

Publication version

The Revival of Bhikkhunī Ordination in the Theravāda Tradition

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Officially sanctioned bhikkhunī ordination disappeared from the Theravāda Buddhist tradition centuries ago. The last evidence for the existence of the original Bhikkhunī Sangha in a country following Theravāda Buddhism dates from Sri Lanka in the eleventh century. Beginning in the late 1990s, however, a revival of the bhikkhunī ordination has been underway in the Theravāda world, spearheaded by monks and nuns from Sri Lanka. With the support of a number of learned monks,¹ Sri Lankan women have sought to restore the long-vanished order of nuns not only to a place in their nation's heritage but to the religious life of international Theravāda Buddhism.

The first ordination in the contemporary revival movement took place at Sarnath, India, in December 1996, when ten Sri Lankan women were ordained as bhikkhunīs by Sri Lankan monks from the Mahābodhi Society assisted by Korean monks and nuns. This was followed by a grand international ordination at Bodhgaya in February, 1998, conferred on women from many countries. It was held under the auspices of the Taiwan-based Fo Guang Shan organization and was attended by bhikkhus from different Buddhist countries following both the Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions along with bhikkhunīs from Taiwan. From 1998 on, bhikkhunī ordinations have been held regularly in Sri Lanka, and at present over 500 women on the island have been ordained. But while the ordination of bhikkhunīs has won the backing of large numbers of bhikkhus as well as lay devotees, to date it still has not received official recognition from either the Sri Lankan government or the *mahānāyaka theras*, the chief prelates of the fraternities of monks. In other Theravāda Buddhist countries, notably Thailand and Myanmar, resistance to a revival of the Bhikkhunī Sangha is still strong. In those countries, the conservative elders regard such a revival as contrary to the Vinaya and even as a threat to the longevity of Buddhism.

In this paper I intend to focus on the legal and moral issues involved in the revival of the Theravāda Bhikkhunī Sangha. My paper will be divided into three parts. In Part I, I will review the arguments presented by Theravādin traditionalists who see a revival of bhikkhunī ordination as a legal impossibility. In Part II, I will offer textual and ethical considerations that support the claim that bhikkhunī ordination should be resuscitated. Finally, in Part III, I will respond to the legal arguments presented by the traditionalists and briefly consider how the restoration of bhikkhunī ordination might be harmonized with the stipulations of the Vinaya.

¹ These include the late Ven. Talalle Dhammāloka Anunāyaka Thera of the Amarapura Nikāya, Ven. Dr. Kumburugamuve Vajira Nāyaka Thera, former vice-chancellor of the Buddhist and Pali University of Sri Lanka, and Ven. Inamaluwe Srī Sumaṅgala Nāyaka Thera of the historic Rangiri Dambulla Vihāra. The first practical steps in resuscitating the Bhikkhunī Sangha were taken by Ven. Dodangoda Revata Mahāthera and the late Ven. Mapalagama Vipulasāra Mahāthera of the Mahābodhi Society in India.

I. The Case Against the Revival of Bhikkhunī Ordination

While monastic ordination has never been an absolute requirement for spiritual practice and attainment in Buddhism, through the centuries the lifeblood of the Buddhist tradition has flowed through its monasteries and hermitages. Even today, in this age of electronic commerce and high technology, the call to the simple monastic life still inspires many, women as well as men. Yet in most countries that follow the Theravāda tradition women are allowed to enter only upon subordinate forms of renunciant life. The heritage of formally sanctioned monastic ordination prescribed in the ancient canonical texts is denied them.

Monastic ordination as a bhikkhunī involves three stages: (1) *pabbajjā*, the "going forth" into homelessness or novice ordination; (2) the *sikkhamānā* training, which prepares the candidate for full ordination; and (3) *upasampadā* or full ordination. Conservative Theravādin Vinaya experts posit hurdles at all three stages. I will discuss each in turn.

(1) *Pabbajjā*. The first step of entry into the renunciant life, *pabbajjā*, transforms the woman aspirant from a lay devotee into a *sāmaṇerī* or novice. The Vinaya Piṭaka itself does not explicitly state who is entitled to give *pabbajjā* to a female aspirant for ordination, but the Theravāda tradition unequivocally understands that it is a bhikkhunī who assumes this role. Of course, in the earliest phase of the Bhikkhunī Sangha, this procedure had to be managed differently. According to the account found in the Cullavagga, the Buddha ordained Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī by giving her eight principles of respect and then allowed bhikkhus to ordain the other women.² The bhikkhus then gave *upasampadā* to the five hundred Sakyan women directly. It seems that at this point the distinction between *pabbajjā* as novice ordination and *upasampadā* had not yet arisen. But thereafter it became the duty of a bhikkhunī to give *pabbajjā* to a female aspirant, who would become her pupil, to be trained by her for eventual full ordination.

Once a full-fledged Bhikkhunī Sangha came into being, one never finds in the Pāli Canon or its commentaries an instance of a bhikkhu giving *pabbajjā* to a woman. But we can still ask whether there is any prohibition against a bhikkhu doing so. Though no Vinaya rule forbids this, conservative Theravādins hold that the *pabbajjā* always has to be given by a bhikkhunī. They point out that in the texts and commentaries, when a woman asks the Buddha to admit her to the Sangha, the Buddha does not give her *pabbajjā* himself or send her to any of the senior monks for ordination but always instructs her to go to the bhikkhunīs. Later texts, neither canonical nor commentarial, explicitly state that it is prohibited for a bhikkhu to give *pabbajjā* to a woman. Thus the *Mahāvamsa*, the "Great Chronicle" of Sri Lankan history, relates the story of the Elder Mahinda's arrival in Sri Lanka and his conversion of the royal court to the Dhamma.

But the queen Anulā, who had come with five hundred women to greet the elders, attained to the second stage of salvation [once-returning]. And the queen

² Vin II 255.

Anulā with her five hundred women said to the king: "We wish to receive the pabbajjā-ordination, your Majesty." The king said to the elder, "Give them the pabbajjā!" But the elder replied to the king: "It is not allowed (to us), O great king, to bestow the pabbajjā on women. But in Pāṭaliputta there lives a nun, my younger sister, known by the name Saṅghamittā. She, who is ripe in experience, shall come here bringing with her the southern branch of the great Bodhi-tree of the king of ascetics, O king of men, and (bringing) also bhikkhunīs renowned (for holiness); to this end send a message to the king my father. When this elder-nun is here she will confer the pabbajjā upon these women."³

While waiting for Saṅghamittā to arrive, the queen Anulā, together with many women of the royal harem, accepted the ten precepts and wore ochre robes. That is, they observed the same ten precepts that a sāmaṇerī observes and wore the robes of a renunciant (probably not cut up into patches), but they had not received any formal ordination; they were the equivalents of the *dasasilmātās* of present-day Sri Lanka. They left the palace and went to reside in a pleasant convent built by the king in a certain part of the city. It was only after Saṅghamittā and the other bhikkhunīs arrived from India that they could take *pabbajjā*.

(2) *The Sikkhamānā Training*. The second legal obstacle to a woman's ordination, according to the conservative Vinaya experts, is imposed by the sixth *garudhamma*. This rule states that before she can take *upasampadā* a woman candidate must live as a *sikkhamānā*, or "probationer," training in six rules for a period of two years. She receives the status of *sikkhamānā* through a *saṅghakamma*, a legal act of the Sangha. Now this act is performed by the Bhikkhunī Sangha, not by the Bhikkhu Sangha,⁴ and therefore, in the absence of a Bhikkhunī Sangha, a female candidate for ordination has no way to become a *sikkhamānā*. Without becoming a *sikkhamānā*, it is said, she will not be able to fulfill the prescribed training (*sikkhā*) leading to *upasampadā*. Further, after completing her training in the six rules, the *sikkhamānā* must obtain an "agreement" (*sammati*) from the Sangha, an authorization to take *upasampadā*, and this agreement too is given by a Bhikkhunī Sangha.⁵ Thus these two steps along the way to *upasampadā*--namely, (1) the agreement to train in the six rules, and (2) the agreement confirming that the candidate has completed the two years' training in the six rules--both have to be conferred by a Bhikkhunī Sangha. In the absence of a Theravāda Bhikkhunī Sangha, the Vinaya experts say, a candidate for bhikkhunī ordination cannot pass through these two steps, and without passing through these two steps, she will not be qualified for full ordination.

The last book of the Pāli Vinaya Piṭaka, known as the *Parivāra*, is a technical manual dealing with fine points of Vinaya observance. One section of this work called *Kammavagga* (Vin V 220-23), devoted to legal acts of the Sangha, examines the conditions under which such acts "fail" (*vipajjanti*), i.e., grounds on which such acts are

³ *Mahāvamsa*, XV.18-23. Wilhelm Geiger: *The Mahāvamsa or The Great Chronicle of Ceylon* (London: Pali Text Society 1912), p. 98. I have slightly modernized Geiger's archaic English and translated some words he left in Pāli.

⁴ Bhikkhunī Pācittiya 63; Vin IV 318-20.

⁵ Bhikkhunī Pācittiya 64; Vin IV 320-21.

invalidated.⁶ Among the stipulations of the *Parivāra*, an *upasampadā* can fail on account of the candidate (*vatthuto*); on account of the motion (*ñattito*); on account of the announcement (*anussāvanato*); on account of the boundary (*simāto*); and on account of the assembly (*parisato*). Applying these requirements to the case of the female candidate for *upasampadā*, conservative Vinaya experts sometimes argue that a woman who has not undergone training as a *sikkhamānā* is not a qualified candidate and thus *upasampadā* given to her will be invalid.

(3) *Upasampadā*. In the eyes of the Vinaya conservatives, the most formidable barrier to reviving the Bhikkhunī Sangha concerns the *upasampadā*, the full ordination. In the case of bhikkhu ordination, the ordination of a monk *upasampadā* is administered by an act known as "ordination with a motion as the fourth" (*ñatticatuttha-kammūpasampadā*). First the spokesman for the Sangha makes a motion (*ñatti*) to the Sangha to give ordination to the candidate with a certain senior monk as preceptor. Then he makes three announcements (*anussāvana*) that the Sangha ordains the candidate with the senior monk as preceptor; any monk present who disapproves is invited to voice objection. And finally, if no monk has objected, he concludes that the Sangha has given ordination to the candidate with the senior monk as preceptor.

When the Bhikkhunī Sangha was first established the same method must have been used to ordain women as bhikkhunīs. After the Bhikkhunī Sangha gained maturity, however, this method was replaced by another, which involves the participation of both the Bhikkhunī Sangha and the Bhikkhu Sangha. Both ordain the candidate by separate processes following in close succession, each with a motion and three announcements. The method is therefore called ordination through eight proclamations (*aṭṭhavācīkūpasampadā*). The sixth *garudhamma*, which Mahāpajāpati Gotamī reportedly accepted as a condition for ordination, already states that after training as a *sikkhamānā* for two years in the six rules, a woman should seek *upasampadā* from a dual-Sangha, that is, from both the Bhikkhunī Sangha and the Bhikkhu Sangha.⁷ The same principle is described more fully in the Cullavagga section of the Vinaya in its explanation of the *upasampadā* rite, where the candidate first takes ordination from the Bhikkhunī Sangha and then comes before the Bhikkhu Sangha to undergo the second ordination involving another motion, three announcements, and confirmation.⁸

The main legal objection that conservative Vinaya legalists raise against a revival of bhikkhunī ordination is that it must be given by an *existing* Bhikkhunī Sangha, and to be a purely Theravāda ordination it must come from an existing Theravāda Bhikkhunī Sangha. This leads to a conundrum, for in the absence of an existing Theravāda Bhikkhunī Sangha, a legitimate Theravāda bhikkhunī ordination cannot be granted. The ordination cannot be self-generated, but must be the continuation of an existing tradition. Therefore, the argument runs, when that tradition has been disrupted, it cannot be reconstituted even with all the good will in the world. For monks to attempt to reconstitute a broken Bhikkhunī Sangha, it is said,

⁶ This section is expanded upon in the *Samantapāsādikā* (Sp VII 1395-1402), as well as in the *Vinaya-saṅgaha*, "A Compendium of the Vinaya," a topical anthology from the *Samantapāsādikā* composed by the twelfth-century Sri Lankan elder, Sāriputta (chap. 33, VRI ed. pp. 363-84).

⁷ Vin II 255: *Dve vassāni chasu dhammesu sikkhitasikkhāya sikkhamānāya ubhatosaṅghe upasampadā pariyesitabbā.*

⁸ Vin II 272-74.

is to claim a privilege unique to a perfectly enlightened Buddha, and no one but the next Buddha can claim that.

Those who favor reviving the bhikkhunī ordination cite a statement by the Buddha in the Cullavagga: "Bhikkhus, I allow bhikkhus to give *upasampadā* to bhikkhunīs,"⁹ rightly pointing out that the Buddha never revoked that allowance. However, it would be *incorrect* to say that the Buddha gave permission in perpetuity to the bhikkhus to ordain bhikkhunīs on their own. As long as there were no bhikkhunīs in existence, that is, at the very inception of the Bhikkhuni Sangha, it was only natural that the Buddha's allowance to the bhikkhus to ordain bhikkhunīs would be applied in this way, for there was simply no other way it could be applied. Thereafter the allowance continued, but it did not mean that bhikkhus *on their own* could ordain bhikkhunīs. The Buddha did not revoke this allowance because the allowance was necessary after the dual-Sangha ordination procedure was initiated. If the Buddha had revoked the permission he had earlier given to bhikkhus to ordain bhikkhunīs, then the Bhikkhu Sangha would not have been entitled to give ordination after the Bhikkhunī Sangha gave its ordination. However, the bhikkhus retained this privilege, except now it was part of a two-stage system of ordination. When the new procedure was introduced, with the Bhikkhunī Sangha conferring ordination first, the allowance to the bhikkhus to ordain bhikkhunīs was integrated into the new two-stage ordination. So the permission remained intact, except that now the bhikkhus did not act alone. The *upasampadā* they were entitled to confer followed *upasampadā* conferred by the bhikkhunīs.

This requirement for dual-Sangha ordination became integral to the Theravāda tradition's conception of the bhikkhunī. In the Pāli Vinaya Piṭaka, we encounter a standard description of a bhikkhunī that reads thus:

"*Bhikkhunī*: one who is a mendicant; one who arrives on alms round; one who wears a robe made of cut-up patches; one who has the designation of a bhikkhunī; one who claims to be a bhikkhunī; a "come, bhikkhunī," bhikkhunī; a bhikkhunī ordained by going to the three refuges; an excellent bhikkhunī; a bhikkhunī by essence; a trainee bhikkhunī; a bhikkhunī beyond training (i.e., an arahant bhikkhunī); a bhikkhunī fully ordained *by a dual-Sangha in harmony*, through an act that is unshakable and able to stand, consisting of a motion and three announcements. Among these, what is intended in this sense as a bhikkhunī is one fully ordained *by a dual-Sangha in harmony*, through an act that is unshakable and able to stand consisting of a motion and three announcements."¹⁰

⁹ Vin IV 255: *Anujānāmi, bhikkhave, bhikkhūhi bhikkhuniyo upasampādetuṃ.*

¹⁰ Vin IV 214: *Bhikkhunī ti bhikkhikāti bhikkhunī; bhikkhācariyaṃ ajjhupagatāti bhikkhunī; bhinnapaṭadharāti bhikkhunī; samaññāya bhikkhunī; paṭiññāya bhikkhunī; ehi bhikkhunīti bhikkhunī; tīhi saraḍagamehi upasampannāti bhikkhunī; bhadrā bhikkhunī; sārā bhikkhunī; sekhā bhikkhunī; asekhā bhikkhunī; samaggena ubhatoṣaṅghena ñatticatutthena kammena akuppena thānārahena upasampannāti bhikkhunī. Tatra yāyaṃ bhikkhunī samaggena ubhatoṣaṅghena ñatticatutthena kammena akuppena thānārahena upasampannā, ayaṃ imasmiṃ atthe adhippetā bhikkhunīti. [Can delete Pali here.]*

From the time the Bhikkhunī Sangha reached maturity until its demise, in Theravāda countries the dual-Sangha ordination was regarded as mandatory. We find in the Vinaya Piṭaka occasional mention of an *ekato-upasampannā*, "one ordained on one side," and we might suppose this means that some bhikkhunīs continued to be ordained solely by the Bhikkhu Sangha. This, however, would be a misinterpretation of the expression. The expression *ekato-upasampannā* refers to a woman who has received ordination solely from the Bhikkhunī Sangha but not yet from the Bhikkhu Sangha. It denotes a woman in the intermediate stage between ordinations by the two wings of the "dual-Sangha." The Pāli Vinaya Piṭaka is scrupulously consistent in restricting the use of the word "bhikkhunī" to those who have fulfilled the dual-Sangha ordination. In the Suttavibhaṅga section of the Vinaya, whenever the text has occasion to gloss the word "bhikkhunī," it states: "A bhikkhunī is one who has been ordained in the dual-Sangha" (*bhikkhunī nāma ubhatosaṅghe upasampannā*).

Thus, in the light of the *Parivāra's* criteria, the Vinaya legalists argue that when the rules for ordination specify a dual-Sangha *upasampadā*, and when a bhikkhunī is legally defined as one ordained by a dual-Sangha, if a single Sangha performs the ordination, the assembly is defective, because valid ordination requires the participation of the two assemblies, of bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs. The motion and announcements are also defective, because only one motion and three announcements have been recited, whereas valid ordination requires two procedures each with its own motion and three announcements. Starting from these premises, since a Theravāda Bhikkhunī Sangha no longer exists, the legalists arrive at the inevitable conclusion that there is simply no possibility of reviving the Theravāda Bhikkhunī Sangha. Bhikkhunī ordination will remain out of reach throughout the duration of the present Buddha's dispensation.

II. The Case for a Revival of Theravāda Bhikkhunī Ordination

Now that I have sketched the legal arguments that conservative Theravāda Vinaya authorities raise against restoring the bhikkhunī ordination to the Theravāda tradition, I want to look at some factors, textual and ethical, that favor its restoration. The factors that I will consider can be distributed into two groups: one might be called ancient mandate; the other, compelling contemporary circumstances.

The primary *ancient mandate* is the Buddha's own decision to create a Bhikkhunī Sangha as a counterpart to the male Bhikkhu Sangha. We should note that when the five hundred women headed by Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī came to the Buddha with their heads shaved, wearing ochre robes, they did not ask the Buddha to establish an order of nuns. They simply asked him "to permit women to go forth from the household life into homelessness in the Dhamma and Vinaya proclaimed by the Tathāgata."¹¹ Although, according to the canonical record, the Buddha at first denied this request, he finally yielded. In yielding, however, he did not simply agree to allow women to go forth in some secondary role, for example, as ten-precept nuns; rather, he allowed them to take full ordination as bhikkhunīs, the female counterpart of the bhikkhus.

¹¹ Vin II 253; AN IV 274: *Sādhu, bhante, labheyya mātugāmo tathāgatappavedite dhammavinaye agārasmā anagāriyaṃ pabbajjāṃ.* [Leave Pali.]

Further, he constituted renunciant women into a distinct *order*, a society governed by its own rules and regulations. Though he subordinated this order to the Bhikkhu Sangha with respect to certain functions, he still made it largely autonomous.

In the canonical record, the Buddha is shown giving a dire prediction about the effect this step would have on the life span of the spiritual life (*brahmacariya*) or the good Dhamma (*saddhamma*). He says that because women have received the going forth, the spiritual life will not last the full thousand years that it was originally destined to last, but will instead endure only five hundred years.¹² This prediction is one of the major stumbling blocks that conservative Theravādins raise against attempts to revive the Bhikkhunī Sangha. It is beyond my purpose here to determine whether this passage is authentic or not, but regardless of the truth value of the story, we should still note a significant fact about the version that has come down in the Pāli Canon (and, I believe, in all the other Vinayas that have been preserved except that of the Mahīśāsakas): namely, that the Buddha is shown making this prophecy *only after* he has agreed to allow women to go forth. If he truly wanted to prevent women from going forth, he would have made this prophecy while Ānanda was still launching his appeal on behalf of the Sakyā women. In such a case, Ānanda would probably have desisted from his effort and a Bhikkhunī Sangha would never have gotten off the ground.

There is little evidence that the permission to women to go forth contributed in any way to shortening the life span of the Teaching, and the time frame mentioned in the text is also difficult to reconcile with the facts of Buddhist history in so far as we can ascertain them. The text may be suggesting that the reason for the Buddha's hesitancy was concern that close contacts between bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs would contribute to a situation whereby intimate feelings between the two would arise, and this would lead to many disrobings or to the rise of a married clergy such as we find among the Buddhist priests of Japan. But the historical record contains no indications that this happened in the course of Indian Buddhism—certainly not around the dreaded date (approximately the first century C.E.). Other suttas speak about different causes for "the decline and disappearance of the good Dhamma," and these seem to me to point to factors that might play a greater role in the decline of the Dhamma than the conferring of ordination on women. For example, a sutta in the Aṅguttara Nikāya says the good Dhamma declines when the four assemblies dwell without respect for the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, the training, *samādhi*, and heedfulness.¹³ We should note that in this prediction the bhikkhunīs will also be around when the good Dhamma declines and disappears, which shows that in the view of the texts, the Buddha did not expect the Bhikkhunī Sangha to die out before the Bhikkhu Sangha did.

One way to interpret the Buddha's hesitancy to permit the going forth of women is to see it as a mean of giving special emphasis to the need for caution in the relations between bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs. Consider a parallel: Shortly after his enlightenment, the Buddha pondered the question whether or not to teach the Dhamma to the world. According to the texts, he first decided *not* to teach, to keep silent and dwell at ease.¹⁴ The deity Brahmā had to come down from his celestial abode

¹² Vin II 256; AN IV 278.

¹³ AN III 340.

¹⁴ MN I 167-69; SN I 135-37; Vin I 4-7.

and persuade the Buddha to take up the task of proclaiming the Dhamma to the world. Can we really believe that the compassionate Buddha actually decided not to teach, to pass the rest of his life dwelling quietly in the forest? This hardly seems conceivable in the light of other texts which suggest that his career as a world teacher was already pre-ordained.¹⁵ But this dramatic scene can be seen as a way of emphasizing how hard it was for the Buddha to come to a decision to teach, and a message emerges that we have to revere and treasure the Dhamma as something precious. Similarly, because the Buddha hesitated to admit women to the Sangha, from fear that it would shorten the life span of the Teaching, we can draw out the message that bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs have to be heedful in their dealings with one another and not indulge in frivolous socializing. The Buddha might also have hesitated because he foresaw that the creation of a Bhikkhunī Sangha would have placed on the bhikkhus the burden of educating and protecting the nuns, responsibilities that could have obstructed their own progress.

Positive statements of support for the existence of bhikkhunīs can be gathered from the Sutta Piṭaka. I will briefly mention three.

(1) The first is the well-known statement in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (DN 16), which the Buddha is said to have made to Māra, when, shortly after his enlightenment, the Tempter urged him to pass straightaway into final Nibbāna without teaching others:

"Evil One, I will not pass into final Nibbāna until I have bhikkhunī disciples who are competent, well trained, confident, learned, upholders of the Dhamma, practicing in accordance with the Dhamma, practicing properly, conducting themselves in accordance with the Dhamma, who have learned their own teacher's doctrine and can explain it, teach it, describe it, establish it, disclose it, analyze it, elucidate it, and having thoroughly refuted rival doctrines in accordance with reason, can teach the compelling Dhamma."¹⁶

According to this text, then, the Buddha considered well-trained bhikkhunī disciples one of the pillars of the teaching.

(2) Another passage, less well known, comes from the Mahāvachchagotta Sutta (MN 73). In this discourse, the wanderer Vacchagotta has been asking the Buddha whether he alone has achieved realization of the Dhamma or whether he has disciples who have also achieved realization. The wanderer inquires in turn about each class of disciple: bhikkhus, bhikkhunīs, celibate male householders, non-celibate male householders, celibate female householders, and non-celibate female householders. With each inquiry, the Buddha confirms that he has "not merely five hundred, but many more disciples than that" who have attained the highest realization appropriate

¹⁵ For example, AN 5:196 (III 240-42) relates that the Bodhisatta had five dreams shortly before his enlightenment several of which foretell his role as a great teacher with many disciples, both monastics and householders.

¹⁶ DN II 105: *Na tāvā'haṃ, pāpima, parinibbāyissāmi, yāva me bhikkhuniyo na sāvika bhavissanti viyattā vinīta visāradā bahussutā dhammadharā dhammānudhammappaṭipannā sāmīcippaṭipannā anudhammacārīniyo, sakaṃ ācariyakaṃ uggahetvā ācikkhissanti desessanti paññāpessanti paṭṭhapessanti vivarissanti vibhajissanti uttānikarissanti, uppannaṃ parappavādaṃ sahadhammena suniggahitaṃ niggahetvā sappāṭihāriyaṃ dhammaṃ desessanti.* [Can delete Pali]

to their particular status. When the questioning is finished, Vacchagotta exclaims, in words with which the Buddha himself would surely have agreed: "If the Venerable Gotama (the Buddha) had attained success in this Dhamma, and if there were bhikkhus who had attained success, but there were no bhikkhunīs who had attained success in this Dhamma, then this spiritual life would be incomplete with respect to this factor. But because, besides the Venerable Gotama and the bhikkhus, there are also bhikkhunīs who have attained success, this spiritual life is complete with respect to this factor."¹⁷ For bhikkhunīs the highest success is arahantship, the same as for the bhikkhus.

(3) The Sangha is known as "the field of merit for the world," and while this epithet applies pre-eminently to the "ariyan Sangha," it also extends to the monastic Sangha as the visible representation of the ariyan Sangha in the world. Therefore, in the *Dakkhiṇāvibhaṅga Sutta* (MN 142), the Buddha discusses seven types of gifts that can be made to the Sangha, and most of these include bhikkhunīs among the recipients. These are: (1) a gift to the dual-Sangha headed by the Buddha; (2) a gift to the dual-Sangha after the Buddha has passed away; (4) a gift specifically for the Bhikkhunī Sangha; (5) a gift for a selection of bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs taken to represent the Sangha; and (7) a gift for a selection of bhikkhunīs taken to represent the Sangha. The only two types of gifts excluded are those specifically for the Bhikkhu Sangha and for a selection of bhikkhus taken to represent the Sangha. Yet today, in Theravāda lands, these latter two types of gifts for the Sangha are the only two that are possible; the other four are excluded by the absence of a viable Bhikkhunī Sangha.

Besides these passages, the *Āṅguttara Nikāya*, *Ekanipāta*, includes a series of suttas in which the Buddha is shown appointing various bhikkhunīs to the position of "most eminent" in different domains of the spiritual life; for example, the bhikkhunī *Khemā* was most eminent in wisdom, *Uppalavaṇṇā* in psychic potency, *Bhaddakaccānā* in great spiritual penetrations.¹⁸ The compilers of the Pāli Canon also collected the verses of the elder nuns into a work called the *Therīgāthā*, which offers us deep insights into the yearnings, striving, and attainments of the earliest generations of Buddhist women renunciants.

Quite apart from specific texts, an even more powerful argument based upon ancient precedent would appeal to the spirit of the Dhamma itself, which by its very nature is intended to disclose the path to liberation from suffering to all humankind. When the Buddha first consented to teach, he declared: "Open to them are the doors to the Deathless: Let those who have ears release faith."¹⁹ Obviously, he did not intend this invitation to apply only to men but to all who would be willing to listen to his message of deliverance from suffering. He compares the Dhamma to a chariot, and says "One who has such a vehicle, *whether a woman or a man*, has by this vehicle drawn close to

¹⁷ MN I 492: *Sace hi bho Gotama imaṃ dhammaṃ bhavaṅ c'eva Gotamo ārādhako abhaviṣṣa, bhikkhū ca ārādhakā abhaviṣṣaṃsu, no ca kho bhikkhuniyo ārādhikā abhaviṣṣaṃsu, evam idaṃ brahmacariyaṃ aparipūraṃ abhaviṣṣa ten'aṅgena. Yasmā ca kho bho Gotama imaṃ dhammaṃ bhavaṅ c'eva Gotamo ārādhako, bhikkhū ca ārādhakā, bhikkhuniyo ca ārādhikā, evam idaṃ brahmacariyaṃ paripūraṃ ten'aṅgena.* [Can delete Pali]

¹⁸ AN I 25.

¹⁹ MN I 169, SN I 138, Vin I 7.

Nibbāna.”²⁰ The poet-monk Vaṅṅīsa confirms that the Buddha’s enlightenment was intended to benefit bhikkhunīs as well as bhikkhus:

Indeed, for the good of many
the Sage attained enlightenment,
for the bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs
who have reached and seen the fixed course.²¹

In the suttas, we see that the Buddha often included the bhikkhunīs as the recipients of his teaching. When he compares himself to a farmer cultivating different fields, he likens the bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs jointly to the most excellent field for his teaching.²² In the simile of the ancient city, he says that after he had followed the Noble Eightfold Path and penetrated the links of dependent origination, “I explained them to the bhikkhus, the bhikkhunīs, the male lay followers, and the female lay followers, so that this spiritual life has become successful and prosperous, extended, popular, widespread, well proclaimed among gods and humans.”²³ When Sāriputta devises a teaching that elucidates the path that all Buddhas take to arrive at full enlightenment, the Buddha urges him to expound this teaching to the bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs as well as to the male and female lay devotees.²⁴

Though many people will not be mature enough to tread this path to its end, in principle no one should be hindered from doing so merely by reason of their gender. Yet this is precisely what is done when women are prevented from taking full ordination. While defenders of the present system say that women can make just as much progress by taking up some surrogate female renunciant lifestyle as they could by becoming bhikkhunīs, the plain fact is that these subordinate renunciant roles do not meet their aspirations or give them access to the complete training laid down by the Buddha. Nor did the Buddha ever design for women renunciants such subordinate roles as that of the *dasasilmātā*, the *thilashin*, or the *maechee*, who all technically still belong to the assembly of *upāsikās*. The one position that the Buddha intended for those who leave the homeless life was that of a fully ordained bhikkhunī, and if one is to be faithful to the Buddha, we should give renunciant women the role he intended for them. Further, in Asian Buddhist societies, nuns who have settled for such surrogate positions usually do not command the reverence from the Buddhist lay communities that bhikkhunīs could inspire. Thus they seldom take on leadership roles or give guidance in religious activities and social services, but linger on the margins, often appearing timid and self-conscious.

This line of thinking leads directly to reflection on the *contemporary conditions* that support a resuscitation of bhikkhunī ordination. I will note two such conditions.

(1) The first arises out of the realization that has been thrust upon Theravādins, beginning around the middle of the twentieth century, that they are not the only

²⁰ SN I 33.

²¹ SN I 196. The parallel verses at Theragāthā 1256-57 extend this to laymen and laywomen as well.

²² SN IV 315.

²³ SN 107.

²⁴ SN 161.

Buddhists who preserve a monastic system guided by a Vinaya traceable to the early Sangha. As communications have improved between different parts of the Buddhist world, more knowledgeable Theravādin Buddhists (especially in Sri Lanka) have come to learn that the monks and nuns of East Asia—in Taiwan, China, Korea, and Vietnam, though not Japan—while following Mahāyāna teachings and practices, are still governed by a Vinaya with a body of rules largely identical with those laid down in the Pāli Vinaya Piṭaka. This Vinaya, which derives from the Dharmaguptaka school, is strikingly similar in many details with the Pāli Vinaya. The Tibetan Buddhist monastic system is also guided by a Vinaya derived from another early school, the Mūlasarvāstivādins. In recent years prominent Tibetan lamas have encouraged some of their student-nuns to receive full ordination in East Asian countries, and now they are on the verge of officially starting a Bhikkhunī Sangha within Tibetan Buddhism. Thus, when the Buddhist traditions of East Asia and Tibet have (or will soon have) orders of officially sanctioned bhikkhunīs, the absence of a recognized Bhikkhunī Sangha in South Asian Theravāda Buddhism will be conspicuous, a glaring gap. Educated people around the world—even educated Theravādin lay followers, both men and women—will find it difficult to empathize with the refusal of the Theravādin monastic order to grant full ordination to women and will compare Theravāda unfavorably with the other forms of Buddhism.

(2) Such an exclusive attitude would receive strong public disapproval today because of the vast differences between the social and cultural attitudes of our age and those of India in the fifth century B.C. when the Buddha lived and taught. Our own age has been shaped by the ideas of the European Enlightenment, a movement that affirmed the inherent dignity of the human person, led to the rise of democracy, ushered in such concepts as universal human rights and universal suffrage, and brought demands for political equality and equal justice for all under the law. In today's world, all discrimination based on race, religion, and ethnicity is regarded as unjust and unjustifiable, the remnant of primal prejudices that we are obliged to cast off in the realization that all human beings, by virtue of their humanity, are entitled to the same rights that we assume for ourselves, including the right to fulfill their highest religious aspirations. The great project of the contemporary world, we might say, has been the dissolution of privilege: without a sound reason, no one is entitled to special privileges denied to others.

One of the most basic grounds for distinguishing people into the privileged and the deprived, the superiors and the subordinates, has been gender, with men in the privileged position, women in the subsidiary position, denied those privileges claimed by men. From the mid-nineteenth century on, discrimination based on gender came to be perceived as arbitrary and unjust, a system that had been imposed on society simply because of the dominant roles that men had played in eras when social stability depended on physical strength and military force. Thus women came to claim the right to work at professional jobs, the right to vote, the right to equal salaries, the right to serve in the military, even the right to hold the highest position in the land. As far back as 1869, John Stuart Mill wrote in the opening paragraph of his tract, *On the Subjection of Women*: "An opinion which I have held from the very earliest period when I had formed any opinions at all on social political matters ... is that the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to

the other—is wrong itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other."²⁵ The 130 years since these words were written have witnessed, in the progressive countries of the West, a sustained effort to translate this conviction into practice in various domains of both private and public life.

Now that discrimination based on gender has been challenged almost everywhere in the secular sphere, it is time for its role in religious life to come up for serious scrutiny. For religion, unfortunately, remains one of its most persistent strongholds, and Buddhism is no exception to this. It is true that the Vinaya makes bhikkhunīs subordinate to bhikkhus and the Bhikkhunī Sangha subordinate to the Bhikkhu Sangha, but we have to remember that the Buddha lived and taught in India in the fifth century B.C. and had to conform to the social expectations of the period. While certain practices that pertain to etiquette may need to be evaluated in the light of altered social and cultural conditions in so far as they do not touch on the basics of monastic discipline, in this paper I am not concerned with rules governing the relationship between monks and nuns, but solely with the question of ordination. When we contemplate what line of action would be appropriate for us to take on this issue, we should not ask what the Buddha did twenty-five centuries ago, but *what he would want us to do today*. If people see Theravāda Buddhism as a religion that includes male renunciants but excludes female renunciants, or which admits them only through some type of unofficial ordination, they will suspect that something is fundamentally askew, and defensive arguments based on appeals to arcane principles of monastic law will not go very far to break down distrust. This will be an instance of the type of behavior that we meet so often in the Vinaya where “those without confidence do not gain confidence, while among those with confidence, some undergo vacillation.”²⁶

On the other hand, by showing that they have the courage to restore to women the right to lead a full religious life as instituted by the Buddha, that is, by reviving the Bhikkhunī Sangha, Theravādin elders will enable their form of Buddhism to take its place in the modern world, firmly and proudly, while still upholding a path that is timeless and not subject to the vagaries of changing fashions. To take this step does not mean, as some might fear, that we are “meddling” with the Dhamma and the Vinaya just to fit people's worldly expectations; the truths of the Dhamma, the principles of the path, the guidelines of the Vinaya, remain intact. But it would show that we know how to apply the Dhamma and the Vinaya in a way that is appropriate to the time and circumstances, and also in a way that is kind and embracing rather than rigid and rejecting.

III. Addressing the Legalist Challenge

Nevertheless, while there might be strong textual and ethical grounds favoring a revival of the Theravāda Bhikkhunī Sangha, such a step would not be possible unless

²⁵ John Stuart Mill, *On the Subjection of Women*. (1869; Online version: The University of Adelaide Library Electronic Texts Collection).

²⁶ *Ibid.*: *Appassānañceva appasādāya pasannānañca ekaccānaṃ aññathattāya.*

the legal objections to such a movement can be addressed. The legalists object to resuscitating bhikkhunī ordination, not so much because of bias against women (though some might have such a bias), but because they see such a measure as a legal impossibility. To restore the Theravāda Bhikkhunī Sangha, the three challenges posed by Theravāda Vinaya legalists would have to be overcome. These are the challenges based on: (1) the problem of *pabbajjā* (novice ordination); (2) the problem of *sikkhamānā* ordination and training; and (3) the problem of *upasampadā*.

Before I deal with these problems individually, however, I first want to note that Theravāda jurisprudence often merges stipulations on legal issues that stem from the canonical Vinaya texts, the *Aṭṭhakathās* (commentaries), and the *Ṭīkā*s (subcommentaries) with interpretations of these stipulations that have gained currency through centuries of tradition. I do not want to undervalue tradition, for it represents the accumulated legal expertise of generations of Vinaya specialists, and this expertise should certainly be respected and taken into account in determining how the Vinaya is to be applied to new situations. But we also must remember that tradition should not be placed on a par with the canonical Vinaya or even with the secondary authorities, the *Aṭṭhakathās* and *Ṭīkā*s. These different sources should be assigned different weights of authority according to their different origins. When our understanding of the Vinaya is strongly grounded in tradition, however, without realizing it we may become entangled in a web of traditionalist *assumptions* that obstructs our ability to distinguish what derives from the canonical Vinaya from what is prescribed by tradition. Sometimes simply changing the assumptions can recast the principles of the Vinaya in a whole new light.

I will illustrate this point with an analogy from geometry. A straight line is drawn through a point. As this line is extended, the distance between its two ends widens. It is thus obvious that the two ends will never meet, and if anyone expresses doubts about this, I would almost question their rationality. But this is so only because I am thinking within the framework of traditional geometry, Euclidean geometry, which held sway over mathematics up until the twentieth century. When, however, we adopt the standpoint of spherical geometry, we can see that a line drawn through a particular point, if extended far enough, eventually encounters itself. Again, in traditional geometry we are taught that a triangle can have at most only one right angle and that the sum of the angles of a triangle must be 180° , and this can be proven with absolute rigor. But that is so only in Euclidean space. Give me a sphere, and we can define a triangle with three right angles whose angles make a sum of 270° . Thus, if I break away from my familiar assumptions, a whole new range of possibilities suddenly opens up to my understanding.

The same applies to our thinking about the Vinaya, and I write from personal experience. During my years in Sri Lanka, I shared the traditional conservative Theravādin view about the prospects for bhikkhunī ordination. This was because the monks that I consulted on this issue were Vinaya conservatives. Thinking the question of bhikkhunī ordination too abstruse for me to understand myself, I asked them about it and simply deferred to their judgment. When I finally decided to examine the canonical and commentarial sources on the subject, I did not find anything to disprove what they had said. They were quite learned in the Vinaya, and so I found that they had indeed been speaking about straight lines and triangles, not about bent lines and

hexagons. But what I found was that they were framing their judgments against a background of traditionalist assumptions; they were locating their straight lines and triangles in a Vinaya-version of Euclidean space. And the question occurred to me: "Is it necessary to frame these lines and triangles in Euclidean space? What happens if we transfer them to a Vinaya-version of curved space? What happens if we detach the pronouncements of the Vinaya from the background of traditionalist premises and look at them using the Buddha's original intention as a guide? What happens if we acknowledge that the Vinaya Piṭaka, as it has come down to us, did not anticipate the division of the original Sangha into different schools with their own ordination lineages or the disappearance of the Bhikkhunī Sangha in one particular school? What happens if we acknowledge that it simply gives us no clear guidance about what should be done in such a situation? What if we then try to guide ourselves by the question, 'What would the Buddha want us to do in such a situation as we find ourselves in today?'" When we raise these questions, we can see that the procedures for bhikkhunī ordination laid down in the Vinaya Piṭaka were never intended to preclude the possibility of reviving a defunct Bhikkhunī Sangha. They were simply proposed as the norm for conducting an ordination when the Bhikkhunī Sangha already exists. When this understanding dawns, we then enter a new space, a new framework that can accommodate fresh possibilities unimagined within the web of traditionalist assumptions.

For conservative theory, the fundamental assumptions are: (i) that the dual-Sangha ordination was intended to apply under all circumstances and admits of no exceptions or modifications to accord with conditions; (ii) that the Theravāda is the only Buddhist school that preserves an authentic Vinaya tradition. For those who favor revival of the Bhikkhunī Sangha, the fundamental starting point is the Buddha's decision to create the Bhikkhunī Sangha. Although the Buddha may have hesitated to take this step and did so only after the intercession of Ānanda (according to the Cullavagga account), he eventually did establish an order of bhikkhunīs and gave this order his wholehearted support. The procedure of ordination was merely the legal mechanics to implement that decision. From this standpoint, to block the implementation of that decision because of a legal technicality is to hamper the fulfillment of the Buddha's own intention. This is not to say that the proper way to implement his intention should violate the guidelines of the Vinaya. But within those broad guidelines the two assumptions of conservative legalism can be circumvented by holding either or both of the following: (i) that under exceptional circumstances the Bhikkhu Sangha is entitled to revert to a single-Sangha ordination of bhikkhunīs; and (ii) that to preserve the form of dual-Sangha ordination, the Theravāda Bhikkhu Sangha can collaborate with a Bhikkhunī Sangha from an East Asian country following the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya.

This approach to ordination may not satisfy the most rigorous demand of conservative Theravāda Vinaya legal theory, namely, that it be conducted by Theravāda bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs who have been ordained by Theravāda bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs in an unbroken lineage. But to make that impossible demand the uncompromising requirement for restoring the Bhikkhunī Sangha would seem unreasonably stringent. Admittedly, those who insist on the dual-ordination do so, not because they take some special delight in being stringent, but out of respect for what

they see as the integrity of the Vinaya. However, the strictest interpretation of the Vinaya may not necessarily be the only one that is valid, and it may not necessarily be the one that best serves the interests of Buddhism in the modern world. In the view of many learned Theravāda monks, mainly Sri Lanka, adopting either of the above routes will culminate in a valid bhikkhunī ordination and at the same time will grant to women—half the Buddhist population--the chance to live the spiritual life as fully ordained bhikkhunīs.

I will now turn to the three hurdles posed at the beginning of this section--*pabbajjā*, the *sikkhamānā* training, and *upasampadā*--taking each individually. Since functional Bhikkhunī Sanghas already exist, these discussions are partly anachronistic, but I think it is still important to bring them up to address the concerns of the legalists. Hence I will be giving, not explanations of how a bhikkhunī ordination can be revived, but justifications for the procedures that have already been used to revive it. I will begin with the *upasampadā*, since this is the most critical step in the whole ordination process. I will then continue in reverse order through the *sikkhamānā* training back to *pabbajjā*.

(1) In the Pāli Vinaya Piṭaka, *upasampadā* for bhikkhunīs is prescribed as a two-step process involving separate procedures performed first by a Bhikkhunī Sangha and then by a Bhikkhu Sangha. To restore the extinct Bhikkhunī Sangha two methods have been proposed. One is to allow Theravāda bhikkhus on their own to ordain women as bhikkhunīs until a Bhikkhunī Sangha becomes functional and can participate in dual-Sangha ordinations. This method draws upon the authorization that the Buddha originally gave to the bhikkhus to ordain women during the early history of the Bhikkhunī Sangha. Such a procedure must have held for some time before the dual-Sangha ordination was instituted, after which it was discontinued in favor of dual-Sangha ordination. However, because the Buddha's permission to bhikkhus to ordain bhikkhunīs was not actually abolished, advocates of this method contend that it can become operative once again during a period when a Bhikkhunī Sangha does not exist. On this view, the original process by which the bhikkhus, on the Buddha's command, created a Bhikkhunī Sangha serves as a viable model for reviving a defunct Bhikkhunī Sangha. The original allowance could be considered a legal precedent: just as, in the past, that allowance was accepted as a means of fulfilling the Buddha's intention of creating a Bhikkhunī Sangha, so in the present that allowance could again be used to renew the bhikkhunī heritage after the original Theravāda Bhikkhunī Sangha disappeared.

The other route to re-establishing the Theravāda Bhikkhunī Sangha is to conduct the dual-Sangha ordination by bringing together Theravāda bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs from an East Asian country such as Taiwan. This method, the one generally preferred, could be combined with a single-Sangha ordination by Theravāda bhikkhus in two successive steps. This was the procedure used at the grand ordination ceremony at Bodhgaya in February 1998, held under the auspices of Fo Guang Shan, and it had certain advantages over either taken alone.

The grand ordination ceremony assembled bhikkhus from several traditions—Chinese Mahāyāna, Theravāda, and Tibetan--along with Taiwanese and Western bhikkhunīs to conduct the full dual-ordination in accordance with the Chinese tradition. The women who were ordained included Theravāda nuns from Sri Lanka and

Nepal, as well as Western nuns following Tibetan Buddhism. One might think that this was a Mahāyāna rite which made the nuns Mahāyāna bhikkhunīs, but this would be a misunderstanding. While the Chinese monks and nuns were practitioners of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the monastic Vinaya tradition they observe is not a Mahāyāna Vinaya but one stemming from an early Buddhist school, the Dharmaguptakas, which belonged to the same broad Vibhajjavāda tradition to which the southern Theravāda school belongs. They were virtually the northwest Indian counterpart of the Theravāda, with a similar collection of suttas, an Abhidharma, and a Vinaya that largely corresponds to the Pāli Vinaya.²⁷ Thus the *upasampadā* ordination performed by the Chinese Sangha at Bodhgaya conferred on the candidates the bhikkhunī lineage of the Dharmaguptakas, so that in Vinaya terms they were now full-fledged bhikkhunīs inheriting the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya lineage.²⁸

However, the bhikkhunīs from Sri Lanka wanted to become heirs to the Theravāda Vinaya lineage and to be acceptable to the Theravāda bhikkhus of Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan bhikkhus who sponsored their ordination, too, were apprehensive that if the nuns returned to Sri Lanka with only the Chinese ordination, their co-religionists would have considered their ordination to have been essentially a Mahāyānist one. To prevent this, shortly afterwards the newly ordained bhikkhunīs traveled to Sarnath, where they underwent another *upasampadā* conducted in Pāli under Theravāda bhikkhus from Sri Lanka. This ordination did not negate the earlier dual-ordination received from the Chinese Sangha, but gave it a new direction. While recognizing the validity of the *upasampadā* they received through the Chinese Sangha, the Sri Lankan bhikkhus effectively admitted them to the Theravāda Sangha and conferred on them permission to observe the Theravāda Vinaya and to participate in *saṅghakammas*, legal acts of the Sangha, with their brothers in the Sri Lankan Bhikkhu Sangha.

While dual-Sangha ordination should certainly prevail whenever conditions make it feasible, a case—admittedly, a weaker one—can also be made to justify

²⁷ See Ann Heirman, “Can We Trace the Early Dharmaguptakas?” *T’oung Pao* 88 (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

²⁸ In the course of the Chinese transmission of the Dharmaguptaka ordination lineage, the bhikkhunī ordination has often been conferred solely by a Bhikkhu Sangha rather than by a dual-Sangha, which could open the ordination to a strict Theravādin objection that valid transmission has been broken. The account of bhikkhunī *upasampadā* in the Vinaya texts of the Dharmaguptakas, as preserved in Chinese (at T 22, 925a26-b17; 1067a28-c2), does describe it as a dual-Sangha ordination, very much as in the Pāli Vinaya. Vinaya masters in the Chinese tradition have explicitly discussed this problem. An early Vinaya master from Kashmir, Guṇavarman, who in the fifth century presided over the ordination of Chinese bhikkhunīs by a Bhikkhu Sangha alone, expressed the opinion: “As the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination is finalized by the *bhikṣu saṅgha*, even if the ‘basic dharma’ (i.e., the ordination taken from the *bhikṣuṇī saṅgha*) is not conferred, the *bhikṣuṇī* ordination still results in pure vows, just as in the case of Mahāprajāpatī.” And Tao-Hsuan (Dao-xuan), the seventh century patriarch of the Chinese Dharmaguptaka school, wrote: “Even if a *bhikṣuṇī* ordination is transmitted directly from a *bhikṣu saṅgha* without first conferring the ‘basic dharma,’ it is still valid, as nowhere in the Vinaya indicates otherwise. However, the precept masters commit an offence.” Both quotations are from Heng Ching Shih, “Lineage and Transmission: Integrating the Chinese and Tibetan Orders of Buddhist Nuns” (*Chung-Hwa Buddhist Journal*, no. 13.2, May 2000), pp. 523, 524. These opinions suggest that, from the internal perspective of this school (or at least according to several important Vinaya commentators) ordination solely by the Bhikkhu Sangha, though not in full conformity with the prescribed procedure, is still valid. If this fault were considered serious enough to invalidate ordination through a lineage of Chinese bhikkhunīs, ordination could still be sought from Korean or Vietnamese bhikkhunīs, who have preserved the dual ordination through the centuries.

ordination solely by a Sangha of Theravāda bhikkhus. Although we speak of "a Bhikkhu Sangha" and "a Bhikkhunī Sangha," when a candidate applies for ordination, she actually applies simply to be admitted to *the Sangha*. This is why, during the earliest phase in the history of the Bhikkhunī Sangha, the Buddha could permit the bhikkhus to ordain women as bhikkhunīs. By giving women the *upasampadā*, what the bhikkhus do is admit them to the Sangha. It is then by reason of the fact that they are women that they become bhikkhunīs and thereby members of the Bhikkhunī Sangha.

According to the Cullavagga, preliminary ordination by bhikkhunīs was introduced because the candidate has to be questioned about various obstructions to ordination, among them issues relating to a woman's sexual identity. When the bhikkhus asked women candidates these questions, they were too embarrassed to reply. To avert this impasse, the Buddha proposed that a preliminary ordination be held by the bhikkhunīs, who would first question the candidate about the obstructions, clear her, give her a first ordination, and then bring her to the Bhikkhu Sangha, where she would be ordained a second time by the bhikkhus.²⁹ In this arrangement, it is still the Bhikkhu Sangha that functions as the ultimate authority determining the validity of the ordination. The unifying factor behind most of the *garudhammas* is the granting of formal precedence in Sangha affairs to the bhikkhus, and we can thus infer that the point of the sixth *garudhamma*, the principle of respect that requires that a *sikkhamānā* obtain *upasampadā* from a dual-Sangha, is to ensure that she obtain it from the Bhikkhu Sangha.

We can therefore claim that there are grounds for interpreting this sixth principle to imply that under extraordinary conditions *upasampadā* by a Bhikkhu Sangha alone is valid. We can readily infer that under the exceptional circumstances when a Theravāda Bhikkhunī Sangha has vanished, Theravāda bhikkhus are entitled to take as a precedent the original case when there was no Bhikkhunī Sangha and revive the allowance that the Buddha gave to the bhikkhus to ordain bhikkhunīs on their own. I have to emphasize that this is an interpretation of the Vinaya, a liberal interpretation, and it is far from compelling. But while Vinaya conservatives might have reservations about this way of interpreting the text, we would ask them to consider carefully whether their views are rooted in the text or in traditional interpretation. If our attitude is open and flexible, there seems no reason to deny that under these pressing conditions an *upasampadā* given by a Bhikkhu Sangha alone, being used for a purpose in harmony with the Buddha's intention, is valid, able to elevate a woman to the stature of a bhikkhunī.

Further, if we pay close attention to the wording of the Vinaya passage concerned with bhikkhunī ordination,³⁰ we would notice that the text does not lock this rite into a fixed and immutable form sealed with inviolable imperatives: "You must do it in this way and never in any other way." In fact, grammatically, the Pāli passage uses, not the imperious imperative, but the gentler gerundive or optative participle, "it should be done thus." But grammar aside, the text is simply describing the *normal and most natural way* to conduct the ordination when all the normal requisite conditions are at hand. There is nothing in the text itself, or elsewhere in the Pāli Vinaya, that lays

²⁹ See Vin II 271.

³⁰ Vin II 272-74.

down a rule stating categorically that, should the Bhikkhunī Sangha become extinct, the bhikkhus are prohibited from falling back on the original allowance the Buddha gave them to ordain bhikkhunīs and confer *upasampadā* on their own to resuscitate the Bhikkhunī Sangha.

To me this seems to be the crucial point: Only if there were such a clear prohibition would we be entitled to say that the bhikkhus are overstepping the bounds of legitimacy by conducting such an ordination. In the absence of such a decree in the text of the Vinaya Piṭaka and its commentaries, the judgment that an ordination by bhikkhus is in violation of the Vinaya is only an interpretation. It may be at present the dominant interpretation; it may be an interpretation that has the weight of tradition behind it. But *it remains an interpretation*, and we can well question whether it is an interpretation that needs to stand unquestioned. I myself would question whether it is the interpretation that properly reflects how the Buddha himself would want his monks to act under the critical conditions of our own time, when gender equality looms large as an ideal in secular life and as a value people expect to be embodied in religious life. I would question whether it is an interpretation that we should uphold when doing so will “cause those without confidence not to gain confidence and those with confidence to vacillate.”³¹ Perhaps, instead of just resigning ourselves to a worst-case scenario, i.e., the absolute loss of the Theravāda Bhikkhunī Sangha, we should assume that the Theravāda Bhikkhu Sangha has the right, even the obligation, to interpret the regulations governing bhikkhunī ordination with the flexibility and liberality needed to bring its sister Sangha back to life.

The Buddha himself did not regard the Vinaya as a system fixed immutably in stone, utterly resistant to interpretative adaptations. Before his passing, he taught the Sangha four principles to help deal with novel situations not already covered by the rules of discipline, situations the monks might meet after his *parinibbāna*. These are called the four *mahāpadesā*,³² “the four great guidelines,” namely:

- (1) “If something has not been rejected by me with the words ‘This is not allowed,’ if it accords with what has not been allowed and excludes what has been allowed, that is not allowed to you.
- (2) “If something has not been rejected by me with the words ‘This is not allowed,’ if it accords with what has been allowed and excludes what has not been allowed, that is allowed to you.
- (3) “If something has not been authorized by me with the words ‘This is allowed,’ if it accords with what has not been allowed and excludes what has been allowed, that is not allowed to you.
- (4) “If something has not been authorized by me with the words ‘This is allowed,’ if it accords with what has been allowed and excludes what has not been allowed, that is allowed to you.”³³

³¹ See above, p. 12.

³² *Samantapāsādikā* | 231.

³³ Vin I 251: *Yaṃ bhikkhave, mayā 'idaṃ na kappatī' ti apaṭikkhittam, taṃ ce akappiyaṃ anulometi' kappiyaṃ paṭibāhati, taṃ vo na kappati. Yaṃ bhikkhave, mayā 'idaṃ na kappatī' ti apaṭikkhittam, taṃ ce kappiyaṃ anulometi, akappiyaṃ paṭibāhati, taṃ vo kappati. Yaṃ bhikkhave, mayā 'idaṃ kappatīti ananuññātam, taṃ ce akappiyaṃ anulometi, kappiyaṃ paṭibāhati, taṃ vo na kappati. Yaṃ bhikkhave, mayā 'idaṃ kappatī' ti*

Applying these guidelines to the question whether the Sangha has the right to revive the Bhikkhunī Sangha in either of the two ways discussed (or their combination), we can see that such a step would “accord with what has been allowed” and would not exclude anything else that has been allowed. Thus this step could clearly gain the support of guidelines (2) and (4).

It might be surprising to learn that the revival of the Bhikkhunī Sangha was advocated over half a century ago by a distinguished authority in one of the most conservative bastions of Theravāda Buddhism, namely, Burma. The person I refer to is the original Mingun Jetavan Sayadaw, the meditation teacher of the famous Mahasi Sayadaw and Taungpulu Sayadaw. The Jetavan Sayadaw composed, in Pāli, a commentary to the *Milindapañha* in which he argues for a revival of the Bhikkhunī Sangha. I have translated this part of the commentary and include it as an appendix to the present paper. Writing in the heartland of Theravāda conservatism in 1949, the Jetavan Sayadaw unflinchingly maintains that bhikkhus have the right to revive an extinct Bhikkhunī Sangha. He contends that the dual-Sangha ordination was intended to apply only when a Bhikkhunī Sangha exists and that the Buddha’s permission to the bhikkhus to ordain bhikkhunīs regains validity at any period of Buddhist history when the Bhikkhunī Sangha becomes non-existent. I do not agree wholly with the Sayadaw’s argument, particularly with his contention that the Buddha had foreseen with his omniscience the future extinction of the Bhikkhunī Sangha and intended his permission to bhikkhus to ordain bhikkhunīs as a remedy for this. I see this permission in its historical context as a measure designed to deal with an immediate problem arisen during the Buddha’s own time; but I also regard it as one that that we can employ as a *legal precedent* to solve our present problem. Nevertheless, I believe the Jetavan Sayadaw’s essay is a refreshing reminder that a current of thought sympathetic to the revival of the Bhikkhunī Sangha could flow through the Theravāda world even sixty years ago. Moreover, we can see from his essay that the idea that the Bhikkhunī Sangha can be revived was a hotly discussed topic of his time, and it is likely that a positive attitude towards the issue was shared by a sizeable section of the Burmese Sangha.

Now, however, that a Theravāda Bhikkhunī Sangha exists in Sri Lanka, the question of how to revive it is no longer relevant. Any woman who wants to be ordained as a bhikkhunī in the Theravāda tradition can go to Sri Lanka to receive full ordination there. Of course, she will first have to fulfill the preliminary requirements, and in my view it is important to restore the observance of the *sikkhamānā* training to the preliminary requirements for bhikkhunī ordination.

(2) I next come to the *sikkhamānā* training. In the first section of this paper, I presented an argument sometimes posed by conservative Vinaya theorists. To recapitulate: *Sikkhamānā* training is a prerequisite for valid bhikkhunī ordination. Authorization to undertake this training, and confirmation that one has completed it, are both conferred by a Bhikkhunī Sangha. Without an existing Theravāda Bhikkhunī Sangha, this training cannot be given nor can one be confirmed as having completed it. Full ordination given to women who have not gone through these two steps is invalid. Hence there can be no valid Theravāda bhikkhunī ordination, and thus no revival of the Theravāda Bhikkhunī Sangha.

ananuññātāṃ, taṃ ce kappiyaṃ anulometi, akappiyaṃ paṭibāhati, taṃ vo kappatī ti.

I want to look more closely at this issue, for if this contention is true, this would mean in effect that all the *upasampadās* given to all women in all Buddhist schools who have not undergone the *sikkhamānā* training are invalid. The question we are addressing is the following: Is bestowal of *sikkhamānā* status an absolutely necessary condition for valid *upasampadā*? Is the *upasampadā* conferred on a *sāmaṇerī* who has not gone through the formal *sikkhamānā* training valid or invalid, legal or illegal?

First, let us be clear that the Vinaya requires that a woman undertake the *sikkhamānā* training before undergoing *upasampadā*. To do so is one of the eight *garudhammas*. It is on this basis that the Vinaya legalists maintain that the *upasampadā* is valid only when given to a candidate who has trained as a *sikkhamānā*. Here, however, we are concerned, not with what is prescribed by the texts, but with a question of strict legality.

The "variant cases" sections attached to Bhikkhunī Pācittiyas 63 and 64 establish that *upasampadā* given to a woman who has not undergone the *sikkhamānā* training, though contrary to the intention of the Vinaya, is still valid. According to these rules, the preceptor receives a *pācittiya* offense for conducting the *upasampadā*, while the other participating bhikkhunīs receive *dukkāṭa* offenses, but the ordination itself remains valid and the candidate emerges a bhikkhunī. Bhikkhunī Pācittiya 63 states: "If a bhikkhunī should ordain a probationer who has not trained for two years in the six dhammas, she incurs a *pācittiya*."³⁴ The "variant cases" section reads:

When the act is legal, she ordains her perceiving the act as legal: a *pācittiya* offense. When the act is legal, she ordains her while in doubt [about its legality]: a *pācittiya* offense. When the act is legal, she ordains her perceiving the act as illegal: a *pācittiya* offense.³⁵

According to this statement, the preceptor incurs a *pācittiya* if she gives the *upasampadā* to a candidate who has not trained in the six dhammas in three cases when the act is legal: she perceives it as legal, she is doubtful about its legality, and she perceives it as illegal. If, however, the act is illegal, she incurs only a *dukkāṭa*, even when she perceives it as legal. Interestingly, in describing these illegal cases, the text omits the word *vuṭṭhāpeti*, glossed by the word commentary as *upasampādeti*, "to fully ordain"; for in these cases, though the participants "go through the motions" of conferring full ordination, technically no act of ordination is performed.

Now since in the first three variants, the act is described as "legal" (*dhammakamma*), this implies that in the view of the compilers of the Vinaya, the *upasampadā* itself is valid and the candidate is legally ordained. Since the sixth *garudhamma*, as well as Bhikkhunī Pācittiya 63, are binding on the preceptor, she is penalized with a *pācittiya* for disobeying it; but disobedience, it seems, does not negate the validity of the *upasampadā*. We find the same set of variants for Bhikkhunī Pācittiya 64, which assigns a *pācittiya* to a bhikkhunī who gives the *upasampadā* to a *sikkhamānā*

³⁴ Vin IV 319: *Yā pana bhikkhunī dve vassāni chasu dhammesu asikkhitasikkhaṃ sikkhamānaṃ vuṭṭhāpeyya pācittiyam.* [Leave Pali.]

³⁵ Vin IV 320: *Dhammakamme dhammakammasaññā vuṭṭhāpeti āpatti pācittiyassa. Dhammakamme vematikā vuṭṭhāpeti āpatti pācittiyassa. Dhammakamme adhammakammasaññā vuṭṭhāpeti āpatti pācittiyassa.* [Leave Pali.]

who has not received the authorization from a Sangha; the implications are similar. Admittedly, there is an internal tension here between (i) the stipulation that the candidate must have undergone the *sikkhamānā* training and have had this authorized by the Sangha before she is eligible to receive *upasampadā*, and (ii) the fact that the ordination can be considered a "legal act" (*dhammakamma*) when given to a candidate who has not met these requirements. But it seems that failure to undertake or complete the *sikkhamānā* training does not negate the validity of the *upasampadā*. It might be noted, by way of contrast, that Bhikkhunī Pācittiya 65, which assigns a *pācittiya* to a preceptor for ordaining a *gihigatā*, a formerly married girl, below twelve years of age, does not have the variants in terms of legal acts, etc., attached to it. In this case there can be no legal ordination, for the ordaining of a *gihigatā* below the age of twelve can never be legal. Similarly for Pācittiya 71, the parallel rule for ordination of a *kumāribhūtā*, i.e., a maiden, below the age of twenty. In this case, too, there are no variants expressed in terms of legal acts perceived as legal, as illegal, or doubted, for the ordination of a maiden below the age of twenty is always invalid.

I bring up these cases, because they show that the Vinaya did not regard as invalid an *upasampadā* ordination that failed to fully conform to the procedures laid down in the eight *garudhammas* and even within the body of the Suttavibhaṅga; that is, women who received full ordination without having undergone the *sikkhamānā* training were still regarded as validly ordained bhikkhunīs as long as their ordination conformed to the other decisive criteria. How this would have been possible under a traditional system of bhikkhunī training is difficult to imagine, but the theoretical possibility at least is envisaged. Rather than declaring the ordination null and void, the Suttavibhaṅga allows it to stand, while requiring that disciplinary offenses (*āpatti*) be assigned to the preceptor, the teacher, and the other bhikkhunīs who filled the quorum.

This example might be taken as an analogy for the case when *upasampadā* is given by a dual-ordination with bhikkhunīs from another school, followed by a single-Sangha ordination by a community of Theravāda bhikkhus. Although the procedure might not fulfill the highest standards of legal perfection, one could contend that because it does conform to basic templates of ordination prescribed in the texts, it should be admitted as valid.

Let us return to our main issue. Since the agreement to undertake the *sikkhamānā* training is given by a Sangha, in the absence of a Bhikkhunī Sangha, one would suppose that this task should fall to a Bhikkhu Sangha. This might seem odd, but in the Vinaya Piṭaka itself we find a passage which suggests that at a time when the canonical Vinaya was still in process of formation, departures from the standard practice of *sikkhamānā* appointment were recognized. In the Mahāvagga's *Vassūpanāyikakkhandhaka*, the "Chapter on Entering the Rains Retreat," there is a passage in which the Buddha is shown granting permission to a bhikkhu to leave his rains residence at the request of a *sāmaṇerī* who wishes "to undertake the training," that is, to become a *sikkhamānā*. The passage reads thus:

"But here, bhikkhus, a *sāmaṇerī* desires to undertake the training. If she sends a messenger to the bhikkhus, saying: 'I desire to undertake the training. Let the masters come; I want the masters to come,' you should go, bhikkhus, for a matter that can be done in seven days even if not sent for, how much more so if

sent for, thinking: 'I will be zealous for her to undertake the training.' You should return before seven days."³⁶

The *Samantapāsādikā*—the Vinaya Commentary—comments on this amidst a long list of occasions when a bhikkhu can leave his rains residence, and thus it has to string them all together and touch each one briefly. Therefore, in commenting on this passage, it says rather tersely:

A bhikkhu can go visit a sāmaṇerī if he wants to give her the training rule (*sikkhāpadaṃ dātukāmo*). Together with the other reasons (i.e., she is ill, wants to disrobe, has a troubled conscience, or has adopted a wrong view), there are these five reasons [for which the bhikkhu can go visit her during the Rains].³⁷

The commentary seems to be “normalizing” the passage by assigning the bhikkhu the task of re-administering to the sāmaṇerī her training rules, but the canonical text, in contrast, seems to be ascribing to him a key role in the transmission of the *sikkhamānā* training to a sāmaṇerī, a task normally assigned exclusively to the Bhikkhunī Sangha. Could we not see in this passage a subtle suggestion that under unusual circumstances the Bhikkhu Sangha can in fact give the *sikkhamānā* training to a female aspirant for *upasampadā*? It might be an elder bhikkhu eligible to give the “exhortation” (*ovāda*) to bhikkhunīs who would be considered fit to serve as preceptor for a *sikkhamānā*. Still, the best alternative would be for the aspiring sāmaṇerī to find a situation where she could receive authorization to train as a *sikkhamānā* from bhikkhunīs and actually train under their guidance for the full two-year period, until she is qualified to take full ordination.

(3) Finally we come to the problem of *pabbajjā*. Conservatives maintain that only a bhikkhunī can give a woman aspirant *pabbajjā*, that is, can ordain her as a sāmaṇerī. However, we should note that there is no stipulation in the Vinaya explicitly prohibiting a bhikkhu from giving *pabbajjā* to a woman. Such a practice is certainly contrary to established precedent, but we have to be careful not to transform established precedent into inviolable law, which, it seems, is what has happened in the Theravāda tradition. When the *Mahāvamsa* has the Elder Mahinda declare to King Devānampiyatissa, “We are not permitted, your majesty, to give the *pabbajjā* to women,” we should remember that Mahinda is speaking under normal circumstances, when a Bhikkhunī Sangha exists. He therefore requests the king to invite his sister, Sanghamittā, to come to Sri Lanka to ordain the women of the court. His words should not be taken as binding under all circumstances. We should also remember that the *Mahāvamsa* is neither a canonical Vinaya text nor a Vinaya commentary; it is a partly mythical chronicle of Sri Lankan Buddhist history. Neither the canonical Vinaya nor any authoritative Vinaya commentary expressly prohibits a bhikkhu from giving *pabbajjā* to women. To do so would certainly be the less desirable alternative, but in the hypothetical situation when a Theravāda Bhikkhunī Sangha does not exist at all or

³⁶ Vin I 147: *Idha pana, bhikkhave, sāmaṇerī sikkhaṃ samādiyitukāmā hoti. Sā ce bhikkhūnaṃ santike dūtaṃ pahiṇeyya "ahanhi sikkhaṃ samādiyitukāmā, āgacchantu ayyā, icchāmi ayyānaṃ āgatan"ti, gantabbaṃ, bhikkhave, sattāhakaraṇīyena, appahitepi, pageva pahite-- "sikkhāsamādānaṃ ussukkaṃ karissāmi"ti. Sattāhaṃ sannivatto kātabboti. [Leave Pali.]*

³⁷ Sp V 1069.

exists only in remote regions, this would seem to be justification for a departure from normal procedure.

One last issue that must be faced, which I can only touch on, concerns the strategy of implementing a revival of the Bhikkhunī Sangha. In particular, we must deal with the question: "Should individual Sanghas begin ordaining women as bhikkhunīs independently or should they first attempt to gain recognition of bhikkhunī ordination from the higher authorities of the Sangha hierarchy?" This is an extremely delicate question which takes us into the heart of communal monastic life. It is also a partly dated question, since bhikkhunī ordinations have already started. But still, I think it is useful to reflect on this consideration to ensure that the Bhikkhunī Sangha will develop in healthy and harmonious integration with the Bhikkhu Sangha.

The very question raises other questions, almost unanswerable, about where exactly in the Theravāda monastic order authority begins and how far that authority extends. To try to settle the issue before us by obtaining a universal consensus among bhikkhus throughout the Theravāda world seems unfeasible, and it would also seem unfeasible to hold an international election among Theravāda bhikkhus. A council of prominent elders from the leading Theravāda countries would almost certainly represent the viewpoint that I have called conservative legalism, and they would again almost certainly decide that bhikkhunī ordination is unattainable. Since they are not an official authority, it would be an open question whether the entire Theravāda Sangha need be bound by their decree, especially if they reach a decision without giving proponents of bhikkhunī ordination a chance to present their view. In my opinion bhikkhus who belong to an extended community, such as a Nikāya or network of monasteries, should attempt to reach consensus on this issue within their community. It is only when serious, sincere, and prolonged attempts at persuasion prove futile that monks who favor restoring the Bhikkhunī Sangha should consider whether to hold bhikkhunī ordinations without such a consensus.

Although there might not be any such thing as a unified international Theravāda Sangha, it seems to me that each monk has an obligation to act in conscience *as if* there were such an entity; his decisions and deeds should be guided by the ideal of promoting the well-being and unity of an integral Sangha even if this Sangha is merely posited in thought. On this basis, I would then have to say that when one group of bhikkhus decides to confer bhikkhunī ordination without obtaining the consent of the leadership of the Sangha body to which they belong, or without obtaining a wide consensus among fellow bhikkhus in their fraternity, they risk creating a fissure within the Sangha. While they are certainly not maliciously causing a schism in the Sangha, they are still dividing the Sangha into two factions that hold irreconcilable views on the critically important question of whether persons of a particular type—namely, women who have undergone the *upasampadā* procedure—actually possess the status of a fully ordained monastic. And this is surely a very serious matter. In short, while in principle I believe there are legal grounds for re-introducing bhikkhunī ordination in the Theravāda tradition and strongly support a revival of the Bhikkhunī Sangha, I also feel that this should be done in a cautious way that will preserve the tenuous unity of the Sangha rather than divide it into two factions, a dominant faction that remains convinced the Bhikkhunī Sangha cannot be revived, and

a smaller faction that acknowledges the existence of a Bhikkhunī Sangha. But this concern also has to be balanced against concern that an established monastic old guard committed to preserving the status quo will persistently block all proposals to revive a Bhikkhunī Sangha, thus frustrating all attempts at transformation. In such a case, I would hold, those committed to reviving the Bhikkhunī Sangha are entitled to obey the call of their own conscience rather than the orders of their monastic superiors. But in doing so they might also try to draw their monastic superiors into the process. In Sri Lanka, at least, the attitudes of the senior monks have changed dramatically over the past ten years. Thus supporters of bhikkhunī ordination might sit down with the leading elders of the Sangha and patiently try to bring them into this process in a way that will allow them to support it while at the same time enable them to preserve their dignity.

Conclusion

The disappearance of the Theravāda Bhikkhunī Sangha has presented us with a situation not explicitly addressed in the Vinaya and thus one for which there is no unambiguous remedy. When faced with such a contingency, naturally Vinaya authorities will hold different ideas about how to proceed, all claiming to accord with the purport of the Vinaya. As I see it, the Vinaya cannot be read in any fixed manner as either unconditionally permitting or forbidding a revival of the Bhikkhunī Sangha. It yields these conclusions only as a result of interpretation, and interpretation often reflects the attitudes of the interpreters and the framework of assumptions within which they operate as much as it does the actual words of the text they are interpreting.

Amidst the spectrum of opinions that might be voiced, the two main categories of interpretation are the conservative and the progressive. For conservatives, bhikkhunī status absolutely requires a dual-Sangha ordination with the participation of a Theravāda Bhikkhunī Sangha; hence, since no Theravāda Bhikkhunī Sangha exists, and for conservatives non-Theravādin bhikkhunīs cannot fill this role, the Theravāda bhikkhunī lineage is irreparably broken and can never be restored. For progressives, bhikkhunī ordination can be restored, either by permitting bhikkhunīs from an East Asian country to fulfill the role of the Bhikkhunī Sangha at a dual-Sangha ordination or by recognizing the right of bhikkhus to ordain bhikkhunīs until a Theravāda Bhikkhunī Sangha becomes functional.

In my opinion, in deciding between the conservative and the progressive approaches to the bhikkhunī issue, the question that should be foremost in our minds is this: "What would the Buddha want his elder bhikkhu-disciples to do in such a situation, *now*, in the twenty-first century?" If he were to see us pondering this problem today, would he want us to apply the regulations governing ordination in a way that excludes women from the fully ordained renunciant life, so that we present to the world a religion in which men alone can lead the life of full renunciation? Or would he instead want us to apply the regulations of the Vinaya in a way that is kind, generous, and accommodating, thereby offering the world a religion that truly embodies principles of justice and non-discrimination?

The answers to these questions are not immediately given by any text or tradition, but I do not think we are left entirely to subjective opinion either. From the texts we can see how, in making major decisions, the Buddha displayed both compassion and disciplinary rigor; we can also see how, in defining the behavioral standards of his Sangha, he took account of the social and cultural expectations of his contemporaries. In working out a solution to our own problem, therefore, we have these two guidelines to follow. One is to be true to the spirit of the Dhamma--true to both the letter and the spirit, but above all to the spirit. The other is to be responsive to the social, intellectual, and cultural horizons of humanity in this particular period of history in which we live, this age in which we forge our own future destinies and the future destiny of Buddhism. Looked at in this light, the revival of a Theravāda Bhikkhunī Sangha can be seen as an intrinsic good that conforms to the innermost spirit of the Dhamma, helping to bring to fulfillment the Buddha's own mission of opening "the doors to the Deathless" to all humankind, to women as well as to men. At the same time, viewed against the horizons of contemporary understanding, the existence of a Bhikkhunī Sangha can function as an instrumental good. It will allow women to make a meaningful and substantial contribution to Buddhism in many of the ways that monks do--as preachers, scholars, meditation teachers, educators, social advisors, and ritual leaders--and perhaps in certain ways that will be unique to female renunciants, for example, as counselors and guides to women lay followers. A Bhikkhunī Sangha will also win for Buddhism the respect of high-minded people in the world, who regard the absence of gender discrimination as the mark of a truly worthy religion in harmony with the noble trends of present-day civilization.

APPENDIX

Can an Extinct Bhikkhunī Sangha Be Revived?

by

The Original Mingun Jetavan Sayadaw of Burma

Translated from the Pāli by Bhikkhu Bodhi

From the *Milindapañha Aṭṭhakathā* (Haṃsāvātī Piṭaka Press, Rangoon, Burmese year 1311 (= 1949)), pp. 228-238.

[228] In this problem [of the *Milindapañha*], a guideline can be said to be given for bhikkhus of the future.³⁸ What is this guideline that can be said to be given for bhikkhus of the future? “Bhikkhus, I allow bhikkhus to ordain bhikkhunīs.” There is a passage beginning: “After completing her training in six rules for two years, a *sikkhamānā* should seek ordination from both Sanghas.” The statement, “Bhikkhus, I allow bhikkhus to ordain bhikkhunīs,” does not occur with reference to the subject³⁹ of [the statement]: “After completing her training in six rules for two years, a *sikkhamānā* should seek ordination from both Sanghas.” And the statement, “After completing her training in six rules for two years, [229] a *sikkhamānā* should seek ordination from both Sanghas,” does not occur with reference to the subject of [the statement]: “Bhikkhus, I allow bhikkhus to ordain bhikkhunīs.” Although the latter does not occur [with that reference], still the subject referred to by the two statements, each taken by itself, is just a woman who is to be ordained.

One statement says that a woman who is to be ordained should be ordained by a Bhikkhu Sangha; the other, that a woman who is to be ordained should be ordained by a dual-Sangha. Now there will be future bhikkhus of wrong beliefs who will cling to their own conviction and for the purpose of promoting their wrong beliefs will argue thus: “Friends, if the Tathāgata said: ‘Bhikkhus, I allow bhikkhus to ordain bhikkhunīs,’ then the statement: ‘After completing her training in six rules for two years, a *sikkhamānā* should seek ordination from a dual-Sangha’ is false. But if the Tathāgata said: ‘After completing her training in six rules for two years, a *sikkhamānā* should seek ordination from a dual-Sangha,’ then the statement: ‘Bhikkhus, I allow bhikkhus to ordain bhikkhunīs’ is false. Isn’t it true that ordination by a dual-Sangha is excluded by [the injunction] that a Bhikkhu Sangha should give ordination to a woman? And isn’t [the allowance to give] ordination by the Bhikkhu Sangha excluded by the injunction that a dual-Sangha should give ordination to a woman? Thus the two are mutually exclusive. A Bhikkhu Sangha giving ordination to a woman candidate is one; a dual-Sangha giving ordination to a woman candidate is another.”

This is a dilemma. At present, when bhikkhus are unable to answer and resolve this dilemma, [other] bhikkhus sometimes come along and argue over it. Some say:

³⁸ *Anāgatabhikkhūnaṃ nayo dinno nāma hoti.*

³⁹ In the phrase *atthe nappavattati*, I understand the word ‘*attha*’ to signify, not “meaning,” but the referent of a statement. Thus the *attha* or referent of the statement “I allow bhikkhus to ordain bhikkhunīs” is a female aspirant for ordination at a time when no Bhikkhunī Sangha exists in the world; and the referent of the statement “a *sikkhamānā* should seek ordination from a dual-Sangha” is a *sikkhamānā* who has completed her training at a time when the Bhikkhunī Sangha exists in the world.

“The Bhikkhu Sangha could ordain women only in the period before the Bhikkhunī Sangha arose. From the time the Bhikkhunī Sangha arose, women must be ordained by a dual-Sangha. Therefore, now that the Bhikkhunī Sangha has become extinct, women cannot be ordained by the Bhikkhu Sangha.” But others argue: “They can be ordained.” [230]

In this matter we say that the statement: “Bhikkhus, I allow bhikkhus to ordain bhikkhunīs” was made by the Exalted One, and this statement of the Exalted One concerns restriction [of the ordination solely by a Bhikkhu Sangha] to a period when the Bhikkhunī Sangha does not exist.⁴⁰ Hence there is a difference in both meaning and wording [between this statement and the other] explaining the procedure for a *sikkhamānā*. The statement: “After completing her training in six rules for two years, a *sikkhamānā* should seek ordination from a dual-Sangha” was spoken by the Exalted One, and it explains the procedure for a *sikkhamānā*. Hence there is a difference in both meaning and wording [between this statement and the other] restricting [the single-Sangha ordination] to a period when the Bhikkhunī Sangha does not exist. One is a restriction [of the ordination solely by a Bhikkhu Sangha] to a period when the Bhikkhunī Sangha does not exist, while the other explains the procedure for a *sikkhamānā*. The two are far apart in meaning; they are not speaking about the same thing and should not be mixed up. All the Exalted One’s bodily deeds, verbal deeds, and mental deeds were preceded and accompanied by knowledge. He had unobstructed knowledge and vision regarding the past, the future, and the present. So what should be said of an arahant?⁴¹

Thus the Exalted One’s statement: “Bhikkhus, I allow bhikkhus to ordain bhikkhunīs” concerned restriction [of the ordination solely by a Bhikkhu Sangha] to a period in the past when the Bhikkhunī Sangha did not exist; in the future, too, it will be restricted to a period when the Bhikkhunī Sangha will not exist; and at present it is restricted to a period when the Bhikkhunī Sangha does not exist. Since the Exalted One had seen [such situations] with his unobstructed knowledge and vision, that is, with his knowledge of omniscience, his statement should be allowed [to have such applications]. It should be admitted that the Bhikkhu Sangha had been allowed [to ordain bhikkhunīs] in the past, though restricted to a period when the Bhikkhunī Sangha did not exist; in the future too, though restricted to a period when the Bhikkhunī Sangha will not exist; and at present too, restricted to a period when the Bhikkhunī Sangha does not exist. Hence at present, or even now, though restricted to a situation in which the Bhikkhunī Sangha has become non-existent, women can be ordained by the Bhikkhu Sangha.⁴²

[Question:] Then, when Queen Anulā wanted to go forth, and the king said, “Give her the going forth,” why did Mahinda Thera reply: “Great king, we are not permitted to give the going forth to women”?⁴³

⁴⁰ *Taṭ ca pana bhagavato vacanaṃ ayaṃ bhikkhunī saṅghassa abhāvaparicchedo*. I understand the last phrase to signify the limitation (*pariccheda*) of single-Sangha ordination to a time when the Bhikkhunī Sangha is non-existent (*bhikkhunīsaṅghassa abhāva*).

⁴¹ The mention of an arahant here is difficult to account for, unless the Sayadaw is referring to Nāgasena, one of the two protagonists in the *Milindapañha*.

⁴² *Tato eva paccuppanne ca etarahi vā pana bhikkhunīsaṅghassa abhāvapariccheden’eva bhikkhusaṅghena mātuḅāmo upasampādetabbo*.

[Reply:] This was because the Bhikkhunī Sangha existed at the time, not because it was prohibited by the text (*sutta*). Thus to explain the meaning, Mahinda Thera said: [231] “My sister, the Therī Sanghamittā, is at Pāṭaliputta. Invite her.” By this statement, the point being made is that he is not permitted [to ordain women] because of the restriction [of the ordination solely by a Bhikkhu Sangha] to a period when the Bhikkhunī Sangha does not exist, not because it is prohibited by the text. The text which states: “Bhikkhus, I allow bhikkhus to ordain bhikkhunīs” should not be rejected merely on the basis of one’s personal opinion. One should not strike a blow to the Wheel of Authority of the omniscient knowledge. The wishes of qualified persons should not be obstructed. For now women are qualified to be ordained by the Bhikkhu Sangha.⁴⁴

When [the Buddha] said: “If, Ānanda, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī accepts these eight principles of respect, let that suffice for her ordination,” he laid down these eight principles of respect as the fundamental regulations (*mūlapaññatti*) for bhikkhunīs at a time when bhikkhunīs had not yet appeared. One principle among them—namely, “After completing her training in six rules for two years, a *sikkhamānā* should seek ordination from a dual-Sangha”—was laid down as a fundamental regulation for a *sikkhamānā* to undertake as part of her training at a time even before the Bhikkhunī Sangha appeared. After the Buddha had laid down these eight principles of respect as the fundamental regulations for bhikkhunīs, ordination [initially] arose by [Mahāpajāpatī’s] acceptance of them. When Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī then asked: “Bhante, how shall I act in regard to these Sakyan women?” the Exalted One did not see: “It is only now that the Bhikkhunī Sangha is non-existent [but it will not be so] in the future too.”⁴⁵ He saw: “The Bhikkhunī Sangha is non-existent now and in the future too it will be non-existent.” Knowing that when the Bhikkhunī Sangha is non-existent the occasion arises for an allowance [given to] the Bhikkhu Sangha [to be used], the Buddha laid down a secondary regulation (*anupaññatti*) to the effect that women can be ordained by the Bhikkhu Sangha, that is: “Bhikkhus, I allow bhikkhus to ordain bhikkhunīs.” But this secondary regulation did not reach a condition where it shared [validity] with any prior and subsequent prohibition and allowance that had been laid down.⁴⁶ Thus the Exalted One, the Worthy One, the Perfectly Enlightened One, who knows and sees, allowed women at present to be ordained in such a way.

In order to achieve success in [the recitation of] the enactment formula (*kammavācā*), the text of the enactment formula should be recited in full. A competent, able bhikkhu, who understands the Exalted One’s intention, should inform the Sangha: [232] “Bhante, let the Sangha listen to me. This one of such a name seeks ordination under that one of such a name. She is pure with regard to the obstructive factors. Her bowl and robes are complete. This one of such a name asks the Sangha for ordination

⁴³ The reference is to *Mahāvamsa*, XV.18-23. See Wilhelm Geiger: *The Mahāvamsa or The Great Chronicle of Ceylon* (London: Pali Text Society 1912), p. 98.

⁴⁴ *Sabbaññutañāṇassa āñācakkam na pahārayitabbaṃ. Bhabbapuggalānaṃ āsā na chinditabbā. Bhikkhusaṅghena hi mātugāmo etarahi upasampādetuṃ bhabbo ti.* [Leave Pali.]

⁴⁵ I felt it necessary to add the phrase in brackets in order to give this sentence (which in the original is merely a clause in an extremely complex sentence) the meaning required by the context.

⁴⁶ *Esā pana anupaññatti pure ceva pacchā ca paññattena paṭikkhepenāpi anuññātenāpi sādharmaṇabhāvaṃ na pāpuṇi.* The purport seems to be that this authorization is valid only as long as the Buddha does not issue another decree that implicitly annuls its validity, such as that stipulating a dual-Sangha ordination.

with that one of such a name as sponsor (*pavattinī*). If the Sangha finds it fitting, the Sangha may ordain this one of such a name with that one of such a name as sponsor. This is the motion. Bhante, let the Sangha listen to me. This one of such a name seeks ordination under that one of such a name. She is pure with regard to the obstructive factors. Her bowl and robes are complete. This one of such a name asks the Sangha for ordination with that one of such a name as sponsor. The Sangha ordains this one of such a name with that one of such a name as sponsor. Any venerable who agrees to the ordination of this one of such a name with that one of such a name as sponsor should remain silent; any venerable who does not agree should speak up. A second time I declare this matter ... A third time I declare this matter [repeat above pronouncement]. This one of such a name has been ordained by the Sangha with that one of such a name as sponsor. The Sangha is in agreement; therefore it is silent. That is how I understand it.”

At the conclusion of the enactment formula, the woman who was to be ordained by the Bhikkhu Sangha is now called “one ordained on one side [solely by a Bhikkhu Sangha].”⁴⁷ But in the Commentary, the bhikkhus ordained the five hundred Sakyan women on the basis of the secondary regulation, “Bhikkhus, I allow bhikkhus to ordain bhikkhunīs.” Without having them first select a preceptor, they ordained them making them pupils of Mahāpajāpatī, and thus, for the success of the enactment formula, they used the following proclamation: “Bhante, let the Sangha listen to me. This one of such a name seeks ordination under Mahāpajāpatī,” and so forth. Thus they too were all called “ordained on one side.” There is no reference to them first selecting a preceptor. And since here the Exalted One had not yet authorized it, here there is nothing [233] about first selecting a preceptor, or about explaining the bowl and robes, or about requesting the ordination, or about inquiring into the twenty-four obstructive factors, or about explaining the three dependences and the eight strict prohibitions. Thus, even at the cost of life, bhikkhus do not lay down what has not been laid down and do not abrogate what has been laid down, but they take up and practice the training rules that have been laid down; such is the Exalted One’s intention. By this very method, a Bhikkhu Sangha can give ordination [to constitute] a Bhikkhunī Sangha made up of those ordained on one side, and when a chapter of five [bhikkhunīs] has been constituted, it is proper for them to give ordination in the remote countries through a dual-Sangha procedure. And in this case it is determined that a dual-Sangha has arisen.⁴⁸

Then, if it is asked, “Why did the bhikkhus in the past ordain the five hundred Sakyan women?” the answer should be given: “Because the narrative gives the story of what had been allowed all as one.”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ *Ekato upasampanno*. The expression ends in the masculine termination –o because the subject of the sentence, *mātugāmo*, “woman,” is a word of masculine gender.

⁴⁸ *So eten’ev’upāyena bhikkhusaṅghena etarahi upasampādetabbo ekato upasampannabhikkhunīsāṅgho, pañcavagge pahonte paccantimesu janapadesu ubhatosaṅghena upasampādetum yutto c’eva hoti. Ubhatosaṅgho ca uppanno ti idha thātābameva.* [Can delete Pali.]

⁴⁹ *Atha kasmā pubbe bhikkhū pañcasatā sākiyāniyo upasampādentī ti pucchitā anuññātassa vatthuno ekato nidānattā ti vissajjetabbā.* Perhaps the point is: “Why did the bhikkhus go on to ordain five hundred women by a single-Sangha ordination, instead of ordaining five and then letting these five function as a Bhikkhunī Sangha that could help to ordain the others?” But I am not sure that I have caught the

At this point, with the arising of a dual-Sangha, if a woman wishes ordination, she should acquire the going forth as a *sāmaṇerī* in the presence of bhikkhunīs, and it is only a bhikkhunī who should let her go forth. After they have let her go forth, only a Bhikkhunī Sangha should give her the agreement [to train] as a *sikkhamānā*. After she receives it, she should train in the six rules for two years. When the *sikkhamānā* has completed her training, she should then seek ordination from a dual-Sangha. And here, when it is said in the fundamental regulation, “After completing her training, a *sikkhamānā* should seek ordination from a dual-Sangha,” the Exalted One laid down a particular sequence. He first had the *sikkhamānā* receive ordination from a Bhikkhu Sangha and cleared [of obstructive factors by the bhikkhus]. Thereupon she would receive ordination by a Bhikkhunī Sangha, and thus she would be “ordained by a dual-Sangha.” At a later time, however, the Exalted One laid down a secondary regulation, saying: “Bhikkhus, I allow a woman who has received ordination on one-side and been cleared [of obstructive factors] by the Bhikkhunī Sangha to receive ordination by the Bhikkhu Sangha.” Thus he enjoins a *sikkhamānā* who has completed her training to first receive ordination from a Bhikkhunī Sangha. When she has been ordained on one side and cleared [of obstructive factors] by the Bhikkhunī Sangha, she is subsequently to be ordained by the Bhikkhu Sangha. Thus he allowed her to become ordained by a dual-Sangha in a reversal of the preceding sequence,⁵⁰ but did not reject one who previously had been ordained on one side by the Bhikkhu Sangha.⁵¹ The one was too remote from the other for the two to be confused with one another. Also, imagining that a later secondary regulation negates a previously [234] laid down [regulation] occurs to blind foolish persons, not to those with insight, for the conclusion is seen in the narrative on the secondary regulation.⁵²

This is the sequence in the text for the act of ordination of a *sikkhamānā* who has completed her training: First, she should be asked to choose her preceptor. After she has done so, the bowl and robes should be explained to her: “This is your bowl. This is your outer robe; this is your upper robe; this is your under robe; this is your blouse; this is your bathing cloth. Go, stand in that area.”

[Pages 234-238 give the formulas for dual-Sangha ordination found at Vin II 272-74, starting with “*Suṇātu me, ayye, saṅgho, itthannāmā itthannāmāya ayyāya upasampadāpekkhā. Yadi saṅghassa pattakallaṃ, ahaṃ itthannāmā itthannāmaṃ anusāseyyaṃ,*” and ending with “*Tassā tayo ca nissaye aṭṭha ca akaraṇīyāni ācikkheyyātha.*” The translation here resumes at the very end, on p. 238.]

author’s point.

⁵⁰ The earlier sentence, when explaining the procedure in which the bhikkhus give the ordination first, refers to the sequence as *anukkama*. I assume that the expression used here, *kamokkama*, means “a reversal of the preceding sequence,” and translate accordingly.

⁵¹ The point seems to be that after introducing the dual-Sangha ordination, the Buddha did not require the women who had previously received ordination by the Bhikkhu Sangha alone to undergo another ordination by the Bhikkhunī Sangha; he allowed their one-sided ordination to stand.

⁵² *Anupaññatiyā nidānena niṭṭhaṅgatadiṭṭhattā*. The point is not quite clear to me.

Thus the Bhikkhu Sangha described above should make a determined effort as follows: “Now that the Bhikkhunī Sangha has become extinct, we will revive the institution of bhikkhunīs! We will understand the heart’s wish of the Exalted One! We will see the Exalted One’s face brighten like the full moon!”⁵³ A bhikkhu motivated by a desire to resuscitate the institution of bhikkhunīs should be skilled in the subject praised by the Exalted One. But in this problem [set in the *Milindapañha*], this is the guideline given for bhikkhus of the future. So the question asked, “What is this guideline that is given for bhikkhus of the future?” has just been answered.

⁵³ *Idāni bhikkhunīsāṅghe vaṃsacchinne mayaṃ bhikkhunīsāsanāṃ anusandhānaṃ karissāma, bhagavato manorathaṃ jānissāma, bhagavato puṇṇindusāṅkāsamukhaṃ passissāmā ti. [Leave Pali.]*