

Now is the Time

Paper presented at the discussion panel with HH Dalai Lama on the final day of the First International Congress on Buddhist Women's Role in the Sangha

Bhikkhu Sujato, 19/7/2007

Any decision regarding the method for bhikkhuni ordination must be guided primarily by the broad principles of the Vinaya. Traditional commentaries, customary practices, and personal preferences should be respected but should not be the deciding factors. It seems to me, and appears to be the broad consensus of this Congress, that both of the options for bhikkhuni ordination (that is, ordination by the Mūlasarvāstivāda bhikkhus alone, or by Mūlasarvāstivāda bhikkhus together with bhikkhunis ordained in Dharmaguptaka tradition) are perfectly valid. Therefore our choice between the two should not be based on legal technicalities but on the spiritual welfare of the nuns.

Vinaya says nothing about ordination lineages, nothing about Mūlasarvāstivāda, nothing about Dharmaguptaka, nothing about Theravada, nothing about Tibet, nothing about China, and nothing about Sri Lanka. Rather, Vinaya establishes procedures for enabling a candidate to go forth in the Buddha's dispensation to seek the end of suffering. These procedures address two main concerns:

1. That the Sangha be protected from unsuitable applicants;
2. That suitable applicants be guaranteed material and spiritual support for their new lives as bhikkhunis. This is chiefly provided by the mentor/disciple relationship which is established for life between preceptor and ordinand.

Let us then consider the two options before us in this light.

1. Ordination by Mūlasarvāstivāda bhikkhus alone.

This has the outstanding merit of enabling the bhikkhunis to benefit from the abundant learning and spiritual experience of the living Tibetan bhikkhu Sangha. While this will certainly provide for the formal education for the bhikkhunis, the absence of a female Sangha and bhikkhuni preceptor will, however, severely limit the provision of personal mentorship for the applicant.

2. Ordination by Mūlasarvāstivāda bhikkhus with bhikkhunis ordained in the Dharmaguptaka

This option also enjoys the full benefit of the support of the bhikkhu Sangha, without diminishing this in any way. In addition, by formally recognizing the female preceptor/ordinand relationship it enables the benefits that will flow from the close and special understanding that grows between nuns who live together in community; as the Vinaya says, looking on each other like mother and daughter. It will also allow the bhikkhunis to assess the candidates and ensure they are suitable and ready for ordination. This mentorship role should be developed in close co-operation with the senior Tibetan ten-precept nuns. The ordination itself should be performed in accordance with the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya procedures for bhikkhuni ordination by Mūlasarvāstivāda bhikkhus and senior bhikkhunis who have ordained in the Dharmaguptaka tradition but who are practicing within the Tibetan tradition. I support Ven Bodhi's suggestion that such senior bhikkhunis be 'adopted' within the Mūlasarvāstivādin lineage by performance of an act modeled after the '*dālhikamma*' performed in similar contexts in the Theravādin community. This post-canonical procedure does not formally affect the actual ordination, but provides a means of recognizing the new affiliation of the bhikkhunis. Such a dual ordination has all the benefits of single ordination and none of the drawbacks.

The only concept found within the Pali Vinaya that might be construed as preventing such a dual ordination is that of *nānāśāmīvāsa* (different communion). This term describes groups of bhikkhus or bhikkhunis who cannot perform formal acts of the Sangha (*saṅghakamma*) together. However, in the Pali Vinaya itself this status only arises in two ways: either one declares oneself *nānāśāmīvāsa*, or one is expelled by formal punishment by the Sangha. Neither of these conditions obtain at this time, so the concept of *nānāśāmīvāsa* cannot apply. This is in accord with the main theme of my paper at this Congress, which demonstrated that none of the three existing Vinaya lineages are in a schismatic relation with each other.

It is my sincere wish that His Holiness the Dalai Lama together with the Tibetan Sangha grant our request to institute the bhikkhuni Sangha through dual ordination within the Tibetan tradition, now, out of compassion for the whole world. We can wait no longer. We can never ensure that any ordination lineage, including those of the bhikkhus, is 100% valid. It is unreasonable to expect the spiritual aspirations of nuns to be indefinitely postponed in order to satisfy impossible demands. Let us do the ordination as best we can. If this is not yet perfect, we can do better next time.