Buddhist Discrimination Against Women in Modern Burma  •  Venerable Anālayo  •  Take It or Leave It and the Ground Between  •  Saccavadi Bricker  •  Welcome Good Branch, You are Not Unwelcome  •  Thea Mohr  •  Dignity and Discipline  •  Thanissara Mary Weinberg  •  Archetyping and the Language of Personhood in the Mātugāmasamyutta  •  Jampa Tseodren  •  The Bahudhātuka-sutta and its Parallels On Women’s Inabilities  •  Marica Pimentel  •  The Four Assemblies and the Foundation of the Order of Nuns
When the Buddha established his community over twenty-five centuries ago, he did so upon a foundation of radical equality among lay and monastic women and men. And indeed, the earliest Buddhist scriptures celebrate the teachings and inspiring influence of path-blazing female renunciants.

Nonetheless, through much of the Buddhist world, the order of nuns has disappeared or was never transmitted at all. Edited by Ven. Jampa Tsedroen and Thea Mohr, ‘Dignity and Discipline: Reviving Full Ordination for Buddhist Nuns’ represents a watershed moment in Buddhist history, as the Dalai Lama, together with scholars and monastics from around the world, present powerful cases, grounded in both scripture and a profound appeal to human dignity, that the order of Buddhist nuns can—and should—be fully restored.

A compilation of presentations from The First International Congress on Buddhist Women’s Role in the Sangha, held at the University of Hamburg in July 2007 at the request of H.H. the Dalai Lama, contributors include respected scholars such as Dhammananda Bhikkhunī, Bhikkhu Sujato, Bhikkhu Bodhi, Lobsang Dechen, Thubten Chodron, Karma Lekshe Tsomo, Bhikkhu Anālayo, and many more.


Abstract: The Four Assemblies and the Foundation of the Order of Nuns

By Bhikkhu Anālayo

According to the account of the foundation of the order of nuns, found with some variations in the different Vinayas preserved in Chinese, Pali, Sanskrit and Tibetan, the Buddha was quite hesitant to permit women to go forth and was persuaded by his monk disciple and attendant Ananda to do so only after repeated pleading. Not only was the Buddha unwilling to institute the order of nuns, but he supposedly even made the prediction that this step would cause his teaching to last for a period of only five hundred years.

This hesitation and prediction have had and still have a rather negative impact on the way the order of nuns is perceived and thus form one of the contributing factors that make it so difficult to establish an order of nuns in those traditions where the bhikṣuni ordination does not at present exist.

A close inspection of the account of the foundation of the order of nuns brings to light several inconsistencies. As already noticed by other scholars, the eight special rules that according to this account were laid down as a pre-condition for the founding of the order of nuns presuppose an already existing bhikṣuni-sangha, so that, in the form in which they have come down to us, these eight rules could only have been formulated at a time when nuns were already in existence. Some canonical passages do in fact refer to the ehi bhikkuni type of ordination for nuns, indicating that in the earliest stages of the history of the Buddhist order nuns were ordained with this simple formula, instead of the procedure referred to in the eight special rules.

Another problem is a chronological one, a problem that to my knowledge so far has not been noticed by other scholars. According to what can be gleaned from other canonical discourses regarding the foundation of the order of nuns would have taken place in the 5th or 6th year of the Buddha’s ministry. A closer examination of the canonical sources brings to light that at this early point of time Ananda still had to become the Buddha’s attendant, in fact he still had to ordain. This makes it impossible for him to act as an intermediary in the way his role is depicted in the different Vinayas.

In addition to these internal inconsistencies, the account of the foundation of the order of nuns also does not concord with what can be gleaned from other canonical discourses regarding
the Buddha’s attitude towards the order of nuns and the role the bhikṣuni-sangha played in early Buddhism.

Particularly noteworthy is a passage found in the Chinese, Pali, Sanskrit and Tibetan versions of the Mahaparinirvana-sutta, which makes it clear that right after his awakening the Buddha must already have decided to found the order of nuns, since according to this passage he told Mara that he would not pass away until his nun disciples were well established and trained. This passage directly contradicts the hesitancy to establish the order of nuns that the above Vinaya accounts attribute to the Buddha.

The Mahaparinirvana-sutta not only has this unique instance, in fact quite a number of discourses make it clear that the order of nuns, as one of the four assemblies, was an integral part of early Buddhism. The Mahavacchagotta-sutta of the Pali Canon and its Madhyama-agama parallel, for example, make a point of highlighting that the existence of accomplished practitioners in each of these four assemblies is what makes the Buddha’s teaching “complete” in every respect. These and other instances make it clear that, without an order of nuns, the transmission of the Dharma is incomplete and an essential aspect of its inner life is missing. In view of such passages, preserved by different early Buddhist schools, it becomes evident that the account of the foundation of the order of nuns does not only suffer from internal inconsistencies, but also stands in direct contradiction to other canonical passages.

Besides, the prediction given in this account, unlike several other predictions attributed to the Buddha in various suttas, did not come true. From archaeological evidence we know that even in the 3rd and 4th century nuns were active participants in Indian Buddhism, so that they, and with them the Dharma, were still flourishing far beyond the five-hundred years’ period envisaged in the Vinayas.

In sum, in view of a predication that did not come true and a hesitancy that is directly contradicted by other canonical sources, it seems more probable that the Buddha was positive about the foundation of the order of nuns and that the Vinaya account of the foundation of the order of nuns, due to some transmission problem, does not accurately reflect the situation.

In contrast to the negative impression created by the account of the foundation of the order of nuns in the different Vinayas, the testimony of other canonical sources indicates that for the continuation and growth of the Dharma each of the four assemblies is what makes the Buddha’s teaching “complete” in every respect. These and other instances make it clear that, without an order of nuns, the transmission of the Dharma is incomplete and an essential aspect of its inner life is missing. In view of such passages, preserved by different early Buddhist schools, it becomes evident that the account of the foundation of the order of nuns does not only suffer from internal inconsistencies, but also stands in direct contradiction to other canonical passages.

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In contrast to the negative impression created by the account of the foundation of the order of nuns in the different Vinayas, the testimony of other canonical sources indicates that for the continuation and growth of the Dharma each of the four assemblies is an essential requirement. From this it would follow that every effort should be made to ensure that by establishing an order of nuns in each of the different Buddhist traditions the ideal conditions for the growth and spread of the Dharma in the modern world are being provided.
Once, while Mahánága was begging alms at Nakulanagara,
he saw a nun and offered her a meal. As she had no bowl,
he gave her his, with the food ready in it. After she had
eaten and washed the bowl, she gave it back to him saying,
“Henceforth there will be no fatigue for you when begging
for alms.” Thereafter the Elder was never given alms
worth less than a kahápana. The nun was an arahant.

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