

Present

The Voices and Activities of Theravada Buddhist Women | Winter 2011

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Venerable Kusuma and the Power of Literacy Education

Turning Back Towards Freedom

Wearing White in the West ■ Bhikkhunīsaṃyutta



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Turning Back Towards Freedom

November 2007: The First Recitation of the Bhikkhuni Patimokkha within the Theravada Bhikkhuni Lineage in North America

By Roseanne Freese

The Buddha established the Sangha 2,550 years ago to provide an additional means for men and women aspirants to attain enlightenment. The Vinaya, containing the monastic precepts, governs the vitality, health, and discipline of the Sangha. The Vinaya guides the actions of the individual and ensures the integrity of the Sangha as a community. The Buddha also called upon his disciples to meet every new and full moon to recite the Patimokkha or monastic vows as one community. Through this effort, everyone has an opportunity to review her own practice of the precepts in thought, word, and deed. This ceremony also allows the participants to acknowledge conflicts that may have arisen in the community as well as address any potential sources of discord. In addition, the Patimokkha outlines procedures through which the community can resolve disputes as well as providing the appropriate medicine for educating, nurturing, or correcting the monk or nun whose issue has gone beyond the bounds of individual review and correction.

Against the backdrop of two recent ordinations of bhikkhunis in the United States, one an ordination of four bhikkhunis in an exclusively Theravada dual platform ceremony by bhikkhu and bhikkhuni sanghas in Northern California in August 2010, and the second an ordination of five bhikkhunis in another dual platform ceremony in Southern California in October 2010, this may be the ideal time to reflect on another defining moment in the establishment of the Bhikkhuni Sangha in the West.

Three years ago in a small bhikkhuni vihara in rural South Carolina, just days before the Thanksgiving holiday, nine Theravada bhikkhunis, fully

ordained women, gathered at the Carolina Buddhist Vihara to recite the Patimokkha or Monastic Confession Ceremony for the first time in North America. The auspicious date was November 22, 2007. While Mahayana nuns have been able to gather at various Chinese and Vietnamese Pure Land Temples in California to recite the Patimokkha in recent years, it was not until 2007 that there were enough Theravada bhikkhunis in the United States to allow them to come together and perform sangha-kamma, formal acts as a community.

The idea of meeting to recite Patimokkha was first raised in the initial meeting of the North American Bhikkhuni Association in January 2006. Unfortunately, the North American bhikkhunis live far apart. Their small temples are located off obscure country roads and too often well outside of major airport hubs. Coming from communities with no more than one or two nuns, they could ill afford to be away from their communities. Several times over the prior two years they had struggled to gather, but sudden illness thwarted their plans. Inspired by the upcoming eightieth birthday of Bhante Gunaratana, abbot and founder of the Bhavana Society of West Virginia, one of the oldest Sri Lankan viharas in the United States, Venerable Tathaaloka, Abbess of Dhammadarini Vihara of Fremont, California, decided in February 2007 to commemorate Bhante Gunaratana's contribution to American Buddhism by sponsoring the Patimokkha. Without hesitation the venerable abbot agreed to support the event and immediately set about recruiting the support of the Theravada Bhikkhu community. Soon, Bhikkhu Bodhi, the famous translator of the Buddhist Canon and former president of the Pali Text Society, and Ajahn Pasanno, renowned abbot of Abhayagiri Mon-



astery of Redwood Valley, California, pledged their support as well.

The main challenge was assembling the quorum necessary to make this a valid gathering of the Sangha. According to Venerable Tathaaloka, a senior bhikkhuni with ten years in robes at the time, “The significance of the first gathering for Patimokkha recitation is that only a Sangha, with a minimum of five members, can do it. The ceremony can only be done on ground that has been sanctified by a Sangha for the purpose.” Motivated by events at the First International Congress on Buddhist Women’s Role in the Sangha: Bhikkhuni and Vinaya Ordination Lineages, held at the University of Hamburg in June 2007, Venerable Bhikkhunis Sobhana of the Bhavana

Society of West Virginia, Sudhamma, abbess of the Carolina Buddhist Vihara of Greenville, South Carolina, and abbess Tathaaloka decided to renew their effort to meet to recite the Patimokkha. Venerable Sudhamma offered to host the event during her temple’s annual celebration of the Kathina Ceremony that November.

Sri Lankan Bhikkhuni Venerable Sudarshana of the Samadhi Buddhist Meditation Center of Pinellas Park, Florida, the most senior bhikkhuni with eleven years in robes, was chosen to serve as the Patimokkha Master. With Venerable Sudhamma hosting, the other participants included Bhikkhunis Tathaaloka, Sudinna of Sri Lanka and a member of the Bhavana Society of West Virginia, Gunasari

of Burma and currently the abbess of Mahapajapati Monastery in California, Mudita of Germany and founder of Anenja Vihara in Rettenberg, Sobhana, now prioress of Aranya Bodhi in California, Sattima of Sri Lanka and member of the Minneapolis Vihara, and Poonsirivara of Thailand and abbess of the Buddhist Friends Dhamma Centre in Samut-sakhon Province.

A petite woman who stands five feet four inches tall, Venerable Sudhamma can chant with ease the Pali chants from her training in Sri Lanka. Indeed, in the four years I have known her, she has always looked to her practice as something more than cerebral and far deeper than a commitment undertaken merely for her benefit alone. With her kind support, I was allowed to interview the participants before and after their Patimokkha Recitation and to share their expectations and experiences.

the bounds of what is appropriate or suitable for a monastic and to prevent us from doing things or entering upon kammic paths that are not conducive for liberation or mokkha in Pali.

Venerable Sudinna (a Sri Lankan bhikkhuni who ordained as a novice or samaneri in 1999): I have participated in Patimokkha recitations in Sri Lanka for six years after my full ordination in 2002. When the ceremony is held, we wash our feet before we enter the meeting hall or “sima.” We enter the sima according to seniority based on the number of years of ordination and take our seats on the cushions. The cushions are placed close enough that we can touch each other if we stretch out our hands. We then recite the Patimokkha together, led by bhikkhunis who can recite it correctly. Everyone listens and rejoices saying “Sadhu” or “Excellent!” at the end of every precept.

“Patimokkha literally means to make an ‘about face’ or to ‘turn back towards freedom or liberation.’”

Since non-monastics cannot attend a Patimokkha ceremony, can you describe what happens during the ceremony?

Venerable Tathaaloka: This ceremony can happen anytime. The Patimokkha is the list of precepts of the Buddhist Monastic Discipline that we receive when we are fully ordained. We are asked to have confessed any infractions or precepts broken before participating in the recitation or commit the offence of deliberately and intentionally lying, something the Buddha spoke of as an obstacle or hindrance on the Path of one who seeks to know Truth. Thus, all who gather together for the Patimokkha recitation should be pure in the precepts. Patimokkha literally means to make an “about face” or to “turn back towards freedom or liberation.”

Like coming upon a boundary, the Patimokkha precepts are meant to keep us from going out of

Venerable Sudhamma: We bhikkhunis hold 311 rules; some are complicated and include many sub-rules. Yet the Buddha also said that one cannot confess to someone who shares a mutual offense. That complicates things. Even simple rules can be unexpectedly difficult to maintain consistently. For example, the rule against being away from one’s robes overnight can be easily blown by leaving a robe in your room when going for pre-dawn meditation or checking the heavy outer robe in luggage for an overnight flight. In most cases, purity can be achieved through simple confession. Hence, before this Patimokkha, most memorable for me was the preparatory effort to double-check and confess any instances of rule-breaking to someone actually pure from the same offenses, and to remember and make sure no past offense was overlooked.

What does this Patimokkha mean to you in terms of your community and vihara?

Venerable Sudinna: The Patimokkha is not only for the individual but also for the community. It guides our behavior towards each other and helps to maintain harmony and peace without confrontation. Almost every aspect of monastic life is covered by the Patimokkha. Paying respect is an essential factor in our lineage. The juniors are bound to respect the seniors irrespective of their age differences, which is also a rule. This is especially meaningful in the modern world where showing respect is considered obsolete. The running of the monastery is not a burden as everyone willingly participates in sharing the work.

Venerable Satima (a Sri Lankan who ordained in 2005 and a resident of Minneapolis Vihara): In Minnesota we still do not have a bhikkhuni residence. We only have a bhikkhu residence and a temple. As

clothing], and the lay community needs the guidance and the teachings from the Sangha.

What does this Patimokkha mean to you in terms of your practice?

Venerable Sudhamma: Prior to working on this project of hosting our gathering, doubt had begun to creep in; the voice of Mara was pointing out to me, “I didn’t get into the holy life in order to be so lonely!” For a couple of weeks I began to seriously consider whether to disrobe. The day I began to work on putting together the arrangements for this program, turning my mind towards how to serve the bhikkhunis and starting to get in touch with them, my loneliness became a memory. The doubt had become laughable. This is just from getting into the preparatory work, how much more heartening will be the gathering itself!

*When the Sangha is pure and lives
in harmony with each other they
become a “field of merit”*

a single bhikkhuni living by myself, I feel the necessity to live in a community with other bhikkhunis. It is by living together that a strong sense of Sangha can evolve. This getting together and reciting the Patimokkha will make a strong Sangha. We will have each other to learn from and get help when in need. I also see the far-reaching effects that this will promote. We will not be individual members living by ourselves but members of a very dedicated Sangha living in harmony with each other irrespective of the distance that separates us.

Also, when the Sangha is pure and lives in harmony with each other they become a “field of merit” to the lay community. When the community understands this, they develop confidence in the Sangha. When they have confidence in the Sangha they come to them for guidance and teaching. Then there is mutual interaction between the lay community and the Sangha and this is of great benefit for both. The Sangha needs the lay community for their four basic requisites [food, medicine, shelter, and

Venerable Satima: In terms of my practice, the Patimokkha is my teacher, my guide, my refuge and my kalyana mitra. Kalyana mitra means “noble friend.” It is this that steers me in the right direction, keeps me as it were on track on the Noble Eightfold Path and eventually will lead me to final liberation. The rules are there only to assist me in my journey, not to catch and punish me when I make a mistake. The rules not only set the boundaries but also give me limitless freedom to function in this conceptual dualistic world.

Venerable Sobhana (an American bhikkhuni and current Prioress of Aranya Bodhi in California): The Buddha said that the good friend is not half the holy life, but the entirety of the holy life. It is clear to me that the dear relationships within Sangha fulfill several basic human needs. We are social animals. At least as long as we are in training, not yet fully enlightened, to be part of community creates the sense of psychological safety and nurturance.

Venerable Satima: As my nurse-maid taught me while

I was growing up, there are only two things we need to remember, practice, and cultivate as our ‘guardian angels’ two values: moral remorse and moral resolve – hiri and ottappa. Now I find that those two things she taught me help me to keep my 311 rules and not be overwhelmed by them.

What does reciting the Patimokkha means to you in terms of brahmacariya or leading the holy life?

Venerable Sobhana: Developing and perfecting our virtue or sila depends on relationships within Sangha. Questions about what is skillful can properly be raised during the Patimokkha, and we are encouraged to lovingly point out the errors of our companions in the holy life.

Venerable Satima: As I see it, the rules are for my own growth, for my own independence, for my own freedom and for my own happiness. When I see that I have made a transgression and when I talk to a fellow bhikkhuni who I regard as a kalyana mitra, about my transgression a feeling of relief comes to me. Then I am able to let go without any remorse. I feel pure and light and happy. It also helps me to be more aware of my actions and not do the same mistake again and again. This brings about my own development and progress.

Venerable Sobhana: For example, consider bowing. When I was with a full nuns’ community in Sri Lanka, everyone paid respects deeply and frequently. The laity paid respects to bhikkhunis and samaneris, samaneris with one year in robes paid respects to those with one year and a day. The little samaneris paid respects to me as a one-day-old bhikkhuni and so on up the line. These deep bows were always repaid not just with a dismissive “sukhi hotu” or “May you be happy,” or “suvapat veva” or “May you be well,” but with a veritable stream of blessings. At the formal respect paying with our teacher, she would give a dozen phrases in Sinhalese, and then reach for some few English phrases to benefit the foreigners, “Blessings of the Triple Gem, Good day, Good luck.” These mutual exchanges, the currency of respect and kindness, knitted our community together in a protective web.

Venerable Sudhamma: I am hoping that the presence in this Vihara of some bhikkhunis following

Vinaya conscientiously will give a model or example that will add credibility to my lifestyle. My supporters from Buddhist countries cannot help but question why I don’t act so “relaxed” about the rules as do many monks in the USA. Sometimes they speak up saying, “But can’t you receive the food today and eat it tomorrow?” or “Can’t you just take this money now?” or “Can’t you just go alone with that man who can drive you?” Then they add, “Venerable So-and-So does it all the time,” or “Venerable So-and-So said it doesn’t matter. So why can’t you do it?” I cannot respond by criticizing the actions of our good senior monks. But the scriptures are pretty clear and the benefits are clear in my mind. It will be a great help if this tension is eased to where supporters do not have doubt about the necessity of my Vinaya practice.

Venerable Tathaaloka (the most senior American bhikkhuni in the gathering): Thinking of the Buddhist way of life, I must consider its base: sila, samadhi and panna. Sila means moral virtue and ethical integrity, samadhi means focused or concentrated meditation and panna, or prajna in Sanskrit, means wise discernment or wisdom. In Buddhist monastic life, there should be unity and purity of sila, samadhi, and panna. In sila, to my current experience, there is no greater sense of unity in purity than in gathering for the Patimokkha. With trust and pure intention, this means expiating one’s transgressions to those who are pure, full acknowledgement and confession, the resolution not to further transgress, and then, the communal gathering together in that mutual purity, harmony and unity. In the Patimokkha, pure intention, pure speech and pure action are united, and affirmed in their unity, both physically and mentally. This may be compared to making a space very clean and clear, without breaches, and with an integrity that becomes apparent in both physical and mental perceptions. It is a fundamental part of the practice and its beneficent manifestation.

What does this Patimokkha mean to you in the context of the growth of Buddhism in North America?

Venerable Sudinna: This is a coming together of many bhikkhunis scattered in North America. They get acquainted and instead of trying to be critical they learn to appreciate each other. They could par-

ticipate in other programs, learn from each other, and find ways and means of sharing the Dhamma with others who want to get rid of their suffering.

America is materially wealthy, but that material wealth has brought much suffering to themselves as well as other countries. Many Americans are searching for happiness, which has eluded them so far in spite of all their wealth. Here Buddhism has a great role to play, for Buddhism recognizes the ills of the world, their cause, their cessation and the way to end all suffering. People assembled here will see for themselves the happiness that a spiritual gathering could provide. Therefore the recital of the Patimokkha could have far reaching effects that we may not visualize at present.

Venerable Sobhana: We hope that the monastic option will become a viable choice for American women who are prepared to deepen their practice. The current multiple crises in the world cry out for a more visible presence of renunciant Buddhists, fully dedicated to the practice of wisdom and compassion.

Most American Buddhists do not see models of female monastics. Or they see us women profoundly hindered by inferior status within the monastic Sangha. That said, the possible long term – very, very long term – benefits from establishing a Theravada bhikkhuni Sangha would be the holding up of a model of strict renunciate practice; the reviving the unique culture of strict bhikkhuni community, which is a little different than the bhikkhus' or monks' culture; and, the developing of a more universal model, where a nun can travel and learn from different communities and teachers around the world, as monks in Ajahn Chah's tradition now do.

Venerable Sudhamma: This is a benchmark of how far bhikkhunis have come and how far overall the Sangha in USA have come. In itself it means nothing, in that it does not create converts or greatly alter the lives of people other than the participants. Yet like a flag held up in wartime, it can have powerful effect. In ancient times, warriors on not seeing their flag would become doubtful. They didn't know whether their comrades were dying or in flight. They didn't know whether to hang on or to flee and live. On seeing their

flag held high, however, they take heart at seeing evidence that their side is strong and they press forward. News of our Patimokkha gathering is like a flag proclaiming strength in this territory. Monastics can take encouragement. Laypeople who offer dana and energy are going to be heartened to do more. Laypeople who wish to ordain cannot be told that ordination is a pipedream. Those American Dhamma students who consider the monastic life utterly irrelevant to the American scene will hopefully come to doubt their position. Finally, the Theravada bhikkhus are also receiving a strong signal and that is to challenge them to do the same.

What was the most memorable part of the experience of actually chanting the Patimokkha?

Venerable Tathaaloka: The image that comes to mind is all of us sitting together closely, within forearm's length and this image arises with an incredible sense of mutual harmony and dedication. We have overcome so much to get here. Great feelings of anumodana or "rejoicing together" arose. I



Going clockwise, starting with the bhikkhuni wearing the bright yellow robe:
Ven. Poonsirivara, who would later found Suan Siridham Vihara south of Bangkok
Ven. Satima, associated with Minnesota Buddhist Vihara in Minneapolis, Minnesota
Ven. Mudita, founder of Anenja Vihara in Rettenberg, Germany
Ven. Sobhana, now Prioress of Aranya Bodhi Hermitage in Jenner, California
Ven. Tathaaloka, founder of Dhammadharini Vihara in Fremont, California
Ven. Sudinna, now residing at the Bhavana Society in high View, West Virginia
Ven. Gunasari, founder of Mahapajapati monastery near Joshua Tree, California
(in the center of the circle) Ven. Sudhamma, Abbess of Carolina Buddhist Vihara in Greenville, South Carolina



marvel at the amazing good fortune that brought us together, the mystery of the past karma we might have together, and the only barely-known karma of the incredible efforts of each of us in this lifetime that have brought about transformation.

I think of how far each of us has come to be able to gather together as a community in this way. All of us are incredibly strong individuals, all highly independent ground breakers, now we have come together in re-clearing and walking this path; a path that not so long ago appeared so heavily overgrown by time, by prejudicial false views, and by the forgetting of our great history.

Venerable Sobhana: Every part of our weekend together was memorable. In the Patimokkha ceremony itself, I felt a lot of serenity in the knowledge that we were carrying out the Buddha's plan. I clearly saw the genius of Buddhism, where our monastic Sangha knits itself together into a real community by uniting around the teachings.

The women who gathered here are quite diverse, each one a strong-minded and determined individual willing to be a path breaker. But in reciting the Patimokkha, we joined together under the direction of a supremely powerful teacher, the Blessed One's voice speaking to us through the Vinaya teaching.

Venerable Sudhamma: The recitation wasn't boring! The Patimokkha recitation covers 138 pages of Pali text. It's not something that goes quickly, yet the time did not lag. Venerable Sudarshana's voice was strained due to a cold, yet she patiently kept on going with steady determination, which I greatly admired. I also admired the steadiness of her rhythm, not charging hurriedly over the easier parts nor slowing down for the more difficult passages, as one would tend to do when reciting a lengthy, difficult text. After the recitation was finished, most memorable was feeling shiny as a new penny: no unconfessed offenses on my conscience and no wavering or uncertainty, but fresh, pure and confident. Pure! And I remember feeling warm and close to my bhikkhuni sisters, with much appreciation to them for coming together in this way.

How did chanting the Patimokkha change your understanding of the Buddhist way of life?

Venerable Tathaaloka: My understanding of the Buddhist monastic way of life is continuously changing and growing in the living of this life, moment by moment, every day. In the twenty years since I left home as an anagarika seeker, and in the decade since full bhikkhuni ordination, this way of life has never gotten old, or stale, or dull.

In Thailand and in Thai temples in America, I had the chance to observe, from a distance or from outside, the Patimokkha chanting of the Bhikkhu Sangha, even to hear it chanted over the loudspeaker! Its sound echoed through the rural village and city precincts alike. I noticed how it was where the observance of the Uposatha Patimokkha was done fully in meaning as well as in rite, as compared to how it was where it was done partially or in ritual only, and where the community had abandoned the practice. Now this experiential inside knowledge has radically increased my saddha, my trust and confidence, and my faith, in both the wisdom of the methods the Buddha established and recommended for the monastic Sangha, and in the Sangha itself.

Venerable Sobhana: I have more hope that a truly functional bhikkhuni Sangha will be found in America during the next few years. By truly functional, I mean that there will be places for candidates and junior bhikkhunis to receive proper training; fully Theravada upasampada ordinations will be avail-

able; those bhikkhunis who prefer to live in community will have suitable places; and the bhikkhunis will help each other in times of hardship.

Venerable Sudhamma: In the weeks before our gathering, I had mulled over certain differences among us that I doubted could be worked out harmoniously, and worried whether we could sit together without holding the same views on seemingly basic issues related to the Patimokkha. However, issues did arise. Meeting together on the day of the recitation, we each expressed our concerns and doubts about various rules and issues related to living in the USA. These sorts of topics tend to trigger opinions and debates among people. Perhaps due to cues given by our senior bhikkhunis, we had no argument, discussion, or setting forth of theories. We just listened to each other.

We then sat together for the Patimokkha, in peace. During the several days we spent together, old friendships were renewed, new friendships forged, and one fractured friendship, shattered years ago, made whole. Influenced by others' examples, my focus in the holy life shifted from technical concerns to being peaceful together, and my respect and faith in our whole Sangha of Bhikkhunis was strengthened.

If you were to meet another woman who wanted to go forth and become a bhikkhuni, what would you tell her about the Patimokkha practice?

Venerable Sobhana: The purpose of Vinaya is for our own spiritual progress, not to be a cause of distress. We use Vinaya rules as tests of our mindfulness, as we are able, and when it is impossible to hold a particular rule, due to modern times and situations, then we break it mindfully and confess at the next opportunity. I would tell her not to be discouraged by the difficulties in upholding the Vinaya, and not to focus on the imperfections or differences in how others hold the Vinaya.

The value of confession and Patimokkha is to protect from the mind's tendency to rationalize, to cut corners. We open up our judgments to the scrutiny of a wise colleague in the holy life. The rules that we are not well able to hold hang over us as a constant, gentle reminder, asking, "How can I organize my life differently, in order to make this rule workable for me?"

Venerable Sudhamma: If I were to receive such a request for advice, I would not say much at first. Out of the many laywomen who talk and dream of ordaining, few actually take the difficult steps to get started in that direction. Of those who get started, due to many personal and logistical obstacles few actually go forth into homelessness by becoming anagarikas. Of those who do become anagarikas, few manage to ordain as samaneris while others feel drawn back to the lay life or are overwhelmed by aversion to the pressures of monastic life. Of those who do ordain as samaneris, few stick with it for long, due to those obstacles, and the difficulty of enduring training that touches upon one's defilements. Of those samaneris who do stick with it, few will seek higher ordination and fewer obtain it. Out of hundreds of millions of people born in the USA, only approximately six have yet ordained as Theravada bhikkhunis.

Although the details about the Patimokkha are not likely to help a laywoman undertake the difficult initial steps, and may even develop doubt, I would say this much, "We came together for the Patimokkha in unity and harmony, and there is, therefore, hope for a growing USA Theravada Bhikkhuni Sangha into which you may someday enter. You will be welcomed." To other bhikkhunis, junior or senior, I would say, "Just do it. Travel a long way if necessary. Consider the Patimokkha gathering a duty, an honor, and a privilege."

Venerable Tathaaloka: For any woman who wishes to go forth and shares in the aspiration to fully live the monastic life, I would highly recommend that she come and see and know for herself what it really is, through the full living of the life. It is so good to see the Holy Life well lived, so beautiful, rare and precious in this world.

The Dhamma, with the monastic Vinaya, supports and provides the container and the means to live in this world while fully letting go. I would like to ask the aspiring woman who wishes to go forth, "How can I help you?" and offer whatever I could in terms of encouragement and support on her Path. It is so worth it.

Our world could well use having more women with higher training in morality, in meditation, and in wisdom. The benefits of the presence of women and men of wisdom, dedicated to peace and non-harming, and fully training themselves and becoming proficient in the Buddha's Dhamma and Vinaya are incalculable.

The holding of this ceremony means that a Sangha— a Theravada Bhikkhuni Sangha^a—now exists in America. We are no longer just scattered individuals, but have come together united and in harmony. This is the main significance of the Patimokkha Recitation Gathering. This is the first place that this has ever been done, in Theravada, outside of Asia. Following Sri Lanka, America has now become the second place where the Theravada Bhikkhuni Sangha has been revived and established.

The nine bhikkhunis returned to their homes in Sri Lanka, Germany, and the United States. Since this Patimokkha recitation, some have gone on to create new bhikkhuni viharas in California. Now that the seed of Dharma has been planted and now nurtured in the soil of the New World, let us be confident that our Fourfold community of monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen, from Canada to Panama, may all receive the benefits of the merit of these nine heroic, devoted, and wise bhikkhunis!

Roseanne Freese is a member of the Sakyadhita USA Organizing Committee and an occasional contributor of articles and presentations, including the 2007 Hamburg Congress on the Ordination of Buddhist Women, on the birth of the bhikkhuni lineage in China.



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93102-1058

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