

The Compassion Network

Buddhist Canonical Texts

Biographies of Bhiksunis (excerpts)

Canonical Source: Taishō *Tripitaka*, Vol. 50, No. 2063

CBETA Reference: [T50n2063](#) 比丘尼傳

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Fascicle 1, [0934c03] 淨檢

淨檢，本姓仲，名令儀，彭城人也。父誕，武威太守。檢少好學，早寡家貧。常為貴族童稚授書，兼教音律。積習滋信，屬遇大法，欣然慶悅——而無酬問之人。

後遇沙門法始，深通內典。晉世於城西立寺，檢助其營構。法始為說法，檢乃心悟。念其志力，隨借經論，尋其旨趣。

一日問法始：「經中言『比丘、比丘尼』，吾欲度彼岸，作比丘尼。」

法始曰：「外國則有，此土法未備。」

檢曰：「既同言比丘、比丘尼，何得法有異耶？」

法始曰：「外人云，尼受五百戒，必當有異。吾當問高師。」

高師云：「尼戒大同僧，細事有異，故婦人未能受此法。尼中常行十戒，可從大僧受。但恨無大尼為依耳。」

檢即落髮，從此高師受十戒。二十四人同時出家，於城西門外立竹林寺。既無尼師，共諮淨檢。行操過於高僧。

有罽賓國沙門智山，體度寬和，明哲雅亮，志在禪誦。晉永金（永嘉）末，出化來中夏。時人信薄，未知啟請。建武元年還反罽賓。後竺佛圖澄述其德業，智山深恨不見淨檢。

檢蓄徒養眾，清雅有節，說法教化，如風靡草。晉咸康中，沙門僧建於月支國得僧祇尼羯磨及戒本。以昇平元年二月八日，請外國沙門曇摩迦羅（曇伽）於洛陽立戒壇。晉沙門道場疑其緣起，難僧建度女。不能使阻，道場遂拂衣而去。

淨檢與四人於浮於水上船壇中，從大僧受具足戒。晉世淨檢，此土尼中受戒之始也。

當其羯磨之日，殊香芬馥，闔眾同聞，莫不欣歎加其敬仰。由是信敬轉深。善修戒行，志學不休。信施雖多，隨得隨散，常自後己，先人後己。

昇平末，羯磨日復聞異香芬馥，兼覩赤氣。有一天女從空雨雜色華。檢見歡喜，告大眾曰：「善理吾後事，吾將去矣。」手拂之，騰空而去。行跡如虹，直入天漢。春秋七十。

CBETA Reference: T50n2063, p. 0934c03

Biography: *Bhikṣuṇī* Jingjian (Pure Selection), Bamboo Forest Monastery of the Jin Dynasty

Jingjian's lay surname was Zhong, her given name Lingyi, and she was a native of Pengcheng (modern day Xuzhou, Jiangsu). Her father, Dan, served as governor of Wuwei Commandery (in modern day Gansu). From childhood she delighted in study. Widowed early and living in poverty, she supported herself by teaching reading and music to the children of noble families. As her habit of reflection deepened her faith, she encountered the Buddha's teachings and rejoiced inwardly, though she had no one to answer her questions.

She later met the monk Fashi,¹ who was thoroughly versed in the Buddhist canon. When he established a monastery west of the city during the Jin dynasty, Jingjian assisted in its construction. Fashi expounded the Dharma to her, and her mind opened to awakening. Recognizing her resolve, he lent her scriptures and treatises, through which she pursued their essential meaning.

One day she asked, "The scriptures speak of *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs*.² I wish to cross to the other shore and become a fully ordained *bhikṣuṇī*."

Fashi replied, "They exist in foreign lands, in this land the ritual procedures are incomplete."

She asked, "If both are recognized as *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs*, why should their ordination differ?"

Fashi answered, "Foreign teachers say *bhikṣuṇīs* uphold five hundred precepts,³ so there must be distinctions. I will consult my senior master."

The senior master explained, "The precepts for *bhikṣuṇīs* largely resemble those for *bhikṣus*, though certain details differ; thus women here cannot yet receive full *upasampadā*.⁴ Nuns may receive the Ten Precepts⁵ from senior monks. The only obstacle is the absence of senior *bhikṣuṇīs* to serve as preceptors."

Jingjian immediately shaved her head and received the Ten Precepts from this senior master. Twenty-four women renounced household life with her, establishing Bamboo Forest Monastery outside the

1 Fashi (法始): The specific monastic name of an early Western Jin monk that literally means "Dharma Beginning", not to be confused with the transliteration for Dharma masters.

2 *Bhikṣu* and *Bhikṣuṇī* (*bhikṣu* / *bhikṣuṇī*): Fully ordained Buddhist monks (*bhikṣus*) and nuns (*bhikṣuṇīs*) who have left household life to enter the monastic order (*saṅgha*), bound by the monastic code of discipline (*prātimokṣa*).

3 Five hundred precepts (五百戒): A traditional round figure representing the extensive body of rules (*prātimokṣa*) for fully ordained nuns, which historically numbered between 348 and 380 depending on the *Vinaya* lineage.

4 *Upasampadā* (具足戒 / 受具): Full ordination. The formal monastic rite of passage by which a novice transitions into a fully admitted member of the *saṅgha*, accepting the full set of monastic vows.

5 Ten Precepts (十戒): The foundational vows taken by a novice monastic (*śrāmaṇerī*), which can be transmitted by monks prior to full ordination.

west gate. With no senior Buddhist nuns to serve as preceptors, they all turned to Jingjian for guidance, and her conduct surpassed even that of eminent *bhikṣus*.

A monk from Kashmir named Zhishan—broad-minded, gentle, refined, and devoted to meditation and recitation—came to China near the end of the Yongjia era (307–313 CE). The people's faith was shallow, and none knew to request his teaching, so in the first year of Jianwu (317 CE) he returned home. Later, when the Central Asian master Fotucheng⁶ praised Jingjian's virtue, Zhishan lamented deeply that he had never met her.

Jingjian trained disciples with purity and restraint, and her teaching moved others like wind bending grass. During the Xiankang era (335–342 CE), the monk Sengjian obtained the ordination liturgy and precept manual⁷ for *bhikṣuṇīs* from abroad. On the eighth day of the second month of Shengping's first year (357 CE), the foreign monk Dharmakāla⁸ was invited to erect an ordination platform in Luoyang. The Jin monk Daochang doubted the legitimacy of ordaining women and attempted to halt the ritual; when he could not, he shook out his robes and departed.

Jingjian and four others ascended a floating platform built upon a boat on the river and received full *upasampadā* from the assembly of *bhikṣus*. She thus became the first fully ordained *bhikṣuṇī* in China.

On the day of the ordination liturgy, an extraordinary fragrance filled the air, sensed by all. The assembly rejoiced and honored her even more. She upheld the precepts impeccably and never ceased her studies. Though offerings were abundant, she distributed them immediately, always placing others before herself.

Toward the end of the Shengping era (357–361 CE), the fragrance appeared again during a ritual, accompanied by a red radiance. A celestial maiden descended from the sky, scattering multicolored blossoms. Delighted, Jingjian told the assembly, "Attend well to my affairs; I am leaving now." She raised her hand, soared into the sky, and her path arced like a rainbow into the Milky Way. She lived to the age of seventy.

[Fascicle 2, \[0937b08\] 僧果](#)

僧果，本姓趙，名法祐，汲郡修武人也。宿殖誠信，純篤自然。在乳哺時，不過中食，父母異之。及長，志思專密。機緣未偶，年二十七始出家，事廣陵尼慧宗。

果持戒堅白，禪定純深。每入定時，不覺夕旦。神情清淨，貌若枯木，時人不識，或生疑焉。

宋元嘉六年，外國海師難提致獅子國尼來京師，住福應寺。後問果：「此地曾有外國尼來不？」

6 Fotucheng (佛圖澄, 233–348 CE): A prominent Central Asian monk and advisor to the rulers of the Later Zhao dynasty.

7 Ordination liturgy and precept manual (大眾尼羯磨及戒本): Refers to the *Mahāsāṃghika* liturgy for nuns' ordination (*karmavācanā*) brought to China from Central Asia by Sengjian.

8 曇摩迦羅 / Dharmakāla (c. third century CE): A Central Indian monk who traveled to Luoyang during the Cao Wei dynasty (ca. 250 CE). He is historically credited with introducing the first formal monastic ordination liturgy (*karmavācanā*) and establishing the legal platform system for Chinese monastics. (Note: Chinese manuscripts of T2063 alternate between variants such as 曇摩迦羅 / Dharmakāla and 曇摩羯多 / Dharmagupta).

果答云：「無也。」

復問：「以往諸尼，從何二眾受戒？」

果答云：「從大僧耳。昔受戒權立誠信，如大愛道從八敬受戒，五百尼以大愛道為師。」

雖以此理答，心猶有疑。往諮三藏，同前所說。又問：「當重受不？」答云：「戒定慧微，重受為善。」

至十年，海師難提復從獅子國致尼十一眾，鐵薩羅等。先來尼解宋言，請僧伽跋摩於南陵寺壇，三百餘人重受戒。

元嘉十八年，果年三十四，曾一日禪定，行者意其死，以手觸之。行者驚懼，白寺諸官，令往臨視。見果身冷硬，微息尚存。將欲移瘞，果開眼言笑如常。驚怪者莫不肅然。不知卒時。

CBETA Reference: T50n2063, p. 0937b08

Biography: *Bhikṣuṇī* Sengguo (Fruit of the Saṅgha), Vast Hills

Sengguo's lay surname was Zhao, her given name Fayou, and she was from Xiuwu in Ji Commandery (modern day Xinxiang, Henan). Having cultivated sincerity and faith in past lives, her devotion was natural and pure. As an infant, she never took milk past noon, which her parents regarded as extraordinary. As she matured, her mind became focused and contemplative. Because conditions were not yet ripe, she did not renounce household life until age twenty-seven, becoming a disciple of the *bhikṣuṇī* Huizong of Guangling (modern day Yangzhou, Jiangsu).

Her precept-keeping was firm and immaculate, and her meditative absorption was deep. When she entered meditation states, she remained unaware of the passage of time from dusk until dawn. Her spirit was serene and pure, though her outward appearance resembled a withered tree, causing some to doubt her.

In the sixth year of Yuanjia (429 CE), a foreign sea-captain named Nandi brought *bhikṣuṇīs* from Sīṃhala⁹ to the Song capital, where they resided at Fuying Monastery. They asked Sengguo whether foreign *bhikṣuṇīs* had ever come before.

She replied, "Never."

They asked, "Then from which Twofold Saṅgha¹⁰ of *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs* did earlier *bhikṣuṇīs* here receive ordination?"

She answered, "From senior male monastics alone. In earlier times, ordination was established as an expedient based on sincere faith—just as Mahāprajāpatī¹¹ received ordination through the Eight Rules of Respect,¹² and five hundred nuns accepted her as their teacher."

9 Sīṃhala (執師子國): The historical Sanskrit/Pāli name for Sri Lanka, from where *Theravāda* nuns traveled to China in two contingents (429 CE and 433 CE) to establish a dual-lineage ordination.

10 Twofold Saṅgha (二眾): The dual assembly (*ubhato-saṅgha*) comprising both the order of *bhikṣus* and the order of *bhikṣuṇīs*, required for canonical full ordination under standard *Vinaya* rules.

11 Mahāprajāpatī (大愛道): The maternal aunt and foster mother of the Buddha, recognized as the first woman to receive ordination and establish the order of nuns (*bhikṣuṇī-saṅgha*).

Although she answered with this precedent, she still harbored internal doubts. She consulted a *Tripiṭaka* Master, who confirmed the same. She asked whether *bhikṣuṇīs* should receive ordination again. He replied, “The subtleties of precepts, meditation, and wisdom are profound; receiving them again is beneficial.”

In the tenth year of Yuanjia (433 CE), Captain Nandi brought eleven more *bhikṣuṇīs* from Sīṃhala, including Devasarā.¹³ Because the earlier arrivals now understood the local language, they invited Saṅghavarman¹⁴ to preside over an ordination platform at Nanling Monastery, where more than three hundred nuns received *upasampadā* anew.

In the eighteenth year of Yuanjia (441 CE), when Sengguo was thirty-four, she entered deep meditation for an entire day. The temple cantor, suspecting she had died, touched her and became alarmed. The cantor reported to the monastery officials, who found her body cold and rigid, with only faint breath remaining. As they prepared for burial, Sengguo opened her eyes, speaking and smiling as usual. All who had misjudged her were filled with reverent awe. Her eventual passing is unknown.

[Fascicle 2, \[0937b15\] 寶賢](#)

寶賢，本姓陳，陳郡人也。十六丁母憂，三年不食穀，以葛芋自資，不衣繒纈，不坐床席。十九出家，住建安寺，操行精修，博通禪律。

宋文皇帝深加敬重，衣服供饌。孝武甚加禮異，月給錢一萬。明帝嗣位，見面賞賜益隆。

太始元年，名普賢寺主。二年，授京邑僧正。威風肅然，斷決明果，義寄無私，枉者必申。性剛直，無所阿閤。

晉興平中，尼淨檢從大僧受戒，為尼之始。福應寺慧果、淨音等往問求那跋羅，跋羅云：「此土無二眾，女得從大僧受具。」果等後遇外國尼鐵薩羅，元嘉十一年復從南陵寺求那跋羅重受戒。非前不受，福善資增也。

好異者傳說妄相師效，儀矩稍虧。元輝二年，律穎法師於景興寺開講十誦律。聽徒十餘尼欲求重受。賢遣僧司往制其講堂，擊板告諸尼曰：「勿妄重受！」

且推檢讎悔，若年不滿者，使師集眾，啟請僧司。推簡得理，聽受。若默然呵之，知此可過。自此競受之風一時停息。

賢在任清素明察，才以理稱，下安眾賴。少欲無為，人皆嚴憚。泰始七年卒，年七十七。

CBETA Reference: T50n2063, p. 0937b15

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- 12 Eight Rules of Respect (八敬法 / *Garudharma*): Eight foundational institutional rules governing the relationship between Buddhist monks and nuns, requiring nuns to show formal deference, respect, and institutional reliance toward monks regardless of seniority.
 - 13 Devasarā (鐵薩羅): A senior Sri Lankan nun who led the second delegation of nuns to China in 433 CE, serving as preceptor to re-ordain Chinese nuns under the dual-assembly rite.
 - 14 Saṅghavarman (僧伽跋摩): An Indian *Vinaya* master who arrived in Nanjing in 433 CE and presided over the dual-assembly re-ordination of Chinese nuns at Nanling Monastery.

Biography: *Bhikṣuṇī* Baoxian (Treasured Worthiness), Universal Worthy Monastery

Baoxian's lay surname was Chen, and she was from Chen Commandery (modern day Zhoukou, Henan). At sixteen, grieving her mother's death, she abstained from grains for three years, living on arrowroot and taro she cultivated herself. She wore simple clothing and slept without a bed or mat. At nineteen she left home and lived at Jian'an Monastery, practicing diligently and mastering meditation and monastic discipline.

Emperor Wen of the Song honored her deeply, providing clothing and food. Emperor Xiaowu supported her generously with a monthly stipend of ten thousand cash. When Emperor Ming ascended the throne, he granted her frequent audiences and increased his patronage.

In the first year of Taishi (465 CE), she became abbess of Universal Worthy Monastery. In the second year, she was appointed Monastic Rector¹⁵ of the capital. Her presence was authoritative and dignified; she judged matters clearly and impartially, ensuring that the wrongly accused were vindicated. She was upright, resolute, and free from favoritism.

Earlier, during the Jin dynasty, Jingjian had initiated the lineage of *bhikṣuṇīs* in China by receiving ordination from senior monks. Later, when Huiguo, Jingyin, and others consulted Guṇavarman,¹⁶ he explained: "Because this land lacked the Twofold *Śaṅgha* of both *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs*, women were permitted to receive full ordination from senior *bhikṣus*." When Huiguo and others later met the foreign *bhikṣuṇī* Devasarā, they received ordination again from Saṅghavarman¹⁷ [text reads: Guṇavarman] at Nanling Monastery in the eleventh year of Yuanjia (434 CE)—not because the earlier ordination was invalid, but to enhance their virtue.

Some who favored novelty imitated this practice, though their rituals were flawed. In the second year of Yuanhui (474 CE), ethics teacher Luying lectured on *the Ten Recitations Vinaya*¹⁸ at Jingxing Monastery. More than ten nuns wished to re-receive ordination. Baoxian sent monastic officers to restore order. Striking the wooden clapper, they announced to the assembly: "Do not seek re-ordination lightly!"

She required that candidates below the minimum monastic age undergo investigation and repentance. Their masters were to assemble the monastic order and formally petition the monastic authorities. Only after proper review could they receive ordination. If the authorities responded with silence or reprimand, the matter was closed. After this, the trend of competitive re-ordinations ceased.

Baoxian served with clarity, integrity, and impartial judgment. She applied principle with precision, bringing stability to the community. With few desires and no attachments, she inspired deep respect. She passed away at age seventy-seven in the seventh year of the Taishi reign (471 CE).

15 Monastic Rector (僧正 / Sēngzhèng): An official state-appointed administrative office tasked with supervising monastic discipline, registering monastics, and resolving legal or ritual disputes.

16 Guṇavarman (求那跋摩, 377–431 CE): A Kashmiri prince turned monk who traveled to China via Java; he advised Chinese nuns on the validity of their initial ordination before his death in 431 CE.

17 The Chinese text here reads 求那跋摩 (Guṇavarman). However, this is a scribal error in the source text; Guṇavarman died in 431 CE. The preceptor who conducted the 434 CE re-ordination at Nanling Monastery was Saṅghavarman (僧伽跋摩), as accurately detailed in Fascicle 2 (p. 0937b08).

18 *Ten Recitations Vinaya* (十誦律): *The Sarvāstivāda-Vinaya*, translated into Chinese by Puṇyatāra and Kumārajīva, which became one of the primary *Vinaya* codes studied in Southern China during the fifth century.

[Fascicle 2, \[0937b19\] 慧果](#)

慧果，本姓潘，淮南人也。常行苦節，不衣綿纈。篤好毘尼，戒行清白，道俗欽羨，風譽遠聞。宋青州刺史北地傅弘仁，雅相歎異，厚加資供。永初三年，捨東宅立精舍，名曰福應。果為物儀，所得四事，隨分入僧，眾善增長，人皆樂從。

元嘉六年，外國沙門求那跋羅至。果問曰：「初受戒尼，不留遺記，尋其傳統，即大愛道，誠為高範。但後代尼在外國，受戒之儀，得無別異不？」

答云：「無別，即舊也。」

又問：「律師問難犯緣，何得無別？」

答云：「尼無僧住處二歲，方問難耳。」

又問：「本無尼國，非天下無尼。」

答云：「制十僧受具，邊地得五。不可違法。」

又問：「幾里為邊地？」答云：「千里外，山海隔。」

元嘉九年，慧意、慧楷等五人，更從僧伽跋摩受具戒，頂戴奉持，重如首領。

元嘉十年，果卒，春秋七十餘。弟子慧楷，亦以操行知名。

CBETA Reference: T50n2063, p. 0937b19

Biography: Bhikṣuṇī Huiguo (Fruit of Wisdom), Blessed Scenes Monastery

Huiguo's lay surname was Pan, and she was from Huainan. She practiced rigorous asceticism, never wearing padded garments. She cherished monastic discipline and maintained pure precepts, admired by monastics and laity alike. Her reputation spread widely. Fu Hongren, the Inspector of Qingzhou, esteemed her deeply and provided abundant support. In the third year of Yongchu (422 CE), he donated his eastern residence to establish a hermitage named Fuying. Huiguo served as a model for the community; whatever offerings she received, she shared with the community, increasing collective virtue and inspiring others to follow her gladly.

In the sixth year of Yuanjia (429 CE), the Indian monk Guṇavarman arrived. Huiguo asked, "The earliest *bhikṣuṇīs* left no detailed ritual records. If we trace the lineage to Mahāprajāpatī, her example is lofty. But in later generations abroad, did the ordination procedures change?"

He replied, "No. They remain as before."

She asked, "*Vinaya* masters question candidates about impediments to ordination. If practices changed, how could the rules remain the same?"

He answered, “Only if a candidate has not lived for two years in a community of *bhikṣuṇīs* is she questioned about such impediments.”

She continued, “Although this land originally lacked fully ordained Buddhist nuns, that does not mean they were absent around the world.”

He replied, “The discipline prescribes ten *bhikṣus* for full ordination, but in border regions five suffice. One must not violate the Dharma rules.”

She asked, “What distance defines a border region?” He answered, “Beyond a thousand *li* (approx. 400 km), separated by mountains or seas.”

In the ninth year of Yuanjia [read: eleventh year, 434 CE],¹⁹ Huiyi, Huikai, and three others received full ordination again from Saṅghavarman, vowing to uphold the precepts as carefully as protecting their own heads.

In the tenth year of Yuanjia, Huiguo passed away at over seventy years of age. Her disciple Huikai was likewise renowned for her fine character and conduct.

19 The Chinese source text reads "ninth year of Yuanjia" (元嘉九年 / 432 CE). However, this is an established chronological error by the compiler Baochang. Saṅghavarman did not arrive in Jiankang until 433/434 CE, and the historic dual-assembly re-ordination at Nanling Monastery actually took place in the eleventh year of Yuanjia (434 CE), as accurately recorded in the biography of Baoxian (CBETA, T50n2063, p. 0937b15).