

# WHO TRAINS FOR TWO YEARS?

The requirements for those who must undertake the *sikkhamānā* training

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It is often assumed that all women must spend two years training as a *sikkhamānā* (trainee) before ordaining as a *bhikkhunī*. Of course, like many other ‘requirements’ for ordination depicted in the Vinayas, omission of the *sikkhamānā* period does not invalidate the ordination; it is at most a procedural flaw that results in a *pācittiya* offense for the ordaining *bhikkhunī*. Hence many candidates for *bhikkhunī* ordination in the present – and, it seems, the past as well – do not see this training as essential. Nevertheless, this attitude is sometimes regarded as a failure to live up to the highest standards of the Vinaya.

However, when we immerse ourselves in the texts and become more intimately acquainted with textual environments which show how the *bhikkhunī* order became established and flourished, it becomes apparent that there is little canonical support for the universal application of *sikkhamānā* training.

The following short study focuses specifically on the question as to who is required to do *sikkhamānā* training according to the Pali texts, with only minimal reference to other Vinaya traditions, questions of historical development, or application in modern contexts.

## The General *Sikkhamānā* Training

We begin our study with *pācittiyas* 63 and 64, which provide the overall framework for *sikkhamānā* training. *Pācittiya* 63 reads as follows:

If any *bhikkhunī* should ordain a trainee who has not trained for two years in the six rules, there is an offense entailing expiation.

*Yā pana bhikkhunī dve vassāni chasu dhammesu asikkhitasikkhamānaṃ vuṭṭhāpeyya pācittiyā'ti.*  
(Pali Vinaya 4.319)

*Pācittiya* 63 does not tell us who must undergo *sikkhamānā* training, but rather that whoever has undertaken the *sikkhamānā* ordination should fulfill the required precepts for the required period of time before taking higher ordination. The rule is specifically concerned with the prerequisites for conferring higher ordination on someone who has undertaken the *sikkhamānā* training, not with the ordination of women in general. Hence the focus of the rule is on maintaining the integrity of *sikkhamānā* training.

The phrasing of this rule is paralleled in *garudhamma* 6, concerning *sikkhamānā* training:

A *sikkhamānā* who has trained for two years in six rules should seek full ordination (*upasampadā*<sup>2</sup>) from the dual Sangha...

*Dve vassāni chasu dhammesu sikkhitasikkhāya sikkhamānāya ubhato saṅghe upasampadā pariyesitabbā...*  
(Pali Vinaya 2.255)

Here too the rule stipulates that one who is a *sikkhamānā* should have fulfilled the training in six rules for two years before taking higher ordination, but does not say that all *bhikkhunī* candidates need to do *sikkhamānā* training.

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Bhikkhu Bodhi for comments and references.

<sup>2</sup> The use of *upasampadā* here as opposed to *vuṭṭhāpana* in *pācittiya* 63 suggests a later date of redaction for this rule.

## Gihigatā & Kumārībhūtā

After *pācittiyas* 63 and 64 have provided the framework for sikkhamānā training, the text goes on to define in two sets of parallel clauses (*pācittiyas* 65-67, 71-73) who is eligible for ordination. These passages treat in similar terms two categories of candidates who seek bhikkhunī ordination at a young age, the *gihigatā* and the *kumārībhūtā*. *Gihigatā* is a problematic term, usually interpreted as a ‘married woman’, whose greater experience of life allows her to be ordained at a younger age than the unmarried *kumārībhūtā*.

*Pācittiyas* 65 and 71 tell us the age requirements: a *gihigatā* must be at least 12 years old,<sup>3</sup> and a *kumārībhūtā* must be 20 years old before she can take full ordination. Then *pācittiyas* 66 and 72 tell us the training requirement: the *gihigatā* who has just turned 12 and the *kumārībhūtā* who has just turned 20 must have completed sikkhamānā training before they are eligible for full ordination.

The crucial rule for our purposes is *pācittiya* 72, which reads as follows:

If any bhikkhunī should ordain (*vuṭṭhāpeyya*) a maiden who is fully twenty years of age [but] who has not trained for two years in the six rules, there is an offense entailing expiation.

*Yā pana bhikkhunī paripuṇṇavāsativassam kumārībhūtaṃ dve vassāni chasu dhammesu asikkhitasikkhamā vuṭṭhāpeyya pācittiyā'ti.* (Pali Vinaya 4.328)

The subject of this rule is not women in general (*itthī* or *mātugāma*) but a girl or maiden (*kumārībhūtā*), which likely here refers to a young unmarried female. The rule analysis refers to a *kumārībhūtā* of 18 years of age.<sup>4</sup> This age is also mentioned repeatedly and consistently in all other Vinaya recensions.<sup>5</sup>

The statement that she must be fully twenty years of age is a standard idiom in Pali, which would normally mean ‘at least twenty years’. But in this context such a reading is misleading: the rule is not about anyone who is twenty, but about a ‘girl’ of twenty. Since this rule is specifically about the ordination of girls, it cannot have been meant to apply to all women.

Thus this rule specifically refers to an allowance for giving sikkhamānā training to 18 year-old girls, who must train for two years in the six rules before taking full ordination.

## The Wider Context

Sikkhamānā training does not play an integral role in passages about bhikkhunī ordination found elsewhere in the Pali. The absence of sikkhamānā training within these contexts, while not decisive, tends to support a reading which narrows the scope of sikkhamānā training to younger women.

The sikkhamānā is entirely absent from the description of bhikkhunī ordination in the *Cūlavagga*.<sup>6</sup> In addition, although the story which details the inception of the bhikkhunī order mentions the sikkhamānā training in the sixth garudhamma, there is no record that Mahāpajāpati or the Sakyan women actually undertook this training.<sup>7</sup> Further, there is no mention of the sikkhamānā in the standard definition of a bhikkhunī.<sup>8</sup> Thus the Vinaya as a whole, while recognizing the sikkhamānā training, does not support the idea that it was intrinsic to all bhikkhunī ordinations.

Sikkhamānā training is mentioned occasionally in the *Therīgāthā*.<sup>9</sup> It appears twice in the rubrics (short descriptions of the verse context), saying that the verse in question was frequently taught by the Buddha

3 This extraordinary situation, where a 12 year old married woman is allowed to ordain, remains an enigma, in clear contradiction with the 20 year requirement stipulated in the ordination procedure itself.

4 ‘I allow you, monks, to give a maiden of 18 years of age the agreement as to training for two years in the six rules...’. (Pali Vinaya 4.328)

5 See Bhikkhu Sujato, *Vuṭṭhāpana & Upasampadā* (<http://santifm1.0.googlepages.com/writings>)

6 Pali Vinaya 2.271ff

7 Pali Vinaya 2.257ff

8 Pali Vinaya 4.214

9 See K.R. Norman, *Elders Verses II*, PTS 1995, p52.

to Muttā the sikkhamānā (Thī 2),<sup>10</sup> or to Nandā the sikkhamānā (Thī 19-20). The verses themselves do not suggest that she was a sikkhamānā, nor do they give any information as to her age. The commentary adds nothing on this point. Hence we cannot draw any conclusions from these references.

More interestingly, the word sikkhamānā appears in several of the actual verses: Thī 99, 104, 330,<sup>11</sup> and 516. The commentary to Thī 104 explains sikkhamānā here as the three trainings (ethics, samadhi, understanding).<sup>12</sup> This is borne out by the contexts, which say, for example, ‘For me undergoing training, the divine eye is purified’ (Thī 104; 330 is similar); or ‘the six clear knowledges and the highest fruit were realized while training’ (Thī 516).<sup>13</sup>

More challenging for our hypothesis are the verses of Sakulā at Thī 97-101. Thī 98 says that she abandoned son, daughter, money, and grain before going forth; while not definitive, this suggests Sakulā was of a mature age. Thī 99 says that while she was sikkhamānā she abandoned greed and hatred, together with the associated defilements; the commentary confirms the obvious interpretation that this refers to the ‘third path’, i.e. the state of a non-returner (*anāgāmi*). Thī 100 and 101 say she took bhikkhunī ordination and subsequently<sup>14</sup> became an arahant. So it seems that here the text implies that a woman of mature age took sikkhamānā ordination, became an *anāgāmi*, then took bhikkhunī ordination at a later time.

This contradicts our thesis, but a number of factors must be considered. Firstly, this is a verse text, and should not be relied upon for definitive judgements in Vinaya; it merely gives an example of what one woman did, not a rule governing what all women must do. Secondly, there clearly seems to have been change and variation in the sikkhamānā training, so this may be just an example of this. Third, Sakulā says that she heard the dhamma from ‘a bhikkhu’. This is unusual in the Therīgāthā, where the nuns are usually taught by the Buddha or by other nuns. Perhaps – and this must remain speculative – these verses stem from a time after the Buddha’s passing away, when the sikkhamānā training became required for all women, such a requirement having been introduced by the monks. Against this suggestion stands the commentary, which says she was alive in the Buddha’s day, and Āṅguttara i.25, which claims that the Buddha honored Sakulā as the foremost in the divine eye. However, neither of these can be regarded as definitive; in particular, the Āṅguttara passage could be simply derived from the Therīgāthā verses and hence might not stand as an independent source.

Apart from this singular case, the Therīgāthā verses do not imply that the term sikkhamānā refers to the formally instituted period of preliminary training. Rather it seems to be a non-technical use simply meaning training in ethics, samadhi, and understanding.

This usage finds an echo in the bhikkhu Vinaya, which also refers to a monk who is ‘training’, with no technical meaning. The analysis to this rule simply says ‘trainee means one who desires the training’.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, other accounts in the Therīgāthā depict the Buddha giving bhikkhunī ordination to women without the period of sikkhamānā training, such as Bhaddā Kuṇḍalakesā.<sup>16</sup> Hence, while Therīgāthā verses 97-101 suggest that sikkhamānā training was undertaken by at least some mature women, other contexts suggest that it was not required.

An idea of how this training may have occurred in Theravādin history may be cautiously gleaned from

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10 The commentary says Muttā took sikkhamānā ordination ‘in her 20<sup>th</sup> year’ (*visativassakāle*), then after having fulfilled her training (presumably the 6 rules for 2 years) she took full ordination (*paripunnasikkhā upasampajjitvā...*)

11 Here we follow the numbering from K.R. Norman’s translation, *Elders Verses II*. The verse numberings differ by one or two in different editions, due to different divisions of the verses.

12 *Sikkhamānāyāti tissopi sikkhā sikkhamānā*. The commentary to Thī 330 merely glosses the grammar: *Tattha sikkhamānāya meti sikkhamānāya samānāya mayā*.

13 Again the commentary merely glosses the grammar: *Sikkhamānāyāti sikkhamānāya samānāya cha abhiññā sacchikatā...*

14 The commentary says ‘when the vassa was fulfilled...’ (*vasse paripunṇe*), apparently in reference to the period of sikkhamānā training.

15 Pali Vinaya 4.141-142 (*pācittiya* 71)

16 Therīgāthā 109

the Mahāvamsa. It is unclear how much the information in this legendary chronicle may be relied on for such a specific legal question; but the text is clearly pulling out all stops to convince us of the authenticity of the transmission to Sri Lanka, so it is unlikely to mention details that contradict the orthodox position. In verses 5.204-205, Saṅghamittā, Aśoka's daughter and the founder of the bhikkhunī lineage in Sri Lanka, is said to be 18 years of age when she is given the sikkhamānā training.<sup>17</sup> However, when she later went to Sri Lanka to ordain the royal ladies, there is no mention that those older women underwent the sikkhamānā period. Hence the information in the Mahāvamsa, in so far as it is relevant, supports our interpretation.

Reading the texts in a way that restricts the application of sikkhamānā ordination to younger women clarifies the apparent contradiction of the existence of rules prohibiting ordination of women who are pregnant or breast-feeding. If sikkhamānā training was required for all women from the start of the bhikkhunī order, as stated in the story of the ordination of Mahāpajāpati, supposedly the first bhikkhunī, then these rules would be superfluous. Typically this inconsistency is explained by the evident fact that the story of Mahāpajāpati's ordination has little or no historical credibility, and that the sikkhamānā ordination must have been introduced later. While this argument makes sense, it may not be necessary. For if the sikkhamānā training applies only to women under twenty, it would indeed be possible to ordain a woman who is pregnant or breast-feeding, hence the need for rules to prevent this.

### The Commentary

The main commentarial passage of interest for us occurs in the Samantapāsādikā's comment on *pācittiya* 63. Here is a translation of the relevant portions:

'To give the agreement to training': why did he give it? Thinking: 'Women are wanton (*mātuḡāmo nāma lolo hoti...*). Not fulfilling the training in the six rules for two years they are stressed, but having trained, afterwards they are not stressed, they will cross over', he gave it. (1077)

...These six trainings should be given to one who has gone forth even for 60 years; one should not give full ordination to anyone who has not trained therein. (1079).

Here we find the reassuring clarity and assertiveness so lacking in the canonical contexts. Perhaps this decisiveness results from the commentator's evident surety that the extra training is essential due to the 'wanton' nature of women, an attitude likewise lacking from the Buddha's statements about women.

This statement, or anything like it, is absent from the Sudassanavinayavibhāsā, a Chinese translation of a Sinhalese Vinaya commentary in many ways similar to the Samantapāsādikā (T1462). It is therefore unclear to what extent Buddhaghosa's comments in the Samantapāsādikā represent the Sinhalese tradition in general. We have seen that the Therīgāthā commentary (by Dhammapāla rather than Buddhaghosa) appears to vacillate between seeing sikkhamānā as simply meaning the threefold training, and seeing it as the specific stage of ordination status.

### The Dharmaguptaka

While this study is mainly concerned with how the sikkhamānā training appears in the Pali sources, a short glance at the situation in the Dharmaguptaka is instructive. This tradition has a special importance in the context of bhikkhuni ordination, since it is very similar to the Pali, and moreover it has been the historical medium for the bhikkhuni transmission in East Asian countries. The bhikkhuni ordination in this Vinaya is treated in more detail throughout this Vinaya, and the situation regarding the sikkhamānā training is spelled out more clearly.

The sequence of events starts with the ordination of young girls, which caused various problems due to their immaturity. The Buddha therefore allowed the *sāmaṇerī* training for such girls. There follows the allowance for giving the sikkhamānā training to girls of 18 years of age, followed by the requirement that

<sup>17</sup> Mv 5.204: *Saṅghamittā rājadhītā aṭṭharasasamā tadā*

she must train for two years in the six rules. Next the text goes on to describe the bhikkhuni ordination. When the first part of the ordination, in front of bhikkhunis, is completed, the candidate is led to the bhikkhu Sangha. There she is questioned again before the bhikkhus give the final statement of the ordination. In this final questioning, the candidate is asked an extra question, not found in the earlier part of the ordination procedure: ‘Have you completed the training in the precepts?’<sup>18</sup>

Only here, right at the end of the whole procedure, is the requirement of sikkhamānā presented as if it applies to all women. Even here it is, given the context, ambiguous, since we started out talking about young girls. But the striking thing is that the requirement is made specifically by the bhikkhus. It is as if the text is trying to tell us: ‘The sikkhamānā training was originally laid down for young girls, but the bhikkhus applied it to all women’.

The situation, then, parallels that of the Theravāda, except here the universalization of the sikkhamānā training made it into the canon, rather than being relegated to the commentary. This is not untypical of the situation in these Vinayas, for the Pali frequently displays features suggesting its redaction was closed earlier than the Dharmaguptaka. It remains to be seen who far these findings apply in the context of other Vinayas.

### Conclusion

The sikkhamānā training was intended as an extra allowance so that married women of ten or unmarried women of eighteen could undertake a training similar to that of the bhikkhunīs at an earlier age. The idea that sikkhamānā training is integral for the ordination of all women is not supported by the general picture detailing bhikkhunī ordination that emerges in these texts. Only the Therīgāthā verses of Sakulā suggest that mature women might take sikkhamānā ordination; but this is not definitive. The universal requirement for sikkhamānā training is recorded in some later texts, where it has evidently been introduced by the bhikkhus. It is not clear how widespread these beliefs were, whether the opinions were shared by the bhikkhunīs, or to what extent women have actually practiced this training.

One issue we have not considered, but which is equally unclear, is exactly why the sikkhamānā allowance was made. Sometimes it is said it was to prevent pregnant women from ordaining; but the texts do not support this. The reason given in the texts is that the young women needed extra training. This is reasonable enough, but still does not explain why the situation should be different for men and women.

Two possible explanations suggest themselves. The more obvious one would look to the social conditions in ancient India, where women had much less opportunity for education, and were expected to be dependent on men their entire life. Less obvious is the suggestion that the difference does not derive from gender differences, but from the differing redaction history of the texts. The bhikkhu Vinaya was settled first, so may have been more resistant to change. The bhikkhunī Vinaya remained open for a longer period, so it remained possible to introduce more complex ordination requirements.

Such an unclear textual situation has definite ramifications in the context of modern bhikkhunī ordination. It is difficult to justify the perpetuation of this difference between the male and female ordination procedures, which inevitably will be seen as embodying chauvinist attitudes. Such a perspective can hardly be dismissed when the central passage in the Theravāda commentary that stipulates the universal requirement for the sikkhamānā training is, in fact, blatantly chauvinist. Since there are serious textual objections to the belief that such a universal requirement was ever intended by the Buddha, an insistence on the sikkhamānā training will be interpreted, rightly or wrongly, as nothing more than the perpetuation of such attitudes.

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18 汝已學戒清淨不 (CBETA, T22, no. 1428, p. 757, c18-19)