

# A Problem in the Re-establishment of the *Bhikkhunī Saṅgha* in Modern Theravāda Buddhism

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FROM the beginning, Buddhists have considered practice to be the most important activity. This is natural, considering that Buddhism arose as one of the *śramaṇa* religions which consider human effort to be of supreme importance, as opposed to Brahmanism. The main practices of Buddhism are meditation, and memorizing and reciting the Buddhist scriptures. Buddhism states that spiritual enlightenment cannot be realized without thorough performance of these practices. One must abandon all everyday productive activities and use all one's time for practice. Therefore, in this religion, abandonment of self-support serves as a basic principle in one's practice.

However, if one discontinues productive activity, one cannot eat. Thus, in Buddhism, begging was adopted as a way of life for practitioners who had left such activity in which leftover food is received from householders. According to the *vinaya*, Buddhist mendicants (*bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī*) may eat only the food which other people put into their begging bowl, while they themselves can freely put water and toothbrushes into their mouths. Therefore, it is an absolute rule that they live on only what is given by the outside community. This regulation by which they have to live, depending on the generosity of the general public, is the most important rule in Buddhism. The fundamental principle of Buddhism behind this rule is to make the best conditions for practice.

Many religions besides Buddhism, such as the *śramaṇa* religions and traditional Brahmanism, were vying with one another in India in those days which made it very difficult for Buddhist mendicants to obtain food from the general public, by wandering around towns or villages. Since the householders in those days in India naturally wanted to give offerings to the most worthy, these mendicants had to be recognized as virtuous in order to be fed, and hence, the fundamental relationship between Buddhist practitioners and society materialized here. That is, the general public considers Buddhist mendicants to be upright people who deserve offerings. By giving such items as food or other things, householders expect future returns. Offering is not mere charity but an act to profit oneself in the end. And those who receive such offerings can maintain their practice. Monks and nuns are required to lead a righteous life that meets the expectations of the general public. If Buddhist mendicants do not act as upright human beings, respect for them will be lost and they will become unable to continue their offering-dependent life.

In principle, Buddhist mendicants need to live in a group, because it is more convenient for practice than living alone. Such a community is called a *saṅgha*. Although a *saṅgha* must consist of more than four monks or nuns according to the *vinaya*, in order to actually fulfil its function, at least twenty or more members are required. Buddhism is a typical group religion. Further, because all of its members have to live by depending on offerings from the general public, the *saṅgha* needs to be near a town or a village in which many people live. Therefore, Buddhism is essentially village-based.

The point that Buddhism is both a group and village-based religion must be considered when we try to understand it. Its mendicants, who live on offerings, have to live as upright people who deserve them. If one is living alone, the result of his actions will return to only himself. That is, if he behaves as a worthy practitioner, the general public will respect him, and many offerings will be given to him. If he behaves badly, on the other hand, he will be despised and will receive no offerings. Therefore, whether he can continue his practice as a monk or not depends on his own behavior. However, when mendicants live in a *saṅgha*, the situation is very different. If only one out of a hundred monks does a bad deed, the whole *saṅgha* will be blamed, even if the other ninety-nine are living honest lives. As a result, offerings from the outside community will not be given, and, in the end, their practice will fail. Therefore, in the Buddhist *saṅgha*, it is a necessary condition for all members to behave as worthy practitioners, who are free of blame.

The problem lies in the distinction between right and wrong behavior. Since

people of various backgrounds and personalities make up a *saṅgha*, the sense of values of those in it will differ. In order to unify the mendicants who have such a variety of standards, a certain system of rules inside the *saṅgha* is needed. This is the *vinaya*.

Buddhists are subject to two kinds of regulations: *śīla* and *vinaya*. Originally, these two terms denoted separate concepts. The law used inside a *saṅgha* is referred to as the *vinaya*. Its purpose is to regulate the *saṅgha* as a whole, rather than the spiritual progress of each individual member. In order to be respected and receive offerings, all of its members have to live based on accepted norms, which are provided by the *vinaya*. It is the same as the law of a country, which is never enacted for the purpose of the improvement of the individual, but only to maintain the country as a community and allow it to develop. The state itself carries out punishment of those who do not uphold the law and obstruct the smooth management of the country. The Buddhist *vinaya* is also used in this way. Its rules are accompanied by penal regulations which the community organization, the *saṅgha*, enforces. Thus, it is as natural for the members of a *saṅgha* to observe these rules, as it is for people to observe the laws of their country.

On the other hand, *śīla* is based on a completely different concept. It is a code of conduct for each mendicant in his/her progress toward enlightenment. This is equivalent to morals in society. Like a moral code, which helps the individual to improve as a person, *śīla* in Buddhism is used to develop each mendicant's humanity. Because it does not have a direct relation to the *saṅgha*, those who break *śīla* are not punished. Punishment for not observing *śīla* is entirely an individual problem, because those who break *śīla* will not be able to attain enlightenment. This fundamental difference between *vinaya* and *śīla* came to be disregarded in the later stages of Indian Buddhism, and was completely confused when the single word *jie lü* 戒律 was created in China as a translation of the two words *śīla* and *vinaya*. Therefore, in order for us to understand the concept of the *vinaya* correctly, we must grasp its original meaning, as the Buddha defined it.

We have seen that the *vinaya* is equivalent to community laws and *śīla* to morals. Although there are various differences between the two, the most important is that *śīla* is religious truth and the *vinaya* is social regulation.

The *vinaya* is, as stated above, a set of laws enacted to build smooth relations between the *saṅgha* and society and to maintain the former as a socially-respected group. It simply needs to be observed by the mendicants as if it is the law. Those who do not observe a particular law are held to be offenders. However, laws must undergo changes according to the social situation. Since

laws are used to manage a community, when society changes, naturally laws must also change. If they do not, the community will be unable to change and will soon collapse. In the same way, in Buddhism, amending the *vinaya* is not contradictory to observing it. On the other hand, since *śīla* is religious truth in Buddhism, it must always be observed by all Buddhists, unrelated to changes in society and is considered to be a necessary condition for enlightenment.

Evidently, the Buddha recognized the *vinaya* as the law of a *saṅgha*. He is said to have stated before passing away: “If the order, Ānanda, after my death is willing, the lesser and minor rules of training may be abolished” (I. B. Horner, *Book of the Discipline*, volume 5, p. 398). If the *vinaya* was taken to be absolute truth, the Buddha (or, more strictly, the author of this sentence) could not possibly be thought to have made such a statement. Most likely, the Buddha said this because he recognized correctly that the *vinaya*, as the law of the monastic community, would have to be changed in accordance with the social situation. Unfortunately, he passed away without defining the actual procedure for such a change, and so, his disciples decided to maintain the *vinaya* without any alteration. However, as the above quote suggests, the Buddha did not consider that the *vinaya* was absolute and, therefore, to treat it as though it were absolute truth, like the *sūtra*, is a mistake. The true purpose of the *vinaya* is to create the best possible environment for practice.

A clear example of the problem of treating the *vinaya* as absolute truth can be seen in Sri Lanka. According to the *vinaya*, for a woman to be ordained as a *bhikkhunī*, both a *bhikkhunī* and a *bhikkhu saṅgha* of more than ten members each are required. In Sri Lanka in the tenth century, the *bhikkhunī saṅgha* disappeared due to war, and thus, it became impossible to perform *upasampadā*, the ordination ceremony for women. This has resulted in the absence of *bhikkhunī* in Southern Theravāda Buddhism for almost a thousand years. As long as this rule is observed, there is no possibility for a *bhikkhunī saṅgha* to be established again in Theravāda Buddhism.

Even though this female *saṅgha* has disappeared, the number of women who continue to pursue enlightenment has not decreased. Since that time, although there have been women who wish to be ordained, they have had to be content with a lower position as “apprentices,” because this rule prevents their full ordination as *bhikkhunīs*. Faced with this situation, a new movement has been taken place since the 1980s, whose main purpose is to obtain the cooperation of the *bhikkhunīs* in the Buddhist world, and thereby re-establish the *bhikkhunī saṅgha* in Southern Theravāda Buddhist countries. Twenty Sri Lankan *bhikkhunīs* were at last ordained in 1998 after a long struggle.

In Sri Lanka, many *bhikkhus* and Buddhist scholars had been aiding the women who were involved in this movement and hoped to become *bhikkhunī*. The Fo Guang Shan 佛光山 group in Taiwan responded positively when these people consulted them about re-establishing the *bhikkhunī saṅgha* in Sri Lanka. In February 1998 at Buddhagaya in India, twenty Sri Lankan women who had been chosen as novices and trained for several years received *upasampadā* ordination from Taiwanese *bhikkhunīs* and were then ordained by Sri Lankan *bhikkhus*. Because there are now more than ten *bhikkhunīs* in Sri Lanka, it has become possible to carry out full ordination without depending on foreign *bhikkhunīs*. Since then, the number of *bhikkhunīs* there has continued to increase.

This ceremony was an important event in the history of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Women, who for many centuries had no way to become a *bhikkhunī*, have a newly re-established *saṅgha*. An environment in which women can practice formally has been revived, and many of the pressures of a male-dominated society have been overcome. The original intention of the Buddha, who recognized the equal possibility of enlightenment in men and women, has been revived in present-day Sri Lanka. We should praise the efforts of the many Buddhists who supported and participated in this movement.

However, I hold some reservations about this situation. When one of my friends visited a *bhikkhunī* temple in Sri Lanka, she received the following account:

Fo Guang Shan  
International Full Ordination Ceremony  
Commemorating 2000 Years of Buddhism in China  
CERTIFICATE OF TRIPLE PLATFORM ORDINATION

Fo Guang File No. xxx.

This is to certify that xxx (name of the woman who accepts the ordination), a native of Ingiriya, Kalutana born on xxx (the date of birth), has successfully completed all the required training of Sramanerika Ordination on April 2nd, Upasampada Ordination on April 15th and Bodhisattva Vows on May 7th and has vowed to uphold the precepts for life. The Ten Most Venerable Masters have examined the ordination procedures and certified the issuance of this certificate by the ordination monastery.

May the Triple Gem bear testimony to this auspicious ordination and with blessings from all the devas!

(Here, the names of *bhikkhunīs* who attended the ceremony are listed.)

This certificate is issued by:

Fo Guang Shan Monastery to the above-named precept recipient.

Dated this 16th day, May, Buddha Era 2545

Common Era 2002, and Fo Guang Era 33.

(I have heard that the women of Sri Lanka did not participate in the ceremony of the Bodhisattva Vows. However, there is no change in the fact that Mahāyāna Buddhism, which requires the taking of such vows for ordination, is the basis of the newly-established *bhikkhunī saṅgha* in Sri Lanka.)

As we can see from this account, the Sri Lankan *bhikkhunīs* were initiated into Mahāyāna Buddhism by receiving the *upasampadā* ceremony held by the Taiwanese *bhikkhunīs*. According to my friend, a certain female lay believer who heard a *bhikkhunī*'s reciting the invocation, "namo-amita-bo 南無阿弥陀仏," said with a frown, "that *bhikkhunī* is not a true Theravāda *bhikkhunī*." Here lies a serious problem for Theravāda Buddhism.

The attitude of some men who use the *vinaya* to justify male predominance in the Buddhist *saṅgha* is deplorable and goes against the real intention of the Buddha. While opposing such attitudes, we must continue trying to build absolute gender equality in the *saṅgha*. However, the fact that the Sri Lankan *bhikkhunīs*, who received *upasampadā* ordination from the Mahāyāna *bhikkhunīs*, are now following Mahāyānic doctrines, shows that there are serious problems in the movement toward re-establishing a *bhikkhunī saṅgha* in Theravāda Buddhism. The position of those concerned about such Mahāyānization is fundamentally different from that of those who are opposed to the re-establishment of the *bhikkhunī saṅgha* based on simple sexism. Because opposition to such a re-establishment arises from two completely different positions which need to be clearly distinguished, we should admit that the former position is understandable to a certain degree.

The identity of Theravāda Buddhism is, in a sense, found in its purity. Whether this purity actually exists or not is another question. The exclusive stance that the Theravāda doctrine is the only legitimate one is characteristic of Theravāda Buddhism. If we compare this position to a color, we could say white. On the other hand, Mahāyāna Buddhism is an ideological synthesis of various theories and doctrines, and a willingness to embrace any doctrine is distinctive of Mahāyāna, and hence its color would be gray, which has infinite shades. When this snow-white Theravāda Buddhism and the gray Mahāyāna Buddhism contact each other and mix together, it then turns gray. That is, Theravāda Buddhism loses its identity and is Mahāyānized, while Mahāyāna remains as it is. Along with the re-establishment of the Sri Lankan *bhikkhunī saṅgha*, a *bhikkhunī saṅgha* has also been recently formed in Tibet for the first time. Here, the problem seen in Sri Lanka has not occurred. Even when the Mahāyāna Buddhism of Taiwan enters that of Tibet, the identity of Tibetan Buddhism remains unaffected. It is a unique and risky situation when Theravāda Buddhism takes in Mahāyāna Buddhism, because once this is done, it can never return to its original color of white.

Thus, if the purity of Theravāda Buddhism is going to be maintained, the *bhikkhunī saṅgha* can never be revived. Also, if its revival is enforced, Theravāda Buddhism could face annihilation. There is unfortunately no perfect solution to this problem. However, we should strive to solve this impasse in the best possible way. What is the most appropriate way to do this without destroying the tradition of Theravāda Buddhism?

Prejudice exists both among those who promote the re-establishment of the *bhikkhunī saṅgha* and those who oppose it, namely that the *vinaya* is absolute truth—rules which cannot be changed. I have already mentioned that this view is incorrect. The *vinaya* is merely a set of laws which can be changed, as the Buddha himself recognized. The problem is that he did not define the procedure for such changes. If this had been defined, many problems in the present Buddhist world, including the one involving the *bhikkhunī saṅgha*, could have easily been solved long ago. However, it is meaningless to lament over this past misfortune now. The only way to solve the problem is to discover a way to change the *vinaya*, but this procedure has yet to be clarified. Specifically, we need to know how to revise the regulation that states a new *bhikkhunī* can only be ordained if ten or more *bhikkhunīs* are present. If the *vinaya* is considered a kind of legal system, the revision procedure of various laws used in society can be consulted (for more concrete details, refer to the following article : Sasaki Shizuka 佐々木閑, “Bukkyō ni okeru ritsuzō no yakuwari” 仏教に

おける律蔵の役割, *Kairitsu Bunka* 戒律文化, 2002, vol. 1, pp. 3–17). To summarize, the only legitimate way of solving this problem is to alter the *vinaya*, and in order to do this, we first need to recognize that the *vinaya* is a set of laws or rules which can be changed.

The doctrine of Theravāda Buddhism maintained over 2500 years is a real treasure for humankind. Throwing it away over a relatively trivial rule in the *vinaya*, namely, that a new *bhikkhunī* cannot be ordained unless ten or more *bhikkhunīs* are present, is very foolish. Therefore, I look forward to the day when this problem will be adequately dealt with so that men and women can, in complete equality, live a life of practice in accordance with the doctrine of Theravāda Buddhism.