

## “Coming Into Our Own” Perspective of a Bhikkhunī Preceptor on Discipline, Agency and Inquiry Amidst the Renascent Theravāda Bhikkhunī Saṅgha/s

Tathālokā Therī<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

“Coming Into Our Own,” the second part of the two-part “Remaking of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha in Transcultural Contexts,”<sup>2</sup> offers internal perspective on how Dhamma and Vinaya studies are brought into and inform bhikkhunīs’ monastic community life (with highlights on the role of the Bhikkhunī Vibhaṅga Project), together with offering a look at some of the puzzles or problems that bhikkhunīs are working on within the Theravāda tradition. The author draws from her experience with ordinations and bhikkhunīs’ individual and community life including but not limited to North America, Australasia, India, Sri Lanka & Thailand over a 30 year period, from approximately the last decade of the 20th century to the second decade of the 21st. Topics of active interest and work center on a dynamic and creative tension or fusion between ideals and vision, with striving, attainments and lived practices in the renascent bhikkhunīs’ community. These topics include:

**I. From past to present**—the dynamic interplay between envisioned past (or pasts) and present;

**II. From “ordination” to “full acceptance”**—forms of dual ordination and one-sided ordination; *upasampadā* as “full acceptance” or “fully sharing in the training and way of life” and the actuality in the contemporary greater Saṅgha; questions of belonging, lineage and *saṃvāsa*;

**III. From text to congruence in cultural context/s**—the *gāruḍhammas* and *sikkhamānā*; the position of senior teaching bhikkhunīs with regards to *ovāda*, and bhikkhunī teachers’ and community leaders’ position in Buddhist monastic teaching and leadership structures; support, living with Vinaya, and religious alms mendicancy in the contemporary West;

**IV. From renascence to renaissance**—bhikkhunīs’ discipline and developing bhikkhunī saṅgha/s as optimal container or the most optimal conditions for

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my gratitude and appreciation to my co-presenter Prof. Dr. Ute Hüsken for her fruitful comments and questions on earlier drafts of this paper, and to the bhikkhunīs, monastic women and supporters of Dhammadharini’s Aranya Bodhi Awakening Forest Hermitage for their blessings and support allowing me the time to write. Special thanks go to my most kind editors Sāmaṇerī Niyyānikā and Dr. Patricia M. Buske Zainal.

<sup>2</sup> Portions of Part I, Ute Hüsken’s 2017 “Translation and Transcreation: Monastic Practice in Transcultural Settings” (forthcoming), and Part II, “Coming Into Our Own” (here), were presented sequentially during the “Discipline, Agency, Inquiry: Vinaya Reception in Women’s Monastic Communities Past and Present” panel of the XVIII International Association of Buddhist Studies Conference in Toronto 21 August 2017.

supporting and effecting the Buddhist intention and aim of women’s liberation, *ceto-vimutti*.

## Discipline, Agency & Inquiry: Setting the Stage

As we traditionally learn in Buddhist monastic life, the Buddha spoke of his own teaching as Dhamma and Vinaya, often translated as “Dhamma and Discipline,” with the monastic discipline being given the primary place as the first “basket” or *pitaka* of all known surviving versions of the canonical Tipiṭaka, and the Sutta Piṭaka placed as the second basket. In the Early Buddhist texts attributed to the Buddha, these words very often appear as one, *Dhammavinaya*, with the word “Dhamma” coming first. In the Buddha’s own words, “Disputes about livelihood or the Pāṭimokkha [Vinaya] would be trivial, Ānanda. But should a dispute arise in the Saṅgha about the path or the way [Dhamma], such a dispute would be for the harm and unhappiness of many, for the loss, harm, and suffering of heavenly and human beings.”<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, a well-known saying of the primary Pāli-text Theravāda Buddhist Vinaya Commentary gives very high importance to Vinaya, calling it “the Life of the Sāsana.”<sup>4</sup> We see here an interplay between sensed importance of Vinaya and Dhamma, with one or another placed foremost by the ancient traditions at different times under differing circumstances.<sup>5</sup>

The chronicles of the Aśokan-period early Indian Buddhist Missions of the 3rd Century BCE relate that with the awakened *arabant Dhammadhūta* missionaries’ teaching of the Dhamma in new lands, hundreds if not thousands of men and women realized noble attainments and entered into Buddhist monastic life upon

<sup>3</sup> —The Buddha, Sāmagāma Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya 104.5)

<sup>4</sup> *Vinayo nāma Buddha Sāsanassa āyu; Vinaye thite Sāsanaṃ thitam hoti.* “Vinaya is the life of the Buddha’s Dispensation; where the Vinaya endures, the Dispensation will endure.” The *Sumaṅgalavilāsinī* [Dhīga Nikāya Commentary] reports that at the first communal recitation at Rājagaha the bhikkhus decided to recite the Vinaya first, since they felt that the Vinaya is what gives life force to the Buddha’s dispensation, whose endurance is ensured as long as the Vinaya endures (Anālayo, “Revival of the Bhikkhuni Order,” 132). In modern times, we see this saying engraved above the entryway to the Chithurst Cittaviveka Buddhist Monastery in England, a western international bhikkhu monastery in the Thai forest tradition of the eminent teacher Ajahn Chah.

<sup>5</sup> In “The Legacy of the First *Saṅgīti* and Theravāda Monasticism” section of “The First *Saṅgīti* and Theravāda Monasticism,” Ven. Bhikkhu Anālayo speaks to a changed emphasis on Vinaya developed in Theravāda Buddhism and the Theravāda tradition’s attitude: “The decision reportedly taken at the first *saṅgīti* has had considerable impact on the implementation of Vinaya rules and their observance in the Theravāda tradition in particular, where strict adherence to the rules in the way these are found in the Pāli Vinaya has become a core element of normative monastic identity.” (7) “In other words, for Theravāda monastics the Pāli Vinaya, held to have been recited in this form at the first *saṅgīti*, forms the core of their monastic identity, and this often to such an extent that it can overshadow the other component of the definition of theravāda in the Dīpavaṃsa: the Dhamma.” (8)

hearing that teaching;<sup>6</sup> they, by implication, then training fully in both Dhamma and Vinaya. For them, reception of Vinaya came together, or very soon after, reception of the Dhamma, with their full acceptance into the Buddhist monastic Saṅgha. In the transmission of the Buddha’s teaching to the west in the last century, the number of those suddenly inspired to enter into monastic life upon contact with the Buddha’s Dhamma and Saṅgha has been less than hundreds or thousands per teaching, but still a regular phenomena. However, without strong, established cultures of support for traditional Buddhist monasticism in the west, the receiving and taking up of Vinaya has been much slower, often accompanied by serious inquiry as to the scope of relevance or importance of Vinaya in contemporary contexts in comparison to the Dhamma. This is not a new inquiry and process, but an old one as above, perceived and responded to differently by different Buddhist teachers, monastic communities and traditions, presently as also over the centuries.

Our records of these past processes often, but not exclusively, highlight male leaders of the Saṅgha and their agency with regards to both Dhamma and Vinaya—including where the records indicate Buddhist women and bhikkhunīs have been present. We do have both textual and epigraphical records of bhikkhunī Tipitaka masters, master bhikkhunī Dhamma teachers, and bhikkhunī *Vinayaḍharā* “holders” of the Vinaya traditions both in India and Sri Lanka—as so highly lauded and emphasized in the early Sri Lankan classic *Dīpavaṃsa* (“Chronicle of the Island” or “Transmission of the Lamp”) which is even thought to have been authored by bhikkhunīs.<sup>7</sup> Thus we find records which appear to show past bhikkhunīs as full holders of both their teaching and

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<sup>6</sup> Ānandajoti Bhikkhu’s 2012 / 2556 translation of *The Extended Mahāvamsa: Asoka and the Missions*, XII. Faith in Various Districts [Nānādesappasādo]33-47 = Mhv 29-43; web: <http://www.ancient-buddhist-texts.net/Texts-and-Translations/Asokan-Missions/12-03.htm> (accessed 27 July 2017). Compared to *Samantapāsādikā* Vinaya Commentary attributed to Ācariya Buddhaghosa and *Shàn jiàn pí pó shā* 善見毗婆沙 by Saṅghabhadra 僧伽跋陀羅 (T24n1462), as well as “Nine Dharma Missions” (pp 199-201) of *Light of Liberation: A History of Buddhism in India* (Crystal Mirror Series vol. 8), Compiled by the Yeshe de Project and edited by Elizabeth Cook, Dharma Publishing, Berkeley (1992). Note: various sources include or do not include specifics on the number of women ordained or the story of Saṅghamittā as part of the Aśokan Missions.

<sup>7</sup> Gunawardana in his 1988 “Subtle Silks” says with regards to the *Dīpavaṃsa*: “The chronicle pays great attention of the presence of a tradition of teaching the Vinaya within the community of [bhikkhunīs] and traces the history of this tradition back to the time of Saṅghamittā. This long succession of teachers of the Vinaya is presented without reference to any links with the line of the teachers among monks [bhikkhus], as found in the *Samantapāsādikā*. Hence, it does seem likely that the community of nuns possessed their own versions of the Vinaya and distinct traditions of its interpretation.” (p 26) For Gunawardana’s discussion of Hugh Nevill’s and Malalasekera’s attribution of authorship of the *Dīpavaṃsa* to Mahāvihāra-tradition bhikkhunīs, see pp 15-17.

practice traditions as well as their histories (truly “her-stories”).<sup>8</sup> Not only were they “holders,” they are presented as creators. The ancient Pāli Vinaya Piṭaka text known as the *Bhikkhunī Vibhaṅga*, as well as other traditions’ Vinaya texts, depict the bhikkhunīs as the primary co-creators (in consultation with the Buddha) of their precepts and monastic discipline, as they brought to light the issues of importance to them. Contemporary monastic and lay scholars mining of these gems from the past is once again increasingly making these stories known within the Buddhist Saṅgha, among Buddhist peoples, and in broader world spheres, largely through academia, education and popular media. Examples of ancient Buddhist women leaders and teachers then inspire and inform contemporary monastics, aspirants, teachers and practitioners in both the East, West and Australasia.

Two now relatively well known and key examples with regards to international historical reception of the Vinaya-based traditions of Buddhist monasticism after the Buddha’s lifetime would be the third century BCE journey of the Indian Emperor Aśoka’s bhikkhunī daughter Saṅghamittā Therī to Sri Lanka with her bhikkhunī peers to grant the “going forth” and “full ordination” to Queen Anulā and five hundred of her aspiring peers, and the fifth century CE journey of the Sinhalese 師子國 Bhikkhunī Tissarā 比丘尼 鐵薩羅 (*Tie-sa-luo*, aka Tesarā, Devasārā or Ayyā Sārā) with her bhikkhunī peers from Sri Lanka to Nanjing 南京, China.<sup>9</sup> These have come to be well known not only in academia and to historians, but within the greater contemporary Buddhist Saṅgha. In both cases,

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<sup>8</sup> Per historian Indrani Munasinghe, in her “Religious Life of Women in Ancient Sri Lanka” p 6: “According to *Dīpavaṃsa* the two [bhikkhunīs] Sivalā and Mahārūhā of India were invited to Sri Lanka by the King Vattabamani Ab[h]aya for the explicit purpose of coaching the [bhikkhunīs] who were experts not only in the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* (discipline) but also in religious history (*Saddhamma-vamsa*). According to Dr. Malalasekera the first instance in which a [bhikkhunī] was entrusted with the task of teaching religious history was in the reign of King Dutugamuni[31] (101-77 B.C.). Of the 72 [bhikkhunīs] teaching *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* referred to in the book *Saddhamma-vamsa*, 8 were historians.[31]” “f31: G.P. Malalasekera, *The Pali Literature of Ceylon* (Colombo), 1950, p. 137.”

<sup>9</sup> Sinhala Bhikkhunī Tissarā 師子國比丘尼鐵薩羅 is remembered in the Taisho Tripiṭaka in *Eminent Monks of the Liang Dynasty* by Hui Jao: “The Life of Saṅghavarman”: [CBETA T50, no. 2059, 0342b11-c07](#); *Lives of the Bhikkhunīs* by Bao Chang, Liang Dynasty: “A Biography of Bhikkhunī Seng-Guo of Kuang-Ling”: [CBETA T50, no. 2063, 0939c07](#); *Lives of the Bhikkhunīs* by Bao Chang, Liang Dynasty: “A Biography of Pu-Xian Monastery Bhikkhunī Bao-Xian”: [CBETA T50, no. 2063, 941a09](#). As to her name: Gunarwardana speculates “Tesarā”; Bhikkhu Sujato “Ayyā Sārā”. Bhikṣuṇī Jampa Tsedreon has “Devasārā based on the Tibetan “*singha la’i dge\* slong ma de ba sa rā*,” from (Thu’u bkwan) Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma. *Grub mtha’ shel gyi me long* (The Chrystal Mirror of Tenets) (2nd edition). Lanzhou Shi : Kan-su’u mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1985. \*Corrected from *de* to *gde* per author. Ven. Jampa Tsedreon notes: “Thu’u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma lived from 1737-1802. His *Grub mtha’ shel gyi me long* (The Crystal Mirror of Tenets) was written in 1802, shortly before he passed away. For details of his biography and his connections to China see: <https://www.treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Lobzang-Chokyi-Nyima/3008>” (personal correspondence via email with author 11 Aug 2017). For more on the re-Indicized Romanization of 師子國比丘尼鐵薩羅’s name see f52 of Jampa Tsedreon’s 2016 “Buddhist Nuns’ Ordination”.

with regards to the transmission of the Vinaya traditions of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha, the aspiring women and leading bhikkhunīs themselves appear as strong, dynamic, active and empowered women with, not without, agency. In the former record, it is Queen Anulā and her peers' awakening, aspiration and inquiry which is the pivotal prompt for the unfolding of the story, with the baton then passed to Saṅghamittā Therī's luminary leadership. It is the noble Saṅghamittā's initiative and effective agency then, together with the women aspirants and new bhikkhunīs, which establishes their tradition. In the latter record, it is the inquiry and initiative of the first group of visiting Sri Lankan bhikkhunīs to China regarding their Chinese bhikkhunī sisters' Vinaya, ordination and lived discipline which sets the story into motion, with the dynamic inquiry of the Chinese bhikkhunīs and further Sri Lankan bhikkhunīs active efforts led by Bhikkhunī Tissarā in followup establishing the tradition. Of course, all this is not to say there were no important male supporters or leading male monastic teachers — there clearly were. It is to highlight the inquiry and agency of both the active women aspirants and the leading and supporting therīs — bhikkhunīs and bhikkhunīs to be — in the transmission and reception of their Vinaya tradition of monastic discipline.

With this in mind as introduction — as these stories have been inspirational and motivational in the minds of contemporary aspirants and bhikkhunī leaders — we will now move to brief explication and analysis of contemporary dynamics.

## I. From past to present: the dynamic interplay between envisioned past (or pasts) and present

The inspiration for the contemporary revival of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha in Theravāda Buddhism (as may be similar in some ways to the co-contemporary revival of the Tibetan Buddhist Nāḷanda *bhikkṣuṇī* traditions) arises from several main sources, past and present:

1. the presence of bhikkhunī practitioners, teachers and leaders in the ancient Canonical texts of the Tipiṭaka/s as well as in the ancient Sanskrit-text *Avadānas* and extra-caonical Pāli-text chronicle *Dīpavaṃsa*, in inscriptions,<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See the work of: Kirit K. Shah in *The Problem of Identity: Women in Early Indian Inscriptions*, Rupali Mokashi's "Unveiling Bhikkhunīs in Oblivion," and Alice Collett's recent work with "Women in Early Buddhist Inscriptions."

- archeology,<sup>11</sup> and art (past/s: prescriptive and idealized images combined with compellingly human and varied historical and hagiographical examples);
2. the aspiration and practice/lifestyle inclinations of women who come into contact with and are inspired by the highly exemplary present day teachers and practitioners of the Theravāda Bhikkhu Saṅgha (present: varied, lived examples);
  3. the existence of bhikkhunīs, including bhikkhunī leaders and teachers, in East Asian Buddhist traditions and multi-traditional relations of Buddhist monastic women through international networks of connection, i.e., Sakyadhita International Buddhist Women's Association (present: varied, lived examples);
  4. a self-reflective awareness and comparative perception of Theravāda Buddhism's place in world religious contexts regarding the contemporary rise of religious women in leading and fully ordained positions in other religious traditions; i.e., Protestant and Episcopalian in Christianity<sup>12</sup> and as gurus in similarly Indic-origin Hindu and Yoga traditions.

Rather than a simple line of tension between past and present as is sometimes suggested, the dynamic for women in Buddhism and Theravāda women's monasticism could be characterized more as existing and unfolding within an ever-shifting multi-dimensional geometry, with all of the sometimes complex

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<sup>11</sup> Much textual and epigraphical research has been done on our ancient Bhikkhunī Saṅgha and Women in Buddhism; Garima Kaushik has undertaken the archeological approach with *Women and Monastic Buddhism in Early South Asia*, offering new possibilities and perspectives. In Part 2 "Locating the bhikṣuṇī: identifying nunneries," and "Tables, site plans and plates," she identifies numerous dedicated places of bhikkhunīs' lodging and practice at many of the famous ancient monasteries and vihāras in India, including the Jetavāna in Sāvatti (Sṛāvastī), Kapilavāstu, Sārnath, Kushinagar, Sañci, Nālanda, Āmaravāti, Nāgarjunakonda, Rātnagiri, etc. See also lecture of the same title: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=irxK8uqeSJo>.

<sup>12</sup> The late Sri Lankan chief bhikkhu prelate of the Western Hemisphere, Ven. Dr. Havanpola Ratanasāra (d. 2000), who played a groundbreaking and leading role in the revival of the sāmaṇerī pabbajjā and bhikkhunī upasampadā in the 1980's and 90's, was highly active in Interfaith and Interreligious Dialogue and acutely aware of this. He personally spoke to the author and colleagues on several occasions of his awareness of Theravāda Buddhism not living up to its full potential and ancient paradigms with regards to the ordination of women in comparative light with women's ordination and community leadership in the USA in both Protestant and Episcopalian Christianity. Ven. Dr. Ratanasāra was likewise impressed by the comparable capabilities of Asian bhikkhunī (bhikṣuṇī) associates of the Taiwanese Fo Kuang Shan/Buddha's Light International Mahāyāna Humanistic Buddhism tradition. During the author's time in Thailand, Buddhist friends sometimes mentioned fellow Buddhists sending their daughters to become Catholic rather than Buddhist nuns because they could live a life of good sīla (moral virtue) far better materially supported, educated, and of greater status within the Church and society as compared to the general situation of the *maechees* in their own Theravāda Buddhism. Several such cases were mentioned of originally Theravāda Buddhist daughters training and ordaining as Mahāyāna bhikkhunīs for similar reasons of betterment: better support, better training and education, and better status in the Saṅgha with opportunities for leadership in service to society.

network of interconnections more or less “in touch,” in a dynamic and productive interplay with one another.

Within the renascent Theravāda bhikkhunī saṅghas, observed efforts to be bridging the gap between past and present are not unique to the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha alone, but may be observed in the Bhikkhu Saṅgha and among the greater networks of Buddhist peoples as well, especially in the strong, popular revivalist movements in Theravāda Buddhism. These movements harken back to and aim to re-manifest the original or early spirit, teachings and practice within the contemporary Saṅgha. Prime examples can be found in the Thai forest traditions stemming from Ven. Ajahn Mun Bhuridāta Mahāthera, including the traditions of Ven. Ajahn Chah Bodhinyāna and Ven. Ajahn Mahā Boowa Ñāṇasampanṇo, the Sri Lankan forest traditions arising from Mithrigale Nissaraṇa Vanaya as taught by the late most venerable Matara Ñāṇarāma and the venerable Katukurunde Ñāṇananda Mahāthera, the Sri Lankan Mahawevnawa movement founded by Ven. Kiribathgoda Gñāṇānanda Thera, the Thai Buddhawacana movement founded by Ven. Ajahn Kukrit Sotthibalo, and the multiple international Burmese- and Indo-Burmese-origin Vipassana movements of this past century.

All of these are reactionary in some ways to trends from the previous century or more towards viewing the Saṅgha as in degeneration and to related beliefs that saintly attainments (such as the *jhānas* or stream-entry —*sotāpanna*) are no longer possible in this degenerate “Dhamma ending age,”<sup>13</sup> and will only become possible once again after Buddhism has entirely disappeared from the world and the future buddha Maitreya realizes buddhahood and sets the Dhamma wheel in motion once again. The idea that the early, saintly and accomplished Bhikkhunī Saṅgha has died out and cannot be revived until the time of the future Buddha Maitreya (Pāli: Metteya) is a very much related idea in this whole package of thought.<sup>14</sup> The present, rising and growing belief in the existence of both attainments and mastery in the Path, and that these are currently attainable

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<sup>13</sup> For a good look at the historical development of these ideas, see Jan Nattier’s *Studies In A Buddhist Prophecy Of Decline*.

<sup>14</sup> In “For the Sake of Women Too” Ven. Damchö Diane Finnegan notes such ideas in Tibetan Buddhist traditions as well: “This notion undergirds the quipster’ clever retort—and one I have heard myself—that nuns in the Tibetan Mūlasarvāstivādin tradition who want full ordination therefore have to wait for Maitreya” (f 201). Ven Damchö also finds “The link between ordination levels and levels of spiritual attainment is evident [with regards to a bhikṣuṇī exemplar] in the [Mulasarvāstivāda Vinaya] narrative.” “The narrative presents a clear pattern in which monastic ordination itself serves as her springboard to spiritual attainments.” (p 203).

through teaching and practice of the old methods the Buddha and ancient masters taught is connected to belief in the ultimate value of Bhikkhunī Ordination and the present existence of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha.

Although numerous lay initiatives have placed value on the revival of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha for valid social reasons: counseling women, balancing the communities, gender equity, equal opportunities and egalitarianism; on the inside, the belief in the contemporary efficacy of the Path and belief in the entire “package” of the Dhamma-Vinaya the Buddha taught as the best teacher and best inheritance from the Buddha is the ultimate and strongest motivation amongst Buddhist women who aspire to and undertake Bhikkhunī Ordination.<sup>15</sup> The premise: what was available and attainable to women (and men) in the past (as exemplified by the texts), is available and attainable to us too now, if we practice it.<sup>16</sup> For women as for men, this means full cultivation of the three trainings in *sīla* —, *samādhi* — meditation and *paññā* — wisdom. *Sīla*, in the classical Theravāda texts, is defined not just as “moral virtue,” “ethics” or “ethical integrity,” but specifically as *Paṭimokkha Sīla*, that is, the full training with the Bhikkhu or Bhikkhunī Paṭimokkha precepts by those who are fully ordained. Thus, for those who are faithful to the texts and to the traditions, there is strong linking between the idea of full ordination — undertaking and training with Paṭimokkha *sīla*, together with the trainings in *samādhi* and *paññā* — and the best supported combination of conditions for making progress in and fully realizing the Path.

Women’s ability to act with agency in going forth, and fully undertake the three trainings for themselves as they are defined in the texts, is thus connected with the mainstream Path to Liberation set forth by the Buddha being fully open and accessible to them. Contemporary Buddhist women’s study of and publication of modern-language translations of the ancient *Bhikkhunī Paṭimokkha* texts

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<sup>15</sup> With devotion to the Buddha, to live in the way the Buddha taught and established for his Saṅgha is also a strong related motivation; that is, to be holders and upholders of Dhamma and Vinaya, as well as the bhikkhunī way of life and livelihood as an act of full and firm devotion to the Buddha.

<sup>16</sup> For more on this topic regarding ancient texts and the essential issue of women’s liberation, see: Bhikkhunī Dhammadinnā’s 2016 “Women’s Soteriological Agency, Text Transmission & Buddhist Institutions.”

undertaken in the past century by both bhikkhunīs and laywomen scholars<sup>17</sup> has been of tremendous importance in regaining a growing sense of agency which was largely historically lost in the move from oral to written transmission followed upon by women becoming further and further excluded, and even legally barred, from studies of sacred texts in Indian religious traditions, and the disappearance of the bhikkhunīs communities.<sup>18</sup> With the disappearance of the bhikkhunī *Tipiṭakadhārās* (“Women Holders/Bearers of the Canon”) and

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<sup>17</sup> Particularly Ven. Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā (Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh)’s 1991 *The Bhikkhuni Patimokkha of the Six Schools*, Ute Hüsken’s 1995/1997 “Die Vorschriften für die buddhistische Nonnengemeinde im Vinaya-Pitaka der Theravādin,” Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo and Ven. Heng-ching Shih’s 1996 *Sisters in Solitude: Two Traditions of Buddhist Monastic Ethics for Women: A Comparative Analysis of the Chinese Dharmagupta and the Tibetan Mulasarvastivada Bhiksuni Pratimoksa Sutras*, Ven. Juo-Hsueh Shih’s 2000 *Controversies over Buddhist Nuns*, Ann Heirmann’s 2001 *The Discipline in Four Parts: Rules for Nuns according to the Dharmaguptakavinaya*, Venerable Bhikshuni Wu Yin’s 2001 *Choosing Simplicity: A Commentary on the Bhikshuni Pratimoksha*, Ven. Yifa’s 2002 *The origins of Buddhist monastic codes in China*, Ven. Damchö Diane Finnegan’s 2009 “For the Sake of Women, Too”: Ethics and Gender in the Narratives of the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya,” Mari Jyväsjärvi Stewart’s 2014 “Fragile Virtue: Interpreting Women’s Monastic Practice in Early Medieval India,” Amy Paris Langenberg’s 2014 “Mahāsāṅghika-Lokottaravāda Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya: The Intersection of Womanly Virtue and Buddhist Asceticism” and 2015 “Female Agency in Two Buddhist Vinayas,” Ven. Bhikkhunī Kusuma and Sāmaṇerī Akiñcanā’s 2015 *Code of Conduct for Buddhist Nuns (Bhikkhunī Vinaya) Arising of the Buddhist Order of Nuns and Their Code of Conduct According to Pāli Sources with Text and Translations of the Bhikkhunī Pātimokkha*, and Ven. Jampa Tsedroen’s 2016 “Buddhist Nuns’ Ordination in the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya Tradition” and more. All of these scholars are women; most but not all are Buddhist; most of the monastics are bhikkhunīs or bhikṣuṇīs.

<sup>18</sup> The canonical Pāli-text *Therī Apadāna* (“Sacred Biographies of the Women Saints”) collection, which seems to have transitioned out of and followed upon the *Therīgāthā*, gives great pride of place to Buddhist bhikkhunī therīs’ knowledge and erudition, recounting thousands of them, not only in the bhikkhunī “foremost of great wisdom” Khemā Therī’s *apadāna* (CST v 376), but also Uppalavaṇṇā Therī’s (CST v 402), Pesalā Therī’s (CST v 230), Ambapāli Therī’s (CST v 216), Puṇṇikā Therī’s (CST v 199), Aḍḍhakāsī Therī’s (CST v 180), Abhirūpanandā Therī’s (CST v 164), Sukkā Therī’s (CST v 139), Siṅgālamātu Therī’s (CST v 107), Kisāgotamī Therī’s (CST v 89), Uppaladāyikā Therī’s (CST v 78), Kuṇḍalakesā Therī’s (CST v 51), the Caturāsītisahassā Bhikkhunīs (CST v 29), the Yasodharā Pamukha Aṭṭhārasasahassa Bhikkhunīs (CST v 444), Yasodharā Therī’s (CST v 344), and Mahāpajāpati Gotamī Therī’s (CST v 285). These apadānas relate again and again, in addition to these women saints cutting off all defilements and gaining supernormal powers such as the divine eye, clairaudience and the ability to know the minds of others: *Attadhammaniruttīsu, paṭibhane tatheva ca; parisuddham ṇāṇaṃ*—“She had perfectly clear knowledge of meaning and doctrines, of etymology and preaching” (adapted from Walters’ translation in “Voice from the Silence: the Buddha’s Mother’s Story”). This is carried through in the assumedly later Sri Lankan Pāli-text chronicle the *Dīpavaṃsa*. Shah, in *The Problem of Identity*, comments upon, as an assumption, the literacy of Buddhist bhikkhunīs, in analysis of Indian donative inscriptions (140). See Skilling’s “Eṣā agrā” (143) for more from the Sanskrit traditions.

*Vinayadhārās* (“Women Holders/Bearers of the Vinaya Tradition”)<sup>19</sup> together with the loss of the bhikkhunī saṅghas of South & Southeast Asia, the sense of women being rightly fully empowered and fully effective heirs and bearers of the tradition came to be deeply compromised in these regions.

The examples of Vinaya scholarship given above, plus bhikkhunīs and laywomen’s active participation in the contemporary SuttaCentral project, and bhikkhunīs incentive with the Bhikkhunī Vibhaṅga Project, are examples of bhikkhunīs themselves taking up the Bhikkhunī Paṭimokkha and the Bhikkhunī Vinaya texts once again. They do so not only through the act of ordaining and wearing the robes, but through in-depth studies, research & inquiry into these ancient texts. Their studies and inquiry are not only in theory, they put what is

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<sup>19</sup> From the Pāli-text canon: *Etad-aggaṃ bhikkhave mama sāvikanāṃ bhikkhunīnaṃ Vinayadharānaṃ, yad-idaṃ Paṭācārā*—“Monastics, this is the foremost of my bhikkhunī disciples amongst those who are holders of the Vinaya, that is, Paṭācārā” (*Angūttaranikāya* Pāli 1.5.4). From the Sanskrit tradition, the *Cūḍapakṣāvādāna* of the *Divyāvādāna* speaks of bhikṣuṇīs who are “versed in Tripiṭaka, teachers of the Dharma, clear and fluent speakers”—*bhikṣuṇyas tripiṭā dhārmakathikā yuktamuktapratibhāṇā* (Skilling’s 2001 “Female Roles in Early Indian Buddhism” 252), specifically bhikṣuṇī Somā who learned the entire *Prātimokṣasūtra* in a single recitation from the Blessed One himself and went on to learn the entire Tripiṭaka (Skilling’s “Esa agrā” 146). First to second century Indian inscriptions also mention bhikkhunī Tipiṭakadharā, i.e., *bhikkhunī Buddhāmitrā trepiṭikā*—“the Tripiṭaka master Bhikṣuṇī Buddhāmitrā” (Skilling’s 2014 “Women in the vanguard?” WiBSI powerpoint, p 56). Returning to the Pāli-text Theravāda tradition, the *Dīpavaṃsa* relates the bhikkhunī masters’ teaching lineage from India to Sri Lanka thus: XVIII 9-10 speaks of Khemā and Uppalavaṇṇā; Pātācārā, Dhammadinnā, Sobhitā, Isidāsikā, Visākhā, Soṇā and Sābalā, wise Saṅghadāsī and Nandā, as “guardians of the Dhamma” and “well-versed in the Vinaya.” These (bhikkhunīs) who well knew the Vinaya and the paths (of sanctification), (lived) in Jambudvīpa. XVIII 11-13 tells of Therī Saṅghamittā, wise Uttarā, Hemā and Pasādapālā, Aggimittā, Dāsikā, Pheggū, Pābbatā, and Mattā, Mālā, and Dhammadāsiyā, the eleven bhikkhunīs who came from Jambudvīpa (India) and taught the Vinaya Piṭaka in Anuradhapura, also teaching the five Collections (of the Sutta Piṭaka) and the Seven Treatises (of the Abhidhamma). XVIII 14-16 then relates the Sri Lanka bhikkhunīs own lineage of luminary teachers, with special emphasis on Vinaya teachers: Sadhammanandi and Somā, also Giriddhī, Dāsikā, and Dhammā are *Dhammapālā*—“guardians of the Dhamma” and *Vinaya visāradā*—“well-versed in the Vinaya.” Mahilā who kept the Dhutaṅga precepts, and Sobhaṇā, Dhammatāpasā, highly wise Nāramittā who was “well-versed in the Vinaya.” Sātā, “versed in the exhortations of the Therīs,” Kālī and Uttarā, these Bhikkhunīs received the upasampadā ordination on the island of Lanka.” Verses 17-46 continue the exposition of these bhikkhunīs illustrious tradition, with more than ten verses lauding the ongoing lineage of those bhikkhunīs who were outstanding Vinaya teachers (*Vinaya visāradā* (vv 15, 16), *Saddhammavinayaratā* (vv 18, 23, 43) *Vinaya tāvāca* (vv 27, 31, 33, 38), *Aggāvinayavādī* (30), and *Vinayadharā* (vv 42, 45). Eighteen verses laud those who were of great wisdom—*mahāpaṇḍitā* (vv 16, 40, 41), “confident, knowledgeable and skilled”—*visāradā* (vv 35, 40) widely learned—*bahussutā* (vv 22, 44, 46) and *paṇḍitā* (vv 35, 40), “holders of the sutta tradition”—*sutadharā* (v 44), “teachers of the Doctrine of Discernment”—*Vibhajjavādī* (vv 42, 45), “unexcelled teachers of the Dhamma”—*Dhammakathikamuttamā* (v 30) and “teachers of the five Nikāyas of the Sutta Piṭaka and Seven Treatises on Abhidhamma”—*Nikāye pañcavācesuṃ sattappakaraṇānica* (vv 20, 34) and masters of the passed down teachings of the Therīs’—*Theriyovāda* (v 16) “illuminating the Saṅgha”—Saṅghasobhaṇā (v 42). Five more verses reveal bhikkhunīs known for extraordinary knowledge and the six powers: *Abhiññātā* (vv 17, 21, 42), *chaḷabhiññā* (v 26) and *mahiddhikā* (v 26). Further verses speak of bhikkhunīs of great renown in the Sāsana—*Sāsane vissutā* (37), and those known as “guardians of the Sāsana—*Sāsana pālakā* (v 45), and those who are “leaders of the Island”—*Dīpanayā* (v 41). Last but not least, seven verses record those bhikkhunīs who had the very special role of Saddhammavaṃsakovidā (17, 21, 29, 31, 36, 39, 42), those “possessed of right wisdom who were the bearers and transmitters of the lineage and traditions of the Saddhamma.”

learned into the crucible of actual lived practice on an ongoing basis—with the noble aim of fulfilling the foundational and in-depth training of Paṭimokkha sīla.

## II. From “ordination” to “full acceptance”

*a) Forms of dual ordination and one-sided ordination; b) upasampadā as “full acceptance” or “fully sharing in the training and way of life” and the actuality in the contemporary greater Saṅgha; c) questions of belonging, lineage and saṃvāsa.*

### *a) Forms of dual ordination and one-sided ordination*

The revival of the Theravāda Bhikkhunī Saṅgha has not happened via one means alone. Rather, as two main methods were considered to be valid and workable by the First International Congress on Buddhist Women in 2007 in Hamburg Germany,<sup>20</sup> so too, the preliminary reconstituting methods which have actually been used have been various, but falling into these two main categories. These include:

1. Bhikkhunī ordination by a Theravāda bhikkhu saṅgha alone (advocated by eminent Theravāda Buddhist monastic scholars, but to date used only rarely as an exclusive method, i.e., California in 1997 & Thailand in 2006)<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See Alexander Berzin’s 2017 “Summary of the Main Points of the Papers” under “Issues in Reinstating Bhikshuni Ordination” in “Conference Report on Bhikshuni Ordination Lineages” Part 1 of 4. See also Ven. Jampa Tsedroen’s 2016 “Buddhist Nuns Ordination” (166).

<sup>21</sup> In Burma, the 1930s saw a proposal for reinstatement of the Bhikkhunī Order through ordination by the Bhikkhu Saṅgha submitted by the senior Buddhist monk, Ven. U Ādiccavaṃsa (Burmese: U Ardisavintha) in his Bhikkhunī Sāsana Upadesā, (Burmese: *Beikkhuni Thathano Padeiktha*, “Overview of the Bhikkhunī Sāsana”). In the 1940s, one of the greatest masters of the 20th century, the teacher of the Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw out of whom most of the contemporary international Vipassana meditation traditions have emerged—the Most Venerable Mingun Jetavan Sayadawgyi—also offered his reasoned proposal in his *Milindapañha Tika* for the reestablishment of the Bhikkhunī Sāsana through ordination by the Bhikkhu Saṅgha alone (Tathālokā 2017 “Honoring”). See also: Bhikkhu Anālayo’s 2017 “The Validity of bhikkhunī Ordination by bhikkhus Only, According to the Pāli Vinaya”. Note also: Tathālokā “Bhikkhus’ Right to Ordain Bhikkhunīs” (forthcoming).

2. Bhikkhunī ordination by East Asian Dharmaguptaka Vinaya tradition bhikkhu saṅgha or dual saṅgha<sup>22</sup> (a) followed by Commentarially- and traditionally-sanctioned Pāli-text Theravāda tradition *dalhīkamma*<sup>23</sup> with a Theravāda bhikkhu saṅgha or dual saṅgha,<sup>24</sup> or (b) followed by Vinaya-

<sup>22</sup> I use the term *bhikkhu* with regards to East Asian monks here for these reasons: (1) There is an artificial distinction created by contemporary English-language scholarship which has the effect of being divisive, creating the sense of being a kind of different species based on use of different forms of Indic language. The premise is that the Northern traditions use/d (and so still must use) Sanskrit and the Southern traditions use/d (and so still must use) Pāli. However, this is a vast and not entirely accurate over simplification, both historically and in contemporary practice. (2) The early Chinese characters normally still used in the “Northern” or East Asian traditions represent *biku* 比丘 and *bikuni* 比丘尼 based on old Prakrit more similar to Pāli—not the Sanskrit form *bichu* 苾芻 for *bhikṣu* and 苾芻尼 for *bhikṣuṇī* which come later into Chinese with the not-so-widely-successful introduction of the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya. Old phonetic alphabets such as Korean Hangul attest to the early pronunciation: 비구/비구니 *biku/bikuni*, with the Hangul alphabet capable of making a ‘k+s’ sound, but this is not the spelling. In general colloquial linguistic use in both Thailand and Sri Lanka within Theravāda Buddhism—the “Southern” tradition—it is the Sanskrit forms *bhikṣu* and *bhikṣuṇī* (Thai: ภิกขุ/ภิกษุณี, Sinhala: චිත්ඡු/චිත්ඡුණී) which are commonly used for everything other than formal Pāli-text *kammavācās* and academic work. As an historical inheritance, the use of Sanskrit forms of words and of classical Sanskrit literature is still widespread in both South and Southeast Asian Buddhist countries which generally practice and follow the Theravāda tradition. At the level of practical use, in most if not all branches of the Asian Buddhist Pāli-text Vinaya and Dharmaguptaka-text Vinaya monastic traditions’ bhikkhu and bhikkhunī saṅghas, *biku* 比丘 and *bikuni* 比丘尼 are used in writing in North and East Asia independent of Vinaya affiliation; similarly in colloquial speech, *bhikṣu* and *bhikṣuṇī* are used independent of Vinaya tradition in much of South and Southeast Asia.

<sup>23</sup> It may be noted that although the extra-canonical Pāli-text *dalhīkamma* “strengthening” procedure is said to be unique to Theravāda traditions; in fact, fifth century senior Tripiṭaka Master Ācārya Guṇavarman who studied and taught internationally in India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and China and translated the Dharmaguptaka Bhikkhunī Vinaya’s ordination proceedings into Chinese, also supported the “augmenting” reordination of bhikkhunīs in China, saying: “*sīla, samādhi and paññā* are all gradual/progressive trainings; to receive [the ordination] again is more beneficial. 答曰。戒定慧品從微至著。更受益佳。(Taisho Tripiṭaka *Eminent Monks of the Liang Dynasty* by Hui Jao’s “The Life of Saṅghavarman”僧伽跋摩 at [http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/T50n2059\\_003](http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/T50n2059_003) [0342b11]). The reordination was also said to be “for growth in and the long endurance of the Vinaya and for the support its virtues” 謂是增長戒善耳。“Lives of the Bhikkhunis” by Bao Chang, Liang Dynasty: A biography of Pu-Xian Temple Bhikkhuni Bao-Xian 普賢寺寶賢尼傳 at [http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/T50n2063\\_002](http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/T50n2063_002) [0941a09]). The Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya tradition also allows reordination in case of there being any doubt as to the initial ordination (Tsedroen 2016 “Ordination” 221).

<sup>24</sup> All these first ordinations were performed by East Asian Dharmaguptaka Vinaya tradition bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs first, then converted by a Theravāda bhikkhu saṅgha. Even if there were a mix of “witnessing” masters (as in 1996, ’97 & ’98); the ordaining quorums and the procedures always matched. Thus for Dharmaguptaka Vinaya proceedings, all the officiating monastics and quorums were those ordained and hailing from East Asian Dharmaguptaka traditions. For Pāli-text Vinaya proceedings, all the officiating monastics and quorums were Theravāda bhikkhus (later together with bhikkhunīs as at Spirit Rock in 2012). I am only aware of one ordination in 1994 (generally unknown) at International Buddhist Meditation Center in Los Angeles, in which, for the dual ordination, Dharmaguptaka Vinaya tradition bhikkhunīs joined together (for the bhikkhunīs side of the ordination) with Theravāda bhikkhus (for the bhikkhus side of the ordination) in the dual ordination of a Theravāda bhikkhunī. One other was planned to be so (my own in 1997), but that plan was changed due to one bhikkhunī missing to fulfill the bhikkhuni saṅgha quorum. Thus, it came to be rather a one-sided ordination, legally officiated by and with quorum of a Theravāda bhikkhu saṅgha alone. It must be said that there may be ordinations of which I’m unaware.

based self-determination as a Theravāda bhikkhunī<sup>25</sup> and joining Pāli-text “Harmony” Bhikkhunī Patimokkha recitation.<sup>26</sup>

Underlying these two means are two different understandings or perspectives on the relationship between the Pāli text-based Theravāda traditions and the East Asian Dharmaguptaka traditions, with method 2(a) covering both bases of understanding. Methods covering both bases of understanding have so far been —for the preliminary transitional relinking or bridging— most popular and successful, that is, most well accepted. One of the reasons for the popularity of the latter methods is the greater comfiture there has been both for many in

<sup>25</sup> *Dvemā, bhikkhu, nānāsaṃvāsakabhūmiyo—attanā vā attānaṃ nānāsaṃvāsakaṃ karoti, samaggo vā naṃ saṃgho ukkhipatī adassane vā appaṭikamme vā appaṭinissagge vā...Dvemā, bhikkhu, samānasaṃvāsakabhūmiyo—attanā vā attānaṃ samānasaṃvāsaṃ karoti, samaggo vā naṃ saṃgho ukkhitaṃ osāreti adassane vā appaṭikamme vā appaṭinissagge vā. Imā kho, bhikkhu, dve samānasaṃvāsakabhūmiyo”ti—*“Bhikkhu, there are these two grounds for belonging to a different communion: either, **of oneself** one makes oneself belong to a different communion, or a complete saṅgha suspends one for not seeing or for not making amends for or for not giving up...Bhikkhu, there are these two grounds for belonging to the same communion: either, **of oneself** one makes oneself belong to the same communion, or a complete saṅgha restores one who was suspended for not seeing or for not making amends for or for not giving up. Bhikkhu, there are these two grounds for belonging to the same communion.” (Pāli-text Vinaya *Mahāvagga Khandhaka* 10. *Kosambakakkhandhaka*—“The monks from Kosambī” 1. *Kosambakavivādakathā*—“On the dispute among the monks from Kosambī”). Pāli and adapted English text from [SuttaCentral.net](https://suttacentral.net/pi/pi-tv-kd10#table-of-contents): <https://suttacentral.net/pi/pi-tv-kd10#table-of-contents> and <https://suttacentral.net/en/pi-tv-kd10> (accessed 3 Aug 2017), bolds are my own. See also, Bhikkhu Anālayo’s 2013 “Revival” (f 91). In other Vinaya traditions as well, i.e., “[i]n the Tibetan translation of the *Posadhavastu* (Tib. *gso sbyong gi gzhi*) [related to Pāli-text *Uposatha Khandhaka*] two ways of regaining the *samānasaṃvāsaka* status are explained: ...Either **one declares oneself on one’s own** to be of the same community, or one is reinstated by the community...[96]” “f96: D 1 (‘dul ba, ga, 127a3” (Tsedroen 2016 “Ordination” 219), bolds are my own.

<sup>26</sup> *Na ca, bhikkhave, anuposathe uposatho kātabbo, aññatra saṃghasāmaggiyā”ti.* “Observance should not be carried out on a non-Observance day except when it is for unity of the Saṅgha” [Mv II.36.4] “*Sāmaggī Uposatha* (Harmony or Unity Observance). In addition to the uposatha days of the 14th and/or 15th each month, there is a third occasion when the Pātimokkha may be recited by the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha. It is known as *Sāmaggī Uposatha*, the “Harmony” or “Unity Uposatha.” The purpose is to affirm and establish the unity and harmony of the Saṅgha, through joining together for the recitation of the Pātimokkha. This method is used for uniting disparate factions, groups or traditions, as well for healing actual rifts or schisms in the Saṅgha. It establishes “the Recitation,” that is, the tradition of Dhamma and Vinaya that is collectively agreed upon and thus central to the lives of all participants. It is thus a very old method—predating sectarian reordination or *dalhīkamma*—of formally establishing or reestablishing a bhikkhu/ nī’s tradition of adherence. The *Sāmaggī Uposatha* is related to and may, when called for, be enacted in conjunction with the *Sāmaggī Pavāraṇā*, in case a resolution of issues is needed. As these events are dedicated to harmony and unity of the Saṅgha, it is not necessary to wait for the New or Full Moon Uposatha Day or the yearly Pavāraṇā Day to hold *Sāmaggī Uposatha* or *Sāmaggī Pavāraṇā*. *Sāmaggī Uposatha* may be held on any suitable day, as called for, whereas the Commentary says *Sāmaggī Pavāraṇā* may be held between the first day of the first Rains (Vassa) and the full moon day marking the end of the second Rains. [*Samantapāsādikā* 233] For *Sāmaggī Uposatha*, the introduction to the Pātimokkha should be changed from: “*Suṇātu me, ayye, saṅgho. Ajjuposatho paṇṇaraso.*” → “*Suṇātu me, ayye, saṅgho. Ajjuposatho sāmaggī.*” “Venerables, let the Saṅgha listen to me. Today is the uposatha of the fifteenth (fourteenth) day” → “Venerables, let the Saṅgha listen to me. Today is the day for Harmony Uposatha.” [*Samantapāsādikā* 183]”. Quoted from Santipada’s 2015 *Bhikkhunī Patimokkha Third Edition* (110).

respectfully including contemporary East Asian<sup>27</sup> Dharmaguptaka Vinaya traditions' bhikkhunīs in the process and respecting their agency, *together with* respecting the agency of the Theravāda bhikkhu Saṅgha (in 2(a)) as they would traditionally have in dual ordination of Theravāda bhikkhunīs in the full acceptance process.<sup>28</sup>

Within ten to twenty-some years, the traditions have moved on to “all-Theravāda” dual bhikkhunī ordinations, which began in Sri Lanka in 1998 (ten years after the first 1988 ordinations), in Australia in 2009 and in the United States in 2010 (more than twenty years later). Those so ordained are the second generation, and now also anywhere from ten to thirty years later, the third generation. With each generation, the level of acceptance has grown as a “normalizing” occurs. With a spreading ripple effect, more and more women find it easier and easier to go forth—the ground better tilled, less hard to break, and more easefully fruitful. With increased acceptance, and increased knowledge, skill and proficiency in their living of the monastic life, “coming into their own,” the level of agency of the bhikkhunīs themselves, in training, vetting and accepting their own candidates has grown exponentially. With this increased sense of agency also comes an increasing practice of discernment which calls for progressively deeper understanding in and proficiency in Vinaya, in Dhamma, and in the Path.

***b) Upasampadā as “full acceptance” or “fully sharing in the training and way of life” and the actuality in the contemporary greater Saṅgha***

*Bhikkhunī upasampadā* is generally translated into English as “full ordination” or “higher ordination.” However, in monastic Vinaya classes and texts, we are

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<sup>27</sup> It may be noted that using “East Asian” in description here is somewhat problematic for several reasons. (1) We now have a growing number of Theravāda bhikkhunī places in East Asia led by East Asian Theravāda bhikkhunīs (i.e., Hong Kong, Vietnam, Taiwan, South Korea). (2) We also have both Western, Asian and African monastics living in the West or Africa and ordained in these traditions who are neither from East Asia nor living in East Asia. However, to call them “Mahāyāna” misses the crucial point that they’ve been ordained as bhikkhunīs via the Vinaya of one of the old Theriya traditions, the Dharmaguptaka.

<sup>28</sup> It may be noted that even for the groundbreaking 1988 Sāmaṇerī Pabbajjā in Southern California in which leading Sri Lankan Theravāda bhikkhu elder Ven. Dr. Havanpola Ratanasāra served as preceptor— which according to Theravāda Vinaya does not require the presence of a dual saṅgha—Ven. Dr. Ratanasāra invited not only numerous Theravāda bhikkhus’ attendance and participation, but invited bhikkhunīs of three East Asian bhikkhunīs’ traditions, from Taiwan, Korea and Vietnam, to participate as well. Although these bhikkhunīs had no legal role in the ordination, they did have formal roles of close contact: examining the candidate beforehand, shaving her head (after Ven. Dr. Ratanasāra had cut the first lock), assisting her in fully donning the monastic robes (after Ven. Dr. Ratanasāra had placed the *kāyabandhana* robe over her shoulders), escorting her to the ordination site and remaining by her side (while her preceptor was in front of her), and followup mentorship (together with instruction from her preceptor). See pabbajjā video: “Chutima~Dhammamittā’s Sāmaṇerī Ordination at Dharma Vijaya Vesak 1988” on Youtube.

taught the literal meaning is more of “full acceptance” and “fully sharing in the training and way of life” or “entering into full communion” with the existing Saṅgha.<sup>29</sup> Although the level of acceptance has grown exponentially and is still growing (as above); at the present time, as is well known to scholars, bhikkhunīs are still *not* yet fully accepted within the Theravāda traditions in Asia, even in Sri Lanka, Thailand and India where the number of bhikkhunīs is greatest.

This is especially so at the very top levels of the Theravāda Buddhist traditions in Asia where the numbers of Buddhists and the power of the Saṅgha and developed ecclesiastical hierarchies are strongest and most well established in conjunction with a State. This remains largely so at the top levels of non-democratic feudal-model Bhikkhu Saṅgha hierarchies, despite greatly increasing numbers of supportive younger bhikkhus and lay Buddhists, and increasing numbers of bhikkhunīs.<sup>30</sup> The pattern has been different in the United States, with separation of Church and State, and much newer and smaller Saṅgha association and councils, many of the senior-most bhikkhus of Sri Lankan traditions have been actively supportive, playing key roles in the “going forth” (*pabbajjā*) and full acceptance (*upasampadā*) of both their male and female students.<sup>31</sup> This has also been true of the international Thai forest tradition community led by Ven. Ajahn Brahmavaṃso Mahāthero in Western Australia.

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<sup>29</sup> For “Acceptance” and “full Acceptance” as translation of *upasampadā*, see *Buddhist Monastic Code I and II*, spec. *BMC II* Chapter Fourteen. *BMC I & II* are perhaps the most widely disseminated contemporary English language study books on Pāli-text Vinaya. *Upa+sam+pada* {“entering+shared/common/same+base [of training]”} is explicated to monastic in Vinaya classes, with “padā” being short for the *sikkhāpadā*—“the precepts which are the base of training.” For this reason, and due to the procedure, we learn to say “our entry into the Saṅgha has been accepted” and we have “received” ordination, that is, “acceptance”, rather than we have “taken” vows. See also: Ven. Bhikkhu Nyanatusita’s *Analysis of the Bhikkhu Patimokkha* pp 168-169; he uses “full admission” and “full entry into..”.

<sup>30</sup> Although the “Supreme Saṅgha Councils” of Thailand, Sri Lanka and Burma have not given their approval, it should not be misunderstood that all of their members are opposed to bhikkhunī ordination, but rather that they have not yet been able to reach a positive consensus to change their predecessors’ position on the subject. In example, in 1997, one quarter (10 out of 40) of the Mahā Nāyakas in Sri Lanka were reported as favorable to the revival of Bhikkhunī Ordination (Bhadra 2001, 27).

<sup>31</sup> See pp 4-6 and 10-11 of Tathālokā “Honoring Those Worthy of Honor,” where their reasoning is explored in more detail. This is expressed more fully in their own words in the videos linked to within: “[Chutima~Dhammamittā’s Sāmanerī Ordination at Dharma Vijaya Vesak 1988](#)” (32:30-39:20) and “[Samaneri Sama Ordination, July 22, 1989](#)” (21:05-31:20 and 32:30-41:50) on Youtube.

In India, senior Theravāda bhikkhus of various Theravāda traditions as well have joined in historic bhikkhunī ordinations from 1998.<sup>32</sup>

However, in Sri Lanka with Ven. Siri Sumangala Mahāthera, the founder of the Dambulla Bhikkhunī Order; in Thailand with Ven. Ajahn Brahmavamso and the bhikkhunī ordinations at the Australian monastery Bodhinyana, and in Bangladesh with the leading elder Ven. Vārāsambodhi Mahāthera granting sāmaṇerī pabbajjā at Bodhgaya—in all of these cases—the punishment delivered by the leading elders of the related traditions was strong, swift and exclusory. The United States has been one important exception to this pattern, with the leading Sri Lanka bhikkhu elders such as the late nāyakathera (“leading elder”) of the Western Hemisphere Ven. Dr. Havanpola Ratanasāra, Ven. Henepola Gunaratana Nāyakathera and Ven. Dr. Walpola Piyānanda Nāyakathera all supporting and participating in bhikkhunī ordinations without such mishap. It is noteworthy too that these days bhikkhunī ordinations now happen regularly in Sri Lanka and Australia (as well as the United States) without great further ado. In the absence of overlord-type regulation by Buddhist kingship, the general Buddhist practice of “live and let live” with regards to “other” Buddhist traditions as long as they don’t do anything too awful, has allowed for a measure of peace, acceptance and possibility, even if there is not formal acceptance of

<sup>32</sup> In 1998, leading Theravāda bhikkhu elder participants were from Sri Lanka, India (including Burma and Ladakh), Malaysia, Thailand, Nepal, Great Britain and USA including:

“Bodhgaya International Full Ordination Committee —

“(Sri Lanka) 1. Venerable Pandith Talalle Dhammaloka Anunayaka Thera, Chief High Priest of Justice (Adhikorana Nayaka) for Western Province, Deputy Prelate of the Amarapura Sect; 2. Venerable Prof. Kumburugamawe Vajira Maha Thera, Vice Chancellor of Pali and Buddhist University, Sri Lanka; 3. Ven. Kamburupitiye Nandarathana Nayaka Thera, Chief High Priest of Western Province; 4. Venerable Dr. Waragoda Pamarathana Thera, Vice Chancellor, Buddhhasravaka Bhikkhu University at Anuradhapura; 6. [sic] Venerable Porawagama Somalankara Nayaka Thera, Deputy Saṅgha Nayaka Thera of Southern Province, Chief Secretary, Sarvodaya Bhikkhu Congress; 7. Ven. Mahagalkadawala Punnasara Nayaka Thera, Principle of Nuns Education Center, Dambulla; 8. Venerable Inamaluwe Sumangala Nayaka Thera, Chief Secretary of Rangiri Dambulla Saṅgha Chapter; (India) 1. Venerable Dr. Mapalagama Wipulasara Maha Thera, President, The Maha Bodhi Society of India; 2. Venerable Dr. Rastrapala Mahathera, Founder, President-Cum-Meditation Teacher of International Meditation Centre, Bodhgaya; 3. Venerable Dharmapal Mahathera, President of All India Bhikkhu Congress; 4. Venerable Nyanainda Mahathera, Abbot of the Burmese Temple, Bodhgaya; 5. Venerable Saṅghasena, President of the Mahabodhi International Meditation Center, Ladakh, India; (Malaysia) Venerable Dr. Kirinde Dhammananda Maha Nayaka Thera, Chief Prelate of Malaysia; (Great Britain) Venerable Pandith M. Vajiragnana, Sangha Nayaka of Great Britain; (USA) Venerable Pandith Henepola Gunaratana, Chief Sangha Nayaka of the United States & North America; (Thailand) 1. Venerable Phra Kru Phiphit Prachanart, Abbot of Samakki Temple; 2. Venerable Phra Maha Somchai Prohmsuwan, Assistant Abbot of Maha Chula Buddhist University; 3. Venerable Phra Maha Nibhon Subhadhammo, Abbot of Dhammasopit Temple; 4. Venerable Phra Khru Sangha Wichai, Abbot of Plukmailai Temple; (Nepal) 1. Venerable Bhikkhu Sumangala - President of Religion and Peace Academy; 2. Venerable Bhikkhu Ashwaghosh - Editor in Chief, The Dharmakirti (Buddhist Monthly).”

“[Theravāda] Organizers: Sarvodaya Bhikkhu Congress, Moratuwa, Sri Lanka; All India Bhikkhu Congress, India; The Maha Bodhi Society of India; Dambulla Rock Temple, Dambulla, Sri Lanka” (*Bodhgaya International Full Ordination 1998* 一九九八年印度菩提伽耶 國際三壇大戒會 (14-15)).

nikāya membership yet at the top levels of State-sanctioned and -embedded Saṅgha hierarchies.

Thus we can see that although “ordination” is happening, “full acceptance,” and with it having full rights and responsibilities that are the “shared base of training” within the greater Theravāda Saṅgha is a far greater work unfolding. This “not *full* acceptance” but “*growing* acceptance” is felt deeply in the hearts of those women who ordain, and in the hearts of both those bhikkhus and lay community members who support them (and those who don’t).<sup>33</sup> Some hold this with ease, compassion and understanding; some with a measure of dis-ease; many with some combination thereof, depending on the peaceful progress or the challenges of any given day, week, month or year, as the movement unfolds.

It may be noted that the dynamics found in I.1-3, are also found here in the way the bhikkhunīs and their monastic and non-monastic supporters view themselves and their context. In the ancient historical context (I.1), the Buddha and his great bhikkhu and bhikkhunī disciples too had to face great challenges and hardships as groundbreakers—they persevered brilliantly as the heroes and heroines of the Saṅgha (or in more foolish and destructive ways as the Vinaya gives examples of and warns against!<sup>34</sup>). In the present context (I.2), within the Theravāda Bhikkhu Saṅgha too, those who are the brightest of the luminary teachers have also had to overcome great challenges, sometimes from conservative leading bhikkhus and sometimes from issues within the Departments of Buddhism at the State level. At the level of the international multi-traditional network of Buddhist women (I.3), bhikkhunīs learn of other luminary and exemplary Buddhist women and bhikkhunīs of other traditions who have overcome grave challenges, internal and external, and are thus heartened to persevere. At the inter-religious level (I.4), they may share both joys and challenges with fellow women religious of other faiths, as embedded within the greater world context. In this way, many of the pioneering bhikkhunī

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<sup>33</sup> In Susanne Mrozick’s 2013 work “We Love Our Nuns,” she finds that among some Buddhist lay communities in Sri Lanka, the bhikkhunīs revival is so well integrated that local Buddhist people do not know that it had ever died out and been revived (61).

<sup>34</sup> In example, *Na, bhikkhave, bhikkhuniyā bhikkhussa pahāro dātabbo. Yā dadeyya, āpatti dukkaṭassa*—“A bhikkhunī should not give a blow to a bhikkhu (not hit him). Whoever should do so, an offense of wrongdoing’ (Vinaya *Cūlavagga Khandhaka X.12*) This bhikkhunī precept was formulated when “a woman formerly from the Mallan clan (according to the Commentary, formerly the wife of a boxer) went forth among the bhikkhunīs. Encountering a bhikkhu along a main road, she gave him a blow with the point of her shoulder and knocked him flat” (Buddhist Monastic Code II, Ch 23). See also: Ohnuma’s 2013 “Bad Nun”.

leaders and their communities are protected and supported by this moralizing network—which is so far more often than not, strong enough to carry them through; while some fall by the wayside seeking out less strenuous, more easeful and socially better-supported or “more fully acceptable” ways of livelihood and practice.

In my personal experience as a bhikkhunī teacher and preceptor (*ācarinī* and *pavattinī-upajjhāyā*) over the past twelve years, to date, twenty-seven out of thirty women have continued in monastic life, while three—a total of ten percent of those who ordained as bhikkhunīs—have disrobed and returned to lay life. In all three cases (first generation Buddhist women from European, Jewish, Native American and Hispanic backgrounds raised in the West and ordained in USA), the strongly felt ongoing lack of ease in obtaining basic requisite support to fully devote time to the training, study, practice and teaching, and being worn down by the stress and controversy of not being fully accepted, together with disappointment and disheartenment at the gender-misogyny or unsupportive gendered structures in Buddhism—which is felt and perceived as non-Dhammic, unBuddhist or just unfair and uninspiring—greatly contributed to their decision to leave the Buddhist monastic life.<sup>35</sup> Although none of these women entered monastic life for material gains or praise, the extreme to which the challenges above presented was more than they felt well to bear on an ongoing basis. It may be noted that the other ninety percent are not without these challenges, although some situations have developed to the degree that these challenges are not felt quite as strongly (e.g., Dhammasara Monastery in Western Australia). Again, as above, the ability to contextualize the challenges and hurdles in a valorizing, moralizing and progressive way, which can come from ancient examples as well as the examples of contemporary Theravāda bhikkhu teachers and fellow bhikkhunīs (including the growing number of senior bhikkhunī teachers within the Theravāda traditions), bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs of other Buddhist

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<sup>35</sup> In two-thirds of these cases, Vinaya-strictures unique to bhikkhunīs including restrictions to solitude and freedom and autonomy of movement were important factors (see Bhikkhunī Saṅghadisesa Three). Both found solitude, walking alone and staying and practicing alone in nature (as highly recommended by the Buddha in the suttas) to be highly important, even essential, elements of their practice. These may not generally be perceived as as dangerous for women in areas of contemporary North America or Australia as they may have been in India long ago or now.

traditions,<sup>36</sup> and even fellow women religious of other faiths,<sup>37</sup> are keys to the ability to persevere and overcome; to grow, progress and shine.

*c) Questions of belonging, lineage and saṃvāsa*

As noted in II.a) above, there have been various means of ordination which now include at least three generations of Theravāda bhikkhunīs. In II.b) we also noted the issues of both social and Bhikkhu Saṅgha acceptance and support. A third issue is of questions of belonging, lineage and *saṃvāsa* within the reascent greater Theravāda Bhikkhunī Saṅgha and local bhikkhunī saṅghas.

Most all of the women who have ordained as bhikkhunīs in the first generation have had important guiding bhikkhu teachers.<sup>38</sup> Those teachers themselves have been leading members of various Theravāda Buddhist monastic *nikāyas*, lineages, communions, and sub-communions or *saṃvāsa*. With these teachers and their habits and ways of life, the bhikkhunīs too have inherited a sense of community belonging, although often a sense of belonging which is complicated and partly negated by not legally being able to fully belong to the *nikāya*, lineage or communion of those teachers. This is a situation partly shared with their bhikkhu brothers (inheriting a sense of belonging accompanied by unique habits and ways of living the monastic life), but also not-shared (in terms of not formally legally belonging).

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<sup>36</sup> For most of the past twenty two years, Western Buddhist Monastic Conferences (now called “Gatherings” rather than “Conferences”) have been held annually in the United States, with both male and female Buddhist monastics (those ordained either as sāmaṇeras/sāmaṇerīs or bhikkhu/nīs) of all celibate traditions, whether born or raised in the West or mainly teaching westerners, participating. These gatherings provide opportunities to share in the joys and challenges, and learn from and support one another. It was through attending this Conference in 1996 for the first time the author was not only encouraged to persevere in monastic life, but learned of and was encouraged to apply for full ordination as a bhikkhunī in 1997. Other western monastics, time by time, have reported the support of these gatherings to have been essential in their perseverance in the monastic life. Since 2010, the number of new Theravāda bhikkhunī participants in the gatherings has greatly increased. These gatherings, as similar to the Sakyadhita Conferences, encourage a supportive sense of “greater belonging” in the greater Saṅgha or *Mahāsaṅgha*.

<sup>37</sup> In the United States: Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID/DIM) and the correlated “Nuns in the West” Conferences, as well as the local San Francisco East Bay women’s religious association Interfaith Women of Peace. Internationally: the Global Peace Initiative of Women Religious and Spiritual Leaders.

<sup>38</sup> It may be noted that even now, with the existence and growing presence of bhikkhunī mahatherīs,\* therīs, teachers, preceptors and communities, a significant number of female aspirants who ordain as bhikkhunīs are still primarily students or disciples of a great bhikkhu teacher, who maintain that primary association and connection. In these cases, their association with bhikkhunīs—even Theravāda bhikkhunīs—may sometimes be only for the sake of the formalities of ordination. (\*All of those women fully ordained as bhikkhunīs in the first wave in 1988 and in the second wave of ordinations in 1996, 1997 and 1998 are now, or will by 2018 be mahātherīs, with twenty or more years in bhikkhunī life.)

Additionally, for the bhikkhunīs, as at II(a)2, many have had to go outside of their circle of teacher/s and peers in order to be fully ordained. The gathered saṅgha of supportive monastics (or part of it), for the first generation, sometimes came from far away countries, were of different ethnicities, wore different style robes, spoke and chanted in different languages, etc. Questions arose (and still persist) as to how full are these ordinee's' belonging with their ordaining saṅghas. For the second generation, the similitude increased, and with it the sense of belonging, although still the supportive bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs often came from far and wide. Even if wearing similar robes and being "same Theravāda," still they often hailed from different countries and were trained by different teachers, thus coming with a variety of monastic customs and interpretations of monastic discipline. Although the sense of belonging increased, still, feelings of mixed or multifarious, even multi-traditional, belonging continued, often passed down from the first generation to the second.<sup>39</sup>

With the third generation of ordinations, in some places, the sense of commonality and local community belonging has grown much stronger, to the point of being very much like, and almost the same as, that of their bhikkhu brothers and peers. However, at this point, the greater sense of belonging and coming from a much broader lineage can sometimes shrink or almost disappear. This sense may be or may have been held with great gratitude, or sometimes with a sense of some embarrassment of a checkered and not completely acceptable past that is wished to be forgotten and left behind.

The latter has led, at times, to heartache between groups within the greater Buddhist monastic tradition which once gathered so broadly to offer support, and within just a couple of generations over the course of one to three decades again became more sectarian or insular as they re-embedded with their local

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<sup>39</sup> See Ute Hüsken's 2017 "Translation and Transcreation: Monastic Practice in Transcultural Settings" (forthcoming) and "Theravāda Nuns in the United States: Modernization and Traditionalization" for an example with regards to the first Theravāda Bhikkhunī Ordination in Europe at Anenja Vihara.

contexts.<sup>40</sup> Here, a (sometimes Vinaya-couched) question of location of identity, agency and communion can and has arisen. The Vinaya basis has to do with the whole concept of where the bhikkhunīs’ lineage comes from: is it always essentially from the Bhikkhu Saṅgha as some monastic scholars propose;<sup>41</sup> or does it come from the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha, as the prevalent contemporary South and Southeast Asian traditions which have denied bhikkhunī ordinations have generally asserted? Or some combination thereof? Or, because of the essential

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<sup>40</sup> One exception would be the Dambulla Bhikkhunī Order of Sri Lanka founded by Ven. Inamaluwe Sirī Sumangala Mahāthero and the Bhikkhunī Sāsanābhivruddhi Saṅgha (Sri Lankan Bhikkhunī Re-awakening Organization SLBRO) of which he served as founding president, which went through this process first to second generation process within a matter of months. Although originally planned to be an ordination by the Bhikkhu Saṅgha alone, the women monastic candidates selected and trained at Dambulla were, when the opportunity opened for them, sent for dual bhikkhunī ordination and training organized by Fo Kuang Shan Buddha’s Light International Foundation in Bodhgaya, India in 1998. Both Theravāda bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs played active roles in the pre-ordination training of the Theravāda women monastic candidates. Directly after the full dual ordination according to the Chinese Dharmaguptaka tradition, the new dually-ordained Theravāda bhikkhunīs received another *dalhīkamma* (“strengthening/acceptance of change of tradition) ordination from a Theravāda bhikkhu saṅgha alone in Sarnath. Those who were eminent women monastics of many years were carefully selected from among these newly-ordained bhikkhunīs to become bhikkhunī preceptors and teachers themselves, with “all Theravāda” bhikkhunī ordinations beginning upon return to Sri Lanka in the Dambulla Bhikkhunī Order shortly thereafter. See Bhikkhunī Bhadrā’s “Re-establishment of Bhikkhuni Order in Sri Lanka” in *Higher Ordination and Bhikkhuni Order in Sri Lanka* (26-28).

<sup>41</sup> Ven. Jampa Tsedroen’s relates this perspective in her 2016 “Ordination”: “the male saṅgha is paramount” (186) and “[t]he flawless and perfect bhikṣuṇī vow arises (1) because the male saṅgha is essential and sufficient to make the ordination legitimate” (186); “(3) in contrast to the bhikṣu ordination, in case of the bhikṣuṇī ordination—because bhikṣuṇīs play only a secondary role and are even completely dispensable” (186); “[bhikṣuṇīs], however, have always, right from the beginning, been dependent on bhikṣus” (187); “bhikṣuṇī ordinations never take place without bhikṣus...[t]hey took place without bhikṣuṇīs throughout Buddhist history, not only at the time of the Buddha...a bhikṣuṇī ordination lineage consisting of bhikṣuṇīs alone does not exist...[t]he only stable factor in bhikṣuṇī ordination has always been the participation of bhikṣu saṅghas” (188).

“sameness” of the bhikkhus’ and bhikkhunīs’ ordination,<sup>42</sup> is it simply possible to

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<sup>42</sup> The explication of Pārājika One in the Canonical Pāli-text Mahāvibhaṅga’s explication and analysis of the Pātimokkha precepts states: *Tena kho pana samayena aññatarassa bhikkhuno ithiliṅgaṃ pātubhūtaṃ hoti. Bhagavato etamatthaṃ ārocesuṃ. “Anujānāmi, bhikkhave, taññeva upajjhaṃ tameva upasampadaṃ tāniyeva vassāni bhikkhunīhi saṅgamituṃ. Yā āpattiyo bhikkhūnaṃ bhikkhunīhi sādharmaṇā tā āpattiyo bhikkhunīnaṃ santike vuṭṭhātuṃ. Yā āpattiyo bhikkhūnaṃ bhikkhunīhi asādharmaṇā tāhi āpattihi anāpatti”ti. Tena kho pana samayena aññatarissā bhikkhuniyā purisaliṅgaṃ pātubhūtaṃ hoti. Bhagavato etamatthaṃ ārocesuṃ. “Anujānāmi, bhikkhave, taññeva upajjhaṃ tameva upasampadaṃ tāniyeva vassāni bhikkhūhi saṅgamituṃ. Yā āpattiyo bhikkhunīnaṃ bhikkhūhi sādharmaṇā tā āpattiyo bhikkhūnaṃ santike vuṭṭhātuṃ. Yā āpattiyo bhikkhunīnaṃ bhikkhūhi asādharmaṇā tāhi āpattihi anāpatti”ti.*—“At one time the sexual characteristics of a woman appeared on a bhikkhu. They informed the Master. He said: “Bhikkhus, I allow that very discipleship [with the original ordaining preceptor], that very ordination, those years [of seniority] as a bhikkhu, to be transferred to the bhikkhunīs. The bhikkhus’ offenses that are in common with the bhikkhunīs are to be dealt with in the presence of the bhikkhunīs. For the bhikkhus’ offenses that are not in common with the bhikkhunīs, there’s no offense. At one time the sexual characteristics of a man appeared on a bhikkhunī. They informed the Master. He said: “Bhikkhus, I allow that very discipleship [with the original ordaining preceptor], that very ordination, those years [of seniority] as a bhikkhunī, to be transferred to the bhikkhus. The bhikkhunīs’ offenses that are in common with the bhikkhus are to be dealt with in the presence of the bhikkhus. For the bhikkhunīs’ offenses that are not in common with the bhikkhus, there’s no offense” (Paṭhamapārājikaṃ 5. Vinītavatthu 14-15).

See also Ven. Jampa Tsedrean’s 2015 “Ordination” with regards to the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya tradition. Quoting the Tibetan text: “the bhikṣu and bhikṣuṇī vow are of one nature (Tib. *ngo bo gcig*) or of one substance (Tib. *rdzas gcig*)” (187); “Whether the person to be fully ordained obtains the vow or the vow lineage of a bhikṣu or bhikṣuṇī has to be decided from the aspect of whether at the time when the actual vow arises the person to be ordained is a man or a woman. It cannot be decided from the aspect whether the person who gives the ordination is a male or female saṃgha member.”[43] At the end, all the geshes present agreed that this is probably correct.” “43 Tib: *sdom rgyun ni bsnyen rdzogs bsgrub bya pho mo’i cha nas dngos gzhi’i sdom pa skye tshe dge slong pha ma’i sdom pa’am sdom rgyun bzhag dgos pa red ma gtogs sgrub byed dge ‘dun pho mo’i cha nas ma red*” (190). “This implies that gender is not the deciding factor. The main cause of the bhikṣuṇī vow and the vow lineage lies in the person to be ordained, not in the ordainer” (191). “The *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* (*Chos mngon pa’i mdzod kyi bshad pa*) explains that in substance or in essence the vow of a bhikṣuṇī does not differ from that of a bhikṣu.[57]” “57 [in substance] the vow of the bhikṣuṇī does not differ from the vow of the bhikṣu...The name changes with the sex. *dge slong gi sdom pa las ni dge slong ma’i sdom pa gzhan ma yin no l... mtshan las ming ni ‘pho ba’i phyir l*” “This is in line with a famous quote from the *Vinayottaragrantha*: Upāli asks the Buddha: “Bhadanta, if at the time of full ordination [a man] changes sex, is [that person] deemed to have been fully ordained?” The Buddha replies: “[That person] is deemed to be ordained. Transfer [her] in the midst of the bhikṣuṇīs” (197).

come from either and/or both?<sup>43</sup>

*Questions asked:* Shall the bhikkhunīs just follow the ways of the bhikkhus as our ideal; as bhikkhu-*nīs* are we an adjunct female branch which are followers of bhikkhus? Or, are we actually female bhikkhus? Does the revived Bhikkhunī Saṅgha have its own lineage, identity and agency, and with it a unique opportunity, restored by the greater Saṅgha, to in turn restore greater harmony of the Saṅgha within the international community of bhikkhunīs—a communion not riven by the sectarianism that is so prevalent in the bhikkhus’ communions

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<sup>43</sup> The canonical Vinaya texts appear to support the bhikkhus’ essential role. Inscriptions show bhikkhunīs primarily associated with male teachers as well as bhikkhunīs primarily associated with female teachers, and bhikkhunī lineages that illustrate a progression of bhikkhu->bhikkhunī->bhikkhunī as the Buddhist monastic Saṅgha spread to new locations (Collett “Inscriptions”). These may illustrate different stages of dispensation, with the bhikkhus initially being more active as groundbreaking missionaries in some areas, but then quickly (within one generation) establishing bhikkhunī lineages. The records of the Aśokan Missions also seem to show bhikkhu missionaries ordaining both men and women, without mention of bhikkhunīs’ initial presence and participation, with the notable exception of the chronicles of Sri Lanka. The Sri Lanka tradition is unique in its record of the words of Mahinda Thera, saying: *Akappiyā mahārāja thīna pabbajjā bhikkhuno*—“Great King, it is not allowable for a bhikkhu to confer the going forth” with regards to giving the pabbajjā and upasampadā to women (*Dīpavaṃsa* 15.75 from Sri Lanka Tipitaka Project on [GRETIL](#), Oldenberg 1879 84,19 has specifically: *akappiyā mahārāja itthipabbajjā bhikkhuno*—“it is not allowed for bhikkhus to give the going forth to women”). Further, in the early Sri Lankan chronicle *Dīpavaṃsa*, in the words of Gunawardena, “It is interesting to note that, in this account in the chronicle, no names of [bhikkhus] occur as teachers of [bhikkhunīs]. On the other hand, it presents a succession of female teachers as individuals who had gained renown for their scholarship and intellectual ability as well as for spiritual attainments and had, as such, become “leaders of the island” (dīpanayā). The implication seems to be that the order of [bhikkhunīs] was not just a minor appendage, dependent on the order of [bhikkhus]: in the *Dīpavaṃsa* it was obviously conceived as representing a distinct and independent tradition which was traced back to Saṅghamittā and her companions and, through them, to Mahāprajāpatī Gotamī” (Gunawardena’s 1988, 14). It may be noted that in non-Vinaya texts such as the *Therīgāthā* and the majority of stories of women going forth in the Pāli Canon (other than Vinaya), they themselves go to or are sent by the Buddha to a leading bhikkhunī teacher to ordain. The Pāli-text Vinaya’s *Bhikkhunī Vibhanga*, in the stories related to the creation of the precepts, also illustrates individual bhikkhunīs initially giving ordination themselves to their students, until precepts and procedures are established which mandate bhikkhunī community participation and approval. This process is said by the traditions to have developed in this way for the bhikkhu preceptors and communities as well, that is, they transitioned from individual authorized early teachers giving full acceptance to the Saṅgha doing so. In example: *Pācittiya* 64. *Dutiyasikkhamānasikkhāpada*—“the second sikkhamāna precept”, 67. *Tatiyagihigatasikkhāpada*—“the third married woman precept,” and 73. *Tatiyakumāribhūtasikkhāpada*—“the third maiden precept.” In this whole series of precepts, from *Pācittiya* 61 to 73, the bhikkhus show no signs of involvement or of being aware of what is going on with the bhikkhunīs’ ordinations until they are informed of it by conscientious bhikkhunīs in order to bring the matter/s to the Buddha’s attention. “For the other [traditions] Vinayas, J. Chung (Ursprung)...constructs the hypothesis that [bhikṣuṇīs] were first ordained by [bhikṣuṇīs] alone, which was [then later] prohibited...[when] the eight gurudharmas were formulated.”[4] “f4: This possibility has also been expressed by Damchö Diana Finnegan (Flawless 197) based on the narratives on [bhikṣuṇīs] in the MSV: ‘We may also be surprised to see that in both these ordination narratives, Buddha Śākyamuni appears to simply entrust women to Mahāprajāpatī’ for ordination, a fact that hints at greater practical autonomy and responsibility for the [bhikṣuṇīs]’ community than comes to light elsewhere.’” (Tsedroen 2016 “Ordination” 168). See also Skilling’s *Eṣā agrā* (154).

and communities?<sup>44</sup> These questions are not only asked by the bhikkhunī ordines themselves, but may also have been asked or are being asked by their local bhikkhu teachers and by their bhikkhu preceptors and ordination masters, as well as by Dharmaguptaka traditions’ bhikkhunīs who were active participants in the movement reviving the Bhikkhunī Ordination.<sup>45</sup> For, although sometimes seen as divisive, many of these teachers have shown much stronger than average inclinations and tendencies towards *Saṅghasāmaggī*, towards bringing the greater Buddhist Saṅgha of many traditions together again.

On the other side, these tendencies towards multi-traditionalism or “multiple belonging,” are seen by some Theravāda traditionalists as not preserving the purity and distinctness of the traditions and lineages, leading some bhikkhu teachers of such traditions and lineages to hold back on sending their women disciples “outside” for ordination, and leading some self-affirmed faithful women disciples also to refrain from “going outside.” The number of these has turned some in the traditions back to considering the question of “ordination by the Bhikkhu Saṅgha alone,” for the sake of admitting women into one school, one

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<sup>44</sup> *Saṅghasāmaggī* (“harmony” or “unity of the Saṅgha): the opposite movement as compared to *Saṅghabheda* (“dividing the Saṅgha”). *Yo ca kho, devadatta, bhinnam saṅgham samaggaṃ karoti, brahmaṃ puññaṃ pasavati, kappam saggamhi modati*—“whoever, Devadatta, unites an Order that is split, he sets up sublime merit, he rejoices in heaven for an aeon” (Pāli-text Vinaya *Cūlavagga Khandhaka*: Second Recitation Section (*Dutiyabhāṇavāro*) 17. Schism in an Order (*Saṅghabheda*). Per the Pāli-text Vinaya, bhikkhunīs are said not to be able to cause Saṅghabheda: *Na kho, upāli, bhikkhunī saṅgham bhindati, api ca bhedāya parakkamati*—“Upāli, a bhikkhunī does not split the Saṅgha, even if she endeavors for schism” (*Cūlavagga Khandhaka*: Third Recitation Section (*Tātibhāṇavāro*) 2. Questions of Upāli (*Upālipaṇhā*). However, the Sārnāth pillar inscription of emperor Aśoka states: “But indeed that monk or nun who shall break up the saṅgha shall be caused to put on white robes and to reside in nonresidence. Thus this edict must be announced to the saṅgha of monks and the saṅgha of nuns: *hevaṃ iyaṃ sāsane bhikkhu-saṅghasi ca bhikuni-saṅghasi ca vimnapāyitaviye*. Thus speaks Devanampriya” (Skilling 2014, p11). This is not isolated, but is repeated also in the Sāñci and Allāhābād-Kosambī pillar edicts (Mokashi 2013, p16). As seen contemporarily bhikkhunīs can also be a part of bringing the Saṅgha back together again within the spheres of bhikkhunī saṅghas. Note: Dambulla’s Ven Sirī Sumangala Mahāthero’s inclusion of bhikkhus from all three main Sri Lankan nikāyas in the initial bhikkhunī ordinations in Sri Lanka in 1998, and later Thai Ven. Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā and Sakyadhita Sri Lanka’s conscious inclusion of bhikkhus of all three nikāyas in the 2016-2017 dual ordination of bhikkhunīs from Thailand in the Sakyadhita International Training Centre sīmā. Note also the multi-tradition harmony Bhikkhunī Pāṭimokkha recitations undertaken at the Sakyadhita International Conferences in India and Indonesia.

<sup>45</sup> See “Honoring Those Worthy of Honor” for injunction from Ven. Havenpola Ratanasāra (Tathālokā 2017, 36-28). Ven. Bhikṣuṇī Thubten Chodron (co-author of *Buddhism: One Teacher Many Traditions* with HH the Dalai Lama) in her presentation to the 2016 Western Buddhist Monastic Gathering spoke with concern with regards to learned behavior between monastics of various Buddhist traditions in North America as if there had been a schism between those traditions, when research works such as Bhikkhu Sujato’s 2007 *Sects and Sectarianism* show no evidence of schism ever having occurred between the three main contemporary Buddhist monastic Vinaya traditions currently still existent.

tradition, one *samvāsa*—to preserve the sense of purity and integrity of a particular teacher’s or tradition’s sense of belonging.

One aspect of the traditionalism above is the question of whether something is missing, and pride of completeness. The popularization of the concept of the ideal complete Buddhist community being the *Buddhā Catuparisā*, the Fourfold Community of the Buddha—including *bhikkhūnīs*—has led to the sense of something perhaps being missing and having been lost irrevocably—or to be recovered. And yet, for some teachers and traditions, the sense of pride of lineage and investiture of the tradition in the teachers and elders of the Bhikkhu Saṅgha as being *the* ultimate lineage holders and Dhamma & Vinaya holders and preservers, tends to a staunch perspective of being fully invested and complete in themselves and lacking nothing—even sometimes to the perspective of living in a purer state,<sup>46</sup> a state in which the long-endurance of the Sāsana is unthreatened. For those women practitioners who live, practice and are lauded as exemplary disciples in such a tradition and support it, it can be very hard to surmount the high wall sense of belonging and *samvāsa*, that is, “bounded communion,” as to go beyond it may likely mean not being able to come back and be a whole part of that communion again. For those who have come out of such, they themselves may feel they must, sometimes even formally, renounce that lineage and *samvāsa* (I.2), in order to honorably become members of a greater belonging in the lineage and greater communion of the historical and

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<sup>46</sup> In the textual renditions of the founding of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha of the Mahāsāsaka and Sarvāstivāda traditions which used to be present in South and Southeast Asia: (Mahāsāsaka) “If women had not gone forth and received the higher ordination in my teaching, after my passing away the male and female disciples would have followed behind the monks, holding the four requisites, and said: ‘Venerable sirs, out of compassion for us, accept our offerings.’ On going out of the door and seeing [a monk], they would in turn have led him by the arm and said: “Venerable sir, out of kindness towards us, please come in and sit for a while, so that we may obtain peace in the house.” On meeting them in the streets they would all have loosened their hair to wipe the feet of the monks and spread it out for them to walk on.” (Sarvāstivāda) “Ānanda, if women had not obtained to leave the home out of faith and become homeless to train in the path in this right teaching and discipline, brahmins and householders would have spread their clothes on the ground and said: ‘Diligent recluses, you can walk on this!’ ...

Brahmins and householders would have spread their hair on the ground and said: ‘Diligent recluses, you can walk on this!’ ...Brahmins and householders, on seeing recluses, would have respectfully taken various types of beverages and food in their hands, stood at the roadside waiting, and said: ‘Venerable sirs, accept this, eat this, you can take it away to use as you wish’ ...Faithful brahmins [and householders], on seeing diligent recluses, would respectfully have taken them by the arm to lead them inside [their houses], holding various types of valuable offerings to give to diligent recluses, and said: ‘Venerable sirs, accept this, you can take it away to use as you wish’ ...” (Bhikkhu Anālayo’s 2016 *Foundation* (134-137)). It may be noted that in fact, in Burma as late as the twentieth century, faithful householders *did* lay out their clothes and even their hair for eminent visiting bhikkhu masters to walk on, etc., as observed in the videos of the late venerable Webu Sayadaw (Youtube).

present Bhikkhunī Saṅgha (I.1 & I.3) and as restorative members of the Fourfold Community.<sup>47</sup>

It may bear mentioning here that in the absence of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha among Southeast Asian Theravāda Buddhist peoples, the ancient Buddha Catu Parisā fourfold community ideal, with exemplars in all four folds, has often changed in the absence of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha, not so much to a three-fold community, but rather more towards a two-fold community, were the ideal Buddhist man is a bhikkhu (monastic renunciate) and the ideal Buddhist woman is an *upāsikā* (faithful laywoman follower/supporter). Not only has this two-fold ideal denied or depreciated women's fully moralized and valorized role as monastic renunciate disciples of the Buddha, it has also tended to depreciate and disable male householders (*upāsakas*) fully moralized role as non-monastic householder disciples. The full healing, regeneration and restoration of the fourfold community of the Buddha thus not only involves resuscitation and full moralization and capacitation of the ideal women's renunciate role as bhikkhunī disciples, but also involves resuscitation and full moralization and valorization of ideal male householders' role as *upāsakas*.<sup>48</sup>

From the perspective of some traditionalists as above, nothing is lost in the largely twofold model, while everything is gained by the most worthy of recipients. The alternative perspective is that everyone gains and benefits most from the model set forth by the Buddha, in which everyone is moralized and fully valorized in their respective balanced roles, and all are encouraged to

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<sup>47</sup> One example of monastic women who decided to honorably leave their lineage to become bhikkhunīs would be the bhikkhunīs of the Aloka Vihara Forest Monastery of the Sierra foothills in Northern California: "In April 2011, in the presence of the Siladhara Order and a sangha of four bhikkhu elders, Ajahn Anandabodhi & Ajahn Santacitta took leave of the Ajahn Chah lineage, so as to pursue full Bhikkhuni Ordination" (confirmed via personal correspondence with the author 30 July 2017). It may be noted that this is not only an issue for women monastics. In Theravāda Buddhism, there are several cases of "fine and upcoming" young Western bhikkhus who have also left Buddhist monastic life entirely in significant part due to their grave discomfort over moral issues with regards to the state of women in the tradition, and what is perceived as steep and harmful gender discrimination. With regards to awareness of harm, see Alison Goodwin's 2012 "Right Views, Red Rust, and White Bones."

<sup>48</sup> An interesting change of pattern may be noticed in ancient Indian Buddhist donative inscriptions over time. In the early days, i.e. in the Sāñchi area, all four folds of the Buddhist community participated roughly equally in accomplishing Buddhist projects (such as raising and decorating a stupa) which were meant for the whole community. The number of bhikkhunī participants was nearly as high as the bhikkhus and the number of women householders' participation high, even if not quite as high the male householders'—with people coming from all walks of life. The male householders were the largest single number of recorded donors and participants at that time—very different than what we see today! There is a shift in trends observed over an approximately 1000-year period, and later period inscriptions do not show this kind of whole community participation. There is more emphasis on the royalty, the bhikkhunīs all but vanish, and the women royals lavish donations on the Bhikkhu, while very occasionally a king supports one of the now-rare bhikkhunī foundations (Kaushik 2016, "Locating the *bhikṣuṇīs*," 83).

appreciate, uplift and support one another. Thus, the revival of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha *as part of the restoration of the Buddha Cātupariṣā* would offer more full and complete benefit all round, not only for the bhikkhunīs and woman householder disciples, but for the entire community and society, including a far greater and more holistic benefit for the genuine practitioners within the Bhikkhu Saṅgha and the male householder disciples folds as well, in line with the integrity and wisdom of the Buddha's own vision for the longterm endurance of his Sāsana, that is, both his teaching as well as its practice and realization among all folds.

With this vision in mind with regards to our contemporary contexts, we now turn back to the bhikkhunīs fold as it is embedded within these contexts, and textual teachings and practices which are dynamic places of inquiry, contemplation and consideration, whether hindrances or enabling and supportive Vinaya-dhammas.

### III. From text to congruence in cultural context/s

*a) The gārudhammas and sikkhamānā; b) the position of senior teaching bhikkhunīs with regards to ovāda, and bhikkhunī teachers' and community leaders' position in Buddhist monastic teaching and leadership structures; c) support, living with Vinaya, and religious alms mendicancy in the contemporary West.*

The relationship between revivalist traditions of Pāli text-based Buddhist meditation and canonical Dhamma & Vinaya teaching and practice, has been noted in section I above. At least in the West, the majority of those born in the West who have become bhikkhunīs have done so as part of, and as active participants in, these initially great bhikkhu teacher-led revivalist traditions which see themselves as returning to and living the spirit, as well as embodying the practices and the realizations of the ancient texts. This has been observed to be relatively easier for the bhikkhus than for the bhikkhunīs, as bhikkhu vinaya is perceived to contain far less material offensive to contemporarily Western sensibilities as compared to bhikkhunī vinaya. It has been regularly commented by Western bhikkhus, laypeople, and also female aspirants, and some bhikkhunīs as well, that they feel the discipline contained within the bhikkhu vinaya would be enough for them, without a “rub” or a “place of burn.” But bhikkhunī vinaya *does* contain such points which are of rub and burn to many in contemporary culture, which are doubtful as to their supportiveness in the

contemporary contexts. This is challenging for the reception of bhikkhunī vinaya in the West. It is also so in the contemporary East.<sup>49</sup>

### *a) The gārudhammas and sikkhamānā*

As is widely known, and relatively easy to notice for newcomers, the eight *bbikkhunī garudhammas* rank (or rankle) among places of tension, friction, doubt and mistrust in English-language forums and writings, as well as in conversations at Western Dhamma & meditation groups. In California, for example, it is not uncommon as a bhikkhunī, to meet and hear from people who confess having even been turned away from Buddhism, feeling unable to trust the teaching and path because of their encounter with the bhikkhunīs' eight garudhammas being so antithetical to their values and the way they were raised and educated.<sup>50</sup>

Therefore, it might come as a surprise that not all western bhikkhunīs are opposed to the garudhammas. Some bhikkhunīs raised in post-cold war Germany or elsewhere in Europe, or in conservative eastern continental US Christian environments, are well able to see the value and support in the garudhammas or take them on faithfully together with all the other teachings in

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<sup>49</sup> In the author's earlier time in Thailand when she was one of the only bhikkhunīs in country, she heard many laypeople, bhikkhus' and maechees express both interest and sincere doubts about bhikkhunī ordination. Some of them were initially against bhikkhunī ordination due to a perception of excessive restrictions, particularly the mandates of the eight garudhammas as well as some of the additional bhikkhunīs pārājika and saṅghadisesa precepts (see also Anālayo's 2017 "Theravāda Vinaya" 4, 353-356). Nearly ten years later in 2009-10, leading bhikkhus of the Thai forest tradition of the late master Ajahn Chah at Wat Pah Pong also expressed concern for the amount of regular contact between bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs mandated by the Vinaya upon the Bhikkhu Saṅgha in the case of the existence of bhikkhunīs as a concern for the brahmacariya. The reason this was perceived as a greater danger than the bhikkhus' regular association with white-robed maechee nuns, despite increased disciplinary restrictions upon both the Vinaya-keeping bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs, was due to a sense of shared affinity and commonality and of being of the same class leading to greater mutual compassion.

<sup>50</sup> Gunawardana in "Subtle Silks" (20), writes with insight regarding the first garudhamma and the "bases of relations" which "would have appeared...to be an anomaly, especially since, in lay society in ancient South Asia, relationships between the sexes varied in accordance with the relative status of the individuals, and, as such, were not governed by a single absolute principle of the superiority of one sex over another." This is still the case in South and Southeast Asia. With regards to the Thai culture, the author recollects a case where she as an eight-vassa bhikkhunī and seventeen-year monastic, went to pay respects to a newly temporary-ordained bhikkhu at the local wat, per the first garudhamma. She was stopped by the resident bhikkhus, who explained to her the perceived cultural inappropriateness of her doing so as a longer-time *majjhimā* bhikkhunī, that is, female monk, of more than five years standing (same class, higher rank). On inquiry, they felt however that it would have been appropriate to do so if she were a white-robed eight-precept nun or *maechee*, who was understood to be a member of a different class. In this case the "natural" sense of social propriety of ranks of respect within classes of individuals came before gender, as rightly noted by Gunawardana. In the last fifteen years since however, with awareness of the garudhammas spreading among the Thai bhikkhus via the internet (in part spread by Thai bhikkhunīs such as Ven. Dhammanandā Bhikkhunī themselves), these once "natural" cultural sensibilities are changing. Amongst those so educated, an understanding is growing of bhikkhunīs not just as "female bhikkhus," but as a class unto themselves; a class which ranks between the level of the bhikkhus and that of novice sāmaṇeras and sāmaṇerīs.

the Pāli-text as expressions of the Buddha's deep insight and wisdom. However, for many women monastic life aspirants and supporters of the Buddhist, as well as for many of those western men who aspire to or become bhikkhus, this is not the case. This is all the more so for western-born and westernized internationals who are younger and more well-educated. A significant number of "convert Buddhist" supporters of the revival of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha, both male and female, express wanting to support equal opportunity with the full ordination of women in Buddhism, *not* establishing yet another form of misogyny, suppression and patriarchy. For those with doubt in the timeliness and benefit of the eight bhikkhunī garudhammas in the contemporary western context, and even in the contemporary international context, the scholarship on the garudhammas which has raised question as to their historical authenticity as *Buddhavacana* ("word of the Buddha") has been welcome and appreciated.<sup>51</sup> Whereas affirmative writings on the topic by otherwise esteemed bhikkhu teachers and scholars have raised flags of alarm. For some, as above, this factor is off-putting from Buddhism itself, especially when they are inclined to feel the power of knowledge and decision is in the hands of forces beyond their control.<sup>52</sup> For others, it leads to their undertaking Buddhist textual studies to try to understand the issues and the texts for themselves, generating agency.

Many of those supporting the bhikkhunīs' communities and also those aspirants and seekers coming to and entering these communities, look for parity of training for men and women in places where bhikkhunī training and ordination is offered. Looking at the example of the Dhammadharini or Aloka Vihara bhikkhunīs' communities as compared to the Abhayagiri bhikkhus' community in Northern California, a general parity of process in training and entering monastic life can be found. Even so, the level of establishment and support of these bhikkhu and bhikkhunīs' communities is different, and the processes of entering their communities are not completely the same. Aspirants, both men and women, will have time in the monastery with the eight precepts before their heads are shaved and they don white robes. They will normally have six months to one year before then renouncing money and the driving of motor vehicles, donning the ochre robes and undertaking the ten novice precepts as a *sāmaṇera* or *sāmaṇerī*. For the men then, they will have at least one year training as a

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<sup>51</sup> See Ute Hüsken's "The Eight Garudhammas" pp 143-148 of *Dignity and Discipline*. Also Bhikkhu Sujato's "Principles to Be Respected" pp 46-74 of *Bhikkhuni Vinaya Studies*.

<sup>52</sup> This is noted to be especially so for those who have come to Buddhism who were raised Catholic and have left the Catholic Church in adult life, who may not be able to accept the return to apparently similar patterns.

novice with the ten precepts before bhikkhu upasampadā. For the women, they will normally have two years of such training before bhikkhunī upasampadā. After upasampadā, the new (*nava*) bhikkhus will have five years of training in dependency with their preceptor and/or related teachers, the new bhikkhunīs will normally have at least two.<sup>53</sup>

The reason for the increased time for women prior to upasampadā might be assumed to be the requirement of sikkhamānā training, however this is only partly so. When the traditions and ordination were passed on from the senior leading Sri Lankan bhikkhu teachers in the USA, they noted the ten precepts of the sāmaṇerī included the six precepts of the sikkhamānā. Thus, they did not additionally give sikkhamānā ordination to women aspirants. These highly educated bhikkhus did not understand the state of sikkhamānā to be an absolute Vinaya requirement for bhikkhuni ordination, and they did not require it. However, they generally did require women to have been observing at least the principle precepts among the novice precepts continually for at least two years before granting bhikkhunī upasampadā. Still, there was debate among the senior bhikkhus highly educated in the Pali-texts about whether even this was required, as it is based on the sikkhamānā concept. This was not the only reason for not administering sikkhamānā training precepts. These bhikkhus, while highly faithful to the early Buddha's teachings, were also sensitive to the contemporary North American context, where boys' and girls' early public education curriculums are generally identical. They understood the sikkhamānā training to have been established in a past cultural context to offer special support and exceptional opportunity in Buddhism to young women where this was not the case.<sup>54</sup>

As was once explained in this regard by my own preceptor, the late most venerable Dr. Havanpola Ratanasāra Nāyaka Thero, “an instrument, such as a medical tool, must be used for its right purpose in order to achieve benefit, and cause help rather than harm. It must be used in the right way.” He, having a very high level of Pali-text studies, was of the decided impression, that the

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<sup>53</sup> Pāli-text Bhikkhunī Pātimokkha pācittiya precept no. 69. *Pavattinīnānubandhana-sikkhāpadarṇḥ: Yā pana bhikkhunī vutthāpitaṃ pavattiniṃ dve vassāni nānubandheyya, pācittiyaṃ*—“Should any bhikkhunī not attend to her preceptor for two years, it is to be confessed.” [See Cv.VIII.11.2-18] Note: with the Buddhist Society of Western Australia led by Ven. Ajahn Brahmavamso and its Bodhinyana bhikkhus' monastery and Dhammasara bhikkhunīs' monastery, the standard is five years dependency for also the bhikkhunīs, as is so per Vinaya for the bhikkhus.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Ven. Dr. Havanpola Ratanasāra Nāyaka Thero prior to the bhikkhunī upasampadā in 1997 at International Buddhist Meditation Center of Los Angeles (author's personal notes).

garudhammas and some other elements of monastic discipline, had been developed by teachers subsequent to the Buddha.<sup>55</sup> “They had their purpose at the time they were created and established which can be appreciated, but every care should be taken that they not be used wrongly now.” Rather, “the principles of both the timelessness of the Dhammavinaya and right adaptation to conditions for the sake of least harm and most benefit must be seen and understood together, in light of each other.”

*b) The position of senior teaching bhikkhunīs with regards to ovāda, and bhikkhunī teachers’ and community leaders’ position in Buddhist monastic teaching and leadership structures*

Another of the garudhammas concerns the *ovāda* or exhortation, the bhikkhunīs fortnightly requests for teaching from the Bhikkhu Saṅgha, to be administered by highly-qualified elder bhikkhu teachers beloved to the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha, suitable to act as mentors and guides. As with all of the garudhammas, there is the supportive and protective aspect, as well as the limiting and subordinating aspect. At one point, when I had just entered my tenth vassa of bhikkhunīhood and had been in monastic life nearly twenty years, a senior bhikkhu *ajahn* (teacher), the vice-abbot of our local Thai wat, asked me when I requested the *ovāda* of him: “for how long are you supposed to do this?” He had been educated fully in Thailand in the Pāli texts up to level seven, including Vinaya. So, he remembered about *ovāda* for bhikkhunīs, but did not remember learning

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<sup>55</sup> See Tathālokā, “Honoring Those Worthy of Honor” (54, f115). Web: <http://present.bhikkhuni.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Honoring-those-Worthy-of-Honor.pdf> (accessed 28 Jul 2017)

for how long it was supposed to be given and when it was enough, and could end. To his thought, ten or more years was long enough!<sup>56</sup>

For our nascent bhikkhunī community in the United States, the Vinaya injunction for Ovāda has been of great boon to many of us. We have regularly received excellent teaching from excellent senior bhikkhu teachers, which we might not have otherwise. For this we have enormous gratitude and have much benefitted. And yet also, senior bhikkhunī teachers—*therīs*—of ten or more years in monastic life, in training their own students, are sometimes felt to be undermined by always needing to come back to a senior male teacher. The students also feel this undermining and can be disheartened and discouraged by

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<sup>56</sup> There are differing text-based perceptions as to what the ovāda entails. Ovāda in general means a teaching or exhortation. The canonical *Nandakovāda Sutta* (as analyzed by Ven Bhikkhu Anālayo in his 2016 “Foundation History” pp 15-38) depicts progressive Dhamma teachings being given by the Buddha himself and subsequently his arahant bhikkhu disciples to the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha, up to the point of their establishment in the path and full awakening. The canonical Pāli-text Bhikkhunī Vibhaṅga Vinaya text explicating the bhikkhunīs’ precepts also depicts bhikkhunīs, when meeting after the Vassā period, asking each other whether the bhikkhus’ teaching (the ovāda) has been successful for them—“*katthāyyāyo vassaṃvutthā? Kacci ovādo iddho ahoṣī’ti?*” (Bhikkhunivibhaṅga Pācittiyakaṇḍa Ārāmagga 56. Abhikkhukāvāsasikkhāpada). The Sanskrit Mahāsaṅghika-Lokottaravāda (Ma-L) Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya at *pācattika-dharma* 132 (at 243) also says: *thera-bhikṣū paryāyeṇa bhikṣuṇīyo ovaḍanti*—“through many means/with many teachings the elder bhikṣus taught the bhikṣuṇīs.” However, here in the Pāli-text word explication and elsewhere in Vinaya in several passages it is said that the eight garudhammas are the content of ovāda: *ovādo nāma aṭṭha garudhammā* (Vin IV 315,6). Some senior Theravāda bhikkhunīs in North America have expressed their discomfort with this. Some simply give Dhamma teaching; others first acknowledge what the Vinaya says by asking if all the bhikkhunīs present have received instructions in the garudhammas and are practicing with them, and then move on to giving their advice in Dhamma-vinaya. The garudhammas themselves are clear about the life-long commitment to ovāda. However, the parallel bhikkhunīs’ Pācittiya precepts (Pāc. 56, 58-59) do not mention this as a lifelong commitment. The extra-canonical Vinaya commentary *Samantapāsādikā* explains what the request for ovāda has to look like (Sp 794,28-796,4) and that ovāda has to take place at the Uposatha day (Sp 794,18-20); whereas the canonical Vinaya text does not prescribe the date of the ovāda (note, the Sanskrit Ma-L Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya *does* prescribe the range of possible dates for the giving and receiving of the ovāda, but *not* on the Uposatha Day). Both are clear that the entire bhikkhunī saṅgha is not to go for this request, although all the bhikkhunīs of that resident community other than those who are ill are to attend the later scheduled teaching (94-102 under gurudharma 6). The Ma-L Bhikṣuṇī Vinaya (68) additionally refers to the ovāda as the bhikṣuṇī preceptors’ and teachers’ (*upādhyāyini-ācāryāyo*) instruction on the dhammas and anudhammas of the Bhikkhunī Paṭimokkha and the overall training, and being able to give this teaching (the ovāda and *ānūsāsana* instruction) is one of the requirements of a woman preceptor and teacher included in her twelve-year qualifications (Pāc 92 at 206). Note here the ovāda and ānūsāsana are defined as: *nāvavaded iti abhidharme vā abhivinaye vā; abhidharma nāma nava-vidhaḥ sūtrāntaḥ*, that is, higher learning of sutta Dhamma and Vinaya (Pāc. 104 at 218). In the Pāli-text, the first teaching directly after a bhikkhu or bhikkhunīs’ upasampadā ordination on the threefold training, on the three or four reliances and on the four or eight pārājika dhammas is also called the ovāda. In this case, in the Pāli-text, the eight serious/weighty rules to be taught a bhikkhunī directly after her upasampadā are the eight pārājika dhammas. In both these Vinayas, for the fortnightly ovāda teaching, it is mentioned if there is not a qualified elder bhikkhu teacher to give the ovāda, it is a Dhamma teaching in brief that is to be given; that is, the Buddha’s last words (in the Pāli-text), similarly “*apramādena sampādeṭṭha*” (in the Ma-L text Pāc. 132). It may be mentioned that in the Pāli-text, with regards to the precepts where the bhikkhunī preceptor’s giving the ovāda and ānūsāvana and their reception by the new bhikkhunī are mentioned above (Pāli Bhikkhunī Pāc 69. *Pavattinānubandhanasikkhāpada* and Pāc 74. *Unadvādasavassasikkhāpada*, there is no mention of these qualities; all that is mentioned is the gross absence thereof: *bālā honti abyattā; na jānanti kappiyaṃ vā akappiyaṃ vā*—“they were foolish; they were ignorant; they did not know what was allowable or unallowable.”

this. From the standpoint of contemporary western culture, with educational and teaching opportunities as they are for both women and men, it is not within the cultural paradigm that a women cannot be an independent teacher in her own right. Nor, in many ways, does this seem to be the paradigm presented by the ancient Early Buddhist texts, which demonstrate the mastery of the ancient therīs who bear the victory banner of the *arabants* and are rightly meant to be exemplars unto themselves, with the Buddha as their teacher.<sup>57</sup>

Another aspect is that of the observance of the Uposatha. Buddhist people in Theravāda Buddhism gather to undertake sīla, listen to the Dhamma and meditate together on the full moon days and, in the Thai forest traditions, also on the new moon and half moons. As bhikkhunīs have their own separate monastic residences, vihāras, monasteries and hermitages, people gather there for these purposes on the moon days. The vision of the ancient texts in these regards is not clear. *An element of our Vinaya inquiry related to agency*: in ancient times, was the bhikkhunīs' dwelling separate or part of and adjunct to a greater bhikkhus' monastery complex which was the main place of the entire community's Uposatha gathering?

The Pali-texts and chronicles illustrate separate dwellings. Yet contemporary work in ancient Indian and Sri Lankan archeology<sup>58</sup> suggests from perhaps as early as the first century, separate bhikkhunīs' lodgings were incorporated as part of the great bhikkhus' monasteries and later as part of the great Saṅgha

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<sup>57</sup> Although a different image than found in the Pāli-text *Sutta Piṭaka*, chronologically earlier inscriptions and the also earlier *Dīpavaṃsa* which highlighted bhikkhunīs as attained and authorized teachers of the Dhamma, the *Samantapāsādikā* Vinaya Commentary attributed to Ācariya Buddhaghosa roughly 1000 years after the Buddha, and still considered highly orthodox by many contemporary Theravāda monastics, taking a (not-isolated) misogynist turn, “devotes a lengthy passage running to about seven pages to emphasize the subordinate status of the [bhikkhunīs]... and the need for [bhikkhunīs] to constantly depend on the advice of [bhikkhus].” 74 (74. *Samantapāsādikā*, Vol. IV, pp. 792-900). “The passage reflects a situation in which learned [bhikkhunīs] were claiming to know the dhamma as proficiently as the [bhikkhus]... The response of the [bhikkhus] to this challenge was presented in the form of the general proposition that women are inherently inferior in their intellectual abilities and, consequently, have no other alternative but to be dependent on the bhikkhus.” “*Iti bhagavā aññassa kammaṣṣa okāsaṃ adatvā nīrantaraṃ bhikkhunīnaṃ santike gamanameva paññāpesi. Kasmā? Mandapaññattā mātuḡāmassa. Mandapañño hi mātuḡāmo.*” “It may be rendered into English as follows: ‘Why did the Blessed One decree that nuns should constantly go to monks [for guidance] without allowing them an opportunity for any other mode of action? It was on consideration of the lack of wisdom among females. Females lack wisdom.’ Gunawardena “Subtle Silks” (23-24). The Pāli *manda* means “dull, stupid, lazy, ignorant, of slow grasp.” PTS Pāli-English Dictionary (1183)

<sup>58</sup> With regards to India, see Garima Kaushik’s 2016 “Locating the bhikṣuṇī: identifying nunneries” in *Women and Monastic Buddhism in Early South Asia*. In Sri Lanka, the archeological museum at Abhāyagirivihāra in the Sacred City Anuradhapura locates a historical bhikkhunīs' compound contemporarily known as Lankārāma or Māñithupārāma within the greater Abhāyagirivihāra compound (author’s onsite visit March 2017) All other cases of ancient bhikkhunī ārāmas noted in Sri Lanka were of separate bhikkhunī monastery compounds.

University complexes, as is still found in some very large Chinese and Vietnamese Buddhist monastic complexes in the contemporary United States.<sup>59</sup> In the latter case, the entire community gathering in that place for the Uposatha certainly makes sense. However, in the case of the Pali-texts (and such text-inspired revivalist practice traditions), this is not at all clear, and numerous signs point in the opposite direction.<sup>60</sup> Thus, the bhikkhunīs request and receive teaching from senior bhikkhu teachers fortnightly at an appointed time as part of our own interior discipline. But also senior bhikkhunī teachers teach their own students and lead their own Dhamma and meditation programs for their communities. The latter is in accordance with what is wished, desired, hoped for and expected from bhikkhunī teachers and community leaders as to our position and roles within Buddhist monastic teaching and leadership structures, both from within our monastic communities and from the greater community at large.

***c) Support, living with Vinaya, and religious alms mendicancy in the contemporary West***

As mentioned above at II(c), most bhikkhunīs in the west have entered into monastic life with strong association to one or more of the great leading bhikkhu teachers. These teachers come from a variety of mostly Sri Lankan, Thai and Burmese traditions, with varying practices of Vinaya. Some, like the Thai forest

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<sup>59</sup> Kaushik in “Locating the bhikṣuṇī” (*Women in Monastic Buddhism* pp 44-45) states of India: “in the memoirs and chronicles of the Chinese travelers; for example, the Chinese monk Sheng-chi, a contemporary of I-Tsing, who visited Samantata in the second half of the seventh century A.D., found 4,000 monks and *bhikṣuṇīs* there. I-Tsing himself stayed in the Bha-ra ha Monastery, where he learnt Sanskrit and Philosophy (Śabda Vidya) (Takakasu, Itsing, Ch. X: 62-5). Interestingly he also mentions a monastery which was then ‘inhabited by both monks and *bhikṣuṇīs*’.” The ninth century Indonesian Javanese Chandi Plaosan temple complex is also speculated to have contained a Dual Saṅgha monastery (Tathālokā 2015 “Shedding Light on the Bhikkhunīs and the Great Founding Women of Borobudur,” 48-49). Stephanie Balkwill, in her 2016 “When Renunciation is Good Politics” also cites the *Weishu* (13: 338) as highlighting a balance of “four nunneries, four monasteries, and the [5th -6th century Chinese Northern Wei] dynasty’s pre-eminent Buddhist structure, the Yongning si 永寧寺 (Forever abiding monastery), which according to the biography of Empress Dowager Ling in the *Weishu* housed both *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs*” (237). In contemporary California there are these large Dual Saṅgha monasteries from East Asian Buddhist traditions: the Chinese monastery known as the Sagely City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, the Vietnamese Kim Seon Monastery and Deer Park Monastery. There are however many more smaller monasteries which are separated by gender. The Korean Buddhist monasteries and temples in California are all separated by gender, as in Korea, with the exception of the Kwan Um School of Zen. In contemporary Southeast Asia, in Thailand for example, approximately forty percent of bhikkhu temple monasteries also contain a section or division for women renunciates (*maechees*/eight- or ten-precept nuns), while most all of the newly reascent bhikkhunī saṅghas’ temple monasteries are separate complexes.

<sup>60</sup> According to the extra-canonical Pāli-text Vinaya commentary the *Samantapāsādikā*, the distance between the living quarters of bhikkhus’ and bhikkhunīs (not imagined to be in the same greater monastery compound) should not be too far apart [such that the bhikkhunīs can travel to the bhikkhus’ monastery and return by nightfall in a single day] (Sp 792,29-794,1).

traditions of Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Maha Boowa, are strong in Vinaya and *korwat* (*kāravāsa*) extra-Vinaya monastic rules and discipline. Others come from traditions of stronger monastic discipline in their home country, but (at least temporarily) that discipline has been modified and relaxed to suit the circumstances while the tradition develops in the west, with a slowly increasing strictness over time. Still others, for example, many but not all from Sri Lanka or Thailand, come from traditions where large parts of the Pali-text Vinaya are not practiced in contemporary times in the home country (i.e., the receiving, keeping and use of money), and are further adapted or relaxed in the west to meet the circumstances and expectations of western society in ways that are not allowed “back home” (i.e., to cook and store food, drive, shake hands with both genders).<sup>61</sup> The bhikkhunis associated with these teachers and varied traditions often do likewise, which means there is a diversity in the ways Vinaya and *korwat* (*kāravāsa*) extra monastic rules and discipline are held.

On the one hand, there is an assumption (often from Asian monastics in the West), that there must be major Vinaya lifestyle adaptations to society in the West. On the other hand, there are monastics (often, but not always, those born in the west) who hold the belief and assert that living fully with Vinaya and traditional alms mendicancy are both possible in the west. For the latter, many are or have been first or second-generation students of the great Asian masters of the northeastern Thai forest traditions, who actively encouraged these perceptions and practices in the early days during their visits to the West to their sometimes incredulous Western students. That this rigorous training and discipline bore out and bore fruit, has led to there being a lived example of such Vinaya training and practice being possible in contemporary times, even in the West. This Vinaya training links up past and present Dhamma & Vinaya practices, eliciting perceptions of the continuity of an unbroken tradition, and supporting a rewarding sense of the full living of this ancient Buddhist Path in contemporary times in the West. The perception arises that “this ancient Path and its fruits are apparent here and now.” Doing so for the reasons above, and because it is not so easy to do, often brings unique inspiration and unique rewards to both Asian householder Buddhists and lay supporters, as well as to Western and Westernized or international students and seekers. The full living

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<sup>61</sup> For a discussion on the question of adaptation of Vinaya practices in contemporary North America among Buddhist leaders and teachers of various Buddhist traditions including Theravāda monastic traditions, see the [1987 World Buddhism in North America Conference video](#) (34-48).

of Vinaya and a life of religious alms mendicancy is often (or can be) of great inspiration to the monastics who live it as well.

A case in point in this regard would be the alms rounds (*piṇḍapāta*) of the Dhammadharini bhikkhunīs community in Sonoma County north of the San Francisco Bay Area in Northern California, USA. The Bay Area itself is racially ethnically and religiously enormously diverse. The areas to the north of the Bay, including Sonoma County, are not nearly as diverse, with much higher population of non-immigrant (or earlier generations' immigrant) Euro-Americans. The Dhammadharini bhikkhunīs community began alms rounds in the San Francisco Bay, and this was well received and well-supported, with many (but certainly not all) of the participants being first-generation Asian-American immigrants from traditional Buddhist backgrounds. Many of these were especially happy to support a part of their tradition which was not commonly practiced by their likewise-Asian immigrant Buddhist bhikkhus in the United States, due to the practice being deemed unsuitable or risky (in the case of the Thai and Lao monks), or due to it not being regularly practiced in the home country (in the case of many of the Sri Lankan monks).

However, it was not expected that traditional piṇḍapāta alms rounds would be well supported and successful as a means to sustain life in the counties farther north of the San Francisco Bay. The surprise has been to find how much the people in the Sonoma County area appreciate and engage with the alms rounds. People known to the monastic community organize and plan on giving, and local people who do not know the monastic community also are somehow drawn to the bhikkhunīs on piṇḍapāta and wish to join in giving. After the piṇḍapāta, the bhikkhunis sit in a local town center park area to eat their meal and then share Dhamma reflections and Dhamma discussion with all those who gather. This has been observed to be heartening, encouraging, and inspiring, not only to the lay participants, but also, and very much so, to the local monastics themselves. Visiting bhikkhunīs and sāmaṇerīs of Theravāda traditions often remark on this, as do visiting and local monastics of other traditions (Zen, East Asian-traditions Mahāyāna, Tibetan Vajrayāna) who sometimes join in the alms round and or discussion in the park together.

While it has been found to be possible and even of much inspiration to train fully with the precepts of the Bhikkhunī Paṭimokkha and to live on alms in the San Francisco Bay Area and Sonoma County, to do so is not without its rigorous

effort, and its toll to seclusion. The amount of interpersonal contact and community networking effort that is needed to legally live the alms life according to civil law, having renounced money and training with the additional precepts of the Paṭimokkha<sup>62</sup> supported by a religious not-for-profit support foundation of Buddhist householders and the local and more widespread Buddhist community, is sometimes staggering. This is so to a lesser degree for smaller groups of two or three monastics, while to support a larger monastic community including trainees, aspirants and seekers—in the absence of primary wealthy donors or royal grants—calls for community engagement to a much greater degree, with a much broader and multi-faceted network of friends and supporters.

Women inclined to the life of a recluse may join the monastic life seeking more seclusion and more focused hours for their Dhamma study and meditation practice. They sometimes find there are less such hours available to them in alms-mendicant Vinaya-practicing communities due to the rigorous effort involved in living with the Vinaya precepts. However, they do gain the benefit and support of being in a community with likeminded monastics and aspirants, and do develop as monastics via the rigor of the ongoing training in patient endurance, perseverance and renunciation with their Paṭimokkha sīla—in conjunction with Dhamma study and meditation—that living such training with Dhamma and Vinaya in the west calls forth. Often needed in such environments to compensate and balance are rotating regular periods of silent, secluded personal retreat (secluded within the monastic community) and/or joining group retreats led by bhikkhus or bhikkhunīs at retreat centers (outside the monastic community, but generally together with co-retreating monastic sisters).

#### IV. From renaissance to renaissance

*Bhikkhunīs' discipline and developing bhikkhunī saṅghas as optimal containers or the most optimal conditions for supporting and effecting the Buddhist intention and aim of women's liberation, ceto-vimutti.*

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<sup>62</sup> Additional precepts involved in these regards include precepts barring bhikkhus and bhikkhunīs' from engaging in commercial transactions (Pāli-text Bhikkhunī Nissaggiya Pācittiya 22 & 23, Bhikkhu Nissaggiya Pācittiya 19 & 20), digging the earth (Bknī Pāc. 106, Bk Pāc. 10), harming plant and seed life - including most kinds of cooking (Bknī Pāc. 107, Bk Pāc. 11), storing food overnight (Bknī Pāc. 121, Bk Pāc. 38), and eating food which has not been offered by hand by a lay person on that very day directly into the hands or alms bowl of a bhikkhu/nī (Bknī Pāc. 122, Bk Pāc. 40).

This brings us to our final section and, a last but not at all least, locus of fruitful and dynamic tension. The Bhikkhunī Saṅgha has been revived, and many of its members in the West have gone forth in faith, with the best of sincere aspirations and intentions to dedicate themselves wholly to leading the full-fledged life of Dhamma-Vinaya and to realizing the fruits of this noble effort for themselves. And here is the place of dynamic tension. We understand that the Buddhist monastic Saṅgha and its Vinaya were originally established as the very best and most optimal container and supportive intentional community—for the realization of Nibbāna and with it the liberation of the mind & heart that is *ceto-vimutti*. There is no shortage of willingness and of effort, and yet questions do arise as to whether everything that we have taken on, individually and together, is, in fact, of the greatest and most wise and skillful support for our main aim of liberation for ourselves, and that this effective tradition can be well shared and passed on as a community.

A part of this question arises due to the changed social circumstances in which we presently live, which have already been acknowledged in part. There is another aspect, reasonably well known in some spheres. In the West, and now increasingly in the East as well, it is no longer necessary to join the monastic community to study, learn and practice the Dhamma. Individual lay householders (of particular social strata) often have both time and financial resources (however limited) to be able to study and practice, to meditate personally and in groups, and to undertake regular highly-supported meditation retreats, payed for with their own assets or via scholarships. Early Buddhist texts and teachings have been made freely available via the internet. This has led to a great development of householder Buddhist practice in the west. There is no longer as much of a strict separation or dichotomy of study and practice opportunities in life between being a householder and being a monastic.

Yet still, with such deep practice as a householder, the inclination to a deeper letting go and a deep renunciation can and often does naturally arise in Theravāda Buddhist circles. This leads many to explore the possibility of going forth as a monastic individually or into a monastic community. And yet, is the support in place within that community (as it was during their retreat time) to be able to fully renounce and let go? This leads us back to III.c above. For men who aspire to go forth as bhikkhus, in some Theravāda Buddhist monastic communities, they may find easy access to ample material support. However,

they may or may not find the moral support and guidance they need with regards to learning the Dhamma and fully practicing the teachings. If they enter a community where there is such practice support, they may find the level of work needed to develop the monastery and the community to be strong and sometimes more than they are capable of sustaining. Or, where there is both material and practice support, they may find great challenges with culture, language, food, visas, etc., which are unsustainable for many for the long run.

For women entering the monastic life in the West, there are no such very well materially supported situations (yet) in Theravada Buddhism, with perhaps the notable exception of Dhammasara Monastery in Western Australia. Rather, if women join a community and train with Vinaya, they will need to work very hard for their renunciation, making their hours for formal meditation and Dhamma & Vinaya study much less, even if not entirely absent. If they travel to Asia, they will be faced with all of the challenges faced by western men, with the additional challenge of often not being quite as well and deeply affirmed, embedded in the society, appreciated and morally supported as their male peers. These challenges include not being able to apply for or obtain a monastic meditation practice visa or full Buddhist education support as bhikkhunīs in the same way that bhikkhus are generally able to obtain within the Asian Theravāda Buddhist systems, and generally not being as equally qualified as their male bhikkhu counterparts to receive medical care and in-country transportation support.

All this leads us to an ongoing path of inquiry into conditional causation, right effort, and wise and skillful means (*upāya kosala*) in which our agency is affirmed. *And, it leads to this open working question:* Given our current societies, cultures and conditions, what is the optimal container for the great renunciation, the great going forth, the great practice, and the great liberation? With the depth of sincerity present, there is a wish and willingness to simply trust in the Dhamma & Vinaya teachings, and to live them as fully and completely as possible. Thus, there is also the wish and the heart to seek out, understand, and apply the Dhamma & Vinaya teachings as well as possible to these very present contexts for supporting and developing the contemporary monastic Saṅgha and our bhikkhunīs communities within it, intentionally, as the optimal container for liberation.

## The Bhikkhunī Vibhaṅga Project and Closing Words

Towards the aims above, the Bhikkhunī Vibhaṅga Project, to which the author is a contributor, has arisen out of a wish, on our bhikkhunīs', novices' and aspirants' part, as well as that of our co-related bhikkhus, to be able to study and understand the bhikkhunīs' discipline (and its relationship, sameness, similarities and differences to the bhikkhus' discipline) much more deeply, and to share this growth in knowledge and understanding with Buddhist communities as a whole.

Although sometimes called the “Old Commentary,” the *Bhikkhunī Vibhaṅga* is the canonical explication and analysis of the Bhikkhunī Paṭimokkha precepts as well as the canonical source of the unique bhikkhunīs precepts themselves, found embedded within it. Through the Pāli-text's study in relationship to the co-related bhikkhus' and bhikkhunīs' discipline as recorded in various other ancient language canons' and traditions'-texts (such as the Classical Han Chinese and Tibetan of the still-living Dharmaguptaka and Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya ordination lineages; or the older Gandhāri or Khotanese, or younger Indic Sanskrit or Prakrit of Dunhuang, Gilgit or Qizil of now extinct Vinaya practice traditions), much has been learned and gleaned even with preliminary studies. Much more can be learned about the reception/s, development/s and adaptation/s of the Buddhist women's monastic discipline over both time and space—with further study.

Understanding of this process and its principles in context provides a solid, Vinaya-level basis of knowledge in support of the development of full Dhamma & Vinaya training and education for contemporary Theravāda bhikkhunīs, and bhikkhunīs' communities' informed decision-making with regards to the intentions and ongoing contemplations and efforts expressed at the end of the previous section. Open access and the development of wise discernment in practice is essential for the right effort for ending suffering through skillfully applied effort in Dhamma and Vinaya together. Through fully understanding and embodying this process, the renascent Bhikkhunī Saṅgha is making great strides towards “coming into our own;” that is, once again, becoming full heirs to and full bearers and holders of both the Dhamma and the Discipline that is the Buddha's complete teaching and Path of Awakening.

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