

## Development of the Bhikkhuni Sangha

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According to early accounts, the Buddha established the Bhikkhuni Sangha (the order of nuns) that exists to this day. Since that time, women in many parts of the world have taken Buddhist vows to become bhikkhunis, engaged in practice, attained realizations and worked for the peace and well being of the smaller and larger communities to which they belong. This paper considers the history of the Bhikkhuni Sangha, the stories and histories of its development and its propagation. Special points in the Vinaya Piṭaka concerning the Bhikkhuni Sangha are also touched upon as well as incidences of attainment by bhikkhunis.

In many Buddhist texts and in actual circumstances throughout the history of Buddhist communities around the world women have often been afforded a lower status as compared to men. In early Buddhism, this attitude may be seen as continuing the mind-set of pre-Buddhist religious communities of India, such as those of Brahmanism. In numerous Buddhist sūtras and commentaries, women are described as inferior, temptresses and the personifications of evil. The *Larger Pure Land Sūtra (Mahā-sukhāvātī-vyūha)* and many other scriptures explain that in order to attain enlightenment, women must first "despise their female nature" and be reborn as men.<sup>1</sup> In perhaps the most famous biography of the Buddha's life and enlightenment, the *Buddha-Karita* attributed to the Sanskrit poet Aśvaghosha (1<sup>st</sup> century CE), in a failed attempt to prevent the imminent enlightenment, Māra sends his three daughters before the meditating Tathāgata.<sup>2</sup> These daughters are the incarnations of Lust, Delight and Thirst and embody female seduction. The Buddha's rejection of these temptresses represents the monastic transcendence of the bonds of women.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, earlier in the text, when the Buddha-to-be is preparing to leave the palace of his father in order to seek enlightenment, he becomes surrounded by "a herd of females" some of whom "pressed him with their full firm bosoms in gentle collisions."<sup>4</sup> Such descriptions are common in Buddhist literatures and sermons from at least the first century CE on, with rare exceptions found in scriptures composed at a much later date, such as the *Śrimaladevi Sūtra*, where a woman attains Buddhahood without the necessarily of first being

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<sup>1</sup> Müller, 19

<sup>2</sup> Aśvaghosha, 136.

<sup>3</sup> Paul, 7.

<sup>4</sup> Aśvaghosha, 40.

reborn as a man.<sup>5</sup> Also, an early scripture, the *Dīghanikāya*, has the disciple Ānanda asking the Buddha how he should behave towards a woman. The Buddha replies, "You should keep out of her sight." When Ānanda asks how he should behave if he does come into the sight of a woman the Buddha replies, "Do not speak to her."<sup>6</sup> From this we gather there could never be interaction between Buddhist men and women, much less could there be a Bhikkhuni Sangha.

The story of the circumstances and founding by the Buddha of the Bhikkhuni Sangha can be found in an early Buddhist writing in Pali language, the *Cullavagga* of the Vinaya Piṭaka.<sup>7</sup> With few alterations, the story appears in all known Vinaya collections of the world. In summary, the story is as follows. When the Buddha's father, King Suddhodana, died, his stepmother, who was also his aunt named Mahāpajāpatī, went with five hundred palace women before the Buddha in Kapilavatthu requesting permission to join the sangha. The Buddha replied, "Do not ask this." Nevertheless, Mahāpajāpatī repeated her request three times. Each time the Buddha's response was the same, "Do not ask this." Probably because early Buddhism generally took a very liberal and anti-caste stance in relation to the Buddhist sangha, as attested to by numerous scriptures, those who heard his words in this case did not understand why the Buddha refused to admit the women to the sangha.

Later, the Buddha traveled to Vesali, which took many days to reach by walking. Meanwhile, Mahāpajāpatī and the five hundred palace women shaved their heads and also walked to Vesali, showing their determination to be accepted in the sangha and to follow the Buddha. In Vesali, Mahāpajāpatī and the others sat crying with swollen and bleeding feet from walking so far. Ānanda, who was the Buddha's cousin, personal attendant and disciple with a gift for perfect recollection, saw the women and asked them why they were crying. After hearing their story repeated and seeing their determination, Ānanda went to the Buddha on their behalf, telling him Mahāpajāpatī and the others had come in hopes of being granted permission to join the sangha. Again, the Buddha said, "Do not ask this." But Ānanda felt compassion for the women and appealed in another way. He reminded the Buddha that Mahāpajāpatī was both the aunt and stepmother and had fed the Buddha as a baby with her own milk. The Buddha still refused. Surprised and after having been refused three times, Ānanda asked if the reason for

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<sup>5</sup> See *The Lion's Roar of Queen Śrīmala*, Alax Waymand and Hideko Wayman (translators). Columbia University Press, New York: 1974.

<sup>6</sup> Lamotte, 61.

<sup>7</sup> Horner, 352-7.

refusal was because women do not have the same capacity as men to become enlightened? Here the Buddha makes a very important statement for the history of Buddhism, declaring that indeed women possess an equal potential as men for attaining enlightenment. Afterwards, Ānanda implored the Buddha to accept women into the sangha on the grounds that they could attain enlightenment and would be able to do so through monastic discipline, and since Mahāpajāpatī has been so kind to the Buddha.

At this point the Buddha gives in and says he will allow women to join the sangha,<sup>8</sup> but only if Mahāpajāpatī agrees to accept eight important rules. Mahāpajāpatī accepts the rules and thus the Bhikkhuni Sangha is born about seven or eight years after the Bhikkhu Sangha had been formed.

Afterwards, the Buddha is reported to have made another famous and much quoted statement about the negative consequences of forming a Bhikkhuni Sangha. Had he not allowed women to join the sangha, the statement goes, the Buddhist Dharma would have lasted one thousand years. However, since he did allow the foundation of the Bhikkhuni Sangha it would last only five hundred years.

In the story above we see many possible points of ambivalence in the Buddha's attitude towards woman. Scholars and practitioners have analyzed these in various ways, sometimes emphasizing either the negative or positive aspects of this view of women in Buddhism in support of their own positions. For example, the story has been used in Thailand where no Bhikkhuni Sangha has ever been allowed to officially exist. Women who want to join the sangha are refused on the bases that the Buddha did not really want them to do so. In response, a separate group of female Buddhist devotees has emerged in and around temples. These women, who shave their heads and wear white robes in contrast with the yellow robes of the official monks, are known as Mae Jis.<sup>9</sup>

On the other end of the spectrum, the Japanese Buddhologist Kajiyama Yuichi argues that the Buddha's prediction that the life of the Dharma would be shortened due to the formation of the Bhikkhuni Sangha was a later addition to the original story, perhaps reflecting the attitudes of the bhikkhus who recorded the vinaya in Sri Lanka some four hundred years after the Buddha. If so, by implication, the story works contrary to the Buddha's intent. According to Kajiyama, the

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<sup>8</sup> This may be the only time in scriptures where the Buddha is out argued or changes his mind.

<sup>9</sup> For a description and discussion of Mae Jis, see Kabilsingh, 36-44.

story was added at a period of time when the newer ideas of Mahāyāna Buddhism were threatening to supplant those of early Indian Buddhism, some five hundred years after the Buddha's life. In the same paper, Kajiyama outlines five possible historical periods relating to Buddhist scriptures and changing attitudes toward the Bhikkhuni Sangha. In order of occurrence, these five periods and their characterizations are as follows. (1) Early Buddhism at and around the time of the Buddha is characterized by the belief that there is no distinction between the capacity for enlightenment of women and men. (2) Around the first century BCE the idea that women cannot achieve Buddhahood became prominent in texts. (3) Around the beginning of the Christian Era, the Aksobhya and Amitabha Buddha movements held that those savior deities would either transform women into men or remove other obstacles so they may attain enlightenment. (4) Early Mahāyāna sūtras taught that women should be reborn as men before entering the Pure Land or attaining enlightenment. (5) A few later scriptures such as the *Lions Roar of Queen Srimala* depict women achieving Buddhahood in their female bodies.<sup>10</sup>

There are also indications that the eight rules Mahāpajāpatī accepted in order to become a bhikkhuni may have been added later. In fact, a number of the eight important rules seem to make no sense other than deferring to male members of the sangha. The first rule states a bhikkhuni must always rise and bow when she comes into the presence of a bhikkhu. This applies even to a senior bhikkhuni who encounters a bhikkhu who has only been in the sangha for one day. The second rule says bhikkhunis must spend the rainy season in a location where they can be supervised by bhikkhus. The third rule says bhikkhus will determine the dates for bhikkhunis to confess twice a month. The fourth rule stipulates that bhikkhus will be a part of the interrogation of bhikkunis accused of digressions against the vinaya. However, the opposite case does not apply. Fifth, bhikkhus were to participate in deciding the punishment of a digressing bhikkuni, but the opposite again does not apply.

According to the sixth rule, women should train themselves for two years before receiving ordination. At that time, bhikkhus must participate in the ordination of bhikkunis, while there was no necessity for bhikkunis to participate in male ordination. However, when the Buddha accepted Mahāpajāpatī as a Bhikkhuni, there does not appear to be a probationary period of two years, during which time she had to prove herself worthy of ordination.

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<sup>10</sup> Also see Gross, 33 and Kabilsngh, 26-7.

Seventh, a bhikkuni could never criticize a bhikku but a bhikku may criticize a bhikkuni. Eighth, a bhikkuni could never officially admonish a bhikku, while but a bhikku could officially admonish a bhikkuni.<sup>11</sup>

Later writings such as the 13<sup>th</sup> century *Pūjāvaliya* of Sri Lanka (Ceylon) record that the Buddha's reluctance to accept women into the sangha and his prediction about the shortened life of the Dharma resulted from his feeling that women are fickle by nature.<sup>12</sup> In an even stronger statement, the academically influential late 19<sup>th</sup> century European Buddhologist Monier-Williams states in relation to this story, "Clearly the Buddha was originally a misogynist as well as a misogamist, and wished his followers to be misogynists also."<sup>13</sup> In contradistinction, a number of self-identified feminist Buddhist scholars have offered alternative explanations as speculation about why the Buddha may have hesitated to form a Bhikkuni Sangha, if he in fact was hesitant.<sup>14</sup> It is first pointed out that the hesitancy was never related to a women's potential for enlightenment. Instead, the Buddha may have worried about the harsh conditions his aunt and other women would encounter as bhikkhunis. After all, in the story they were found crying with swollen feet. In addition, begging for food in the villages, they would sometimes receive very little for sustenance. It may have been painful to imagine the elderly queen Mahāpajāpatī and five hundred palace women begging for alms in the streets. Likewise, since there were no monasteries at the time, living in the forests and caves would be difficult, perhaps especially so for those used to palace pampering.

Confucians in East Asia would later severely criticize Buddhism for destroying the family. Early Buddhists heard similar criticisms directed toward the Buddha's abandonment of this wife and children. The Buddha's decision to accept five hundred women into the sangha can be interpreted as destroying five hundred families or potential families. It is possible that the Buddha considered such issues. Interestingly in this respect, there is no mention that women had to sever ties with their families during the two years of prescribed probation in preparation for ordination.

After the two-year probationary period, at the time of examination to receive full ordination as a bhikkhuni, the aspirant is to be asked a series of questions specified in the vinaya.

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<sup>11</sup> Gross, 36.

<sup>12</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, G. P. Malalasekera (editor). V. III, p. 44. Government of Ceylon, 1971.

<sup>13</sup> Monier-Williams, 86.

<sup>14</sup> Gross, 34-5.

These include: "Are you a human being? Are you a woman? Are you a free woman? Are you without debt? Are you free from royal service? Have you received the consent of your parents and husband? Have you completed twenty years of age? Do you have a bowl and robes? What is your name? What is the name for your woman-proposer?"<sup>15</sup>

Regardless of his reasoning or reluctance, the Buddha's acceptance of women into the sangha and his declaration that they were equally capable of enlightenment as men were remarkably radical in light of the social setting of India at the time. Repercussions, both reactionary and progressive, are still felt to this day.

Some feel there was no ordination of sangha members during the lifetime of the Buddha. "Going forth," that is, giving up a family life and living as a mendicant while following the Buddha's teachings would have constituted being a member of the Buddhist sangha. At that time, when the Buddha's followers lived in the forests and caves, there may also have been no real division in terms of a Bhikkhu Sangha and a Bhikkhuni Sangha. Accordingly, this division developed as the Buddhist community began to dwell in permanent structures. At some point while the Buddha was still alive, the Buddhist community grew large and new aspirants were asked to recite the "refuge formula" three times in order to become full members of the sangha: "I take refuge in the Buddha; I take refuge in the Dharma; I take refuge in the sangha." It was around the time of the First Council that the community rules known as the *Pratimoksha* (Sanskrit, *Prātimokṣa*) were recorded, expanding the qualifications for becoming a fully ordained member of the Buddhist sangha.<sup>16</sup>

According to legend and early records, the First Council met sometime between a few days to three months after the Buddha passed away. At that time, five hundred bhikkus gathered to recite the Buddha's teachings. It seems logical that female followers would have also attended but if so, this has been omitted from the records. Before the recitation began, some of the bhikkus admonished Ānanda for what they said were eight mistakes he had made during the lifetime of the Buddha, and they demanded that he confess to these and repent. Among these offenses was that he had introduced women into the sangha. There is no indication that while the Buddha was alive some bhikkus objected to his allowing of women in the sangha. Apparently, however, the Indian conservative backlash followed immediately afterward and Ānanda was

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted for the vinaya in the *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, G. P. Malalasekera (editor). V. III, p. 45. Government of Ceylon, 1971.

<sup>16</sup> *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*. Robert E. Buswell Jr. (editor). Macmillan Reference USA, NY: 2004, p. 741.

asked to confess his transgression of wrongly convincing the Buddha to allow women to join the sangha. Ānanda is reported to have responded that he did not see it as a mistake, nor had he violated a precept in so doing. However, seeing that the community was on the verge of sectarian splits and trying to keep the followers united, he agreed to confess. Soon afterwards, the *Pratimoksha* was written, recording the rules for the sangha. While there are 227 such rules recorded there for bhikkus, those for bhikkunis are more stringent and number 331.

### **Bhikkunis who attained arhatship.**

There are numerous stories from many countries about bhikkunis who attained arhatship. A collection of such stories has been preserved from early Indian Buddhism in a writing known as the *Therīgāthā*. The text, attributed to women authors, preserves the stories of the many struggles faced by bhikkunis in their quests for and attainment of enlightenment. A separate document, the *Theragāthā*, records the struggles of bhikkus in their attainment. Both documents are collections of poems each recording an individual's story. Both maintain the view that the female body should be meditated upon as a putrefying corpse discarded in a cemetery.<sup>17</sup>

The *Therīgāthā* contains seventy-three stories in poetic form. Of these, fifty-six report the subjects' attainment of arhatship.<sup>18</sup> The variety of problems recorded and the types of attainment achieved likely cover an intentionally wide range of possibilities in order to be broadly didactic. Among these are stories of bhikkunis who attained liberation by overcoming desire, by ending rebirth, by achieving nibbāna, by overcoming ignorance, etc.

In one famous story from the *Therīgāthā*, the bhikkuni Vimalā recalls her life as a prostitute before entering the sangha. She tells how she was intoxicated by her complexion, her figure and youthfulness, despising other women. She decorated her face and stood at the brothel door to attract men. The poem expresses her awareness that the beauty we perceive in the body is superficial and illusory, as are the pleasures found in sex. She describes this reality in terms of a hunter entrapping an animal and the fatal consequence therein. Likewise, from the bhikkus' point of view, a number of stories in the *Theragāthā* use images of hunting, entrapping and fatality in connection with relationships with women. In the *Therīgāthā*, the women identify their bodies

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<sup>17</sup> The *Visuddhimagga* also prescribes meditation on the female body as a decomposing corpse discarded in a cemetery. Although the whole Pali canon is typically dated to the first century BCE, the earliest the *Therīgāthā* can currently be traced is through a mention of it by Dhammapāla in the fifth century CE. The *Visuddhimagga* was also composed in the fifth century CE by Dhammapāla's contemporary, Buddhaghosa.

<sup>18</sup> Blackstone, 108

with Māra. But there is no such identification with the males' body in the *Therīgāthā*.<sup>19</sup> Having renounced her past life, Vimalā roams the forests and reaches enlightenment. The event is presented as follows.

Today (that same) I, having wandered for alms with shaven head, clad in the outer robe, am seated at the foot of a tree, having obtained (the stage of) non-reasoning.

All ties, those which are divine and those which are human, have been cut out. Having annihilated all the *āsavas*,<sup>20</sup> I have become cool, quenched.<sup>21</sup>

Today the *Therīgāthā* is being examined with renewed interest by western feminist Buddhist scholars as well as by bhikkunis around the world. It is one of the few canonical religious texts with authorship attributed to women. In its stories of the attainment and struggles of women, readers are discovering pleasant alternatives to the typically dominant male heroes in so many Buddhist scriptures and old texts of other traditions.

Along with Mahāpajāpatī who, with the Buddha's help and permission, is credited with having founded the Bhikkhuni Sangha, and the fifty-seven Bhikkhunis who reached enlightenment as recorded in the *Therīgāthā*, there is a famous story of a bhikkuni who attained arhatship and founded the Bhikkuni Sangha in Sri Lanka.

After much violence and destruction, King Asoka seized power from the rulers of various regions and united most of India. Having done so, he hoped to restore peace and maintain his position as emperor. Thus, he proclaimed his conversion to Buddhism and became its greatest patron and propagator in the third century BCE. Asoka himself became associated with the symbols of Buddhism he placed throughout the country and in this way spread his reign and fame. His son, Mahinda, was sent to Sri Lanka to spread his influence through the Buddhist teachings, establish a Bhikkhu Sangha and ask the King of Sri Lanka, Devanampiyatissa (reigned 250-210 BCE), to convert to Buddhism. After so converting, Asoka arranged a second coronation for Devanampiyatissa. Princess Anula of Sri Lanka also converted to Buddhism and asked to join the sangha. However, Mahinda informed her that according to regulations, it takes at least five bhikkhunis to form a sangha and that a preceptor with at least twelve years experience must grant the precepts. For this reason, King Devanampiyatissa asked Asoka to send

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<sup>19</sup> Blackstone, 70-1.

<sup>20</sup> *āsavas* = impurities.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted from the *Therīgāthā* verses 75-6 in Blackstone, 96.



ten bhikkunis and a branch from the bodhi tree, under which the Buddha achieved enlightenment.

Meanwhile, Asoka's daughter, Princess Sanghamitta (Sanskrit, Saṅghamittā), like her brother, had become a highly respected member of the Buddhist sangha. Being a great teacher of the Dhamma and the vinaya, she agreed to sail to Sri Lanka as the senior bhikkuni in order to establish the Bhikkhuni Sangha in that country. Chronicles (the *Mahāvamsa*) report that en route monsters attacked her ship. However, Sanghamitta had attained great powers through her Buddhist realization and subdued the monsters. In Sri Lanka, King Devanampiyatissa planted the branch of the bodhi tree and later distributed cuttings from it to be planted throughout the island. Sanghamitta and the other Indian bhikkhunis formed the Bhikkhuni Sangha in Sri Lanka and ordained Princess Anula. It is said that upon her arrival five hundred women wanted to receive ordination from Sanghamitta. King Devanampiyatissa provided ample quarters for them, establishing a separate nunnery called Bhikkhunupasaya.<sup>22</sup> This community of women became the first Bhikkhuni Sangha to be established outside of India.

In the year 433 CE a group of Chinese women requested help from the Sri Lankan Buddhist community to establish a Chinese Bhikkhuni Sangha. Led by a Bhikkhuni named Devasara, a group of Sri Lankan Bhikkhunis went to China. There they granted ordination to three hundred Chinese women at Nanking. That Bhikkhuni Sangha is said to still be in existence today and has propagated the Bhikkhuni Sangha to other regions of East Asia.<sup>23</sup>

The Bhikkhu Sangha and the Bhikkhuni Sangha of India prospered until the eleventh century CE. At that time, Muslims demolished countless Buddhist temples and monasteries and destroyed the Buddhist order there. Both divisions of the sangha also thrived in Sri Lanka until a King from Southern India attacked the country in 1017 CE. When a Buddhist king returned to the throne in Sri Lanka some fifty years later, he searched the island for the remains of the sangha but found only a male novice. He sent envoys to Burma and Thailand to request the kings there to send bhikkhus and bhikkhunis to grant ordinations in his country. However, because Thailand did not have a Bhikkhuni Sangha, only the Bhikkhu Sangha could be revived.

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<sup>22</sup> See Lamotte, 267-9.

<sup>23</sup> Kabilsingh, 87.

Today Bhikkhunis and other Buddhist women are determined to find ways to help improve society and lighten the burden of oppressed people. Attuned to the Buddhist path in right livelihood, some have worked in secular positions such as that of psychologists, helping women and children who have been hurt or marginalized.<sup>24</sup>

Others have voiced the idea that bhikkhunis can improve the world by setting living examples of unpretentiousness and living in according to principles of non-hurting. Likewise, it has been suggested that bhikkhunis can and have helped with problems regarding abortion, prostitution, menopause, and other issues that women prefer to discuss with other women. They have also helped unwed mothers. Buddhist women in Thailand recently opened a home for women with unwanted pregnancies.<sup>25</sup>

In regards to academics and scriptural studies, today a number of Buddhist women and other Buddhologists are reexamining classical interpretations of Buddhist texts. They are publishing findings they consider examples of misogyny and those honoring the Buddhist practices of women. Some have suggested the need for a new, feminist reading of history and a "reconstruction of Buddhism" accordingly.<sup>26</sup> According to Gross, such an undertaking repairs the Buddhist tradition, which has been damaged internally by its patriarchal forms. As she sees it, hers is a task of restoring the fundamental values of Buddhism as well as restructuring it in terms of feminism.

In many places in the world, including western countries, the Bhikkhuni Sangha is being restored or appearing for the first time in history. There is today a feeling the Bhikkhuni Sangha has great potential for producing an atmosphere conducive to women's Buddhist attainment and that a ripple effect is bringing women to Buddhism throughout the world.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> See Anita Borrow's article "The Light of Outrage: Women, Anger, and Buddhist Practice," in Dresser, p. 51-6.

<sup>25</sup> See "The History of the Bhikkhuni Sangha" by Chatsumarn Kabilsingh in Thubten.

<sup>26</sup> See Rita M. Gross.

<sup>27</sup> Chatsumarn Kabilsingh in Thubten.

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