The Legality of Bhikkhunī Ordination

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Bhikkhu Anālayo

Abstract

This paper examines the legal validity of the revival of the Theravāda *bhikkhunī* ordination that has had the 1998 Bodhgayā ordinations as its starting point.

Introduction

My presentation is based on extracts from a more detailed study of various aspects related to “The Revival of the *Bhikkhunī* Order and the Decline of the Sāsana,” in which I also tried to cover relevant secondary sources to the best of my ability (JBE 20: 110–193). In what follows, I focus on the canonical sources only in an attempt to make my main findings regarding the question of the legality of *bhikkhunī* ordination easily accessible to the general reader. My presentation covers the following points:

1. The *bhikkhunī* order and the Bodhgayā ordination
2. Theravāda legal principles
3. The sixth *garudhamma*
4. The female candidates at the Bodhgayā ordination
5. The Chinese preceptors
6. Single ordination by *bhikkhus*
The Bhikkhunī order and the Bodhgayā Ordination

The account of the constitution of the bhikkhunī order in the Theravāda Vinaya is as follows (Vin II 255). The Cullavagga (X.1) reports that Mahāpajāpatī was the first woman to receive higher ordination. In her case this took place by accepting the “eight principles to be respected,” garudhammas.

One of these garudhammas is of considerable importance for the legal aspects of bhikkhunī ordination. This is the sixth garudhamma, which stipulates that a female candidate should have observed a two year training period as a probationer, a sikkhamānā. After having observed this period of training, higher ordination should be requested by her from both communities, that is, from the communities of bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs.

The Cullavagga (X.2) continues by reporting that, after having been ordained herself by accepting the eight garudhammas, bhikkhunī Mahāpajāpatī asked the Buddha how she should proceed in relation to her female followers, who also wanted to become bhikkhunīs. In reply, the Buddha prescribed that the bhikkhus should ordain them.

According to a subsequent section of the Cullavagga (X.17), female candidates who wanted to become bhikkhunīs felt ashamed when being formally interrogated by bhikkhus regarding their suitability for higher ordination (Vin II 271). Such interrogation involves questions about the nature of their genitals and their menstruation, so naturally women in a traditional setting are not comfortable discussing such matters with men, let alone with bhikkhus. The Cullavagga reports that when the Buddha was informed of this problem, he gave a ruling to amend this situation. He prescribed that the bhikkhus should ordain female candidates who have previously undergone the formal interrogation in front of the
community of bhikkunīs. These are the key elements from the Cullavagga account.

In what follows I briefly survey the subsequent history of the bhikkunī order. The order of bhikkunīs appears to have thrived in India until about the 8th century. Before it disappeared from India, the ordination lineage was transmitted to Sri Lanka during the reign of King Asoka. The Ceylonese chronicle Dīpavāṃsa reports that the recently converted king of Sri Lanka approached bhikkhu Mahinda with the request to allow his wife, queen Anulā, to go forth. According to the Dīpavāṃsa (Dīp 15.76), bhikkhu Mahinda explained that bhikkunīs from India were required, because: akappiyā mahārāja itthipabbajā bhikkhuno, “Great King, it is not proper for a bhikkhu to confer the going forth on a woman.” The implications of this passage need a little discussion.

The canonical Vinaya has no explicit ruling against the conferring of the “going forth” on a female by a bhikkhu and it is only in the commentary that the suggestion is found that a female candidate should receive the going forth only from a bhikkunī (Sp V 967). Considered within its narrative context, it seems that in this passage in the Dīpavāṃsa the expression pabbajjā does not carry its technical Vinaya sense of “going forth” as a stage distinct from higher ordination, upasampadā. Instead, it appears to be used here as a term that describes the transition from lay life to monastic life in general. That is, here the expression pabbajjā would cover both the “going forth” and the “higher ordination.”

Since the king had only recently converted to Buddhism, it could hardly be expected that he would be familiar with the technicalities of ordination. As his request is formulated with the expression “going forth,” pabbājehi anūlakaṇṭ (Dīp 15.75), it is natural that Mahinda’s reply uses the same terminology. The Dīpavāṃsa (Dīp 16.38f) in fact continues to use the same expression when reporting that Anulā and her followers received ordination: pabbajiṁsu, even though they eventually became
bhikkunīs, not just sāmaṇerīs. Thus it seems clear that in this usage both the “going forth” and the “higher ordination” are included under the term pabbajīmu.

Let us return to the topic of the history of bhikkhuni ordination. In Sri Lanka the order of bhikkunīs, founded with the help of a group of Indian bhikkunīs headed by Saṅghamittā, continued to thrive until the 11th century. During a period of political turmoil that had decimated the entire monastic community, the bhikkhuni ordination lineage seems to have come to an end in Sri Lanka.

Before the Sri Lankan bhikkhuni order came to an end, in the early fifth century a group of Sri Lankan bhikkunīs transmitted the ordination lineage to China (T L 939c). A Theravāda Vinaya had been translated into Chinese in the late fifth century, but this was later lost (T LV 13b), presumably during a period of political instability. Towards the beginning of the eighth century the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya appears to have been imposed by imperial order on all monastics in China (T L 793c). From that period onwards all bhikkhus and bhikkunīs in China had to follow this Vinaya.

The bhikkhuni ordination lineage has recently been re-established in Sri Lanka with the help of Chinese bhikkunīs at an ordination held in 1998 at Bodhgayā in India. While there have been bhikkhuni ordinations earlier, it is since the 1998 Bodhgayā ordination that the bhikkhuni order in Sri Lanka has gained momentum and subsequent bhikkhuni ordinations have been conducted in Sri Lanka itself.

At the Bodhgayā bhikkhuni ordination, the candidates received Theravāda robes and bowls; they did not take the bodhisattva vows. After completing the ordination, the new bhikkhunīs underwent a second ordination at which only Theravāda bhikkhus officiated. The crucial question now is whether this ordination can be recognized as valid from
a Theravāda legal viewpoint. In order to explore this, I first need to discuss Theravāda legal principles.

**Theravāda Legal Principles**

The term Theravāda can be translated as “Sayings of the Elders.” The Dipavamsa (Dīp 4.6) uses the term Theravāda for the “sayings” that according to the traditional account were collected by the elders at the first communal recitation (saṅgīti) at Rājagaha. The same term Theravāda in the Dipavamsa (Dīp 5.51f) and in the commentary on the Kathāvatthu (Kv-a 3) then refers to the Ceylonese Buddhist school that has preserved the Pāli version of these sayings collected at the first communal recitation. A central aspect of the Theravāda sense of identity is thus the Pāli canon. This is the sacred scripture of the Theravāda traditions that developed in different countries of South and Southeast Asia, who also share the use of Pāli as their liturgical language.

The rules and regulations given in the Vinaya part of the Pāli canon are therefore of central importance for monastic members of the Theravāda traditions. The commentary on the Vinaya, the Samantapāsādikā (Sp I 231), highlights the eminent position of the canonical sayings. It declares that one’s own opinion is not as firm a ground as the indications given by the ancient teachers as recorded in the commentarial tradition, and these in turn are not as firm a ground as the canonical presentation, attanomatito ācariyavādo balavataro . . . ācariyavādato hi suttānulomam balavataram. In short, the Pāli Vinaya is the central reference point for deciding legal questions that concern Theravāda monasticism.

For the question of reviving the bhikkhunī order in the Theravāda traditions, the central role of the Pāli Vinaya has important ramifications. To propose that the Vinaya rules should be amended to allow for
reviving the *bhikkhunī* ordination is unacceptable from a traditional viewpoint. Such a suggestion misses out on a central aspect of the Theravāda traditions, namely the strict adherence to the regulations in the way these have been preserved in the Pāli *Vinaya*.

According to the commentary on the *Dīgha-nikāya*, the *Sumaṅgalavilāsini* (Sv I 11), at the first communal recitation at Rājagaha the *bhikkhus* decided to recite the *Vinaya* first. They did so because they felt that the *Vinaya* is what gives life force to the Buddha’s dispensation, *vinayo nāma buddhassa sāsanassa āyu*. The Buddha’s dispensation will endure as long as the *Vinaya* endures, *vinaye ṭhite sāsanam ṭhitaṃ hoti*.

The proposal to adjust the rules not only misses out on what is considered to be the life force of the Buddha’s dispensation, it also suggests something that within the traditional framework is not really possible. According to the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* (DN II 77), the Buddha highlighted a set of conditions that will lead to the welfare of his disciples and prevent decline. According to one of these conditions, the *bhikkhus* are not to authorize what has not been authorized and are not to abrogate what has been authorized: *appaññattaṃ na paññapessanti*,¹ *paññattaṃ na samucchindissanti*. Thus, it is not particularly meaningful to argue for membership in the Theravāda traditions and at the same time request changes that are directly opposed to the very way the Theravāda traditions ensure their continuity.

The revival of the *bhikkhunī* ordination is in fact not simply a question of gender equality. The detrimental effects of discrimination are of course important values in modern days, but these are not decisive criteria in relation to the question of membership in the Theravāda monastic traditions. That is, much of the problem lies in the apprehen-

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¹ E*: *paññāpessanti*. 
sion that the legal principles, which form the basis for the Theravāda monastic traditions, are being jeopardized.

Suppose a woman who wants to become a bhikkhunī takes the Chinese Dharmaguptaka ordination and subsequently wears their style of robes and participates in their monastic rituals. Traditionalists would probably have little to object, only they would not recognize her as a Theravāda bhikkhunī. The problem is not merely that a woman wants to become a bhikkhunī. The question is rather if a bhikkhunī, who has been ordained in the Chinese Dharmaguptaka tradition, can become a recognized member of the Theravāda community.

This is a matter that needs to be resolved within the parameters of the Theravāda traditions. In particular, it needs to be evaluated from the viewpoint of the Pāli Vinaya. While calls for gender equality, etc., have an influence in the case of legal ambiguity, they are in themselves not decisive. Of decisive importance are rather the legal principles recognized in the Theravāda traditions.

Therefore, if the rules in the Theravāda Vinaya render a revival of the bhikkhunī order legally impossible, then such a revival stands little chance of meeting with general approval. At the same time, however, if a revival can be done without infringement of the rules, then there is also no real basis for refusing to accept that the bhikkhunī order has been resurrected.

With this in mind, I now turn to the legal aspects involved. My discussion concentrates on the canonical Vinaya regulations, in line with the injunction given in the Samantapāsādikā (Sp I 231) that the canonical injunctions in the Vinaya itself are more important than the commentarial tradition or one’s own opinion. These Vinaya injunctions are the final standard to evaluate if a revival of the bhikkhunī order in the Theravāda traditions is legally possible or not.
Regarding one’s own opinion, in what follows I consider the *Vinaya* description of events simply at face value. This description, in the way it has come down in the canonical *Vinaya*, forms the basis for legal decisions in the Theravāda traditions. For various reasons I may believe that things happened differently. Yet, my personal views are not directly relevant to the present matter, which is to explore a legal question based on the relevant legal document. The legal document in question is the Pāli *Vinaya*. Therefore my discussion regarding the bearing of the *Vinaya* on the present issue has to stay within the parameters of the canonical account, independent of whether I believe that this actually occurred or not.

**The Sixth Garudhamma**

The term *garudhamma*, “principle to be respected,” carries distinct meanings in the *Vinaya*. In general, the term *garu* can have two main meanings: *garu* can mean “heavy” in contrast to light, or else “respected” in contrast to being disrespected.

An example for the first sense can be found in the *Cullavagga* (X.1), according to which a bhikkhunī who has committed a *garudhamma* needs to undergo penance (*mānatta*) for half a month in both communities (Vin II 255). Here the term *garudhamma* refers to a saṅghādisesa offence — the second gravest offence recognized in the *Vinaya* — which requires the undergoing of penance (*mānatta*). Subsequent to that, the offending monastic has to go through an act of rehabilitation called *abbhāna*. A saṅghādisesa offence is a rather grave offence, a breach of the rules which merits temporary suspension of the offender. So here the term *garudhamma* stands for a “grave offence.”
This is not necessarily the sense the term garudhamma carries in the same part of the Cullavagga (X.1), however, when it is used for the eight dhhammas that Mahāpajāpati accepted in order to receive higher ordination. Closer inspection shows that here the term garu does not stand for an offence of the saṅghādisesa category.

Several of the eight garudhammas recur as case rules elsewhere in the Vinaya. None of the eight garudhammas, however, occur in the category of saṅghādisesa offences. Instead, those garudhammas that recur elsewhere are all found in the pācittiya class. A pācittiya is an offence of a lighter class that requires disclosure to a fellow monastic. If the pācittiya offence involves possessions, their formal forfeiture is required.

According to the second principle to be respected (garudhamma 2), a bhikkunī should not spend the rainy season retreat in a place where there is no bhikkhu. This garudhamma is identical to pācittiya rule 56 for bhikkunīs in the Bhikkunīvibhaṅga (Vin IV 313).

The third principle (garudhamma 3) stipulates that a bhikkunī should inquire every fortnight about the date of the observance day (uposatha) from the community of bhikkhus and she should come for exhortation (ovāda). This garudhamma corresponds to pācittiya rule 59 in the Bhikkunīvibhaṅga (Vin IV 315).

According to the fourth principle (garudhamma 4), a bhikkunī should carry out the invitation (pavāraṇā) to be told of any of her short-comings in front of both communities, the communities of bhikkhus and bhikkunīs. This garudhamma has its counterpart in pācittiya rule 57 in the Bhikkunīvibhaṅga (Vin IV 314).

The seventh principle to be respected (garudhamma 7) stipulates that a bhikkunī should not revile or abuse a bhikkhu. This garudhamma corresponds to pācittiya rule 52 in the Bhikkunīvibhaṅga (Vin IV 309).
Therefore, it seems clear that these garudhammas belong to the pācittiya class; they are not “grave” offences of the saṅghādisesa class.

Now, another noteworthy feature of the eight garudhammas is that they do not make a stipulation about the punishment appropriate to one who violates them. In fact, the eight garudhammas differ from all other rules in the Vinaya because they are not laid down in response to something that has happened. Instead, they are pronounced in advance. Moreover, they are pronounced in relation to someone who at the time of their promulgation has not yet been formally ordained. According to the Cullavagga, Mahāpajāpatī only became a bhikkhunī after these garudhammas had been pronounced by the Buddha and after she had decided to accept them. The eight garudhammas clearly differ in nature from the rules found elsewhere in the Vinaya.

This impression is strengthened when one examines the pācittiyas that correspond to some garudhammas. The Bhikkhunīvibhanga reports that the Buddha prescribed these pācittiya rules in reply to some event that involves bhikkhunīs. From the viewpoint of the Vinaya, these events therefore must have happened after the promulgation of the garudhammas, which marks the coming into existence of bhikkhunīs.

Now each of the pācittiya rules discussed above—rules 52, 56, 57 and 59—concludes in a way that is common for Vinaya rules: They indicate that the first perpetrator (ādikammika) is not guilty, anāpatti. This means that the first transgressor against the pācittiya rules that correspond to garudhammas 2, 3, 4 and 7 does not incur an offence. Only after the corresponding pācittiya rule has come into existence are transgressors considered guilty.

This in turn shows that, from the viewpoint of the canonical Vinaya, the eight garudhammas are not rules in themselves. Otherwise it would be impossible to transgress them, once they have been promul-
gated, and still to go free of punishment. It is only after a corresponding regulation has been laid down as a pācittiya that one can become guilty of an offence, āpatti.

In sum, the eight garudhammas are not rules whose breaking entails a punishment, they are instead recommendations. The description of each of these eight garudhammas in the Cullavagga (X.1) indicates that they are something to be revered, respected, honored and held in esteem, sakkatvā garukatvā mānetvā pūjtvā. In short, a garudhamma is a “principle to be respected.”

With this basic assessment of the nature of the garudhammas in mind, it is now time to turn to the sixth of these. This principle to be respected (garudhamma 6) stipulates that a woman wishing to receive bhikkhunī ordination must have first undergone a two year training period as a probationer, sikkhamānā, after which she should request higher ordination from both communities, from the bhikkhus and the bhikkhunīs (Vin II 255). Here is the formulation of this principle to be respected:

A probationer who has trained for two years in six principles should seek for higher ordination from both communities, dve vassāni chasu dhammesu sikkhitasikkhāya sikkhamānāya ubhatosāṅhe upasampadā pariyesitabbā.

The requirement to train as a sikkhamānā is also covered in one of the pācittiya rules (63) in the Bhikkhunīvibhaṅga (Vin IV 319). The need for the involvement of both communities, however, does not have a counterpart among the rules found elsewhere in the Vinaya.
The Female Candidates At The Bodhgayā Ordination

The stipulations made in the sixth garudhamma give rise to two questions in relation to the higher ordination carried out a Bodhgayā:

1. Were the female candidates qualified for higher ordination by having observed the training for two years as probationers?

2. Can the officiating Chinese bhikkhunī preceptors be recognized as bhikkhunī preceptors from a Theravāda viewpoint?

Regarding the first of these two points, the female candidates that had come from Sri Lanka to participate in the Bodhgayā ordination had been carefully chosen among experienced dasasil mātās. Moreover, they had been given a special training to prepare them for higher ordination. Because they had been dasasil mātās for many years, they had for a long time trained in a form of monastic conduct that covers the six rules incumbent on a probationer, a sikkhamāṇā. However, they had not formally become sikkhamāṇās.

As I mentioned above, the need to train as a sikkhamāṇā is also covered in one of the pācittiya rules (63). The Bhikkhunīvibhaṅga explains that if a female candidate has not trained for two years as a sikkhamāṇā, to ordain her nevertheless results in a pācittiya offence for the ordaining bhikkhuni preceptors. It is a standard pattern in the Vinaya that a particular rule is followed by a discussion of possible cases. In line with this pattern, the Bhikkhunīvibhaṅga continues by discussing several such cases where a female candidate is ordained who has not fulfilled the sikkhamāṇā training. Three such cases describe that an offence can take place when the ordination itself is legal, dhammakamma, and another three cases concern an ordination that is not legal, adhammakamma (Vin IV 320). The first three cases are as follows:
1. *dhammakamme dhammakammasaññā vuṭṭhāpeti*, “the act being legal, she ordains her perceiving the act as legal”;

2. *dhammakamme vematikā vuṭṭhāpeti*, “the act being legal, she ordains her being uncertain [about its legality]”;

3. *dhammakamme adhammakammasaññā vuṭṭhāpeti*, “the act being legal, she ordains her perceiving the act as illegal.”

These three cases differ because the preceptor has a different perception. She may think the act to be legal (1), she may be in doubt about its legality (2), or she may think the act to be illegal (3). In each of these three cases, the preceptor incurs a *pācittiya* offence, āpatti pācittiyassa. In each of these three cases, however, the act itself of ordaining a female candidate who has not fulfilled the training as a *sikkhamānā* is legal, *dhammakamma*. This clearly implies that a *bhikkhunī* ordination is not invalidated by the fact that the candidate has not fulfilled the *sikkhamānā* training.

Therefore, from the viewpoint of the canonical *Vinaya*, a higher ordination of a female candidate is not invalid if she has not undertaken the two year training period as a *sikkhamānā*. This in turn means that the validity of the Bodhgayā ordinations is not jeopardized by the fact that the female candidates have not formally undertaken the *sikkhamānā* training. In fact, as already mentioned, in actual practice they have followed a comparable training.

**The Chinese Preceptors**

The Chinese preceptors are the heirs of the *bhikkhunī* lineage that was brought from Sri Lanka to China in the fifth century. However, the Chinese *bhikkhunīs* now follow a different code of rules, *pātimokkha*. These
are the rules found in the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya, which appears to have been imposed in China by imperial order in the eighth century. The Dharmaguptaka Vinaya has more rules for bhikkunīs than the Theravāda Vinaya and it also differs in the formulation of some of the rules that the two Vinayas share. Moreover, the markers that according to the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya can be used for establishing the ritual boundary for ordination, the sīmā, differ, as well as the formulations to be used for this purpose.

Thus the Chinese bhikkunīs belong to a “different community,” nānasamvāsa, vis-à-vis Theravāda monastics. Being of a “different community” means that it is not possible for them to carry out legal acts that will be recognized as valid by traditional members of the Theravāda.

In the Vinaya, the notion of being of a “different community,” nānasamvāsa, refers to a case of disagreement about the rules. Here a fully ordained monastic disagrees with the community where he lives on whether a particular act constitutes an offence. Because of this discord on the implication of a Vinaya rule, the monastic, together with his fully ordained followers, carries out legal acts independent from the community. Alternatively, the community bans him or them from participating in their legal acts by an act of suspension.

The status of being nānasamvāsa thus comes into existence because of a dispute about the interpretation of the rules. Therefore it can be resolved by settling the dispute. Once there is agreement in relation to the interpretation of the Vinaya rules, those who were nānasamvāsa become again samānasamvāsa, part of the same community.

The Mahāvagga (X.1) explains that there are two ways of becoming again samānasamvāsaka (Vin I 340). The first is when “on one’s own one makes oneself to be of the same community,” attanā vā attānaṃ
samānasamvāsakaṃ karoti. Here one becomes part of the community through one’s own decision. This happens when one gives up one’s earlier view and is willing to adopt the view held by the rest of the community regarding the Vinaya rules.

The second way of becoming again part of the same community takes place when one is reinstated by the community after one had been suspended for not seeing an offence, not atoning for it, not giving it up.

For the present case of bhikkhunī ordination, this second option does not seem relevant, as there is no record of the Dharmaguptakas being suspended by the Theravādins or the other way round. The two traditions appear to have come into being simply because of geographical separation. Therefore, only the first of these two alternatives would be relevant. Following the first of these two alternatives, perhaps the difference in the rules could be overcome if the newly ordained bhikkunīs decide to follow the Theravāda Vinaya code of rules. Through a formal decision of this type, perhaps they could become samānasamvāsa.

The ordination performed by Theravāda bhikkhus after the dual ordination at Bodhgayā could then be considered as an expression of the acceptance of these newly ordained bhikkunīs by the Theravāda community. This would be in line with the procedure for settling a dispute about monastic rules that has led to the condition of being nānasamvāsa.

In this way, the ordination by the Theravāda bhikkhus would have had the function of what in the modern tradition is known under the technical term of dalīhikamma, literally “making strong.” This refers to a formal act through which a bhikkhu or a group of bhikkhus ordained elsewhere gain the recognition of a particular community of which he or they wish to be part.

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2 Bā: samānasamvāsaṃ.
While this may be a possible solution, it is also clear that this is not necessarily compelling. In fact the Vinaya precedent regarding how to become samānasamvāsa concerns only differences in the interpretation of the rules. Here, however, the difference is in the rules themselves. Therefore, it needs to be ascertained if the cooperation of the Chinese bhikkhunīs is an indispensable requirement for reviving the Theravāda bhikkhuni order. This is the question to which I turn next, namely the issue of single ordination, of bhikkhunīs being ordained by bhikkhus alone.

**Single Ordination by Bhikkhus**

At first sight single ordination by bhikkhus only appears to be ruled out by the sixth garudhamma. Yet, in terms of legal validity it needs to be kept in mind that the eight garudhamma are only recommendations, they are not rules whose violation carries explicitly formulated consequence. Another and rather significant fact about all of these garudhammas — so obvious that it is easily overlooked — is that they are concerned with the behavior that should be adopted by sikkhamānas and bhikkhunīs. The garudhammas are not rules given to bhikkhus.

The Cullavagga (X.5) reports that the newly ordained bhikkhunīs did not know how to recite the pātimokkha, how to confess a transgression, etc. (Vin II 259). This suggests that the rationale behind the sixth garudhamma may have been to ensure that the newly founded bhikkhunī order carries out higher ordination in accordance with the ways established by the bhikkhu community. In such a setting, it would only be natural to make sure that bhikkhunīs do not conduct higher ordinations without the involvement of bhikkhus. In other words, the sixth garudhamma would be meant to prevent bhikkhunīs from just giving higher ordination on their own. It would also be meant to prevent sikkhamānas
from taking ordination just from bhikkhunīs, without any involvement of the bhikkhus.

However, the same garudhamma is not a rule regarding the way bhikkhus should behave. Needless to say, quite a number of rules in the Vinaya apply to bhikkhunīs, but do not apply to bhikkhus. This distinction is made explicitly in the Cullavagga (X.4). Here the Buddha advises Mahāpajāpatī on the appropriate behavior that the bhikkhunīs should adopt regarding two types of rules: a) those they share in common with the bhikkhus and b) those that apply only to bhikkhunīs (Vin II 258). Both types of rules are binding on Mahāpajāpatī, on her followers ordained by the bhikkhus, and on bhikkhunīs who have been ordained by both communities.

According to the Cullavagga (X.2), after the promulgation of the sixth garudhamma Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī approached the Buddha with the question (Vin II 256): “Venerable sir, how should I proceed in relation to those Sākyan women?” kathāhaṃ, bhante, imāsu sākiyanīsu paṭipajjāmī ti?

Following the Cullavagga account, this question would be related to the sixth garudhamma, in which the Buddha had recommended dual ordination. Having undertaken to respect this garudhamma, Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī was now asking about the proper procedure in this respect. As a single bhikkhunī, she was not able to form the quorum required for conducting the higher ordination of her followers in a dual ordination. In this situation, she was asking the Buddha for guidance. According to the Vinaya account, the Buddha thereon explicitly prescribed that the bhikkhus should give bhikkhunī ordination (Vin II 257):

“Bhikkhus, I prescribe the giving of the higher ordination of bhikkhunīs by bhikkhus,” anujānāmi, bhikkhave, bhikkhūhi bhikkhuniyo upasampādetun ti. Unlike the sixth garudhamma, this is a regulation that is

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3 B°, C° and S°: sākiyānīsu.
meant for bhikkhus, and it is the first such regulation for bhikkhus on the issue of ordaining bhikkhunis.

It is noteworthy that the Vinaya account does not continue with the Buddha himself ordaining the female followers of Mahāpajāpatī. A simple permission by the Buddha for the whole group to go forth in his dispensation would have made the situation clear: when no bhikkhunī order is in existence, only a Buddha can ordain bhikkhunīs.

While this is the prevalent interpretation nowadays, it is not what took place according to the canonical Vinaya account. According to the Vinaya, when approached by Mahāpajāpatī and asked how she should proceed in relation to her followers, the Buddha turned to the bhikkhus and prescribing that they perform bhikkhunī ordination.

Following the canonical Theravāda Vinaya account, this first prescription given to bhikkhus that they should ordain bhikkhunīs was given after the promulgation of the sixth garudhamma. This ruling by the Buddha thus comes after the Buddha had clearly expressed his preference for a dual ordination for bhikkhunīs. The implications are that, even though dual ordination is preferable, single ordination of bhikkhunīs by bhikkhus is the proper way to proceed if a bhikkhunī community is not in existence.

This original prescription to ordain bhikkhunīs was given in the same situation as in modern days: a group of female candidates wished to receive higher ordination, but no bhikkhunī community able to carry out the ordination was in existence, because so far only Mahāpajāpatī had received higher ordination. In the modern day situation, if the Dharmaguptaka bhikkunīs are considered as not capable of providing an ordination that is valid by Theravāda standards, the same predicament arises: a group of female candidates wishes to receive higher ordination,
but no bhikkhuni community able to carry out the ordination is in existence.

The Buddha’s first prescription that bhikkhus can ordain bhikkhunīs is followed by a second explicit statement to the same effect, made by the newly ordained bhikkhunīs themselves (Vin II 257): “The Blessed One has laid down that bhikkhunīs should be ordained by bhikkhus,” bhagavatā paññattaṃ, bhikkhūhi bhikkhuniyo upasampādetabbā ti.

This reinforces the importance of a theme that runs like a red thread through the stages of evolution in the ordination of bhikkhunīs in the Vinaya: the need for the involvement of bhikkhus. The cooperation of the bhikkhus is required. The importance accorded to the willingness of bhikkhus to confer higher ordination on bhikkhunīs suggests itself also from a passage in the Mahāvagga (III.6) of the Vinaya (Vin I 146). This passage permits a bhikkhu to leave his rains residence for up to seven days in order to participate in the higher ordination of a bhikkhuni.

The central point of the sixth garudhamma and of the subsequent regulations is that the bhikkhus can confer higher ordination to female candidates. They can do so either in cooperation with a bhikkhuni order, if such is in existence, or else on their own, if no bhikkhuni order is in existence. The cooperation of the bhikkhus is throughout indispensable for ordaining bhikkhunīs. The same is clearly not the case for the cooperation of a bhikkhuni order, which is not an indispensable requirement.

The Cullavagga (X.17) reports that when the problem of interviewing female candidates arose, the Buddha gave another prescription. According to this ruling, the bhikkhus can carry out bhikkhuni ordination even if the candidate has not cleared herself — by undergoing the formal interrogation — in front of the bhikkhus. Instead, she has done so before in front of the community of bhikkhunīs (Vin II 271). Here is the ruling:
“Bhikkhus, I prescribe the higher ordination in the community of bhikkhus for one who has been higher ordained on one side and has cleared herself in the community of bhikkunīs,” anujānāmi, bhikkhave, ekato-upasampannāya bhikkunīsaṅgha visuddhāya bhikkhusaṅgha upasampadan ti.⁴

As the context indicates, the situation that led to this prescription was that female candidates felt ashamed on being formally interrogated by bhikkhus. This part of the task of ordination — the interrogation of the candidate — was therefore passed on to the bhikkunīs. This enables bhikkhus to carry out the ordination of bhikkunīs without this interrogation. For this reason the regulation refers to a candidate who has “cleared herself in the community of bhikkunīs” and who “has been higher ordained on one side.”

It is instructive to compare the wording of this prescription to the ruling in the case of higher ordination for bhikkhus. According to the account in the Mahāvagga (I.28), the higher ordination of bhikkhus developed in successive stages. At first, bhikkhus were ordained through the giving of the three refuges. Later on they were ordained through a transaction with one motion and three proclamations. Since the time of the transaction with one motion and three proclamations, the mere giving of the three refuges served as part of the going forth only. Therefore it was no longer a valid form of higher ordination. To make this matter clear, the Buddha is on record for explicitly stating that the earlier form is now being abolished (Vin I 56):

“From this day forth, bhikkhus, I abolish the higher ordination by taking the three refuges that I had prescribed; bhikkhus, I prescribe the giving of the higher ordination by a transaction with one motion and three proclama-

⁴ B⁴: bhikkunīsaṅgha, S⁴: upasampādetun ti.
tions,” yā sā, bhikkhave, mayā tihi saranagamanehi upasam-
padā anuññātā, tāhaṃ ajjatagge paṭikkhipāmi; anujānāmi, bhikkhave, ṇatticatutthena kammāna upasampādetumā.⁵

The second regulation for bhikkhus on the topic of bhikkhuni ordination is not preceded by any explicit abolishment of the first prescription that bhikkhus can ordain bhikkhnīs. It just reads: “I prescribe the higher ordination in the community of bhikkhus for one who has been higher ordained on one side and has cleared herself in the community of bhikkhnīs.”

Similar to the case of the ordination of bhikkhus, the Buddha could have declared that from this day forth he abolishes the ordination of bhikkhnīs by bhikkhus only, before prescribing the giving of the higher ordination to bhikkhnīs by both communities. There was no need to keep the first prescription just to ensure that bhikkhus are allowed to ordain bhikkhnīs at all, as the second prescription makes this amply clear. An explicit abolishment of the first prescription would have clarified the situation: From now on bhikkhunī ordination can only be done by both communities. Yet, this is not what according to the Vinaya account happened.

This seems significant, since several rules in the Cullavagga (X.6) that address legal matters related to bhikkhnīs have such indications. The Cullavagga reports that at first the Buddha had prescribed that the bhikkhus should undertake the recitation of the bhikkhuni code of rules (pāṭimokkha), the confession of offences (āpatti) done by bhikkhnīs, and the carrying out of formal acts (kamma) for bhikkhnīs. Later on this task was passed over to the bhikkhnīs. When this happened, the Buddha is on record for explicitly indicating that bhikkhus should no longer undertake these matters. Not only that, but the Buddha even made it clear that the

⁵ B⁵: tam, C⁶ and S⁶: upasampadām.
bhikkhus would incur a dukkata offence if they were to continue undertaking these matters on behalf of the bhikkunīs (Vin II 259 f).

Could there be a reason for the absence of any such indication in relation to the second prescription on bhikkunī ordination? There appears to be indeed such a reason: The second prescription refers to a fundamentally different situation compared to the first prescription. It regulates the proper procedure that the bhikkhus should follow when a bhikkunī order exists. In such a situation, they are to confer the higher ordination without themselves interrogating the female candidate, who should be interrogated and ordained beforehand by the bhikkunīs. The first prescription, in contrast, regulates the proper procedure in a situation where no bhikkunī order able to confer higher ordination is in existence.

The two prescriptions thus do not stand in conflict with each other, as they refer to different situations. They are both valid and there is no need for abolishing the first to ensure the validity of the second. Together, these two rulings legislate for the two possible situations that could arise for bhikkhus in the matter of bhikkunī ordination:

1. One possibility covered in the first prescription is that they have to carry out the higher ordination of females on their own, because no bhikkunī community able to cooperate with them is in existence.

2. The other possibility covered in the second prescription is that they carry out such an ordination in cooperation with an existing bhikkunī community, who will take care of the task of interrogating the candidate and ordain her first, as a precondition for her subsequently ordination by the bhikkhus.
Thus, as far as the canonical Vinaya is concerned, it seems clear that bhikkhus are permitted to ordain bhikkhunīs in a situation that resembles the situation when the first prescription was given—“I prescribe the giving of the higher ordination of bhikkhunīs by bhikkhus”—namely when no bhikkhunī order able to confer higher ordination is in existence.

From this it follows that the higher ordination carried out at Bodhgayā fulfills the legal requirements of the Theravāda Vinaya. The female candidates have followed the stipulations made in the sixth garudhamma, in as much as they did indeed “seek for higher ordination from both communities,” to the best of their abilities. If their ordination by the Chinese bhikkhunīs is considered unacceptable, then this implies that at present there is no bhikkhunī order in existence that can give ordination to female followers of the Theravāda traditions. In this case, the subsequent ordination of these female candidates carried out by Theravāda bhikkhus only is legally valid. Its validity is based on the precedent that according to the canonical Vinaya was set by the Buddha himself when he delegated the ordination of the followers of Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī to the bhikkhus.

The combination of higher ordinations adopted for the 1998 Bodhgayā procedure is legally correct. The order of bhikkhunīs has been revived. It stands on firm legal foundations and has a right to claim recognition as a Theravāda order of bhikkhunīs.
Abbreviations

(References are to the PTS edition)

Bʻe  Burmese edition
Cʻe  Ceylonese edition
Dīp  Dipavamsa
DN  Digha-nikāya
Eʻe  Pali Text Society edition
JBE  Journal of Buddhist Ethics
Kv-a  Kathavatthu-atthakatha
Sʻe  Siamese edition
Sp  Samantapasadikā
Sv  Sumanagalavilasinī
T  Taishō (CBETA)
Vin  Vinaya