

The Revival of Bhikkhunī Ordination in the Theravāda Tradition

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My paper focuses on the legal and ethical issues involved in the revival of the Theravāda Bhikkhunī Sangha. The paper is divided into three parts. In Part I, I review the arguments presented by Theravādin traditionalists who see a revival of bhikkhunī ordination as a legal impossibility. In Part II, I offer textual and ethical considerations that support the claim that bhikkhunī ordination should be restored. And in Part III, I briefly consider the legal mechanics of restoring the bhikkhunī ordination to the Theravāda tradition, that is, how the ordination can best be harmonized with the stipulations of the Vinaya.

Monastic ordination as a bhikkhunī involves three stages: (1) *pabbajjā*, the novice ordination; (2) the *sikkhamānā* training; and (3) *upasampadā* or full ordination. Theravādin Vinaya experts posit hurdles at all three stages. In my paper, I discuss all three stages from two points of view: in terms of the objections posed by the conservative legalists, who claim that it is impossible to revive them; and from the point of view of those who favor reviving the bhikkhunī ordination. Since the time allotted for the oral presentation is limited, I will be focusing exclusively on the *upasampadā*. To anticipate my conclusion: I hold that neither position can be derived unambiguously from the Vinaya, but that interpretation depends upon the setting under which the interpretation of the Vinaya is made and the set of presuppositions and purposes that the interpreters bring to the task of interpretation.

I. *The Case Against the Revival of Bhikkhunī Ordination*

For Vinaya legalists, the *upasampadā* presents the most formidable barrier to reviving the Bhikkhunī Sangha. The main legal objection the legalists raise against bhikkhunī *upasampadā* is that it is a dual-ordination. It must be given by both the Bhikkhunī Sangha and the Bhikkhu Sangha, and to be a purely Theravāda ordination it must come from an existing Theravāda Bhikkhunī Sangha. This leads to a predicament, for in the absence of an existing Theravāda Bhikkhunī Sangha, a legitimate Theravāda bhikkhunī ordination itself cannot be granted. There is thus 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. Those women who want to live a life of renunciation will have to be content with surrogate forms of renunciant life, such as that of the *dasasilmātā*, the *thila-shin*, or the *maechee*.

II. *The Case for a Revival of Theravāda Bhikkhunī Ordination*

After sketching the legal arguments that conservative Vinaya authorities raise against restoring the bhikkhunī ordination to the Theravāda tradition, I look at some factors, textual and ethical, that favor its restoration. I distribute these factors into two groups: one I call “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. When Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī and the five hundred Sakyan women came to the Buddha, they did not ask the Buddha to establish an order of nuns. They simply asked him for permission to go forth into the homeless life. Although the Buddha at first denied this request, he finally yielded. In yielding, however, he did not simply allow women to go forth, but constituted renunciant women into a distinct *order*, a community 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. This shows that he recognized the Bhikkhunī Sangha as an essential component of his Sāsana, and without the Bhikkhunī Sangha the Sāsana is imperfect and incomplete.

Reflection on *contemporary conditions* also supports the case for a revival of bhikkhunī ordination. Our own age has been shaped by the ideas of the European Enlightenment, a movement that affirmed the inherent dignity of the human person and brought demands for political equality and equal justice for all under the law. From the mid-nineteenth century on, people around the globe came to perceive discrimination based on gender 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 discrimination based on gender has been challenged almost everywhere in the secular sphere, and its role in religious life has also come up for serious scrutiny. Religion 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. Practices that pertain to etiquette must be evaluated in the light of altered social and cultural conditions. When we ask what line of action would be appropriate for today, 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 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.” On the other hand, by rousing the courage to restore to women the right to lead a full religious life, that is, by reviving the Bhikkhunī Sangha, Theravādin elders will show that they know how to apply 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 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*.

Here I will deal only with the question of *upasampadā*. Before doing so, however, I first want to note that Theravāda legal theory often merges stipulations on legal issues that stem from the canonical Vinaya texts and the Commentaries with interpretations and assumptions 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. 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. 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. Once these assumptions are accepted, there is no escape

from the conclusion that the Bhikkhunī Sangha is forever extinct. Those who favor revival of the Bhikkhunī Sangha, however, work with different assumptions. For them, the fundamental starting point was the Buddha’s decision to create the Bhikkhunī Sangha. 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 can revert to a single-Sangha ordination of bhikkhunīs, based on the Buddha’s statement: “I allow you, bhikkhus, to ordain 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 “Four-Section” 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. In the view of many learned Theravāda monks, mainly Sri Lankan, adopting either of the above routes will culminate in a valid bhikkhunī ordination and at the same time will grant to women the chance to live the spiritual life in the way that the Buddha intended them to live it—as fully ordained bhikkhunīs.

The grand ordination held at Bodhgaya in February 1998, under the auspices of Fo Guang Shan, combined both approaches mentioned above. This method yielded a more satisfactory ordination than either could if 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 the Vinaya of 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. 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.

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 by Theravāda bhikkhus from Sri Lanka. This ordination did not negate the earlier dual-ordination received from the Chinese Sangha, but supplemented it and gave it a new direction. The dual-Sangha ordination at Bodhgaya made the women bhikkhunīs, but heirs of the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya lineage; the subsequent ordination by a Sangha of Theravāda bhikkhus at Sarnath inducted them into the Theravāda Sangha. They were now entitled to follow the Vinaya of the Pāli Canon and to perform the necessary sanghakammas together with their brothers in the Theravāda Bhikkhu Sangha of Sri Lanka.

While dual-Sangha ordination should certainly prevail whenever conditions make it feasible, a case can also be made to justify ordination solely by a Sangha of Theravāda bhikkhus. It might be argued 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. This allowance might be defended on the principle of analogy: When an exceptional method is used in one set of circumstances to achieve a desirable goal, then in circumstances that are similar in all relevant respects, if there is no other feasible method to achieve that goal, the exceptional method again becomes permissible. In this case, the original situation is that found at the inception of the Bhikkhunī Sangha, when the Sangha was placed in a double-bind. The sixth garudhamma required a dual-Sangha ordination for bhikkhunīs, but there was no Bhikkhunī Sangha to give the ordination. So how was the Sangha to escape this predicament? According to the account, the Buddha said: “I authorize bhikkhus to ordain bhikkhunīs.” And thus bhikkhus continued to ordain bhikkhunīs until the dual-Sangha ordination was prescribed. This situation is almost exactly analogous to the one we faced until recently, when there were women who wanted Theravāda bhikkhunī ordination but no Theravāda bhikkhunīs to ordain them. So one solution proposed was to allow Theravāda bhikkhus to use that authorization, never withdrawn, to ordain bhikkhunīs until a functional Bhikkhunī Sangha came into being. This was the method the Sri Lankan monks employed at Sarnath to give the Sri Lankan nuns a second ordination that inducted them into the Theravāda Sangha.

However, now that the Bhikkhunī Sangha has been reconstituted in Sri Lanka, there is no longer any justification for using ordination by a Sangha composed solely of bhikkhus. If any woman wants to receive bhikkhunī ordination in the Theravāda tradition, she should receive training as a sikkhamānā and eventual bhikkhunī ordination in Sri Lanka itself. No doubt, in time the opportunity for bhikkhunī ordination will also spread to the West.

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. 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 words of the text they are interpreting.

In my opinion, in dealing with this 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?" 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 don't 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, the existence of a Bhikkhunī Sangha can function as an instrumental good. It will allow women to make a meaningful 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.