

Buddha. The *Tapussa Sutta* might never have been uttered by the Buddha, but by drawing out doctrinal inconsistencies and debate in the early material, we might be able to find out what he did say.

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RED RUST, ROBBERS AND RICE FIELDS:
WOMEN'S PART IN THE PRECIPITATION OF THE
DECLINE OF THE DHAMMA

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The lack of a current female monastic Order in Theravāda Buddhism is often substantiated by reason of the Buddha's initial reluctance to ordain women and by his alleged prediction that the lifetime of the true Dhamma would be significantly diminished by their presence. I have argued previously¹ that the argument of his reluctance is seriously flawed; I intend in this paper to demonstrate that the real precipitation of the decline of the Dhamma was in fact facilitated by the monk Sudinna and that there is no textual evidence, other than the story in *Cullavagga* X, that women were at all culpable.

It is said in *Cullavagga* X,

If, Ānanda, women had not obtained the going forth from home into homelessness in the dhamma and discipline proclaimed by the Truth-finder, the Brahma-faring, Ānanda, would have lasted long, true dhamma would have endured for a thousand years. But since, Ānanda, women have gone forth ... in the dhamma and discipline proclaimed by the Truth-Finder, now, Ānanda, the Brahma-faring will not last long, true dhamma will endure only for five hundred years (Vin II: 256).²

The Buddha then proceeds to liken the presence of women in the Saṅgha to a household with few men which would easily fall prey to robbers, a diseased rice field and a sugar-cane field attacked by red rust. This is the only reference to women's culpability in the downfall of the teachings. Elsewhere in the Vinaya (see below), the Saṅgha as a whole is cautioned over its behaviour and its effect

¹ See my article 'A Whisper in the Silence: Nuns before Mahāpajāpatī', *BSR* 17, 2 (2000), pp.167-73.

² I.B. Horner, tr., *The Book of the Discipline* (= *BD*; 5 vols, PTS) V, p.356.

on the Dhamma.

It is said at Vin III:10, that the company of bhikkhus present in Gotama's Saṅgha is

Devoid of immorality, devoid of danger, stainless, purified, based on the essential. Sāriputta, the most backward of these five hundred monks is one who has entered the stream, not liable to be born in any state of woe, assured, bound for enlightenment.³

This is in response to Sāriputta's enquiring of the Buddha as to the reasons why the 'Brahma-life' has lasted longer under some previous Buddhas than it has under others. The Buddha lists three previous Buddhas, being Vipassin, Sikhin and Vessabhu, who were 'idle in preaching Dhamma in detail to the disciples' (Vin III: 8), and who did not have the binding element of the Suttas or other texts, or the Pātimokkha to maintain and support monastic purity. The consequence of this was that, after the enlightened ones had attained final Nibbāna, there were fewer and fewer bhikkhus, leading to the eventual demise of the Dhamma. The Buddha uses the simile of an unbound pile of flowers being scattered by the wind:

Inasmuch as they are not held together by a thread, even so, Sāriputta, at the disappearance of these enlightened ones, these lords, at the disappearance of the disciples enlightened under these enlightened ones, those last disciples of various names, of various clans, of various social strata, who had gone forth from various families, caused this Brahma-life rapidly to disappear (Vin III: 8).⁴

He then describes the reverse situation during the time of the Buddhas Kakusandha, Koṇāgamana and Kassapa, who had the advantage of having recourse to the oral texts and who had the Pātimokkha binding the Saṅgha together, and who therefore, 'established the Brahma-life for a very long time' (Vin III: 9).

At this point, there is no suggestion of any danger to the life of the present Dhamma as all the existing members of the monastic Community have, at the very least, attained stream-entry. It is

obviously seen as inevitable that the Dhamma will eventually decline, no matter what the circumstances, but that the purity of the Saṅgha is vital to the cohesion of it and is a significant influence on the duration of it.

Sāriputta then urges the Buddha to 'make known the course of training for disciples' so that the 'Brahma-life' will last for a long time. The Buddha responds by saying,

Wait, Sāriputta, wait, Sāriputta. The tathāgata will know the right time for that. The teacher does not make known, Sāriputta, the course of training for disciples, or appoint the Pātimokkha until some conditions causing the cankers appear here in the Order (Vin III: 9).⁵

He then goes on to list the circumstances causing the cankers to appear. They will only appear when the Order has attained long standing, has attained full development, has achieved the 'greatness of gain' and has attained great learning. Obviously then, as the Order is, as yet, seen as totally pure and the Saṅgha is in its infancy, there is no need for the formulation of any rules. There is no suggestion here that the existing lifetime of the Dhamma is in imminent danger of declining, nor is there any suggestion that the admission of women to the Order will have any impact on it.

The existence of the present dispensation is seen as beginning with the Buddha's first sermon, the *Dhammacakkappavattana*, when Koṇḍañña 'enters the stream', 'plunges into the Dhamma' and with insight sees crucial aspects of the Dhamma, i.e., that conditioned phenomena can be transcended and Nibbāna attained.

And while this discourse was being spoken, there arose in the Venerable Koṇḍañña the dust-free, stainless vision of the Dhamma: 'Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation'.⁶

At this point, it is said that a cry went up among the gods that the Dhamma-wheel had been set in motion. The message then rippled through the universe that an event of cosmic importance

³ BDI, p.19.

⁴ Ibid., p.16.

⁵ Ibid., p.18.

⁶ Bhikkhu Bodhi, tr., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*, Boston 2000, p.1846.

had taken place. Moreover, it is said that the motion of the Dhamma-wheel cannot be stopped by anyone in the world.

A parallel narrative of a major cosmic event is given at Vin III: 19, when Sudinna, a bhikkhu who has shown great determination in overcoming his parents' dissent at his ordination and then resisting their attempts to coax him back to lay life with offers of wealth, succumbs to temptation and has sexual intercourse with his former wife. Sudinna has tainted an organisation that was formerly pure with danger and immorality. The mythological element is again employed to illustrate that a major cosmic event has occurred, i.e. the precipitation of the decline of the Dhamma. Again, a 'cosmic ripple' is said to go up through the various layers of gods, causing the earth to shake. When the Buddha is informed of Sudinna's offence, he rebukes him, saying, 'Foolish man, you are the first-doer of many wrong things' (Vin III: 21).⁷ Sudinna, then, has breached the boundary of purity that was essential for the flourishing of the Dhamma.⁸ He has provided the means by which the Pātimokkha has had to be formulated, in direct opposition to Koṇḍañña who had been instrumental in the setting in motion the Wheel of Dhamma. In both cases, news of the event was said to ripple up through the various levels of gods, implying that the two events have a parallel, if opposite, significance. The Buddha then lays down the first *pārājika* rule that, 'Whatever monk should indulge in sexual intercourse is one who is defeated, he is no longer in communication' (Vin III: 21).⁹

The steady decline is then begun as more and more monks commit offences necessitating Vinaya rules. This laxity within the Saṅgha is stressed ubiquitously by the Buddha himself as the cause of the decline of the Dhamma. In the *Samyutta Nikāya* (SN II: 224) the Buddha lists five detrimental causes which lead to the decay and disappearance of the true Dhamma:

What are the five? Here the bhikkhus, the bhikkhunīs, the male lay

⁷ BDI, p.37.

⁸ For a discussion of the concept of boundaries in the Ordination story, see K. Blackstone, *Standing Outside the Gates*, unpublished PhD thesis, McMaster University 1995.

⁹ BDI, p.38.

followers, and the female lay followers dwell without reverence and deference towards the Teacher; they dwell without reverence and deference towards the Dhamma; they dwell without reverence and deference towards the Saṅgha; they dwell without reverence and deference towards the training; they dwell without reverence and deference towards concentration.¹⁰

The reverse situations which will lead to its non-decay and non-disappearance are then listed. Obviously then, the whole Community is responsible for the well-being of the Dhamma.

At SN V: 173, the monk Bhadda asks of Ānanda, 'Friend Ānanda, what is the cause and reason for the decline of the true Dhamma? And what is the cause and reason of the nondecline of the true Dhamma?'¹¹ Ānanda responds by explaining that it is by cultivating the four foundations of mindfulness that the Dhamma is preserved, and by neglect of these that its lifetime is diminished. Ānanda is traditionally considered to be a reliable source of information because of his long association with the Buddha as his faithful and constant attendant, and because of his prodigious memory. Therefore, any teaching given by Ānanda is acknowledged as being equivalent to hearing it directly from the Buddha himself.

Another cause for the Dhamma's demise is said to be the arising of a 'counterfeit' Dhamma. At SN II: 224, Kassapa asks the Buddha why there are now fewer arahats and more precepts than previously. The Buddha replies to Kassapa by explaining that, 'There is no disappearing of the true doctrine, Kassapa, till a counterfeit doctrine arises in the world: but when a counterfeit doctrine does arise, then there will be a disappearance of the true doctrine'.¹² He then reiterates the caution (as above) that it is when all four elements of the Saṅgha, monks, nuns, female lay-followers and male lay-followers are negligent in their behaviour and observance of the rules, that the Dhamma will be short-lived.

What then, of the account in *Cullavagga* X: that it is the

¹⁰ Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Connected Discourses*, op.cit., p.681.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp.1650-1.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp.680-1.

admission of women into the monastic Order that will lead to the eventual downfall of the teachings? Why, after all the cautions given to the members of the Saṅgha and even to lay people on the maintenance of discipline, would the Buddha himself precipitate its downfall by admitting women if they would cause its demise? Sponberg¹³ hears a 'multiplicity of voices' in early Buddhist texts and, rather than a literal, historical account, suggests a symbolic or mythical process of mediation by which the problems posed by the existence of a female Order were reconciled. The 'problem' posed by women in the Order does not seem to have been apparent during the Buddha's lifetime. Many nuns speak of their spiritual quest and, indeed, their attainment of the ultimate goal in the *Therīgāthā*. None of these women refers to ordination by both Orders, yet they achieved equivalent spiritual goals to men. There are no records of any questioning of the Buddha's decision to admit women during his lifetime. It would appear that problems only arose after the demise of the Buddha, when social and cultural norms were being challenged by the presence and the attainments of women in a society which had deep roots in Brahmanism, where the most common and acceptable role for a woman was that of wife and child-bearer. Perhaps because of the necessity for so many Vinaya rules, caused by infringements by both men and women, a scapegoat was needed to explain the diminishing standards of monastic behaviour. Who better, then, than women, who were occupying the privileged position previously held by men in society and by monks in the Saṅgha?

Nattier¹⁴ lists seven causes of the demise of Buddhism which she labels 'internal', that is, shortcomings on the part of Buddhists themselves (pp.120-1). She sees the repeated admonitions to monastics to maintain their commitment and practice as another teaching on impermanence. Not only is human rebirth precious, but the life of the Dhamma is transient. While human efforts can

¹³ A. Sponberg, 'Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism', in J. Cabezón (ed.), *Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender*, SUNY 1992, pp.3-36.

¹⁴ For a detailed analysis of the prediction of the decline of the Dhamma, see Jan Nattier, *Once upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline*, Berkeley 1991.

contribute to the longevity of it and human failings cause its decline, Buddhism, like all conditioned phenomena, is subject to decay (p.286), one of the most fundamental teachings of Buddhism. The decision made by the Buddha to admit women, contradicting all his other admonitions and thereby contributing to the early decline of the Dhamma, Nattier sees as a 'somewhat convoluted attempt by the early Buddhist community to resolve a complex and pressing set of issues related to the presence of women in the saṅgha' (p.121).

Whether women are any more responsible for the demise of the Dhamma than men remains a matter of conjecture, but the responsibility for the initiation of the decline of a formerly pure institution remains unequivocally with Sudinna.

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