

Reintroduction of Theravada Bhikkhuni Order

Possibility of reintroduction of bhikkhuni order is a recent issue in Theravada tradition. There are different views regarding this problem put forward by both lay and bhikkhus. All these views can be classified into two: as views supportive of reintroduction of bhikkhuni order and the views which are against it.

Those who are supportive of reintroducing the bhikkhuni order marshal diverse arguments to strengthen their stance. Some of them are from the point of women's liberation, human rights, its contemporary relevance etc. Besides, they strongly hold that the some records in Tripitaka which are not supportive to women are later interpolations and not the words of the Buddha himself. They were interpolated by bhikkhus, specially who entered into the order from Brahmanic caste background. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar writing an article to *Sambhasha* cites such instances found in the Tripitaka. Some of them are as follows: the promulgation of eight major conditions (atthagarudhamma) before establishing the bhikkhuni order, using Ven. Ananda as a messenger to establish bhikkhuni order, three times rejection of establishing the bhikkhuni order by the Buddha, etc. (1) However, I hold quite a different view on this. Examining Such incidents of the sasana and facts in the Tripitaka should be studied in a practical background and it is the most appropriate way to find the motive behind them. In other words, the social influence and the consequent sasanic problems which would have arisen because of establishing the bhikkhuni order appear to have been taken into consideration by the Buddha when he established the bhikkhuni order. So, in that sense the above mentioned incidents and promulgations cannot be labeled as due to male dominated mythical drapery.

Another view raises the question how could the Buddha who was equally kind to everybody irrespective of narrow divisive factors such as caste creed and gender, preached and acted differently in this bhikkhuni issue. With this regard my explanation is that it is possible to have different answers for similar questions according to their nature, time, future effects etc. So, this situation is common even to the Buddha. It is very clear that according to Buddhism the gender is not an important factor or condition in the process of attaining nibbana(2) but in case of establishing bhikkhuni order parallel to bhikkhu order, it is obvious that the gender becomes the most important issue.

There is another view that the Tripitaka must be studied in critical and analytical background without resorting to traditional views. I agree with the point that in the study of the Tripitaka it should be critical and unbiased without hanging on to tradition, but at the same time I do not endorse those who discard tradition merely to find evidence supportive of their own mythical imagination saying that they are critical and high level academic analysis. Being merely against the tradition does not always make one see the truth.

There is an allegation that the Theravada monks are merely concerned about vinaya even than the Buddha and use this as a mechanism to prevent the reintroduction of the bhikkhuni order. When compared with other Buddhist traditions it is true that the Theravada tradition has given more prominence to vinaya. As *Samantapasadhikavinaya commentary*, recorded this tradition has considered vinaya as the life of the sasana (vinayonamasasanassaayu)(3). There are many other evidences such as decision not to change even lesser vinaya rules(5), the rejection of the ten points raised by the second Buddhist council so on to proof of this (4). But our question is did the Buddha pay less consideration to vinaya. As recorded in Bhaddalisutta of the *Majjhimanikaya* (5) until the asavathaniyadhammas appeared the Buddha did not take steps to promulgate vinaya rules. So, some are of the view that the Buddha was reluctant to promulgate vinaya. This may be true with regarding to the formal promulgation of vinaya. But it should be borne in mind that there had been no stage in the sasana where vinaya was not disregarded. The kakachupamasutta also of the *Majjhimanikaya*(6) provides evidence to this. As recorded in the Mahaparinibbanasutta of the *Dighanikaya*(7) the Buddha has considered vinaya as being equally important to the dhamma“ *O monks I address you the dhammavinaya which is preached and promulgated by me would be your teacher after my departure*”(*handadanibhikkhavevoamanatayayamiyovodhammocavinayocadesitopannatto so vomamaccayenasattha*). So, according to this statement it is clear that the Buddha's intension had been to establish a order of disciples which gives equally importance to dhamma and vinaya. This makes it clear that the bhikkhuni order should be established giving due consideration to the vinaya rules promulgated with regard to this issue.

Historical Background.

As recorded in bhikkhunikhanda of the *Cullavaggapali* the first step of the bhikkhuni order was the acceptance of the eight major conditions by MahaprajapatiGotami(8)

(*yadaggenaAnandamahapajapatiyaGotamiyaatthagarudhammapatiggahitatadevaupasammanna ti*) . Its second step was that the Buddha gave permit ion to bhikkhus to grant higher ordination to bhikkhunis(*anujanamibhikkhavebhikkhubhikkhiniyoupasampadetum*)(9). In this second method there were two important steps that one must clearly understand. They are: (a) to question a bhikkhuni regarding twenty four things which are stumbling-blocks (*antarayadhamma*) and (b)grant higher ordination to bhikkhunisby bhikkhus (*anujanamibhikkhaveupasampadentiycatuvisatiantarayikedhammepucchitum*). Those twenty four things which are stumbling-blocks are given below.

And thus, monks, should she be questioned:

- i. You are not without sexual characteristics ii. ‘You are not a hermaphrodite? . Have you disease like this: iii. leprosy, iv. boils, v. eczema, vi. consumption, vii.epilepsy? viii. Are you a human being? ix. Are you a women ? x. Are you a free women?. xi. Are you a without debts? xii. You are not in royal service. xiii. Are you allowed by your mother and father, by your husband. Xiv. Have you completed twenty years age? Xv. Are you complete as to bowl and robe? Xvi. What is your name? xvii. What is the name of your women prosper? (11)

As recorded in the bhikkhuniKandhakawhen these twenty four things which are stumbling-blocks were asked from bhikkhunis by bhikkhus, practical problem occurred(12) (*tenakhopanasamayenabhikkhubhikkhuninamantarayikedhammepucchantiupasampadapekkhay ovitthayantimankuhonti. Na sakkontivissajjetumbhgavatoetamatthamarocesum*).

“ at that time, bhikkhus ask bhikkhunis about the things which are stumbling -blocks, then the bhukkhunis who were wishing for higher ordination were at a loss, they were abashed, they were unable to answer they told this matter to the Lord”

After considering this practical problems the Buddha made amended the rule. It is that firstly, the both questioning of things which are stumbling –blocks and granting the higher –ordination must be completed by bhikkhunis. Secondly these two facts should be informed to the bhikkhus. It is after that the bhikkhus can grant higher ordination to those who wish to have it (upasampadapekkhayo) . It is recorded as below.

“ I allow them , monks, ordination in the Order of monks after she has been ordained on the one side, and has cleared herself (in regard to the stumbling-blocks) in the Order of nuns”.(*anujanamibhikkhaveekatoupasampannayabhikkhunisanghevisuddhayabhikkhusangheupasampadanti*) (13).

This last process can be mentioned as the third step of the development of the bhikkhuni higher ordination during the Buddha’s time. So, in the Buddha’s time bhikkhuni higher ordination has been granted in three methods. They are ;

- i. Granting Bhikkhuniupasampada by accepting eight major conditions.
- ii. Bhikkhuniupasampada granted by bhikkhus
- iii. Upasampadato be first given by bhikkhunis and this to re conferred by bhikkhus-upasampada both given by bhikkhus and bhikkhunis.

Here, the first system was done by the Buddha to give upasampada to MahapajapatiGotami. This was unique to the Buddha himself. Second one was done by bhikkhus only. As practical problem arose in the second system the third method was introduced by the Buddha. It was the final system suggested by the Buddha. That system came to be known as ‘ubhatosanghaupasampada’ because that is effected by both bhikkhunis and bhikkhus together. As matters stand at present, this upasampada becomes valid when it is done with participation of both bhikkhunis and bhikkhus.

This higher ordination system of bhikkhuni order carried out from generation to generation and the bhikkhuni arahath Sanghamita introduced it to Sri Lanka. According to the Mahawamsa(14) the great Chronicle, the first bhikkhuni of Sri Lanka was sub-queen Anula who lived in the 3rd century B.C. This system was continued up to the end of Anuradhapura period. After that not only bhikkhuni order but also bhikkhu order disappeared in Sri Lanka because of many disasters such as civil wars, foreign invasions , famine etc. The king Vijayabhau I of the Polonnaruwa period, reestablished the bhikkhu order from Thailand, but there was no evidence to proof that the bhikkhuni order continued after the Anurathapura period. In the recent past, dasasila matas appeared in Sri Lanka. It is said that the first dasasilamata was Sudharma and the

first dasasilamata aramaya was built in Kandy by governor Blerck in 1905 A.D.(15). Today, this dasasilamata movement is continuing in Sri Lanka but they are not accepted as bhikkhunis.

Problem involved in the implementation of above mentioned systems.

In the present there is a problem with regard to reintroduction of the bhikkhuni order. This is that as there are no Theravada bhikkhunis in the world, there is no way to fulfill the requirement of both bhikkhus and bhikkhunis(ubhatosangha) participating in bhikkhuni higher ordination. Hence, the impossibility of reestablishing the bhikkhuni order. In the contrary there is a view which says that as there are no Theravadabhikkhunis, the previous method conferring that upasampadaby bhikkhus to bhikkhunis can be re implemented. In doing so, both the inquiring of things which are stumbling-blocks and granting higher ordination can be done by the bhikkhus themselves. It is not against the vinaya. With regard to this we have to solve the problem whether former system got nullified or not after introducing the latter ? .

Some are of the view that the Buddha, when he changed a rule he declared a special term which meant that if one do so there is an offence of wrong-doing (yokareyyaapattidukkatassati) but in this particular instance of bhikkhuniupasampada he has not said so. So, the point raised is that both questioning things which are stumbling –blocks from those who are wishing to have upasampada and granting them upsampada can be done by bhikkhus. According to this system there is no need of bhikkhunisanghas' participation in the event of conferring upasampada on women candidates. This is cited as the most reasonable and practical way of establishing the bhikkhuni order overcoming the problem of lack of Theravada bhikkhunis.

In contrast to this there is a another view which says that though the Buddha has not declared 'if one do so there is an offence of wrong-doing (apattidukkatassati) with the promulgation of the second system, the former system has been automatically made invalid. According to this point of view the Buddha introduced a second system because of the practical problems arising of the former. And there is no need to say that the former is annulled. On this questioning of twenty four things which are stumbling-blocks and granting upasampada by bhikkhus to bhikkhunis not possible, for that system has got invalidated. Some strongly hold the view that to reestablish the bhikkhuni order the participation of bhikkhunis for the upasampada can be fulfilled by the Chinese bhikkhunis because they have obtained higher

ordination from the Sri Lankan bhikkhunis. According to the source of *the biographies of the great Chinese Bhikkhunis (Biqiuni Chuan)*, Sri Lankan bhikkhunis went to China twice in 429 A.D., and 433 A.D., (16) It is said that after it spread to Korea, Japan, Vietnam and Taiwan. A famous Chinese scholar Wang Ru Tong(王孺童) in his book, *Biqiuni Chuan Xiaozhu* records it as follows:

“ With Shipman Nandi, bhiksunis came from Sri Lanka (The Country of lions-Shi si guo) to Songdou a city of Nanjing in China and lived in Jingfu temple in 429 A.D. At that time, many Chinese bhiksunis such as Huiguo, Jingyun etc lived in this temple and wished to have higher ordination. They requested Nandi Shipman to invite Sri Lankan bhiksunis (Shisi guo biqiuni) to come China and complete their ambition. So, second time eleven bhiksunis headed by bhiksuni Tesala came to china in 433 A.D. By that time bhiksunis who came first can understand Chinese Language. At the Sima of Nanlin temple, there were about over 300 nuns asked for their Higher Ordination. (A high rank Chinese Buddhist monk,?) Seng Ge Ba Mo also participated for the event. This is the beginning of bhiksuni Higher Ordination in China with the participation of both bhiksu and bhiksuni”.

This incident is not recorded in the *Mahawamsa* the great Chronicle of Sri Lanka and may be the reason behind this was that the authors of the *Mahawamsa* belonged to *Mahavihara* tradition which who were against the Abhayagiri tradition. The both groups were from Abhayagiri tradition which was influenced by the Dharmaguptika Nikaya from India.

Based on this some Theravada monks and lay followers argued in favour of the case that bhikkhuni order can be reintroduced in the Theravada tradition. Now they have done it three times. For the first time, it was started at the Saranath Temple in India, under the guidance of the Most Ven. Mapalagama Wipulasara Nayakathero. At this occasion, Korean Buddhist nuns together with some Theravada Buddhist monks gave higher ordination to eleven Dasasilmatas headed by Dasasilamata Kusuma from Sri Lanka on 8th December 1996.(17). The second time was when it was done both by some Theravada monks and Chinese Buddhist nuns at the Buddhagaya in India under the patronage of Foguang Shang Buddhist Organization in Taiwan. (18). On that occasion, twenty Sri Lankan dasasilmatas first took their higher ordination according to the Chinese bhikkhuni order and then obtained higher ordination from Theravada Buddhist monks. At present this latter system of upasampada is continuing at

DambullaRajamahaviharaya and those who are wishing to have upasampada from many countries get higher ordination from that monastic institution.(19).

The question behind this is that can the Chinese bhikkhunis be accepted as Theravada bhikkhunis or not?. As mentioned above they got higher ordination from Sri Lankan bhikkhunis who belonged to the Hinayana Dharmaguptika tradition. It is argued that as the vinaya of all the Hinayana traditions is same or mostly similar to each other the Chinese bhikkhunis can fulfill the requirement of ubhatosangha for the Theravada bhikkhuni upasampada. So, there should be proper investigation regarding vinaya system followed by so called dharmaguptika Chinese bhikkhunis the manner in which they obtained their higher ordination.

As far as available information shows all Chinese bhikkhus and bhikkhunis obtain their admission and higher ordination according to the following three methods.

- i. Svami jie- (Samanera sila) after two or three years of training period under a recognized teacher and after his approval one can enter into the bhikkhuni order
- ii. Bhiksuni jie- when a samaneri become eighteen years old she can have upasampada.
- iii. Pusa jie – bodhisattva upasampada- this is unique to Mahayana tradition.

This is the system both bhikkhus and bhikkhunis in China conducting for their higher ordinations. They have newly added the last step of bodhisattva upasampada which is not found in Hinayana or Theravada. It is said that recently introduced bhikkhuni order in Sri Lanka followed only the first and the second systems and not bodhisattva upasampada. So, this is very complicated issue which would course for rising of many questions.

I would like to draw your attention to the facts put forward by the Most Ven. MadihePannasihaMahanayakaThero in his article “ **Is reestablishing bhikkhuni order suitable for the time ?**”(in Sinhala) (20) in his article Ven. mentioned that to inquire about Theravada system in China Ven. Himself, Ven. Soma and Kheminda were sent to China in 1946 by Mahabodhi Society in response to the invitation of Most Ven. Taishu and his disciple Ven. Fan to inquire whether Theravada tradition is preserved in China or not. Though they went for five years period, because of the internal civil war in China this mission came to an end within nine months and three Venerables came back to Sri Lanka. According to the Most Ven.

MadhiheMahanayakathero there were neither Theravada bhikkhus nor bhikkhunis in China. He further recorded that the bhikkhunis who met him and discussed with him are not aware of the historic incident of giving upasampada to Chinese bhikkhunis by Sri Lankan bhikkhunis. Ven. Mahanayake Thero wrote this article to Dinamina paper on 2nd January 1997. This issue of reestablishing bhikkhuni order was taken into discussion at the Mahasangha meeting held at SiriVajragana Dharmayatanaya, at Maharagama on 23rd July 1988 and decided, it is not possible to reintroduce bhikkhuni order in Theravada tradition. This sangha meeting was headed by the three Mahanayakatheros of the three main sects namely, Siam, Amarapura and Ramanna in Sri Lanka and with the participation of more than three hundred senior monks.

Conclusion

It is clear that in the Buddha's time this process of granting higher ordination to bhikkhunis had undergone amendments trice. And these amendments were made for important and valid reason. Whether a fourth amendment could be made is a very grave issue which requires sober discussion and consideration. However, when doing so another issue that should be taken up is whether it is reasonable to wait for the appearance of Maitraya Buddha for women to obtain higher ordination.

End Notes.

1. B.R. Ambedkav, The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman, P. 302, *Sambhasha, Mahabodhi Centenary Commemorative Volume*, (1-No. 2) The Branch of Pirivena Education the Ministry of Education and Hither Education, Battaramulla, Sri Lanka, 1991.
2. *Samyuttanikaya*, I, p 234 "SomasuttaZZ Buddhajayanti Tripitaka Sanskaranya" Colombo, 2005 zzitthibhavo kim kaira-cittamhi susmahite nanamhi vattamanamhi-sammadhammam vipassatoZZ
3. *Samantapasadhikavinaya commentary*
4. *Cullavaggapali* Vol. 2. Buddhajayanti Tripitaka Sanskaranya, Colombo,
5. *Cullavaggapali* Vol.2. Buddhajayanti Tripitaka Sanskaranya, Colombo,
6. *Majjhimanikaya* Vol. II, p116, " Bhaddalisutta", edited by I.B. Horner, Motilala Banarasisidass, Delhi, 2004.
7. *Majjhimanikaya* Vol. I, p 159, " Kakacupamasutta", edited by I.B. Horner, Motilala Banarisisidass, Delhi, 2004.

8. *Rhys Davids, Dialogues of the Buddha*, Vol. III, p171, “Mahaparinibbanasutta”, The Pali Text Society, Oxford, 2002.
9. *Cullavaggapali p 478* “Bhikkhuni Khandaka” Buddhajayanti Tripitaka Sanskaranaya" 2006'
10. Ibid, p 476

11. Ibid , p512 '
 naianimitta,nasinimittamatta,asialohita,nasidhualohita,
 nasidguvachola,nasipaggharanti,nasisikharani, nasiitthipandaka,nasivepurisika, nasisamabhinna,
 nasiubhatobyanjananta, santi te everupa abada: kuttam,gando,kilaso, soso,apamaro. manussasi,
 itthisi, bhujjissasi,ananasi, nasirajabhathi, ananunnasi matapituhi samikena,paripunnavisati vassasi,
 paripunnam te pattacivaram kimnamasi, kanama te pavatiti

12. Ibid, p 512

13. Ibid, p 512

14. *Mahawamsa*, Chapter 19, gatha 64, Buddhajayanti Tripitaka Sanskaranaya, Colombo, 1977.

15. Panagoda Mittra Gnanissari, *Silmatasanvidhanaye aitihasika pasubima saha ehi wartamana tatvaya, 2300 Sanghamitta jatyanti Sanghrahaya*, p 140, Baudhha Katayutu Departhamentuwa, Colombo, 1993.

16. (王孺童)Wang Ru Tong, 《比丘尼传校注》—*Biqiuni chuan xiaozhu*, p, 41, Zhonghua press, Beijing, 2006-7.

“关于比丘尼戒由斯里兰卡传入中国，本书提供了重要的史料。据本书僧果传等说：元嘉六年(429)，有外国舶主难提(Nandi)从师子国载比丘尼来至宋都 (Songdou)，住景福寺 (Jingfu temple)，时景福寺尼慧果 净音等，欲如大爱道之缘重请受戒，于是别请难提(Nandi)更请师子国尼来满十数。嗣后，元嘉十年(433)，难提(Nandi)复将师子国铁萨罗 (Thesala) 等十一尼至。这时先至诸尼，已通宋语。请僧伽跋摩于南林寺坛戒次第重受尼戒者三百余人。此为中国比丘尼二部僧受戒之始。”

Biqiuni Chuan Xiaozhu of Wang Ru Tong(王孺童) is a annotated translation of original text of Biqiuni Chuan, written by Baochang (宝唱). The Biquni Chuan contains biographies of Buddhist nuns who lived in Nan, Zhao, and Liang periods of china. This is the only literary source of Mahayana Buddhist Texts that provides valuable details of the bhiksunis. Besides, this source records plenty of details regarding history, personality and temples etc.

17. Amarasiri Weeraratna" Revival of the Bhikkhuni Order in Sri Lanka, p. 2, *The Island news paper*, Colombo, Sri Lanka, 4th April, 1998. "At this ceremony 11 selected Sinhalese DDSM nuns were ordained fully as Bhikkhunis by a team of Theravada monks in concert with a quorum of Korean Nuns."
(www.buddhanet.net/nunorder.htm)
18. "A Summary Report of the 2007 International Congress on the Women's Role in the Sangha: Bhikshuni Vinaya and Ordination Lineages" University of Hamburg, Hamburg, Germany 18-20 July 2007 Alexander Berzin, August 2007. www.congress-on-buddhist-women.org/
19. Bhikkhuni order in the 20th Century, *Daily news*, Sri Lanka, 05-05-2010, www.mingkok.buddhistdoe.com "In view of the many hundreds of applications by dasasilmathas, the Most Venerable Inamaluwa.
20. Bhikkhuni order in the 20th Century, *Daily news*, Sri Lanka, 05-05-2010, www.mingkok.buddhistdoe.com "In view of the many hundreds of applications by dasasilmathas, the Most Venerable namaluwa. Sri Sumangalamahathera, the chief incurlbent of RangiriDambullaMahaVihara of Dambulla invited moe than one hundred monks and appointed two preceptors from the newly ordained Bhikkhumis and commenced the Sangha ordination for women in Sri Lanka. This ordination is now held annually".
21. MadihePannasihamahanayakathero "Is reestablishing bhikkhuni order suitable for the time" *Dinamina*, 1997.1.2. "The Bhikkhuni Order: Can it be Re-established? " See also Arakan Webpage.