Hiroko Kawanami


Suddenly, about 200 pages in, this book gets really exciting. This is not to say that it is not eminently worthwhile up to that point. The author is an anthropologist who has spent considerable amounts of time in Burmese Buddhist nunneries and indeed became a nun for a period in Sagaing, the famous town, home to a great concentration of monasteries and nunneries, across the Irrawaddy River from Mandalay. In the Introduction and the first seven chapters of her book, she gives us a thorough, judicious and wide-ranging description of the lives and circumstances of Burmese Buddhist nuns. But in the last chapter, she lets us see more of what goes on behind nunneries' walls and then it gets to be truly riveting.

Kawanami tells us at the outset that she has three aims: (1) to provide an ethnographic account of female renunciation in Burma; (2) to relay information she gathered as best she could about how nuns' lineages have formed and have transmitted knowledge over the past 150 years; and (3) to trace the ways that women have benefited by the chance to join a monastic community in pursuit of their spiritual aims, despite the very different treatment of nuns in Burmese society as compared to that accorded monks. After an engagingly frank account of the travails she had to endure at the beginning of her fieldwork—a very strict abbess subjected her to the full rigors of the renunciatory regimen, to Kawanami's great physical and emotional discomfort—she describes the range of ascetic roles, both lay and religious, open to women in Burma. Kawanami then relates the range of reasons nuns gave for choosing to give up lay life and becoming female renunciants. She provides a great many cameo sketches of individual nuns she spoke with. These short interpolations, like so many colourful illustrations accompanying a text made up of broad generalisations, attest to the continued power of long-term fieldwork to make ethnographic description vivid, even in this day of 'multi-sited' (often a euphemism for 'quick and shallow') fieldwork.

Kawanami relates the ritual process by which a woman becomes a member of the community of nuns, and then describes the disciplinary rules they must observe and the kinds of activities that characterise most nuns' lives. The latter may include service on behalf of monks, as well as to the benefit of other (often more junior) nuns. It may also imply textual study, group recitation of Pali formulas and texts, meditation, and other worthy endeavours. Welfare work such as is typical for the 'engaged Buddhism' prominent in some other Buddhist
societies, such as Sri Lanka, is not unheard of in Burma, but seems less salient here than elsewhere.

The number of nuns in Burma seems to have grown quite dramatically since the 1980s. Official efforts to keep track of, and tabs on, both nuns and monks also intensified during the same period. But legal tracts appear, in Kawanami’s description, to constrain nuns’ lives less than their own, internalised sense of their own discipline and dignity. These clearly keep nuns acting according to a high moral standard. Nevertheless, when Kawanami discusses relations between nuns and lay society, she makes it clear that much ambivalence is displayed in lay responses to, and treatment of, nuns. As in most Buddhist societies, nuns enjoy a status equivalent only to that of novices (males below the age of 20), not that of monks. They go on alms rounds but receive only raw foodstuffs, not the cooked food lay people provide to male religious. Sometimes nuns elicit only a certain disdain. Public acceptance and respect for nuns appears to be growing. Yet vestiges of a long-standing prejudice against women who renounce—when women’s roles are thought by many people to consist in providing for parents, a husband, children and other kin—clearly still remain.

Important to whatever elevation in public standing nuns have enjoyed in recent decades have been their efforts to gain access to Buddhist education. They have benefited in this regard from the avuncular assistance of a certain number of monks invested in teaching them, and from the history of scholarly endeavours undertaken by a certain number of prominent 20th-century nuns, both on their own behalf and on behalf of nuns whose training they promoted. Kawanami provides brief biographies of a number of these ‘pioneer nun teachers’, each of them appearing to be vigorous, committed and effective women who simply did not let the difficulties they faced phase them.

An on-going problem, however, is how nuns can sustain themselves economically. It is a reflection of Burmese attitudes toward nuns that nuns’ basic well-being is so much less secure than is the case for monks. One effective way for nuns to assure the viability of a nunnery is to team up with nuns whose strengths complement their own. So Kawanami describes pairs of nuns who spent years together; if one was an eminent scholar, say, the other might be a skilful organiser.

Further exacerbating the problem of nunneries’ survival through time is the fact that nunneries are apparently communal institutions in which all property is held individually: most in the hands of the principal nun, although not necessarily all of it. Monasteries are not exempt from the problems that arise at such critical moments as the passing of an abbot, but at least it is usually clear that they are institutions held in trust by a number of people and that decisions as to what happens next must be reached in concert. Nunneries are