

The Revival of a Dual Ordination for Korean Buddhist Nuns in the Modern Period

by Inyoung Chung (*Bhikṣuṇī* Sukdham)

Religious Studies at University of Virginia

Introduction

This paper is mainly concerned with the historical revival of a dual ordination for Korean Buddhist nuns¹ in the modern period. It focuses on the revival of a dual ordination for Korean nuns as well as some issues on the observance of the ordination procedure required for nuns in the *Ssu-fen lü* 四分律 or the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya* in the Korean historical and social contexts. This paper is divided into four parts. In the first part, I discuss *Vinaya* Master Chaun's 慈雲 (1911-1992)² dedication tutoring Buddhist monastic disciplinary texts to Korean monks and nuns. In the second part, I examine the role of Master Chaun in reviving the practice of a dual ordination and the historical revival ordination for Korean nuns in October, 1982. In the third part, I investigate some issues related to observe the procedure of

¹ There are not many historical records that indicate how a dual ordination for Korean nuns was carried out in early Korean Buddhist history, but Korean Buddhist scholars agree that a legitimate Korean *bhikṣuṇī* lineage was established in accordance with a proper procedure of a dual ordination by the sixth century in Korea. For more information on the history of a dual ordination for Korean nuns, see Hyangsoon Yi, "Vicissitudes in the Order of Buddhist Nuns during Chosŏn Korea" in this book.

² For more information on Chaun, see Robert E. Buswell, Jr., *The Zen Monastic Experience: Buddhist Practice in Contemporary Korea* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 90.

a dual ordination for nuns as they were encountered in October, 1982. In the last part, I focus my discussion on Korean nuns' struggle to maintain the autonomy of a dual ordination for nuns.

Master Chaun's Dedication Tutoring Buddhist Monastic Disciplinary Texts to Korean Monks and Nuns

The end of the Chosŏn 朝鮮 period (1392-1910) of Korean history was marked by the beginning of the period of Japanese colonial rule (1910-1945). During this tumultuous thirty-six year period, the Japanese Buddhist practice of married monks permeated Korean monasticism, and the number of monks who adhered to the traditional Korean monastic practice of celibacy dwindled rapidly.³ Yet Korean nuns remained celibates throughout Japanese colonial rule and were ordained as *bhikṣuṇīs* under the *bhikṣu saṃgha* alone. Profoundly distressed by what he considered to be the degeneration of Buddhism, the negligence of *Vinaya* study, and the poor observance of the monastic rules, Master Chaun vowed to restore the practice of celibacy to Korean monasticism and dedicated his life to *Vinaya* study.⁴ After the Korean liberation from the Japanese, celibate monks and nuns anxiously wished to restore their earlier celibate monastic tradition, but the devastating Korean

³ For more information on Korean Buddhism during Japanese colonial rule, see Buswell, Jr., *The Zen Monastic Experience: Buddhist Practice in Contemporary Korea*, pp. 25-36.

⁴ Interview with Myoŏm at the Pongnyŏngsa Nunnery in Korea in July, 2004. Myoŏm is the abbess at the Pongnyŏngsa Nunnery, President of the Pongnyŏngsa Monastic Seminary for Nuns, and Rector of the Diamond *Vinaya* Institute at Pongnyŏngsa. For more information on Myoŏm and Pongnyŏngsa, see the website (<http://www.bongnyeongsa.org/html/intro.html>).

War (1950-53) prevented immediate action. Many Korean monks and nuns were forced to take refuge at monasteries and nunneries in the area of Pusan, the temporary wartime capital of South Korea.⁵ As a refugee, Master Chaun tutored a small group of monks and nuns at T'ongdosa 通度寺 with Buddhist monastic disciplinary texts. At the height of the Korean War in 1951, three nuns, Myoöm 妙嚴 (1932-), Myoyöng 妙英 (?–1955), and Myohi 妙熙 (1935–2007),⁶ began to study Buddhist monastic disciplinary texts under Master Chaun. The three nuns shared a room at the Pot'aam 普陀庵 Nunnery near T'ongdosa and commuted on foot to the monastery to study the Buddhist precepts under Master Chaun. Food was scarce than ever during the war. The three nuns often alleviated their hunger with their very meager supplies of food. They routinely gathered firewood in the mountains and begged for alms in the local villages. The copies of Buddhist monastic disciplinary texts were also scarce at war. Master Chaun provided with them for the three nuns.⁷ The three nuns started with learning the precepts and regulations of the Chinese *Samini yurüi* 沙彌尼律儀 (Precepts and Decorums for *Śrāmaṇerikā*) and continued to study the *Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa* of the *Ssu-fen lü* and the *Fan-wang ching* 梵網經 (Book of *Brahmā's* Net). These Chinese monastic disciplinary texts written in literary Chinese were not yet translated into Korean, nor did the three nuns have the ability to read literary Chinese at the time. As is the customary practice of Korean monks

⁵ Wörun, "Unhō nosa üi p'yönyong (Some Memories of Master Unhō)," in *Myöngsöng sünim kohüi kinyöm pulgyohak nonmunjip* (A Collection of Essays in Buddhist Studies: A Festschrift for Venerable Myöngsöng in Honor of Her Seventieth Birthday), ed. Myöngsöng sünim kohüi kinyöm nonmunjip kanhaengwiwönhoe (Seoul: Pulkwang ch'ulp'anbu, 2000), p. 546.

⁶ For more information on Myohi, see Martine Batchelor, "Myohi Sunim: A Korean Nun Teacher of Elderly Women," in *Women's Buddhism Buddhism's Women*, ed. Ellison Banks Findly (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), pp. 278-9.

⁷ Interview with Myoöm at Pongnyöngsa in June, 2005.

and nuns, Master Chaun sat down cross-legged on the floor of his room before the three nuns and translated word by word each of the three-hundred-forty-eight *bhikṣuṇī* rules in the *Bhikṣuṇī Prātimokṣa*, as well as the ten major and forty-eight minor *bodhisattva* precepts in the *Fan-wang ching*. Because the three nuns did not even have small floor desks on which to place their texts, they put their texts on the laps and repeated word by word the Korean translation of each precept after Master Chaun.⁸

Although Master Chaun made great efforts to tutor the monastic disciplinary texts to the nuns, he never had them performed any menial task for him such as washing and sewing his clothes, cooking, or cleaning his room. Nor did he receive any financial compensation from the nuns for his work. In the face of Korean monks' declining adherence to the monastic rules even after Korean liberation from the Japanese, Master Chaun was determined to restore a tradition of monastic celibacy in the midst of the destruction and tremendous human suffering of the Korean War.⁹

The Role of Master Chaun in Reviving the Practice of a Dual Ordination for Korean Nuns in October, 1982

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

During the three years of the Korean War, all industrial facilities on the Korean peninsula were ravaged by intense aerial bombardment. Due to the destruction of the war, Korean Buddhists took decades to recover from the devastating losses of their literary, architectural, and human resources. In early 1982, Master Chaun, who was revered by monks and nuns alike, petitioned the members of the council of the Korean Buddhist Chogye 曹溪 (or Jogye) Order to reinstitute the practice of a dual ordination for nuns. In June of 1982, the members of the council of the Chogye Order restricted *bhikṣuṇī* ordination, proclaiming that nuns must be ordained as *bhikṣuṇīs* under both *saṃghas*.¹⁰ According to the new regulation, a *śrāmaṇerikā* who was eighteen-years-old or more must be ordained as a *śikṣamāṇā* under the six rules by qualified *bhikṣuṇī* masters. A *śikṣamāṇā* who is twenty-years-old or more must be ordained as a *bhikṣuṇī* under ten qualified nuns in addition to ten qualified monks, or at least five qualified nuns in addition to five qualified monks.¹¹

In 1981, Master Chaun appointed Myoŏm to lead a *bhikṣuṇī* committee that geared to prepare for the revival of a dual ordination for nuns. With Master Chaun's full support, the *bhikṣuṇī* committee held the First Korean *Bhikṣuṇī* Congregation for ten days in August of 1982 at the Chin'gwansa 津寬寺 Nunnery in Seoul. The abbess of Chin'gwansa provided all the food and lodging for fifty *bhikṣuṇī* participants of the First Korean *Bhikṣuṇī* Congregation.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "Piguni yebisugye piguni ka sŏrhanda (Lecturing the Monastic Rules for *Bhikṣuṇīs* by *Bhikṣuṇīs*)," *Bulgyosinmun* (Buddhist newspaper), 1982 (June, 20), p. 1. The *Bulgyosinmun* is a weekly Buddhist newspaper in Korea.

¹² I was one of the fifty *bhikṣuṇī* participants of the First Korean *Bhikṣuṇī* Congregation at the Chin'gwansa Nunnery in August, 1982.

Between October 15th and 20th of 1982, for the first time in the modern Korean Buddhist history, the three principal and seven witnessing *bhikṣuṇī* masters chosen by the First Korean *Bhikṣuṇī* Congregation held a historic revival of a dual ordination for nuns at the Taesöngam 大成庵 Nunnery near Pömösa 梵魚寺 in Pusan. While monks held their ordination platform at Pömösa, nuns performed their ordination ceremony separately at Taesöngam. Of the three principle *bhikṣuṇī* masters at this revival of a dual ordination, Chönghaeng 淨行 (1902-2000) was the *chön'gye asari* 傳戒阿闍梨 or the preceptor, Myoöm was the *kyosu asari* 教授阿闍梨 or the instructor, and Myöngsöng 明星 (1931-) was the *kalma asari* 羯磨阿闍梨 or the confessor.¹³ Master Chaun single-handedly provided all expenses for the revival of a dual ordination for nuns with money donated by his devotees. During the entire ordination proceedings for nuns at Taesöngam, he was present to ensure that every step of the ordination procedure for nuns was performed properly.¹⁴

At the beginning of the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination ceremony at Taesöngam, the prospective *bhikṣuṇīs* verified their physical states and spiritual capacities with the confessor, and then again with ten *bhikṣuṇī* masters. Myoöm as instructor delivered on lectures *bhikṣuṇī* rules in the *Ssu-fen lü* to the prospective *bhikṣuṇīs* twice a day during the six-day intensive monastic training for nuns until all the three-hundred-forty-eight *bhikṣuṇī* rules had been covered. On the last day of the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination ceremony at the nunnery, the ten *bhikṣuṇī* masters and the prospective *bhikṣuṇīs*

¹³ "Pömösa sugyesallimsö 6paek14 myöng sugye (The Ordination Platform at Pömösa for Six-Hundred- Fourteen Monks and Nuns)," *Bulgyosinmun*, 1982 (Oct. 24), p. 1.

¹⁴ Interview with Myoöm at Pongnyöngsa in June, 2005.

walked to Pömösa and completed the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination under ten *bhikṣu* and ten *bhikṣuṇī* masters.¹⁵

Some Issues Related to Observe the Procedure of a Dual Ordination for Korean Nuns in October, 1982

At the revival of a dual ordination for Korean nuns in October, 1982, the authorities of the ordination platform had nuns ordained as both *śikṣamāṇās* and *bhikṣuṇīs* within one week. According to the *Vinaya*, nuns must be ordained as *bhikṣuṇīs* after two-year *śikṣamāṇā* training under the six rules. Nonetheless, preparing for the revival of a dual ordination for nuns was a mind-boggling procedure for the authorities of the ordination platform. The authorities were faced with a shortage of finances as well as a lack of *bhikṣuṇī vinaya* masters. Other difficulties including finding a nunnery located near a major monastery, choosing ten qualified *bhikṣuṇī* masters, setting the dates of the ordination ceremony, and gathering ten *bhikṣu* and ten *bhikṣuṇī* masters for the fixed period of the ordination ceremony. It was practically impossible to fulfill all of required regulations of a dual ordination for nuns as specified in the *Vinaya* at the time.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

After carefully scrutinizing the qualifications of the prospective *bhikṣuṇīs*, the authorities of the ordination platform selected one-hundred-eighty-nine nuns, all of whom had spent their monastic lives as *śrāmaṇerikās* for years, to be ordained as *śikṣamāṇās* and *bhikṣuṇīs* within one week.¹⁷ The revival of a dual ordination for Korean nuns in October of 1982 was as if a baby took the first step, but it was a step with a hope to work on accomplishing all of the regulations specified for nuns in the *Vinaya* in years to come.

Korean Nuns' Struggle to Maintain the Autonomy of a Dual Ordination for Nuns

Since the revival of the practice of a dual ordination for nuns in 1982, the Chogye Order has continuously worked to fulfill the regulations of the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination in the *Ssu-fen lü*. After Master Chaun's death in 1992, a new generation of young monks has presided over the ordination procedures for monks and nuns. In 1999, the current *bhikṣu vinaya* masters announced that a *bhikṣu vinaya* master would deliver lectures on the three-hundred-forty-eight *bhikṣuṇī* rules during a nunnery's ordination ceremony. Taking fundamentally the story of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī's ordination, they insisted that a *bhikṣu vinaya* master lecture on the three-hundred-forty-eight *bhikṣuṇī* rules during a nunnery's ordination ceremony.¹⁸

¹⁷ "Pömōsa sugyesallimsō 6paek14 myōng sugye."

¹⁸ Interview with Myoōm at Pongnyōngsa in June, 2005.

Citing the guidelines for a dual ordination for nuns given in the *Vinaya*, Myoŏm vehemently protested this decision, insisting that a *bhikṣu vinaya* master should not play the role of instructor during a nunnery's ordination ceremony. In spite of Myoŏm's protest, a *bhikṣu vinaya* master took over the role of instructor during a nunnery's ordination ceremony in 1999.¹⁹

This incident involving a *bhikṣu vinaya* master playing the role of instructor for the nunnery's ordination ceremony offers an example of how Korean nuns are constantly struggling to maintain the autonomy of a dual ordination for nuns under the male-dominated Buddhist tradition. Obviously, monks feel threatened by the growing vitality of the assembly of Korean nuns and fear that their monastic hegemony may be disturbed.

Yet, I would also like to point out that Korean nuns, including myself, have long been ignored when studying the *Vinaya* is considered, even though most nuns observe monastic rules more strictly than monks. For example, all the writers of the authoritative textbooks of Korean translations and commentaries of the Chinese monastic disciplinary texts for *śrāmaṇerikās*, *śikṣamāṇās*, and *bhikṣuṇīs* are monks. As briefly mentioned earlier, the lack of *bhikṣuṇī vinaya* masters was one of the most difficult challenges faced by the authorities of the ordination platform during the preparations for the revival of a dual ordination for nuns in 1982. Until the early

¹⁹ Ibid.

2000s, Myoŏm was the only senior Korean nun who is specialized on the *Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya*.²⁰

On the other hand, there has been no a shortage of *bhikṣu vinaya* masters since Master Chaun engaged in teaching the monastic disciplinary texts to monks in the 1950s. In the mid-1970s, Korean monks established a *vinaya* institute at Haeinsa 海印寺²¹ and began to train young generations of monks as *vinaya* masters.²² Most of the current *bhikṣu vinaya* masters are monks who studied the *Vinaya* at Haeinsa. Yet there was no *vinaya* institute for nuns in Korea until Myoŏm established a *vinaya* institute at the Pongnyŏngsa 奉寧寺 Monastic Seminary for Nuns²³ in 1999. In April, 2007, the second *vinaya* institute for nuns was founded at the Ch'ŏngamsa 靑巖寺 Monastic Seminary for Nuns.²⁴ If Korean nuns had established *vinaya* institute for nuns and begun to train young generations of nuns as *bhikṣuṇī vinaya* masters earlier, they would not have been stripped of their right to play the role of *bhikṣuṇī* instructor during a nunnery's ordination ceremony for the six years between 1999 and 2005.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ For more information on Haeinsa, see the website (<http://www.haeinsa.or.kr/home.html>); Charles Muller's website ([http://www.buddhism-dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?6d.xml+id\('b6d77-5370-5bfa'\)](http://www.buddhism-dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?6d.xml+id('b6d77-5370-5bfa'))).

²² For more information on the *vinaya* institute for monks at Haeinsa, see Buswell, Jr., *The Zen Monastic Experience: Buddhist Practice in Contemporary Korea*, p. 54.

²³ For more information on the Pongnyŏngsa Monastic Seminary for Nuns, see the website (<http://www.bongnyeongsa.org/html/intro.html>).

²⁴ For more information on at the Ch'ŏngamsa Monastic Seminary for Nuns, see the website (<http://chungamsa.org/html/sungframe.htm>).

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the revival of a dual ordination for Korean nuns in October of 1982 was performed under the circumstances of a serious shortage of *bhikṣuṇī vinaya* masters in the *bhikṣuṇī saṃgha* and several unfulfilled tasks regarding the procedure of a dual ordination required for nuns in the *Vinaya*. Yet the authorities of the dual ordination platform made an important breakthrough in the history of ordination for Korean nuns. Korean *bhikṣu* and *bhikṣuṇī saṃghas* have constantly worked together to fulfill the procedural requirements for a dual ordination for nuns as specified in the *Vinaya*. Moreover, Korean nuns have continuously strived to regain their right to act as *bhikṣuṇī vinaya* masters at the *śrāmaṇerikā*, *śikṣamāṇā*, and *bhikṣuṇī* ordination platforms of subsequent years. In September, 1996, the Chogye Order began to hold a separate ordination ceremony for *śikṣamāṇās*. *Śikṣamāṇās* must be trained in the six rules for two years prior to their *bhikṣuṇī* ordination.²⁵ Finally, in 2007, *śrāmaṇerikās* began to be ordained as *śikṣamāṇās* under qualified *bhikṣuṇī vinaya* masters.²⁶ In addition, faced with the persistent pressures of *bhikṣuṇī* masters, in 2006, the current head of the Chogye Order restored the role of *bhikṣuṇī* instructor during a nunnery's ordination ceremony.²⁷

²⁵ "Sikch'amanani sugyesallim hoehyang (Completion of the Ordination Platform for *Śikṣamāṇās*)," *Bulgyosinmun*, 1995 (Oct. 3), p. 2.

²⁶ Phone interview with Chōgyōn 寂然 (1955 -) in June, 2007. In May, 2007, Chōgyōn was conferred on as a *bhikṣuṇī vinaya* master by Myoōm at Pongnyōngsa.

²⁷ Phone interview with Myoōm in January, 2007.

After twenty five years of effort, Korean *bhikṣu* and *bhikṣuṇī saṃghas* have accomplished the observance of the procedural regulations of a dual ordination for nuns as guided in the *Vinaya*. There are still many issues and controversies to be worked out regarding ordination for Korean nuns. Korean nuns continue to challenge the practices perpetuating gender inequality under the male-dominated monastic tradition, with the hopes of achieving equality between monks and nuns in the near future.