Foundation of Bhikkhuni Order in Buddhism: Meaning and Interpretation

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Introduction

Women in Buddhism is a topic that can be approached from varied perspectives including those of theology, history, anthropology and feminism. Topical interests include the theological status of women, the treatment of women in Buddhist societies at home and in public, the history of women in Buddhism, and a comparison of the experiences of women across different forms of Buddhism. As in other religions, the experiences of Buddhist women have varied considerably.

The position of women has been a subject of considerable interest in recent decades. In all societies, particularly in the West, there has been a rethinking of the position accorded to women in all spheres of activity. This has resulted in a significant change in the role played by women in social, economic and even political life. This reappraisal has also touched on the question of the position accorded to women in the main religious traditions of the world. In Christian countries the issue of the ordination of women has become a highly controversial topic, and some Churches are facing the prospect of dissenion, and even schism, on this question. It is therefore opportune to consider the place accorded to women in Buddhism.

The role of women in Buddhism could be considered in several ways. We can, for instance, compare the position accorded to women in both the religious and the secular life in India before the Buddha’s time with that after the establishment of Buddhism, and consider whether the Buddha’s teaching resulted in a change radical or otherwise. We can see whether the Buddha’s teaching accords to women a position different to that accorded to men, as is the case in many other religions. We may consider whether the accident of the sex of one’s birth helps or retards progress on the Buddha’s path, and indeed whether gender is itself a chance event or caused by pre-existing factors.

The part played by women in the early history of Buddhism, notably during the Buddha’s own time, could be considered as providing a clue to the place accorded to women in Buddhism. In this connection the events surrounding the establishment of the Bhikkhuni Order need to be re-examined, as there is a measure of misunderstanding on this question. The influence of Buddhism on the position of women in the countries where Buddhism became a living presence could be highlighted. Finally the position of women in Buddhism could be contrasted with that accorded to women in the other great religious traditions of the modern world.

While the attitude of the Buddha to the role of women was an enlightened one, even when judged by the standards of the modern age, it must not be thought that everything that is said on this subject in Buddhist writing, even in the Pali Canon itself, measures up to the high standard expected of a Buddha. There are many explanations for this, not least of which is the fact that most of these works were written down several centuries after the Parinibbāna of the Buddha, and that during this time the teachings were sustained by monks, some of whom might not have been entirely free from the prejudices of the age.

Records of the going forth of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī can be found in a range of Vinayas, as well as in discourses in the Aṅguttara-nikāya and the Mahānāma-āgama. This conforms to a general pattern evident in early Buddhist texts, where some degree of overlap exists between the material allotted to the collections of discourses and to the Vinaya.

1 The Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, T 1428 at T XXII 922c7 to 923c12, the Vinayamātrī kā, T 1463 at T XXIV 803a22 to 803b24, the Mahāsāṅghika-Lokottaravāda Vinaya, Roth 1970: 4–21, the Mahīśāsaka Vinaya, T 1421 at T XXII 185b28 to 186a28, the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya, T 1451 at T XXIV 350b10 to 351c2, with considerable parts preserved in Sanskrit fragments, Schmidt, and a Tibetan counterpart in D 6 da 100a4 to104b5 or Q 1035 ne 97a7 to 102a1 (cf. also D 4094 ju 212b6 to 214a3 or Q 5595 tu 242b6 to 244a4), and the Theravāda Vinaya, Vin II 253,1 to 256,32. Other versions of the same episode can also be found in T 156 at T III 153c7 to 154a6, T 196 at T IV 158a22 to 159b17, and T 1478 at T XXIV 945b25 to 950a15.
It is important to consider all these issues. In particular it is significant to comb the Buddhist texts to collect all the relevant issues relating to the foundation of women in Buddhism with a real meaning and interpretation.

Soteriological inclusiveness

Some degree of soteriological inclusiveness is reflected right away in the title of the discourse, which highlights the fact that here Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī herself raises the topic of women’s ability to attain the four fruits of recluseship. Except for the closely similar Madhyama-āgama account and the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya, the other versions do not provide a relation between her initial request to be granted the going forth and the fruits of recluseship, but instead present this as a topic raised by Ānanda on a later occasion, when intervening on behalf of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī.6

Besides investing Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī with more agency, we can realize a significant perspective on the Buddha’s refusal. Here, as well as in several other versions, this perspective is to be found in the suggestion that Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī can live a celibate life, after shaving off her hair and donning robes, in the protected environment at home. This changes a flat refusal to grant and donning robes, in the protected environment at home.5 This changes a flat refusal to grant ordination to women into what appears to express a concern that embarking on the life of a wandering mendicant at a time when the Buddhist monastic order was still in its formative stages may involve hardships and dangers for women that make it advisable to postpone such a move.

Institutional androcentrism

Alongside such indications, however, the discourse also stands out for expressing rather misogynist sentiments. These become prominent in the last part, which depicts a whole series of repercussions associated with the mere existence of an order of nuns.7 In the present discourse and its counterpart in the Madhyama-āgama this goes so far as to lead up to the proclamation of the five impossibilities of women, according to which a female is unable to occupy the position of heavenly rulers like Sakka, Māra, or Brahmā, or else in the human realm be a universal emperor or a Buddha. This type of presentation is also found in the Bahudhātuka-sutta and its parallels, where closer study shows this doctrine to be a later addition.

In this way, it succeeds in affirming the soteriological agency of women and their potential to reach awakening and offers a solution to the otherwise perplexing refusal of the Buddha to grant ordination to women. The very fact that he does grant them ordination implies that Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī’s quest was, in the end, successful, which in turn sets the starting point for Buddhist female monasticism that has lasted until the modern day. It also clearly expresses misogynist sentiments that are concerned with attributing any mishap a monk may experience to the mere existence of nuns, which eventually culminate in a proclamation of various impossibilities of women.

Ascetic misogyny

Alongside these instances of “soteriological inclusiveness” as well as of “ascetic misogyny,” the Vinaya text also testifies to institutional an drocentrism. The Vinaya Pitika lists the eight gurudharmas (Skt) or garudhammas (Pāli), which in all versions of the foundation account express the subordination of nuns and thus unmistakably stand for “institutional androcentrism.” In this way, the single text translated above shows evidence of each of the three tendencies identified by Sponberg.

In relation to these tendencies in the early texts in general, Sponberg points out that “the characterization of ambivalence is misleading,” because what we have here “is not a single, uncertain voice, but rather a multiplicity of voices, each expressing a different set of concerns current

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3 T 1451 at T XXIV 350b13 and D 6 da 100a7 or Q 1035 ne 97b2; the same is also recorded in the Sanskrit fragment, Schmidt (242,1), although here this is the formulation used when Mahāpajāpatī Gautamī repeats her request on a subsequent occasion.

4 The Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, T 1428 at T XXII 923a22, the Vinayamāt kā, T 1463 at T XXIV 803b9, the Mahāsārīghika-Lokottaravāda Vinaya, Roth (14,4), the Mahīśāsaka Vinaya, T 1421 at T XXII 185c16, and the Theravāda Vinaya, Vin II 254,29.

5 Besides MĀ 116 at T I 605a17, such a suggestion can be found in the Mahīśāsaka Vinaya, T 1421 at T XXII 185b27, and the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya, T 1451 at T XXIV 350b15 and D 6 da 100b2 or Q 1035 ne 97b4; cf. also Schmidt (242,5).

6 Besides MĀ 116 at T I 607a16, such descriptions are also found in the Mahīśāsaka Vinaya, T 1421 at T XXII 186a16, and at a later juncture in the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya, T 1451 at T XXIV 352a11 and D 6 da 121a1 or Q 1035 ne 116b1. A comparable outburst can be found as part of the account of the accusations levied against Ānanda during the first saṅghāṭi in the *Vinayamāt kā, T 1463 at T XXIV 818b18.
among members of the early community”. In the present case this multiplicity of voices converges on a single text.

By incorporating these three distinct types of voices, it poses a challenge to one-sided interpretations of the attitude toward women in early Buddhist texts. T 60 shows that, even in the case of relying on a single text alone and without taking into account epigraphic, archaeological, or other evidence, simple generalizations fail to capture the multivocality that pervades early Buddhist discourse on women.7

**Bhikkhuni Order in Modern Age**

The same complexity in attitudes toward women can also be seen in the modern setting. Needless to say, the account of the formation of the Buddhist order of nuns has considerable impact on the modern day situation, in various ways influencing attitudes toward current attempts to revive the Theravāda order of Bhikkhunīs. In what follows I briefly turn to Bhikkhunīs in Thailand as an illustration of the convergence of the same three attitudes in a single situation.

One of the developments that influences the situation of convergence I will be describing stems from a peculiarity in northern Thai Theravāda Buddhist attitudes toward women. In some monasteries in the north of Thailand, women are prohibited from entering sacred grounds.8 Behind this prohibition stands the fear that the purity and power believed to inhere in stūpas or uposatha halls stands in danger of becoming polluted through the presence of a menstruating woman.9

An attempt in 2004 by Senator Rabiabrat Pongpanit to promote the abolishment of such prohibition led to strong public opposition.10 This documents that such attitudes are still very much alive in modern times and not merely a relic from the past. In terms of Sponberg’s categories, for women to be prevented from entering certain areas of a monastery is undeniably an expression of misogyny.

Another development relevant to my discussion is the recent attempt to revive the Theravāda Bhikkhunī order. As far as we know the Bhikkhunī ordination lineage never reached Thailand in the past.11 An attempt by Narin Phasit to start an order of Bhikkhunīs led to a Saṅgha act promulgated by the Saṅgharāja of the Thai Saṅgha in 1928. This Saṅgha act prohibits Thai bhikkhus from participating in the ordination of women as sāmaṇerīs, sikkhamānas or Bhikkhunīs. Similar to the ban on entering sacred ground, this prohibition is also not a mere relic from the past but has been reaffirmed and is still the stance taken by the Thai Saṅgha Supreme Council.

The successful revival of the Bhikkhunī order in Sri Lanka, which has gathered momentum since an ordination ceremony undertaken in 1998 at Bodhgayā, has also affected Thailand, where by now gradually growing groups of Bhikkhunīs can be found. In addition to the wellknown Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā, based in the Bangkok area, a sizable group of Bhikkhunīs under the leadership of Bhikkhunī Nandaṇāni live in the area of Chiang Mai. It is in relation to this group that the situation of a convergence of the three attitudes identified by Sponberg can be observed.

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7 On the need to proceed beyond reading into the texts either a consistently provomen attitude or else a consistent tendency to patriarchal supression.
8 Pichard (143) sums up that “dans le Nord de la Thaïlande . . . aujourd’hui encore il est commun que l’accès de l’ubosot y soit interdit aux femmes, une pratique inconnue dans le reste du pays.”
9 Tanabe explains, “during menstruation women are prohibited from entering Buddhist monasteries . . . owing to the polluted and sinful nature of menstruation. Since menstrual blood also has destructive effects on plants, they are prohibited from setting foot in the kitchen garden, rice field or tobacco field . . . menstrual blood, the focus of the uncontrolled female physiology, can disrupt a man’s emotional balance . . . the blood is dangerous and sometimes powerful because of its marginal and illegitimate nature” (188f).
11 Skilling, pp.36–38.
According to recent anthropological research, Bhikkhunī Nandañāṇī has been very successful in establishing cordial relationships with local bhikkhus and cultivating mutual trust and cooperation with them. Cooperation between Bhikkhunīs and bhikkhus in several aspects of monastic communal transaction is in fact a need enshrined in the Theravāda Vinaya, reflected already in the eight garudhammas mentioned in all accounts of the founding of the Bhikkhunīs’ order. One of these garudhammas requires the undertaking of pavāraṇā, a formal “invitation” to be extended after the completion of the rains retreat period, an invitation to be pointed out any shortcoming in behavior. The formulation in the Theravāda Vinaya is as follows:

“After the completion of the rainy season a Bhikkhunī should make an invitation before both communities in respect to three matters: what has been seen, heard, and suspected.”12

Thus Bhikkhunīs need to extend such invitation not only to their own community of Bhikkhunīs, but also to the community of bhikkhus. In contrast, bhikkhus only need to undergo pavāraṇā in front of the community of bhikkhus. In terms of Sponberg’s terminology, this is clearly an instance of institutional androcentrism.

At the same time, in the present day situation in Thailand for bhikkhus to participate in such a formal act of invitation constitutes equally an act of inclusiveness. Although such participation falls short of fully violating the Saṅgha act of 1928 against giving ordination, it comes rather close to challenging it. By participating in a pavāraṇā ceremony bhikkhus implicitly acknowledge the Bhikkhunī status of the female monastics that have come for this monastic observance. Given the normative association of ordination with progress toward awakening,13 such inclusiveness would in fact be of a soteriological type.

In addition to combining inclusiveness, which here is due to the specific setting in Thailand, and institutional androcentrism as a principle characteristics of this monastic observance, the third strand of misogyny comes into play when such a ceremony is conducted in an uposatha hall into which normally women are not allowed to enter. This is precisely what has happened recently at Wat Phra That Sri Chomthong. The picture below shows Bhikkhunīs coming out of the uposatha hall of Wat Phra That Sri Chomthong after completion of the pavāraṇā ceremony. The picture shows the senior-most Bhikkhunī from Sri Lanka, followed by Thai Bhikkhunīs, respectfully waiting for a moment as the last of the Thai bhikkhus is about to put on his slippers and depart. To the side of the entrance to the compound and again to the actual hall, blue sign posts can be seen which prohibit entry for women.

The picture on the following page documents a combination of the three attitudes identified by Sponberg within a single moment at a single place. Although some degree of disobedience to Bangkok authorities is not altogether surprising among the heirs to the Lanna tradition in northern Thailand, the present instance clearly throws into relief the degree to which good conduct and harmonious behavior by the Bhikkhunīs, combined with sincerity of aspiration, can make the difference. Such impact by the Bhikkhunīs on the ground will be decisive in determining their acceptance by society in Theravāda countries at large.

Conclusion

The foundation history of the Bhikkhunī order in Buddhism exemplifies the complexity of attitudes toward women in Buddhist literature, where “soteriological inclusiveness” can be found just as “institutional androcentrism” and “ascetic misogyny.” Such multivocality continues up to modern days, a telling expression of which is the undertaking of the pavāraṇā ceremony by Thai Bhikkhunīs in an uposatha which otherwise prohibits women from entry. In this way ancient text and modern day situation converge on reflecting a complex situation that defies attempts at simplistic evaluation.

Bibliography

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