ānanda failed to give the Buddha clear water when he asked for it and that Ānanda allowed women to see the penis of the Buddha while his body was being prepared for cremation. In explaining why he did this, Ānanda explained that he hoped that by seeing the penis of the Buddha, the women would want to be reborn as men.[2]

There is much to say about each of these, from a variety of perspectives. However, for the purposes of this essay, we will consider only three: (1) urging the Buddha to establish an order of nuns for women, (2) not asking the Buddha to live for an eon or until the end of the eon, and (3) failing to ask the Buddha what the minor infractions were. This is the order in which these events occur in the life of the Buddha. However, we will consider them in the order in which Ānanda was charged, beginning with his failure to ask the Buddha what he meant by "minor rule."

The question of what constituted a minor rule seems to have remained a source of some consternation in the centuries after the Buddha's passing. Thus, in the *Questions of Milinda* (P. *Milinda Pañha*), the earliest parts of which likely date from the second century of the Common Era, we find the king Milinda asking the monk Nāgāsena about the minor rules, saying that if the Buddha had the *abhijñā* or supernatural knowledge that he claimed to have, why would he make rules that could then be rescinded later? That is, when the Buddha told the monks that they could ignore the minor rules after he was gone, was this not a tacit admission that he had been mistaken in prescribing those rules in the first place? Nāgasena, of course, says that this is not the case, that the Buddha was rather testing the monks to see if they would abandon the minor rules if given a chance. The monks showed their mettle when they did not.[3] And, although we do not have space to consider the topic here, the failure to observe what seem to us to be minor rules would provide the occasion for the Second Council, which resulted in the split between the Sthavīra Nikāya and the Mahāsaṅghika.

Let us turn to Ānanda's most famous crime. The story of the ordination of women is well known. The Buddha's mother died seven days after he was

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1 For the Pāli account of the First Council, see Horner, *The Book of Discipline*, 393–401.

2 For an early study of the first council and a discussion of Ānanda's crimes, see La Vallée Poussin, *The Buddhist Councils*, 2–29.

3 Horner, trans., *Milinda's Questions*, 198–201. See also Jaini, "Buddha's Prolongation of Life."

born. He was raised by her sister, Mahāprajāpatī, who was also married to his father, King Śuddhodana. According to the Pāli account, five years after the Buddha's enlightenment and after the death of his father, the Buddha visits his home city. His stepmother, now a widow, asks for his permission to become a nun. The Buddha refuses. He then proceeds with five hundred of his kinsmen, all monks, to the city of Vaiśālī. Unbeknownst to him, they are followed by Mahāprajāpatī and the abandoned women of these monks. They have cut off their hair, taken off their shoes, and put on robes. When they arrive, Ānanda sees them and asks Mahāprajāpatī why they are there. She says that they have come to ask the Buddha to ordain them. Ānanda takes her request to the Buddha, three times. Three times, the Buddha refuses. In general, when the Buddha was asked a question three times and refused three times, the matter was considered settled. However, Ānanda persists, asking the Buddha whether women are capable of attaining the four levels of enlightenment, that is, stream enterer, once returner, never returner, and arhat. The Buddha says that they are. This leads Ānanda to make one last appeal, reminding the Buddha that Mahāprajāpatī is the Buddha's aunt and foster-mother, that after his mother had died, it was Mahāprajāpatī who had nursed him. Given this, it would be well if the Buddha agreed to allow women to join the order.

The Buddha finally agrees to ordain Mahāprajāpatī on the condition that she will agree to follow what are called eight "heavy rules" (Skt. *gurudharma*) in addition to the rules followed by monks. Mahāprajāpatī agrees, only to have second thoughts, asking that the Buddha rescind one of the eight heavy rules: that a nun always pay homage to a monk, despite the fact that the nun has been a nun for a hundred years and the monk has been a monk for one day. The Buddha refuses to do so, Mahāprajāpatī agrees to all the rules, and the Buddha gives the order that the other women be ordained. However, he tells Ānanda that his decision to ordain women has cut the lifespan of his teaching in half. If he had not done so, it would have lasted for one thousand years. Now it will only last for five hundred years.[4]

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[4] Horner, *The Book of Discipline*, 352–59. What I have recounted here is the Pāli version of the story. For a comparison of the story as it appears in the surviving vinaya traditions, see Heirman, "Chinese Nuns and their Ordination in Fifth Century China." For a discussion of this story, and especially Ānanda's reminding the Buddha that Mahāprajāpatī was his foster mother, see Ohnuma, *Ties that Bind*, 86–112.

In the Pāli account of the First Council, it is perhaps noteworthy that when Ānanda was charged with convincing the Buddha to establish the order of nuns, he does not defend himself by referring to the fact that women can achieve enlightenment. Instead, he refers only to Mahāprajāpatī, reminding the assembled monks that she was the Buddha's foster mother, nursing him after his own mother had died. In the Sanskrit version, he adds what would seem to be an important point. If a buddha is to have a fourfold assembly (Skt. *catuḥpariṣad*), consisting of monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen, there would have to be an order of nuns.

Scholars have noted a number of distinctive features concerning the Buddha's interactions with the order of nuns. In other situations of bringing new members into the monastic order, as in the case of groups of ascetics from other traditions, the Buddha ordains them himself, *en masse*, with the famous Pāli phrase *ehi bhikkhu*, "Come, monk." By the time of the ordination of nuns, the procedure for ordination, set forth in the *Mahāvagga*, seems already to be in place, with the requisite group of monks performing the ordination. The original purpose of such a system was to relieve those who wished to become monks from having to travel great distances to be ordained by the Buddha himself, being ordained instead by local monks. However, in the case of the nuns, the Buddha is obviously present and so could have ordained the women himself. Yet he does not even ordain Mahāprajāpatī, telling her that her acceptance of the eight heavy rules had constituted her ordination. Nor does he say *ehi bhikkhunī*, "Come, nun," and ordain the other women. In the Pāli version of the story, he says that the five hundred women who accompanied her will be ordained by monks.

Quite surprisingly, although he sometimes refers to nuns, nowhere in the four famous *nikāya*s of the Pāli canon does the Buddha speak directly to an individual nun, although he speaks to individual women, such as his patron, the courtesan Ambapālī. Furthermore, in the lengthy account of the Buddha's final days and his passage into nirvāṇa, where so many matters are discussed, no nuns are mentioned as being present. This has led some to suggest that the order of nuns was established after the death of the Buddha, but prior to the reign of Aśoka, which likely began around 268 BCE; nuns are mentioned in his Bairat Edict (also known as Minor Rock Edict 3).[5] The problem is that there

[5] These points have been made by von Hinüber in his essay, "The Foundation of the Bhikkhunīsamgha."

remains considerable scholarly uncertainty about the date of the Buddha's death and thus also about the length of time between his death and the reign of Aśoka. This uncertainty is found in Buddhist sources. For example, the Sanskrit *Aśokāvadāna* predicts that a king named Aśoka will appear one hundred years after the passing of the Buddha. The Pāli *Mahāvaṃsa* and *Dīpavaṃsa* say Aśoka was crowned 218 years after the death of the Buddha.

The length of the interregnum is important here, for reasons that will become clear. For if the Buddha did not establish the order of nuns—that is, if the order of nuns was established after the Buddha passed into nirvāṇa—then the story of Mahāprajāpatī's appeal, of the intercession of Ānanda, of the Buddha's grudging agreement and, especially, of the Buddha's prophecy about the dire consequences of his agreement for the duration of the dharma, must be seen in an entirely new light, a light that shines far into the future and to the present day.

Scholars of religion, and especially scholars of Buddhism, have come to understand that prophecies should sometimes be read not as predictions of the future but as descriptions of the present. In the Buddhist case, an author may wish to heighten the importance of a particular situation of their own era by having it be prophesied in the distant past by the Buddha himself. In some cases, such prophecies are used to promote a particular text (such as the *Śūraṅgama Samādhi Sūtra*) or a particular figure (such as Nāgārjuna). More often, however, the Buddha's prophecy is more dire, predicting a dangerous future, a future that in fact has already come to pass. Sometimes, this prophecy is simply a lament. Sometimes the author of the prophecy will have the Buddha go on to set forth a remedy.

If we assume for the sake of argument that the author of the account of the ordination of women that appears in the *Cullavagga* knew and accepted the traditional Theravāda date of the Buddha's passing—544 BCE—and if we assume that, like so many other Buddhist prophets, the author was describing his present, then we can date the description of the establishment of the order of nuns to the last decades before the Common Era, that is, five hundred years after the traditional Theravāda date of the death of the Buddha. If we calculate the death of the Buddha as 218 years before the coronation of Aśoka, the Buddha would have passed into nirvāṇa in 486 BCE, placing the prophecy in the second decade of the Common Era. All of this is based on the admittedly questionable assumption that the figure of five hundred years is an accurate figure and not just a large round number. One factor in favour of its accuracy

is that among the many prophecies of the duration of the dharma, the figure of five hundred years is shockingly short.[6]

What is important for our purposes is that if we assume that the *Cullavagga* prophecy is describing the present rather than the future, then the author of that prophecy, writing after the order of nuns had already been established, was saying that because of the presence of nuns, Buddhism was essentially over around the beginning of the Common Era. Because this is one of the shortest of the many prophecies of the disappearance of the dharma, a rare prophecy whose time came and went some two thousand years ago, then we can say with some confidence that that prophecy was wrong. We will consider the implications of that below.

Thus far, we have described the circumstances behind two of the charges made against Ānanda at the First Council: that he neglected to ask the Buddha what he meant by "minor rules," and that he encouraged the Buddha to ordain women; one sin of omission, one sin of commission. Let us turn to a third crime, a most consequential sin of omission. Here is the story, as set forth in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, the famous account of the Buddha's final days.

Now eighty, the Buddha is frail, describing his body as being like a cart held together by straps. At one point, he and Ānanda go to a village outside the city of Vaiśālī to meditate in order that the Buddha can regain his strength. While sitting together at a forest shrine, the Buddha mentions that a buddha can live "for an eon or until the end of an eon." Here is the passage:

> Ānanda, whoever has developed the four roads to power [(P. *iddhipāda*): aspiration (*chanda*), thought (*citta*), effort (*viriya*), and analysis (*vīmaṃsā*)], practiced them frequently, made them his vehicle, made them his base, established them, become familiar with them and properly undertaken them, could undoubtedly live for an eon or the remainder of one. The Tathāgata has developed these powers, practiced them frequently, made them his vehicle, made them his base, established them, become familiar with them and properly undertaken them. And he could, Ānanda, undoubtedly live for an eon, or the remainder of one.[7]

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[6] On prophecies of the duration of the dharma, see Nattier, *Once Upon a Future Time*.

[7] See Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, 246. For reasons explained below, Walshe's rendering of the Pāli *kappa* as "century" has been changed to "eon."

Ānanda does not respond, despite the Buddha repeating the same statement two more times. Shortly thereafter, Māra, the Buddhist deity of death and desire who had attacked the Buddha under the Bodhi Tree forty-five years before, appears to the Buddha. Māra reminds him that after his enlightenment, the Buddha told Māra that he would not enter nirvāṇa until he had established a community of followers consisting of monks, nuns—his mention of nuns in the wake of his enlightenment seems significant—laymen, and laywomen who were wise, disciplined, and had learned to preserve his teachings. Māra tells the Buddha that that time has now come. The Buddha eventually agrees that Māra is correct in this, saying that he will pass into nirvāṇa three months later.

The Buddha then immediately "relinquishes his life force," causing the earth to quake. When Ānanda feels the tremor, he asks the Buddha why it has occurred, leading to a description of the eight reasons for an earthquake, including a Buddha's relinquishment of his life force. It is only then that Ānanda understands what has happened, begging the Buddha to live for an eon or until the end of the eon. But it is too late, with the Buddha reminding Ānanda that he has missed his chance, not only on these three occasions, but fifteen other times in the past, which the Buddha rather cruelly enumerates.

There is some question as to what the word kalpa (P. *kappa*), translated as "eon," means when the Buddha says that he can live for a kalpa or until the end of the kalpa. Interestingly, the Pāli commentary says that it means *ayukappa*, "lifespan." According to that reading, the Buddha is saying that a buddha has the power to live to the end of the human lifespan, which at that point in Buddhist cosmology was said to be one hundred years. In this reading, then, if Ānanda had had the good sense to ask the Buddha to do so, he could have lived an additional twenty years, from age eighty to age one hundred.

That seems a rather paltry power of the Buddha, one of whose epithets is *devātideva*, the god beyond the gods, gods who live for many millions of years. That seems a rather paltry power for a being who causes an earthquake when he renounces his life force. Indeed, six of the eight reasons for an earthquake that the Buddha enumerates are linked to the life of a buddha, with an earthquake occurring when he descends into his mother's womb, when he is born, achieves enlightenment, first teaches the dharma, renounces his life force, and when he passes into nirvāṇa. And we recall that in the sixteenth chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the Buddha revealed that his lifespan is immeasurable.

It is unclear why the Pāli commentator endowed the Buddha with such

a modest power. In the context of the trial of Ānanda, it seems doubtful that a charge would be brought against him for not asking the Buddha to live for such a short period of time. Indeed, there was disagreement among the schools and the commentators about the meaning of "eon" here, with some arguing that it meant an eon in the common sense of the term. For example, we read in the *Mahāvastu*, a work of the Lokottaravāda school: "Although they could suppress the working of karma, the conquerors let it become manifest and conceal their sovereign power. This is mere conformity with the world."[8] For our purposes, we should imagine that kalpa means what it usually does in Buddhist texts: an eon.

The Yin-Cheng Distinguished Lecture series has Buddhism and contemporary society as its focus. To this point, I have only discussed the very ancient past, the earliest centuries of the Buddhist tradition in India. Readers may well ask, then: What does the trial of Ānanda have to do with Buddhism in the modern world? I would argue that the three crimes of Ānanda that I have discussed—not asking the Buddha what he meant by "minor rules," persuading the Buddha to ordain women, and not asking the Buddha to live for an eon or until end of the eon—represent the dreams, perhaps the fantasies, of Buddhists, or at least some Buddhists, fantasies that have lasted for centuries, and until the present day.

As monks and nuns have tried, and often failed, to maintain the complicated code of conduct, they have likely wished, whether they have admitted it or not, that Ānanda had asked the Buddha what he meant by "minor rules." Indeed, they have likely wished that the Buddha would have told Ānanda that those minor rules were many. Any reading of Buddhist literature reveals a deep and troubling misogyny, especially in the vinaya literature. Thus, from the time that the story of Mahāprajāpatī's request was composed two thousand years ago, to Thailand's Sangha Act of 1928, forbidding monks from ordaining women as nuns, postulants, or novices, there have certainly been monks who have wished that Ānanda had not persuaded the Buddha to ordain his stepmother. And what Buddhist has not wished that the Buddha was still in the world to lead us to liberation?

As we look at Buddhism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we see, at least in some regions of the world, a turn away from the doctrine of

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[8] Cited in Jaini, "Buddha's Prolongation of Life," 551.

rebirth, as well as away from the rites and practices designed to ensure rebirth in heaven and to avoid rebirth in hell. For centuries, these rites and practices have been the primary concerns of the Buddhist laity and the primary responsibilities of the Buddhist clergy. Recently, we have seen a turn toward this world and this lifetime. In the twentieth century, we see the efforts of figures like Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947), Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–2022), and Master Cheng Yen 證嚴 (1937–) herself to bring Buddhism into the social arena. More recently, we see the meteoric rise of mindfulness, a simple meditation technique invented in Burma at the beginning of the twentieth century to help forestall the destruction of the dharma. That technique is now being used around the world, claimed to derive from the Buddha himself, but integrated into the discourse of self-help and into wellness regimens for weight loss, treating substance abuse, and control of high blood pressure. Some may decry this as a misappropriation of practices intended for very different purposes, that this is a dilution of the dharma.

Whether or not this is true, we must recognize that concerns about the dilution of the dharma have been expressed in Buddhist texts from the beginning. In the *Kāssapasaṃyutta* of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, the Buddha says to Mahākāśyapa, "When beings are deteriorating and the true dharma is disappearing there are more training rules but fewer bhikkhus are established in the final knowledge. Kāssapa, the true dharma does not disappear as long as the counterfeit of the true dharma has not arisen in the world. But when a counterfeit of the true dharma arises in the world, then the true dharma disappears."[9]

There is much to say about this passage, but for our purposes, we might focus on the Buddha's statement that, "When beings are deteriorating and the true dharma is disappearing there are more training rules but fewer bhikkhus are established in the final knowledge." From one perspective, we could read this simply as an affirmation of what is known from the history of the vinaya: that rules were made as monks entered the order who needed a code of discipline, with each deviation from decorum requiring a new rule. But the statement also calls to mind two things: the minor rules that Ānanda forgot to ask about and the eight heavy rules imposed on Mahāprajāpatī and

[9] See Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, 681. In the quotation, the term "true Dhamma" has been changed here to "true dharma."

the five hundred Śākya women. What effect have those rules had on the health of the saṅgha? "There are more training rules but fewer bhikkhus are established in the final knowledge." That is, was the huge number of rules imposed on women—three hundred and eleven for a fully ordained nun in the Pāli vinaya—a reason for the demise of the community of nuns in so many regions of the Buddhist world?

My focus in this essay has been the early tradition, the time of the *āgama* and the vinaya, without discussing the Mahāyāna. Here, I follow the teachings of Master Yinshun 印順 (1906–2005), who saw the *āgama*s as the part of the canon most suitable for modern society and most appropriate for promoting a humanistic Buddhism, in his terms, a Buddhism for the human realm (*renjian fojiao* 人間佛教).[10] He also believed, as most scholars do, that not everything called *buddhavacana*, the word of the Buddha, was spoken by the Buddha. But perhaps his greatest insight is that Buddhism itself, like all conditioned things, is subject to impermanence and change. It has changed over the centuries of the past and thus it can and will change in the future. With these as our principles, what lessons might we draw from the trial of Ānanda?

Let's begin with those minor rules and the restrictions on who can and cannot become a monk. Despite the long association of Buddhism and medicine, many who are not familiar with the ordination process would not know that those with a wide range of medical problems were prohibited from joining the order. Thus we read in the Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya that one who is seeking to be a monk must be free from the following medical conditions:

> leprosy, goiter, boils, exanthema, blotch, scabs, itch, carbuncle, psoriasis, consumption, pulmonary consumption, epilepsy, Prader-Willi syndrome, jaundice, elephantiasis, scrotal hernia, fever, virulent fever, one-day fever, two, three and four-day fevers, multiple disorder, daily fever, chronic fever, lethargy arising from fever, cutaneous eruption, spasmodic cholera, wheezing, cough, asthma, bloody abscess, rheumatism, swelling of the glands, blood disease, liver disease, hemorrhoids, vomiting, retention of the urine, fatigue, elevated body heat, burning in the chest, or bone disease.[11]

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[10] On Master Yinshun's use of the term "human realm Buddhism," see Bingenheimer, "Some Remarks on the Usage of Renjian Fojiao."

[11] Schopen, *Buddhist Nuns, Monks, and Other Worldly Matters*, 180.

In addition to exclusions because of medical conditions, there are also exclusions because of sexual identity, with a particular anxiety around those who are considered neither male nor female, especially the *paṇḍaka*, a term sometimes translated inaccurately as hermaphrodite, but which some scholars translate now as "queer."[12] In the Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya, ordination is to be denied to ten classes of beings: (1) a magically created being, (2) a male *paṇḍaka*, (3) a female *paṇḍaka*, (4) a person with diseased genitals, (5) a person with no genitals, (6) a person who has changed sex at least three times, (7) a eunuch or impotent male, (8) an animal, (9) a nonhuman spirit, and (10) a person from the northern continent of Uttarakuru (in the traditional Buddhist four-continent cosmology). Other lists of those to be excluded include hermaphrodites, understood as those who possess both male and female genitals, although there seems to be a difference of opinion as to whether those genitals are present simultaneously or appear and disappear based on the object of desire.[13]

In addition to those suffering from various diseases and those considered sexually deviant, also prohibited from ordaining are those who perform certain occupations, including carpenters, leatherworkers, washermen, bamboo-harvesters, and cartwrights, as well as slaves (Skt. *dāsa*), and prisoners of war (*āhṛtaka*).[14]

Buddhism has long had a reputation in the West as being egalitarian, welcoming members of all of the Indian castes, including outcastes or the so-called "untouchables" (Skt. *caṇḍāla*) into the saṅgha. We recall the story of the beautiful *caṇḍāla* maiden named Prakṛti who falls in love with Ānanda and whom the Buddha ordains as a nun. The story first appears in the West in French in Burnouf's 1844 *Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism*. It was read by Wagner, who made it the basis of an opera that he never completed.

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[12] For a detailed discussion of the term, building on the important scholarship of Michael Sweet and Leonard Zwilling, see Cabezón, *Sexuality in Classical South Asian Buddhism*, especially 373–451.

[13] For a list of the five types of male *paṇḍaka* according to the Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya, see Cabezón, *Sexuality in Classical South Asian Buddhism*, 377–78. The five types of female *paṇḍaka* according to the Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya are discussed on pages 434–36. For the somewhat different Pāli list of the male *paṇḍaka*, see 408–09. There is no standard Pāli list of female *paṇḍaka*.

[14] On prohibitions of the ordination of slaves, see Schopen, *Buddhist Nuns, Monks, and Other Worldly Matters*, 157–72.

However, if Burnouf had read the Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya, he would have seen that the *caṇḍāla*, the outcaste, is barred from ordination.[15]

How are we to understand these exclusions? The medical exclusions reflect the fears of an ancient society long before the development of modern medicine. The sexual and social exclusions represent the mores and prejudices of a conservative Brahmanical society. And all of these exclusions point to what appears to be the most common motivation for a particular rule in the Buddhist monastic code: the fear of offending the laity upon whom the monastic community relied for its sustenance. As we move to the modern day, we, the modern laity, feel offended by many of these rules, with their prejudice against those who do not conform to a narrow and outdated medical, sexual, and social "norm." Indeed, in modern America, many of these exclusions would be illegal under civil rights statutes.

But what can be done? Perhaps we can find an answer in the trial of Ānanda. For if we look to what the *āgama* and vinaya literature can tell us about their own origins, we might conclude, as some scholars have, that not only the order of nuns but the detailed ordination interview about medical conditions and sexual identity came into existence after the passing of the Buddha and that the elements of the ordination interview likely evolved over time. They are not, therefore, the word of the enlightened Buddha but the word of not yet enlightened monks, monks who are not established in the final knowledge, rules reflecting the prejudices of their day. Those prejudices cannot survive in our day. And so the minor rules might be ignored and the eight heavy rules forgotten. In the Mahīśāsaka vinaya, the Buddha says, "Although something has been authorized by me, if in another region it is not considered to be pure, no one is allowed to use it. Although a thing has not been authorized by me, if in another region there are people who must practice it, then everyone must practice it."[16]

But what about that passing of the Buddha? What about the other charge against Ānanda, that he failed to ask the Buddha to live for an eon or until the end of the eon? The account of the Buddha's last days is such a strange and fascinating text. How much of it should be considered historically true? There

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15 For a detailed study of the issue, see Silk, "Indian Buddhist Attitudes toward Outcastes."

16 Jaworski, "Le section de la nourriture dans la vinaya des mahīśāsaka," cited in Schopen, *Buddhist Monks and Business Matters*, 194.

are so many questions to consider. Here, for example, we find the story of the Buddha's final meal. Why would the tradition have the noble Buddha suffer from an ignoble bout of dysentery if it were not true? What is the source of his elaborate instructions for how his body is to be cremated? Would he really have recommended pilgrimage to the places of his birth, enlightenment, first teaching, and death on his deathbed, or was that added to the text later as an advertisement for already existing pilgrimage sites? And what of his claim that he could essentially live forever and Ānanda's failure to ask him to do so?

Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664) is said to have told his biographer that when he saw the statue of Śākyamuni in the temple at Bodh Gayā, he prostrated before it and said to himself, his eyes filled with tears, "I don't know where I was born in the course of transmigration at the time when the Buddha attained enlightenment. I could only come here at this time, the end of the Image [Semblance] Period. It makes me think that my karmic hindrances must have been very heavy."[17] A common refrain in Buddhist literature is the lament of those of us who were wandering elsewhere in saṃsāra when the Buddha was preaching the dharma in northern India, prevented by our karma from finding a place in his circle of followers. How we wish that the Buddha could have lived until the end of our eon. If only Ānanda had asked him to stay. The crimes of kind Ānanda here represent the lament of all Buddhists. As he said, he must have been distracted by Māra. Aren't we all?

Is it the case that basic elements of human longing, and hence religion, are somehow encoded in the human psyche, and that "early Buddhism," with its renowned negations of self, of purity, and of immortality, challenged those deep longings, going so far as to identify those longings as the source of human suffering? And is it the case that those longings are so powerful that they eventually made their way into the tradition, in the form of the Mahāyāna? The *prajñāpāramitā* sūtras confront the problem of impurity and contamination by removing attachment not so much through repulsion as through illusion. The tathāgatagarbha literature goes further, restoring self with its reversal of the four inverted views, describing the buddha nature as pure, permanent, blissful, and self. The *Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra* offers assurances of immortality, heaven, and universal salvation. The *Sūtra of Brahmā's Net* seems to suggest that monks

[17] Li, trans., *A Biography of the Tripiṭaka Master of the Great Ci'en Monastery of the Great Tang Dynasty*, 89–90.

and nuns can ignore the minor rules and simply follow the bodhisattva precepts. And the *Lotus Sūtra* solves the dilemma of the death and disappearance of the founder with the Buddha's proclamation that his lifespan is immeasurable and that he only pretended to die.[18] If the tradition has changed and, at least according to many, changed so successfully over its long history, are further changes in store?

Let me conclude with one final question. If we decide to make history the basis of our Buddhist practice, can we consider the most radical claim? This is a claim that has been made from time to time over the past two centuries and to the present day. It is the claim that the Buddha may not have been a historical figure, or at least a figure whose history can be known, that he is instead the product of the most profound and meaningful inventions of the human imagination. If that is the case, then we can forgive Ānanda for his crimes. For if the Buddha is the most exalted creation of the human imagination, then the Buddha will live for an eon or until the end of the eon. As we read in the sūtras, "You should know that for bodhisattva *mahāsattva*s who yearn for the dharma, the Tathāgata never passes into *parinirvāṇa* and the true dharma never disappears."[19]

Bibliography

Abbreviations

Toh *A Complete Catalogue of the Tibetan Buddhist Canons (Bkaḥ-ḥgyur and Bstan-ḥgyur)*. See Bibliography, Ui, Suzuki, Kanakura, and Tada, eds.

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[18] On the immortality of the Buddha, see Radich, "Immortal Buddhas and their indestructible embodiments."

[19] *Sarvapuṇyasamuccayasamādhi Sūtra*, Toh. 134, 96b1–2. Translated by the author.

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