

Bhikkhunis in Thai Monastic Education

Bhante Sujato 18/6/2008

In the debate about bhikkhuni ordination, information plays a key role. We have made substantial strides in our understanding of Buddhism in history, the relation between different Buddhist traditions, and so on. Unfortunately, little of this information has permeated into the tradition Sangha bodies. It seems to be assumed that organizations like the Thai Sangha are a preserve of profound Dhamma knowledge, full of experts who are thoroughly versed in the issues. But this is, alas, far from the case. The reality is that the vast majority of Thai monks receive no more than a basic Buddhist education, which is largely based on a set of textbooks compiled around a hundred years ago..

At that time, Thai Buddhism was being rapidly modernized, and the leaders of the Thai Sangha, were foremost in promoting a re-evaluation of their own tradition based on the earliest teachings available in the texts. This tradition was initiated by Prince Mongkut and carried on by Prince Vajirañāṇa during their time in robes. By rediscovering the central importance of the Pali Canon, and promoting a rational, non-superstitious approach to Dhamma, they laid the foundations for modern Thai Buddhism. However, they had access to only a small sector of the Buddhist scriptures, and our textual, archaeological, and historical understanding has developed rapidly since then. But due to the royal prestige of these texts, it has proven almost impossible to update them. Thus the Sangha today clings to the outdated and often incorrect conclusions of these texts, while ignoring the spirit of inquiry and exploration on which they were founded.

In the debate on bhikkhunis, the following passage stands as one of the most influential statements on the matter. It is found in Prince Vajirañāṇa's *Vinayamukha*, the basic Vinaya text learnt by all Thai monks. Later, I will show how its conclusions about bhikkhunis are wrong, but we must appreciate that this criticism is entirely in the spirit of the text itself. The text does not assert a dogmatic ideology, it bases itself on reasons and tries to establish a historical case. We are able to criticize it from a rational perspective precisely because the text itself is rational. But, as the Buddha said, what is hammered out by reason is not necessarily correct.

Vinayamukha vol.III Standard text

Liengchieng Press, Bangkok, pg. 170.

The Bhikkhuni Sangha started in the middle of the Buddha's time. But at the time of the great passing away of the Buddha there was no mention of the bhikkhunis. That time it was a great event, so if the bhikkhunis still existed they should have come for the cremation, or been part of the celebration of the relics. With this evidence, bhikkhunis might have already disappeared after the Buddha passed away for a hundred years.

There was a story [from the time of the Second Council, 100 years after the Buddha's parinibbana] of Ven. bhikkhuni Nandā Therī, King Kālaśoka's sister, who informed him that the Vajjiputtaka monks were propagating wrong understanding [of the Vinaya].

Then there was a long story during King Aśoka's reign in B.E.236 when Saṅghamittā, King Asoka's daughter, was ordained as bhikkhuni. The King sent her to Sri Lanka to establish the bhikkhuni Sangha there. At the same time Mahindathera, King Asoka's son, was already there establishing Buddhism.

Saṅghamittā Therī gave ordination to Sri Lankan women with princess Anulā as their chief.

Regarding these two stories, Ven. Nandā Therī's story was not found in the **Pali Sattasatikkhanda** [the canonical source for the Second Council], but in the *Mahavaṃsa*, which was written after the commentaries [in the fifth century C.E.].

The story of Saṅghamittā is told in the [Vinaya] commentary [Samantapāsādikā]. There were no names of the accompanying bhikkhunis, unlike in the case of Mahinda [who traveled to Sri Lanka with a group of monks whose names are given]. It was recorded only that King Aśoka Mahārāja invited the Therī and her followers aboard the ship. There was no details of her followers, number of bhikkhunis or their names. If she went alone how can she give ordination? Also the commentator did not think that one bhikkhuni cannot give ordination every year. With this reasoning we cannot depend on this evidence. So it is agreed that the bhikkhunis have disappeared since then.¹

This passage would appear on the surface to be inconsistent: for if bhikkhunis had disappeared by the time of the parinibbana, how could they have survived until the time of Aśoka? However, while the reasoning used is not always entirely clear, it seems to me that this passage develops a perfectly rational argument. I think we can rephrase the logic like this.

The canonical texts suggest that the bhikkhunis had disappeared even by the time of the parinibbana. There are, however, occasional references to bhikkhunis in later literature. But these passages occur in texts that include much unhistorical information, and so may well be incorrect. Nevertheless, if the bhikkhunis did survive until the time of Aśoka, then the fact that Saṅghamittā did not have a full Sangha to perform ordination means that the lineage died out then.

Let us take this one piece at a time.

1. The bhikkhunis were not present at the Buddha's parinibbana.

The *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, the standard Pali text on the Buddha's passing away, does not mention the bhikkhunis being present at the Buddha's deathbed. The *Vinayamukha*, while it is not completely clear, seems to think that this shows that the bhikkhunis had already disappeared. But this conclusion is obviously wrong, not just because of the many references to bhikkhunis through history, but even in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* itself.

The first reference to bhikkhunis in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* is where the Buddha mentioned a bhikkhuni who had recently died, Nandā, and praised her as a non-returner.

More importantly, it is recorded that the Buddha said to Māra:

I shall not come to my final passing away, Evil One, until my bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, laymen and laywomen, have come to be true disciples — wise, well disciplined, apt and learned, preservers of the Dhamma, living according to the Dhamma, abiding by the appropriate conduct, and having learned the Master's word, are able to expound it, preach it, proclaim it, establish it, reveal it, explain it in detail, and make it clear; until, when adverse opinions arise, they shall be able to refute them thoroughly and well, and to preach this convincing and liberating Dhamma.²

1 Translation supplied by Bhikkhuni Dhammanandā.

2 This and following passages from the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* are from Sister Vajira & Francis Story's translation at <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.16.1-6.vaji.html>.

Thus not only were bhikkhunis present, but they were an essential part of his dispensation. The Buddha would only pass away when the bhikkhunis were well established. This statement, found widely in the different versions of this text, was said to have been made by the Buddha shortly after his Awakening. It was his stated aspiration, right from the start of his teaching, to establish the bhikkhunis.

A little later the Sutta refers to bhikkhunis yet again as a positive and essential sector of his dispensation:

But, Ananda, whatever bhikkhu or bhikkhuni, layman or laywoman, abides by the Dhamma, lives uprightly in the Dhamma, walks in the way of the Dhamma, it is by such a one that the Tathagata is respected, venerated, esteemed, worshipped, and honored in the highest degree. Therefore, Ananda, thus should you train yourselves: 'We shall abide by the Dhamma, live uprightly in the Dhamma, walk in the way of the Dhamma.'

And a little further down the same theme recurs:

These, Ananda, are the four places that a pious person should visit and look upon with feelings of reverence. And truly there will come to these places, Ananda, pious bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, laymen and laywomen, reflecting: 'Here the Tathagata was born! Here the Tathagata became fully enlightened in unsurpassed, supreme Enlightenment! Here the Tathagata set rolling the unexcelled Wheel of the Dhamma! Here the Tathagata passed away into the state of Nibbana in which no element of clinging remains!' And whoever, Ananda, should die on such a pilgrimage with his heart established in faith, at the breaking up of the body, after death, will be reborn in a realm of heavenly happiness.

And once more:

Capable and judicious is Ananda, bhikkhus, for he knows the proper time for bhikkhus to have audience with the Tathagata, and the time for bhikkhunis, the time for laymen and for laywomen; the time for kings and for ministers of state; the time for teachers of other sects and for their followers.

It is perfectly obvious that, according to the Pali version of the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, bhikkhunis existed at the time of the Buddha's parinibbana and, moreover, were regarded as a regular, essential part of the Buddha's community. The fact that no bhikkhunis appear in the text as actually present at the Buddha's passing away must be due to other factors. Perhaps the redactors of the texts, who were of course monks, simply didn't mention the bhikkhunis. Or perhaps there were no bhikkhunis in the nearby districts who could be summoned in time.

A search of the (very many) alternative versions of this Sutta available in Chinese, Tibetan, and Sanskrit would also be necessary before reaching any firm conclusions. But, sadly, hardly any monks in Thailand even know of the existence of these texts. For them anything outside the Pali Canon is 'Mahayana' and therefore wrong and irrelevant. This naïve, sectarian misuse of textual criticism is, again, largely based on 19th Century ideas. Mongkut and Vajirañāṇa, with their western-influenced education, introduced the notion of a skeptical scrutiny of the received texts. But this was based on the state of knowledge of Buddhist texts in the wider academic sphere at the time. The Chinese and Tibetan texts had hardly been read by any Westerners, and it was widely believed, even among Western scholars, that the Mahayana traditions were nothing more than later degenerations. The course of 20th century scholarship has systematically corrected this bias, while retaining respect for the Pali Canon. Yet the existence of several different versions of the Vinaya, of

several collections parallel to the Pali Nikāyas, of large quantities of manuscript material recovered from Central Asia and elsewhere, has had no practical effect on the ideological stand that regards the Pali Canon as the be-all and end-all of Buddhism.

2. Bhikkhuni Nandā's story is not mentioned in the canonical version of the Second Council.

This is true, but we cannot use this as an argument to say the bhikkhunis did not exist. There are many details of the later accounts that are not mentioned in the canon. King Kāḷāśoka is not mentioned in the canonical account, and we do not infer from this that there were no kings at the time. Nor is there any mention in the canon of the recitation of the scriptures, or of any connection between the Vajjiputtakas and the Mahāsaṅghikas, and so on. That does not stop these 'facts' being repeated endlessly in Theravadin accounts.

It is entirely appropriate that the canonical accounts do not mention the bhikkhunis, for the Second Council was essentially a disciplinary action taken against the miscreant Vajjiputtaka monks, and bhikkhunis would not be present at such a meeting. King Kāḷāśoka, Bhikkhuni Nandā, and the rest, entered the story much later.

But the story of Nandā shows the influence of bhikkhunis in ancient Indian Buddhism. Whether or not the story is historical it shows that bhikkhunis could be seen in such a powerful role.

3. Saṅghamittā had no bhikkhuni companions, therefore could not have done bhikkhuni ordination correctly.

This conclusion was made on the basis of the Samantapāsādikā and also the Mahāvamsa. The *Vinayamukha* acknowledges that the Samantapāsādikā does indeed mention that Saṅghamittā traveled with a group, but points out that there is no evidence that they were bhikkhunis. But the Mahāvamsa is just a later retelling of the Dīpavamsa, which was earlier and more historically reliable.³ The Dīpavamsa does, indeed, mention the names of Saṅghamittā's companions: ten bhikkhunis, all arahants with psychic powers.⁴ But this text was little known in Thailand.

Given the evident concern shown by Mahinda for the Vinaya, it is inconceivable that ordination would be given without bhikkhunis present. But the text as it has come down to us is far more interested in weaving legends around the bringing of the Bodhi tree than about describing Vinaya procedures. Arguments from absence are always dubious, as what is left out is determined entirely by the redactors.

Not only this, but the Samantapāsādikā itself mentions bhikkhunis several times. The names of Saṅghamittā's preceptor and teacher are given. And at a great assembly, it is said that 9 600 000 bhikkhunis were present.⁵ An impossible number, no doubt, but a clear indication of a substantial bhikkhuni community.

All the above evidence was available to the author of the *Vinayamukha*, and there is no excuse for not taking it into account. However, since that time substantial new evidence has come to light. The most substantial evidence of all is the Aśokan edicts, which do mention

3 Elsewhere (*Sects & Sectarianism*) I have criticized certain aspects of the Dīpavamsa, but as I made clear there, this was only relevant for the earlier sections, not the events in Sri Lanka.

4 Dīpavamsa 13.2.77-8: *Saṅghamittā mahāpaññā uttarā ca vicakkhaṇā/Hemā ca māsaḡallā ca aggimittā mitāvada/Tappā pabbatachinnā ca mallā ca dhammadāsikā/Ettakā tā bhikkhuniyodhūtarāḡā samāhitā*. Retrieved from: http://www.sub.uni-goettingen.de/ebene_1/fiindolo/gretil/2_pali/3_chron/dipava2u.htm. English translation: Hermann Oldenburg, 3rd reprint, New Delhi 2001. p.205 chapter 18.11-13.

5 The Chinese Sudassanavinayavibhāsā has the more modest, if still improbable, number of 960 000.

bhikkhunis; in fact, they always mention bhikkhus and bhikkhunis together. According to the research of Gregory Schopen, the inscriptions found in India mention bhikkhunis roughly the same number of times as bhikkhus, and they play similar roles, including being teachers, reciters of texts, sponsors of major building projects, etc. Similarly, throughout the scriptures of Indian Buddhism, bhikkhunis play their role, even if it is a quiet one.

Of course, we could not expect that the author of the *Vinayamukha* would have known of such matters. Nor could he have known of the historical records telling of the transmission of the bhikkhuni lineage from Sri Lanka to China; or of the fact that the Chinese Dharmaguptaka Vinaya lineage is essentially identical to the Theravada; or of the substantial evidence for bhikkhunis in Thai history. Nor, sadly enough, could we expect him to be responding in a meaningful way to the spiritual aspirations of women in our modern times. It seems that he, like many in Thai Buddhism, believed that the higher spiritual attainments were not available in our degenerate times, and his main goal was to construct a religious basis to support Thai nation-building.

But we can, and should, expect that today's Sangha should know these things. The tragedy is not that a Dhamma book was written that contains obvious mistakes; this is normal. The tragedy is that the mistakes are perpetuated again and again, without investigation or revision. The spirit of inquiry and reason on which the 19th Century Thai Sangha reforms were based has disappeared. The criticisms I am making are nothing new or unusual. They have been voiced many times by Thai monks and within the Thai community. But the Thai Sangha no longer appears to be capable of reforming itself to become relevant for our times. The spirit of reform which inspired prince Vajirañāṇa has long departed from the institutions that he set up.⁶ Today, we must seek the Dhamma elsewhere.

6 See, for example, Thanissaro, 'The Traditions of the Noble Ones', <http://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/Writings/CrossIndexed/Uncollected/MiscEssays%5CThe%20Traditions%20Of%20The%20Noble%20Ones.pdf>; Phra Paisan Visalo, 'When Buddhist Monks Cheat in Exams', <http://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=70,6289,0,0,1,0>.