

sāṃghika, Ārya-Sthavira, Ārya-(Mūla-)Sarvāstivāda and Ārya-Sammatīya (Hsüan-tsang and I-ching)<sup>53</sup>.

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After the Sarvāstivāda school originated on – most likely – Vinaya grounds, its development took two philosophical-dogmatic directions: one was situated in Kāśmīra, where the seven Abhidharma works (i.e. with the inclusion of the *Jñānaprasthāna*) were put together. These Vaibhāṣikas became the dominant Sarvāstivāda sub-group and Vaibhāṣika viewpoints came to be considered as ‘orthodox’. The second direction was situated in places such as Bactria and Gandhāra where, modelled on the \**Abhidharmahrdaya*, a Bactrian compendium of Sarvāstivāda philosophy, a series of works called \**Abhidharmahrdaya* were compiled. The Kāśmīri orthodoxy spread to the bordering regions and influenced Gandhāran works. This is revealed in the two later *Hṛdaya* treatises. This growing influence led to a reaction by those Sarvāstivādins who had remained conservative and who referred to themselves as Sautrāntikas (and were called Dārṣṭāntikas by their opponents). The major work of this period is Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośa*. When the Vaibhāṣika doctrinal supremacy disappeared, the original non-Kāśmīri Sarvāstivādins renamed themselves as Mūlasarvāstivādins. This explains why Mūlasarvāstivāda texts do not refer to the Sautrāntikas, but show analogous doctrinal positions. The Mūlasarvāstivādins became the dominant group in the seventh to ninth centuries, a period in which their Vinaya was also finalised<sup>54</sup>. Sarvāstivāda history is thus shown to have originated on Vinaya grounds, to have been further decimated on philosophical matters and to have known a philosophical restoration that was backed and followed by a Vinaya renaissance.

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<sup>53</sup> See Ruegg, *op. cit.*, pp.118-19.

<sup>54</sup> See A. Heirman, ‘Vinaya: perpetuum mobile’, *Asiatische Studien* LIII, 4, 1999, pp.849-71.

## A WHISPER IN THE SILENCE: NUNS BEFORE MAHĀPAJĀPATĪ?\*

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The story in the *Cullavagga* 10 of the ordination of women into the monastic Sangha is accepted by scholars and monastics, both ancient and modern, as evidence for the Buddha’s reluctance, or at least hesitation, to accept women as fully ordained bhikkhūṇīs. However, I argue that there is textual evidence to support the idea that there may have been bhikkhūṇīs in existence before the request for ordination by Mahāpajāpatī, and that there is evidence in the *Therīgāthā* to suggest that bhikkhūṇīs were sometimes ordained by the Buddha in much the same way as bhikkhus, by the use of the formula, ‘*ehi bhikkhūṇī*’. What I am suggesting is that the established argument, that the Buddha was reluctant to ordain women, is flawed, and therefore one aspect of the basis for the exclusion of women from the fully ordained monastic Sangha is weak and without substance.

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So, what is the evidence on which the Buddha’s alleged reluctance is based? The most commonly quoted explanation given by monks and scholars<sup>1</sup> is that the Buddha initially refused and that only after the intervention of Ānanda did he relent and allow women the opportunity to follow the holy life: moreover, this was only on condition that Mahāpajāpatī and all who followed her accept the eight weighty rules (*garudhammas*) which would have the effect of subordinating them to the bhikkhus. The ordination story is still recounted in universities and monasteries, where the current exclusion of women from the fully ordained Theravādin Sangha is being justified as acceptable. If the Buddha was reluctant to ordain women, then there is some justification for their exclusion. So ingrained is this interpretation of the text (Vin.II.253) that scholars of Buddhism, ancient and modern, male and female,

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<sup>1</sup> Bhikkhu Khantipālo, *Banner of the Arahants*, Kandy 1979, p.133; Rita Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy, A Feminist History, Analysis and Reconstruction of Buddhism*, Albany, NY 1993, p.221.

Buddhist and non-Buddhist, continually repeat the story as Buddhist teaching. Even though many of these scholars are fully conversant with the original texts and must therefore be familiar with the canonical tradition of repeating a request three times before being accepted, they seem unable or unwilling to acknowledge the Buddha's egalitarian principles, as seen for example in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (D.II,195). In this Sutta, perhaps the most comprehensive exposition of fundamental Buddhist teachings, the Buddha emphatically tells Māra that he will not enter Parinibbāna until all four classes of disciple are well-versed in the teachings and can teach them to others. This includes bhikkhūṇis as well as laywomen and was stated to have been said shortly after the Buddha's enlightenment and then repeated three months before his final Nibbāna. This would imply then that the Buddha knew he would ordain women as soon as he had attained liberation.

'Evil One, I will not take final Nibbāna till I have nuns and female disciples who are accomplished . . .'<sup>2</sup>

Moreover in the *Dakkhinaṅga Sutta*, the Exposition of Offerings in the Majjhima Nikāya (M.II.253), there is evidence that Mahāpajāpatī may not have been the first nun. In this sutta, the latter approaches the Buddha and requests him to accept a pair of new cloths, which she has spun and woven especially for him. The Buddha refuses them, saying,

'Give it to the Sangha, Gotamī. When you give it to the Sangha, the offering will be made both to me and to the Sangha'.

<sup>2</sup> *Na tāvāham pāpima parinibbāyissami yāva me bhikkhūṇiyo na sāvikā bhavissanti viyatā vinitā. . .* (D.II.105). The English version is taken from Maurice Walshe, *The Long Discourses of the Buddha, A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya*, Boston 1995 (first published as *Thus have I Heard* in 1987), p.246.

She repeats her request for a second, and a third time, after which, following the established pattern<sup>3</sup>, the Buddha refuses three times. At this point in the *Dakkhinaṅga Sutta*<sup>4</sup>, Ānanda intervenes on her behalf, just as he does in *Cullavagga* 10 (Vin.II.254), the ordination story. He reminds the Buddha of how helpful Mahāpajāpatī has been to him. She was his nurse and foster-mother and suckled him when his own mother died.

Ānanda then elucidates Mahāpajāpatī's debt to the Buddha, in that it is because of him that she keeps the five precepts. This clearly implies that this is meant to have taken place before she was part of the Sangha, members of which adhered to ten precepts for novices, and many more for those who had taken higher ordination. Although she is thus depicted as a lay person, it is also obvious that she is already a stream-enterer. Ānanda says,

'It is owing to the Blessed One that Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī possesses perfect confidence in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, and that she possesses the virtues loved by the Noble Ones' (M II.254).

These are the four factors of stream-entry, so the text intends to convey that Mahāpajāpatī has already attained this level of spiritual development, as had many laymen and laywomen in the Suttas. Later in the text of the *Dakkhinaṅga Sutta* (M.II.255), the Buddha expounds the fourteen kinds of personal offerings, then the seven kinds of offering to the Sangha. He gives the descending order of karmic fruitfulness (*puñña*) accrued from

<sup>3</sup> A layman requests the 'going forth' three times, a sāmaṇera requesting the higher ordination (*upasampadā*) asks three times, lay people request the precepts three times; therefore to request something three times is obviously not a demonstration of reluctance but a recognised canonical tradition, not peculiar to Mahāpajāpatī's desire for women to 'go forth'.

<sup>4</sup> All subsequent sutta references are taken from Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*, Boston 1995.

gifts to:

Both Sanghas with the Buddha at the head,  
Both Sanghas after the death of the Buddha,  
The Order of bhikkhus,  
The Order of bhikkhunīs,  
A given number of bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs,  
A given number of bhikkhus,  
A given number of bhikkhunīs.

If she is still a lay person, as has already been demonstrated by the fact that she adheres only to five precepts, then, if the ordination story is accurate, there would be no bhikkhunīs in existence. It would seem then that this is evidence of the existence of bhikkhunīs *before* Mahāpajāpatī requested the going forth. The only other explanation is that this sutta may be an assimilation of one story with another. *Cullavagga* 10, then, looks as if it may have been added on by later compilers of the texts. Unlike bhikkhus, whose admission to the Order precedes all other rules specific to them in the text order as we have it, bhikkhunīs appear throughout the *Vinaya* prior to the story of their admission. Certain rules are also laid down for bhikkhunīs *before* any transgression takes place, which is another inconsistency.

There would appear to be a general reluctance to acknowledge that the Buddha elevated women from the socially constructed second class roles that were thought appropriate for them. Surely, one of the qualities of an enlightened being is that he can see beyond human prejudice. Why then do Buddhists, who see the Buddha as the ultimate paradigm of spiritual and ethical action, continually over-look and deny this aspect of his enlightenment?

In the *Therīgāthā* commentary<sup>5</sup>, most of the nuns refer in some way to their ordination. Of the seventy-three verses, twenty-four

<sup>5</sup> William Pruitt (tr.) *The Commentary on the Verses of the Therīs (Therīgāthā-Atthakathā Paramattadīpanī VI)* by Ācārya Dhammapāla, PTS, 1998.

are ascribed to nuns who state that they went to the monastery of the bhikkhunīs for their ordination. Twenty-two refer to 'going forth' in the presence of Mahāpajāpatī. Some refer to hearing the Buddha teach, and then being instructed by him to go to the residence of the bhikkhunīs to be ordained. Only two, namely Vaddha-Mātā (ThigA 171) and Ambapālī (ThigA 207) refer to hearing the Dhamma in the presence of a bhikkhu, this being, on both occasions, their son. None refers to receiving the *upasam-padā* from bhikkhus. Although an argument from silence cannot be taken as substantial evidence, in the compilation of seventy-three accounts, the law of averages would suggest that at least a few would refer to bhikkhus if indeed these were needed at the ordination of nuns, as suggested in *Cullavagga* 10. There is, however, a whisper in the silence.

The first account in the *Therīgāthā*, that of a certain bhikkhunī of Name Unknown (Thig. 1), the bhikkhunī describes her attainment of the state of Non-returner while still a laywoman. She is then taken to Mahāpajāpatī by her husband, who says,

'Let the reverend Sisters give her ordination. And Pajāpatī did so'<sup>6</sup>.

This is worded similarly by Dhammapāla's commentary on Thig, a translation of which has recently been published by the Pali Text Society, which states:

'Like the lay disciple Visakhā for [his wife] Dhammadinā, he led her with great ceremony into the presence of Mahā-pajāpatī and said, "O noble lady [please] give the going forth [to this woman]'. Then Mahā-pajāpatī Gotamī had her go forth and take full ordination'<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Mrs C.A.F. Rhys Davids and K.R. Norman, *Poems of the Early Buddhist Nuns (Psalms of the Sisters)* Revised Version, (*Elders Verses II*) Revised Version, Pali Text Society, 1997, p.7.

<sup>7</sup> ThigA 6. Pruitt, *op. cit.*, p.10.

The bhikkhuṇī Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā, an ex-Jain, in both Norman and Rhys Davids' translations of Thig, verse 109, refers to her ordination as being only by the Buddha himself.

'Low on my knees I worshipped with both hands  
Adoring. "Come Bhaddā!" the Master said.  
Thereby to me was ordination given<sup>8</sup>  
and  
'Having bent the knee, having paid homage to him,  
I stood with cupped hands face to face with him,  
"Come Bhaddā!" he said to me; that was my ordination<sup>9</sup>.

Dhammapāla's commentary elaborates on this verse as:  
'Come Bhaddā! Go to the residence of the bhikkhuṇīs, and in the presence of the bhikkhuṇīs go forth and be fully ordained'<sup>10</sup>.

Even here, there is no reference to double ordination. Dhamma pāla then goes to extreme lengths to explain that there is no '*Ehi bhikkhuṇī*' ordination equivalent to that for bhikkhus. His explanation appears to be merely a denial of something he is not comfortable with, that is, that the Buddha ordained women in the same way as men, implying an equivalent status to men. His opinion is that,

On still other occasions [something] is mentioned that is not possible, or that does not exist<sup>11</sup>.

He also explains away the inclusion of 'Come bhikkhuṇī' in the *Bhikkhuṇī-Vibhaṅga* (Vin.IV.214) by saying that

It is not an expression that makes clear the independent existence of full ordination of bhikkhuṇīs by [the formula] 'Come bhikkhuṇī' because there are no bhikkhuṇīs [admitted to] full

ordination in this way<sup>12</sup>.

This is merely a circular argument which adds nothing in the way of evidence or reasoning to support his contention. I would argue that the passage on Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā has just demonstrated that bhikkhuṇīs were indeed sometimes admitted to full ordination in this way, just as bhikkhus were sometimes admitted by the formula 'Come Bhikkhu!'

Dhammapāla is thought to have lived in South India in the sixth century CE, so his commentary dates from almost a millennium after the time of the Buddha. His views of and attitude towards women are obviously coloured by the socio-historical context in which he was writing. Blackstone<sup>13</sup>, in discussing the attitude of disgust and disapproval of the body and its functions in the *Therī/Theragāthā*, recognises that 'those bodies that are of an unspecified sex are designated female by the commentary' (p.64).

Thus, even from the earliest days of the monastic Sangha, shortly after the decease of the Buddha, and for centuries later, women were denied the status, respect and recognition that was acknowledged by the Buddha. The same wariness and fear of women's achievements has filtered down through the centuries to the present day, and is still reflected in the lack of opportunity for women to realise their aspirations and to offer a significant and valuable contribution to the Theravādin monastic Sangha.

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<sup>8</sup> Rhys Davis, *op. cit.*, p.154.

<sup>9</sup> Norman, *op. cit.*, p.182.

<sup>10</sup> Pruitt, *op. cit.*, p.106.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.380.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.379.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of attitudes to the body in the Therī/Theragāthā; see Kathryn Blackstone, *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha; Struggle for Liberation in the Therīgāthā*, Richmond, Surrey 1998.