

Tenzin Palmo Public Statement on Bhikkhunu Ordination Controversy

I have been waiting for someone to comment – publicly – on the ramifications of Venerable Thanissaro’s pronouncement that the Vinaya rule against ordaining more than a single nun at one time during a year renders the ordination invalid.

As you all know, the great Emperor Ashoka sent his daughter Theri Sanghamitta to Sri Lanka in the 3rd century B.C. She travelled with several of her nuns at the invitation of Queen Anula and her five hundred court ladies who wished to be ordained. This ordination was subsequently carried out by Sanghamitta – but there is nowhere a suggestion that it was done one candidate at a time annually. If so most of those devoted ladies would have died long before entering the sangha. Later on according to the Mahavamsa chronicle there were 14,000 bhikkhunis who attained arahantship and 90,000 nuns participated in a consecration ceremony. Even given the tendency to exaggeration, this means that the bhikkhuni sangha was very strong in Sri Lanka.

In the 4th century CE bhikkhunis from Sri Lanka travelled to China and established the bhikkhuni order there by ordaining 300 Chinese nuns and of course this lineage has continued down to the present day with tens of thousands of bhikshunis spread throughout China, Taiwan, Korea and Vietnam.

But according to Venerable Thanissaro’s premise none of these above ordinations is valid! So for the past two and a half millennia nuns have been passing on and receiving invalid ordinations and there are therefore no ordained nuns in existence – nor have there been almost since the time of the Buddha. In addition, since in East Asian countries the shramanerika ordination is bestowed by bhikshunis, these ordinations are also not valid. All those hundreds of thousands of nuns throughout the centuries were in fact not nuns at all and not a part of the monastic sangha. How absurd.

It is also sad to think of an eminent scholar monk combing the Vinaya to prove that the ordination of devoted women eager to go forth in faith, was invalid and futile. Fortunately other scholars have come to the defence of the bhikshuni sangha with well-reasoned refutations, so hopefully we bhikshunis are not required to give back our robes.

All good wishes in the Dharma,

Tenzin Palmo

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